

Vol. 11, No. 5
pp. 31-57
November &
December
2020

Received: 29 September 2020
Received in revised form: 22 October 2020
Accepted: 1 November 2020

Pre-Service ESL Teachers' Self-Reported Knowledge of English Language Learners' (ELLs) Reading Assessments

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Abstract

Educators in reading are cognizant of the importance of proper assessment practices in order to screen for the risk of reading disabilities, guide proper instruction, and evaluate growth. While teacher preparation programs are striving to equip future teachers with the best reading assessment practices, little is known about the actual knowledge and attitudes that these students have toward assessing English language learners (ELLs). In order to determine the attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge of pre-service teachers (PTs), a survey constructed by the researchers was administered to 105 PTs. The PTs were enrolled in an ELLs reading assessment course at a public university in Texas. Based on the descriptive statistical analyses, there was a general lack of confidence in ability and/or preparedness to assess the reading abilities of ELLs. On a more positive note, the majority of respondents indicated a positive attitude towards ELLs overall. In addition, an exploratory factor analysis using cross-tabulations was conducted to determine what factors contributed to PTs feeling prepared to assess ELLs reading. This study has implications for teacher educators to recognize the importance of teachers' having knowledge of ELLs reading assessment practices as this knowledge could enhance teachers' self-efficacy and confidence in reading assessment of ELLs. It is suggested that teacher education programs include a course dedicated to reading assessment to enhance teachers' content knowledge of basic language constructs and also their pedagogical knowledge of ELLs literacy acquisition and assessment.

Keywords: ELLs reading, second language assessment practices, ELLs teacher preparation, ELLs reading assessment, pre-service teacher education

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1. Introduction

Assessment remains a pervasive element of any reading classroom and is vitally important to the academic growth of students (White, 2009). Assessment literacy, defined as under understanding of good assessment practices, is critical for all teachers (Popham, 2004), and essential to achieving and maintaining high quality of teaching and learning. In fact, researchers (e.g., Taylor, 2010; Weigle, 2007; White, 2009) have claimed that for second language (L2) teachers to become assessment literate, they need guidance in those aspects of assessment involving scoring, grading, and making judgments about students' language skills and abilities. Teachers need to make informed choices regarding the assessment of ELLs in order to maintain their students' motivation, confidence, and engagement and to ensure the realization of their best potential.

Despite the critical role teachers' knowledge of assessment plays in students' success, limited number of teachers possess adequate knowledge about assessment (e.g., Malone, 2013; Scarino, 2013; Taylor, 2013; Weigle, 2007; White, 2009). Research has indicated that many second language (L2) teachers do not feel prepared to assess their L2 students' performance and achievements. Teachers' limited assessment literacy can lead to teachers' low self-efficacy and confidence (Zhu, 2004).

Although the field of research in ELLs reading assessments is still developing, a considerable amount of research has suggested best practices for effectively assessing the reading development in ELLs. However, research shows that current practices of ELLs reading assessment used by most in-service teachers heavily relies on standardized/high-stakes testing (Anstrom, 1997). They do so without employing alternative reading assessment strategies for ELLs, as outlined by the literature. Perhaps this can be contributed to the inchoate preparation the current teaching workforce in respect to ELLs reading assessments. It is possible that such information was not disseminated by their instructors or personally researched during their teacher preparation. As the student population of linguistically diverse learners continues to increase and as research begins to continually reveal effective reading assessments practices of ELLs, will tomorrow's teachers be better prepared to assess the reading development of ELLs? To address this question and the concerns above, we will focus our research to examine PTs' attitudes towards and knowledge/perceptions of ELLs reading assessment. In the present study, we seek to answer the following research questions (RQs):

1. Are preservice teachers familiar with the best practices for assessing the reading development of ELLs?
2. How prepared do preservice teachers perceive themselves to be with ELLs reading assessment?
3. What factors may have possibly contributed to preservice teachers' sense of preparedness?
4. What are preservice teachers' overall attitudes towards teaching and assessing ELLs?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Problems in ELLs Reading Assessment

The development of reading skills is the cornerstone of all academic development for ELLs. As a result, it is paramount that teachers possess the ability to properly assess reading with these students. In order for ELLs to have full access to educational attainment, the best practices for instruction must be formulated and guided by the best practices for assessments, as both are interdependent and absolutely exigent. Sadly, an over-emphasis on standardized testing blurs the focus on reading assessment in U.S. schools (Gonzales-Jensen & Beckett, 2002). What educational researchers have found to be effective reading assessment practices are largely ignored, to the detriment of ELLs. As a result, many are given inadequate reading instruction or are erroneously evaluated and misplaced in educational programs where they do not belong (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Ehler-Zavala, 2010; Ortiz, 2002). Artiles and Klinger (2006) point out that there is a pronounced overrepresentation of ELLs among those that qualify for special services. This is partially attributed to inadequate assessment practices, particularly of the language and literacy development of these students. Some professionals lack the ability to distinguish between language acquisition issues and a real learning disability. Often times, language delay that is typical of a second language learner and characteristics that suggest cognitive deficiencies are confused for one another (Artiles & Klinger, 2006; Geva, 2000). It is important to note that this issue had been exacerbated by legal philandering. As a result of U.S. Public Law (94-142), fear of litigation has led to school districts nationally under and over referring bilingual and ESL students to special education (Baker, 2006). Below we will discuss the literature in which both

