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# ESL Teacher-Candidates' Beliefs About Language

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*How do ESL teacher-candidates grapple with beliefs about language during their professional training? In this article, we present the findings of a qualitative research study conducted in a large eastern Canadian university Bachelor of Education program. As Johnson (2010) has recently noted, despite extensive research and theoretical work that stresses the importance of functional conceptualizations of language based on social practice, much ESL teacher training still revolves around the skills needed to transmit antiquated notions centered on descriptions of phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar. This study identifies five key factors that influenced how the teacher candidates in this study thought of language: prior beliefs, interaction with peers, the course textbook, lectures, and the teaching practicum. We found that our participants demonstrated willingness to consider language as social practice and argue that this tendency can be strengthened in particular through the integration of teacher-training course content as it pertains to functional conceptions of language with the practicum experience.*

*Comment les enseignants-stagiaires en ALS traitent-ils les croyances relatives à la langue pendant leur formation professionnelle? Dans cet article, nous présentons les résultats d'une recherche qualitative entreprise dans un programme de B.Ed. d'une grande université de l'est du Canada. Comme Johnson (2010) a noté récemment, malgré une vaste quantité de recherche et de travail théorique soulignant l'importance des conceptualisations fonctionnelles de la langue et reposant sur la pratique sociale, une grande partie de la formation des enseignants en ALS mise les capacités nécessaires pour transmettre des notions désuètes portant sur des descriptions phonologiques, morphologiques, syntaxiques et grammaticales. L'article identifie cinq facteurs clés qui avaient influencé les croyances des enseignants-stagiaires sur la langue : croyances antérieures, interaction avec les pairs, le manuel de cours, les cours et les stages. Nous avons trouvé que nos participants se montraient aptes à considérer la langue comme une pratique sociale et nous expliquons que cette tendance peut être renforcée, notamment par l'intégration aux stages du contenu des cours de formation qui porte sur les conceptions fonctionnelles de la langue.*

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It is not enough ... to identify differences or tensions between teachers' beliefs and practices; rather, attempts need to be made to explore, acknowledge and understand the underlying reasons behind such tensions. (Phipps & Borg, 2009, p. 388)

*A sociocultural perspective* on human learning challenges the way second language teacher education has traditionally thought about how teachers learn to teach, how they think about and teach language, [and] the broader social, cultural and historical macro-structures that are ever present and ever changing. (Johnson, 2010, pp. 123-124)

Preservice teachers' prior knowledge of "good" teaching is powerful and an important element with which we as teacher educators must contend. Until we develop ways to invite our students to share their lay beliefs and ways to understand the implications of those beliefs, we will fall short of actually practicing with them the very principles we are busy teaching. (Holt-Reynolds, 1992, p. 22)

## **Introduction**

What are the beliefs about language that English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teacher candidates bring to professional programs, and how do they grapple with these beliefs during their training? More particularly, how do teacher candidates grapple with the notion that language is a functionally based form of *social practice* (Johnson, 2010) that goes beyond structurally based descriptions of phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar? In this article, we focus our attention on these questions through an analysis of qualitative research findings of a study of teacher candidates in a large Canadian Bachelor of Education program. Through examination of the themes that emerged from the data, we identified five key factors that influenced how these respondents thought of language: prior beliefs, interaction with peers, the course textbook, lectures, and the teaching practicum. Noteworthy about these findings is that the teaching practicum, which occurred in general K-12 classrooms, outweighed the other three factors and significantly restricted these teacher candidates' ability to explore the notion of language as social practice.

In this article, we first lay out our theoretical frameworks as they relate to conceptions of language and teachers' beliefs. We then discuss the case and method and present the data and findings related to our study. We conclude with remarks about the implications of our findings, arguing for the importance of integrating teacher training course content as it pertains to functional conceptions of language with the practicum experience.

