

Hamline University

DigitalCommons@Hamline

School of Education and Leadership Student
Capstone Projects

School of Education and Leadership

Summer 2022

English Language Learners: Closing the Achievement Gap

Silyvanus Juma

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_cp



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

English Language Learners: Closing the Achievement Gap

by

Silyvanus Juma

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

August 2022

Capstone Project Facilitator: Tia Clansen
Content Reviewer: Douglas Ayega
Peer Reviewer: Pa Nhia Vang, Kaari Bly

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	4
Research Question.....	4
My Experience as an English Language Learner.....	5
Project Rationale.....	11
Conclusion.....	13
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	15
Introduction.....	15
Overview.....	15
Immense Strengths of English Language Learners.....	16
Risk Factors Contributing to the Achievement Gap in ELLs.....	17
English Language Learners Performance Statistics.....	22
Language Development Theories.....	25
Best Practices for Teaching English Language Learners.....	29
Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners.....	29
The Role of Schools in Closing the Achievement Gap.....	43
The Role of Families in Closing the Achievement Gap.....	44
Conclusion.....	45
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....	47

Overview.....	47
The Benefits of Professional Development for Teachers.....	48
Setting.....	49
Participants.....	49
Timeline.....	50
Summary.....	51
CHAPTER FOUR: Overview.....	53
Learning Experiences.....	57
Limitations.....	59
Future Implications to Policy Makers.....	60
Benefits of the Profession.....	61
Into The Future.....	61
Summary.....	62
REFERENCES.....	64

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Research Question

My project will be centered on the research question: *What best practices and strategies can teachers use with English Language Learners to close the achievement gap?*

An English Language Learner (ELL) is a student whose first language is not English. It refers to any student who speaks or writes in another language other than English. Native language is also known as mother-tongue or first language. Families who communicate in another language other than English at home form the fastest growing population in the United States, and the student population from these families is the fastest growing (Rafa et al., 2020). Bialik, Scheller, and Walker (2018) have found that most U.S. public school students with limited English proficiency are U.S. citizens. The most common languages that ELLs speak are: Spanish, Chinese, Somali, Arabic, Russian, Hmong, Swahili, Ethiopian, Vietnamese, and Haitian with their populations varying from state to state (Batalova, J. & McHugh, M., 2010). In a more broad definition, English Language Learners (ELLs) also encompass American-born students from families for whom English is not their first language and students born of parents who are American native citizens. These students are struggling to grasp the basics of the English language to enable them to read and write. It is projected that by 2025 ELLs will be about 25% of the student population in the United States (Daniel, 2014).

To further complicate instruction for English Learners is the fact that ELL students are not all at the same level. Yvone and Freeman (University of Texas at

Brownsville, n.d.) have found that there are four types of ELLs namely: newly- arrived with adequate form of schooling, newly-arrived with limited formal schooling experience (SLIFE), long-term English learners (LTELs), and Standard English Learners (SELs). SELs understand English when it is spoken but find it difficult to speak or write. LTELs are ELLs who have been enrolled in American schools for more than six years and are not progressing towards English proficiency. ELLs face obstacles learning the English language while at the same time meeting the expectations of other content areas where English is the language of instruction.

My Experience as an English Language Learner

I was born and raised in Kenya, which has forty two tribes, each speaking its own language. I grew up speaking in my tribal language. My parents, siblings and the local community spoke in my tribal language which is my home language. My tribal language is Kisii. I still speak in Kisii language today and it is the language in which I am most fluent. Kiswahili, a language that started spreading in Kenya from the coastal areas to the towns and cities in the upcountry without being taught in schools, became preferred and taken up by many Kenyans. This preference as the universal language of communication made it spread quickly to the rural regions. This was important because every Kenyan wanted a language that could give them an opportunity to communicate and connect with other tribes. The Kenyan government, after realizing how Kiswahili was uniting and enabling citizens to relate, started facilitating its roll-out across the country, and later declared it the national language of communication. Kiswahili had become beneficial in the sense that it was uniting the people of Kenya by enhancing communication among ethnic communities who only formerly knew how to speak in their home languages. The

government introduced it as a mandatory subject in schools and developed its syllabus. I was first introduced to learning Kiswahili when I was in grade six. Before that, I used to hear a few people who would occasionally speak in it in my community. I had known how to name a few things around me in Kiswahili but could not construct a meaningful sentence about them in the language. I started learning how to read, write and speak in Kiswahili in school. I became a Kiswahili language learner. It was not easy; however, it was not difficult as compared to learning English because to some extent, it could be spoken at home and in the community, although seldomly.

English language was introduced as a subject in schools much earlier than Kiswahili in Kenya. Its introduction is traced back to the pre-independence period. When I started school, I was first taught how to read and write in my home language. Later on, I slowly started learning English. The home language teacher was also the English teacher. This was important because it was easy to connect from something I knew in my home language to the English language. For example, the teacher would first ask how to name something in my language and he would in turn name it in English. One of the most common teaching styles in class was listing things in my home language in one column and their names in English in the second column. The teacher would then ask us to draw a related picture in the third column. We were then told to recite. During the next lesson the teacher would quiz us by drawing a picture of an item on the board and then ask us to write its name, first in the home language and then in English.

Another common teaching method used was when the teacher would write a short sentence in the home language, then ask us to translate it and write it in English. We would then be given several sentences in the tribal language after which the teacher

would ask us to first read them aloud, and then write them in English. The next step was to read them aloud in class while the teacher corrected our spellings and speech. Reading many English story books was another strategy the teacher employed. He gave a target for each student to read weekly. Friday was reserved for feedback and read-alouds. The teacher would ask students to pick out something exciting from the readings in one of the books and have them explain it in the home language. If there were pictures, students were to choose one which they were expected to describe in the mother-tongue and then translate it to English. Constructing English sentences in both written and spoken form was a very difficult task for students.

In the early years of learning English in Kenya, teachers used various strategies that were available to them, but the use of the bilingual language helped to enhance reading, speaking, and writing. I read a full English sentence for the first time in the first term of third grade. I was the first one in my class to do so. It was a big achievement for the teacher and me. The teacher praised me and I felt excited. The teacher encouraged me to continue reading the next sentences until I did a full paragraph. It took me several minutes to complete reading the paragraph. It was a miracle to the teacher, students, and me. The teacher patted my back several times in amazement. He did this with excitement given the amount of time and resources he had invested so that we could read. This scenario marks as a pointer to the many challenges that ELLs and teachers undergo in the classroom.

While home language was specifically used for instruction in all content areas in elementary school, learning English was mandatory because it would gradually be blended into instruction in middle school. Instruction was given in both the home

language and English language until 8th grade in all content areas. In order to have us engage in speaking in English within the school compound, the school administration came up with strict strategies that were to make students from 5th grade to 8th grade speak in English only while within the school grounds, and when talking with other students during breaks, such as lunch and sports time.

Mandate to Speak in English Only Within the School

My school administration used a harsh strategy to force every student in grades 5 through 8 to speak in English while they were within the school grounds. This strategy did not take into consideration how challenging it was to learn a new language and the need for teachers to be empathetic, while at the same time devising friendly means of engaging with students without putting undue pressure, meanwhile creating a conducive environment for learning.

The strategy worked this way: A student was chosen from each class. The student was given what was called “ a disk”, which was a small piece of wood with a grade level engraved on it. Therefore, there were 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade disks. Each disk was to target members of its grade only. During breaks, a gag order was imposed on chosen days of the week, probably two or three depending on the teacher who was on duty that week. Everyone was expected to speak in English only. A student was to pass on the disk to another student whom he/she found speaking in the home language. The other student was to do likewise to any student belonging to his/her class he/she found speaking in the home language. The chain went on and on. An hour or so before the end of the school day, at the assembly, students who started the chain were called to the front where they were asked to name the one to whom they passed the disk. Those who were handed the

disk came to the front as their names were mentioned by those who had handed them.