under and over diagnosis for special services were found, due to the negligent use of best assessment practices.

Limbos and Geva (2001) documented the accuracy of teacher assessments in screening for reading disabilities with ELLs as compared to native English speaking students (L1). They found that teachers' accuracy in screening and assessing for reading disabilities among ELLs is markedly lower than their accuracy with native speaking students. They found that children who were identified by teachers' assessment as "at-risk," consistently had lower oral language proficiencies than those who were identified as "not-at-risk." However, objective measures indicated that the children with lower oral language proficiency identified by teachers as "at-risk" were misidentified. Therefore, inappropriate use of oral language proficiency measures can lead to over-identification of some ELLs, who are truly not at-risk for reading disabilities.

There is also evidence that ELLs who should be rightfully diagnosed and treated for reading disabilities are actually being ignored. In response to the 1996 report issued by The Commission for Racial Equality (CARE) in London that revealed an under-representation of ELLs assessed as learning disabled/dyslexic, Deponio et al.(2000) performed an audit that confirmed CARE's findings, with a very low occurrence of ELLs diagnosed as learning disabled/dyslexic. They state, "The 'high profile' of dyslexia and the requirement to accurately assess are compounded by the sensitivity of working with pupils from other cultures and the difficulty of selecting appropriate assessment tools" (Deponio et al., 2000, pp. 37-38).

2.2. Best Practice for Assessing ELLs Reading

As of now, we have addressed the problems and implications of deficient reading assessment for ELLs. Now, let us turn the discussion to what the literature has to offer in terms of how these assessments should be conducted. Geva (2000) suggests that educators should assess phonological processing and rapid basic reading skills, and measure the gap between reading and listening comprehension. While a small gap between reading and listening comprehension (with reading comprehension being slightly lower) would be normal and expected for developing readers, a large gap indicates that while the student is able to understand vocabulary and ideas, he/she is having trouble making sense of words and ideas in print (decoding deficits) (Geva, 2000). Because so much of ELLs' reading ability is

dependent upon their English vocabulary knowledge, Woolley (2010) suggests that measuring the students' receptive vocabulary with assessments such as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 1981) can be quite useful.

Liu et al. (2001) published a study that investigated the effectiveness of a multi-step Test Item Post-Conference (TIPC) procedure. The TIPC procedure involves a multiple-choice comprehension test, in which students identify portions of a reading passage that gave them problems, are asked questions about their responses, and then interviewed over their testing strategies and background knowledge. All of these steps serve the ultimate purpose of being able to adjust the students' score appropriately. Liu et al. (2001) found a strong consistency with the adjusted score in its equivalent form reliability over a one week period, particularly in comparison to the original score. Surprisingly, background and cultural reasons accounted for only 11% of the score adjustments, while the most popular reasons for score adjustments include comprehension, guessing, elimination, and carelessness (21-25% each). These results suggest that background and cultural differences be used to examine the students' multiple-choice standardized tests scores and that educators must be aware about the use and misuse of test-taking strategies, in particular for ELLs. Elimination and guessing strategies more helped than hindered their answers, which led to an overestimation of reading abilities when using original scores (Liu et al., 2001).

Beaumont et al. (2002) studied the implementation of an alternative assessment for ELLs called the Transitional Performance-Based Assessment (TPBA), to be taken in place of the regular Performance-Based Assessment (PBA). TPBA differs from the regular assessment in that it provides a scaffolding of its content, has reading passages that are adjusted to the English proficiency level of the students, contains provisions that allow students to activate prior knowledge, and uses bilingual individuals to score the exams in a more holistic manner. They reported that:

Findings from the research project concluded that the TPBA showed that students who traditionally performed poorly on district-wide assessments could successfully engage with English texts and demonstrate progress toward the district's language arts standards when the assessment took into account their unique language and literacy profiles and planned for their language development needs. The transition assessment, with its emphasis on assisted performance, enabled the students to demonstrate their ability to comprehend English text. Even

those students whose overall performance was low in the holistic scoring demonstrated ability to go beyond concrete responses on certain items. (Beaumont et al., 2002, p. 230)

According to Schneider and Ganschow (2000), the teaching and learning of a second language would be greatly assisted with the infusion of dynamic assessment of metalinguistic skills. This practice is deemed as highly useful in second language learning. They describe dynamic assessments as a method in which the teacher acts simultaneously as a facilitator and assessor of student learning through interactive and shared dialogue with the student. Thus, the teacher should be able to identify response patterns and elicit other problem-solving strategies, respond with verbal and nonverbal thought-provoking hints, and observe metalinguistic awareness (Schneider & Ganschow, 2000).