## **Conceptions of Language**

As Johnson (2010) has noted, the public discourse or commonsense attitude about ESL teaching has long assumed that explicit knowledge about language stands at the core of what has been defined as good pedagogy. As noted below, the mainstream teachers who sponsored our respondents in their general K-12 practica shared these commonsense attitudes. Being a good ESL

teacher has historically meant that one must first master and then transmit a cognitively based understanding of explicit descriptions of English. Being a good language-learner meant that one was able to describe and accurately use correct forms of phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar. This is closely connected to the heavy influence that structural linguistics has historically exerted on the field, as opposed to other disciplinary influences such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, or general education (Stern, 1983).

The second-language-teaching field changed somewhat with the advent of the *communicative approach*. This approach, which has become the most commonly accepted methodology for ESL language programs since the 1980s (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004), emphasizes learner-centered instruction, pedagogical task-based activities, and a concentration on function rather than form (Brown, 2000). As Allen and Widdowson (1979) stated in a seminal early text, the approach defines language as consisting of "the rules of use as well as rules of grammar" (p. 141). The widespread adoption of the communicative approach now meant that ESL teachers were encouraged to teach the language in ways that took into account specific social contexts. This is part of the greater effect of sociological concerns in the field, a trend Block (2003) has called the "social turn" in second-language (L2) education.

As Howatt and Widdowson (2004) make clear, the communicative approach is based on Hymes' (1972) model of *communicative competence*. This approach, although retaining a central place for the notion of language as structure, refocused classroom treatments to *competence*, a criterion or skill-based orientation that emphasizes "how you use what you know" in reference to a normative standard more than "what you know" about an abstract system (Tight, 2002). In second-language education, the notion of communicative competence focuses on how learning the L2 is not just a matter of learning structures, but also the ability to master the rules of use for the target language in social contexts in reference to a normative or native-like standard. In this approach, the communicative function of language holds a place as important as that of structure.

The principles that Hymes (1972) expounded were subsequently adapted by Canale and Swain (1980) into what has become a highly influential four-part language competence model: the more explicit language elements such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar (linguistic competence); the social and cultural rules underlying language (sociocultural competence); the strategies used to overcome language difficulties or enhance communication (strategic competence); and the forms of discourse and conventional use in structures of communication (discoursal competence).

In Canada, where this study took place, teachers are quite commonly directed to use the communicative approach and Canale and Swain's (1980) competence model in curriculum and policy documents at both the national and local levels. Examples of these documents include Citizenship and Im-

migration Canada's *Canadian Language Benchmarks* (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000) and the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2007) K-12 curriculum document *English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development*.

Borg (2006) noted that teachers' knowledge about the structural and functional components of the target language is rarely translated into pedagogical practice. This is because, as Johnson (2010) notes, the "traditional definition of language that has permeated the content of L2 teacher education programs may not provide teachers with a conceptualization of language that is amenable or useful to L2 instruction" (p. 42). Experienced teachers soon find that there is truth to Krashen's (1981) distinction between language acquisition and the cognitively based learning of language structures, because the necessities of dealing with concrete language use for the purposes of communication rarely provide opportunities for sustained abstract treatments of phonology, morphology, syntax, or grammar, and vice versa.

In contrast to structurally based conceptions of language (Chomsky, 1965), Johnson (2010) has called for a new orientation that focuses on *language as a social practice*. She cites Halliday's (1985) *systemic functional linguistics* as the most prominent theory that defines language as a resource that provides sets of meaningful choices rather than a system of formal grammar rules. Language is a resource, a set of meaningful choices for the user, rather than a system of formal grammar rules.

Halliday (1985) makes different assumptions from those of Chomsky (1965) about the relative importance of social and innate influences on the brain's ability to use language. Whereas Chomsky described our knowledge of the language as being hard-wired into our genetic code, Halliday emphasized the social determination of our language use. Chomsky concentrates on the formal structures of language such as syntax and discrete units of language (e.g., morphemes and phonemes). Halliday, on the other hand, takes as his unit of analysis the text, because he believes that functional meaning in language is not expressed in smaller components.

Halliday's (1985) orientation places little value on positing ideal or abstract versions of a language because its use is organized in chunks and not in discrete words or phonemes. Thus there is no orthodox or *received* version of a language that can be separated from meaning. In systemic functional linguistics, the focus is on the social meaning of language (Field of Discourse), the role played by the participants (Tenor of Discourse), and the status assigned to the language being used (Mode of Discourse).

