



Critical service-learning in adult ESOL teacher preparation: Reflections from the field

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In the United States, few universities offer preservice training for new teachers entering adult ESOL teaching and learning contexts. This paper reports on a pilot service-learning course offered during spring 2015 at Georgia State University, "Teaching adult ESOL in community settings," one of few courses of its kind in the country of which we are aware. We begin by introducing the course and its philosophy, then share reflections on our experiences in the course and lessons learned. We conclude with a call for others to take up this work at universities and communities in Georgia.

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Introduction

In the United States, few universities offer preservice training for new teachers entering adult English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teaching and learning contexts. This is perhaps unsurprising, since pre- and in-service training requirements for adult ESOL teachers vary greatly from state to state and program to program. Around the country, some publicly funded programs require a K-12 or adult education teaching license, others a state-level alternative credential, others a bachelor's degree in any professional field (as in Georgia), and others have no minimum education or credentialing requirement. (For a list of the professional requirements for adult education instructors by state as of 2007, see http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/briefs/Teacher_Credentialing_Table_RED_MBxIs.pdf). Thus, many new teachers come to adult ESOL in unexpected ways, such as through volunteering in nonprofit adult ESOL programs, or teaching in other contexts, for instance, K-12, higher education, or overseas. This has created an ongoing need for in-service training for adult ESOL educators, especially in small, community based programs run with insufficient funding (Perry & Hart, 2012). Such training is particularly important when working with adult learners who were denied access to formal schooling in their home countries and those who may be at beginning levels of working with alphabetic print (Peyton et al., 2007)

This paper reports on a pilot course offered during spring 2015 at Georgia State University, "Teaching adult ESOL in community settings." The central purpose was to prepare preservice teachers to teach in community based adult ESOL programs in the Atlanta area. A fuller description of the course appears below.

The Need

When I (Pettitt) arrived in Atlanta in fall 2012, I began visiting adult ESOL programs. As a former teacher and administrator, I wanted to begin to understand the strengths of, and challenges facing, adult ESOL professionals in this city and state. As I sat with administrators and listened to teachers after visiting their classes, a common theme emerged: the desire for more in-service teacher development, especially since no formal preservice training, such as that required of K-12 teachers, was available. “I never learned to teach in this context,” and “I need more support with literacy,” and “I’m not sure how to assess,” were frequent refrains. Teachers’ reflectiveness and desire to learn for the benefit of the adult immigrants and refugees in their classes and communities impressed me. Their dedication is one of the reasons I responded to those requests by conducting on-site professional development for adult ESOL teachers at various community based organizations during my few first years in Atlanta.

At the same time, some undergraduate and master’s level students at Georgia State University, where I was earning my Ph.D., began to ask me questions specific to teaching in adult ESOL contexts. Many of the undergraduate students were earning certificates to teach English overseas, but were not yet ready to move out of the country. Some of the master’s students were teaching in community based adult ESOL programs to gain more teaching experience, but had understandably not received training specific to teaching non-academic ESOL or to working with learners with interrupted formal school-based learning.

Based on these expressed needs, I wondered what possibilities might emerge from offering university based preservice teacher training specifically for non-academic adult ESOL. I knew some of our department's students would find this useful, but could not presume to know whether adult ESOL programs would as well, so I asked three administrators for their feedback. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive. The administrators were especially interested in the possibility of having future pools of job candidates who would already be familiar with the unique constraints and demands of many adult ESOL programs (e.g., few technology resources, three or more English levels in one classroom, managing volunteers, cobbling together part-time teaching positions, amongst others), as well as teacher candidates who were trained specifically for working with refugees and immigrants who were emergent readers and/or had experienced interruptions in formal schooling.

The Course

I proposed such a course to Dr. Kris Acheson-Clair, then-Director of Undergraduate Studies in Applied Linguistics, who invited me to develop and pilot the course. We agreed the class would be designed with a critical academic service-learning model (Mitchell, 2008), with Georgia State teacher candidates serving for at least 12 hours in an adult ESOL classroom at one of four sites in Atlanta, in addition to their university based learning requirements.

