Praxis-oriented Pedagogy for Novice L2 Teachers

Developing Teacher Reasoning

Karen E. Johnson, Deryn P. Verity, and Sharon S. Childs
PRAXIS-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY
FOR NOVICE L2 TEACHERS

In this cutting-edge book on L2 teacher education, experts Johnson, Verity, and Childs demonstrate how praxis-oriented pedagogy grounded in the principles of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (VSCT) can have a meaningful impact on L2 teachers’ development. Starting with a clear definition of praxis-oriented pedagogy, the authors lay out a theoretical foundation and document how appropriately designed praxis-oriented L2 teacher education pedagogy supports the development of novice teacher reasoning. Drawing from a longitudinal study of L2 novice teachers, chapters address the teachers’ understanding, learning, and cognitive development and how their capabilities grow in creating and implementing engaging language learning environments for their ESL students. At the core of the book lies a unique set of pedagogical concepts: linguistically compact, conceptually rich chunks of language that function as psychological tools for learning and teaching. By covering teachers’ changes in understanding, reasoning, and pedagogical activities, the book reveals the role that pedagogical concepts play in praxis-oriented pedagogy.

Essential reading for language teacher educators, language teachers, and researchers, this book makes the VSCT principles that inform praxis-oriented pedagogy both clear and accessible.

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PRAXIS-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY FOR NOVICE L2 TEACHERS

Developing Teacher Reasoning

Karen E. Johnson, Deryn P. Verity, and Sharon S. Childs
To Glenn, Elizabeth, and Lillian

To the life and memory of Steve Cornwell, extraordinary teacher educator and dear friend

To Karen and Deryn for mediating my professional growth throughout this journey
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It was Tuesday, July 10, 2018. Outside, the lush green, rolling hills of central Pennsylvania were punctuated by orange day lilies, drenched in the warmth of a July sun. But we—Karen, Deryn, Sharon, and Paula—opted to be inside the windowless four walls of the fluorescent-lit conference room in the Department of Applied Linguistics at Penn State. We were just beginning a two-day discussion about each of the initial subsets of data representing the journeys of novice L2 teachers who had graduated from the MA TESL Program at Penn State.

I now reflect on those initial days of impassioned dialogue and the final book that Karen, Deryn, and Sharon (KDS) have written through the dialectic of being/becoming, a conceptualization through which we, as language teacher educators, typically understand our novice L2 teachers. At that point in time, this book was in the process of organically being/becoming as KDS engaged in thinking together and writing themselves into meaning. How does one craft a theorized, compelling, readable book condensing an abundance of data covering a two-year process of teacher development while foregrounding the teachers’ voices? KDS decidedly do this in Praxis-oriented Pedagogy for Novice L2 Teachers: Developing Teacher Reasoning through the revolutionary pedagogy of their language teacher education program. I use the words ‘revolutionary pedagogy’ in the Vygotskian sense, where learning and development are conceptualized as being in a dialectic, through which people make meaning using conceptual tools in socioculturally situated, goal-oriented activities. The book is also revolutionary in the Vygotskian way it actualizes the program as a research laboratory, and, thus, highlights teacher development through their voices within these intentional learning-to-teach activities.

The explanation and exploration of pedagogical concepts through the teachers’ voices is the most theoretically profound yet practical contribution of this
book. The book shows how KDS introduce pedagogical concepts, or “theoretical insights packaged for use by novices” (p. 26), in three pillar courses. They show how novice teachers increasingly make sense of their teaching through conceptual tools; that is, by thinking together with their classmates and teacher educators, they increasingly talk about their instructional activity through the pedagogical concepts, and their practical activity of teaching facilitates a deeper understanding of the concepts. Crucial to this is that as teachers talk through their understandings of their instructional practice through specific pedagogical concepts, the teacher educators gauge teachers’ reasoning, identify emerging growth points, co-construct ZPD activity, and engage in responsive mediation. This book enables readers to witness this through what is rare in many published materials—longitudinal, in-depth highlighting of teachers’ voices as they externalize their intimate, emotional, individual experiences with learning-to-teach in increasingly reasoned and self-regulated ways. It similarly traces these teacher educators’ own understandings and use of these pedagogical concepts, their own being/becoming.

