

## Facilitating Pre-Service ESOL Teachers' Understanding of Language Proficiency

### Pedagogy

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### Abstract

This article reviews an exploratory study intended to determine the contribution of a course unit on L2 proficiency on prospective ESOL teachers' views concerning the language acquisition process. Although many educator preparation programs are structured to equip current/future language teachers with the dispositions and skills needed to promote the development of their students' language competency, fewer studies have investigated the contribution of such training on their perspectives regarding L2 proficiency; the current study thus aims to fill this gap in the current literature. The article begins with an exploration of the concept of proficiency and moves to an examination of previous studies which have attempted to document ESOL teacher candidates' beliefs about language learning and teaching via the teacher version of the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (Horwitz, 1985). The article then describes the logistics of the course unit on L2 proficiency and the data collection and analysis procedures for the study. Participants included pre-service primary-education teachers enrolled in a TESOL methodology course offered at a four-year postsecondary institution located in the southeastern United States. Data for the study were collected via a pre- and post-questionnaire that included statements from the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory; these data were subsequently analyzed via descriptive statistics. Preliminary findings emerging from the study indicate that the course unit made a substantially positive contribution to participants' emerging beliefs about the importance of advancing multilingual learners' language proficiency and provided them with a range of useful strategies and techniques for doing so.

**Keywords:** Educator preparation, ESOL, Language acquisition, Proficiency, Teacher education

## Introduction

Despite the fact that the notion of proficiency has been a central concept in the field of second language acquisition for several decades, the construct for the longest time was not adequately operationalized (Nunan, 1986); more recently, various models of language proficiency have been proposed to address this issue (Motallebzadeh and Moghaddam, 2011). Nevertheless, since proficiency is such an essential component in language teaching and learning, there have been several attempts to define and understand the term. For example, Chomsky (1965) makes the distinction between competence (“one’s implicit or explicit knowledge of the system of the language”) (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001, p. 3) and performance (“one’s actual production and comprehension of language in specific instances of language use”) (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001, p. 3). Similarly, Canale and Swain (1980) assert that language competence consists of the “knowledge of grammar and other aspects of language” (p. 3) while language performance is comprised of “the realization of [such] competencies and their interaction in the actual production and comprehension of utterances” (p. 6). The purpose in making this distinction was to highlight the fact that, up to this point, language teaching methods had heretofore focused in large measure on the advancement of students’ linguistic *competence* (i.e., the Grammar-Translation Method, the Audiolingual Method) and that it was now essential to concentrate on the development of their linguistic *performance*. This movement subsequently led to the development of the phenomenon of communicative competence, initially defined by Savignon (1990) as “the ability of L2 learners to interact with other speakers, to make meaning, as distinct from their ability to perform on discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge” (p. 209). Thus, competence for some time was operationalized as the learner’s knowledge about the target language, while performance was understood as the learner’s ability to use the target language effectively in communicative situations.

Canale and Swain (1980) posit, however, that students should not only possess knowledge of the grammatical system of the language but should also understand the principles and conventions that govern interpersonal communicative exchanges with users of the language; they thus describe communicative competence as “the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the rules of language use” (p. 6). The authors, however, clearly differentiate between communicative competence (defined previously) and communicative performance, or “the realization of these competencies and their interaction in the actual production and comprehension of utterances” (p. 6). To extend the analogy, it could conceivably be claimed that proficiency involves not only communicative competence (one’s understanding of both essential features of the linguistic system along with the norms and expectations concerning exchanges with other interlocutors) but also communicative performance (one’s ability to effectively convey and comprehend messages through language along with one’s capacity to successfully adhere to the standards and practices regulating interactions with others in

social contexts). Consequently, proficiency necessarily entails both competence and performance, thus emphasizing the inherently reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between both phenomena. To put it succinctly, proficiency involves “the ability to use language to accomplish communication objectives” (ACTFL, 2024, p. 4). Harsch (2017) concurs with this perspective by contending that proficiency involves “being able to *do* something with the language...as well as knowing *about* it [language]” (p. 250; emphasis in original).

Additionally, Omaggio-Hadley (2001) explains what the construct of proficiency is by expressly describing what it is *not*. First, although proficiency exemplifies various “principles and practices” (Krashen, 1982) regarding the process of language learning, it does not specifically align with any particular language acquisition theory. Second, in a similar fashion, and for analogous reasons, proficiency does not explicitly coordinate with any singular language teaching method or approach given that the concept tends to focus more on what students are able to do in/with the language and less on the individual processes they engage in to acquire/learn the language. Third, developing learners’ proficiency does not entail the design and implementation of any specified course outline/syllabus since there are a wide array of activities/tasks that could potentially support the advancement of their proficiency in a given language. Finally, although knowledge of the grammatical system of a language is a necessary prerequisite to foster the evolution of one’s proficiency in the language, the study of grammar occupies a minor role in language instruction with respect to proficiency considering the fact that grammar is only one vehicle among others that learners could conceivably utilize to communicate (i.e., convey and interpret meaning) with other language users.

