Teaching English Learners in the Margins: Rural TESOL Preparation and the Struggle for Efficacy

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Abstract
This study investigates how TESOL coursework influences the EL-related instructional enactment of preservice teachers (PSTs) preparing to teach English Learners (ELs) in rural mainstream classrooms. Despite growing EL populations in rural areas, many teacher education programs offer limited coursework and practical experience specifically focused on linguistically diverse learners. To address this gap, this research examines the specific components of a TESOL course that PSTs found most and least helpful in developing their instructional enactment. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data collected from pre- and post-course surveys, classroom observations, and lesson plan documentation/ artifacts, the study explores PSTs' ability to support ELs. Quantitative data from pre- and post-survey were entered and analyzed using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Qualitative data from pre- and post-survey, microteaching observations, and lesson plans used for the microteaching sessions were organized and analyzed using NVivo 11 software. The coding process was informed by broad thematic categories such as "self-efficacy" and "usefulness," which were further refined into subcategories based on participants' responses. Ancillary nodes such as "realization," "practice," and "suggestion" captured additional layers of learning and reflective thought. Findings indicate that PSTs experienced significant growth in their awareness and understanding of EL students' needs. Key components contributing to increase EL-related instructional enactment included practice-based assignments such as micro-teaching as well as instructors' modeling and anecdotes. Participants' realizations about the complexity of EL instruction and their changing views about teaching were closely linked to a shift from theoretical knowledge to practical pedagogical awareness. However, many PSTs still expressed uncertainty about how to translate course content into practice, particularly in rural contexts where support and resources are limited, thus they could not successfully enact their EL-related instructional strategies. The study concludes that while a single TESOL course can promote greater empathy, awareness, and foundational preparedness, it is insufficient on its own to fully equip rural PSTs to teach ELs. Recommendations include expanding field-based experiences with ELs, integrating culturally responsive pedagogies across coursework, and sustaining professional learning opportunities beyond graduation. The study findings offer valuable insights for TESOL teacher education programs aiming to better support future teachers working in under-resourced, linguistically diverse communities.

Key words: TESOL teacher preparation, English Learners, preservice teachers, rural education, instructional enactment

1. Introduction

The rising number of English Learners (ELs) in U.S. public schools has intensified demand for qualified ESL teachers. In 2021–2022, over 5.3 million students—10.6% of the total population—were classified as ELs (NCES, 2024). Rural EL enrollment grew from 250,000 in 2012 to 356,000 in 2021 (NCES, 2023). Yet, ESL-certified instructors remain scarce, especially in rural areas. States like Alabama and Mississippi saw EL growth over 140% in the past decade (Horsford & Sampson, 2013), but ESL endorsement remains optional, and most PSTs avoid it. Many show limited awareness of EL issues and certification options (Webster & Valeo, 2011).

Research demonstrates EL-specific content strengthens PSTs' self-efficacy with diverse learners (Busch, 2010; Coady et al., 2011, 2016; Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Galguera,

2011; Master et al., 2016; Pappamihiel, 2007; Pettit, 2011; Reeves, 2006). However, mainstream teacher preparation often provides limited EL-focused content (Nguyen, 2018). While prior studies have examined PSTs' views on TESOL course components and self-efficacy, most highlight urban or suburban contexts (Batt, 2008; Cho et al., 2012; Fogle & Moser, 2017; Good et al., 2010; Moser et al., 2018; O'Neal et al., 2008). Far less is known about how TESOL-prepared candidates enact instruction and apply self-efficacy in rural classrooms. This gap is significant given rural educators' limited access to sustained professional development and culturally responsive resources (Nguyen & Javorsky, 2025; Nguyen & Pham, in press).

This study extends prior work in two important ways. First, it centers rural preservice TESOL candidates and their enactment of EL instruction, moving beyond reliance on self-efficacy surveys alone. Second, it examines how self-efficacy beliefs evolve in relation to observed teaching practices across a semester, providing a longitudinal perspective. In doing so, the study advances understanding of how TESOL preparation interacts with rural contexts to shape PSTs' development and readiness to support ELs.

2. Research Aim

The present study seeks to identify which components of a TESOL course are most beneficial in preparing PSTs to teach ELs. It also aims to explore how PSTs' participation in the course influences their EL-related instructional enactment, as demonstrated during their microteaching sessions. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Which components of the TESOL course are the most beneficial in preparing PSTs to teach ELs?
2. To what extent do PSTs enact EL instructions in microteaching sessions?