What this book refutes is that teachers do not develop their expertise simply by teaching. The intentionality and quality of the teacher educator mediation in all three courses demonstrates how and why language teacher educators/education matters and the centrality of the novice L2 teacher/teacher educator relationship. The excerpts demonstrate how responsive mediation can be enacted as the teacher educators listen, offer emotional support, offer an instructional alternative, or probe teachers to consider the effects of their instructional choices in the process of teaching the practice teach or after tutoring and teaching in the practicum. What is revolutionary is that the mediation is intentional, orienting, emergent, holistic, and focused on development while enabling teachers to interact with students more thoughtfully in the next class/tutoring session.

KDS note that people ask them “How could I possibly implement these ideas when I’m in a traditional MATESL program and do not have such like-minded colleagues?” I can attest that these pedagogical concepts do ‘travel’: I use them in my undergraduate TESL certificate program with first-time teachers, where I do not have such like-minded colleagues. What this book provides is a vision of possibilities for language teacher education inspired by Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory. This book challenges us as teacher educators to externalize our own being/becoming to create the kinds of intentional and structured mediational spaces that support the teachers with whom we work in their own being/becoming expert language teachers.

Paula Golombek
University of Florida
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to express our enormous debt of gratitude to the many novice L2 teachers who welcomed us into their learning-to-teach experiences for the two years they spent in our MA TESL program. It is their insights, struggles, joy, and passion for becoming language teachers that make up the lifeblood of our work as teacher educators and it is their voices that bring life to this book. We are lucky to teach in a setting where exploration of praxis-oriented pedagogy is not only welcomed, but nurtured. Professor James P. Lantolf, a mentor, colleague, and inspirational researcher into Vygotsky’s theory of mind and human development, has for years been a sounding board for our ideas and questions. His influence is evident in the openness and support we have for our collaborative quest to create innovative educational contexts for our teachers. We also wish to thank the multitude of graduate students in the Department of Applied Linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University who labored over intricate transcriptions of hours of digitally recorded classroom data. They allowed us to see into our teachers’ ‘inner worlds’ in ways that would not have been possible otherwise. We also thank the many instructors who allowed us to come into their classrooms to record lessons and carry out observations, and who thoughtfully mentored our MA TESL students in their practicum teaching experiences. A special thanks goes to our long-time colleague and friend, Paula R. Golombek (University of Florida), who offered us insightful feedback on an initial draft of this book and who pushed us to fully articulate the true potential of praxis-oriented pedagogy for the development of L2 teacher reasoning. We are very grateful to Jacob Rieker for his meticulous copy editing and attention to clarity in the written word. Finally, we would like to thank the reviewers commissioned by Routledge for their constructive feedback and the acquisitions editor, Karen Adler, and series editor, Eli Hinkel, for their professionalism and recognition of the book’s potential contribution to the ESL and Applied Linguistics Professional Series.
NOTES ON TRANSCRIPTION

T teacher
TE teacher educator
S student (not identified)
S1, S2, etc.: identified student
Ss several students at once or the whole class
CM classmate, CM1, classmate 1
[ ] [do you understand? overlap between teacher/student, student/
student
= turn continues, or one turn follows another without any pause
( ) a dot indicates a just noticeable pause
(2.0) a number indicates a timed pause, e.g., 2 seconds
? rising intonation—question or other
____ emphatic speech, usually on a word
CAPITALS speech that is hearably louder than surrounding speech
wo (h) rd (h) to indicate the word is expressed with laughter
wor- a dash indicates a word that has been cut off
word colons indicate elongation of a sound
(word) a guess at unclear or unintelligible talk
( ) talk occurs but unintelligible
((laughter)) indicates paralinguistic sounds like laughter, crying, etc.
((italics)) notes on gestures, actions, eye gaze, etc.

Source: Adapted from van Lier (1988) and Johnson (1995).
References


PART I

DEFINING PRAXIS-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY FOR L2 TEACHER EDUCATION
While past L2 teacher cognition research has critically examined what language teachers know, believe, and think (i.e., their mental lives), limited progress has been made in addressing fundamental questions about the developmental trajectory of L2 teachers (people) and teaching (activity) expertise. Kubanyiova and Feryok (2015) maintain that the field of L2 teacher cognition has barely begun to answer fundamental questions about developing L2 teacher/teaching expertise: “How do language teachers create meaningful learning environments for their students?” and “How can teacher education, continuing professional development, and the wider educational and sociocultural context facilitate such learning in language teachers?” (p. 435). That is, the question of “what constitutes a meaningful and worthwhile impact of L2 teacher education is far from resolved” (p. 436).