It is important to note, as we describe below, that the second-language methodology course that our respondents attended dealt with the practical implications of these two concepts of language. The teacher candidates were provided with simplified summaries of the principal components of the systems developed by both Chomsky (1965) and Halliday (1985) in the form of notes and lectures. This information was provided for the purposes of aug-

menting the course content. Our respondents were not graded on their formal knowledge of these two orientations in linguistics. Although acknowledging the merits of the former orientation, we made known our own personal preferences for the latter. Naturally, given the professional nature of the program, we did not dwell on the technical aspects of structural and functional linguistics. However, we did explicitly introduce the notion of language as functional social practice in contrast to a conception based on descriptions of phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar.

Before describing our empirical study, we provide an overview of the debates pertaining to what has been commonly described as the teachers' knowledge base: the beliefs that teachers hold about pedagogy.

## Teachers' Beliefs

Teachers' beliefs make up an important part of what has been described as a teacher's *knowledge base*. In general education, the knowledge base that individual teachers possess represents the accumulated specialized body of knowledge particular to teaching (Calderhead, 1996; Holt Reynolds, 1992). A teacher's knowledge base is a result of the tensions between prior beliefs held, the knowledge acquired through reflective practice, and the institutional contexts in which one works. Strom (1991) stresses that "the professionalization of teaching depends on showing that teaching, like other learned professions, requires mastery of a specialized body of knowledge that is applied with wisdom and ethical concern." This wisdom is achieved through continual reexamination of one's beliefs through reflective practice (Snook, 2007).

The study of teachers' beliefs has become a major academic preoccupation, both in general education (Freeman-Moir & Scott, 2007; Kagan, 1992; Karavas-Doukas, 1996) and in ESL (Farrell, 2007; Garcia, 2008; Phipps & Borg, 2009). Although the research has shown no simple link between beliefs and practice (Freeman, 2002; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1985) and important distinctions must be made between the beliefs held by novice practitioners and those held by teacher candidates (Borg, 2006), the importance of teachers' beliefs is generally held to structure how teachers "interpret their responsibilities, implement their plans and motivate their interactive decisions during a lesson" (Richards, 1998, p. 53). This is especially true in terms of the interrelationship of goal hierarchies and assessment priorities (Woods, 1996).

In their seminal article on teacher candidates' beliefs, Freeman and Johnson (1998) argued that although researchers have devoted considerable time in recent years to the development of a substantial body of knowledge about what teachers need to have for language and literacy education, less is known about their knowledge base. They argued for a reconceptualization of ESL teachers' knowledge base that focuses on the teacher and the activity of teaching itself. This article set off a set of heated debates rarely found in academic ESL journals.

Scholars in ESL teacher education more specifically have commented on the effect of beliefs on teacher candidates' professionalism and practice (Horwitz, 1985; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). Some researchers have argued that this effect is negligible (Kagan, 1992; Richardson, 1996). Most researchers in the field, however, have taken the position that prior beliefs form the basis of what teacher candidates learn in bachelor of education programs (Freeman & Richards, 1993; Pajares, 1992). The importance of the prior beliefs, especially in terms of their effect on reflective practice, has led to the recommendation that they form the basis for the development of ESL teacher training programming (Stanley, 1998; Wallace, 1991), much as they do in much of general education (Schön, 1987). This emphasis on reflective practice serves as the basis for the contention that teacher candidates must be encouraged to adopt attitudes that take local contexts into account (Johnson & Golombek, 2003; Sharkey, 2004) and go beyond simplistic notions of *best practices or one size fits all* (Edge & Richards, 1998).

Some of the more contentious debates in the literature about teachers' beliefs focus on the question of what constitutes core as opposed to peripheral beliefs (Borg, 2006; Pajares, 1992). Although there is some disagreement in the literature as to what constitutes core beliefs, they are generally understood to be those that teachers consider central to their practice, normative and stable over time. As we demonstrate below in our discussion of our findings, beliefs about language formed a deeply significant portion of the responses that we examined in this study. Thus although linguistically based beliefs were central to the concerns voiced by these teacher candidates, there was a considerable degree of struggle over what constitutes language.