3. Literature Review

3.1. Challenges in Rural EL Education: When Demands Exceed Supply

Rural students underperform compared to suburban peers; only 35% of fourth graders in rural schools met basic reading levels vs. 37% in suburbs (NCES, 2013). ELs now make up nearly half of the national EL population (Field, 2008). NAEP's 2024 Report Card showed EL scores dropped from 167/218 (2019) to 158/212 (2024), largely due to COVID-related school closures (Nguyen, 2022). Nguyen and Xu (2025) stress scalable tools aligned with SDGs to address learning loss. Non-EL scores also declined (202 to 195; 250 to 247). Rural scores fell from 197–246 (2019) to 191–244 (2024), while city scores ranged from 193 to 248 (NAEP, 2024).

Immigrant influxes, especially Latino workers in agriculture and meatpacking, add challenges: low English proficiency, limited parental involvement, and high dropout rates (Good et al., 2010; Field, 2008). Good et al. (2010) note Hispanic ELs are "underachieving" (p. 322). Communities often lack cultural and linguistic readiness (Apedaile & Whitelaw, 2012; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016), and educators may view diversity as a deficit (Field, 2008). Nguyen and Javorsky (2025) call for equity-driven instruction that values linguistic diversity.

Staffing shortages persist: 37% of rural schools struggle to hire ESL teachers; 5% cannot fill vacancies (Provasnik, 2007, p. 110). Funding is also unequal—rural schools received 9% federal funding vs. 11% in urban areas (2003–2004), with EL-specific funding at just 15% federal and 7% state (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Moser et al. (2018) argue rural programs rely on mainstream models that overlook EL needs.

Limited resources hinder bilingual programs and models like SIOP (Echevarria et al., 2017). ESL teachers often serve multiple schools (Field, 2008), while mainstream teachers lack training in language acquisition, cultural competence, and differentiation (Field, 2008). Nguyen and Pham (in press) show Padlet-based reflection can build intercultural awareness in under-resourced districts. In North Texas, 159 teachers cited vocabulary gaps, language barriers, and time constraints (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016). These deficits contribute to lower achievement and higher dropout rates (Field, 2008; O'Neal et al., 2008).

3.2. Rural EL Teacher Education

Few studies focus on EL teacher education in rural contexts; most emphasize instructional methods. Nhongo et al. (2017) and Samaranayake (2016) promote Communicative Language Teaching,

while some classrooms still rely on the Audio-Lingual Method. Abhijit and Sasidher (2012) support interactive techniques like Enriching Vocabulary and Pictorial methods, showing gains from 2006–2010. Ahmed (2017) found short stories improved vocabulary, though urban students benefited more. Ponmani and Mekala (2017) stress corrective feedback for writing; Diamantes and Curtis (2015) offer foundational guidance for content teachers.

Despite these efforts, most rural EL literature centers on instruction—not pre-service teacher development (Abhijit & Sasidher, 2012; Ahmed, 2017; Diamantes & Curtis, 2015; Ponmani & Mekala, 2017; Nhongo et al., 2017; Samaranayake, 2016). Research on rural TESOL training remains limited (Batt, 2008; Cho et al., 2012; Fogle & Moser, 2017; Good et al., 2010; Moser et al., 2018; O'Neal et al., 2008). This study addresses that gap by examining PSTs' EL-related self-efficacy after completing a rural TESOL course.

3.2.1. Beneficial TESOL Course Components

Practical experience is key. Nguyễn and Pham (in press) found Padlet-based lesson design and reflection enhanced pedagogical competence. Spies et al. (2020) identified three core components:

- **Coursework**: Improved beliefs, linguistic knowledge, and assessment skills.
- **Coaching**: 90% said it boosted reflection and intentionality.
- **SAPLI**: Expert-led sessions; 50% fully and 40% mostly agreed they improved practice.

3.2.2. From EL-Related Teaching Self-Efficacy to EL Instructional Enactment

Self-efficacy is belief in one's ability to achieve goals (Bandura, 1994; Klassen et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) define it as "beliefs in their own ability to plan, organize, and carry out activities" (p. 1059). Strong efficacy improves engagement and instruction (Fathi et al., 2020). Though well-studied, its link to EL achievement is underexplored. Mojavezi and Tamiz (2012) found high efficacy improved EFL performance. Kim and Seo (2018) confirmed a modest but significant correlation. Nguyễn and Pham (in press) showed reflective journaling strengthened identity, thinking, and student-centered practices. Spies et al. (2020) noted gains in EL-specific confidence, though gaps remained between self-reported efficacy and observed enactment.

