PROBLEMATIZING THE THEORY-PRACTICE GAP: HOW ESL TEACHERS MAKE SENSE OF THEIR PRESERVICE EDUCATION

(KURAM VE UYGULAMA ARASINDAKİ BOŞLUK ÜZERİNE BİR ÇALIŞMA: İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMENLERİ KENDİ LİSANS EĞİTİMLERİNİ NASIL ANLAMLANDIRMAKTADIRLAR)

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ABSTRACT

Teacher educators have generally considered the "theory-practice gap" to be constructed uniformly by teachers. However, the two preservice teachers who participated in this study made sense of their coursework differently, in ways that were related to the identities they constructed for themselves as teachers. In this paper I argue that it is important to examine *variations* in how preservice teachers make sense of their teacher education, and to examine their understandings of the theoretical and practical elements of their coursework in relationship to the identities they construct for themselves as teachers. That is, before we can make compelling connections between theory and practice we must further explore the complexity of how teachers construct this relationship. This examination may allow us to better tailor teacher education experiences to teachers' unique needs.

Keywords: theory-practice relationship, English (second language), teacher education, teacher identity

ÖZ

Öğretmen eğitmenleri genellikle kuram ve uygulam a arasındaki boşluğa sadece öğretmenlerin neden olduğunu düşünegelmişleredir. Ancak, bu çalışmaya katılan iki öğretmen adayı kendi aldıkları dersler hakkında farklı düşünceler ortaya koydular ve bu derslerin öğretmen olarak kendileri için oluşturdukları kimliklerlerle bağlantılı olduğunu beyan ettiler. Bu makalede, öğretmen adaylarının kendi lisans eğitimlerini nasıl anlamlandırdıkları konusundaki farklılıkların incelenmesinin önemi ve kendileri için oluşturdukları öğretmen kimliklerininin, eğitimleri sırasında aldıklarının derslerin kuramsal ve uygulamalı ögeleriyle ilişkileri hakkındaki düşünceleri tartışılmaktadır. Diğer bir ifadeyle, kuram ve uygulama arasında zorlama bağlantılar kurmadan önce, öğretmenlerinin kendilerinin bu bağlantıyı nasıl kurduklarını araştırmak gerekmektedir. Bu araştırma sonucunda öğretmen eğitimi ile ilgili deneyimleri, öğretmenlerin benzersiz gereksinimlerine daha iyi bir şekilde uyarlamamız mümkün olacaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: kuram-uygulama ilişkisi, ikinci dil olarak İngilizce, Öğretmen yetiştirme, öğretmen kimliği

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INTRODUCTION

For years, we have struggled with the question of what role teacher education plays in informing teachers' practice (Britzman, 1991; Good et al., 2006; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2006; MacDonald, Badger, & White, 2001; Sachs, 1996; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001): Does it have any effects, and if so, what are they? How can we increase the impact of teacher education on teachers' practices? The theory-practice gap has emerged as part of the discourse about teacher education, but little has been done to examine how teachers talk about the relationship between theory and practice, to understand what they view as "theoretical" and what they view as "practical," to examine whether different teachers construct "theoretical" and "practical" differently, and to explore what might account for these differences. However, I argue that to understand the role of teacher education in informing teachers' practice, we should examine teachers' constructions of the theory-practice relationship, and the variations within it.

Teacher Identity as a Lens for Exploring the "Theory-Practice Gap"

In recent decades we have come to understand teaching as socially constructed, and as based on teachers' own experiences as learners (Johnson, 1996; Lortie, 1975). During that time, much of the second language (L2) research has shifted from a view of teachers as technicians who need to apply the "right" methodology, to instead examining sociocultural influences on teachers' practices (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Lantolf, 1996). In light of this shift, Johnson (2006) has argued that "a critical challenge for L2 teacher education is to create public spaces that make visible how L2 teachers make sense of and use the disciplinary knowledge that has informed and will continue to inform L2 teacher education" (p. 241). It is this call to illuminate L2 teachers' sense-making of their teacher education experience to which this paper responds, by examining variations in teachers' understandings of the theory-practice relationship in their preservice preparation, through the lens of preservice teacher identity. Specifically, this paper explores how two preservice English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers constructed their understanding of what was "theoretical" and what was "practical" in their preservice program, and examines how their teacher identities shaped their constructions of what was "theoretical" and what was "practical."