The respondents under study were, of course, at the beginning of their careers. However, even if we cannot be sure whether the beliefs that we have uncovered through this study will be held over time, we can say that they form essential elements in how these teacher candidates will construct their long-term core beliefs. Understanding these elements addresses the call made by Phipps and Borg (2009) to understand the underlying tensions between teaching beliefs and practice in this milieu.

## **The Study: Case and Method**

The data for this study were collected in an English-as-a-second-language/English-language learning (ESL/ELL) methods course that we taught over two years in a large research-based eastern bilingual Canadian university in three sections during fall 2007 and winter 2008. In this university, the Faculty of Education offered undergraduate programs for approximately 1,600 students in teacher education and Native teacher education in English and French. The respondents for this study were enrolled in a one-year, full-time program that leads to a baccalaureate in education and a recommendation for certification by the provincial College of Teachers that allows them to

teach in public elementary and secondary schools. The program was one of the largest of the 18 provincially certified teacher education programs locally, and it met the criteria designed for consistency across the province. Like other programs of this sort, the teacher candidates took courses in educational foundations and their areas of specialization. They also went twice into the field on practica in the public school system during the program. Thus we can confidently assert that it was typical of a teacher education program in this jurisdiction. The teacher candidates had a 10-week teaching practicum at a mid-point during the term in which this course was offered, so they took approximately half of this ESL methods course before their practicum and half afterward.

Of the 150 K-12 teacher candidates who took these courses, 15 agreed to let their blog contributions be used for the purposes of this particular study. These had various subject specialties and were enrolled in this ESL/ELL methods course as a half-course elective. Approximately half were destined for employment in elementary schools, half in secondary. Given how ESL programming is structured in this context, although most of these teacher candidates did not see themselves as potentially employed initially as ESL specialists, all believed that they would inevitably have ESL students in the classes that they would subsequently teach in the multilingual province where the university was located. Many hoped eventually to become ESL specialists in the course of their careers.

As part of the course requirements, the teacher candidates enrolled in this course participated in a blog by making four contributions, each amounting to no fewer than 100 words. There was no grading based on any qualitative criterion. In other words, the nominal grade given to the participants was based solely on their having contributed the number of words requested and was awarded uniformly to all teacher candidates taking the course. The blog was not open to public scrutiny or contribution. In framing this assignment, we encouraged the participants to comment (professionally) on one another's blog contributions. As a result, approximately half the contributions were framed explicitly as responses to particular comments and resulted in conversational trees. Even those contributions framed as new comments often contained references to earlier contributions.

The blog provided the students with the opportunity to grapple with issues dealt with in class and covered in the course material. The other course requirements (a lesson plan and a class presentation) did not provide them with the same scope. Hence the blogs were determined to be the best source of data pertaining to the beliefs that these teacher candidates held about second-language teaching. It is important to note, for reasons mentioned below, that the course professors did not contribute to the blog. Nor did they offer specific prompts or guidelines for the contributions either

at the beginning of the course or throughout its duration. Other than being encouraged to respond to one another's comments, the participants were simply asked to contribute blog entries on any topic related to the course in which they were interested.

Each section of the course lasted six weeks and used a text by Law and Eckes (2000) as a required source for in-class group discussion. This well-known text was selected because its principal focus is on practical and concrete teaching practice. It covers such topics as making decisions related to classroom management, establishing goals, testing and assessment, differentiating language components, determining the role of content area instruction, and choosing teaching resources. Importantly for the purposes of this study, the text also deals with concepts of language and endorses the view that language is primarily communicative. Although the authors of this textbook state that they want no part in debates related to phonics and whole language, their section on reading, for example, does highlight the principles central to the latter orientation. Furthermore, although they endorse a limited role for the explicit treatment of linguistic elements, we believe that it is significant that grammatical accuracy is referred to only twice in the text and in ways that make it clearly subordinate to fluency in communication.