The last ones were those holding the disks when the calling was done. There were consequences towards the end of the school day for those who received the disk.

Unfortunately, the consequences were in the form of punishment where a student could

be asked to either do some cleaning of desks and floors of a classroom or crawl some painful distance with hands raised up. Out of fear, a good number of students practiced

speaking in English not only in school but also outside of school when an opportunity

arose. Practicing speaking in English was, in the minds of many students, a way of

escaping punishment in school. Those who would proceed to high school, where all

learning was mandatory in English from speech to writing and reading, came to

appreciate why efforts being done in middle school to speak in English were necessary.

These strict measures were aimed at preparing middle school students for high school and

higher institutions of learning since English was the only language of instruction in all

content areas. My story clearly indicates how difficult it is to acquire a new language.

Let me explain briefly what strides I have made in reading, writing, and speaking for purposes of unraveling the difficulties facing English Language Learners. Despite having spent many years in classrooms with English-only instruction, I still face many hurdles in speaking, writing, and reading. While I do not have that speech challenge in Kenya, I encounter difficulties in speech as a result of differences in accent in America. It is an arduous task to pronounce words in American English. I am always dealing with conversations which pass me because I could not get the message from someone I was engaged with in a discussion either in class, school, or anywhere else. If I were to write something from the conversation, I would miss key pieces of information caused by the

complexities of words' pronunciations. I have not escaped communication challenges. I am therefore placing myself into the shoes of students who have newly arrived in America with English language communication as an obstacle which they are struggling with daily.

Labels and Perceptions about ELLs

Just as labels and perceptions affect people and their practices in society, the same has not escaped our school compounds and classrooms. Labels have played a huge role in the academic underachievement of ELL students. Labels demoralize and downgrade one's wellbeing. In classrooms, labels coming from either teachers or students can be damaging and limiting and as such damaging the students' motivation to learn. Different types of labels have stifled ELLs' performance for years. When a student takes an English proficiency assessment from the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) consortium, called the ACCESS assessment, or the New York State Identification Test for ELLs, and the student scores below a certain passing percentile, the student is immediately labeled as an ELL (Tatyana, n.d.).

A few years ago ELLs were referred to as Limited English Proficient (LEP), a label that profiled them as being "limited" and "deficient" because they had an English language challenge (Harder & Varga, 2017). This made students feel insufficient, unworthy, dejected, and looked upon with scorn. This label would unfortunately transfer to other school and classroom programs. Later, the term *LEP* was replaced with the term ELL, meaning students were referred to as English Language Learners. Still the term ELL required "English proficiency" as the standard of measurement for solutions to all of a student's academic needs ("Labels as Limitations," n.d.). English proficient students are

not without challenges in learning science, math, history, and other subject areas. They are also struggling. ELL classification, and the services that come with it, can lead to lower academic expectations and carry a stigma from teachers and peers who associate the label with being less able which leads to ELLs demotivated (Carnock, 2016). These are clearly negative connotations embedded with the labels. Garcia and Kleifgen (2008) proposed the term Emergent Bilingual which has been accepted as being more positive since it shows that learning a language is an emerging process that evolves all the time, and at the same time values the students' bilingualism. They have further realized that the term "bilingual" is also contentious because it connotes that these students only know two languages while in fact they can speak and write in a variety of languages other than English.

Inclusive and Motivational Labels

Inclusive and motivational terms can be used to label ELL students in a more inclusive, motivational, and positive perspective. They are elevating and strike a friendly tone which makes ELLs integrate more quickly. Terms such as Emergent Multilingual (EMLL) or Multilingual Learner (MLL) that sound friendly and as inclusive as possible are motivating and not stigmatizing. Other inclusive terms include New Language Program Learner (NLPL), Language Discussion Program Learner (LDP), or Multilingual Learner Seminar (MLLS). These examples promote a sense of belonging.

Project Rationale

Since I arrived in the USA, I have been teaching math on and off because I am not yet fully licensed. I have experienced firsthand what ELLs undergo inside and outside of classrooms. The language obstacles that face them become a limitation to express

themselves confidently. I have seen them shy away from accompanying other students, do not feel confident answering questions in class, miss directions, as well as avoid speaking publicly. It is not in any way a fault of their own but a situation in which they find themselves. There are teachers who argue that too much is required of them to teach ELLs by claiming that it is too demanding to attend to their diverse linguistic needs. In essence, there are perceptions that have been built around this subgroup of students which are making it difficult for them to learn and close the academic achievement gap. It is against this backdrop that I was compelled to create a project that addresses the concerns of both the teacher and ELL students. My project aims to help equip teachers and other educators with the necessary tools and information to continually guide them in addressing the needs of students with diverse language backgrounds where English is not the language of communication. The various teaching strategies for ELL teachers I focus on in my project will bring a positive impact in classrooms whose students speak and write in diverse languages so that language barrier should not be an obstacle to their academic achievement.

I strongly advocate for Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which, through the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, color, or national recipients of federal financial assistance (OCR, 1964). Title VI regulatory requirements have been designed to prohibit denial of equal access to education because of a language minority student's limited proficiency in English. The Equal Education Opportunities Act (EEOA, 1974) specifically forbids states from denying equal education opportunity to students learning English by the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its

students in its instructional programs. Laws and lawsuits to do with teaching of ELL students have not clinically addressed the needs of these diverse learners. The laws are vague because they let schools and school districts formulate their own programs of teaching ELLs. I am hoping this project will empower teachers to confidently address the needs of English Language Learners in any classroom setting. I am also confident that with the experience I gained from conducting this research, I have acquired a substantial amount of skills that would enable me to guide ELL students to academic success with the goal of closing the achievement gap.

Conclusion

Stakeholders in education stakeholders cannot afford to ignore the needs of ELLs who are growing in population by the day. As much as the state and federal government are trying to formulate laws protecting the learning rights of this growing group of students, it is the responsibility of instructors to show empathy and willingness to set up programs and create learning environments that are inclusive of and responsive to English learners. As an immigrant teacher, I will embark on a journey to be a strong advocate for ELLs so that a language barrier should not be an obstacle to their academic dreams. I will ensure that they are also recruited and represented in gifted programs so that they have a forum to showcase their talents. ELLs have enormous potential. I believe that they are the next generation of mathematicians, engineers, doctors, innovators, and entrepreneurs.

Chapter Two discusses the challenges ELLs face in their learning environments, but at the same time try to outline what daily practices that teachers can use for teaching so that ELLs excel academically. The chapter begins with the risk factors that contribute

to the widening of the achievement gap, the theories behind the underachievement and achievement of ELLs that every educator ought to know, and discusses research-based strategies that have been tested and found to work for all educators in the mainstream. In Chapter Three, I discuss how I plan to implement the professional development sessions I created during staff learning time in my school. My school is diverse and located in the suburbs of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. My audience consists of teachers from my school. The training will be conducted in three sessions. One of the main goals will be to provide teachers with skills for teaching ELLs. Chapter Four is dedicated to my reflection on the capstone project. I reflect on what I learned from the whole research process, what was challenging, and share my successes. It is in Chapter Four that I point out the limitations of the research and what I intend to do with it in the future.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter Two explores and aims to answer the research question: “*What best practices and strategies can teachers use with English Language Learners to close the achievement gap?*”

This chapter builds the case for ELLs by exploring their cultural backgrounds, their academic journey, how they are performing, and whether they have made any achievements in their learning so far. The chapter brings to the fore the challenges facing ELLs, the risk factors that have placed obstacles on their way towards academic achievement, and the perceptions and labels that have become part of the limiting factors impeding ELLs’ learning progress. ELLs have immense strengths that they bring into classrooms. The talents and experiences that some of them had gained in their countries of origin can be tapped into and shared by both teachers and students. This chapter debunks the norm that being English language proficient is the gateway to academic achievement. The demand for English language proficiency should not be enough reason why ELLs should not be given the same quality and grade level equivalent academic content as native English speakers. Satisfying the diverse needs brought about by the diverse student population is what every educator should be ready to internalize and strategically teach so that ELLs are not left behind.