Based on the current research, recommendations for assessing reading development in ELLs is available but is too often ignored. The most frequently used current practice of ELLs reading assessment is standardized/high-stakes tests (Cummins, 1989; Gonzales-Jensen & Beckett, 2002; Rueda & Garcia, 1996) that frequently often occur after the student is perceived to have an oral command of English (Gersten et al., 2007; Gottlieb, 2006). Assessments of reading disabilities can and should proceed whether or not the student has developed oral language proficiency in the second language, as these two assessment tasks screen out children with reading disabilities in all students (August & Shanahan, 2006; Case & Taylor, 2005; Gersten et al., 2007; Geva, 2000; Gottlieb, 2006;). Educators do not need to wait until children's oral proficiency in their second language is fully developed to administer assessments that identify reading difficulties. Instead, early assessment, followed by early intervention gives the student a much higher chance of successfully coping with their reading disabilities. Limbos and Geva (2001) also suggest that reading teachers should be trained on the reading development of ELLs, so that they avoid the tendency to rely on assessments measuring oral language proficiency, as research demonstrates that this is not an accurate way to measure English literacy skills (August & Shanahan, 2006). Another notable finding is that teachers should diversify their means of assessment in order to ensure a thorough assessment of ELLs. In addition to traditional standardized exams, alternative assessments such as checklists, portfolios, journals, etc. should be used frequently (Anstrom, 1997; Cummins, 1989; Rueda & Garcia, 1996). Also, an incorporation of both formal and informal assessments, including a deeper look into

the answers on standardized or multiple-choice tests, offers the truest and best reflection of ELLs' reading abilities. Classroom-based formative assessments are of particular importance, as they provide updated measures of a child's reading development, therefore providing the teacher with a valid instructional roadmap (Hurley & Tinajero, 2001; Jia et al., 2006).

2.3. Teacher Knowledge and Attitudes

The majority of studies reviewed have found an apparent lack of teacher knowledge in regards to proper L2 instruction and/or assessment (Anstrom, 1997; Artiles & Klinger, 2006; Deponio et al., 2000; Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Joshi et al., 2009; Li & Zhang, 2004). Although most were performed on in-service teachers, valuable implications for PTs can be readily ascertained by examining the contents of this literature. To begin, Deponio et al. (2000) conducted a study detailing teachers' knowledge on best assessment practices to determine dyslexia in bilingual students. The results revealed that there was a pervasive lack of knowledge and great inconsistency in the assessment practices of teachers. Durgunoglu and Hughes (2010) conducted a mixed-methods study on 62 PTs, measuring their self-efficacy, attitudes, and perceived preparedness, and knowledge of ELLs in general. Using a survey on the attitudes and perceptions of these students toward ELLs, they found that PTs exhibited positive attitudes towards ELLs, but were relatively neutral in their perceptions of their preparedness to teach them. When assessed on their pedagogical knowledge of ESL instruction, the average student score was a whopping 25%. In addition to these findings, a strong, positive correlation was found between self-efficacy and preparedness. Those students who reported a greater sense of preparedness also scored higher on the knowledge test.

Joshi et al. (2009) reported similar findings, although these were PTs educators that were specifically measured on their perceived and actual knowledge of reading instruction. A total of 78 university instructors were surveyed on their perceptions of reading pedagogical knowledge, including items that measured their ability to work with ELLs and to use assessment to inform their instruction. In the latter two categories, they reported moderate confidence in their abilities. However, the results of the content knowledge assessment showed that most participants were not familiar with the five basic constructs needed to teach literacy skills, as highlighted

by The National Reading Panel (2000). If reading teachers do not have a basic knowledge of the proper literacy instruction, they are not able to accordingly assess the literacy skills of any of their students (Moats & Foorman, 2003). Due to the complexities of language development in ELLs, the aforementioned statement rings especially true for this vulnerable population. Furthermore, teacher educators who do not understand the basic components of successful reading acquisition cannot possibly transform college students to effective reading teachers (Binks-Cantrell et al., 2012).