The dominant discourses that typically get invoked when people talk about teacher education reflect notions such as ‘too much theory, not enough practice’ and ‘teachers learn to teach by teaching.’ Surprisingly, even teachers who have gone through teacher education or certificate programs sometimes claim that they did not really learn how to teach until they got into their own classrooms. When we enter the realm of L2 teacher education, an even more misguided notion is typically invoked: ‘If you can speak the language, you can teach it.’ Often, both language teachers and language learners find themselves buying into this notion: for teachers, ‘I speak English, but I don’t know how to teach it,’ or ‘my English is not good enough to teach’; for students, ‘I would prefer to study English with a native speaking teacher.’
This book offers a counter narrative to these dominant discourses. We crucially reject the notion that a person can learn to teach ‘only by teaching’ or can be entrusted with the task of teaching on the basis of being a ‘native speaker’ of a language. To support this perspective, we make our praxis-oriented pedagogy explicit by longitudinally documenting our interactions with the novice teachers in our MA TESL program, whose L1s may or may not be English, and their responses to our interactions as they unfold within our classrooms and institutional context. At the same time, we explore the influences and consequences of this praxis-oriented pedagogy on the development of novice L2 teacher reasoning. We argue, as Vygotsky (1935/1994) did, that school learning is not the same as learning in the everyday world. Instead, he characterized school learning as ‘artificial’ in the sense that it relies upon the artifacts of formal and intentional mediation: the classroom (in this case, the classroom for novice teachers) is an ideal venue for systematic, intentional, goal-directed instruction where new psychological tools (artifacts, concepts, and symbols) can be introduced with the goal of restructuring both thinking (teacher cognition) and activity (language teaching). We also argue that language teacher educators can intentionally shape the social situation of development (i.e., the social environment) by creating structured mediational spaces where novices can grow into becoming L2 teachers. Therefore, language teacher educators are essential participants in the process of seeing, supporting, and enhancing the development of novice L2 teacher reasoning.

This book lays out a theoretical foundation for praxis-oriented pedagogy as systematically and intentionally informed by the principles and concepts of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (VSCT). The book has four primary aims:

- To define praxis-oriented pedagogy as educational innovations that embody the dialectical principle that changes in social activities/relations affect cognitive development
- To document how appropriately designed L2 teacher education pedagogy supports novice teacher understanding, learning, and cognitive development
- To highlight the role that pedagogical concepts, as expressed in brief and accessible phrases, play in praxis-oriented pedagogy and in the development of novice teacher reasoning and instructional expertise
- To trace the developmental trajectory of L2 novice teacher reasoning as well as their emerging capabilities to create and enact engaging language learning environments for the English learners they teach
Specifically, we present and discuss data from our two-year graduate-level L2 teacher education program (MA TESL). The data document how, as language teacher educators, we create cohesively structured, intentionally designed, mediational spaces that expose novice teachers to relevant academic and pedagogical concepts as they engage in a variety of mediated teaching/tutoring activities. To provide more context for the course-driven data, we discuss the intentional design features of three required praxis-oriented courses, Teaching ESL, Tutoring Internship, and Teaching Practicum, what we refer to as our ‘pillar’ courses. We designate these courses as pillars because they hold up the theoretical framework of the approach we call praxis-oriented pedagogy. In essence, we offer a VSCT theorized rationale for the decision-making processes that lie behind our intentional design features. We hope by making the VSCT principles that inform the courses both clear and accessible, readers may find avenues for making their own L2 teacher education programs more principle-driven, cohesive, and praxis-oriented. We then present empirical data that traces the developmental trajectories of novice L2 teachers from two cohorts of teachers in our MA TESL program as they move through the three pillar courses. These courses, which lie at the center of this book, engage novice teachers in learning how to understand teaching as a reasoned and agentive activity, more so on how to teach, rather than on what to teach. Through our voices and the voices and experiences of the novice L2 teachers in our program, we illustrate how praxis-oriented pedagogy contributes to crucial intersections of theory and practice, where professional, intentional, and reasoned activity is modeled, enacted, and explored. Our longitudinal findings document the emerging capabilities of novice L2 teachers to articulate, create, and enact engaging language learning environments for the learners they teach. We highlight a unique set of interrelated pedagogical concepts (see Figure 1.1, also Appendix 1), designed to function as psychological tools, that we ask the novice L2 teachers to engage with in order to orient them toward taking on a more reasoned, dialogic, interactive, responsive instructional stance as they plan for and engage with their learners. Our findings are supplemented with post-program interviews with recent MA TESL graduates. These practicing L2 teachers reflect on the significant concepts, experiences, and/or realizations that have traveled with them from our praxis-oriented pedagogy into their early professional years and how these concepts have become important facets of their own pedagogy. We conclude with implications, propositions, and design options for L2 teacher educators interested in implementing VSCT-informed, principle-driven, cohesive, praxis-oriented pedagogy.
6 Defining Praxis-oriented Pedagogy for L2 Teacher Education