Chapter Two discusses a few selected theories that serve to enlighten ELLs’ background journey. An understanding of this journey is important because it lays the case that leads to best teaching practices by teachers and other educators that fully

accommodate ELLs in the classroom. The theories will help educators to interact with ELLs through a positive lens. The chapter emphasizes the background understanding of ELLs which includes their families and why this is crucial since it forms the basis of the journey towards closing the achievement gap. Finally, this chapter documents the best evidence-based teaching practices and instructional strategies that teachers can use to successfully teach classrooms with ELL students to ensure that they are getting quality education and academically performing at the same level as their counterparts.

Immense Strengths of English Language Learners

A good number of English Language Learners possess immense strengths and other talents, and it is only through a deeper understanding and willingness to closely engage with them that teachers shall come to discover the hidden potential ELLs have, even though they are suppressed by the English language communication barrier.

Breiseth (2015) has found that:

ELLs possess immense strengths such as strong literacy skills in their native language, academic skills and content area knowledge developed in their native language, strong family support and commitment to children's future, strong interest in education, high levels of personal responsibility, resilience, resourcefulness, and commitment to success. (para. 8)

Educators must reflect upon and create ways that can enable this group of students to use their academic potential and uncover other hidden talents which they possess.

Unfortunately, ELL students face many hindrances that obstruct their path to academic success. ELLs enter the classroom with a rich repertoire of funds of knowledge consisting of cultural and linguistic experiences; however the funds of knowledge they possess are

in most cases overlooked by educators (Snyder, 2017). Examining the challenges ELLs face would make teachers and school leadership design programs and best practices that will drastically address their inherent learning needs. The main goal would be to narrow the achievement gap so that ELLs academically excel.

Even though ELLs are endowed with these high abilities that need to be tapped into, there are challenges and risk factors that contribute to their underachievement. Challenges are different from risks because, while challenges are motivational, risks are potentially harmful and hurtful to the individual student. It is important for teachers to be knowledgeable about the risk factors, but also be provided with tools to mitigate them. The awareness about the risk factors would lead to teachers formulating learning programs that would help ELLs to express themselves through the immense strengths stored in their funds of knowledge.

Risk Factors Contributing to the Achievement Gap in ELL Students

Risk factors here refer to those agents that may increase the risk or susceptibility of widening the achievement gap in ELL students. The handling of these risk factors should be undertaken in such a way that their impact does not negatively affect learning. Major risk factors contributing to the achievement gap between EL students and their white, native-English speaking peers are outlined below.

Cultural Differences

Language is intertwined in culture. Culture influences how language is used in speech, writing and reading. ELL students come from diverse cultures. Education as a whole is rooted in culture. Different countries conduct their education programs differently. While learning in most countries is teacher-centered, in the U.S. it is

student-centered with many student-student and teacher-student discussions and sharing of ideas (Aghajanian & Cong, 2012). In most countries, the curriculum is developed and uniformly used across the nation, while in America it is decentralized to states and school districts, which are given the mandate to design their own (Aghajanian & Cong, 2012). It is upon the teachers to take into account the cultural diversity of the students in their classrooms and make it their responsibility to understand ELLs' cultural backgrounds. Different cultures react differently to emerging situations, especially if the cultures clash. Recognizing and being able to distinguish these cultural differences allows the teacher to form a safe environment for all students in addition to implementing culturally responsive teaching and pedagogical practices in the classroom (Alrubail, 2016). Some of the cultural behaviors that may be displayed by newly arrived English language Learners that a teacher should be aware of include:

Eye Contact. Some ELLs avoid direct eye contact with teachers. This is because, while in the western culture this could mean that the person may not be paying attention to the one in authority, in other cultures it is a sign of disrespect or can be interpreted as trying to challenge the teacher. Many cultures discourage direct eye contact with the teacher or any person in a position of authority (Alrubail, 2016).

Smiling. During intense discussions, one may see some ELL students smile. The smile might come unexpectedly. The student may be acting this way so as not to offend the teacher, or to avoid offense during difficult situations as dictated by their culture (Alberta Teachers Association, 2007).

Engaging in Debates. In some cultures, debating or giving different views may be interpreted as challenging participants. In addition, other cultures discourage giving

contrary views to the teacher or someone in a position of authority. This will mean that some students may not take part in direct discussions or debates with other students or teachers. They just want to follow what they are being instructed (Alrubail, 2016).

Space/Physical Contact. Personal space and physical contact are held highly in certain cultures. In some cultures, males and females are supposed to keep some distance away from each other in public places. In other cultures, coming into close contact may not mean much. In some cultures, there are taboos associated with certain parts of the body like the head, soles of the feet, and handshakes (Alberta Teachers Association, 2007). In other cultures, some students can only eat with members of their family and not anyone else, hence collaboration may not work because group work is discouraged, while in other cultures, boys and girls attend separate schools (Alberta Teachers Association, 2007).

Teachers' Cultural Beliefs and Perceptions

Teachers' perceptions of cultural and linguistic competency as they relate to helping children achieve academic and social potential play a very critical role in the type of educational services provided to culturally and linguistically diverse children (Rizzuto, 2017, as cited in MacSwain, 2001, p.54). Owens and Wells (2021) have argued that ELL educational experiences can positively or negatively be shaped by a teacher's beliefs and instructional approaches. Owens and Wells (2021) have further stated that for ELLs to receive an equitable education, educators need to develop effective instructional strategies that target teachers' beliefs about ELL potential. Perceptions that teachers hold towards ELLs have huge consequences since they are reflected in their instruction. Perceptions by teachers should be checked because they play a big role in classroom

activities and determine how teachers implement their teaching practices, otherwise narrowing the achievement gap in ELLs would be a daunting task. Teachers need to be held accountable in their approaches to the kind of opportunities they make available to ELLs in the classrooms to ensure that they are fair, equitable, and of the same quality as mainstream students. The opportunities ought to be modeled with high expectations so that they achieve the standards set for all students.

English Language Proficiency

English language proficiency demand has meant that it has been assumed as the prerequisite for accessing rigorous and grade level academic content (Shapiro, 2014). Research has shown that discussions about the academic performance of ELLs are laden with deficit-oriented discourse (Crumpler et al., 2011). The deficit discourse ideology is reflected in educational practices which tend to manifest White, monolingual, U.S.-born students as the norm and present ELL students as the “other” (Shapiro, 2014). ELLs continue to be labeled as ‘English Language Proficient’ and hence may be perceived as linguistically deficient while in essence they are proficiently rich in a language other than English.

The deficit discourse ideology described above has led other educators to advance the argument that it is the sole cause of the achievement gap (Mitchell, 2013). This destructive argument has aggravated the practice of placing ELLs into “English remedial” classes which segregates them from spending more time in mainstream classrooms. ELLs are in most cases misidentified as students who have learning disabilities (Barrio, 2017), leading to ELLs being disproportionately placed in special education programs. This deficit mindset has led to these students missing out on valuable educational resources

and other learning opportunities. These practices are hurting and discouraging to ELL students. Bassegio (2018) suggested that “misidentification of ELLs as students with learning disabilities by educators is not necessarily intentional, but is commonly as a result of lack of knowledge, training, and information available to the educators who interact with these English language learners” (p. 7).