Accordingly, it is thus essential to develop the proficiency multilingual learners of English in order to expand their knowledge of the linguistic system of English, their awareness of the strategies and techniques commonly used in interpersonal exchanges, and their ability to implement these understandings when engaging in communication with other speakers. Thus, the purpose of this article is to review an exploratory study designed to advance pre-service ESOL teachers’ expertise regarding the theory and practice of developing the proficiency of English language learners.

## **Literature Review**

Various scholars have utilized the student version of the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory to explore students’ attitudes towards the language education enterprise in a variety of institutional contexts. For example, Al-Malki and Zahid (2018) examined the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners concerning language learning/teaching in order to identify possible challenges and impediments to instruction. One hundred and eighteen multilingual learners of English attending a university located in Saudi Arabia completed the BALLI, and their responses were analyzed via both descriptive statistics and the SPSS software package. Results from the study indicated that participants exhibited a strong belief in their ability to learn English, that some languages are easier to learn than others, and that it is

easier for children than adults to learn another language; they do not necessarily believe, however, that certain people possess a natural, innate aptitude for learning another language, that receptive skills are easier to acquire than productive skills, or that translation is an effective way to learn a language.

Several researchers have employed the BALLI to determine the viewpoints of prospective teachers regarding language education. For instance, Altan (2012) investigated the views of Turkish pre-service EFL teachers regarding their outlooks on language learning/teaching for the purpose of determining the role of their beliefs on their future instructional practice. Participants in the study included over two hundred undergraduate students attending one of seven different universities in Turkey who were enrolled in an English Language Teaching (ELT) teacher education program at their respective institution. After completing the BALLI, students' responses on the inventory were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings from the study revealed that teacher candidates strongly believed that languages are easier to acquire/learn for children than for adults, that some language are easier to learn/acquire than others, and that productive skills are not necessarily easier to acquire/learn than receptive skills. However, participants in the study also tended to agree that, while everyone has the potential to learn another language, certain people do exhibit a particular knack for learning/acquiring language. Additionally, while slightly more than half of the respondents indicated that vocabulary plays an important role in language learning, a good number of participants also disagreed with this statement; teacher candidates were also divided on the function of culture in language education.

In addition, Liu et al. (2022) consider EFL Chinese pre-service teachers' stances towards language education in order to better understand the challenges and difficulties they will likely face as future educators. Teacher candidates enrolled in an ELT (English language teaching) program housed in a university in China agreed to be involved in the study. Data collection during the study included students' responses to the BALLI along with semi-structured interviews conducted with students and human-resource professionals from industries which commonly use English as part of their work and an examination of the curriculum of the educator preparation program. Results from the study established that many of the prospective teachers believed that grammar and vocabulary occupied an important position in language learning, that learning English was crucial to their professional success, and that speaking English with little accent is a lofty yet worthwhile goal. An examination of the program curriculum revealed that the teacher candidates received less instruction in English compared to other content areas (namely, political education) and that more attention in the English classes should be dedicated to promoting the development of students' communicative skills. Furthermore, the human resource specialists concurred that proficiency in English was more important in business contexts than academic knowledge.

Additionally, a handful of investigators have worked to establish the positions of both students and educators with respect to language teaching/learning. For example, Cephe and Yalcin (2015) examined

the similarities and differences between learners and teachers' positions regarding language education along with the influence of educators' beliefs on students' learning. Participants in the mixed-methods study included over six hundred students and thirty-three teachers attending/working in a university-level EFL program housed in a Turkish university designed to advance learners' proficiency in English in order to prepare them to successfully complete coursework in the university upon finishing the program. During the course of the study, all students and all teachers filled out the BALLI at the beginning and end of the semester, and approximately one hundred and seventy students (five per teacher) participated in a semi-structured interview intended to confirm educators' responses on the inventory; at the end of the semester, students again completed the inventory. The quantitative data obtained in the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics and t-tests, and the qualitative data were examined using the constant comparative method. Results from the study demonstrated that, on the post-questionnaire, students were less likely to believe that certain people have an ability to learn languages, that English is a difficult language to learn, and that language learning is substantially different from learning in other academic disciplines. Conversely, students were more likely to believe that speaking is an easier skill to master than understanding, that grammar plays a fundamental role in language learning, and that guessing the meaning of unknown words is a potentially successful language learning strategy.

