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Reframing Teacher Identities: ESL pre-service teachers' perspectives of teaching and learning in Australian

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Abstract:

With a significant increase in the number of English as a Second Language (ESL) students attending universities and entering teacher education profession in Australia (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2003), the support for them is becoming an increasingly important issue facing Australian education institutions. These student teachers, who bring multi-cultural experiences into Australian classrooms, confront difficulties and challenges due to their language and cultural differences, as well as their status of being student teachers. This study involves the participation of eleven ESL pre-service teachers from the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania. It intends to find out these ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning experiences in Australian classrooms, and what support strategies are in place to support them. Data were drawn from surveys, focus group meetings and researcher's reflective journals. The paper argues that all support models need to be reframed with considerations of the ESL pre-service teachers' perspectives. It moves towards the elaboration of an emancipatory approach which opens spaces for ESL pre-service teachers to re-frame their practices as well as the Bachelor of Teaching program, to provide enriching cultural experiences for all.

1. Introduction

There are increasing numbers of ESL pre-service teachers entering the teacher education profession in Australian universities. The increase in the number of international students attending universities and acquiring higher education in Australia is significant in recent years (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2003). Many of these international students choose to come to teacher education institutions in their goal to be professional teachers. These beginning teachers bring different experiences and a global perspective to Australian classrooms. In response, universities are under pressure to accommodate and provide assistance to these students in relation to their significant cultural and language differences (Cruickshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003; Dong, 2004). Hence, the teaching of ESL pre-service teachers is becoming an increasingly important issue facing Australian universities.

With an increasing number of ESL students entering teacher education, the support for ESL pre-service teachers' teaching and learning becomes a critical issue. In acquiring a formal teacher education degree in Australia ESL pre-service teachers need to "confront the challenge of a 'metamorphosis' in their identities" (Han, 2005, p. 2). That is, the construction of their identity shifts from their 'old self' to a new teacher identity (Han, 2005). In dealing with this situation, ESL pre-service teachers need to be provided with strategies and support structures to address this identity shift. This study seeks to understand, through researching ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of one teacher education site, what support strategies would be beneficial in supporting ESL pre-service teachers to become teachers.

In this paper, we describe the perceptions of a group of eleven ESL pre-service teachers, including the researcher, from the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania. Data were gathered from these ESL student teachers' responses to the survey questions, ideas expressed in the focus group meetings, their journal entries, and the researchers' reflective journals, for the purpose of seeking further clarification of how to best cater for their needs in the future teaching and learning. It is also believed that the findings of this study may provide an opportunity to

improve teacher education practices, especially support mediation for ESL pre-service teachers in their transition from an ESL student to a professional teacher.

2. Literature review

Many researchers have identified the importance of providing support to students from non-English speaking background in teacher education profession (Cruickshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003; Dong, 2004; Li & Kaye, 1998). It is evidenced by a number of studies that ESL pre-service teachers from other language and cultural backgrounds bring students, in English speaking countries, multi-cultural learning experiences (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Cruickshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003; Han, 2005). Hence, support structures put in place in universities can assist in the development of worldly teachers, who have multi-cultural and global perspectives (Clement & Outlaw, 2002). An examination of the support strategies adapted by universities would be beneficial for the development of intercultural competence both with beginning international pre-service teachers and for the educational communities in which they are involved.

As ESL pre-service teachers are both ESL students and pre-service teachers, they are required to have a higher level of English proficiency, so as to complete course work at university, as well as to perform as professional teachers in classrooms. Some difficulties ESL pre-service teachers face, as a result of the language and/cultural differences, could be: hardly understanding lectures, getting poor marks for assignments, lacking of participation in tutorials, having problem communicating with colleague teachers, and hardly gain rapport from their students (Cruickshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003; Han, 2005). ESL pre-service teachers, who confront these problems, may feel under pressure, or even loose their hope of becoming a teacher and withdraw from the program. Thus, effective support strategies are never so important for them when these challenges emerged.

ESL pre-service teachers also face some problems, which are different from other ESL international students, due to their status of being pre-service teacher. One specific area is during their practicum experiences, as the professional development of pre-service teachers involves making connections between what they have learned at the university and how this knowledge and skills can be applied in the classroom (Kiggins & Gibson, 2003). Practicum experiences are an important part in ESL pre-service teachers' study of becoming professional teachers, and developing their own teacher identities through teaching in Australian classrooms. Since pre-service teachers' teaching is strongly influenced by the learning experiences they had in their prior education, ESL pre-service teachers' lacking of prior experiences in local learning environment would also make a negative impact on their way of becoming teachers.