According to Howard (1998), "Academic service-learning is a pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant community service" (p. 22) and "utilizes the service experience as a course 'text' for both academic learning and civic learning" (Howard, 2001, p. 10). In this teaching and learning model, guided and

purposeful reflection plays a vital role, as it spurs students to make connections between their community based service sites and academic learning (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Academic service-learning, then, differs from volunteering, internships, one time service opportunities, and other kinds of experiential learning in that it ideally marries meaningful service with rigorous academic work, including guided reflection. This course was further designed from a critical perspective; this entailed orienting academic and service objectives toward questions of power and social justice (Mitchell, 2008), as well as ensuring that students understood the systemic “injustice(s)...(that) created the need for service in the first place” (Wade, 2001, p. 1).

To design rigorous critical reflection activities that spurred both academic and civic learning for teacher candidates, I drew on resources provided by the University of Minnesota’s Center for Community Engaged Learning (<http://www.servicelearning.umn.edu/info/reflection.html>). These reflections served several important purposes in our course. As I read the teacher candidates’ written reflections each week, I reconsidered our course texts, the topics we needed to discuss during class in upcoming weeks, and concepts from previous courses to which we needed to return. I also remarked on the challenges some of the teacher candidates were navigating in their service sites, as well as the transformations some of them appeared to be going through that semester; these themes figure in the reflections shared below. Additionally, in ongoing efforts at reciprocity and sharing power, I invited community partner participation from the outset of the course, including syllabus design, service opportunity design, open door policy to visit the university based course component I was teaching, and more. I also invited ongoing reflections and feedback;

some took me up on these opportunities, including Ashley Ekers, whose written reflection appears below.

Collectively, we authors offer the reflections below as a means to share our lessons learned, as well as our remaining questions, as participants in this pilot course. Importantly, we have all participated in different capacities: Pettitt as the course designer and university instructor, Ekers as a cooperating teacher and co-educator of a teacher candidate, and Campbell and Gure as teacher candidates. We hope readers will find that the diverse experiences and perspectives we bring to the endeavor of teaching adult ESOL enrich the discussions that follow.

Teaching a language: It's inseparable from teaching culture

Chanelle Campbell

I stepped into academic service-learning thinking it would just be another thing to check off my list in order to graduate with my bachelor's degree in Applied Linguistics. Nothing prepared me for the eye opening and life changing experiences I would encounter during those three months of service. I was assigned to tutor a Somali woman who worked as a housewife and mother of three. During our weekly Sunday English lessons in her apartment, my main responsibility was to help my student learn the language and literacy practices that would enable her to meet her goals in her new life in the United States. However, during my time with her, I also got a glimpse of the daily struggles she and her family faced; these often left me questioning whether or not I was well-enough prepared to guide them through the obstacles they encountered, which, interestingly, was not part of the curriculum I had been given by my service site.

It seemed like so many things were new and daunting for my student and her family, such as reading a letter sent home by their children's school to say their child had too many unexcused absences, or my student's husband not knowing how to call his employer to request time off to visit the doctor. During my time with my student, my most impactful encounter occurred during a lesson on filling out medical forms; this was timely, since my student was around nine months pregnant at the time. Before the lesson, I decided to get her talking about her previous experiences visiting doctors' offices in the U.S. In our ESOL service-learning/teaching methods class with Nicole Pettitt, we had learned about the importance of establishing real-world contexts for using English, as well as helping language learners create personal connections to the topic at hand; I was trying to help my student link her previous knowledge to our lesson.

During our conversation, she said her due date was Wednesday; my mind immediately went into overdrive with a thousand questions, since Wednesday was only two days away. She tried to walk me through her plans of getting to the hospital, which entailed taking public transportation by herself. Question after question raced through my mind: what happens if she has the baby on the bus? Would she know how to communicate for help if she encountered a dangerous situation? I was overwhelmed with concerns and fear. As I sat flabbergasted, I tried to hide my concerns by changing the subject, and asking if she had a name for the baby. She asked why I asked, and I said she needed to have an idea about names because she would need to provide that information for the baby's birth certificate. She told me that, in her experiences in Somalia, babies are named about three months after birth. I wondered if this cultural practice came about in case of some unforeseen circumstances during a baby's first

three months; this left me puzzled and at a loss for words. I did not know how to express my concerns about what my student might face at the hospital or where to begin my explanations of cultural differences she might encounter.