It is only recently that L2 researchers have become interested in teacher *identity*, and how teacher identity influences the ways in which teachers construct their practices (Ilieva, 2010; Morgan, 2004; Pavlenko, 2003; Varghese, 2001; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson, 2005). Varghese and her colleagues (2005) assert that the move to focus on teacher identity has come from an understanding that teachers' whole identities are "at play in the classroom," and are a crucial component in "how language teaching is played out" (p. 22). They further argue that

in order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual *identities* (emphasis added) which they claim or which are assigned to them (p. 22).

We also have come to recognize, through sociocultural frameworks, that while all teacher development is "socially situated and socially mediated, non-linear, dialogic, and without an endpoint" (Golombek & Johnson, 2004, p. 323), preservice teacher development is especially dynamic because these teachers are early in the process of their identity construction as teachers, are interacting with a variety of settings and experiences, and are "road testing" different images of themselves as teachers (Ball, 2000; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). This recognition of teacher development as socially situated has also contributed to a growing body of research on teacher cognition, which explores how teachers' thinking shapes their practices and the ways in which they make sense of their teaching experiences (Borg, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Cross, 2010; Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2003, 2011).

Our understanding of what comprises teacher identity is still being formed, and, within a sociocultural framework, is tightly intertwined with how teachers interact with and learn from their experiences in their particular environment. Gee (2000-2001) has asserted that the construct of identity in educational research has "taken on a great many different meanings in the literature" (p. 99). Morgan (2004) explains that the field's still developing conceptualization of language teacher identity is underpinned by poststructural/postmodern theory (Butler, 1992; Norton, 2000; Pennycook, 2001; Weedon, 1987), sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000), and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and that teacher identity as emerges from these theories is not fixed, but complex, contradictory, changes across time and place, is performed, and is constituted through discourse. He also suggests that "the abstract perspectives of these frames. . . potentially leave both teachers and teacher educators in a kind of theoretical vertigo" (p. 174). While I find examinations of the discursive construction of teachers a helpful way to explore the multiple and complex dimensions that comprise their practice (Peercy, 2004), I believe it is useful to offer additional elements to consider in our ongoing examination of what constitutes language teacher identity, to perhaps help ground some of the theoretical vertigo Morgan (2004) mentions. Here I use the lens of teacher identity, as well as research on teacher cognition, to explore the different ways in which two preservice ESL teachers constructed their understanding of the theory-practice relationship in their preservice program.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper is one strand of a larger study which examines the relationship between the preservice preparation and in-service practices of secondary ESL teachers (Peercy, 2004). Here I focus on two of the preservice participants in the study, Jason and Roberta, because their constructions of what was theoretical and what was practical in their coursework were very different from one another, and because they each engaged in extended discussion of this topic with me. The difference in which theories they took up as valuable, and how they understood these theories as informing their future teaching practices, help to illustrate the range of perspectives that exist among preservice teachers about what teaching is, and what role theory plays in one's teaching. Jason and Roberta were enrolled in a preservice ESL endorsement program which required seven courses for ESL endorsement: three methods courses, two courses on the structure of language, one course on multicultural education, and one course on language minority students. During data collection for this study, Jason was enrolled in three ESL endorsement courses: *K-12 Methods*, *Content-Based Instruction*, and *Practicum*, and Roberta was enrolled in two: *K-12 Methods* and *Teaching Minority Language Learners.* Over a period of seven months, I formally interviewed each of them twice about their experiences in these courses, and engaged in spontaneous informal follow-up discussions with them before and after class meeting times. Formal interviews with Jason and Roberta were audiotaped and transcribed. I also observed and took field notes in these four courses, interviewed the course instructors, and analyzed artifacts (syllabi, course texts, assignments, rubrics) from the courses to gather further insight about the content and focus of the courses.

Jason was a White, U.S.-born, native speaker of English in his late 20s. Roberta was in her 40s, and was a White native English speaker originally from New Zealand. Both had a limited amount of experience as volunteers teaching adult English language learners (ELLs). Neither participant had engaged in student teaching yet: Jason planned to do his student teaching in the semester following the data collection for this study, and Roberta intended to student teach the following year.

