



## **I Believe I Can: Service-Learning to Raise Preservice Teacher's Efficacy with English Learners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study explores if service-learning significantly improves preservice teachers' efficacy with English learners (ELs). Furthermore, we examine if service-learning sites significantly differ in developing efficacy during service-learning. Two hundred preservice teachers served in three ELs location types: PreK-12, intensive English program, and community adult ESL. We employed a modified version of Yough's (2008) Teacher Efficacy for Teaching English Language Learners (TETELL) survey. The TETELL survey was administered to the preservice teachers at the beginning of the semester, before they had started their EL service-learning experience, and again at the end of the semester after the field experiences had been completed. Survey results indicated that while all locations improved efficacy, this improvement depended on participants' initial levels of efficacy and the site's focus on language and cultural development. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing interest in implementing service-learning into teacher education by examining the perspectives and experiences of preservice teachers in a teacher education program in the United States.*

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

English learners (ELs) are one of the fastest growing student populations in the United States, with over 4.6 million students as of 2015 (McFarland et al., 2017). Because of accountability movements and legislation like the No Child Left Behind Act, there has been an increased focus on the academic success of ELs in US schools (de Cohen & Clewell, 2007). Law makers expect schools and teachers to help ELs achieve the difficult tasks of acquiring a second language and learning academic content through the second language (U.S. Department of

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Education, 2015). Increasingly, the challenge of teaching core content-areas to ELs has been placed on the shoulders of general education teachers (National Education Association, 2011).

Unfortunately, mainstream teachers generally feel unprepared to work with ELs (Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010). In particular, preservice teachers report feeling less confident for working with ELs than with other student populations (Siwatu, 2011). This low confidence could stem from teachers' lack of both cultural competence (Harris, 2010; JohnBull, 2012; Wall, 2017) and knowledge and understanding of second language acquisition, or the language learning process that confronts ELs (Hoover, 2008). Teachers' confidence in themselves to help students achieve educational goals, known as teacher efficacy (Hoy, 2000), plays an important role in the potential for students to succeed in the classroom (Jerald, 2007). Low levels of efficacy mean that preservice teachers will be less likely to focus on ELs and provide them with the high-quality instruction necessary to reach academic success (Washburn, 2008). Without an increase in preservice teachers' efficacy for teaching ELs, future teachers will not be able to properly meet the needs of higher enrollments of ELs in schools and may view students' first languages as barriers when working with ELs (Torres & Tackett, 2016; Wall, 2017).

In an effort to raise preservice teachers' efficacy with ELs, teacher education programs have designed coursework aimed at increasing cultural awareness and understanding of second language acquisition (e.g., Busch, 2010; Palpacuer Lee, Curtis, & Curran, 2018; Perren & Wurr, 2015). However, only when coursework is coupled with field experience that directly engages preservice teachers with ELs does coursework truly affect their levels of efficacy (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2011). The challenge for teacher education programs is to complement coursework with field experiences which will provide opportunities for interaction between their students and ELs. This interaction must enable preservice teachers to develop greater awareness and understanding of different cultures, as well as empower preservice teachers to meet the language learning needs of their future students (Keengwe, 2010; Pappamihiel, 2007; Rodríguez-Arroyo & Vaughns, 2015; Silva & Kucer, 2016; Wall, 2017; Wu & Guerra, 2017).

One method for organizing this interaction between preservice teachers and ELs is service-learning (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Hallman & Burdick, 2014; Kirkland, 2014; Perren & Wurr, 2015; Purmensky, 2009; Wurr, 2013; Wurr & Hellebrandt, 2007). In service-learning, students participate in community service that furthers academic objectives (Cho & Gulley, 2017; Minor, 2002). Service-learning is "a form of experiential education" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 1) in which students engage in community-based activities that provide them with meaningful, often transformative experiences, and contribute to the quality of local people's lives at the same time (Kinloch & Smagorinsky, 2014). In this research, we use service-learning to mean active experiential learning coupled with critical reflection of the self and others.

Studies on service-learning in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages) have found beneficial effects for both the students and the preservice teachers (Bippus & Eslami, 2013; Fan, 2013; Rueckert, 2013; Smolen, Zhang, & Detwiler 2013). For example, Bippus and Eslami (2013) argue that service-learning can help students and teachers engage in authentic dialogue, gain confidence, develop relevant language, and start to build a community.