This experience was enlightening for me: it showed me that some of the challenges my student and her family faced were not only due to language, but potentially to cultural differences as well. In the United States, many cultural practices may be unfamiliar and somewhat overwhelming for them for a while. As a new teacher, I realized that I needed not only to put into practice the things I had learned in my teaching methods courses, but also to gain an understanding of adult students' unique needs. I also realized I needed more knowledge related to assisting adult students through difficult situations that might not occur on a daily basis, such as how to pre-arrange transportation for when one goes into labor. While our adult ESOL teaching methods course provided me with many tools to prepare effective lessons and ways to understand students' social and cultural backgrounds, we had no formal training for handling situations that presented challenges outside of learners' educational needs. Fortunately, our course was also a platform for teacher-learners like me to share our ideas and community based teaching experiences, which helped me glean ideas for handling situations that came up during tutoring sessions. If my classmates' suggestions did not quite work, I would turn to my instructor, Nicole Pettitt, who always had useful advice ready to share.

Before this community engagement experience, I did not know about or pay attention to the needs of refugees and other immigrants in my community. Now I realize that being a teacher is about connecting with students on a personal level, and that

being an ESOL teacher specifically means I am always teaching about culture, as I teach the language and literacy practices that will support adult learners in reaching the goals they have for themselves and their families. These are lessons I brought into my work after graduation, teaching adult refugees at the International Rescue Committee.

Coming full circle: My argument for adult bilingual education

Marwa Gure

As a child of refugees I know firsthand how important adult ESOL teaching can be. When my parents arrived from Somalia, my father spoke English but my mother did not. So, on the days she was off from work, she would take my siblings and me to the Clarkston Community Center where she took English classes. As a bored 6-year-old in that classroom, I would have never imagined that almost 16 years later, I would be in the position to teach people like my mother: people who left their countries because of civil war, famine, or just for better opportunities. Adult refugees and immigrants are often forgotten when it comes to English teaching or even literacy instruction. That is why I was interested in Georgia State's class on teaching adult English learners.

A year prior to taking the adult ESOL community engagement course, I planned on learning Arabic and going overseas to teach English. I initially took the course because it fulfilled graduation requirements I wanted to get out of the way. Then I met Nicole Pettitt, Ashley Ekers (my cooperating teacher, whose reflection appears below), my classmates, and the students at my community engagement site, and I felt at home. I felt something change in the way I looked at myself as a future educator. I realized there was a group of people being ignored and I knew who they were: they were my

mother, my aunts, uncles, and older cousins who had to start working and providing the second they arrived in the U.S. They could not read or write in their own languages, yet, they were expected to live in a country that was not their own, and start working without having a basic understanding of English. I wanted to do something to help even the odds.

Our service-learning course and my service site helped me to reevaluate my future goals. Our course instructor, Nicole, and the teachers at my service site genuinely do care for adult English learners, and I learned so much. I learned how my experiences and my knowledge as the daughter of refugees could be used to make me a better teacher. I learned that even though I am a refugee, I am not as connected to that identity as someone who came here more recently and may be struggling, and I should listen to recent arrivals. I learned that the experiences of immigrants are not monolithic, but we may experience some similar difficulties. I am not arrogant enough to believe that I alone will change how adult ESOL is taught, but the adult ESOL teaching profession needs people like me: young people, who are multilingual, and are not discouraged by teaching adults.

It seemed like we learned everything about adult ESOL in our service-learning course, and I'm not exaggerating. We learned about adult ESOL delivery systems in the U.S. and how different kinds of programs are funded. We learned about different types of teaching styles, how they can be used, and for what learners they might be appropriate. We learned about the curricula and standards that adult ESOL professionals use around the U.S. Additionally, we were always sharing our experiences with one another. We wrote reflections about all of the new things we were

learning in our course and at our service sites, constantly critically examined our ideologies and how we could improve our teaching. We did more in one semester than I have in any class ever and it was worth it.

This course has helped to foster my interest in bilingual adult education. In this educational model, I could leverage my knowledge of the Somali language to teach both English and Somali literacy and would like to work on this with the Somali community in Minnesota. According to Cummins (2001), “Children's cultural and linguistic experience in the home is the foundation of their future learning and we must build on that foundation rather than undermine it” (p. 19). I believe the same is true for adults.