My current positioning as a second language teacher educator, and former positions as a teacher of ESL, of foreign language (Spanish), and as a student in a language teacher education program certainly led me to approach the study with my own biases. My own preparation to teach language learners focused on the cognitive processes involved in language acquisition, the structure of language, and on technical and practical elements of preparing lessons, materials, and assessment. It was not until later that I discovered frameworks which emphasized placing students in broader social, political, cultural, racial/ethnic, gendered, historic, and economic contexts. My

realization that students could be constructed and taught in such different ways led to my interest in how ESL teachers are prepared, how they view their preparation, and how their preparation shapes their understandings of teaching ELLs.

To analyze data from interviews with Jason and Roberta, I used a matrix display technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which I placed Jason and Roberta each in a row, and each of the following two interview questions in a column:

1. How do you envision your role as an ESL teacher, or what do you see the purpose of your job being?
2. Do you think the ESL endorsement courses you are enrolled in this semester are valuable in preparing you to work with English language learners (i.e., to take on the teacher role you envision for yourself)?

Examining the participants' responses to these questions allowed me to probe the teachers' constructions of their roles (i.e., how their teacher identities played out through the roles they identified with), and to explore how their constructions of themselves as teachers related to their discussions of their coursework.[1] To examine this, I placed the teachers' responses to the interview questions above in the matrix. I then explored their responses to these questions, and any related discussion we engaged in, for emergent themes, eventually using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to generate the codes "useful," "not useful" (related to the teachers' responses about their coursework), and "role/identity" (when teachers made comments related to their identity). "Not useful" was the code I assigned for instances in the data when Roberta and Jason referred to coursework as disconnected from their future practices, using phrases like: "unrealistic," "ideal," "[too] perfect," and "not connected to students." "Useful" was a code for instances when Jason and Roberta referred to coursework as having an important impact on their future practices, in the following kinds of ways: "connected to students' real lives," "pertinent," "day-to-day," "realistic," and "nitty gritty." "Role/identity" was the code I used for interview data that related to how the teachers talked about themselves and their teaching.

As I coded interview data about the teachers' views on the value of their preservice experiences in preparing them to teach as "useful" or "not useful," I found that the experiences the teachers identified as not useful to them were experiences that they felt were not connected to ways that they envisioned themselves teaching. As I illustrate in the findings below, the teachers sometimes explicitly used words such as "*theory*" and "*theoretical*" to discuss experiences that they perceived as not useful. In contrast, the program experiences that they described as useful were ones that they identified as more clearly connected to their teaching identities and *practices*.

The ways in which the teachers talked about their coursework (some of it was useful information that they desired to learn; and some of it was information that they did not perceive as useful) led me to examine how each teacher constructed a relationship between theory and practice through the ways in which they viewed their coursework.

One of the ways we have commonly understood the theory-practice relationship is that new teachers tend to gravitate to step-by-step, "what-to-do-on-Monday" types of information, and to consider that to be "practical," useful aspects of their preparation (Alexander, Muir, & Chant, 1992; Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004; Hobson et al., 2008; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 1999). A complementary aspect of earlier constructions of the theory-practice relationship has been that broader discussions of education, including critical perspectives and examination of social foundations, are eschewed by teachers as too "theoretical," or not useful in their daily classroom practices (Butin, 2005a, 2005b; Levine, 2005).

In this paper, I seek not to examine the theory-practice relationship itself, but rather to examine how two teachers very differently constructed aspects of their preservice coursework as useful and not useful. I believe the examples of these two teachers situating themselves and their experiences in very distinct ways from one another illustrates that we should not allow the "theory-practice gap" to be reified. That is, we should not expect that the theory-practice relationship is understood in the same way by all preservice teachers, but instead, we must realize that we need to examine what is useful and not useful for each individual teacher, and explore how this interfaces with their constructions of themselves as teachers. We must also explore the implications that these different constructions have for teacher education.