Preservice teachers can assist ELs in a number of capacities, such as reading partners (Purmensky, 2006), after-school tutors (Fitts & Gross, 2012) and conversation partners (Savage & Cox, 2013). The beneficial effect for preservice teachers includes improved attitudes towards ELs (Avineri, 2015; Cho & Gulley, 2017; Fitts & Gross, 2012; Pappamihiel, 2007), corrected assumptions about ELs (Amaro-Jiménez, 2012), and better understanding of ESL practices

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(Hale, 2008; Moore, 2013; Cho & Gulley, 2017). Regarding efficacy in particular, Bollin (2007) and Hale (2008) noted increased confidence for preservice teachers after serving EL children.

While the existing literature in this field favors the use of service-learning for changing preservice teachers' beliefs towards ELs, particularly their levels of efficacy, most of these studies have been on a small scale, generally only relying on qualitative data like field reflections. Though a number of studies using quantitative methodologies have indicated that service-learning improves preservice teachers' efficacy (Mergler, Carrington, Boman, Kimber, & Bland, 2017; Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014; Stewart, Allen, & Bai, 2011; Tice & Nelson, 2015; Yang, Anderson, & Burke, 2014), the field lacks similar studies specifically targeted at improving teacher efficacy with ELs (Szente, 2008; Wong, 2008). Studies with more experimental or quasi-experimental designs are needed to ascertain service-learning's impact on efficacy for working with this student population (Furco & Root, 2010; Saal, 2018).

One variable that may affect service-learning's impact on teacher efficacy with ELs is where the service should take place. While some EL field experiences are held only in preK-12 classrooms, other EL locations are available to teacher education programs. On-campus, many universities have intensive-English programs for international students (De Angelis & Marino, 2015). Off-campus, communities often offer English classes to adult second language learners (Center for Applied Linguistics [CAL], 2010). Researchers like Bergman (2013) have argued that field experiences in different educational settings may lead to different outcomes. This could also hold true for diverse types of EL settings (Coady, Harper, & deJong, 2011), because one type of EL learning setting may differ from another in its focus on cultural understanding and language learning. To this point, no study has addressed the effects of service-learning in different EL classroom environments.

Considering the need for building up preservice teachers' efficacy for working with ELs, and the potential that service-learning offers to do so (Cho & Gulley, 2017; Rueckert, 2013), it becomes vital to examine if service-learning can indeed increase teacher efficacy with ELs, and if the type of location for this service matters. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following two questions:

1. Does service-learning with English learners significantly improve preservice teachers' self-efficacy for teaching English learners?
2. Do different types of educational settings (specifically preK-12 schools, community adult ESL classes, and university intensive English programs) significantly differ from each other in improving preservice teachers' self-efficacy for teaching learners while engaged in service-learning?

## METHODS

The participants in this project were preservice teachers in a college of education at a Tier-I research university in the Southwestern United States. Their specific degree programs were Pre-K through 6/general, middle grades 4-8 Math/Science, and middle grades 4-8 Language Arts/Social Studies. Two hundred preservice teachers participated in the study. One hundred-eighty-five participants were white, three were African-American, four were Asian-American, two were Native American, and six reported two or more races. 11 were Hispanic and 189 were non-Hispanic. Gender was expectedly one-sided, with 196 females, and just four males.

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One of the degree requirements for the preservice teachers in the program is to take a one semester, three-credit-hour course in ESL theory and methodology. According to the course syllabus, the main objective of the course is to understand how to adapt instructional methodologies to support culturally and linguistically diverse students in the classroom. Students also gain knowledge about first and second language acquisition, multicultural/multilingual environments, ESL methods, and factors that can affect how ESL students learn academic content, language, and culture. Based off this new knowledge, they should know what ELs need in order to develop their English proficiency, advocate for these students in schools, and promote the involvement of ELs' families and communities in the schools.

As part of this course, they participated in a service-learning field experience where ELs were present and made up the majority of the students in the classroom. Participants had the option to choose one of three types of EL locations. These locations were prek-6 schools with large numbers of EL children (this option was not available during the fall semester), community adult ESL classes, or the university's intensive English program for international students. The preservice teachers attended their field experience classroom for a total of ten hours during the semester. However, in the shorter summer session, only eight hours of service-learning were required. Visits to classrooms were usually one hour long, though some locations encouraged visits of an hour and a half to two hours, meaning some participants may have had as few as five visits to complete the ten hours. Participants were also required to write reflection papers (at least 400 words) for every hour that they were in the field (4000 words by the end of the semester or 3200 words during the summer).

