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## **Online Preservice Teacher Education Programs: Issues in the Preparation of Bilingual Education and ESL Teachers**

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Alfredo H. Benavides and Eva Midobuche  
Texas Tech University

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### **Abstract**

With the explosion of technology in the field of education and the tremendous need for Bilingual Education and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, it is tempting for many institutions to attempt to fill this void with fast-track programs aimed at preparing as many teachers as possible. Many people have come to believe that online coursework is viable for many teacher education programs. Many colleges and universities have come to accept online approaches in order to meet the higher demand for teachers. This paper examines the perceptions of subjects preparing to become teachers of English language learners (ELLs). It examines the participants' experiences with online courses in terms of their awareness, appeal, and efficacy. This paper discusses the types of courses that appealed to participants and that were taken online. Furthermore, the subjects compare online and traditional instruction for preparing teachers of ELLs. Also, a detailed examination of some of the demographics that have fueled the movement to accelerate online technology is examined establishing a need for a clear policy for the use of online technology in the delivery of instruction for preservice teachers of ELLs.

### **Online Preservice Teacher Education Programs: Issues in the Preparation of Bilingual Education and ESL Teachers**

There is little doubt that the explosion of technology in education is having a profound influence on how we view and interact with students in teacher preparation programs. U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige (2002) believes that this technology will help to close the achievement gap in our country. He adds that E-learning promotes local control by expanding opportunities; increasing flexibility for schools and for students; promotes individualized instruction; and, empowers parents to make better choices for their children. Sandholtz, Ringstaff, and Dwyer (1997) view

. . . technology as a powerful tool for teaching and learning. However, despite its potential, technology can never replace teachers, as some people predicted when computers were first introduced to classrooms. While the role of computers should go well beyond being teaching machines, technology is only one tool among many. (p. 174)

According to Green (2002), “. . . teachers are in the driver’s seat, making decisions about technology based on their knowledge of students and their understanding of teaching and learning. It is the teachers not the technology, who assume the dominant roles” (p. 8). Bennett (1999) states that the advent of technology offers a rich environment for learning and is a new resource for education. Furthermore, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (1994), the International Society of Technology in Education (ISTE, 1998), and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1997), among others, have devised guidelines for the integration of technology into the field of teacher education. Bennett (1999) further points out that the Internet can be used in courses to research, communicate, problem-solve, and even to reflect.

Midobuche and Benavides (2002b) raised concerns about the exclusive use of online instruction in initial teacher preparation programs. These concerns center mainly on the validity of the exclusive use of online instruction as the sole method of preparation for teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs). It is important to understand that technology is extremely valuable and here to stay. However, we must also keep in mind the educational issues of children who come from ELL backgrounds. This paper reports the findings of a study conducted to examine the use of online instruction in the preparation of preservice teachers of ELLs. The use of technology as part of university instruction has been an added bonus for many teacher preparation programs. However, the exclusive use of online technology to prepare teachers of ELLs needs to be examined very closely. Many questions and issues remain a concern.

### Need for ESL Teachers

The growing need for more teachers to work specifically with ELLs is apparent. Padolsky (2002) reports that California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, and Arizona contain the largest percentage of public school children that are classified as ELLs. As a group, Hispanics comprise the largest minority in the Western U.S.; and, in the state of California, they are projected to surpass non-Hispanic Whites as the largest racial or ethnic group by the year 2015. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (2003), Hispanic K-12 student enrollment in Texas for academic year 2002-2003 is 42.7% compared to 39.8% for White students. Based on the most recent survey results, it is estimated that nationally 4,584,946 ELLs were enrolled in public schools (pre-k through grade 12) for the 2000-2001 school year. This number represents approximately 9.6% of total public school student enrollment and a 32.1% increase over the reported 1997-1998 public school ELL enrollment (Padolsky, 2002).

The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) (2003), reports that only five states in the U.S. did not show a growth in ELL population from 1991-2002. Forty-five states had positive growth numbers in their ELL populations with 35 states showing a growth rate of 50% or higher. The top five ELL growth states were Georgia (671%), North Carolina (652%), Nebraska (571%), South Carolina (378%), and Tennessee (371%). Among all states, California enrolled the largest number of public school ELL students with 1,512,655, an increase of 40% in the last decade. Texas had 601,791 ELL students, showing an 81% increase. Florida increased its ELL population to 290,024 students, an increase of 198%. Clearly the trend is for this particular school-age population to continue to increase.