The text also emphasizes the role of culture in second-language acquisition. So, for example, the text takes the position that immigrant language-learners are making a "transition from one culture to another" (Law & Eckes, 2000, p. 70). The text also (without citation) summarizes a well-known model of acculturation (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) in linear terms. Newcomers go through four stages of acculturation: honeymoon (extreme happiness), hostility (coming to reality), humor (resolution of feelings), and home (feeling "native" in their new country). Given this content, in our opinion, the authors do not go far in challenging or problematizing issues related to sociocultural perspectives of language or culture. Based on the implicit orientations found in it in terms of language and culture, we would say that the text clearly endorses notions of competence consistent with the communicative approach. Based on the student course evaluations, this text was clearly popular with our respondents; it was rated *very good* or *excellent* by over 90% of the students polled.

As professors, we believed that it was important to augment the text with lectures intended to problematize notions of language more explicitly. So our lectures focused on such topics as problematic notions of culture, the globalization of English, language policy, and varied models of language. Although the practical focus and time restraints related to the program made it difficult to go into great depth, these teacher candidates were exposed to debates related to structural, functional, and sociocultural models of language. Although we clearly endorsed the implicit message in the text that language was more than descriptions of phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar, we introduced content that explicitly promoted notions of language as social practice.



We wish to make clear that ethical approval for this study was obtained on the basis of the data being defined as secondary use. Thus no blog data were analyzed, and no interviews were conducted until after the end of the program in which these teacher candidates were enrolled. Even so, all the interviews that were subsequently conducted and all the blog data were compiled by two research assistants who assigned pseudonyms to all participants before submitting the data to us for analysis. No data from non-consenting teacher candidates were used in this study. The interview data collected were not used for the purposes of this particular article for the reasons noted above.

Although this is a qualitative study with no claim to representativeness (see below), we can make a few comments about the demographics of these respondents. All 15 were in their early 20s with bachelor's degrees in a variety of disciplines and from several institutions. Several had experience in non-formal teaching environments (such as outdoor camp counselors), in overseas non-credit adult English-as-a-foreign-language programs, or as volunteers in K-12 settings. One had taught English to adults in a local non-credit program; one had a year's experience as a teacher's aide in a public elementary school. None had previous formal training as credit ESL teachers. Only two had no teaching experience of any sort, but all 15 had second-language-learning experiences of various kinds.

Using QSR qualitative research software, we analyzed the data in the light of a discourse analysis framework following guidelines developed by Johnstone (2008). This allowed us to code and organize the data into cross-referenced themes. Except for noting the sex of the respondents, no demographic data in regard to identity markers were gathered because we believed that the size of the sample militated against the revelation of any meaningful patterns in terms of these variables. Therefore, we did not isolate variables associated with age, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Nor could we determine on the strength of the blog data any discernible pattern associated with the fact that 11 of the respondents were women and four were men. All the respondents noted that English was their first language.

We chose the methods and instrumentation carefully and designed them to examine the nature of the phenomena of the study and focus on the development of a new theoretical understanding of complex patterns of human interaction. As Bryman (2001) makes clear, quantitative inquiry, with its concern for measurement, views human society as an objective reality external to the actors involved. Qualitative inquiry, on the other hand, views human society as a construction that is continually emerging and changing. Qualitative research strategies are best suited to the generation of theory because they allow the researcher to probe and explore various aspects of phenomena as new issues arise unrestrained by the need to maintain restrictions commonly found in quantitative methods. Although

qualitative methods have drawbacks related to the difficulty in corroborating and replicating earlier studies, these concerns were not central to our inquiry.

## Findings

We have organized the findings into five themes that emerged from the data according to what our participants identified as the principal influences on their conceptions of language. These are: (a) prior beliefs, (b) interaction with peers via the blog, (c) the course textbook, (d) lectures, and (e) practicum experiences. Of course, some of these themes overlap. However, in our discussion below we provide exemplary quotes for each of the themes as a way of highlighting the points that we make about them in our conclusion.

We stress that all our respondents identified all five of these themes as significant influences on how they came to conceptualize language. Topics in the blog contributions were varied and covered such issues as withdrawal versus integrated models of learning and the best approach to correcting students' errors. However, we now turn to the influences that these teacher candidates identified in regard to language.