The choices for children's locations were a local elementary school or a daycare with many children for whom English is a second language. The elementary school had bilingual classrooms for native Spanish speakers. The school uses a one-way dual language program, intending to develop linguistic abilities, particularly reading, in both languages, and increase cross-cultural awareness and academic achievement. Preservice teachers volunteered in the school's EL Classroom Tutor Program with students in grades K-5. The daycare, located next to the university, provides child care for many of the university's international students. Preservice teachers in this service-learning experience were part of the center's EL Classroom Tutor Program. Participants here served in two-hour blocks, either during the first or the second half of the semester. Forty-seven of the participants selected this setting.

The community adult ESL classes are run through varying local agencies, including adult learning centers and local churches in the community. Classes in this type of setting were held in both the morning and evening (this was the only setting with an evening option). At least one of these programs offered multiple levels of instruction in reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Students were told that they would observe the ESL teachers as they instruct adult learners and also get to work with adult ELs who are similar to the parents of ELs in schools. The description from their ESL methods course described preservice teachers' work in these programs as English tutors and classroom assistants. Some of these programs required volunteers to be present for two hours, while others required only one hour. Seventy-five of the participants were in this group.

Lastly, the university's intensive English program (IEP) works to develop the English proficiency of international students. These students are generally university-aged, with many of them planning to enter the university after completing their English studies. Preservice teachers in this group were assigned through the IEP's Classroom Partner Program, in which they would visit classes ten times during the semester. Classes that students could be assigned to visit

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included listening skills, oral skills, and American customs classes (oral skills, grammar, and vocabulary classes during summer sessions). The program informed students that they were to act as the ELs' equals in the classroom, rather than as tutors. Seventy-eight of the participants chose this setting.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In this study, we employed a modified version of Yough's (2008) Teacher Efficacy for Teaching English Language Learners (TETELL) survey. The TETELL survey consists of 31 items with a Likert-style scale from 1-9. A lower score on an item indicates that the teacher has a low level of belief in herself to accomplish the specific task with ELs. For example, item number four asks "How much can you do to get ESL students to believe they can do well in school?" A score of 2 indicates that the teacher believes she can do nothing to improve an ESL student's belief, while an 8 indicates that the teacher feels she can do a great deal. The TETELL survey was administered to the students at the beginning of the semester, before students had started their EL service-learning experience, and again at the end of the semester after the field experiences had been completed. Overall internal consistency for the sample in this study was .827.

The researchers used SPSS for the statistical analysis of the research questions. To answer the first research question and test for significant differences between pre- and post-survey scores, across the entire data sample and within each different EL setting, we used a series of paired-sample t-tests. To address the second research question, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), with the presurvey data as a covariate to control for baseline equivalence, would seem to be the most appropriate method of analysis. However, it was detected that the assumption of homogeneity of slopes was not met for ANCOVA ( $F(2, 194)=8.308, p<.001$ ), thus the use of ANCOVA was not appropriate (Poremba & Rowell, 1997). Therefore, regression analysis was chosen to examine if there was a significant difference between the three groups at the post-survey, adjusting for pre-survey difference.

We ran the regression analysis with the following independent variables: location, presurvey, and the interaction between location and presurvey, with the dependent variable being the post survey. Interaction effect was found to be statistically significant in the ANCOVA and thus was included as an independent variable. To identify the region of significance for the interaction effect, we used an online program <http://www.quantpsy.org/interact/mlr2.htm> (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). The next section describes the results of these analyses.