Similarly, Sadeghi and Albi (2015) explored the positions of Iranian EFL students and teachers relative to various aspects of language instruction with the intention of determining similarities and differences between each group's beliefs about language learning and teaching. Participants in the study included one hundred students and eighty teachers from three language learning institutes in Iran. Quantitative data obtained during the study were analyzed via both descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings from the study showed that, in some cases, both participant groups exhibited similar beliefs. For example, students and teachers agreed that it is easier for children to learn language than adults, that it is easier to learn a third, fourth, etc. language if one has already learned a second language, that learning a language is considerably different from learning other academic disciplines, and that it is important to guess the meaning of unknown words from context. In other cases, opinions between learners and educators differed substantially. For instance, students were much more likely than teachers to believe that language learning requires a certain aptitude, that some languages are harder to learn than others, that speaking a language is more difficult than understanding it, and that grammar plays a fundamental role in language learning, while educators were more likely to believe than learners that people who speak more than one language are intelligent.

It is important to note that, although they have employed the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory to examine participants' beliefs about language teaching/learning, these scholars have often incorporated the student version of the inventory as part of their studies, and so less research has

included the teacher version of the inventory as a data collection procedure. Additionally, in many of these studies, participants completed the BALLI at one point in time only, which did not permit researchers to document the evolution of their beliefs over time. Consequently, the current study aims to fill these methodological gaps by utilizing the teacher version of the BALLI to determine the contributions of a course unit on L2 proficiency to ESOL teacher candidates' evolving perspectives regarding language learning and teaching. The research question that guided the study is as follows: What is the relevancy of a course unit on L2 proficiency to prospective elementary-education teachers' beliefs about language learning/teaching?

## Methodology

The current study took place in the spring semester of 2024. The course unit on L2 proficiency was embedded within a TESOL methodology course offered as part of an educator preparation program at a four-year postsecondary institution located in the southeastern United States; participants included sixteen prospective elementary-education teachers enrolled in the course who agreed to take part in the study. The purpose of the course is to equip teacher candidates with the strategies and techniques necessary to effectively instruct multilingual learners of English in a range of instructional contexts. Table 1 below indicates the demographic information of the participants.

**Table 1** *Demographic Information of Participants*

| Self-Identified Age<br>students) | Category (in years) | Number | (of |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|--------|-----|
|                                  | 20                  | 2      |     |
|                                  | 21                  | 6      |     |
|                                  | 22                  | 3      |     |
|                                  | 23                  | 2      |     |
|                                  | 24                  | 1      |     |
|                                  | 27                  | 1      |     |
|                                  | 31                  | 1      |     |

| Self-Identified Gender | Category | Number (of students) |
|------------------------|----------|----------------------|
|                        | Female   | 15                   |
|                        | Male     | 1                    |

| Self-Identified Ethnicity | Category        | Number (of students) |
|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
|                           | Asian           | 1                    |
|                           | Black & White   | 1                    |
|                           | Caucasian/White | 8                    |
|                           | Hispanic/Latinx | 6                    |

The course unit on L2 proficiency consisted of four two-week modules focused on the exploration of each of the four language domains individually; each module was comprised of a series of readings and activities designed to familiarize teacher candidates with important theoretical constructs regarding each domain along with a variety of activities they could potentially incorporate into their own instruction to develop their current/future students' to advance their English learners' proficiency in the domain. Table 2 below outlines the logistics of the course unit; the modules were presented in this order to strategically align with the typical stages of the language acquisition process.

**Table 2** *Language Proficiency Course Unit Modules*

| Module | Content      |
|--------|--------------|
| 1      | L2 Listening |
| 2      | L2 Speaking  |
| 3      | L2 Reading   |
| 4      | L2 Writing   |

The readings that constituted each module were completed in a jigsaw fashion. At the beginning of the semester, students were randomly assigned to one of three groups (Group A, B, or C). During the first week of each module, teacher candidates read the chapter assigned to their respective group before class and participated in a jigsaw discussion of the chapters in class. They first assembled in “vertical” or expert groups (e.g., S1, S4, S7, S10, and S13 in Table 5 below) with classmates who had read the same article and discussed their responses to the reading and identified important points emerging from the

reading in order to consolidate and solidify the learning they gained from the chapter. Next, they congregated into “horizontal” or home groups (i.e., S1, S2, and S3 in Table 5 below) with classmates who had each completed a different reading for the purpose of sharing their knowledge with other colleagues who had read different chapters. Finally, students returned to their seats, were given a blank index card, noted several points of information they gleaned from reading their individual chapter and participating in discussions about other chapters, and shared this new learning with their classmates.