Instructional enactment—applying strategies in real classrooms—is critical (Fazio & Gallagher, 2019; Hinojosa, 2022a). Its quality varies by feedback, beliefs, and PD (Hinojosa, 2022b). Fazio and Gallagher (2019) found enactment of integrated curricula directly affected achievement. Supporting PSTs' shift from self-efficacy to enactment requires scaffolded experiences, feedback, and dialogue (Hinojosa, 2022a). This helps translate confidence into practice, promoting equitable, responsive instruction for ELs.

4. Research Methods

4.1. Participants

All students enrolled in a TESOL course at the university were invited to participate; one declined, resulting in twelve participants (n = 12). The sample was predominantly Caucasian, English-speaking women (83.3%), reflecting national teacher demographics (U.S. Department of Education & NCES, 2018). Most were seniors aged 20–26, educated in rural communities. Nearly all were native English speakers (91.7%) and identified as middle class (75%). Half majored in English Education, and 75% reported proficiency in one or two additional languages (e.g., Spanish, French, German). Prior to this course, 50% had completed one or two EL-related classes and had tutored English Learners.

Table 2

General Demographics

		#	%
Gender	Female	11	91.7
	Male	1	8.3
Age	20	1	8.3
	21	3	25
	22	6	50

	23	1	8.3
	26	1	8.3
Ethnicity	Caucasian	11	91.7
	Hispanic	1	8.3
Home state	Alabama	3	25
	Mississippi	7	58.3
	Tennessee	2	16.7
Socioeconomic status	Lower middle class	1	8.3
	Middle class	9	75
	Upper middle class	1	8.3
	Upper class	1	8.3
Language	English as a native language	11	91.7
	Spanish as native language	1	8.3
	Language(s) other than English	9	75
Education level	High school diploma	7	58.3
	Associate's	3	25
	Bacherlor's	2	16.7
Student type	Sophomore	1	8.3
	Senior	9	75
	Graduate	2	16.7
Major	ELA[a]	3	25
	ELA & Spanish	2	16.7
	ELA & Philosophy	1	8.3
	Elementary Education	2	16.7
	Spanish	2	16.7
	Philosophy & Anthropology	1	8.3
	Philosophy & Religion	1	8.3

Note. [a]English Language Arts

4.2. The TESOL Course

This three-credit fall course is required for the TESOL Certificate, which also includes linguistics, SLA, syntax/grammar, and TESOL methods or practicum. According to the program website, it prepares candidates to "learn techniques for language teaching" and "work with English language learners." The course uses Brown's *Teaching by Principles* (4th ed., 2015) and blends theory with experiential learning to build professional self-efficacy.

Course content covers communicative language teaching and lesson planning. Assignments include:

- Weekly self-reflections based on EL interactions (1 hour/week),
- Original teaching material development,
- A 15-minute microteaching presentation on language skills or form.

Graduate students are assigned formal EL tutoring placements; undergraduates are not. All students engage in discussions on sociopolitical issues in EL instruction and explore culturally and

linguistically responsive teaching. The capstone portfolio includes a teaching philosophy, sample lesson plans, and instructional activities, serving as a professional artifact. Each assignment contributes equally to the final grade.

4.3. Data Collection

4.3.1. Survey Instrument

Surveys are effective for examining participants' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions (Reeves, 2006). To assess pre-service teachers' views on EL inclusion in mainstream classrooms, we adapted Reeves's (2006) validated instrument, *English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Students in Mainstream Classrooms – A Survey of Teachers*.

Participants completed a pre-survey capturing initial attitudes. The same survey was conducted post-course to identify changes in beliefs. Items addressed classroom practices, inclusion impacts, and teacher support, rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Two open-ended questions invited reflections on benefits and challenges of EL-inclusive classrooms. The final section collected demographic data including gender, major, teaching experience, language background, and prior EL-related coursework.

4.3.2. Microteaching Observation

Microteaching took place in a small classroom equipped with standard instructional technology. Candidates used these tools during 15-minute presentations. One author attended nearly all sessions, observing 33 of 36 scheduled lessons. Three were missing due to a training conflict. Most participants were observed three times; a few, twice. This variation may slightly affect data consistency (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To build rapport, the observer dressed casually and engaged informally with students before class. Observations focused on EL teaching constructs drawn from the Five-Minute Observation Form and Classroom Walkthrough Checklist (Oregon Reading First Center, n.d.), recorded via a checklist with space for comments.