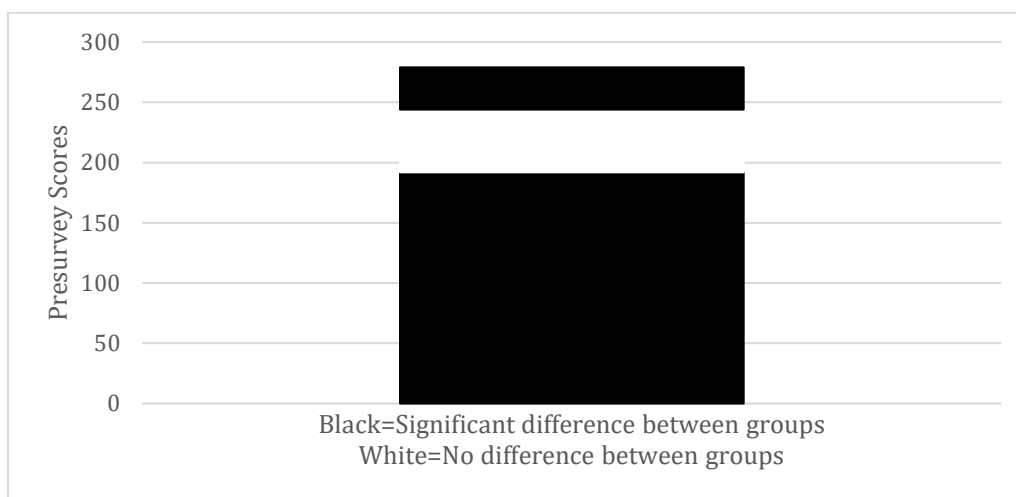
## **RESULTS**

The first research question asks whether or not service-learning improves teacher efficacy for working with ELs. To examine this question, a paired sample t-test was conducted for the pre- and post-survey scores of each of the locations. As shown in Table 1, participants' mean scores in each setting (PreK-12:  $t(46)=-5.25, p < .001$ , IEP:  $t(77)=-8.24, p < .001$ , community adult ESL:  $t(74)=-9.95, p < .001$ ) significantly improved by the end of service-learning.

**Table 1.** Survey mean scores

Location	Pre	SD	Post	SD
PreK-12	181.72	37.36	206.85	40.38
IEP	180.99	45.75	219.42	34.82
Community adult ESL	164.41	47.02	218.76	27.02

Next, the second research question asks if different EL educational settings significantly differ from each other in improving preservice teachers' self-efficacy for teaching ELs while engaged in service-learning. The regression analysis indicated that at least one group was significantly different from another on the post survey ( $t = 4.575, p < .001$ ). However, according to the region of significance obtained from the online program, this did not hold true for the entire range of scores (see Figure 1). For presurvey scores between 192 and 244, there were no significant post survey differences between groups in different locations. In contrast, for participants who initially scored above 244 or below 192, there was a significant difference among the three groups' scores on the post survey.

**Figure 1.** Post survey regions of significance between groups when accounting for initial scores

While this meant that there was indeed a significant difference between the groups, it did not identify where the difference(s) lay. Therefore, a post-hoc analysis was performed to compare the difference on the post survey between two groups at a time, followed by the identification of regions of significance using the online program. Results presented in Table 2 suggest that: (a) participants who scored below 194 on the presurvey (in the “okay” range) had greater increase in their degree of self-efficacy if they conducted their service-learning in the IEP site, as compared to the equivalent participants in the PreK-12 service-learning site; (b) participants who scored below 136 on the presurvey (in the “poorly” range) increased more in their degree of their self-efficacy by serving in the adult community ESL setting as compared to similar participants in the IEP setting; (c) participants who scored below 191 on the presurvey (in the “okay” range) made greater gains in efficacy by serving in the adult community ESL setting than those who served in PreK-12 settings; and (d) participants who scored above 245 on the

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presurvey (in the “very well” range) made greater gains in efficacy while serving in the PreK-12 setting than participants serving in community adult ESL settings.

**Table 2.** Regions of significance between EL settings

<b>Comparison</b>	<b><i>t</i></b>	<b>Significance</b>	<b>Lower boundary of presurvey</b>	<b>Upper boundary of presurvey</b>
PreK-12 vs. IEP	2.64	.009	194	n/a
IEP vs. community adult ESL	2.408	.017	136	n/a
PreK-12 vs. community adult ESL	4.742	<.001	191	245

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of our data in this study has demonstrated that service-learning enhances preservice teachers’ level of efficacy for working with ELs. All three groups increased their self-efficacy. This study supports the findings of other recent research (e.g., Bamber & Hankin, 2011; Boyle-Baise, 2002; Cho & Gulley, 2017; Farnsworth, 2010; Hallman & Burdick, 2014; López & Assaf, 2014; Moore, 2013; Perren, 2013; Rueckert, 2013; Smolen et al., 2013) which showcase service-learning’s potential for building preservice teachers’ confidence to work with ELs and adds to the limited number of quantitative studies dealing not only with service-learning and teacher efficacy for working with ELs, but service-learning and teachers in general. The previous quantitative research that does exist has shown service-learning to improve teacher traits, including efficacy, though not always significantly so, or did not play the sole defining factor in preservice teachers’ growth (Shastri, 2001; Trauth-Nare, 2015).