### *Prior Beliefs*

Not surprisingly, all 15 respondents held beliefs about second-language learning before entering the program. These were commonly framed in terms of their experiences as second-language learners and teachers. We reiterate here that most of our respondents had some experience as teachers or instructors in informal settings such as summer camp counselors, ESL teachers while traveling abroad, or as public school volunteers. This was not unexpected given the admission criteria for the program, which awarded credit for such experience. In addition, all the teacher candidates in this study had second (or multiple) language-learning experiences. Again, this is not remarkable given the bilingual nature of the university in which this study took place.

Only two of the 15 respondents had no teaching experiences and so linked their opinions about second-language pedagogy exclusively to their language-learning experiences. The first of these referred quite negatively to the grammar-orientated textbooks to which she had been exposed while in college, noting that, "if the grammar isn't 100% correct, it's not the end of the world." The other participant linked her conceptions of language directly to her earlier experience living in a non-English-speaking environment, arguing that the social use of language was key. She described how the stress she had experienced while coping with loneliness and isolation negatively affected her second-language acquisition.

The remaining 13 respondents had earlier teaching experiences of various kinds and described prior beliefs that were informed by them. One, for example, observed, "ESL students don't acquire all four skills [listening, speak-

ing, reading, writing] equally at the same time." Another, who based her remarks on her experience as a college tutor, expressed the opinion that "the approach of drilling ESL students with phonics, vocabulary, and grammar is long overdue for abandonment." A third noted that as a teacher, she preferred to deal with grammar as it came up in the context of the lesson and that she had "had the least success [as a teacher] when [she] used it [grammar] as a starting point [for her lessons], and tended to find that [she] lost the attention of a lot of [her] students."

These prior beliefs could be complex. Citing a textbook that she had once used, one participant said that she enjoyed making references to the first language of her students in the context of introducing her lessons "with a purposeful communicative theme, and then incorporate structure lessons as appropriate or required." On the other hand, this same teacher candidate also stated in a subsequent entry that she thought "some people can get hung up on the 'communicative' part of the communicative approach, and assume that anything not directly related to practical communication is not useful for language instruction." She clearly favored a balanced approach toward structural and functional language pedagogy.

As can be seen in the data, the prior beliefs of these teacher candidates covered a full range of opinions about ESL pedagogy. Nevertheless, it is clear that most were critical of grammatically based pedagogy and were open to exploring alternate models of language that went beyond structurally based descriptions of phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar. Most had experience as learners and teachers that indicated that for them, a sole focus on structure was pedagogically limited and should at the very least be balanced with a focus on function.

### *Interaction with Peers via the Blog*

The blog provided a unique window into how our respondents used peer interaction to develop their opinions about second-language education. As mentioned above, approximately half the contributions were framed explicitly as responses to particular comments and resulted in conversational trees. Many contributions took the form of debates about particular topics that had arisen in class or in the course content. These topics included those pertaining to the role of the first language, the connections between culture and language, approaches to error correction, classroom management, and communication with parents of L2 learners. As discussed in more detail below, the practicum experience formed an important part of these blog contributions.

The following description of the use of the blog by one of the participants serves as an example of one of these debates. This participant used the blog explicitly as a debating forum on the relative worth of withdrawal and integration models. She indicated a strong prior support for the latter approach,

but modified her views as a direct result of the interactions she had on-line. As she expressed in a post toward the end of the course,

On the one hand, I can see the benefit of grouping ELL students together so that they have an opportunity to have direct language instruction at a level that is appropriate for their learning needs. On the other hand, what we have read also suggests that ELL students need a lot of exposure to native speakers of the language in order to become more proficient in the new language.

She concluded that the choice of placing students in either a withdrawal or integrated program depended on their level of English proficiency. Lower-level students, she theorized, should benefit from withdrawal classes that focused on English acquisition; students with higher levels of English were better off in an integrated class with native speakers of the target language. It is important to note that her opinion in relation to this debate did not form part of the course content. Significant about this example, however, is that this participant modified her opinion about language pedagogy as a direct result of participating in a debate in the blog.