FINDINGS

Jason and Roberta had quite different interpretations of what they identified as theoretical and what they identified as practical in their coursework. That is, each teacher constructed different understandings of the theory-practice relationship, and their constructions of the theory-practice relationship were evidenced through the ways in which they talked about the usefulness and content of their preservice program. To examine each teacher's construction of the theory-practice relationship, I will first share data regarding how Jason and Roberta talked about their courses, and what aspects of these courses they identified as not useful (or unrelated to their future practices) and useful (or related to their future practices). Then I will illustrate how these constructions of "useful" and "not useful" emerged in relationship to their teacher identities.

Jason

During the first semester that Jason participated in the study, he was enrolled in two methods courses required for ESL endorsement: *K-12 Methods* and *Practicum*. Jason's *Methods* instructor engaged the preservice teachers in what the instructor described as "experiential learning." Experiential learning meant that Jason's *Methods* instructor spent most of the semester modeling how to teach ELLs new content in another language by teaching the preservice teachers in a language unfamiliar to most of them, and asking them to monitor the comprehension strategies they were using. He also modeled techniques for use with language learners, such as the use of visual materials, pantomiming, and pointing out cognates to help the teachers comprehend the text. Throughout the semester, the preservice teachers worked in groups of 4-6 to discuss what strategies and factors enhanced and inhibited their learning of the language taught in the class. They drew from their own experiences to consider what factors might influence their future students' success in learning English, and to generate lesson plans.

In general, Jason was very frustrated with the *Methods* course, and explained that the course focused on "theory" at the expense of providing any kind of practical "structure[s]" or techniques that he would actually use in his own teaching. He stated: "[*Methods*] hasn't been as effective as I had hoped. . . .I need structure to learn and he just has no structure . . . he is too hooked on theory than on what really needs to be done." Jason explained that he was frustrated because the techniques that the instructor used to teach language to the *Methods* students emphasized language learning through the reading and re-reading of a popular story in the target language, and did not present formal grammar or vocabulary instruction. As he stated below, Jason did not feel that he could apply this approach in his own teaching of language learners, and he asserted that language learners need more explicit instruction in vocabulary and grammar to learn a language:

> [The *Methods* instructor emphasizes] the idea of second language acquisition and being exposed to certain things and not to other things, [like] not getting grammatical structure lessons at first, but instead reading a story over and over and then learning [grammar and vocabulary] like that. . . .there is no balance in it. Maybe that would work just fine with some people but I know that it wouldn't work with me. [It would be more effective to read the story], for example, and then maybe spend the other half of the class going over vocabulary words and conjugations. [As it is now, the *Methods* class] is all theory and no concrete methodology and then when he does give [concrete methods] to us it is very vague and not specific and it is never anything where you can say "well I learned this in that class."

Thus, Jason constructed the *Methods* course as overly theoretical and not useful to him because he felt it generally did not provide him with concrete exercises or practices that he felt he could transfer to his own teaching to develop students' language skills. His understanding of the *Methods* class as heavily theory-driven illustrates his understanding of theory as something that was divorced from to the day-to-day functioning of the classroom, which in his view should include activities that focus explicitly on vocabulary and grammar learning.

Jason took the *Practicum* course during the same semester he was enrolled in *Methods*. *Practicum* functioned primarily as a culmination of the ESL endorsement courses, by providing preservice teachers with experience in an ESL classroom setting prior to their student teaching semester. Seventy percent of their time was spent in an ESL classroom (or a classroom with ELLs present in it) observing, and occasionally tutoring or conducting mini-lessons. Preservice teachers spent the remaining 30 percent of their time at the university, practicing lessons intended for the ELLs in their classrooms on their preservice peers, and then receiving peer and instructor feedback on their lesson presentations. Jason expressed frustration with the presentations he did in the *Practicum* class, asserting that the feedback he received on lesson presentations in the *Practicum* class was unrealistic for K-12 ELLs, and he noted that he thought the instructors were out of touch with the reality of public school ESL classrooms:

> I believe that the professor and her teaching assistant are very familiar with textbooks on how to teach, and they're linguists and all this stuff, but a lot of the things that I have heard them say are very different from what would be effective in a real classroom in a real setting. . . .For instance, I got hammered for using idioms in my lesson, the lesson that I taught in front of the class and [the professor] said you can never use idioms . . . but the thing is that I have noticed in the class that I am helping and observing in now, they understand idioms before they understand anything else. They understand "hang on a minute" before they understand "please wait a moment," they catch on to things like that. . . .I think it needs to be more realistic. . . .I haven't really found a connection between the practices that I have [been taught to use in the *Practicum* class] and [the practices I have used in my cooperating teacher's classroom] when I have actually taught. It is totally different.