In 1998, then Secretary of Education Richard Riley estimated that the U.S. would need an additional 2 million teachers in the coming ten years (Riley, 1998). González and Darling-Hammond (1997) estimated that over 5.3 million children in the United States were in need of some form of bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL), instruction. The General Accounting Office (1999) (GAO), of the U.S., supported this figure. However, the shortage of bilingual education and ESL teachers in the United States appears to be even more critical than the overall teacher shortage because as Maroney (1998) pointed out, the number of limited

English proficient (LEP) children is growing at a faster rate than teacher education institutions are able to produce teachers. Díaz-Rico and Smith (1994) pointed out that the U.S. needed 100,000 to 200,000 bilingual teachers as of 1994. Today, the need can only be larger due to the demographic growth of this population.

### Certification Issues in Bilingual and ESL Education

Fleischman and Hopstock (1993) reported that only 10% of the teachers working with LEP children were certified to teach bilingually and a mere 8% were certified to teach ESL. Fully 38% of the teachers included in the Fleischman and Hopstock study reported having had training in multicultural education. However, this training averaged only 7 hours per person. Escamilla (1992) reported that there was a definite lack of teaching materials as well as qualified professionals prepared to teach Mexican American history and culture in the social studies environment. Also, between 30% to 40% of middle grade students had biology and life science, physical education and ESL and bilingual education teachers who lacked certification in these areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Menken and Holmes (2000) also reported severe shortages of qualified teachers in many urban areas. They drew a distinction between 'quantity' of teachers and 'quality' of teachers. Clearly the need to produce more and better-qualified bilingual education and ESL teachers is at a critical stage.

In addition to these grim data, Fleischman and Hopstock (1993) also reported that teachers who are from the same language and cultural backgrounds of their students are more likely and better equipped to identify and serve their needs. According to their data, Fleischman and Hopstock found that as far back as 1992, when almost half of the ELLs in the United States were Spanish speaking, 93% of their teachers were non-Hispanic Whites. They estimated that at this rate, there will be about 5% minority teachers to a 40% minority enrollment in the early part of this century. According to the Urban Teacher Collaborative (2000), two-thirds of the 54 largest urban school districts in 1999 reported immediate openings for bilingual teachers. At the same time, over 80% of these districts allowed non-certified or credentialed teachers to teach. This is an indication of the conditions faced by school districts with high ELL enrollments and also the problems encountered in attempting to produce the requisite teachers.

These figures point to serious problems in terms of how we educate ELL students and their teachers in the U.S. Too often, ELLs have been placed in classrooms with teachers who are not qualified to work with them. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1997), only about 2.5% of teachers who instruct ELLs possess a degree in ESL or in bilingual education. Additionally, only about 30% of teachers with ELLs in their classrooms have received any form of professional development in teaching these students. These statistics do not bode well for ELLs or the institutions attempting to prepare their future teachers.

Institutions that prepare teachers to work with ELLs are already operating under severe constraints as to both quantity and quality. The lack of teachers has created a climate among teacher preparation institutions, which Midobuche and Benavides (2001) feel can be negative toward bilingual and ESL education. Marketability and its accompanying effects, as applied to the field of language minority education are at best questionable because they potentially bring people into the field with negative attitudes and lower skills than are required to be effective with ELLs. Midobuche and Benavides (2001, 1999) suggest that many teachers of ELLs lack the positive attitudes to work effectively with these students.

### Online Approaches to Preparation

One of the more recent developments in teacher preparation is the idea that courses or classes needed for teacher certification, endorsements, or other credentials will be offered by

two and four year institutions through online coursework. More and more professors are developing courses in various disciplines to be taught exclusively through the Internet. In professional education, there seems to be a race to see which institutions can offer as much as possible in an online format. While one can argue the merits and efficacy of institutions of higher education offering professional education coursework exclusively in an online format, perhaps the real dilemma will be what kinds of teachers this approach will produce. According to Ching (1998), it is also notable that researchers acknowledge the different cognitive style of students as they are affected by distance education programs since the impersonal learning environment of distance education could be a greater challenge to field-dependent students. Regardless of these misgivings, institutions continue to offer more and more online instruction. Elizabeth Neuse (2001) of the Arizona Republic wrote:

Cyber certification will soon become a reality for those wanting to teach. Colleges are racing to catch up with the ever-expanding teacher shortage by offering faster fast-track programs designed to get working adults into the classroom. (The Arizona Republic, 2001, North Phoenix section, p. 1 & 7)

The article goes on to describe this particular effort as the “first in the nation, flexible, convenient for working adults, and not easy” (p. #) (in comparison with more traditional teacher preparation programs). These types of approaches in the preparation of bilingual education and ESL teachers (and by extension all teachers) may be extremely shortsighted and flawed. Certainly this approach brings to mind issues that may not yet have been resolved or addressed by institutions offering online coursework. This study attempted to look at some of these issues.