Many Australian universities and other tertiary education institutions have developed a variety of support strategies to address the issues faced by international students. The traditional support strategy refers to university assistance, where ESL students have access to language assessment, self-access materials, as well as short courses on study skills, such as academic writing, note making, and grammar (Cruickshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003). However, teacher educators nowadays intend to develop support models for a more specific purpose of assisting ESL pre-service teachers in their teaching profession. For instance, at the University of Sydney ESL pre-service teachers are supported by a number of teaching strategies including the Cruickshank, Newell, and Cole's (2003) mode, which provides remedial classes, in each semester, to help them cope with their mainstream classes.

3. Background of the program

The Bachelor of Teaching program in the Faculty of Education is a two-year postgraduate degree with a graduate entry requirement. Pre-service teachers are able to choose one of three specialisations: Primary School, Middle School and Secondary School teaching. The program has curriculum and method classes as well as a professional practice component, Professional Studies, which is based around understanding the practice of teaching.

The four practicum experiences, which pre-service teachers take over the two years of the program, is seen as a significant part of the Bachelor of Teaching program. They involve pre-service teachers going into schools and start to take responsibilities in teaching with help and guide from one or more colleague teachers. As same as the local pre-service teachers, ESL pre-service teachers take School University Partnership Program (SUPP) and four practicum experiences in their two-year study.

These ESL pre-service teachers in the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania have relevant support and assistance as follows (International Students, 2009):

- University wide content-based courses, which allow ESL students to learn languages in meaningful contexts, rather than to have them study the language as a separate subject;
- Tutoring approach and focus groups, one in which support staff work with individuals or small groups on specific areas of needs (Cruickshank, Newell, & Cole, 2003).;
- Self-directed learning, which is mainly behind the establishment of self-access materials and the provision of on-line support and other materials in colleges, schools, and universities (International Students, 2009);
- Other support services, (e.g. the English Language Support for International Students (EL SIS, 2009) provides all ESL students with weekly skills-based courses, focusing on academic writing and preparation for examinations) (EL SIS, 2009).

Different from other ESL students, the ESL pre-service teachers are a special group of international students that needs to be provided with additional assistance, due to their status of being beginning teachers. They need not only language and cultural support on their course work, but also support on their practicum experiences. This research focuses more on ESL pre-service teachers' needs in relation to their teaching profession, specifically, their practicum experiences.

4. Research background and participants

The research involved the participation of eleven ESL pre-service teachers who came from four non-English speaking countries. The participants in this research group included five pre-service teachers from Chile, four from China, one from Japan and one German pre-service teacher. The names appeared in this paper are pseudonyms. Of these eleven participants, the five Chilean pre-service teachers and the one from Germany were exchange students who were studying a degree in the Faculties of Education in their own countries and came to Australia for a six month exchange experience. The other pre-service teachers, however, were doing the Bachelor of Teaching full-time. These participants were represented in both the first year and second year of the program.

5. Aims and research objectives

The study aims to determine the dominant discourses present in ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of their experiences in learning and teaching within the Bachelor of Teaching program in the Faculty of Education. The research seeks to find out how ESL pre-service teachers are supported in both their practicum experiences as well as their university courses to enable future ESL pre-service teachers to be better supported in their teaching and learning. This paper addresses the following three issues,

- What are the experiences and perceptions of ESL pre-service teachers studying in the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania?
- What are the responses and actions undertaken by educational institutions to include the culturally diverse student population?
- What support should be in place to provide ESL pre-service teachers with a meaningful cross-cultural experience, and assist their shift of teacher identity?

6. Methodology and data collection

The research was conducted during an eight week period and included the following practicum

experiences: the School University Partnership Program (SUPP), Professional Experience One (PE1) and Professional Experience Three (PE3). The ESL pre-service teachers confronted some difficulties during their teaching practicum at schools, but they were not chosen for this reason. The participants were encouraged to record and reflect on their teaching experiences, including the engagement, happiness, achievement, as well as their confuses, doubts, problems, difficulties and frustrations. These thoughts, feelings and perceptions appeared in different forms of evidence, such as answers to survey questions, journal entries, and discussion in focus group meetings.

The research period of eight weeks included four weeks of the first year pre-service teachers' experience of the School University Partnership Program (SUPP) as well as their Professional Experience One (PE1). However, the second year pre-service teachers involved in the research undertook a Professional Experience Three (PE3) in the first four weeks of the research period. The data were collected in the form of surveys, focus group meetings, participants' journal entries and the researcher's reflective journals.