Thus, Jason felt that the theory (proffered by "linguists" rather than experienced K-12 teachers) in the *Practicum* course about language acquisition and teacher talk was not useful in the practical arena of the

classroom, because this theory conflicted with what he observed learners actually doing. For Jason, the work of linguists and the work of K-12 teachers did not connect in real ways; the former was the domain of theory, the latter the domain of practice.

Jason also felt that the highly structured format of lesson plans presented in the *Practicum* class was at odds with the shifting, complex demands of K-12 classrooms. The *Practicum* class required a six-step lesson planning approach (warm-up and review, introduction, presentation, practice, evaluation, and application). Jason felt that a structure for lesson planning was helpful, but again expressed frustration that the theory about elements of successful lesson plans did not seem flexible enough to allow for issues that might arise in the practical implementation of the lessons in public school ESL classrooms:

> in [the professor's] instructions for the lesson plans it is always A to B to C, and you don't put C before B. . . .I think it is more helpful to have it be more flexible because that is how it has to be. I would like to see [the *Practicum* professor] in a public [school] ESL class, she would just blow a fuse, honestly (laughs). It is important to say that these steps are important, but if it needs to be adjusted, even teach us ways to adjust it. . . I think it is more important to be flexible. It is important to know the importance of sequence, but it simply isn't realistic.

In contrast, Jason was very positive about the ESL endorsement course he took the following semester, *Content-Based Instruction* (*CBI*). The *CBI* course examined how to plan and deliver lessons in which ELLs learned content, and their learning of English occurred simultaneously through their engagement with that content. The final project for the course was a set of lesson plans that included performance objectives, lesson materials, and a review of the literature relevant to the project.

The instructor for the course spent several class periods modeling content-based lessons for the preservice teachers on a variety of topics, including a science lesson on the properties of matter (i.e., density, solubility, conductivity), and a social studies lesson on the different American Indian groups in the United States. These lessons covered a variety of techniques for teaching academic content to ELLs, such as how to use graphic organizers, group work, information gap activities, class discussions, brainstorming, and predicting strategies in class.

Jason felt that this class was quite practical:

> The class is teaching you what you really need to know. . . . it's teaching all the nitty gritty about teaching a second language,

[such as how you structure] lessons, and we have learned about graphic organizers. . . .She gives us great examples with the graphic organizers, and for me, that has been, that is how I have changed my way of thinking about how I want to run an ESL class, that is what I have learned the most. The background information, accessing that information and then doing what you can to reinforce that with new language as much as possible. You try to get something visual to stimulate what they already know, and then introduce new vocabulary and reinforce that with more information. I have just been delighted to learn that. . . .I just need the more realistic. I mean it is important to say "This is how it should be, and ideally this is how you should teach," but bring in more reality instead of giving us . . . perfect situations, tell us how it is in the real classroom in [state where study was conducted] for a public school teacher. . . . Nothing else has been, this is just really about actually teaching.

Jason's enthusiasm about the "realism," "nitty gritty," and information about "actually teaching" that he felt the *CBI* class provided connected to the identity he constructed for himself as a teacher. He identified himself as a teacher of language skills, and his goal was to create successful language learners through the development of their knowledge of and proficiency in English:

[my role is] to help them with all aspects of learning English: comprehension as well as speaking and writing. I think the biggest thing is instilling confidence in them that they can do it and they can get better.

He also identified himself as interested in teaching techniques that were flexible and responsive to the language knowledge of ELLs in local classrooms.

For Jason, the content of *CBI* did not conflict with his implicit theories about explicitly teaching vocabulary and grammar, attending to what language students already knew to determine appropriate teacher talk, and remaining flexible in his planning and interactions with students. Thus, *CBI* had greater applications to his future teaching practices, and therefore was more "practical" than his other two courses.