In an article written by Li and Zhang (2004), the findings of a case study of a 14-year-old Chinese girl “Mei” who had apparently not met grade-level standards in English reading are reported. Using a grounded theory approach, the researchers found that although Mei’s instructors had an overall positive attitude toward ELLs, they did not feel prepared to teach and assess her properly. In addition, her teachers recommended her being exempt from standardized testing because of the looming possibility of her not performing well, which further contributed to her lack of reading development. Because they did not compare on-going standardized test results or adequate classroom assessment data, her reading development severely lagged. This finding is supported by Gonzales-Jensen and Beckett (2002), who looked at the reading assessment practices of 50 in-service teachers who were also taking coursework for an ESL endorsement. Using questionnaires, they found that most of the teachers studied could not differentiate between formal and informal assessments. In addition, some studies suggest that the teachers are equally satisfied with the validity of both formal and informal assessments (Gonzales-Jensen & Beckett, 2002; Jia et al., 2006). However, the latter study did seem to have a better understanding of different types of assessments, as they expressed a preference for classroom-based, formative assessments over standardized tests for L2 reading.

In addition to insufficient pedagogical knowledge, much of the lack of proper reading assessment stems from an unfamiliarity with the students’ L1 and/or inexperience with the process of second language acquisition. Without the ability to assess a student in their native language, a teacher can greatly underestimate students’ academic abilities (Anstrom, 1997; Gottlieb, 2006; Ortiz, 1997). For this reason, it is important that teachers have at least a basic knowledge of the linguistic features of a child’s native language or have access to professionals who can bilingually assess them. When this occurs, educators have no choice but to rely on self-reports (Marian et al., 2007) or other inchoate methods of assessing the

student. Although self-reports from students do play an integral role in ascertaining the best instructional intervention for ELLs, this should not be the only method by which their language ability is determined. Related to the linguistic knowledge of teachers, Reeves (2009) purported that language-related background experiences of teachers shape how they deliver content to ELLs. Case studies of two PTs were conducted to see how the teachers' "language biographies" affected their knowledge and beliefs about second language development and teaching. It appears that both teacher candidates did not have any experience in second language acquisition nor had a sound knowledge base of the pedagogical implications for ELLs. Because the PTs were L1 speakers of English with no second language acquisition experience, the author concluded that they did not have "insight into how language can be effectively presented to learners." (p. 112) Educators should have this knowledge for proper reading assessment, as it will assist in distinguishing the language proficiency from content knowledge (Anstrom, 1997). Furthermore, Reeves (2009) charges L2 teacher educators to construct programs that are responsive to their candidates' language biographies and are equipped with rich praxis experiences.

As stated earlier, it is of the utmost importance to understand how knowledgeable PTs are of reading assessment practices appropriate for ELLs. Equally important, we must also know their attitudes and perceptions concerning this matter, as teachers are the primary agents of improving L2 teaching and learning (Jia et al., 2006). Teachers' attitudes and beliefs have a direct effect on their classroom practices (Oboler & Gupta, 2010). Due to much of their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs being shaped by their pre-service training, there is great merit in examining these PT components in relation to their training. In fact, studies have demonstrated how PTs ideas on reading assessment had been directly affected by their university preparation (Allen & Flippo, 2002; Craig & Leavell, 1995; Oboler & Gupta, 2010). Allen and Flippo (2002) examined pre-service teachers' perceptions of alternative literacy assessments. Using a Likert-type survey as a pilot and a subsequent pre-post assessment of a literacy assessment course, they found that the PTs reported significant differences in their attitudes toward self-evaluation and peer evaluation at the end of the course. It is important to note that this course included hands-on reading assessment training. The results from this study allude to teachers' need for field experiences in order to cultivate their

knowledge of L2 reading assessments. It suggests that PTs need much more than a surface knowledge introduction to alternative assessments, they need practice using them.

Oboler and Gupta (2010) explored how the administration of informal reading inventories in schools by pre-service teachers influenced their knowledge and attitudes of reading education. Using a mixed-methods design, the results from these studies demonstrated that “PTs were beginning to create a cognitive understanding of the testing process, to understand the students’ use of strategies, to decide why a response was given, and then to think about the responses’ appropriateness.” (p. 84). In addition, PTs also reported that working with in-service teachers and their students lead to a deeper understanding of how assessment should be used to tailor instruction. Similarly, Craig and Leavell (1995) administered surveys and conducted interviews with multi-disciplinary team of PTs (including reading) in order to ascertain their perceptions of portfolio assessments. To receive a first-hand experience of the potential benefits of tracking student progress with portfolios, they were instructed to use them to track their own progress in their university Reading/Language Arts course for four semesters. Not only did they agree that portfolios would be an asset in their future classrooms, they all reported a deepening of their understanding of the subject matter through constantly assessing their own progress in the class.

