



Pre-service teachers' implicit and explicit beliefs about English language learners: An implicit association test study

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Preservice teacher participants hold slightly positive implicit beliefs about ELs.
- There is a negative correlation between implicit and explicit beliefs about ELs.
- More accurate language acquisition and pedagogical beliefs correlate.
- Positive attitudes toward ELs correlate with perceived support and workload.
- Perception of support correlates with language beliefs and perception of inclusion.

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ABSTRACT

Pre-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs about English Learners (ELs) are especially critical as they enter their professions among an increasingly diverse student population. This study uses an Implicit Association Test to explore implicit and explicit beliefs and attitudes of pre-service teachers about ELs. Pre-service teachers from a Southeastern U.S. university hold generally positive implicit beliefs about ELs and express positive expectations for working with ELs and school support. Implicit association test measures have potential as tools for preparing pre-service teachers and evaluating the impact of interventions that seek to improve teachers' readiness to serve this population.

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1. Introduction

Teachers hold one of the few professions that allow them to be part of their future professional environment from early childhood onward. Yet, demographic and pedagogical trends in U.S. classrooms suggest that the classrooms in which teachers are currently teaching substantially differ from the ones in which they grew up learning. For example, the [Center for Public Education \(2012\)](#) reports the contrasting populations of the 1970s and the early 21st century; whereas in the 1970s, the student population was 79% non-Hispanic white; in 2008, it was 59% non-Hispanic white. In addition to demographic changes over time, standards-based reform measures such as the Elementary and Secondary Education

Act (in particular, [No Child Left Behind, 2001](#), and [Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015](#)) have necessarily transformed classroom practice to be driven by measurement of student outcomes ([Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008](#)). Nevertheless, while classrooms are becoming more diverse, the people leading them remain predominantly white. [Putman, Hansen, Walsch, and Quintero \(2016\)](#) note that minority populations comprise only 18% of the teaching force, and only approximately 4% Black and 4% Latino college students graduate with a teaching degree. At the same time, nearly half of all children under five in the most recent Census data are from racial/ethnic minority groups, and no racial or ethnic group will constitute a true majority in the United States by 2050, according to Census data ([Deruy, 2016](#)).

In addition to cultural dichotomies present in classrooms, diverse languages and language needs are increasingly evident even in rural schools ([Kreck, 2014](#)). [Ortman & Shin, \(2011\)](#) report a 148% increase in speakers of languages other than English (LOTE) in

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the United States from 1980 to 2009 standing at 20% of the national population 5 years and older. Samson and Collins (2012) note that the number of English learners in public schools between 1998 and 99 and 2009 grew 51% while the general population of students grew only 7%.

Due to this changing population, it is necessary for teachers who situate themselves within the current cultural majority to acknowledge that there are other cultural norms and practices at work in the classroom. Cultural experiences teachers have growing up can shape what they expect everyone's cultural experiences to be, but these experiences are increasingly dissimilar (Lyon, 2009). This dichotomy challenges the beliefs of teachers as they work to implement pedagogical decisions they expect to be effective in diverse classrooms.

Teacher education programs are responding to the need for culturally competent teachers who are ready to teach English learners by integrating courses on these topics into their preparation programs (Education Commission of the States, 2017). Programs and departments are making curriculum, course, and schedule adjustments to meet state mandates regarding diversity training and stakeholder requests for English as a Second Language (ESL) training (Humphreys, n.d.). Pre-service teachers in many states are also taking required courses to understand the issues at stake for English learners in mainstream classrooms (Education Commission of the States, 2017; Samson & Collins, 2012). In the midst of these changes, it is important to study the attitudes that future teachers have about English learners and to use this information as a springboard for discussion and training.

Attitude is defined as, “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols,” (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005, p. 150). It is important to note the inclusion of the term ‘belief’ within this definition, and that in the field of educational research multiple terms are used to describe the same construct such as *belief*, *attitude*, *values*, *perceptions*, *theories*, *dispositions*, *conceptions*, *theories*, and *images* (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). Pajares (1992) further suggests that attitude is a sub-construct of belief, so that when attitudes are being observed or identified, they are interconnected with beliefs in such a way as to make the terminology interchangeable. In order to fully attend to the theoretical construction of our study it is necessary to define and describe beliefs with attention to their importance and impact on teachers. In concurrence with Pettit (2011), we include the construct of attitudes in this broad definition of beliefs since both attitudes and beliefs do not rely on facts to support them, and both can imply some aspect of judgment or preference.