Roberta
Roberta took the *K-12 Methods* course with a different instructor than Jason did. The course content did not take on the experiential format that Jason's *Methods* course had, but instead was derived from a commonly used

second language methods textbook. Roberta questioned whether the approach that the course suggested using to teach ESL students was interesting enough to engage them:

> In the *Methods* class there seems to be a lot of the, like the worksheet type of stuff and they talk about authentic text but the kind of things that they are bringing into the class and the kind of things the teacher talks about don't strike me as all that fascinating. . . .the kind of realia that he is talking about bringing in is as simple as an advertisement for life insurance. I am not sure how exciting that really is. Sure it is simple text, but I don't really get where the interest part lies, and I don't see why kids are going to read that, other than the fact that they are told to. And if they are told to read it then I don't see it being internalized really well. . . . Some of the things [in the *Methods* course] . . . just don't seem very interesting and they don't seem to incorporate a kind of literate environment. They seem to be more designed for step-by-step, worksheet-by-worksheet, unit-by-unit way of dealing with language learning. . . . it doesn't necessarily seem to me the best way to do it.

Roberta felt that a central problem with this kind of "step-by-step, worksheet-by-worksheet, unit-by-unit way of dealing with language learning" was that it did not draw on students' lives and experiences, and teach them meaningful ways of interacting in the world. As she stated:

> We are doing [a lesson] that had to be on the weather. . . .It didn't strike me as very exciting . . . I mean sure it would be nice to understand when they do the weather on the radio, but I didn't think that a whole classroom activity based on being able to understand the weather forecast on the radio was particularly pertinent to the lives of a high school student today. . . .I think that encouraging them to talk about what is happening to them and to write about it on a day-to-day basis would give the opportunity to not only learn to read and write and speak and to listen. It would also teach the day-to-day skills that they need to cope with the world, especially if you are a minority language, or a minority culture, it is not an easy thing to do and they need to have survival skills just for being able to get through life. The weather forecast is not necessarily one of those things.

Thus, for Roberta, *Methods* was not practical because the curriculum it engendered was too far removed from students' real lives. Her example of the

weather lesson shows that although it was underpinned by sound linguistic principles of scaffolding language and vocabulary instruction, she did not view it as suitable because of its lack of connection to students' social contexts.

Roberta took another ESL endorsement course, *Teaching Minority Language Learners*, while she was enrolled in *Methods*. In contrast to the three ESL endorsement courses discussed above (*Methods*, *Content-Based Instruction*, and *Practicum*), which focused on techniques and strategies for individual student learning, this course emphasized ELLs' social contexts in their learning. One of the purposes of this course was to illustrate that ELLs brought important personal, familial, cultural, and linguistic resources with them to school, and to illustrate to teachers that they needed to capitalize on these resources and see ELLs "as a source of enrichment that will broaden the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive horizons of the whole class" (interview with course instructor).

The course also addressed student learning of English as related to issues of identity, culture, and community, and texts for this course focused on political, cultural, and historical dimensions of language learning.

Roberta situated this course as significant to her teaching because it discussed students' learning as occurring within familial, community, and cultural contexts:

> [The course takes] a much more holistic approach. It is not considering just that child, in that classroom, for that day. It is considering . . . . where they come from, their home, their environment, their community they live in, and how that affects them. How their culture affects them, how the school affects them, how the school and the culture affect their family, which also affects them, and that is a much more real life condition for that particular individual, that child, because they don't live in a little box and they don't come to the school in a little glass bubble, they are real life people.

Roberta contrasted her experience in *Teaching Minority Language Learners* with her experience in *Methods*, citing a conflict she felt between the ease of application of the techniques she learned in *Methods*, and what she felt was actually the right thing to do, which was struggle with how to bring students' social contexts into her teaching:

> …but because it [*Teaching Minority Language Learners (TMLL)*] is a much more holistic approach, it is not dealing with the day-to-day classroom environment either. So it has wonderful really big ideas but how to distill them down to an actual classroom setting is where the problem lies. [The

Methods class step-by-step, unit-by-unit, worksheet-by-worksheet approach] *does* give you a day-to-day "things to do in your classroom." So it is much easier to just grab this [*Methods* class step-by-step approach] and say "Okay, I can do this and I can do this in my classroom," but because it is easier does not make it the right thing to do. Where some of the big ideas that we are talking about [in *TMLL*], might be the right thing to do but I need to figure out how to distill them down to a day-to-day activity. . . .So I am having a lot of trouble reconciling the stuff that we are learning in this *Methods* class with a much more interesting way of looking things that have been described [in the *TMLL* class].