Some researchers have expressed the need for more studies that illuminate PTs’ capabilities in L2 reading assessment (Anstrom, 1997; Jia et al., 2006) and studies that highlight how PTs attitudes and beliefs can be affected by their training (Rueda & Garcia, 1997). The current study seeks to answer that call, by looking specifically at PTs background knowledge of best assessment practices, their feelings of preparedness to assess ELLs in reading, attitudes toward L2 reading assessments, and the factors that shaped both their knowledge and attitudes.

3. Methods

3.1. Data Collection Instrument

In order to determine the attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge of pre-service teachers in regards to L2 reading assessment, a researcher-created survey was administered to the participants. The recommendations of Dornyei (2003) guided this process, as he states that questionnaires such as these best measure the

knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of participants involved in second language research. The items of the survey were constructed deductively, based on the aforementioned findings from the literature (Hinkin, 1998). "An advantage of the deductive approach to scale development is that if properly conducted, it will help assure content validity in the final scales. Through the development of adequate construct definitions, items should capture the domain of interest" (Hinkin, 1998, p. 107). The initial survey consisted of 25 items that were carefully examined after its administration. After the data analysis, five questions were deleted and 20 questions were left regarding background experiences related to ELLs, which were designed to assess the participants' attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge of L2 reading assessment. Participants rated each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." A replicated sample of the survey is shown below (Table 1). The questionnaire was sent to all 152 of the participants through e-mail. When the survey closed, 104 of the students had completed the survey, yielding a 68.4% response rate. A final sample size of N=104 was recorded and used in the subsequent data analysis.

3.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 152 undergraduates in four sections of the same course taught by different instructors at a public university in Texas. Furthermore, this teacher preparation program is located in a state whose ELLs population is well above the national average and continues to rise. All undergraduates who participated in the survey were at the junior level and preparing for state certification as pre-kindergarten – 12th grade teachers. In addition, all of these students were in a course specifically designed to train the students in ELLs assessment. All of the texts, additional readings, and assignments were standardized across all courses, regardless of the difference in instructors. As the surveying took place in one of the last required courses before student teaching, the pre-service teachers reported taking an average of three courses in reading and one course in L2 preparation (including this semester). In addition, 10 hours of field experience working with ELLs was a part of this course requirement. The need for carefulness and sincerity in completing the survey was explained to the students. As an incentive for participating in the survey, students received extra credit. The questionnaire was administered to the participants electronically through e-mail and

they were given a timeframe of two weeks to complete the survey. The participants were repeatedly insured by their course instructors and in the attached description of the questionnaire itself that participation was strictly voluntary, all survey responses would remain anonymous, and that their grades would in no way be negatively affected if they chose not to participate.

3.3. Data Analysis

Although this study seeks to provide insight into the research questions stated earlier, it also serves a dual purpose in creating an instrument with the intention of use for future research. These proposed research plans will be thoroughly discussed. Due to this goal, the data collected was analyzed by examining the descriptive statistics and using a chi-square analysis of the responses. The chi-square statistic permits the comparison of two survey items in order to determine a statistically significant relationship between two responses. This method will be used to answer RQ 3; to see how each survey response affected the PTs sense of preparedness, which was measure by the responses to item 1. The descriptive statistical analysis will serve to answer RQ1, RQ2, and RQ4.

Hinkin (1998) outlines a 6-step-process in scale development: 1) Item Generation 2) Questionnaire Administration 3) Initial Item Reduction 4) Confirmatory Factor Analysis 5) Convergent and Discriminant Validity 6) Replication. The present study includes steps 1-4 of this process. A descriptive statistical analysis was used to explore the items in order to make the initial item reduction after the questionnaire was administered. Cross tabulations of the survey responses were used as the confirmatory factor analysis, to see if any of the responses significantly compared to the PTs sense of preparedness.

4. Results

For the descriptive statistical analysis, Items 1 and 5-8 were examined to draw inferences about the participants' indications regarding their perceived preparedness to assess the reading abilities of ELLs. Items 2-4 were analyzed to draw inferences based upon second language background experiences of the PTs. Items 9-10 were used to make inferences about the participants' general attitudes towards ELLs reading assessment. Items 11-20 were examined to draw inferences about the

participants' knowledge of best practices in ELLs reading assessment. The participants' responses for each statement were converted into percentages (of the total number of responses to the statement) in order to allow for most accurate and useful comparisons. For further clarification, the mean and standard deviations for each item response was also recorded. All items, their corresponding domain names, and descriptive statistics are included in Table 1 and 2 below.