Below is a collection of pedagogical concepts that we have extrapolated from our work with Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (V SCT) L2 novice teacher education. As pedagogical concepts, they are not specific to any particular topic or language skill but are relevant to all L2 instruction and L2 teacher education. We use each of the concepts listed here differently to support the development of novice teacher reasoning, that is, for different purposes and in different ways in our individual courses, but all of them encapsulate fundamental principles of praxis-oriented pedagogy. Taken together, this collection becomes a set of powerful psychological tools that enable novice teachers to instantiate teaching as dialogic mediation (Johnson, 2009), or, to phrase its value in the form of a pedagogical concept itself, TEACH OFF YOUR STUDENTS, NOT AT THEM.

ACTIVITY BUILDING

a. design activities in such a way that they build on one another
b. sequence activities so that they lead to a final outcome or ‘product’ that is a demonstration of what learners have learned and are now able to do

BE DIRECT, NOT DIRECTIVE

a. be explicit about what language point you are focusing on
b. do not tell the learner what to write or say in place of their own contribution
c. use targeted mediation to support the learner’s use of language

CREATE PREDICTABILITY

a. explicitly state what learners are expected to say and do
b. explicitly and overtly link activities through language: provide connections/transitions
c. if working in pairs or small groups, provide students opportunities to ‘practice’ before they ‘perform’ or ‘present’

EMBODIMENT IN TEACHING

As a performative act, teaching is filled with gestures and positionings that hold meanings, for both teachers and learners. Consider the following when you teach:

b. How do I use gestures and positioning to support student learning?
c. What do I do when learners are working in small groups?

ENGINEER PARTICIPATION

a. don’t assume learners know how to participate
b. be explicit about HOW you want them to participate
c. arrange the classroom in ways that invite participation
d. continue to monitor participation throughout the lesson

INSTRUCTIONAL PARAPHRASING

Whatever learners say, rephrase or paraphrase it out loud so that you

a. acknowledge the learner’s contribution
b. make it comprehensible to everyone
c. provide appropriate language input/model
d. relate it to what you are teaching (i.e., take learners from where they are to where you want them to be)
e. establish a pattern that any and all learner contributions are welcome (i.e., lessen face-saving threats)
f. give yourself an opportunity to ‘comprehend’ it

FIGURE 1.1 Pedagogical Concepts in L2 Teaching (Continued)
Instruction and Cognition: Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky’s theoretical stance on the relationship between instruction and cognitive development is that attention to what learners can do independently at any given point in time says little about the trajectory of learners’ development or what their potential may be. A more productive measure, Vygotsky argued, is the difference between independent performance and aided performance, framed conceptually as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). In Vygotsky’s own words:

The zone of proximal development of the child is the distance between his actual development, determined with the help of independently solved tasks, and the level of the potential development of the child, determined with the help of tasks solved by the child under the guidance of adults and in cooperation with his more intelligent partners.