Locations differed in their impact on preservice teachers, based on the preservice teacher’s initial level of efficacy. This highlights the importance of taking into account the preservice teacher’s current level of efficacy for working with ELs. The key issue seems to be that the lower the level of efficacy with ELs, the higher the need for developing cultural competency and linguistic understanding. Conversely, the higher the current level of efficacy, the less necessary an emphasis on cultural competency and linguistic understanding will be. Therefore, it is not a question of what type of service-learning location preservice teachers should experience, but when should they experience a specific type of location. Taking into account initial levels of efficacy, and recognizing the varying degree to which preservice teachers need to develop cultural competency and understanding of linguistic needs, we shall examine possible factors in different learning environments that could have contributed to different levels of efficacy development for these preservice teachers.

We begin by addressing why preservice teachers who felt that they could only teach “poorly” or were “not at all” able to accomplish academic objectives with ELs benefited most from the community adult ESL settings. This setting seems ideal for building cultural competency and observing language development. Hooks (2008) reported that working with adult ELs in the community gave preservice teachers increased “confidence in working with all

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of the parents and families of the children in their classrooms” (p. 106), meaning preservice teachers were feeling more comfortable with people from their future students’ culture. Also, because of the general objective of language development in this setting, preservice teachers are able to gain understanding of the second language acquisition process (Mosley & Zoch, 2011). Finally, partner or group activities in this setting between preservice teachers and adult ELs give preservice teachers greater confidence in their abilities to communicate with ELs (Hooks, 2008). This setting may be most effective for preservice teachers with lower efficacy because the purpose of the classroom interaction is to lead to cultural exchange and language development, which is precisely what these preservice teachers need to experience.

Next, of the preservice teachers who initially rated themselves as “okay,” those who served with adults benefitted more than those who worked with young learners. The important difference between adult and young learners’ settings is their intended learning outcomes for ELs. The adult service-learning sites are designed to increase proficiency in English, especially oral language, as well as knowledge of American culture, while the PreK-12 sites aim to promote academic learning, such as literacy development. The following sections more closely examine this key difference between adult and child service-learning sites.

First, in both community adult ESL classes and IEPs, preservice teachers are more likely to participate in conversations and discussions which help ELs to improve oral fluency and build cultural knowledge or understanding, than to assist in academic work. In community adult ESL sites, they are working with programs that meet a wide variety of needs (CAL, 2010), often focusing on improving learners’ spoken English for specific purposes or situations (Hooks, 2008). Preservice teachers are also able to learn from adults’ experiences, or Funds of Knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), that they bring to the classroom. Likewise, in the IEP, preservice teachers help ELs to practice English and engage in cultural exchange (Savage & Cox, 2013).

Service-learning in the children’s locations, however, is directed towards academic concerns. In many cases, there simply is not time in mainstream classes for oral language production with the limited time available for curriculum and testing requirements (Sullivan, Hegde, Ballard, & Ticknor, 2015). Consistent with other studies where preservice teachers worked with elementary school ELs (Purmensky, 2006; Szente, 2008), preservice teachers tutored these elementary ELs in literacy activities, such as reading to them and helping them with class assignments in English. Even in the international preschool, while only working with children under age five, instruction seemed to be academically-motivated. Similar to other research on preservice teachers volunteering with preschool ELs (Heineke, Kennedy, & Lees, 2013), preservice teachers’ main work was to assist the classroom teachers to prepare students for academic work in grade school. Spending service-learning time on only academically-minded activities, while appropriate for the setting, limits the opportunity for preservice teachers to converse with the children and learn more about their cultures.