Table 1
Pre-Service ELLs Teachers' Knowledge of Reading Assessments Survey

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1. I feel prepared to assess the reading abilities of English language learning (ELL) students.
 2. I speak more than one language.
 3. I have family/friends who fluently speak more than one language.
 4. I grew up in a community where a language other than English was commonly spoken.
 5. I feel prepared to assess the reading abilities of **native-English-speaking** students.
 6. I feel my coursework has provided good information about how to assess the reading abilities of ELL students.
 7. I feel I have learned how to assess the reading abilities of ELL students through field experiences.
 8. I feel my teacher preparation program is lacking in preparing teachers to assess the reading abilities of ELL students.
 9. I would like to learn more about assessing the reading abilities of ELL students.
 10. I will be responsible for assessing the reading abilities of ELL students when I teach.
 11. Teachers should wait until an ELL's oral language proficiency has developed in English before administering assessments that identify reading difficulties.
 12. Formal assessments are the best method for assessing the reading development of ELLs.
 13. Teachers should only use informal assessments for assessing the reading development of ELLs.
 14. Teachers can interview ELLs regarding multiple-choice answers to get a more accurate reflection of their reading abilities.
 15. The most effective way to assess the reading abilities of ELLs is to use a multitude of different assessments.
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16. I will use caution in identifying an ELL student as having reading difficulties, since it could actually be a language problem.

17. I am familiar with the expected stages of language and reading in second language acquisition.

18. A phonological awareness screening is a good predictor of reading success/difficulty for ELLs.

19. A large discrepancy between listening and reading comprehension is an indicator of reading difficulty in ELLs.

20. Background experiences can affect an ELLs' reading assessment scores.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Survey Responses

Items	M (N=105)	SD
<u>Perceived Preparedness</u>		
Item 1	2.33	0.74
Item 6	3.91	0.79
Item 7	3.56	1.02
Item 8	2.43	0.95
<u>Best Practices</u>		
Item 11	2.37	0.95
Item 12	1.89	0.82
Item 13	2.22	0.80
Item 14	3.38	0.86
Item 15	4.59	0.58
Item 16	4.24	0.58
Item 17	3.82	0.68
Item 18	3.45	0.62
Item 19	3.50	0.78
Item 20	4.44	0.64
<u>Background</u>		
Item 2	2.12	1.07
Item 3	3.28	1.46
Item 4	2.79	1.35
<u>Attitudes</u>		
Item 9	3.78	0.72
Item 10	4.15	0.71

Of the 20 items on the survey, 16 were intended to indicate positive attitudes/perceptions/knowledge of ELLs reading assessment (if agreed with) and 4 were considered to indicate negative attitudes/perceptions/knowledge of ELLs

reading assessment (if agreed with). Positive statements include the numbers 1-7, 9-10, and 14-20 and negative statements include the numbers 8, 11-13. Intermixing positive and negative statements prevents readers from marking the same opinion on the Likert scale for each statement but instead, requires each statement to be read carefully. The participants' responses for each opinion for each statement were converted into percentages (of the total number of responses to the statement) in order to allow for most accurate and useful comparisons.

A moderately strong sense of confidence in ability and/or preparedness to assess the reading abilities of ELLs was one of the clearest findings of this survey. On item 1, 72% of participants indicated they felt prepared, while only 11% felt unprepared. A meager 17% indicated they did not know if they are prepared. In addition, 80% of respondents indicated that they did feel prepared to assess the reading abilities of native-English speakers. This is a positive statistic, taking into account that the ability to assess reading of ELLs will be just as important as the ability to assess reading of native speakers, especially in the candidates' state of certification. On item 6, an overwhelming 76% of respondents indicated that their coursework had provided them good information about ELLs reading assessment. On item 7, 61% indicated their field experiences had taught them about ELLs reading assessment, while only 18% responded negatively. For this response, it is worthy to note that 21% were unsure of how their field experiences shaped their ability to assess ELLs reading. The participants responded similarly to this on item 8, with 27% indicating uncertainty of whether their teacher preparation program lacks the necessary components to prepare them to assess ELLs reading. Although the attitude of feeling prepared to assess ELLs reading does concur with the literature examined, it does come as a bit of a surprise, given the blatant lack of actual teacher knowledge concurrently displayed. In other words, many of these teachers do not know what they do not know, which could wreak havoc on student outcomes.

Although the survey responses indicated a positive perceived preparation to assess reading of ELLs, the responses in regard to linguistic background experiences were strikingly inversed. For instance, 76% of participants reported that they did not speak more than one language on item 2. 9% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, indicating that they may have some basic language ability, but do not possess fluent command of another language. The responses were a bit more positive for the next question in this domain, with 59% of the participants

indicating that they have family and/or friends who fluently speak another language on item 3. On a more dismal note, 50% of the PTs surveyed reported that they did not grow up in a community where another language was commonly spoken. By informally examining the surveys, it appears that the same PTs who reported having the above ELLs background experiences were usually the same students who reported a higher perceived preparedness for ELLs reading assessment. However, this relationship will be statistically determined in the following.