Given what we know from previous literature about novice teachers' preference for concrete, technical information, Roberta's position that the broad, social foundations focus of her *TMLL* class was more valuable to her than the "step-by-step" focus of her *Methods* class, comes as a surprise.

And yet, what the data from Jason and Roberta illustrate is that teachers seem to construct situated meanings regarding what parts of their pre-service preparation are useful and not useful. Like Jason, the meaning that Roberta made of her courses was closely related to the teaching identity she constructed for herself, although her teaching identity itself was quite different from Jason's. While Jason constructed himself as responsible for motivating students and developing their knowledge of English through vocabulary, grammar, and proficiency skills, Roberta's implicit theories about language as social led her to articulate that language skills were only part of what she needed to teach students, and she identified herself as supporting students and their families through difficulties with survival in a new culture. She located students and herself as a teacher in a broad context, arguing that students needed more than English language proficiency skills or academic skills to be successful:

[I] serve as support for students who are trying to stumble through a school system that is almost entirely in the English language. . . . to provide them with those basic skills that are going to help them get successfully through the school system and that isn't just entirely academic skills. Because there are a lot of other cultural skills and just basic survival skills for teenagers getting through difficult situations and you are going to have to provide those skills to them and to their families really, I mean I think for an ESL teacher there is a lot more than just simple content of English language really.

Thus, Jason framed his teacher identity primarily as attending to students' individual language development, while Roberta created an identity which was more heavily focused on students as using language in social settings, for social purposes. The different ways in which these two teachers understood their practices seemed to have an impact on which aspects of their coursework they found useful to their practice, and which they did not. It is also possible that the coursework they were taking at the time influenced their identity construction about teaching and learning. For instance, it is possible that Roberta was more compelled by, and constructed her teaching identity more heavily around sociocultural explanations about teaching and learning due to her enrollment in the TMLL class. Likewise, it is possible that Jason was more concerned about pedagogical techniques for enhancing individual student learning due to the focus of the courses he was enrolled in at the time of the study (such as Practicum). That is, it is possible that the different educational contexts (teacher education courses) in which Jason and Roberta were involved at the time of the study influenced their identity construction as they thought about themselves as teachers.

DISCUSSION

Jason's call for his courses to focus on "what really needs to be done," and to take the reality of public school classrooms into account, along with Roberta's focus on "how to distill [critical perspectives in the *TMLL* class about the teaching and learning of diverse students] down to a day-to-day activity" *do* represent a plea from each teacher for including information that each viewed as valuable, and thought was missing in their program. But this was not a monolithic, unified complaint that their teacher education courses were too theoretical and did not prepare them for practice. Instead, the ways in which they constructed this disjuncture varied, and the different ways in which they made sense of their coursework were connected to the identities they constructed for themselves as future ESL teachers.

Jason constructed his teacher identity as that of a motivator and a transmitter of skills, focusing on language learning as individually mediated, and rejecting the dimensions of his preparation that he felt did not provide directly transferable strategies for teaching ELLs in local classrooms. The psychology-based discourse about improving the individual achievement of learners that Jason appropriated is one that is very powerful in educational discourses (Buendia, 2000), and it has also been a strong component in the applied linguistics discourses (Pennycook, 2001) that inform the preparation of preservice teachers to work with ELLs. The manifestation of the theory-practice gap in Jason's discourse was one that demanded more evidence of practicality and of reality, which he felt would be evidenced by connections to real classrooms, with real teachers and students.