4.3.3. Documentation

Each participant submitted EL-inclusive lesson plans, which were used to assess alignment between planned instruction and observed micro-teaching practices. All 12 candidates delivered three micro-lessons: two individual lessons targeting language skills (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening) and one co-taught lesson focused on language forms.

4.4. Data Analysis

Survey responses were entered into Microsoft Excel and organized into separate sheets for pre-survey, post-survey, and demographics. Rows included survey items, response levels, and open-ended answers; columns listed participant pseudonyms. Quantitative data analysis includes categorizing responses, calculating descriptive statistics, and comparing results from pre- and post-surveys.

Qualitative data from surveys, observations, and documentation were analyzed using NVivo 11. Guided by Coady et al. (2011) and Faez & Valeo (2012), two nodes were created: "efficacy" (Klassen et al., 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001) and "usefulness." Sub-nodes tracked shifts in perception. Of 53 coded references, 38 were "most useful." Emergent codes like "realization" captured growing awareness; misconceptions were annotated (Lucas et al., 2008). Additional nodes included "suggestion," "individual," "collective," "profession," and "rural." "Practice" was nested under "efficacy."

5. Results

The goal of this research study was to investigate how PSTs participation in a TESOL course prepared them to teach ELs in mainstream classrooms. Prominent findings from the data analysis indicated that PSTs perceived direct EL teaching experiences as the most beneficial components of the course. However, most PSTs did not demonstrate strong EL teacher self-efficacy during micro-lesson presentations. Findings are organized by research questions: (1) perceived usefulness of TESOL course components and (2) evidence of teacher self-efficacy.

5.1. Perceived Usefulness of TESOL Course Components

Analysis of the coded data under the theme of "usefulness" revealed that most participants viewed the TESOL course as beneficial to their preparation for teaching ELs. Among 53 coded

references, 38 were identified as “most useful.” The most frequently mentioned valuable components were hands-on teaching practice, including the preparation and delivery of micro-lessons, peer teaching, feedback sessions, and access to the instructor’s teaching experience.

Many participants emphasized that micro-teaching assignments offered opportunities to apply theory to practice. For instance, Chris explained that while “anything can be made to look great on paper,” lesson delivery often presented unanticipated challenges that helped him learn. Kathy remarked that she had learned “a great deal about teaching ESL students” and how to accommodate their needs through designing and presenting lessons. Several participants appreciated that peer teaching challenged them to think on their feet, especially when classmates asked difficult questions or provided candid feedback. Marie described the classroom as “the ‘harsh’ room,” highlighting the difficulty of responding to spontaneous peer questions and the high expectations of her audience. Nancy commented that seeing her peers teach gave her new ideas and confidence. Even Stacie, who had experience as a substitute teacher, acknowledged that she learned new methods for teaching ELs and became more aware of their needs through the course. Another frequently praised feature was the instructor’s use of real-life examples from her own K–12 teaching career. Beth shared that these examples were “beyond the textbook” and offered practical insights unavailable from other sources.

In contrast, participants viewed indirect or supplementary activities—such as conversation partner hours, EL tutoring sessions, textbook readings, and discussion board postings—as less useful. Difficulties in coordinating schedules with EL partners were commonly reported. Stacie noted that when her conversation partner canceled, she had to “make up that hour,” which was stressful. Nancy expressed frustration with scheduling conflicts and questioned the activity’s value, saying that “it’s not gonna help me…be a good teacher.” Kathy described the conversations as simply casual talk, not directly relevant to learning how to teach ELs.

Textbook readings and discussion board assignments were also perceived as less engaging. Chris said it would have been better to have classroom discussions to reflect on readings rather than completing them independently. Some participants admitted not reading the feedback they received on their discussion board posts. Marie expressed discomfort with critiquing peers, explaining that she did not feel qualified to give feedback as an undergraduate student. In sum, PSTs valued the parts of the course that allowed them to teach, observe, reflect, and receive guidance. Activities that felt disconnected from real teaching practice or were difficult to manage logistically were seen as less beneficial.