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status, as defined by the American Psychological Association (n.d.), is the social standing or class of an individual or group, and is often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation. English Language Learners are more likely to come from families whose parents have lower formal education than their non-ELL peers (Capps et al., 2005). ELLs are more likely to come from low-income families and neighborhoods (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006). ELLs who come from poor backgrounds suffer because their families are unable to meet their learning needs. Lack of enough food and decent shelter can affect ELL students’ academic progress. Parents whose incomes are low might not be able to equip their homes so that they are conducive environments for learning for their children. Parents of some ELLs have low or no education at all since most of them are either new arrivals to the United States or are dealing with poverty challenges. They struggle to get a decent job that pays more in order to keep their families well sustained. Students from families who recently arrived in America could be suffering from a range of psychological issues such as separation from nuclear and extended families, immigration related trauma, financial barriers, various forms of discrimination, and linguistic challenges; this puts children and adolescents at risk of depression and other mental health issues (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002).

Examining the academic performance statistics of ELLs from research gives educators a clear picture of how closing the achievement gap cannot be attained easily. It therefore requires a lot of effort and sacrifice by all stakeholders including teachers, parents, community, schools, school districts, states, and students. A close look at the evaluation outcomes of ELLs as compared to non-ELLs in various assessments gives an indication of how systemic and harmful beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes have retrogressively impacted ELLs in their effort to learn and close the achievement academic gaps that exist between them and their counterparts who are native English proficient. It is important for teachers to be aware of these factors since they affect teaching and learning.

English Language Learners Achievement Statistics

Fry (2007) from the Pew Research Center (PRC) has found that results from standardized testing performed from around the country confirm that the fast growing number of students designated as ELLs are among those farthest behind. Fry (2007) has stated that the results of the national tests carried out in 2005 found that nearly half (46%) of 4th grade students in the ELL category scored “below basic” in math and nearly three quarters (73%) scored “below basic” in reading. Furthermore, Fry (2007) stated that results of the national testing carried out in 2005 found out that middle school achievement created a gloomy picture with more than two-thirds (71%) of 8th grade ELL students scoring “below basic in mathematics” while the same share (71%) of 8th grade ELL students scored “below basic” in reading. Results from the national standardized test scores showed that about 51% of 8th grade ELL students were behind Whites in reading

and math while in the 4th grade, 35% of the students were found to be behind in math and 47% were behind in reading as compared to their White counterparts (Fry, 2007).

Research from the National Public Radio (NPR) has found that overall, only about 63% of ELLs graduate from high school compared with the national rate of 82% (Sanchez, 2017). Sanchez (2017) found that in the state of New York, for example, while the overall high school graduation rate was approximately 78%, that of ELLs was approximately 37%. Sanchez's research gives credence to the findings from the National Center for Education and Statistics (NCES) affirming the assertion that the number of ELL students who graduate is at a much lower rate than non-ELLs. The research found that out of all ELLs who graduated in New York, the number of those who took college entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT was only about 0.4% of the total EL population, and also, ELLs were found to be underrepresented in gifted programs (Sanchez, 2017). Further, while only about 2% of ELLs were enrolled in gifted programs, a substantially higher number (7.3%) of non-ELLs were enrolled (Sanchez, 2017). The Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA; 2020) analyzed the national high school graduation rate for English Language Learners versus all students and found out that in the 2010-2011 academic year, 57% of ELLs graduated as compared with 79% of non-ELLs. In the year 2017-2018, only 68% of ELLs graduated, compared to 85% of non-ELLs.

In the state of Minnesota, research in 2018 by Sugarman and Geary from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) found that there were significant achievement gaps between ELL students and the students who met the standards for reading and math in all grades. The gap widened at higher grade levels in the 2016-17 school year. Sugarman and

Geary (2018) went on to state that if the achievement data were retrieved from states with large numbers of ELL students, such as California, Florida, Texas, and New York, the results would not be encouraging. These findings draw enough attention to English Language Learners in schools and classrooms.

ELLs are characterized with low GPAs, low graduation rates, and higher expulsion and suspension rates (Bressler & Howard, 2011). In most cases they are misunderstood and rarely given chances to explain themselves because of their low English proficiency. ELLs score low on standardized tests. The low scores mean that they cannot be admitted to pursue further education (Colorado Department of Education, 2005). Just as there is pushback against labels that exist in diverse schools and classrooms, the same pushback should be extended to labels that act as limiting obstacles to academic achievement in English Language Learners. The research findings above should act as the center from which teachers and educators are to prepare their daily student activities of learning. A teacher ought to know how many ELLs there are in the classroom and each ELL student's level of English proficiency to help him/her design a responsive lesson plan.

Addressing the Achievement Gap

Closing the achievement gap between ELLs and their white, native-English speaking counterparts is not easy. It requires planning and dedication from teachers. Alrubail (2016) stated that a conducive and equitable learning environment not only makes ELL students feel safe and accepted, but also gives them equal opportunities with their peers which consequently sets high expectations for all. ELLs in the classroom should feel confident, empowered, and able. Homework, quizzes, assignments, and other

tasks given to ELLs should be equally challenging and of the same quality and standards as their non-ELL counterparts (Deussen et al., 2008). It is important for teachers and other educators to have knowledge about theories behind language acquisition and development so that they assist them when teaching in classrooms whose population contains ELLs. Theories help teachers to have a broad perspective on the backgrounds of ELLs, the challenges of learning they encounter, and where they are headed to in their academic progress. They enable teachers to make best decisions about ELLs including lesson plans, behavior, accommodations, scaffolds, and other daily school activities. The following section examines some of these theories.

Language Development Theories

Language development theories are many, but this section will pick a few and briefly examine how their broad perspectives assist in understanding the genesis of the achievement gap that has long persisted in English Language Learners. These theories act as an eye opener to teachers and other educators involved in the learning of ELLs so that they are able to cultivate an answer as to why the academic progress of ELLs is not commensurate with their White, native English speaking peers. It is important to note that some theories become dormant after a while because new evidence keeps on coming as learning goes on. New theories tend to try to solve long-standing issues revolving around learning and there is no “one-size-fits it all.” It is important for teachers to get acquainted with them because they assist them in adopting new modalities of teaching and instruction aimed at closing the achievement gap.

Second Language Acquisitionist Theory

Second Language Acquisitionist Theory (Krashen, 1982) refers to how one acquires language by constructing one's own understanding. In this model, one is not given explicit instruction and it is a process similar to what children undergo as they are acquiring their first language (Krashen, 2009). Students who are newcomers to America without any English proficiency at all will follow the path of this model as they learn content at the same time. This model is basically student-driven rather than teacher-centered. English Language Learners are left to naturally learn how to communicate but will need the presence of English proficient speakers to continue to build the language. As they mingle with their peers in the school grounds, in the classroom, at home, and within the community, they are building the communication process, especially speech. The teacher's task is to guide the ELL students on what kind of interactions are helpful to assist in speech acquisition more quickly. Since ELLs know their home languages, it is easier to transfer to the English language because they build on their home languages to connect to English more easily.

The Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory, also referred to as Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, recognizes that human beings are social and always interacting. They assemble and make meaning out of their social interactions with others. The more capable members of the group help the less capable ones to construct and navigate through the conversations more effectively. Drew (2019) stated that "students and teachers form relationships in the classroom to help the students learn. The relationships help facilitate social interaction and active participation in the learning tasks. Students learn through observation,

listening, and talking through their tasks" (p. 2). In this theory, learners are active participants. Drew (2019) argued that knowledge and interactions are constructed through social interactions with family, friends, teachers, and peers.