In contrast to Jason's focus on individual learners, Roberta focused on placing language learners in a social context in which their success related to how well they and their families learned to negotiate new social and cultural systems, and she positioned herself as responsible for helping them understand those systems. That is, when Roberta constructed her teacher identity, she positioned herself in an advocacy role. She felt that students would be more invested in their learning if she made their lives an important part of the curriculum, encouraging them to read, write, and share their experiences. For Roberta, the theory-practice gap manifested itself in how to attend to the lives, experiences, interests, and struggles of her students and their families and communities through day-to-day practices. She felt this was more important to student learning than the concrete practices being cultivated in her *Methods* course (such as creating lessons on the weather), which she felt were too decontextualized from students' lives and their learning needs. She did not dismiss critical perspectives on teaching diverse learners in the *TMLL* course as too theoretical, as the literature on teachers' views of multicultural education indicates is common (Bell, 2002; Chizhik, 2003; Cross, 2003), nor did she favor concrete technical, practical elements proffered by the *Methods* course, as previous work on preservice teachers' views of theory would indicate she might (i.e., Britzman, 1986, 1991). Instead, she problematized the need for her courses to illustrate *how* to engage in critical practices.

Thus, the teachers' identities, as informed by their implicit theories about the nature of language, and about teaching and learning, had an impact on their constructions of what they constructed as theoretical and what they constructed as practical.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Johnson (2006) has suggested that "perhaps the traditional theory/practice dichotomy . . . is counterproductive in light of the sociocultural turn" in the TESOL field (p. 240). However, as the cases of Roberta and Jason illustrate, the question of the relationship between theory and practice continues to exist in the ways that ESL teachers make sense of their preservice education, despite our turn in teacher education to understand teaching as socially mediated.

Furthermore, exploring theory and practice has continuing importance because teachers' understandings of the theory-practice relationship are not monolithic, but vary in ways that are related to how they identify themselves as teachers. This reveals a need for more research that examines what aspects of their preparation teachers construct as valuable or not valuable, as well as what contributes to differences in these understandings. In this paper I have suggested teacher identity as one lens through which to view and examine these different constructions, and have indicated that teachers' implicit

theories about the nature of language, teaching, and learning can help inform the field's still-developing notion of teacher identity. I have also suggested that applying research on teacher cognition (Borg, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Cross, 2010; Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2003, 2011) to questions about preservice teachers' different interpretations of what is theoretical and what is practical in their teacher education programs could help uncover that teachers may construct their teacher identities, in part, in ways that are related to the experiences they are having at the time in the different contexts, settings, and processes that comprise their teacher education programs. Future research that helps to further inform what contributes to teachers' identities, perhaps through narrative means, would provide deeper accounts of language teacher identity and cognition that were not possible in this study because of the limited amount of data from each teacher. Additionally, longitudinal studies of teachers' shifting identities over time and different contexts, and through interaction with other people and technologies would also allow for richer understanding of the complicated nature of teacher identity.

Given the growing numbers of ESL and EFL teachers who are not native speakers of English (Canagarajah, 1999; Ilieva, 2010), it is also important for future research to examine differences in the construction of one's identity as a language teacher and related questions of the theory-practice relationship for those teachers who are non-native speakers of the language they are teaching.

Because Roberta and Jason's implicit theories about the nature of language, teaching, and learning were central to how they made sense of their courses, and had an impact on how they envisioned their future practices, an implication for practice from this study is that it is important to encourage future ESL teachers to uncover their assumptions about the nature of language, and to help them explore the implications of their assumptions for teaching language learners. It is also important to guide preservice ESL teachers through the exploration of theories about the nature of language that differ from their implicit theories, and to explore their implications for teaching, so that teachers can challenge and inform their implicit theories, and make decisions about how this might inform their practices. Finally, just as we advocate differentiating instruction for ELLs, it seems we need to do the same for our future ESL teachers to benefit from their preservice courses. Further research regarding the variations in teachers' constructions of how they see coursework relating to their future practices may help teacher educators gain a more nuanced understanding of the theory-practice "gap" to better design teacher education coursework and field experiences to build upon and challenge a variety of teacher candidates' expectations and assumptions about what they need to know to teach ELLs well.

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Notes

[1] The shifting nature of identity, particularly for preservice teachers, makes it unrealistic to claim that the identities of the participants in this study are fixed and remain constant over time. However, I chose to examine how their constructions of the theory-practice relationship, and their identities during the academic year in which I interacted with them, related to and informed one another.