Belief formation relies on cultural influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), experience (Block & Hazelip, 1995, pp. 25–28), and knowledge (Borg, 2003). Characteristics of beliefs include that they are personal in nature (Borhek & Curtis, 1975), nonconsensual, have unclear boundaries, contain evaluative and affective elements, may contain episodic material (Abelson, 1979), are interconnected (Pajares, 1992), can be controvertible (Rokeach, 1968), and are often unconscious (Pajares, 1992; Abelson, 1979). Understanding that beliefs and attitudes are unique yet somewhat interrelated constructs, we will use attitudinal beliefs (Flores & Smith, 2008) to represent beliefs that include an aspect of evaluation that might imply favor or disfavor which could also include attitudes or associations (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). The purpose of this study is to understand pre-service education majors' implicit and explicit attitudinal beliefs about ELs.

1.1. Attitudinal beliefs and teacher behavior

All teachers hold beliefs which have an impact on their decisions

at the classroom level and are integral to teacher growth and behavior (Eisenhart, Cuthbert, Shrum, & Harding, 2001; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Peck & Tucker, 1973; Richardson, 1994, as cited in Richardson, 1996). Beliefs can determine, at least to some extent, whether or not a given policy is introduced, practiced, or modified in the classroom. For example, beliefs about language use in the classroom may impact a teachers' willingness or effort to include non-English language texts in curriculum, despite current understandings of L1 and L2 literacy. Furthermore, educational policies out of alignment with teacher beliefs are often not appropriately implemented (Eisenhart et al., 2001). For these reasons, educational researchers have been and continue to be interested in teacher beliefs.

The inaccessibility of deeply held beliefs makes teacher belief and attitude research difficult, and most studies rely on survey instruments, observations, and interviews to gain insight into the beliefs that support actions in the classroom. Survey instruments are subject to response biases, including social desirability effects (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996). Furthermore, not all beliefs and attitudes can be accessed or stated (Kagan, 1992). The feeling of being certain of something and being able to attribute that certainty (without actually being correct) has long been an area of psychological research (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007). Recent breakthroughs in psychological research have challenged the assumptions about cognitive processes, access to accurate knowledge of one's own beliefs, and the explicit and implicit beliefs of humans.

1.2. Implicit and explicit beliefs and attitudes

Teacher belief and attitude research has recognized the dichotomy of implicit and explicit beliefs (Fives & Buehl, 2012). The idea that many of our judgments, feelings, and behaviors occur automatically has gained broad acceptance (Kunda, 1999), and we now have research paradigms that acknowledge that the human mind is made up of more than conscious processes (Nosek & Smyth, 2007). In recognition of the dichotomy of expressed and unexpressed attitudes, researchers have defined *explicit attitudes* as the products of introspection which are accessible and reportable by the holder, while *implicit attitudes* may exist outside of our awareness and may influence our actions without our awareness (Nosek & Smyth, 2007). Understanding the behavior of an individual requires knowledge of this distinction (De Houwer, Teige-Mocigemba, Spruyt, & Moors, 2009), but there is a question as to whether the implicit and explicit belief constructs are two separate constructs or related constructs (Nosek & Smyth, 2007).

The relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes and beliefs is a difficult topic to study. Nosek et al. (2007) reported a weak relation among various implicit measures including the Implicit Association Test (IAT). They attribute this weak relationship to two factors: low reliability of implicit measures as compared to other forms of psychological measurement, and the heterogeneity of cognitive processes that contribute to the various measures (Nosek et al., 2007).

A multitrait-multimethod validation of the IAT suggested that implicit and explicit attitudes were related but distinct constructs (Nosek & Smyth, 2007; Nosek et al., 2007) and theory suggests that direct relationships do not exist between the two measures of attitude (Lane, Banaji, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2007). This suggests that when individuals self-report their attitudes and beliefs it may have no relationship to their IAT results. This is problematic from a validation perspective because the implicit attitudes have not been independently verified and are often surprising to the participant when revealed (Vedantam, 2005).

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