This theory implies that learning of language connects students from different cultural and social backgrounds. Through language, new skills and experiences are acquired and shared. In order for ELL students and teachers to be able to share their experiences, skills, and other forms of knowledge, they should be able to strike a common ground through which this would be possible. As teachers are being attentive to ELLs, learning their culture and their home language responsiveness, ELLs are actively and attentively listening, observing and trying to talk through the English language until meaningful communication takes place. In this way, the mainstream culture and a foreign culture are interacting whereby the end result will be the acquisition of a second language.

Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994, as cited in Lee, 2015) argued that "there are two major tenets of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory as relates to English language development. The first tenet is that cognitive development is mediated by culture and social interaction. The second tenet is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) model" (p. 30). When a more capable member in a particular content area and a student interact socially, the ZPD is reached. The more capable member gives scaffolds in areas where the student could not have proceeded alone without it. The ZPD construct here aims to give ELLs ownership in learning the English language. This creates confidence in ELLs while the teacher's role is to come for assistance only when students need it. The teacher

ensures that the student is provided with enough support and resources necessary for the student to be able to take control of his/her learning (Aljaafreh et al., 1997).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Theory

Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Walker, 2010) has defined the Zone of Proximal Development as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). The learner (ELL in this case) is scaffolded through by a more capable peer (in this case, a teacher, any other educator, or any other capable person) for a specific period of time. The learner graduates to the independence of solving his/her own problems without assistance. Shabani et al. (2010) stated that “individuals learn best when working together with others during joint collaboration, and it is through such collaborative endeavors with more skilled persons that learners learn and internalize new concepts, psychological tools, and skills” (p. 2).

Teachers who have ELLs in their classrooms will do better if they understand the learning curve that happens in the ZPD. When teachers locate a student’s ZPD, it enables them to prepare instruction that will either focus on the whole class or small groups as well as develop an individualized education plan (IEP) for each student (Knestrick, 2012). English Language Learners undergo the same curve in the ZPD just like they do in other content areas.

Use of Theories

It is important and necessary for teachers to understand learning theories, especially those theories focusing on ELLs since new ones are developed to help a certain

concept of learning that has not been understood for a long time. A new theory oftentimes can be an improvement on an already existing one. Theories that focus on ELLs help teachers improve on their teaching by giving them different and broad perspectives which they can effectively use in mainstream classrooms with ELL students. The study of theories enables educators to acknowledge how learning takes place besides critiquing the learning process which gives them an indication of how academic programs are to be designed for the successful delivery of the learning (Goel, 2017). Theories and decisive teaching practices are interwoven in the sense that they assist teachers and other staff who are in direct contact with ELLs on a daily basis to understand the winding and not so straightforward academic background ELLs have been undergoing socially and cognitively. This understanding is essential because it informs teachers about what best practices and strategies they can engage in regarding their teaching.

Best Practices and Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners

Best practices for teachers and other educators are important because they are teaching tools that have been tested and found to be effective for use in the learning journey of ELL students. These tools/strategies are research-based, backed by data and hence, found to work. Below are some of the best practices that can lead to motivation and enhanced ELL learning that would ultimately lead to closing the achievement gap.

Honor Multilingualism

Children benefit from classrooms that promote using multiple languages without showing preference for one (Bauer, 2009, as cited in, Hill, 2020). Holding ELL students to the expectation that they have to assimilate to the dominant White culture causes a backlash and the creation of low esteem because not only does it deny them of their

identity, but also denies non-ELLs the benefits of the diversity of multilingualism and multiculturalism in the school community (Botello et al., 2017). In celebrating their multilingual and multicultural heritage, everyone in the school should know the languages that are spoken there, intertwine multiple languages into school activities such as picnics, sports, conferences, celebrations and other outdoor gatherings, and provide multi-learning opportunities in regard to the diverse languages in the classroom (Botello et al., 2017).

ELL Instruction that is Culturally Responsive

ELL instruction that is culturally responsive is achieved by preparing a curriculum that is culturally relevant to the diverse ELLs in the school. It includes stories, writings, readings, math and other activities that take into account immigration, history, and cultures of the students into the content areas a teacher is instructing in. Culturally responsive instruction is that which encourages ELLs to tell stories in their languages about their experiences so that they feel accepted into the unique learning environment (Botello et al., 2017). The traditional, typical mainstream teaching does not address the pertinent learning realities of today's students. Culturally responsive instruction recognizes cultures from other parts of the world that are represented in the American classrooms, and this approach calls for educators' instructional strategies to reflect these differences. When integrated well into the classroom, culturally responsive instructional strategies have enormous benefits such as strengthening ELLs' sense of identity, promoting equity and inclusivity in the classroom, as well as making the students get engaged in the learning (Burnham, 2020). It is important to make the minority in the classroom feel that they are experts. Instructors can let students know that they are

tapping into their rich cultural potential to teach and help them realize that instructors celebrate their culture and hold it in high regard. Furthermore, instructors can give them the freedom they need to use their native language as a resource. To be culturally responsive requires that educators create a student-centered classroom, pronounce names correctly, learn a few words in the student's native language, communicate goals and set high expectations, and embrace a multilingual-multicultural asset based mindset (Fink, 2018). Fink (2018) further stated that when teaching vocabulary, instructors should look for those that are culturally unique to add to the list. A math instructor, for instance, would work out examples based on ELLs' cultures. If a teacher had Somali students, for example, they might pose a math question like: What is the average speed of a car traveling a distance of 600 km from Mogadishu to Kismayo that takes 12 hours to cover the distance? Math questions that mention White American names and places can be switched for Latino, Native American, Middle Eastern, Asian, or African names and places, for example, in order to reflect students' cultural backgrounds to help foster a sense of belonging. ELLs have feelings of fear among non-ELLs because of their self-doubt of speaking, writing, or reading in English. They need to feel motivated, assured, attended to, listened to, and held with high esteem. Culturally responsive instruction brings confidence to their learning.

Connecting with ELLs Families

Closing the achievement gap in ELLs requires family involvement. A strong partnership between the school and parents of ELLs is paramount. Teachers and other educators need to look for friendly ways to forge relationships with families of students in their classrooms. Schools need to design a workable teacher-parent relationship that

would bring benefits to mainstream classrooms where ELLs are part of the student community. Having an overview of the students' linguistic, ethnic, racial, and situational background can greatly help in designing the appropriate programs and services for ELLs. Breiseth et al. (2015) suggest that in order to know more about ELL families, educators need to find out what helpful resources are available from their district and community, be able to enlist a knowledgeable staff member, community member, or parent, and create a home language survey. Breiseth (2011) states that educators can create a rapport with families of ELLs by taking an extra step to simply know each family and its story. Breiseth (2011) goes further to say that this can be achieved by:

- Communicating across language barriers.
- Getting to know something about the family's journey into the United States.
- Designing a friendly and welcoming plan when meeting with ELL families.
- Requesting and inviting parents to share their child's information.
- Motivating parents to share their experiences, talents, and interests at the school assemblies and in the classrooms.
- Knowing the family's situation at home.

Teachers can make home visits as one way of connecting more to ELL students and their families. They can build positive relationships with ELL parents by smiling when they see them, learning and pronouncing ELLs' names correctly, communicating with them often using various forms, making a positive phone call home, and sharing every success (Aguilar, 2011).

Incorporating ELLs Funds of Knowledge

Educators need to acknowledge that everyone is learning something in society. ELLs have experiences they have accumulated from their cultures and from their countries of origin. In fact, a good number of them have been attending school in their original countries and have been excelling in academic achievement. ELLs have learned a lot from their communities and parents as well as other family members. Before they arrived in America, ELLs who have recently arrived in the United States used to attend family events, took part in sports activities such as soccer, distance running, tennis, swimming, and rope-jumping, attended community ceremonies, helped families in farming, and business. Some of them may have taken part in science and math competitions in addition to attending cultural exhibitions sponsored by their schools. It is therefore important that teachers do a proper inventory of the funds of knowledge that ELLs and their families have in various fields such as history, economics, geography, religion, politics, language, technology, agriculture, and science (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). The funds of knowledge approach pulls educators away from perceiving ELLs from a deficit point of view to recognizing that “they have knowledge assets and that these assets have been gained through authentic personal experiences” (Bennett, 2021, para. 7). Students come with extensive funds of knowledge from their homes and communities that can be used for skill and concept building. Gonzalez et al. (2013) emphasized the use of students’ funds of knowledge which is a repertoire they create when involved in out-of-school activities.