Currently, I am employed at a linguistically and culturally diverse school in the Minneapolis public school district; our surrounding community is quite diverse, and this is reflected in the school's workforce. Whether children attending our school speak Spanish, Somali, Hmong, or Oromo, they always have access to an educator, either in their classroom or in the building, who can support their literacy skills in their home and community language(s). From my experiences at my service-learning site to my current employment, I have witnessed how educational models that support immigrants and refugees in their home and community languages are of great benefit to those who are just beginning to read or write in any language. In the future, I hope that bilingual education will become the norm for all.

Because of my community engagement experiences, I am more comfortable teaching and more interested in becoming not only an educator, but also an advocate for refugees and immigrants of all ages and their right to an education. I am happier

about the trajectory my life is taking post-graduation because I am genuinely interested in what I am going to do and with whom I get to teach and learn.

A Reflective Approach to Mentoring New Teachers

Ashley Ekers

I have taught adult ESOL in various classroom settings for the past 6 years, however I still see myself very much as a beginner teacher. So, when I was asked to participate in this course as a community partner, and specifically as a mentor teacher, I began the way I do almost all of my professional experiences: unsure of my abilities, but hoping I would learn by doing. As a teacher, I have received mentoring through observation, of course, both observing other teachers, as well as microteaching in others' classrooms. I am always grateful when teachers open their classrooms to me, so I hoped I could pass along my positive associations with classroom observation to the teacher candidate assigned to me, Marwa Gure.

My experiences in graduate school also helped prepare me to host a teacher candidate, as these showed me the value of deconstructing everything I do in the classroom. Creating habits of reflection (e.g., asking myself why I framed an activity a certain way, what hidden curricula might be present in my teaching, or what images of a teacher I am attempting to emulate and why) has helped me understand the successes and mistakes in my teaching, and mitigate the insecurities that come with being a new teacher. Realizing that I could bring these strategies to mentoring Marwa made me feel better prepared for receiving her in my classroom.

Additionally, equipping me for the task was the thorough explanation of my role as a community partner and the expectations that came with it, provided by Nicole Pettitt the course instructor, as well as her very present support throughout the whole semester. The structure of the program framed my role as a supporter and facilitator, not someone with additional teaching responsibilities. I knew that the teacher candidates would be learning adult ESOL methods and practices during their campus-based course, so my classroom would simply be where they looked for examples of those in use, or not in use, and tried out various methods for themselves.

During or after each class session in which Marwa participated, I tried to reflect with her: What were her perceptions about the class, and what did she perceive the students might need? As Marwa became more comfortable with me, the students, and our classroom routines, I invited her to teach a portion of the class.

To set up this opportunity, I first projected where we would be in the textbook by the chosen date and asked Marwa to choose any of the vocabulary or grammar points from that unit, using either the text materials to teach it or creating her own. She opted to design her own materials, and was attentive enough to her students' everyday lives to create a "how many/how much" activity to coincide with an upcoming school-wide garage sale. During Marwa's teaching, I took detailed notes, and we later met to reflect upon her teaching.

Since Marwa fit so seamlessly into my classroom, my only challenge as a teacher in this project was being too stretched for time and resources. I would have liked to find ways to make Marwa an even closer collaborator in teaching, perhaps with

scheduled time for her to give me feedback or ask questions, or by inviting her into lesson planning. While I did not have the time for this, or for taking full advantage of resources like the course syllabus and materials provided by Nicole, I think these would have made the teacher candidate/community partner interaction more cohesive.

As I think about what would have made this experience even more successful, the work of several stakeholders comes to mind. For university programs, I would emphasize the advantages of not only giving their students more practical training, but also the potential to foster cooperative relationships between community partners and teacher candidates, leading to graduates who are more equipped to network in the field and pursue potential employment opportunities within community organizations. For teachers who receive university service-learning students in their classrooms, I would emphasize the advantages of having an additional supportive presence in their classroom, rather than taking the perspective that there is another “student” to think about planning activities for. Overall, programs like this stand to benefit all parties involved in practical ways, but as a mentor teacher specifically I found the greatest advantages to be the additional resource for my students and the reflection required to explain my classroom practices to an observer.