### *The Course Textbook*

As mentioned above, the course textbook was popular with our respondents. Nevertheless, the opinions about its content were not uniform. One teacher candidate, for example, took a strong position in favor of phonics instruction and explicitly disputed the points made in the course text about the limited usefulness of this focus for instruction. Although this teacher candidate conceded that although it might be true that “for some students it is enough to teach them just the basics of phonics,” she felt that “some students may need more time spent on phonics than others.” In her own case, she felt that that she “was not able to just pick up a book and start reading it until [she] had developed a complete understanding of phonics.”

Another teacher candidate, who had had several years’ experience as a teachers’ aide in a public school, used the textbook to clarify her opinions about correcting errors in students’ writing. In her blog contributions, she noted that although she had “seen teachers at both ends of the spectrum those who correct every mistake, and those who correct very little, if any spelling and grammar errors,” she “was always under the impression that to leave spelling errors without correcting them reinforces improper spelling.” In subsequent blog entries, this respondent took the position that errors should be viewed positively, noting that they were evidence of students “trying something new” and “daring to do something difficult.” This participant explicitly and favorably cited the contention expressed in the course textbook that errors are strategies that students employ to learn or to master a new form or concept.

## *Lectures*

Each 20-minute lecture featured a formal PowerPoint presentation, an informal question/answer period (held both concurrently and subsequently), and group discussion. The lectures covered such topics as trends in second-language methodology, the Ontario context, the connections between culture and language, identity and motivation, and the sociopolitical aspects of English-language training.

More important for the purposes of this study, one of the lectures explicitly dealt with the topic of structural versus functional linguistics. This lecture, although avoiding technical details, provided some brief theoretical background information about these two linguistic models and outlined the concrete implications for methodology through the examination of exemplary lesson plans.

One of the points made in our lecture on the nature of language had to do with the use of the first language. We argued against enforcing English only in the classroom. This had an effect on one of our respondents, who noted that in her earlier role as an adult ESL instructor, she had not allowed the use of the first language based on her desire to get her students immersed as deeply as possible in the target language. However, she reevaluated this position. As she said,

It seems that restricting L1 use has many socio-emotional disadvantages that in my efforts to create a communicative, relevant, realistic and input rich environment, I had not previously considered ... By allowing students to use their native language in the classroom speaking it, writing it, reading it, and even teaching others to speak some of it educators empower English language learners.

Another teacher candidate made frequent references to academic texts and ESL theorists cited in the course. With evident approval, for example, this participant noted Krashen's (1981) distinctions between acquisition (developing fluent use of the target language) and learning (having cognitive knowledge of explicit descriptions of grammar). She argued,

Communication requires interaction, the transfer of a meaningful idea from one person to another. Teachers bring communication into their lessons by guiding learners through tasks or activities, which require meaningful interaction in a relevant context. Teachers need to go beyond the building blocks of English such as vocabulary lists or grammar drills to develop an ELL's oral, written, and even non-verbal communication skills.

This same teacher candidate wrote at length about planning group communicative activities such as information gaps, role-plays, and collaborative

problem-solving. She advised her colleagues to include grammar-based activities, but to “be aware of the difference between what is communicative and what is not and [to] find a balance between the two.”

We believe that the lecture content found its greatest effect through the group discussions that were held subsequently. In the blog contributions, the participants rarely talked about the lectures as formal presentations. Neither did they refer to the question/answer sessions to any great extent. Rather, the blog contributions framed the lecture content in terms of how they discussed the content after the formal presentation. For example, one noted,

Through comments made in class surrounding the issue [structural versus functional linguistics], my opinions have changed. I believe that I have now reverted back to my original conviction that phonics plays a minimalist role in the language instruction of children.

She elaborated to say that she now believed in a balanced approach where “phonics instruction has a role,” but not at the expense of “comprehension nor ... independent reading activities.” So although our egos as university lecturers were slightly bruised, we can confidently claim that the content of our lectures influenced our students if for no other purpose than to frame the group discussions that followed our formal presentations.