Results from the NVivo word frequency query showed that the term “students” had the highest frequency across qualitative data sources, suggesting that candidates’ primary concern after the course was the academic and emotional well-being of ELs. Many expressed empathies for Els as evidenced in the differentiated instructions sections for high- and low-proficient Els in their submitted lesson plans, acknowledging how these students might feel “left out,” “overwhelmed,” or “frustrated” in mainstream classrooms. Although the candidates emphasized the importance of being “personal,” patient, caring, and flexible to support EL students’ success, very few PSTs put these into actions in their observed microteaching sessions.

5.2. EL Instructional Enactment

While participants reported in open-ended surveys that the TESOL course had helped prepare them to teach ELs, classroom observations told a more complex story. In total, 12 PSTs were observed teaching micro-lessons throughout the semester. Of these, four consistently demonstrated signs of EL instructional enactment, five showed noticeable improvement over time, and three never exhibited clear evidence of efficacy.

Many lesson plans did not include vocabulary instruction or scaffolding strategies tailored to ELs. When students failed to understand new content—such as grammatical structures or vocabulary (e.g., the sentence structure Subject-Verb-Object)—PSTs often responded by repeating explanations more loudly, rather than modifying their instruction. In lessons focused on culture, most PSTs emphasized mainstream U.S. holidays (e.g., Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas holidays) without making space for the home cultures or experiences of ELs.

Participants also appeared uncertain about how to support ELs in their own classrooms. Several assumed that ELs' quietness stemmed from cultural norms rather than language barriers. In response, they typically made no instructional changes. Half of the participants had no prior experience teaching ELs, which may explain their hesitation or reliance on general teaching practices rather than targeted strategies.

A recurring belief among participants was that fairness meant treating all students the same. Eleven out of 12 participants made comments suggesting that ELs should not be singled out or given different instructions: both EL and non-EL students have the same teaching materials and instructional practices. Some PSTs expressed concerns over tutoring outside class hours (e.g., during the recess): Out-of-class tutoring is offered from their goodwill, but how will the ELs perceive this? Will the tutoring make them feel comfortable and encouraged or will this extra tutoring (compared with native peers – no tutoring) lower their self-esteem as they understand that they are "bad" learners in the class? Some PSTs relied on external support services—such as ESL pull-out programs or tutoring—rather than incorporating EL-specific strategies into their own teaching. Sandy, one of the few who supported differentiated instruction for ELs, expressed concern that other students might perceive it as "cheating."

Despite these challenges, most PSTs did show general improvement over the course of the semester. Their third micro-lessons were clearer in purpose (e.g., clear lesson objectives were orally articulated and even written on the board by PSTs), included more interactive elements than their first lessons (e.g., eliciting student schemata about the topic, making connections to previously-learned material, engaging students in discourse, elaborating on student responses), and provided corrective feedback (e.g., providing affirmations for correct responses, promptly correcting errors with supply of correct model, ensuring most feedback was positive). PSTs increasingly used student-centered approaches, such as activating prior knowledge, using realia, and eliciting responses through open-ended questions. For instance, in the lesson "Fact or Opinion" taught to 4th graders, Stacie successfully activated her students' prior knowledge and drew their attention by posing pertinent questions: "Who likes animals? What kind of animals are you favorite? Who can tell me something true that you know about bats? Who can tell me something that you personally think about bats?"

During classroom observations, effective teacher candidates exhibited instructional enactment that was both linguistically supportive and culturally responsive to the needs of ELs. These candidates consistently provided essential key vocabulary, varied their teaching techniques to assess and reinforce comprehension, and incorporated cross-cultural references to enhance students' understanding and foster appreciation for linguistic and cultural pluralism. By building on students' interests and prior knowledge, they successfully captured learner attention at the outset of instruction and sustained engagement throughout the lesson.

When facilitating independent tasks, PSTs employed a structured modeling sequence—Model–Prompt–Practice—to scaffold ELs' understanding. They simplified verbal instructions to focus on skill demonstration, maintained direct eye contact, and articulated directions clearly while modeling. Prior to independent engagement, they confirmed student understanding to ensure ELs could complete the assigned tasks with confidence. Throughout the independent work period, candidates actively circulated the classroom to offer individualized support as needed.

An illustrative example was observed during a vocabulary lesson on body parts for young elementary-aged children. Clare, one of the PSTs, introduced the topic through a multisensory approach. She slowly sang the initial lines of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes," modeling hand motions simultaneously. After a few repetitions, she invited the students to stand and participate by singing and mimicking the gestures. This scaffolded process was repeated with each successive section of the song, allowing ELs to internalize vocabulary through rhythm, movement, and repetition, thereby enhancing both language comprehension and classroom engagement.