**Table 3 Jigsaw Reading Groupings**

| <u>Group A</u> | <u>Group B</u> | <u>Group C</u> |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| S1             | S2             | S3             |
| S4             | S5             | S6             |
| S7             | S8             | S9             |
| S10            | S11            | S12            |
| S13            | S14            | S15            |
|                | S16            |                |

\* “S” = “Student”

The second week in each module was comprised of an exploration of a variety of activities from Gibbons (2014) that the prospective teachers might conceivably integrate into their current/future teaching in order to develop their students’ proficiency with respect to a particular language domain. During this section of each module, students were randomly gathered into groups of three to five students, with each group identifying several activities from the corresponding chapter in the book that they believed would be effective in advancing English learners’ skills with respect to the language domain. Gibbons (2014) was specifically chosen to be included in the course unit since the text outlines a variety of tasks that educators can easily implement into their teaching to concretely and specifically promote the development of their students’ L2 proficiency. Table 4 below indicates the readings by module for each group; the next section provides information about the reasoning behind the selection criteria for including these readings into each module respectively.

**Table 4 Module Readings**

| Module 1 (L2 Listening) | Group | Readings                 |
|-------------------------|-------|--------------------------|
|                         | A     | Horwitz (2020a)          |
|                         | B     | Vandergrift & Goh (2018) |

C

Ur (2012a)

| Module 2 (L2 Speaking) | Group | Readings        |
|------------------------|-------|-----------------|
|                        | A     | Goh (2018)      |
|                        | B     | Gebhard (2017b) |
|                        | C     | Nunan (2015a)   |

  

| Module 3 (L2 Reading) | Group | Readings               |
|-----------------------|-------|------------------------|
|                       | A     | Horwitz (2020b)        |
|                       | B     | Grabe & Stoller (2018) |
|                       | C     | Ur (2012b)             |

  

| Module 4 (L2 Writing) | Group | Readings        |
|-----------------------|-------|-----------------|
|                       | A     | Storch (2018)   |
|                       | B     | Gebhard (2017a) |
|                       | C     | Nunan (2015b)   |

The readings that constituted each module were completed in a jigsaw fashion. At the beginning of the semester, students were randomly assigned to one of three groups (Group A, B, or C). The chapters integrated into the first module were intentionally selected since they provide readers with a succinct yet comprehensive overview of major principles regarding L2 listening. For example, Horwitz (2020a) identifies and describes five important stages in the development of L2 listening, including the acknowledgement of perceiving sounds that are different than those in one's home language(s), the identification of individual words in the target language, the ability to distinguish boundaries between words/phrases, the capacity to determine the overall meaning of a given passage, and the dexterity in moving beyond understanding oral input at the phrase/sentence level. Vandergrift and Goh (2018) explore various facets of L2 listening and highlight the distinction between top-down listening (the application of one's previous background knowledge and experiences to the comprehension of a given

oral text) and bottom-up listening (the integration of details and information from the passage into one's evolving understanding of the text). Finally, Ur (2012a) provides numerous guidelines for teachers wishing to design and implement L2 listening activities in their own instructional contexts.

The chapters included into the second module were specifically chosen because they highlight important theoretical constructs and practical ideas relative to L2 speaking. For instance, Goh (2018) indicates that second language speaking competence involves three core elements (namely, one's knowledge of various grammatical and linguistic features of the target language along with one's understanding of the structure and organization of oral texts in the language, one's ability to converse effectively in the language, and one's aptitude in conveying and transmitting information to others in the language) and also offers suggestions for creating and developing speaking activities for the classroom. Gebhard (2017b) specifies that L2 speaking involves a variety of language behaviors, including the ability to establish and sustain interpersonal relationships while also exchanging information effectively with others, the capacity to employ more informal registers in oral communication, the capability of presenting, expanding on, and switching topics within a given conversation, one's facility in alternating role during the span of a verbal exchange, one's aptitude to understand and obey conversational norms and rules, and the competence to adjust one's language level to the formality of the situation. Additionally, Nunan (2015a) provides a concise review of the concept of communicative competence and outlines numerous principles that educators should keep in mind when incorporating speaking activities into the L2 classroom.