Preservice teachers at this level of efficacy (“okay”), may not be developmentally ready to work directly with ELs in schools. Chang (2009) has observed that when preservice teachers have tutored and been challenged by students who are struggling with literacy or their ability to give feedback to teachers, they recognize that they are currently unprepared to work with these struggling learners. They also begin to consider how well they can or cannot relate to these students. Experiencing the difficulty of helping ELs with academic work, as well as not being able to relate to these students culturally or linguistically, could prove costly for their belief in



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themselves to help these students succeed. These challenging circumstances could stunt, or even have negative effect on their efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Next, for preservice teachers who are beginning to feel confident in their ability to work with ELs, the service-learning site would not necessarily be an intervening variable. They still need to raise their level of efficacy with ELs, but they have enough knowledge of language learning and are culturally competent enough that any additional experience, whether with the actual type of student they will eventually teach (children) or in less academically minded settings (adults), will benefit them.

Finally, if a preservice teacher has an already very high level of teacher efficacy, then service-learning with ELs in more academic settings, such as a university intensive-English program or elementary school may benefit them most. This high level of self-efficacy was most likely based on preservice teachers' previous experiences and would remain higher than other participants throughout their experiences in the field (Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014). Because of their previous experiences, they are confident enough in their understanding of language and culture to jump right into academic settings, including working with children in PreK-12. These preservice teachers benefit most from experiences that most closely simulate academic teaching with ELs, such as individual tutoring or small group teaching (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2011). Experience resembling what they will eventually do as teachers in schools further raises their efficacy for working with ELs beyond that which could happen in less academically oriented environments like the community adult ESL classes.

As this study has shown, service-learning as a teaching method can be a positive way to raise efficacy. By participating in service-learning, it is possible for preservice teachers who have not previously interacted with ELs to eventually enjoy the same levels of efficacy as those who entered with prior experiences (Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014). Additionally, and equally important, this study has shed light on the developmental process that preservice teachers undergo to build up their self-efficacy, which then affects how service-learning should be employed with these future teachers. While teacher education programs do need to prepare preservice teachers to work with ELs in content areas, literacy, and assessment (Harper & de Jong, 2009), this process to build up efficacy with ELs should not necessarily start with academics in mind. Instead, it should begin by focusing on the teachers' level of cultural competency and knowledge of learners' linguistic needs (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Hoover, 2008). Then, as preservice teachers gain confidence in themselves to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of ELs, programs can increase the amount of time preservice teachers spend working directly with and be responsible for children's academic learning (Spear-Swerling, 2009).

While this study has answered questions pertaining to service-learning's effects on preservice teachers with ELs in different circumstances, it poses new questions as well. Avenues for further research include discovering what preservice teachers themselves say impacted their efficacy during these experiences. This could be done by collecting and analyzing other sources of data such as interviews and reflection journals.

Questions also remain concerning the process of developing efficacy. How many hours must a teacher be out in the field serving ELs before she has a sufficiently high level of efficacy? Also, what would be learned about their efficacy levels as they join the teaching profession (Tran, 2015)? Perhaps more importantly, once they have high efficacy, what does this mean for their use of best-practices with ELs? Does high efficacy equate to being able to use strategies effectively with learners, or is there more that must be done?

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Finally, knowing that service-learning can be an effective way to help their preservice teachers, what can programs do to successfully implement and sustain these types of programs (Moore, 2013)? How can teacher education programs create partnerships within the community to find additional placements in community adult ESL classrooms (McDonald, Tyson, Brayko, Bowman, Delpont, & Shimomura, 2011)? Lastly, we need to examine what barriers, if any, prevent these types of partnerships from flourishing.

## CONCLUSION

Teacher education programs should incorporate service-learning with ELs into their preparation for preservice teachers, so that these future teachers feel prepared to meet the needs of ELs in their mainstream classrooms. Programs should design these experiences in the field to appropriately assist students in becoming competent teachers (Aiken & Day, 1999). The placement of students needs to be intentional, with programs carefully considering preservice teachers' developmental needs (Gomez, Strage, Knutson-Miller, & Garcia-Nevarez, 2009). Though unorthodox for most field placements in K-12 education, these programs would be wise to turn more towards class settings involving adult learners as a means to improving preservice teachers' cultural competency and understanding of second language acquisition. Service-learning in these learning environments will give preservice teachers the opportunity to build their confidence before they move to more challenging tasks and simulations. They will be ready for the challenge of teaching ELs in schools. Just as they have discovered their own abilities to teach, so too they will inspire their future ELs to reach their true potential to learn.

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