Overall, findings suggest that while the TESOL course increased participants' general teaching confidence, it did not uniformly develop their enactment of instructions to support ELs. Those who demonstrated EL-specific instructional behaviors often had prior experience or stronger reflective capacities. For many, the belief in equal treatment and the absence of differentiation suggested a need for deeper conceptual understanding and more explicit practice opportunities focused on EL pedagogy.

6. Discussion

6.1. Beneficial Components: Experiential Learning

The findings indicate that PSTs perceived experiential components—particularly micro-teaching, lesson design, feedback, and the modeling of instructional strategies by the course instructor—as the most valuable aspects of the TESOL course. These results affirm prior research highlighting the importance of situated, practice-based learning in teacher education (Coady et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Zeichner, 2010). Micro-teaching activities provided opportunities for PSTs to experiment with instructional strategies, reflect on their performance, and learn from peers. This aligns with Cruickshank and Applegate's (1981) concept of " students of teaching," in which PSTs learned from peers' new insights, and reflected on "what happened, why it happened, and what else they could have done to reach their goals" within a learning community.

Moreover, participants' appreciation for the instructor's real-life examples supports findings by Johnson (2006) and Freeman and Johnson (1998), who emphasized that effective teacher educators' model pedagogical knowledge and situate theory in lived classroom contexts. PSTs in this study perceived such modeling as more useful than textbook readings, further underscoring the argument that TESOL coursework should bridge theory and practice (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Nguyen and Pham (in press) further support this view, demonstrating that integrating digital reflection tools like Padlet into teacher education can foster professional growth and intercultural awareness—especially valuable in rural contexts where mentorship and feedback are limited.

On the contrary, indirect components such as conversation partner sessions and discussion boards were perceived as less beneficial, primarily due to logistical difficulties or unclear instructional purposes. This is consistent with the literature suggesting that when field-based components are poorly structured or disconnected from course objectives, they do not produce meaningful learning (Baecher, 2012; Coady et al., 2011; Faez & Valeo, 2012). In line with Korthagen's (2010) "realistic approach," the study suggests that the value of experiential activities depends not only on their presence in the curriculum but also on how they are framed, scaffolded, and integrated into teacher reflection (p. 414).

6.2. EL Instructional Enactment: A Mismatch Between Perception and Performance

While survey data showed that many PSTs believed the TESOL course increased their EL teaching self-efficacy, classroom observations revealed inconsistencies between self-reported confidence and observable teaching behaviors. Only a subset of participants demonstrated strong enactment of EL-specific instructional strategies, and some misinterpreted silence or non-participation from ELs as cultural characteristics rather than language needs, which aligns with prior literature (Fazio & Gallagher, 2019; Hinojosa, 2022a; Spies et al.). This gap between perceived EL teaching self-efficacy and demonstrated instructional enactment echoes prior studies on novice teachers' overestimation of their efficacy when measured only by self-report instruments (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Hoy & Spero, 2005).

This lack of efficacy may be caused by participants' limited EL-pertinent knowledge and skills and their "neglect" of ELs (i.e., leaving the EL students alone) as pinpointed by Durgunoğlu and Hughes (2010, p. 39). Teachers with low efficacy cannot engage ELs in the class conversation, and they often interpret ELs' silence and lack of classroom participation as a part of the diverse students' culture, so they make no effort in pulling these ELs into the classroom discussion. Concerning the participants' background information, half of the participants took the TESOL class as their first EL-teaching course, which may partially explain their lack of teacher efficacy in the micro-lesson demonstrations.

Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy emphasizes that mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy beliefs. Although micro-teaching offered some degree of simulated practice, many participants lacked real-world, sustained experience with actual ELs. This may have limited the development of self-efficacy beliefs. Furthermore, the course did not sufficiently disrupt PSTs' assumptions about fairness or equity. They think that they are exercising equity for all students in their mainstream classrooms by solely focusing on the content area, not language development of ELs, which is an erroneous perception and belief that needs to be renounced (Coady et al., 2011, 2016). Nguyen and Javorsky (2025) argue that equity-driven instruction must move beyond memorization and embrace linguistic diversity—an approach that directly challenges the "equal treatment" mindset observed in this

study. The belief that fairness means treating everyone the same persisted, even though differentiated instruction is foundational to effective EL teaching (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Lucas et al., 2008).