Encouraging Social Collaboration and Inclusion

Social collaboration is a practice in which persons or groups of people or departments interact with one another to achieve a common goal. Social inclusion is a multidimensional approach aimed at creating favorable conditions that enable the full and active participation of every member of the society in all aspects of life including civic, economic, social, and political activities, as well as taking part in the decision making process (“IGI Global Publisher of Timely Knowledge,” n.d.). Once ELLs step onto the school grounds, what comes into mind immediately is how communication is going to take place. The fear factor of speaking in English immediately sets in. Interaction with their peers should be greatly encouraged from there on. When opportunities for interaction between ELLs and their peers are created, they absorb new concepts of learning more quickly (Bylund et al., 2012). Teachers need to encourage ELLs to mingle with their counterparts in the classroom. This creates an environment where they express themselves as they share ideas despite communication difficulties. In the process they acquire vocabulary and sentence structures necessary for speech. Teachers should design cooperative learning activities because they promote sharing of skills between ELL students and non-ELL students. This is because some of the non-ELL students act as buddies and help ELLs to complete their tasks. Peer collaboration increases interaction. Teachers have a big role in providing opportunities that stimulate sharing of cultures and experiences (Li, 2013). Nunan (1989) has stated that in cooperative learning, students are not considered as passive recipients of knowledge, but rather active participants who are responsible for their own learning. Cooperative learning promotes face-to-face interaction. During the verbal exchanges, the learners critique, elaborate, ask, argue, and

share. ELLs will benefit by looking at the lip movements of non-ELLs to assist them in word pronunciations. They become better listeners too because of the desire to learn a new language. This to a large extent improves their speaking skills.

ELLs are eager to learn the English language and therefore working so hard to emulate how their peers navigate through the language in regard to speaking, writing, and reading. Educators can achieve a socially inclusive environment by adopting classroom practices such as celebrating culture, integrating culture in the curriculum, advocating for diversity and equality within the school and in classroom displays while letting them speak in their native languages (Alrubail, 2014). Many times, ELLs are pulled out of the classrooms for English language remedial instruction. This places them at a disadvantage in forming new rapport with their counterparts and leads to demotivation. Teachers need to do away with this practice because it does not benefit an ELL student in many ways. In order to level the playing field, ELLs should be provided with the same curriculum as their peers, asked the same level of questions as their counterparts, provided with additional scaffolding, and the same level and quality of learning targets (Botello, 2017).

Creating a Positive Learning Environment

In a positive learning environment, every student is participating. There is a friendly relationship and trust among students and between the teachers and students. Students are active. The classroom climate is welcoming; everyone is valued and respected; there are no opinions, views, arguments and suggestions that are disregarded. There is always positive feedback among students and from teachers to students. A positive learning environment is culturally competent and addresses all the needs of diverse students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In this environment, English is not

the prescribed language of communication and instruction. All languages present are recognized as means of communication, teaching and instruction. Students feel safe both physically and emotionally in a welcoming classroom environment. They feel supported, engaged and connected. Li (2013) has argued that a positive learning environment is supportive and open, and while making mistakes should not be subjected to ridicule, ELL students need motivation to continue trying despite the mistakes they make. In a classroom with a positive climate, students feel empowered to own their own learning. ELL students should feel empowered to learn not only in the English language but in all the other subject areas. Teachers can reinforce a positive learning environment by practicing simple actions such as decorating the classroom to reflect all the cultures present, learning some key words in the ELL student's home language, having ELL students share stories from their countries of origin or cultural background, learning how to pronounce an ELL student's name correctly, and reinforcing classroom rules and expectations equitably across all students. Educators need to recognize ELLs' learning styles. Alexandrowicz (2021) at the University of San Diego suggested that the individual learning preferences of linguistic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, kinesthetic, and logical-mathematical of ELL students need to be recognized by teachers as one way of expanding the conducive climate.

Professional Development for Teachers Teaching ELLs

English Language Learners face a myriad of challenges when they encounter teachers who do not have sufficient training on how to handle students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Continuous professional development gives teachers enormous skills in cultural competence and strategies for teaching culturally diverse learners. Miller

(2011) has argued that “culturally competent teachers assure that the curriculum will be taught, delivered responsively to the collective norms and experiences of the student population, and that the relationships forged between teacher and student are built on respect and sincerity” (para. 5). Teachers’ acquisition of the skills of cultural competence will effectively help them serve ELLs who come from culturally different backgrounds. Teachers can learn cultural competence through other sources such as digital resources, staff training, and having meetings with professional teachers who are culturally competent in the school.

Non-linguistic Representation

Non-linguistic representation is a method of representing learning without using speech, reading or writing. ELLs benefit from this strategy because they will store information visually. Non-linguistic learning can be represented using diagrams, pictures, videos, signs, hand movements, and head movements. Schwartz (2020) has found that ELLs’ learning is enhanced by interactive visual aids and access to lessons they can follow at their own pace.

Scaffolding with Native Language

Using native language to scaffold is a powerful tool for teaching ELLs. Scaffolding in the native language is one of the ways a teacher shows that he/she highly values the student’s background. Teachers can achieve this by using a student who is a native English speaker. The classroom teacher can incorporate a bilingual co-teacher who speaks both in English and the student’s home language. Scaffolds give ELL students opportunities to use past experiences to help build new knowledge aimed at making them become independent and self-regulating (Colorin Colorado, n.d.).

Teacher Communication with English Language Learners

Communication is one of the greatest challenges that ELLs face in the classroom. Teachers are supposed to be aware of this so that their communication styles should not negatively affect ELL academic growth. Brown and Ford (2007, September) have suggested that when teachers are communicating with ELLs they should avoid using idiomatic expressions and slang, they should avoid using acronyms, they need to use direct speech, and should avoid complex sentences. Brown and Ford (2007) state that communication needs to be enunciated (words are spoken clearly in full instead of being reduced) and teachers should speak slowly besides avoiding raising their voices.

Teachers should avoid asking yes or no questions because in some cultures it is impolite to give negative answers (Schwartz, 2021). Schwartz (2021) has also found that communication with ELLs should not be one directional but through various means such as verbal, artistic, and written means. Teachers need to determine which means of communication is more applicable to each ELL student. There are students who respond quickly to verbal speech while others do so to written speech. Other students respond to using artistic demonstrations such as hand signs, head movement, graphic organizers, or drawing diagrams on the board.

English Language Learners Assessed Differently

English Language Learners should be assessed differently. ELLs should not be assessed using high stakes standardized tests since they are formulated in English and yet English language proficiency is where they are struggling. Performance-based assessment measures students' ability to apply the skills and knowledge learned from a unit or units of study. Typically, the task challenges students to use their higher-order thinking skills to

create a product or complete a process (Chun, 2010, as cited in, Hilliard, 2015).

Performance-based assessment allows teachers to use oral reports, presentations, demonstrations, written assignments, and quizzes (Colorin Colorado, n.d.). Using non-verbal assessments such as pictures, diagrams, and manipulatives is a meaningful way to assess ELLs. English Language Learners could be assessed using a variety of tools such as writing reports, lab reports, social studies research reports, educational background, cultural background, and daily self-assessment (Gomez, n.d.). In order to have a good picture of the students' progress, it is important for educators and other stakeholders to work together and formulate multiple assessment tools that do not focus too much on tests but go beyond (WIDA, 2009).