Surveys were given before and after the Professional Experience One (PE1) and the Professional Experience Three (PE3). Two surveys were sent out to the first year pre-service teachers before and after the Professional Experience One (PE1). These surveys used both open-ended and pre-coded questions to gain some understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions of a teacher education context. The open-ended questions offered the pre-service teachers more freedom to express feelings and applied more details on qualifications and justification (Sarantakos, 2005); the pre-coded questions, however, provided the researcher with more specific information that was needed.

Focus group meetings were organised every Tuesday afternoon during these eight weeks. The discussion of the focus group meetings was audio taped and made into transcripts to enable further analysis and interpretation of conversations that occurred between the lecturer and ESL pre-service teachers as well as discussions between ESL pre-service teachers themselves. The conversation provided detailed information about participants' attitudes and opinions towards their experiences.

The researcher's reflective journal and participants' journal entries were collected in the last week of the data collection to further support the evidence. All the participants were asked to keep a journal about their teaching and learning experiences during the eight week period. These journal entries were one of the main sources of data. The content of the journals focused on the everyday perceptions of these ESL pre-service teachers on teaching and learning in Australian classrooms. The journal was a further support to the transcripts of the tape recording of these sessions.

7. Data analysis and findings

A constructivist grounded theory approach was used to interpret and interrogate the textual data and transcripts to find the dominant discourses present in the ESL pre-service teachers' responses to their experiences. The researcher used three coding processes: open, axial and selective coding to organise the collection of data (Sarantakos, 2005). Through each step of the coding approach, the textual data were identified and labeled into open codes, themes, and categories. The responses to the identified codes were recorded and constructed according to the frequency of their occurrence. Thirty seven open codes, which are in relation to ESL pre-service teachers' teaching and learning experiences, emerged from the open coding process. These codes were then reclassified into fourteen themes in the axial coding stage which are shown below:

- Cultural differences in teaching and learning
- Language affects teaching and learning
- Experience in teaching in different settings
- Beginning teachers' concerns
- Attributes teachers should have

- Acknowledging importance of Professional Experiences
- Realisation of the importance of teaching philosophy
- Support from the university to help with teaching
- Comparing teaching with own experience
- Need to learn more about teaching strategies
- Doubting oneself in learning and teaching
- Reason for choice of education
- Difference in teaching environment
- Linking Profession Experiences with course work

In the last step of the coding process, the fourteen themes were further refined and reduced into six categories in relation to the ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of their experiences in the Bachelor of Teaching program. The categories are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1
Selective Codes (Categories)

Selective Codes (Categories)	Responses
1. Cultural aspect in teaching and learning	487
2. Experience about the Professional Experience practicums	400
3. Beginning teachers' concerns	314
4. Language aspect in teaching and learning	127
5. Attributes teachers should have	121
6. Reason for choice of education	16

Based on these categories emerged from data analysis, the research has uncovered two significant findings in understanding ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of their experiences of the Bachelor of Teaching program. The first significant finding is that ESL pre-service teachers reconceptualise their knowledge of teaching through their practicum experiences, that is, through phronesis. The second significant finding in the research is the construction of binaries in the ESL pre-service teachers' knowledge of teaching.

Phronesis

The first finding involves the process of phronesis, in which the ESL pre-service teachers explore and refine their own perceptions of teaching through their practicum experiences. As Sawir (2005, p. 568) argues, 'When students from non-English spoken backgrounds enter English-speaking nations, they must adjust rapidly and learn fast, coping both academically and socially'. Therefore, these ESL pre-service teachers need to develop and reconceptualise their perceptions of teaching on their practicum experiences and in turn make adjustments to their teaching practices. Developing a 'practical wisdom based on the perception of a situation' (Korthagen cited in Berry, 2004, p. 1307) on their practicum experiences is a challenge for these ESL pre-service teachers. Added to these initial perceptions is their difficulty in speaking the language which limits their understanding and perceptions of teaching.

A significant factor which assists these pre-service teachers to develop a practical wisdom (Korthagen cited in Berry, 2004) is through the use of support strategies such as the focus group meetings. Traditional teacher education practices have been challenged in that pre-service teachers cannot successfully produce the knowledge they have been presented and expected to produce in their own classrooms (Berry, 2004). Hence, learning about teaching needs to be much more 'context-specific, personal and dynamic than simply transferring theories of good teaching into practice' (Korthagen & Russel cited in Berry, 2004, p. 1299).