(1978, p. 86)
The ZPD can be thought of as a metaphoric space where individual cognition originates in the social collective mind and emerges in and through engagement in social activity. It is not a physical place or a mental level; learners do not have a ZPD per se, but during the activity of aided performance, a ZPD can emerge, and it is in this activity, or arena of potentiality, where we can see what an individual might be able to do with assistance; one’s potential versus what one has already internalized and thus can do on one’s own. In other words, knowing what a novice teacher can do on her own tells us little about her potential to learn something new. When we see/hear how this same teacher interacts with someone who is more capable while accomplishing a task that is beyond her abilities, this creates a window through which we can see her potential for development and her capabilities as they are emerging. Because the bulk of what we do as teacher educators is to help novice L2 teachers do what they are not yet able to do on their own within the limited time frame of a teacher education program, mediation directed at this metaphoric space of potentiality is essential in developing those maturing capabilities. Attention to the quality and character of that mediation and learners’ responsiveness to it are signals of potential cognitive development (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Poehner & Lantolf, 2021). This is why we approach our L2 teacher education program using praxis-oriented pedagogy.

Critical to the ZPD is the notion of change, and of deliberately creating new circumstances, or the social situation of development, where change can occur (Newman & Holzman, 1993). In Vygotsky’s (1935/1994) later work, the study of child development (pedology) entailed the study of the environmental structure (the social situation of development) as it relates to the psychological organization (higher-level consciousness) of the developing child. It is not the environment itself, which may be constant, but the child’s personally meaningful experiences and relationship with that environment that guides the process of higher cognitive development. By design, our praxis-oriented pedagogy should forge ZPD activity, putting teachers ahead of themselves, changing the social situation/circumstances so that change in teaching practices, new dispositions, or habits of the mind, and new views of teaching/learning can take hold or be internalized. And in that new social situation of development, an ideal needs to exist as the end product of development. In VSCT-informed praxis-oriented pedagogy, the ideal is represented by the way we conceptualize teaching as dialogic mediation (Johnson, 2009) and the development of reasoning teaching (Johnson, 1999). Yet, the processes and outcomes of ZPD activity cannot be predetermined or pre-specified—they instead emerge from the relations that form during ZPD activity—so while novice teachers and teacher educators are engaged in joint activity, “learning and development emerges from the fluid social relations and forms of discourse that teachers and teacher educators bring to that activity” (Moll, 2014,
This being the case, teacher educators cannot predict the nature of their interactions with novice teachers—these must be negotiated and constituted *in situ* through and by the relational features while co-constructing ZPD activity. ZPD activity is, thus, from this understanding, the crucible of praxis, the space where theory and practice become inseparable from one another.

**The Dialectical Unity of Theory-practice: Praxis**

To the best of our knowledge, Vygotsky did not specifically write about the concept of praxis [практика], yet his entire enterprise to formulate a new psychology in the early 1900s was based on the notion that there is, or should be, an unbreakable interdependence between theory and practice. The notion of praxis, from the viewpoint of Vygotsky’s theory, is the dialectic unity of theory and practice. This means that theory cannot stand alone from practice, or vice versa, but rather the two ways of understanding must be conceptualized as equal partners. From this perspective, theory guides practice but practice, in turn, influences theory. A theory without practice is empty verbalism; practice enacted without theoretical knowledge is mindless activity. Vygotsky understood human consciousness, and in particular the development of higher-level human consciousness, as premised on this synthesis, the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. In Vygotsky’s own words:

> Previously theory was not dependent on practice; instead, practice was the conclusion, the application, an excursion beyond the boundaries of science, an operation which lay outside science and came after science, which began after the scientific operation was considered completed. Success or failure had practically no effect on the fate of the theory … Now the situation is the opposite. Practice pervades the deepest foundations of the scientific operation and reforms it from beginning to end. Practice sets the tasks and serves as the supreme judge of theory, as its truth criterion. It dictates how to construct the concepts and how to formulate the laws.