#### Description of the Study

In this study, 119 pre-service teacher candidates were surveyed in an attempt to gauge their attitudes toward online instruction and coursework. These 119 subjects were primarily from several teacher preparation programs including cohorts from bilingual and ESL education as well as regular elementary education majors. All 119 subjects were from a large (over 45,000 students), urban four-year institution in the southwestern U.S. There were 41 subjects majoring in bilingual education, 52 in ESL education, 20 in elementary education (with specialized preparation in one methods class whose focus was ELLs), 2 in secondary education, and 4 classified as other. Ethnically, the subjects represented 47 Hispanics, 56 White (non-Hispanics), 4 Asians, 3 African Americans, 4 other students, and 5 students declining to self-identify. The primary goal of the study was to record the subjects' attitudes towards the use of technology for online instruction. Participants were administered a questionnaire and written responses were analyzed for patterns of attitudes and perceptions.

Although the study asked students to respond to several questions, the focus was on the following lines of inquiry:

- (1) How aware are you about online coursework?
- (2) Are online courses appealing to you and why?
- (3) Have you ever taken online courses?
- (4) What was your reaction to online coursework that you have taken?
- (5) What content areas are appropriate for online delivery?
- (6) Do you feel that online coursework provides the necessary skills needed by teachers of ELLs?
- (7) Do you feel that cultural diversity requirements can be met by online coursework?
- (8) Do you feel that online courses are as effective as traditional courses in preparing teachers for ELLs?

## Analysis of Data

The findings in this study indicated that 93 out of 118 respondents were “somewhat aware” or “very much aware” of online courses. This represents 78.8% of the total number of respondents. In reporting this data, the *total* refers to all majors: bilingual education, ESL, elementary education, secondary education, and other. However, when reporting individual majors, only bilingual, ESL, and elementary education figures will be used. This was done in order to focus on the three groups with the largest number of subjects. Bilingual education and ESL students were most aware of online coursework with 47.5% of bilingual education and 40.4% of ESL majors reporting high levels of awareness. Also, bilingual education majors reported being somewhat aware at 25%, while ESL majors reported 36.5% somewhat aware. The smaller sample of regular elementary education majors also had very high awareness levels (40% high awareness and 55% somewhat aware).

Online coursework also had some level of appeal to these participants. The total number of subjects reporting a positive view (or somewhat positive) toward online study was 77 of 119. This represents 64.8% of the total number of students. However, 37.8% of all participants were in the somewhat appealing category, indicating some degree of ambivalence. However, the percentages for individual subjects and categories were interesting. While the number of total subjects who reported that online coursework had some appeal was 26.9%, there were also 35.3% of subjects who reported very little appeal for online coursework. These data are especially interesting when compared within and across groups. For example, bilingual education students had a 24.4% very much appeal rating and 34.1% somewhat appealing, but, a 41.5% very little appeal rating. ESL students were almost evenly split between high appeal (28.9%), somewhat appealing (40.4%), and very little appeal (30.8%). Regular elementary education majors were very similar at 25%, 40%, and 35% respectively. Of high interest is the large percentage of bilingual education students for whom online coursework had little appeal.

The study participants were also asked to indicate if they had ever taken online coursework. A total of 54 participants or 45.4% of the 119 subjects reported having taken online courses as defined by their academic major. The elementary education majors had the highest percentage of students (70%) having taken courses online. They were followed by ESL majors (48.1%) and bilingual education majors (34.1%). These 54 participants were enrolled for a total of 83 online courses. The courses involved were in accounting, special education, political science, computers, mathematics, theatre, child development, biology, human development, psychology, and children’s literature. There were also 7 classes in Spanish (including Conversational Spanish), 14 in English, and 3 in multicultural education.

These 54 subjects were also asked whether their experiences with online coursework had been positive or negative. Overall, 48.2% of students reported being very much satisfied with their online experiences; 24.1% reported that they were somewhat satisfied; and, 27.8% reported that they were very little satisfied. Of greater interest with these students, however, are the differences among groups in terms of their satisfaction with online coursework. The bilingual education majors reported only a 28.6% rate in the category of ‘very little’ satisfaction. ESL majors reported only 16% for this category. However, elementary education majors were dissatisfied at the rate of 42.9%. Further, only the ESL majors showed a high rate of positive reaction to online coursework. Fully 64% of ESL majors liked their online courses very much.