For phronesis to occur successfully this means that the university needs to provide structures, such as focus group meetings, that support ESL pre-service teachers' construction of knowledge. In comparison to traditional lectures and tutorials, the focus group meetings provide ESL pre-service teachers with more opportunities to discuss their concerns and ideas, as the topics of the meetings are designed with more of a focus on their developing perspectives and the size of the groups are usually smaller. Not unlike focused writing groups in university settings, these focus groups support the construction of these ESL professional identities. As Lee and Boud (2003, p. 188) argue, 'Academic identities, including identities as researchers, are forged, rehearsed and remade in local sites of practice'. The Bachelor of Teaching program is a local site of practice (Lee & Boud, 2003) for ESL pre-service teachers to develop and construct their teaching identities. This support strategy is similarly argued by Cruickshank, Newell and Cole (2003), in which small discussion groups are more likely to identify ESL pre-service teachers' specific needs and assist the ESL pre-service teachers in course work studying and in their future teaching.

Binaries

As this research has an explicit focus on the ESL pre-service teachers' teaching and learning in the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania, there are a few 'living contradictions' to emerge in their developing subjectivities (Whitehead cited in Berry, 2004). The ESL pre-service teachers' knowledge about teaching is reframed through phronesis which has the discursive effect of producing a number of conflicting binaries in their knowledge construction. These binaries are shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2
Conflicting binaries

Initial perceptions of teaching and learning	Reframed perceptions of teaching and learning
Teaching is about transmission	Teaching is about the co- construction of knowledge with students
Teacher-centred climate	Student-centred climate
Surface attributes of a teacher	Inner attributes of a teacher
Initial teacher identity	Developing professional multicultural identity
Scared and unprepared for teaching	Confident
Cultural conflict in teaching practice	Developing a multicultural teaching philosophy
English language is a limitation	First language is an advantage

It can be seen from Table 1 above that the ESL pre-service teachers reframe their perceptions of teaching and learning, however, they learn to live with the contradictions and binaries in their knowledge construction. As Davies (1994, p. 2) argues, 'It enables us to see the diversity and richness of our experience of being a person as we find ourselves positioned now one way and now another'.

The main change in these ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching is how knowledge is constructed. That is, teaching in an Australian classroom is not about the transmission of knowledge, which appears as a teacher-centred teaching climate; instead, it is about guiding students to construct their own knowledge, values and beliefs, which appears as a typical student-centred climate. Another change is how these ESL pre-service teachers' initial teacher identities change and adapt Australian practices. Their ideas about what makes a good teacher change to include teaching strategies. The ESL pre-service teachers' identities shift from their 'old self' to a new professional teacher identity (Han, 2005), and they start to build a new rapport in Australian classrooms with this new identity to 'gain respect from zero' (Han, 2005, p. 2).

From the binary model, Table 1, it can be seen that, ESL pre-service teachers' knowledge and perceptions about teaching have been reframed through the pragmatic practice of teaching experiences. For phronesis to occur successfully, however, there needs to be support structures in

place, such as focus group meetings, to assist these ESL pre-service teachers to reframe their practice. This strategy can assist in positively reframing the ESL pre-service teachers' subjectivities in becoming cross-cultural teachers in Australia (Clement & Outlaw, 2002).

8. Implications

This study also provides recommendations that work towards improving teacher education practices to better support ESL pre-service teachers in learning to be a teacher in Australian schools. One significant recommendation is that this teacher education site improves and develops the support strategies for ESL pre-service teachers. It needs to provide, as in this research, focus group meetings in which these ESL pre-service teachers can learn to reconstruct their teaching practices in 'local sites of practice' (Lee & Boud, 2003). Also, this research also suggests an enabling program, which is an online based program that can provide ESL pre-service teachers with opportunities to exchange ideas with lecturers or other pre-service teachers through on line discussions or sending messages. These support strategies, which cater for ESL pre-service teachers' concerns and perceptions, can be used to assist future ESL pre-service teachers in their teaching and learning in the Bachelor of Teaching program at the University of Tasmania.

9. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to understand ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of the Bachelor of Teaching program so that it could make recommendations to improve the quality of teaching and support given to them. The effects of globalisation and technology means that teacher education institutions need to provide and create spaces that allow for the development of global teachers rather than only focusing on locally acceptable teachers (Han, 2005). The global perspectives and pedagogy that global teachers bring into Australia provide students with a cross-cultural experience, which help them to meet their future lifeworlds' needs in this rapidly changing world (Merryfield, Jarchow, & Pickert, 1997). Hence, setting up support strategies to assist them to enter the Australian teacher profession is becoming a necessary feature of teacher education institutions.

This research has made transparent the continual need for teacher education institutions to provide supportive strategies that can better assist ESL pre-service teachers' teaching and learning. Supportive strategies and enabling programs, such as those made in the recommendations, are crucial in assisting ESL pre-service teachers to overcome the cultural and language difficulties and to develop their own professional identities to become worldly teachers who have a cross-cultural perspective to teaching and learning.

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