The chapters incorporated into the third module were purposefully chosen since they consider important elements of the theory and practice of L2 reading. For example, Horwitz (2020b) differentiates between intensive reading (understanding a shorter-length text in detail) and extensive reading (understanding the gist of longer-length texts) and explores the debate between phonics-based and whole language approaches to teaching reading. Grabe and Stoller (2018) distinguish between lower-level processing (automatic handling of the linguistic features of a text) and higher-level processing (conscious treatment of the paralinguistic aspects of the text) and posit that readers construct both a text model (our literal comprehension of a given text) and a situation model (our personal interpretation of the text). Furthermore, similar to Vandergrift and Goh (2018) cited above, Ur (2012b) highlights the importance of utilizing both top-down and bottom-up processing in a concurrent fashion when reading, reviews common misperceptions about the reading process, and provides numerous suggestions for incorporating reading activities into L2 classrooms.

The chapters that comprised the fourth and final module were conscientiously selected because they summarize essential facets of L2 writing. For instance, Storch (2018) reviews a number of important research studies on second language writing and explores the implications of this scholarly work for language educators. Gebhard (2017a) highlights a number of activities that teachers can integrate into

their instruction for the purpose of developing students' writing proficiency along with an analysis of problems instructors commonly encounter when teaching L2 writing and suggestions for overcoming these challenges. Moreover, Nunan (2015b) reviews various aspects of the product versus process debate in (L2) writing and offers numerous suggestions for teachers to more successfully utilize writing activities with their students.

At the beginning of the semester, participants completed a pre-unit questionnaire consisting of an adapted version of the teacher version of the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1985) which is comprised of twenty-seven statements that examine various aspects of educators' views concerning language learning and teaching. The inventory utilized in this study was slightly adapted to the logistical requirements of the study; statement #16 was removed since it concerned the use of the language laboratory, which was not a component of the course. The BALLI was intentionally chosen for the study since it considers educators' views on the language education enterprise in a comprehensive fashion while also allowing researchers to collect information about participants' attitudes towards language teaching and learning with relative ease. Although numerous investigations have employed the student version of the BALLI (Horwitz, 1987), the teacher version of the inventory was particularly selected for the current study since the statements were perceived to be more appropriate and relevant for the participant populations of the study. Additionally, the teacher version of the BALLI was adapted for the current study in several ways. First, statement #16 ("It's important to practice in the language laboratory.") was eliminated from the questionnaire since no mention or discussion of language laboratories was included in the course unit. Also, statements #4 and #11 were adapted to a six-point Likert scale following the recommendations of Nemoto and Beglar (2013) who posit that "when possible...6-point [Likert] scales should be used as they permit the possibility of increased measurement precision" (p. 5). Six-point scales offer participants a greater range of possible responses to a given statement while also forcing them to adopt a particular stance regarding the statement (in other words, a neutral position cannot be taken as is commonly the case with five-point scales). At the conclusion of the course unit, the teacher candidates completed a post-unit questionnaire consisting of the same statements included in the pre-unit questionnaire (see Appendix 1 for the list of statements included in both questionnaires).

The quantitative data collected during the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics. According to Fisher and Marshall (2009), descriptive statistics consist of "numerical and graphical techniques used to organise, present and analyse data" (p. 95). Creswell (2009) maintains that descriptive analysis consists of "describing the results [of a study] through means, standard deviations, and range of scores" (p. 228), among other possible approaches. Similarly, Borg and Gall (1989) contend that descriptive statistics are used to "describe" data collected from a given sample of participants (p. 336). More specifically, within the field of applied linguistics, Dörnyei (2007) notes that the goal of descriptive

statistics is to provide a summary of findings and describe general tendencies occurring in the data in order to provide a global picture of the behavior of the participants. Two types of descriptive statistical procedures were used to analyze participants' responses to both questionnaires. First, the mean average score for each statement was tabulated by identifying the sum of the total number of responses and dividing this number by the number of participants. Second, a percentage for each statement was calculated by dividing the mean average score for the statement by six (the highest possible response). Additionally, the difference between the mean average score and corresponding percentage for each statement across both questionnaires was obtained by subtracting the post-questionnaire average/percentage from the pre-questionnaire one. See the Appendix for the mean average scores, percentages, and differences for the statements between and across both questionnaires.

It is important to note that analyzing the quantitative data via descriptive statistics was useful in attempting to identify and understand overall patterns and trends occurring in the data but did not establish the statistical significance of the data.