The investigators also examined the subjects’ views as to the appropriateness of online coursework in elementary education methods courses. As a whole, 44.1% of all respondents did

not find online courses to be appropriate for elementary methods courses. Only 20.2% thought these courses were appropriate. The bilingual education majors reported a rate of 35.3% inappropriateness and ESL majors reported a 47% inappropriate rating. The least favorable group of respondents was elementary education majors with 55.5% saying that methods courses in elementary education taught in an online format were inappropriate.

When asked if it was appropriate to teach undergraduate ESL methods courses online, 53.8% of all respondents answered negatively. Only 17% of all subjects responded favorably to ESL methods courses being taught online. However, the different majors had different responses. ESL majors did not think very much of their ESL methods courses being taught online with 60.8% reporting a negative view. Elementary education majors were even higher at a 64.7% disapproval rate. The bilingual education majors reported only a 40.7% disapproval rate. Although the bilingual education majors also had strong doubts about ESL methods courses online, they also had more subjects in the middle somewhat category (40.6%).

When all respondents were asked about bilingual education methods courses being taught online, 52.4% did not approve. Only 15.9% thought the idea was positive. Individual majors were also equally split on this category. ESL and elementary education majors were negative on this question with 62% and 58.8% respectively, while the bilingual education majors reported a 38.2% disapproval rate.

Many teacher preparation programs require that students successfully complete coursework in cultural diversity. When asked if cultural diversity requirements could be met by taking courses online, 42.8% of all respondents felt that this would be inappropriate. Yet, 27.7% responded favorably to this item, and 29.5% were in the somewhat appropriate category. Of the three largest majors represented, the bilingual and elementary education majors felt the strongest with 50% and 47.4% respectively disapproving of online cultural diversity courses. Just over 35% of ESL majors approved of online cultural diversity courses.

The study's participants were also asked questions pertaining to whether: (1) Online courses provide the necessary communication skills needed by ELL teachers; (2) online courses provide students with the skills needed to work with linguistically and culturally diverse populations, including students, parents, teachers, and administrators; and, (3) subjects felt that online courses were as effective as traditional coursework in the preparation of teachers of ELLs. In terms of the first question, 59.3% of all respondents felt that online courses would not provide them with the necessary communication skills to be effective teachers of ELLs. Only 10.7% felt that communication skills could be attained in this manner. All majors were very strong in their opinions of this item. The ESL majors were the group responding most strongly to the question of online coursework providing the necessary communication skills. Over 70.6% of ESL majors felt that online courses provided very little opportunity to obtain the communication skills that they needed. Bilingual education majors reported 48.6% in this category while elementary education majors reported 47.4%.

When asked specifically if online courses would be able to provide them with the skills necessary to work with students, parents, teachers, and school administrators, only 9% of all subjects responded affirmatively. A total of 58.5% did not feel that online coursework would provide them with the necessary skills to work with all of the principals involved in the education of ELLs. ESL majors disapproved at a rate of 64.7%; bilingual education majors disapproved by 57.2%; and, elementary education majors disapproved of this item by 47.4%.

Another question asked to the respondents concerned the effectiveness of online courses compared to the effectiveness of traditionally delivered coursework. All majors agreed (60.7%),

that traditional courses were preferable to online coursework in preparing teachers for ELLs. The bilingual majors seemed to feel strongest about this issue (66.7%), followed by the ESL majors (64.7%), and the elementary majors (42.2%).

### Summary and Conclusions

Data and information gathered from the participants in this study benefit our understanding of how to better prepare teachers for ELLs in several ways. The data from this study was able to show pre-service teachers' perceptions and attitudes about their exposure to online coursework and their reactions to the exclusive use of this approach as effective pedagogy in the preparation of bilingual education, and ESL teachers. As researchers in language minority education we were interested in examining the appeal of online coursework from the participant's perspective.

First, we found that undergraduate pre-service teacher education majors in bilingual education, ESL, and regular elementary education did possess an awareness of online courses. We were also surprised at the number of participants who had taken online courses. Fifty-four of the 119 study participants reported having taken at least one online course. These 54 subjects had actually taken a total of 83 online courses. With this sample we also conclude that online courses do hold an appeal for teacher education candidates.