(1926/2004, p. 304)

The ‘pervading’ unity of theory and practice discussed in this quote is what scholars of VSCT mean by the notion of praxis: “material activity adapted to specific goals and informed by theory, while simultaneously testing those same theoretical principles” (Sanchez Vasquez, 1977, p. 95). Vygotsky’s ultimate goal was to create a new methodology to uncover the development of human consciousness, which he believed could not be accomplished by looking at a fully formed adult, but instead had to be traced in its formation either from child to adult or from novice to expert. One of Vygotsky’s greatest contributions to the theoretical study of human development was his insistence that the
process (the trajectory of development) and not just the product (a static, testable outcome) must be considered to fully understand how humans learn and how human cognition develops. Vygotsky’s life challenge was to reimagine the psychology of his day by proposing a new psychology based on the principles of dialectical materialism—a psychology to explain the human ability to use symbols to mediate their psyche. He argued that everything in human life (beyond basic biological drives) is derived from and dependent on cultural activity; that is, it is through socially organized practical activity that humans create and change the material conditions in which they live, and in doing so change themselves. He argued that the goal of psychological research was to show how external knowledge and abilities in children become internalized tools of thinking. And because he viewed the development of human consciousness as a profoundly social process, he emphasized the role of dialogue, social relations, and engagement in goal-directed activity all via language as powerful mediators of the development of higher-level cognitive processes.

**Overview of the Book**

In Part I, Chapter 1, we lay out the principles and concepts of VSCT that inform the goals, design, and enactment of the three required pillar courses that we offer in our MA TESL program. Part I is more theoretically focused than the remainder of the book. This choice is intentional in that to understand praxis-oriented pedagogy, readers need accessible, situated understandings of some of the core concepts and principles of VSCT. However, this section is not a Vygotskian primer but a weaving of VSCT concepts and principles into a coherent rationale for the goals, design, and enactment of praxis-oriented pedagogy with the ultimate aim of developing novice L2 teacher reasoning during experiential coursework in L2 teacher education programs. In Chapter 2, we define the essential elements and design features of praxis-oriented pedagogy for L2 teacher education. This includes the essential principles of praxis-oriented pedagogy, including structured mediational spaces/means, concept development, responsive mediation, teaching as dialogic mediation, and reasoning teaching. We then provide an overview of the deliberate design features of praxis-oriented pedagogy, including the intentional ways that praxis-oriented pedagogy creates mediational spaces/means that foster ZPD activity, restructures the social situation of teacher conceptual development, and fosters reasoned instructional choices and practices.

In Part II, which includes Chapters 3 and 4, we document how praxis-oriented pedagogy supports novice teacher development and offer an overview of the key components of our MA TESL program. While several aspects of our pillar courses will be familiar to those in the field of L2 teacher education, the purpose of Part II is to illustrate for the reader the stance of the courses, that is, praxis-oriented pedagogy. It includes detailed descriptions
and intentional design features of the three pillar courses and the capstone projects MA TESL students must complete to earn the degree. It is important for the reader to know where the empirical data for this book come from. Over four years, ten MA TESL students in cohort one and 17 in cohort two gave us Institutional Review Board permission to collect all of the digitally recorded instruction and written reflections they completed during each of the three pillar courses. Importantly, we, as principal investigators, did not know who had given us permission to access their data until after they had graduated from the MA TESL program. Moreover, these data represent requirements of each course and include not only the novice teachers’ talk, actions, and reflections, but also our mediation, both oral and written, on all course requirements.

This massive database includes the following items:

Teaching ESL—Extended Team-Teaching Project (teams of 2, 3, or 4 novice teachers):

- Nine digitally recorded practice teach sessions (55–75 minutes each)
- Nine digitally recorded actual teach sessions (55–75 minutes each)
- Nine audio recorded stimulated recall sessions (1 hour each)
- 27 written reflection papers (five to seven pages each)

Tutoring Internship

- c. 980 weekly written reflection posts with Internship Supervisor responses
- 27 final written reflection papers (eight pages each)

Teaching Practicum

- c. 351 weekly reflective journal entries with Practicum Supervisor responses
- 27 final reflective journal entries with Practicum Supervisor responses
- 81 digitally recorded teaching sessions (55–75 minutes each)
- 27 teaching philosophies

MA TESL Graduates

- Seven interviews with graduates who had participated in the original research project (c. 1 hour each)

Our novice L2 teachers represent a number of countries and L1s and have taught in a variety of educational contexts. Figure 1.2 (see also Appendix 2) provides a snapshot of their backgrounds and the number of years of teaching experience they bring to the MA TESL program.