On a more positive note, the majority of respondents indicated a positive attitude towards ELLs. For instance, 75% of respondents would like to learn more about assessing the reading abilities of ELL students (item 9) and 88% believe they will be responsible towards assessing reading abilities of ELL students (item 10), most of which were “strongly agree” on both items. Such positive attitudes seem to indicate that these pre-service teachers understand the need and importance of knowing how to best assess the reading abilities of their ELL students. This is also an encouraging indicator of their openness and receptiveness towards learning more about ELLs reading assessment.

Pertaining to the participants’ knowledge regarding ELLs reading assessment, the responses seem to indicate uncertainty about how to best assess ELLs reading. Although the majority (66%) of participants indicated that teachers should not wait until ELLs’ oral language proficiency has developed in English before administering reading assessments, 34% felt that teachers should wait or were unsure about this concept. These findings are consistent with the research that showed many ELLs do not receive needed early intervention because too many teachers hesitate to assess the reading abilities of ELLs. In addition, 48% of the participants on item 18 were unsure or disagreed that phonological awareness screening is a good predictor of reading success/difficulty for ELLs, which is in direct contrast to what is stated in the literature. In contrast, 94% of respondents stated that they would use caution in identifying ELLs as having reading difficulties, since it could actually be a language problem. While the responses to items 12 and 13 indicated favoritism towards informal assessment, it is important to note that these pre-service teachers will have to be prepared to use formal assessments, as mandated by the state. However, it is great that these PTs do see the value of informal assessment, especially as the literature demonstrates that too many teachers rely on standardized, formal assessments. In addition, 55% responded positively to interviewing ELLs regarding multiple-choice answers on

item 14 and 98% responded positively to using multiple assessments on item 15, indicating that the respondents are open to a myriad of both formal and informal assessment techniques. The majority (88%) of participants are familiar with the expected stage of language and reading in second language acquisition, as indicated by their responses on item 17. On item 19, the majority of students did realize that a large discrepancy between listening and reading comprehension is an indicator of reading difficulty in ELLs (59%), but we would be remiss without noting that a substantial 30% did not know how to answer this question. The most positive response emerged on item 20, with 99% of the PTs realizing that background experiences can affect ELLs' reading assessment scores.

Table 3

Cross-Tabulated Chi-Square Statistics of Survey Responses (Item 1)

Items	χ^2 (df=1)	p
<u>Perceived Preparedness</u>		
Item 5	2.93	0.09
Item 6	31.85	0.00**
Item 7	21.90	0.00**
Item 8	11.27	0.00**
<u>Best Practices</u>		
Item 11	0.19	0.66
Item 12	2.46	0.12
Item 13	1.89	0.17
Item 14	0.15	0.69
Item 15	2.31	0.13
Item 16	4.76	0.03*
Item 17	7.85	0.01**
Item 18	4.90	0.03*
Item 19	0.20	0.65
Item 20	2.31	0.13
<u>Background</u>		
Item 2	0.78	0.38
Item 3	0.00	1.00
Item 4	0.01	0.91
<u>Attitudes</u>		
Item 9	1.29	0.26
Item 10	2.47	0.12

Note. *p<.05. **p<.01. Adapted from Qualtrics (2013). [Computer software]. Provo, UT: Qualtrics Research Suite.

A chi-square test was performed to determine if there were significant differences in the survey responses based on the participants' perceived preparedness (as indicated by responses to item 1). A summary table of the cross-tabulation results can be found above (Table 3). To elaborate, a significant relationship was found between the participants' perceived preparedness and the responses to items 6, $\chi^2(1, N=104) = 31.85, p < .01$, item 7, $\chi^2(1, N=104) = 21.90, p < .01$, and item 8, $\chi^2(1, N=104) = 11.27, p < .01$. For item 6, those participants who felt that their coursework had prepared them well to assess ELLs reading were those that had a positive sense of preparedness. This positive relationship was also true for item 7, which asked the PTs if they felt that their field experiences within those courses helped prepare them to assess ELLs reading. On the other hand, item 8 was stated negatively, asking if they felt that their teacher education program lacked adequate preparation for ELLs reading assessments. This statistical relation was significant, but unlike the other two questions, this relationship was inversed. Those who responded negatively to this question had the greatest sense of preparedness. In the domain of best practices, significant relationships were found for item 16, $\chi^2(1, N=104) = 4.76, p < .05$, item 17, $\chi^2(1, N=104) = 7.85, p < .01$, and item 18, $\chi^2(1, N=104) = 4.90, p < .05$. Those respondents who were aware of the intersection between language problems and reading impairments, were familiar with the stages of language acquisition, and knew the value of the assessment of phonological awareness all had a stronger sense of preparedness. However, it is worth noting that the frequencies for item 16 and 18 were less than 5, indicating that these results may be overstated. However, the statistical significance does indicate that this is a relationship that merits further exploration. No other significant relationships were found.