However, we were also surprised at the types of courses being taken online. Some of the online offerings that were often mentioned by the study's participants were courses such as conversational Spanish, English, and multicultural education. Also, study participants were very disinclined to want their content methods courses to be taught online. Very few of the participants thought this was good practice. Therefore, while online courses do have an appeal for students, this appeal is somewhat limited to courses that do not seem to involve content methods or other coursework that directly provides them with skills they deem critical to working with ELLs and their parents. This finding is in keeping with McAlister, Rivera, and Hallam (2001), who found that courses that appeal to a larger audience and have less rigorous methodological and pedagogical requirements may be more appropriate initial course selections for those venturing into online coursework.

Although participants did not react favorably to the idea that content methods courses should be taught online, they nonetheless were enthusiastic about courses such as conversational Spanish, English, and multicultural education. These perceptions, coupled with the participants' favoring traditional coursework as opposed to online work, are also important findings. This could be an indication of the status accorded linguistically and culturally diverse students in general and ELLs in particular. Perhaps subjects perceived the need for traditional coursework as a known quantity and did not want to take risks with their preparation. In terms of courses such as multicultural education, Spanish, and English, perhaps the subjects did not perceive these to be as critical to their preparation as their content methods courses. How is it possible to truly become a culturally responsive teacher (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), when we spend so little time in contact with and experiencing what makes other people different from ourselves? Pre-service teachers who take language and culture courses online may be limiting their ability to understand ELLs, their families, and communities.

Based on the analysis of this data, some inferences and findings can be discerned. These are:

- 1) Pre-service teachers are aware of online coursework.
- 2) Online coursework did have an appeal to many of the subjects.
- 3) Study participants favored traditional coursework as opposed to online courses (in the preparation of ELL teachers).

- 4) There is an apparent lack of policy for the use of online coursework in the preparation of bilingual education and ESL teachers.

The teacher shortage is real and in minority communities it is even more pressing. However, is providing a degree online the way to solve this shortage? Community colleges and universities alike are offering more and more coursework in this fast track manner. Much of this is done under the mantra of extending the institution to the community and cost effectiveness. However, the young professional field of language minority education in the United States has learned a few very difficult lessons in its 30 plus year history. For example, we have learned that children need credible language models in order to more effectively acquire a second language. We have learned that teachers are responsible for lowering the affective filter in a classroom in order to allow children a maximum opportunity to acquire a second language (Krashen, 1981). Will this be the case in online coursework? How does modeling occur on the Internet? How does respect come across on a computer screen (Midobuche, 1999)? Will we be putting more and more language minority students in no-win situations (Midobuche & Benavides, 2002a)? We must remember that teaching is a social activity. As such it requires great oral and written communication skills along with providing students with sensitive and knowledgeable language models for effective learning.

Another concern is practicum or field experiences. Many content methods courses require a field-based component or practicum out in the schools. How would this be accomplished in an online format? What type of supervision would be provided? What is needed is a reflective review of how best to meet the needs of all children—especially those whose first language is not English.

We raise these questions because we are concerned that at a time when we need more quality in the professional field of bilingual and ESL education, institutions seem to be responding mainly with solutions aimed at providing quantity. At times this has led to quick-fix solutions. There is a real possibility of abusing the field of bilingual and ESL education by allowing the exclusive use of online approaches to become the preferred medium of instruction. Since some areas of study do not lend themselves readily to some of these approaches, there is a potential for not preparing teachers (particularly bilingual education and ESL teachers) in a manner that is consistent with providing quality to the field. Pre-service teachers who advance to become teachers of ELLs will not be teaching from the convenience and isolation of their homes. They need to have communication skills, empathy, understanding, classroom management skills, content knowledge, and the pedagogical skills necessary to deliver comprehensible information and instruction to children who do not speak English.

It is very important to integrate technology into the preparation of teachers of ELLs. However, we must caution anyone who would use an exclusive online approach to obtain a degree and licensure in teaching—especially in the field of bilingual and ESL education. The data generated in this study shows an appeal and an awareness of online coursework. However, the subjects in this study also strongly objected to methods courses and other components of their preparation being given to them in an online format. Traditional approaches were favored in their preparation for teaching ELLs. These results only give impetus for further study in the efficacy of online instruction as well as the preparation of teachers of ELLs. These studies should be aimed at providing us with guidelines and policies for the incorporation of technology into teacher preparation programs of teachers of ELLs.

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