Participants' reliance on pull-out services or external ESL support suggests that many still viewed EL teaching as someone else's responsibility (Lee & Oxelson, 2006). This mindset has been noted in prior studies where mainstream teachers failed to see themselves as responsible for ELs' academic success (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Moser et al. (2018) emphasize that rural teacher preparation often relies on generalized models that overlook the specific needs of ELs, reinforcing the mindset that EL instruction is external to mainstream teaching. The lack of sustained fieldwork with ELs may have prevented PSTs from developing a deep sense of instructional responsibility and ownership (Ballantyne et al., 2008).

6.3. Implications for TESOL Course Design

Findings support embedding TESOL coursework in practice-based teacher education (Burns et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Sustained EL interaction and guided reflection are more effective than isolated activities. Deliberate practice (Grossman et al., 2009) and mentor feedback build instructional confidence. Nguyen and Pham (in press) show that digital reflection tools like Padlet foster intercultural awareness and growth, especially in rural settings with limited mentorship.

Coursework should also address equity and differentiation. PSTs need tools to support both language and content learning (Lucas & Villegas, 2013), and to understand how empathy and cultural responsiveness shape classrooms (Gay, 2018; Lucas et al., 2008). Nguyen and Javorsky (2025) advocate for instruction that values linguistic diversity and moves beyond memorization.

The gap between self-efficacy and enactment raises concerns about assessment. Self-reports alone may not reflect readiness. Programs should use reflective writing, simulations, and performance-based assessments. Dinh and Nguyen (2024) emphasize that academic orientations affect strategy use and well-being, suggesting assessments should consider motivation and fairness beliefs. Post-certification supports like coaching and learning communities can strengthen PSTs' development in language knowledge, efficacy, relationships, and cultural integration (Gándara & Santibañez, 2016).

7. Conclusion and Suggestions for Practical Use

This study explored how specific TESOL course components supported PSTs in developing the knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy necessary to teach ELs in rural mainstream classrooms. The findings revealed that while participants valued practice-oriented course elements such as micro-teaching, lesson design, and instructor modeling, their EL-specific teacher self-efficacy varied in application. The mismatch between perceived preparedness and demonstrated competence suggests that coursework alone is insufficient to ensure readiness for EL instruction, especially in underserved rural contexts.

The study contributes to the growing body of research that calls for a more intentional, practice-based approach to TESOL preparation. In particular, it underscores the need for sustained and meaningful field experiences with ELs, structured reflection on teaching practice, and critical engagement with beliefs about equity and inclusion.

7.1. Suggestions for Practical Use

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to improve the design and implementation of TESOL coursework in teacher education programs, especially those serving rural contexts:

- Integrate high-leverage, practice-based components
  Teacher education programs should foreground instructional design, peer teaching, and feedback cycles that mirror real classroom demands. Micro-teaching, modeled instruction, and guided lesson planning should not be isolated activities but part of a coherent curriculum that connects theory to practice.
- Ensure sustained engagement with ELs
  Short-term conversation partnerships or simulation tasks may not offer sufficient exposure to the complexities of EL teaching. Programs should build partnerships with local schools or communities to provide PSTs with sustained, scaffolded opportunities to observe and teach real EL students in authentic settings.
- Embed critical reflection on equity and teacher responsibility

Programs must go beyond teaching instructional strategies by actively challenging deficit-based views and encouraging PSTs to reflect on their roles in promoting equitable learning opportunities for ELs. Case studies, dilemma discussions, and structured journaling can support such critical engagement.

- Assess readiness through multiple, authentic measures
  Instead of relying solely on self-report surveys to measure teacher self-efficacy, programs should incorporate performance-based assessments, such as lesson analysis, teaching videos, and structured observations. These tools can offer more valid evidence of PSTs' instructional competence.
- Provide professional learning for teacher educators
  Instructors of TESOL courses should receive training in culturally responsive pedagogy, EL-specific instructional methods, and how to coach PSTs through experiential learning. Their ability to model effective practices is crucial in shaping PSTs' perceptions of good teaching.
- Address rural-specific challenges and assets
  Finally, coursework should acknowledge the specific sociocultural and logistical challenges of teaching ELs in rural areas, such as limited support personnel, linguistic isolation, or community resistance. At the same time, it should leverage rural schools' strengths—such as close-knit communities and smaller class sizes—to promote inclusive, asset-based instruction.

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