## Results

Several general findings emerged from analysis of the quantitative data collected during the study. First, participants' responses on the questionnaire globally changed little from the beginning to the conclusion of the course unit (a 1.2% decrease across all twenty-six statements), suggesting that the pre-service teachers' views concerning language learning changed little over the course of the unit. The statement that was rated the highest on the pre-unit questionnaire was a tie between statement #1 ("It is easier for children than adults to learn another language.") and statement #13 ("It is important to repeat and practice a lot when learning another language."), with 93.8% agreement with both statements. This result suggests that, with respect to the first statement, teacher candidates generally subscribed to the maturational state hypothesis (Long, 1990) in the sense that they seemed to strongly believe that language acquisition occurs more easily and with less effort for children than for adults. This finding also indicates that, in relation to statement #13, these future educators appeared to resolutely agree with the idea that rehearsal and training are essential ingredients for successful language learning. In both cases, although participants indicate less agreement with both of these statements on the post-unit questionnaire, these decreases were substantially minimal (a 1.1% decrease for statement #1 and a 3.1% decrease for statement #13), implying that their perspectives on these statements remained firmly consistent throughout the course unit. It is also important to note that, despite these decreases, both statements received the highest ratings on the post-unit questionnaire as well. The statement that was rated the lowest on the pre-unit questionnaire was statement #25 ("Americans are good at learning foreign languages."), with 33.3% agreement with this statement. This finding suggests that, in an overall sense, the pre-service teachers seemed to not believe that Americans possess an inherent skill or talent for language learning. On the post-unit questionnaire, this statement demonstrated a +6.4 increase in

participants' responses to the statement, indicating that these teacher candidates appeared to be in slightly more agreement with the statement at the conclusion of the unit.

Nevertheless, participants' responses shifted considerably from the pre-questionnaire to the post-questionnaire in multiple instances. For example, with respect to statement #2 ("Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn another language."), participants indicated 15.6% less agreement with the statement at the conclusion of the course unit than at the beginning of the semester. This result suggests that the unit may have contributed to their awareness and understanding of language proficiency as an external phenomenon and not something that is fundamentally innate. Participants demonstrated 9.3% less agreement with statement #6 ("It is necessary to know the culture in order to speak another language.") after completing the course unit, intimating that, from their perspective, culture does not necessarily play a significant role in the expansion of students' language proficiency; this result is somewhat unexpected given that numerous scholars have highlighted the interdependent and symbiotic nature of language and culture (i.e., Kuo & Lai, 2006; Sun, 2007).

Participants exhibited 9.3% more agreement with statement #7 ("You shouldn't say anything in another language until you can say it correctly.") after the course unit had been concluded, insinuating that, from their perspective, accuracy is a relatively important component in the development of students' L2 proficiency. Similarly, participants indicated 10.5% less agreement with statement #10 ("It is OK to guess if you do not know a word in another language.") at the conclusion of the course unit. This result indicates that the pre-service teachers seemed to believe in the importance of precision in both language production (i.e., speaking, and language reception (i.e., listening, reading).

Interestingly, participants expressed 9.3% less agreement with statement #15 ("Learning another language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.") at the conclusion of the course unit, suggesting that, despite their responses to statements #7 and #10, teacher candidates did nevertheless believe to some extent that grammar plays a lesser role in furthering students' L2 proficiency than they originally thought. In a similar vein, participants displayed 7.4% less agreement with statement #12 ("Learning another language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.") once the course unit had ended, signaling that, at some level, teacher candidates understood that improving students' proficiency involves more than simply mastering vocabulary. A more thorough investigation is consequently needed to identify the underlying reasons behind these contradictory findings.

Participants exhibited 6.2% more agreement with statement #4 ("The language that I am planning to teach is..."), intimating that the unit supported their awareness of the complexities in acquiring/learning English, perhaps ultimately leading them to reexamine a common misperception held by monolingual English speakers that acquiring/learning the language is a relatively easy and straightforward process. Similarly, participants expressed 4.0% more agreement with statement #11 ("If someone spent one hour

a day learning a language, how long would it take them to become fluent?”), intimating a slightly increasing level of understanding that successful language learning/acquisition takes time.

Furthermore, participants showed 1.0% more agreement with statement #17 (“It is easier to speak in another language than understand another language.”); when combining this result with the average mean score for the statement across both questionnaires, it become apparent that this result, coupled with the lower ratings for this statement on both questionnaires, seem to suggest teacher candidates were either unsure about this statement or believed that developing students productive skills in the target language is not necessarily more difficult that promoting their receptive skills in the language.