5. Discussion

Results indicate that these PTs overall have positive attitudes toward ELLs and the need to properly assess them. The findings also show that these participants are open and receptive to receiving the training that will enable them to do so in their future careers as educators. 72% of the participants felt that they could properly assess ELLs, but a substantial percentage (28%) expressed doubt about their ability to properly assess reading in ELLs. It is also evident that the PTs seem to be receiving a respectable quality of preparation in their programs, as many respondents answered favorably to items on knowledge. However, the results from the survey indicated that

many students still lack knowledge based on what the literature indicates as proper assessment practices. Although there is a substantive body of literature that outlines the best practices for assessing ELLs reading, there was a certain level of uncertainty among these students. Although more optimistic than results from other studies, the domain of the questionnaire that tested the pre-service teachers' knowledge of ELLs reading assessment practices illuminates the need for an improved training. Improving pre-service teacher training is the key to "preparing linguistically responsive teachers" (Lucas & Villegas, 2013, p. 99). There is a great need for coursework that informs PTs of all of the issues surrounding ELLs reading assessment, including the practice of being culturally competent teachers overall (Anstrom, 1997). If universities are to answer this call of duty, the way that we prepare our teachers to assess ELLs reading must be closely juxtaposed with what the research tells us is needed to produce effective reading teachers.

One specific aspect of PT preparation that was closely examined in this study was the factors that contributed to a heightened perception of preparedness. We found that students who felt that their coursework was highly informative of ELLs reading assessments and gained knowledge from their field experiences felt more prepared to competently conduct these assessments. These results were in alignment with related literature (Byrnes et al., 1997; Youngs & Youngs, 2001), which asserts that those teachers who have received thorough university preparation tend to exhibit positive attitudes toward having ELLs in their classrooms. In addition, the best practices of reading assessment that were most prominent in our literature review were the same best practices that significantly related to the participants' perceived sense of preparedness. From these responses, we can conjecture that PTs have more confidence in their abilities when they have a sound knowledge of the literacy implications of second language acquisition, understand how reading difficulties can be confounded by linguistic development, and understand the critical role of phonological awareness in reading assessment. It would be wise to make sure that teacher preparation programs all include a separate course solely dedicated to reading assessments and that these courses put an extra emphasis on the concepts mentioned above, as this knowledge could possibly contribute to teachers that are more confident. In addition, this study highlights the importance of field experience in ELLs reading assessment courses. This study reached similar conclusions of Oboler and Gupta (2010); PTs feel better prepared to assess ELLs

reading when they actually have opportunities in their program to go into schools and have practice conducting these assessments. Consequently, all universities should seek to include as much of these field experiences as possible in their programs, with an emphasis on the PTs administering assessments to ELLs. Another recommendation that could serve to ameliorate PT preparation would be to assess these candidates on their knowledge and skills formally. For example, PTs in Idaho are required to take the Comprehensive Literacy Assessment (ICLA), which is used to test PTs knowledge of reading instruction and assessment (Squires et al., 2009). If this or a similar assessment can be adapted and administered to PTs that will be responsible for teaching reading, we could greatly improve the preparation of teachers and the reading outcomes of ELLs.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

The present study could have been greatly improved by obtaining a larger sample size. Methodologists recommend anywhere from 150-200 participants for an adequate sample in survey research (Hinkin, 1998). Though we initially contacted 150 participants, a less than stellar response rate resulted in a smaller sample size. In addition, the initial item development could have been more carefully done, as was evident by the exploratory factor analysis used in the item reduction. In the next stages of the development of this measure, we should aim to construct an instrument with higher reliability.

5.2. Recommendations for Future Research

As stated earlier, this study is a pilot to gather preliminary information about the attitudes, knowledge, and perceptions of PTs on ELLs reading assessments. In addition, it was used as the initial item development for a larger-scale study. This exploratory study should be used to develop a psychometrically sound pre/posttest designed questionnaire to test the effectiveness of an ELLs reading assessment course, according to specified domains designed to improve knowledge, cultivate positive attitudes, and solidify a sense of preparedness in pre-service teachers. A study conducted by Polat (2010) gives us an excellent template for a proposed study design. To briefly summarize, the study looked at whether the instruction given during university training could alter English as a foreign language (EFL) PTs attitudes toward certain instructional practices. The great advantage of this

particular study is that the participants were randomly assigned to courses with varying instruction. The treatment group was explicitly instructed on the effectiveness of teacher constructed, commercial, and authentic instructional materials while the other group received their customary university training. We propose that this design be adapted and implemented by the University of Interest in an effort to empirically explore how we can make our reading teachers better at assessing ELLs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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