### *Practicum Experiences*

All 15 participants expressed concerns in the blog about the disparity that they noted between the content of the course and what they had experienced during the practicum. Of course, this is not an uncommon claim made by many teacher candidates in general about faculties of education. However, these respondents especially noted that their sponsor teachers almost always regarded language pedagogy as being based on structural notions of language. These notions are based on what Johnson (2010) has called mistaken “common sense” interpretations of language.

We stress that the sponsor teachers were not second-language specialists. None had any substantive prior training in second-language pedagogy. This was not a prerequisite for the teacher training program in which they were enrolled. All our 15 participants were placed in mainstream classes in either elementary or secondary schools. Therefore, they might have had their practicum in a mainstream grade 10 science class with only one or two English-language learners, in which the teacher was expected to cover a subject curriculum in a restricted amount of time. Even if these teacher candidates were placed in an elementary school in a neighborhood with a large number of second-language families, the classrooms in which they found themselves were subject to mainstream, provincially mandated K-12 curricula. Thus in terms of second-language pedagogy, the allowable scope for these sponsor teachers was limited by systemic factors.

One example of the disparity between the practicum and our course content suffices for our purposes here. As one of our participants noted,

It was common to see many things happening in my current practicum placement that are exactly what we were told NOT to do. For instance, in my current placement, the teachers I am working with are very focused on getting the students to say every word in the texts correctly. In our text ... the main focus seems to be on getting the students to read fluently ... When I first started working in this classroom ... I followed along the same lines as the other teachers in the room. However, I now understand that when the students are reading, it is very important for them to understand the meaning of what they are reading... they may not be 100% correct, but in the end ... they can feel good about what they have accomplished.

Note that this teacher candidate, after struggling with whether to emphasize accuracy or fluency in her teaching, made her decision based on the effect her approach would have on the students she faced. She clearly agreed with the course textbook that an overemphasis on grammatically based accuracy was potentially detrimental to learners' motivation, and she disagreed with her sponsor teacher.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Theory and Practice**

In our estimation, our examination of the struggles that these teacher candidates experienced has implications for teacher training programs in this milieu. This article contributes to the discussion of what constitutes ESL teachers' knowledge base (Freeman & Johnson, 1998) by illustrating the connections between concepts of language and the experiences of these teacher candidates in specific educational contexts. Moreover, our study deals with the need identified by Phipps and Borg (2009) for a better understanding of the reasons underlying the tensions associated with teachers' beliefs and practices by clarifying the factors involved in how teachers begin to build core beliefs about language at the beginning of their careers. In short, we argue for the importance of integrating teacher training course content as it pertains to functional conceptions of language with the practicum experience.

These teacher candidates grappled with the notion that language is a functionally based form of *social practice* (Johnson, 2010). In this article, we identify five key factors that influenced how these particular respondents thought of language: prior beliefs, interaction with peers, the course textbook, lectures, and the teaching practicum. As noted above, the teaching practicum significantly restricted the ability of these teacher candidates to explore the notion of language beyond structurally based descriptions of phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar.

We certainly do not mean to impute the judgment or professionalism of teachers in the field serving as practicum advisors. One of us (Fleming, 2010), an experienced practitioner in the field, has written at length about how ESL teaching practice is skewed by systemic factors related to standardized testing and assessment much like those identified by Apple (1995) in general education. This being said, we believe that further consideration is needed regarding the mentorship of teacher candidates in terms of second-language pedagogy in reference to their practicum experiences and to their professional acculturation. We also argue that research in this area should focus more extensively on the factors at play on ESL teachers as they progress through their careers.

As teacher trainers, we are concerned with strengthening our teacher candidates' understanding of language as social practice. As Johnson (2010) has noted, the broad-content ESL teacher training has generally been about the skills needed to transmit notions of language based on descriptions of phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar. Although not advocating a wholesale abandonment of skills-based training for teachers, we believe that reflective practice anchored in the social nature of learning must be as central to ESL teacher training as it is in general education. In our opinion, the respondents in this study demonstrated willingness to consider language as social practice. It now becomes our job to spell out the implications of this orientation to language and to help our teacher candidates realize it in classroom practice.

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