## Discussion

Analysis of participants’ responses on the pre-unit and post-unit questionnaires revealed that the course unit may have contributed in specific ways to their views regarding language learning. For instance, participants indicated 15.6% less agreement with statement #2 (“Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn another language.”) at the conclusion of the unit, implying that the pre-service teachers seemed to increasingly subscribe to the idea that developing students’ proficiency is less a matter of intelligence and more a matter of creating and establishing the requisite conditions for advancing their language abilities. Participants demonstrated 9.3% less agreement with statement #6 (“It is necessary to know the culture in order to speak another language.”) after completing the course unit, intimating that the teacher candidates may have believed that culture was relatively insignificant in promoting students’ linguistic abilities. This finding suggests that culture should figure more predominantly in the course unit moving forward, and more attention should be devoted to the role of culture in language learning in future iterations of the unit. Participants exhibited 9.3% more agreement with statement #7 (“You shouldn’t say anything in another language until you can say it correctly.”) but indicated 10.5% less agreement with statement #10 (“It is OK to guess if you do not know a word in another language.”) at the conclusion of the course unit. These results are somewhat unexpected given that, rather than waiting to produce oral/written input that is grammatically precise and exact, proficiency is often developed via one’s attempts to communicate imperfectly and in the target language. This contention is supported by various scholars such as Freeman and Freeman (2014), who review two common perspectives regarding the advancement of reading and writing proficiency. Teachers who subscribe to a learning view of written language development believe in a parts-to-whole approach in the sense that students must initially learn simpler grammatical structures and must subsequently master progressively more complex features before engaging in interpersonal exchanges with other users of the target language. Conversely, educators who align with an acquisition view of written language development endorse a whole-to-parts approach by presuming that students will subconsciously acquire language through exposure to authentic and meaningful input and opportunities to express and convey meaning through communicative encounters. Based on this finding, the course

unit should include more information about these language learning views and should incorporate various strategies for supporting teacher candidates' awareness and understanding of the importance of encouraging learners to engage with other interlocutors despite their linguistic imperfections. However, participants indicated less agreement with both statement #15 ("Learning another language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.") and statement #12 ("Learning another language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words."), suggesting that these future educators also believed that grammar and vocabulary are important aspects of language learning but are not the only ingredients to be considered in the language learning process. With respect to statement #25 ("Americans are good at learning foreign languages.") and statement #23 ("Americans think that it is important to speak another language."), participants responses to both of these statements across both questionnaires demonstrates strong disagreement overall with the statements, implying that, from their perspective, Americans are neither very adept at nor seem to place much importance in learning other languages. Additionally, participants' virtually unchanging responses to statement #1 ("It is easier for children than adults to learn another language.") indicates that more resources could potentially be included in the course unit to help them understand that achieving a high level of proficiency in a given language is nonetheless a realistic and achievable goal for adult learners.

## Conclusion

This article explored the relevancy of a course unit on L2 proficiency to pre-service ESOL teachers' perspectives regarding language teaching and learning. The article began with an overview of the construct of proficiency and then moved to an examination of previous studies which investigated participants' views on the language education enterprise in a variety of instructional contexts. Next, the article reviewed the logistics of the course unit embedded within a TESOL methodology course and summarized the findings of an exploratory study which documented teacher candidates' evolving positions with respect to multiple aspects of language learning and learning. In the final analysis, readings and discussions concerning L2 proficiency should be intentionally and strategically incorporated into ESOL teacher education in order to familiarize prospective teachers with important theoretical concepts related to proficiency along with specific activities and techniques to promote the development of students' proficiency in the target language; this is especially true for language educators who need to further hone their own linguistic proficiencies (Kissau, 2014; Renandya et al., 2018). Additionally, more research needs to be conducted in this area to determine and establish best practices for effectively preparing pre-service language teachers to support the advancement of their students' language proficiency in deliberate and targeted ways.

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## **Appendix: BALLI (Teacher Version) Descriptive Statistics**

Please indicate the level of your agreement with each statement below by writing the number to the left of each statement that matches your level of agreement with the statement.