Differentiating Teaching for ELLs

English Language Learners are at different levels of English proficiency. They are likely to struggle, feel frustrated, and to be unmotivated if they are not given extra support. Teachers should continue adjusting their teaching styles in order to meet the needs of this subgroup of students. By differentiation, a teacher alters a lesson plan in such a way that it creates an equitable playing field for all students. While non-ELLs are more likely to be ahead in content area learning, the teacher can manipulate the lesson plan without watering down its quality to accommodate ELLs so that it is easier for them to grasp concepts while at the same time keeping pace with their peers. Differentiation needs to specifically take into account the students' learning styles and preferences. Baecher (2012) has suggested that as teachers make content information more accessible to students, they should also ensure that the lesson plans provide language support to ELLs with regard to content area literacy skills. It is noteworthy to recognize that

differentiation does not mean different lessons for students, but learning the same task in multiple ways while keeping the same principles and rules applicable to all students, including English native speakers. Tomlinson (2017) has argued that using differentiation as a strategy for teaching ELLs is effective and gives the following reasons: instruction is proactive; and instruction is more qualitative than quantitative. Tomlinson (2017) stated that by using differentiation, instruction takes multiple approaches to content, process, and product; it is student-centered; it is a blend of the whole class, group, and individual student; it is dynamic. ELLs have unique academic needs, personalities, different language backgrounds, cultures, interests, and different learning styles and preferences. Differentiation tries to address the diverse learning needs of ELL students through giving them various opportunities to learn.

Sheltered Instruction for ELLs

Sheltered instruction is a teaching technique in which English Language Learners integrate language learning with content area acquisition (Kongsvic, n.d.). Specifically, the student has two goals to achieve at the same time: English proficiency, and content area advancement and achievement. It is a set of strategies that are designed to assist ELLs acquire English academic proficiency and at the same time acquiring academic skills in other content areas like math, science, art, and social studies. A research-based model called Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is used to implement sheltered instruction (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2017). This model, when well implemented, greatly benefits ELL students since it seeks to have them grow proficient in English but at the same time learning competitively in other content areas. Echevarria (2017, as cited in Reflections on Teaching English Learners, 2022) found that the SIOP

model has eight interconnected components: lesson plan preparation, building background, comprehensive input, strategies, interaction, practice and its application, lesson delivery, review and assessment (p. 4). The eight components simplify content and make it easier for ELL students to learn. This model makes content comprehensible by use of techniques such as visual aids, modeling, demonstrations, graphic organizers, vocabulary building, predictions, adapted texts, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, multicultural content, and native language support (“Content Based Sheltered Instruction, ESOL CPD-Module 4”, n.d.).

Using Technology to Teach English Language Learners

Technology has become an integral part of learning. There are many ELL teaching aids online, including language learning sites and apps. Many translator apps that ELLs can use to foster learning are found online. Students who speak in German or French, for example, can be taught how to use the German-to-English language translator or French-to-English translator app. Sites such as Surface Languages, Duolingo, BBC Languages, and Open Culture provide free language learning resources that ELLs can use to enhance their academic skills in English and other content areas (Restifo, 2021).

Technology encourages language acquisition and development, is engaging, is fast in accessing specific information, and gives feedback quickly.

Establishing a Buddy System in the Classroom

Establishing a buddy system in the classroom uses a partner who is more fluent in English language skills. It is an arrangement where students help to teach each other. Ramsaran (2022) described the buddy system as one where student “buddies” are paired up with newcomers so that they help in translating for teachers as well as having them get

used to the new school environment. In this system, the teacher asks those students whose English proficiency is more pronounced if they can help others in case they share the home language. The buddy supports the newcomer student by giving scaffolds on specific tasks. The buddy does not only assist in language development but also in other content areas. When using this strategy, the teacher assists the buddy with a simple rubric to use when assisting the new ELL student. Teachers encourage rotation of buddies so that newcomer students can make more relationships and enjoy the benefits of getting language and content academic skills from different buddies.. English language learners feel confident when they have friends in the classroom who assist them.

Decreasing Teacher Talk Time

Teacher talking time (TTT) refers to the amount of time a teacher spends speaking in the classroom (Lubin, 2021). TTT is mostly spent during giving instruction and during class discussions. Teachers who have ELLs in their classrooms need to be aware of this. TTT is minimized while student talk time (STT) is allocated more time. The teacher will consciously strike a balance between these two types of discourse. Minimizing TTT encourages student participation, removes boredom, preserves extra time for the teacher to know students more, gives students more time to correct their own mistakes or be corrected by peers, and restores a sense of fulfillment (Nunes, 2021). ELL students benefit more from their non-ELLs in skills development when they are allocated more STT. Teachers can achieve this by using strategies that integrate learning with more speaking activities, engaging in group work activities, giving non-linguistic cues, and requesting feedback (Nunes, 2021).

Teaching strategies are the core instruction delivery tools that assist teachers to teach effectively. The above strategies serve as an eye opener to what teachers can do in the classroom to successfully accommodate and teach ELLs. Closing the achievement gap requires a prolonged approach that requires the use of various strategies.

The Role of Schools in Closing the Achievement Gap in English Language Learners

Schools with the least disparity promote school cultures of high expectations and strong teacher-student relationships in addition to setting high expectations that increase students' sense of self-efficacy and motivation, which improves achievement, aspirations, and behavior (Hanover Research, 2017). Schools play a significant role and impact ELLs learning in many ways. The National Education Association (2020) has stated that schools need to promote research-based processes for effective teaching and come up with strategic methods for making grade level materials and resources comprehensible for ELLs. Schools that are culturally competent set up programs that assist ELL learning. Culturally responsive schools are sensitive to the needs of diverse students within their administrative boundaries. They document the learning needs of every ELL student, design programs that foster relationships with ELLs' families, and listen to the challenges ELLs are facing at home and in the community; as well as, in the classrooms. For effective teaching of ELLs, schools should provide enough resources for teachers and students alike. Schools have the responsibility of ensuring that staff who are in contact with ELL students on a daily basis receive continuous training geared towards understanding and assisting ELL students in order for them to overcome the learning bottlenecks that block their pathways of academic learning and success. Schools should design curricular programs that productively take into account the presence of ELLs in

the classrooms. Creating effective and friendly linkages to ELL families for sound communication should be a top priority for schools. Schools, being centers of academic excellence, should ensure that the motto of excellence is achieved by all learners no matter their background. ELLs should equally excel to the same level as their non-ELL peers. Schools with significant numbers of ELLs should, for example, set up a task force that looks into the affairs of ELLs. The task force should collect data periodically based on the many aspects that surround ELLs such as content area performance, English language proficiency attainment, teacher-ELL relationships, ELL-non-ELL student relationships, resources for teaching, and stereotypes. After analysis of the outcomes, task forces should determine recommendations and interventions necessary to assist ELLs achieve their academic potential.

The Role of Families in Closing the Achievement Gap

Family support for ELLs is crucial. Thompson et al. (2019) stated that close cooperation between schools, parents, and the community is one of the keys to closing the achievement gap and that parent involvement has a strong, direct impact on student achievement. Hatchett (2015) has stated that children with parents who take an active interest in their education make greater progress than other children. ELLs need extra support most times and part of this comes from home. For example, parents or any member of the family can help the student with building their vocabulary by letting the child draw pictures to depict the vocabulary, having them use words to play games, creating opportunities for singing and storytelling at home by using what the child learned in school, and building vocabulary charts at home which helps the child increase connection between English and the home language. Families help with setting a

homework schedule at home so that time is set aside for learning and doing homework. If there is one family member who speaks English no matter how proficient, he/she can help to scaffold through the school homework by using both English and the home language interchangeably. The family can look for a home buddy from the community who is more capable in English and speaks in their home language to step in occasionally to assist. Parents can also look for remedial bilingual programs within the community and enroll their ELL child there so that the student can also benefit from this extra out-of-school support. The family can help their ELL child to enroll in websites that teach English language proficiency. Family members are encouraged to pay visits to classrooms in order to give moral support. Families' involvement in the educational process leads students to develop attitudes and skills that facilitate learning at school (Hoover, Whitaker & Ice, 2010, as cited in, Sutter, 2012).