Discussion: Reflections from the Course Instructor

The reflections above provide a glimpse into some of the concerns, passions, questions, and lessons that Campbell and Gure as teacher candidates, and Ekers as a community partner, experienced during this pilot service-learning course. While each woman shared both professional and personal realizations she had made about herself

and her relationship to the course content, each reflection offers something unique. Campbell was the only teacher candidate in the course to work with an adult learner one-on-one in the learner's home; her reflection helps me to see how impactful such relationships can be, and thus the need for professionalism and maturity on the part of teacher candidates, and ever-present support and mentoring from course instructors, since high levels of intimacy can develop through in-home tutoring. Campbell's realization that teaching language(s) is inseparable from teaching culture(s) is, for me as a teacher educator, a fundamental and essential understanding for any language teacher.

On the other hand, Gure was one of two teacher candidates in the course who self-identified as a refugee and shared home/community language(s) with the adult learners in the classroom where she carried out her service. As Gure's passion surrounding bilingual adult education grew throughout the semester, she wondered what she could do about it; I encouraged her to teach herself to read in Somali, and she did. Gure's reflection challenges me to consider how to overcome barriers to bilingual educational models, which were once much more accepted and prevalent (Huerta-Macías, 2003), and how to attract and support more young multilingual teachers in the work of teaching English for adult immigrants and refugees in the U.S.

Finally, Ekers's reflection reminds us of the vital contributions of community partners, and cooperating teachers in particular, as co-educators of the teacher candidates who share their classrooms. In adult TESOL teaching contexts, cooperating teachers frequently do not receive extra pay or course releases for opening their classrooms to teacher candidates and taking on these mentoring roles. Yet the service-

learning component of this course, the most impactful component according to teacher candidates' post-course surveys, would have been impossible without the participation of community partners and cooperating teachers like Ekers. For Ekers, her professional and personal realizations vis-à-vis her role in the course came early-on: specifically, that she did, in fact, have the knowledge and experiences necessary to mentor Gure. Ekers's reflection reminds me, as the course designer, how important it is to match teacher candidates with cooperating teachers who have personally experienced some type of formal teacher induction program, including opportunities to observe, engage in structured reflection, and, importantly, practice designing lessons, teaching those lessons, and receiving feedback.

My previous experiences as a service-learning coordinator, nonprofit community partner, and university service-learning course instructor all underscored for me the unpredictable nature of what students and teacher candidates might encounter in community settings, as well as what they might take away from those experiences. For example, I could not have predicted that several teacher candidates would make career shifts, setting aside plans to teach abroad in order to instead take positions teaching refugee learners in Atlanta. Additionally, despite many promising course outcomes, it is important to remember that service-learning can be patronizing, and serve to reinforce stereotypes (e.g., Levinson, 1990; Robinson, 2000). Although I designed the course from a critical perspective, including texts and reflections intended to excavate and confront teacher candidates' and my own unexamined assumptions, I cannot say all of the candidates engaged with the material as Campbell and Gure did, or as I had hoped. At times, I found myself extremely challenged as an educator. In my past

experiences, when I failed to reach students through texts and discussions, I turned to the guided critical reflection that accompanies academic service-learning, and found that helpful in supporting students. Where was I going wrong this time? I returned to my teacher journals, re-envisioned our course texts and assignments, and asked trusted faculty members to reflect with me.

I wish I could end these reflections with a tidy tale, a kind of, "...and we all lived happily ever after." The reality is far messier. I do not know if the seeds planted in our class will sprout and bear fruit in the lives of the teacher candidates who I felt needed it most. Yet, I selfishly recognize, those are the teacher candidates who taught me the most. In the same way I could not have foreseen what the teacher candidates gained through the learning that took place primarily in their service sites, I never imagined the ways I would grow as an educator when a few teacher candidates compelled me to critically examine my own ideologies and defend my stances vis-à-vis course content.

Epilogue

As co-authors, we hope our paper underscores for readers the potential for critical service-learning in teacher education for adult ESOL contexts. We also desire for the course description provided above, as well as our reflections, to spur others into taking up this work where we left off. As of our writing, all of us have graduated (Campbell and Gure with bachelors' degrees, Ekers with a master's degree, and Pettitt with a Ph.D.), and all but one of us have moved out of the Atlanta area. Along with the teachers and administrators who initially requested professional development workshops from Pettitt in the Atlanta area, as well as numerous scholars, we believe in

the importance of increasing professionalization in adult ESOL teaching (Crandall, 1993; Perin, 1999), and of expanding the number of well-qualified teachers for adult immigrant and refugee English learners in our communities. We know that teachers in Atlanta and other areas in Georgia have the passion necessary to continue this important work.

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