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On Becoming a Bilingual Teacher: Lessons Learned from a Teacher Preparation Program
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Background of the Problem

- It is important to prepare teachers who can address the learning needs of Latino ELLs in the Rio Grande Valley who need to develop English proficiency and learn academic content simultaneously.
- Preparing our pre-service teachers well in academic Spanish as well as literacy and content knowledge could contribute to their own success, as well as the success of their future students in the Rio Grande Valley.

Research Goals

- To gain a better understanding of bilingual preservice teachers' perceptions and knowledge of what entails to be a bilingual teacher and to teach English learners on the US/Mexico border, and how they perceive themselves as future bilingual teachers
- To identify teacher education strategies that better prepare UTB bilingual teachers to teach the student population in the region

Literature Review

- The implications of promoting the development of academic language in Spanish in terms of teacher preparation and preservice teachers' identity (Guerrero, 2003; Rodríguez 2007, 2006; Sutterby, Ayala & Murillo, 2005).
- Most PBT learned Spanish at home and did not have enough quality opportunities at school to further develop it (if any) (Guerrero, 2003; Sutterby et al., 2005).
- Preservice bilingual teachers should engage in critical reflections in which they explore their own cultural past in order to define themselves and construct their teacher identity (Rioja Clark & Bustos Flores, 2001).
- The development of teacher identity is an intersection of different experiences and social interactions within self, the family unit, the cultural community, and the schooling process and begins before they enter the teacher education program (Bustos Flores, Rioja Clark, & Guerra, 2008).

Theoretical Underpinnings

- **Apprenticeship of Observation** (Lortie, 1975; Mewborn & Tyminski, 2006)
 - Students develop ideas of what good and bad teaching is based on their experiences as learners.
- **Discourse and Identity** (Gee, 1996; Souto-Manning, 2006)
 - "When we write or read, speak, or listen, we coordinate and are coordinated by specific identities, specific ways of using language, various objects, tools, technologies, sites and institutions, as well as other people's minds and bodies" (Gee, 1996, p.6).

Context

- The University of Texas at Brownsville is located on the Texas-Mexico border and serves a predominantly Latino population of Mexican descent.
- UTB prepares most of the teachers who will teach elementary education and early childhood with teaching specializations in bilingual education and ESL in surrounding school districts.
- Most of UTB students define themselves as bilingual or second language learners of English.
- Students pursuing the baccalaureate degree program EC-6 Bilingual Generalist are required to take 9 credit hours corresponding to three courses taught in Spanish

Participants

- Candidates for the EC-6 Bilingual Generalist Program
- Candidates who volunteered to participate in the study and were taking BILS 3314: Content Area Methodology in the Bilingual Classroom.

- Preliminary results are drawn from data collected during Spring 2012 (N=15)

Methodology

- Qualitative study that involves three stages of data collection:
- First stage: Data collected while students take BILS 3314
- Second stage: Five students from each cohort will be selected to be interviewed after completion of the class.
- Third stage: Both researchers will observe selected students twice during their student teaching.

Data Collection

Data collection was in Spanish.

First Stage:

- **Beginning of the Semester Questionnaire:** An open ended questionnaire that explored teacher candidates' representations about the role and skills needed to be a bilingual teacher.
- **Field Observation Narratives:** Students turned in two narratives completed upon their 15 hours of field experience that included observation and tutoring activities.
- **Lesson Plans:** Two lesson plans were collected. These lessons were designed to be implemented in a bilingual classrooms.
- **End of the semester qualitative questionnaire:** Students answered an open ended questionnaire that explored preservice teachers' perceptions about their language, cultural, and learning history and the impact on their identity as future bilingual teachers.

Preliminary Findings

- **Three themes:**
 1. The Role of Language in the Bilingual Classroom
 2. Effective Practices for the Bilingual Classroom
 3. Bilingual Teacher Identity Development
- In each theme, PBTs challenged existing discourses by critically reflecting on prevailing practices or ideas.

Theme 1: The Role of Language in the Bilingual Classroom

- Teacher candidates value L1 and culture.
- In their discourse, teacher candidates were able to articulate the importance of students' languages, cultures, background, prior knowledge, interests, and literacy levels.
- Teacher candidates were concerned about their level of Spanish proficiency.
- Many participants expected to improve their level of Spanish through coursework taught in Spanish.
- Most students identified academic language as being developed in the classroom mostly in terms of vocabulary development
- Students identified several reasons to use L1 in the classroom: not to lose it, work, value, to move into English, transfer
- Students described the way L1 was used in the classroom

Theme 2: Effective Practices in the Bilingual Classroom

- Students identified effective practices that promote students' engagement and provide scaffold for understanding
- Other effective practices identified are connected with balanced literacy (guided or shared reading and writing), the use of word walls for vocabulary development, and the integration of routines
- Some students just described what they observed
- Other students challenged some observed practices, especially when teachers seemed to mistreat students, or diminish their aptitudes for learning and in one case a student objected the excessive use of worksheets.

Theme 3: Bilingual Teacher Identity Formation

- Reasons to become a bilingual teacher: The choice is shaped by childhood experiences, especially influence of past teachers and positive learning experiences involving the first language.
- Reasons to teach in bilingual classrooms:

- Support of bilingualism and biliteracy
- Value and preservation of first language and culture
- Desire to teach as they were taught (whatever helped them learn English)
- Others mentioned negative experiences that they do not want children to experience

Implications for Teacher Preparation

For the Course:

- As teacher educators, we need to look beyond the students' level of academic Spanish proficiency to value the students' capacity to critically analyze and challenge existing discourses.
- This will enable teacher educators to move away from a deficit view of our students when they do not have high levels of academic Spanish proficiency.
- For instance, analyzing PBTs' narratives we were able to value the effort students put in negotiating the discourse of the class (focused on developing strategies to teach language through content) and the discursive practices prevalent in schools and classrooms.

For the Program:

- We need to support students in further developing their academic language in Spanish (Guerrero, 2003; Sutterby et al., 2005)
- Bridging theory and practice.
- Focus more on critical reflection.
 - Providing students with tools in both languages to articulate ideas and critically reflect about the reality at stake

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