| <p>“1” = “Strongly Disagree”<br/> “2” = “Moderately Disagree”<br/> “3” = “Slightly Disagree”<br/> “4” = “Slightly Agree”<br/> “5” = “Moderately Agree”<br/> “6” = Strongly Agree”</p> |                      |                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><u>Pre-Q</u></b>                                                                                                                                                                   | <b><u>Post-Q</u></b> | <b><u>Diff</u></b> | <b><u>Statement</u></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 5.63<br>(93.8%)                                                                                                                                                                       | 5.56<br>(92.7%)      | -0.07<br>(-1.1%)   | 01. It is easier for children than adults to learn another language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 3.38<br>(56.3%)                                                                                                                                                                       | 2.44<br>(40.7%)      | -1.14<br>(-15.6%)  | 02. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn another language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 4.69<br>(78.2%)                                                                                                                                                                       | 4.40<br>(73.3%)      | -0.29<br>(-4.9%)   | 03. Some languages are easier to learn than others.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 3.63<br>(60.5%)                                                                                                                                                                       | 4.00<br>(66.7%)      | +0.37<br>(+6.2%)   | 04. The language that I am planning to teach is... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “1” = a very easy language</li> <li>• “2” = a considerably easy language</li> <li>• “3” = a language of moderate ease</li> <li>• “4” = a language of moderate difficulty</li> <li>• “5” = a considerably difficult language</li> <li>• “6” = a very difficult language</li> </ul> |
| 3.56<br>(59.3%)                                                                                                                                                                       | 3.22<br>(53.7%)      | -0.34<br>(-5.6%)   | 05. It is important to speak another language with an excellent accent.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 4.56<br>(76.0%)                                                                                                                                                                       | 4.00<br>(66.7%)      | -0.56<br>(-9.3%)   | 06. It is necessary to know the culture in order to speak another language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 2.50<br>(41.7%)                                                                                                                                                                       | 3.06<br>(51.0%)      | +0.56<br>(+9.3%)   | 07. You shouldn't say anything in another language until you can say it correctly.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 3.50<br>(58.3%)                                                                                                                                                                       | 3.69<br>(61.5%)      | +0.19<br>(+3.2%)   | 08. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 4.19                                                                                                                                                                                  | 4.50                 | +0.31              | 09. It is better to learn another language in a country in which it is commonly spoken.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

|                 |                 |                   |                                                                      |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (69.8%)         | (75.0%)         | (+5.2%)           |                                                                      |
| 3.38<br>(56.3%) | 2.75<br>(45.8%) | -0.63<br>(-10.5%) | 10. It is OK to guess if you do not know a word in another language. |

|                 |                 |                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2.69<br>(44.8%) | 2.93<br>(48.8%) | +0.24<br>(+4.0%) | <p>11. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to become fluent?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “1” = less than one year</li> <li>• “2” = 1-2 years</li> <li>• “3” = 3-5 years</li> <li>• “4” = 6-8 years</li> <li>• “5” = 9-10 years</li> <li>• “6” = You can’t learn a language in one hour a day.</li> </ul> |
| 4.00<br>(66.7%) | 3.56<br>(59.3%) | -0.44<br>(-7.4%) | 12. Learning another language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 5.63<br>(93.8%) | 5.44<br>(90.7%) | -0.19<br>(-3.1%) | 13. It is important to repeat and practice a lot when learning another language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 4.06<br>(67.7%) | 4.56<br>(76.0%) | +0.50<br>(+8.3%) | 14. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 4.31<br>(71.8%) | 3.75<br>(62.5%) | -0.56<br>(-9.3%) | 15. Learning another language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 3.19<br>(53.2%) | 2.63<br>(43.8%) | -0.56<br>(-9.4%) | 16. Women are better than men at learning other languages.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 3.13<br>(52.2%) | 3.19<br>(53.2%) | +0.06<br>(+1.0%) | 17. It is easier to speak in another language than understand another language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 4.44<br>(74.0%) | 4.38<br>(73.0%) | -0.06<br>(-1.0%) | 18. Learning a language is different from learning other school subjects.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 3.56<br>(59.3%) | 3.25<br>(54.2%) | -0.31<br>(-5.1%) | 19. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from English.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 4.06<br>(67.7%) | 3.94<br>(65.7%) | -0.12<br>(-2.0%) | 20. If students learn to speak English really well, it will help them get a good job.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 2.56<br>(42.7%) | 3.13<br>(52.2%) | +0.57<br>(+9.5%) | 21. It is easier to read and write in another language than it is to speak in and understand that language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 2.13            | 2.38            | +0.25            | 22. People who are good in math and science are not good at learning other languages.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

|                 |                 |                  |                                                                        |
|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (35.5%)         | (39.7%)         | (+4.2%)          |                                                                        |
| 2.44<br>(40.7%) | 2.44<br>(40.7%) | N/A<br>(N/A)     | 23. Americans think that it is important to speak another language.    |
| 2.94<br>(49.0%) | 3.06<br>(51.0%) | +0.12<br>(+2.0%) | 24. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent. |
| 2.00<br>(33.3%) | 2.38<br>(39.7%) | +0.38<br>(+6.4%) | 25. Americans are good at learning foreign languages.                  |
| 5.30<br>(88.3%) | 5.00<br>(83.3%) | -0.30<br>(-5.0%) | 26. Everyone can learn to speak another language.                      |
|                 |                 |                  |                                                                        |
| 3.67<br>(61.2%) | 3.60<br>(60.0%) | -0.07<br>(-1.2%) | OVERALL                                                                |