Schools and families are the core institutions that determine the academic performance of ELL students. This is because students spend most of their time in these two institutions daily. The institutions have a huge bearing on their academic growth. These institutions influence greatly how ELLs learn and attain quality education. It is therefore important that the two institutions make friendly and workable linkages that promote communication and feedback on the performance of ELLs.

Conclusion

Chapter Two addressed the research question: *What best practices and teaching strategies can teachers come with in order to close the achievement gap in English language learners?* The achievement gap in ELLs requires effort that should come from various stakeholders: teachers, parents, community, school districts, schools, and

students. Their roles and responsibilities do define the achievement path for ELLs. Everyone involved should have enough background information about the challenges ELLs face on a daily basis both in school and out of school. Teachers and school administrators have the responsibility to have knowledge about the risk factors that affect ELLs. These factors are most likely to cause long-term damage to a student's academic progress. The socioeconomic status of a family, for example, can negatively impact the learning of an ELL student if parents do not have a constant source of income to meet the family demands. Knowing ELL students well assists teachers in designing learning programs that are motivating. This capstone project emphasizes the importance of respecting different cultures that ELLs possess since they originate from diverse cultural backgrounds. The project gives an account of best practices that teachers need to have to assist them make best decisions that address the needs of ELLs. This capstone addresses which strategies that teachers can effectively use in the classroom to successfully deliver instruction that meets the learning needs of ELLs in order to excel academically. Chapter Three discusses the professional development sessions that will be held as a means of implementing the findings from this research. It provides a detailed sequence on how the professional development will be implemented and outlines the learning goals for participants.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Overview

The research question for which this capstone is focused is, “*What best practices and strategies can teachers use with English Language Learners to close the achievement gap?*” The main purpose of Chapter Three is to execute a professional development (PD) plan that answers the research question of the capstone. English Language Learners (ELLs) in classrooms undergo a series of learning challenges because of their limited English language proficiency. During this series of professional development, teachers will have an opportunity to investigate their lesson plans, instructional methods, and daily classroom routines. This will enable them to make informed decisions about their daily teaching practices.

Chapter Two revealed glaring disparities in academic performance between ELLs and native English speakers. ELLs are struggling in an education setting whose only language of instruction is English. This capstone project is grounded on the premise that the lack of English language proficiency should not be the obstacle that denies ELLs equal opportunities of learning that their peers are receiving. In addition, it should not be used as the yardstick to measure the academic performance and achievement of ELLs. The chapter gave statistics on how ELL students are lagging behind in almost all content areas; however, the chapter helped to answer the research question by identifying strategies that educators can use for effective teaching of ELLs. Chapter Three describes a professional development (PD) plan that will guide teachers on the best practices and instructional strategies that they can use to teach and close the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs.

The Benefits of Professional Development for Teachers

Given that American classrooms are becoming more diverse each year, their various needs are also emerging. ELLs are a sub-group of students with a variety of learning needs that require attention. Professional development (PD) programs are therefore a matter of necessity because the continued evolution of varying needs brought about by the increasing number of diverse student needs is putting pressure on teachers to constantly devise new ways of addressing their needs in the classroom. PD programs equip educators with new skills that are necessary for planning lesson plans that responsively address the learning needs of ELLs. This capstone project focuses on professional learning for teachers since, the ever changing diversity of classrooms calls for equipping teachers with the necessary skills that are concurrent with the new trends. Robinson (2019) has listed the following benefits of continuous professional development opportunities for educators:

- It expands the knowledge base.
- It is a confidence booster.
- It provides an opportunity to meet other teachers and share experiences.
- A teacher becomes more effective by learning from others.
- It helps teachers set and achieve goals after attending the PD meetings. (p. 1).

When teachers meet, they are able to collaborate and reflect on their practices in teaching as they implement the curriculum. They interrogate their teaching practices and instructional strategies to make meaning out of them. During the professional development created for the purposes of this capstone, teachers will be taken through a series of training sessions. The focus will be on which best practices and teaching

strategies that teachers can use with ELLs with the goal of closing the achievement gap between ELLs and their White, native-speaking counterparts..

Setting

The PD sessions will take place in the school where I teach. I teach in a high school located in the suburbs of Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. My school has about 550 students and 28 teaching staff. Both staff and student populations are significantly diverse. The school has a substantial number of ELL students. The majority of the ELLs in the school are from families that recently arrived in the United States. Even though I chose to start from my school, I would not mind if I change settings in future since I believe that more teachers need training based on the findings from the research for this capstone. I intend to forge relationships with many schools in the metro area so that they will invite me to present my ELL findings during their PD sessions.

Participants

The targeted audience will be the teaching staff in my school. The audience, who are members of my staff, are adults who interact with ELL students on a daily basis. Knowles (1984, as cited in Clardy, 2005) stated that adult learners are self-directed, ready to learn, make meaning of their lives from the learning, and inquire about the relevance and context of the learning. The PD sessions will be modeled taking into account the learning styles of adults. The school holds PD sessions during every quarter of each semester. While most members of staff are monolingual, there are a few who are either bilingual or multilingual. During one of our PD training sessions, when I asked how many staff have had training in teaching ELLs, only two responded in the affirmative. After many interactions with my audience, they believe that equitable learning in schools

can only be achieved through meaningful engagement with ELLs that enables them to exploit their hidden potential. Alrubail (2016) has stated that a conducive and equitable learning environment not only makes ELL students feel safe and accepted, but also gives them equal opportunities with their peers which consequently sets high expectations for all. My goal will be to provide the audience with a wide range of strategies they can use to teach ELLs in the mainstream in order to close the achievement gap between them and their non-ELL peers. I will engage my audience in the following topics: challenges facing ELLs, background information about ELLs, and best practices and strategies they can use for teaching ELLs.

Timeline

I will schedule the PD sessions to be held in the Spring of the 2022-2023 academic year. All the sessions will be held in the first semester. I intend to hold Session One in the first quarter, Session Two in the second quarter, and Session Three in the third quarter. I have planned Session One to last 50 minutes, Session Two to last 90 minutes, and Session Three to last 40 minutes. In the first session, the main goal is to present background information about English Language Learners and why it is important for teachers to have this information. Breiseth (n.d.) has found the following:

“ When asking veteran teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs) to share the secret of their success, I usually hear the same answer. It is not the name of a particular language instruction model, learning strategy, or new district-wide curriculum. It is, instead, this: getting to know their students.” (pg. 1).

During Session One, a few minutes is allocated for the recognition of experienced teachers and staff who have worked with ELLs for a long period of time because they

will be requested to share their experiences and what their thoughts are on the future of teaching English Language Learners.

Session Two is dedicated to engaging teachers with best practices and strategies they can use to teach ELLs. In the third session, participants will be supplied with a topic from which they will be required to design a comprehensive lesson plan that fosters learning of ELLs in the mainstream classroom. In Session Three, the participants are also required to give feedback to a reflection exercise provided on Google Forms. The reflection will focus on all the training sessions. This final reflection will help me gauge how the training went and what changes I would make to improve on my PD sessions in the future. Each of the first two sessions has a pre- and post-assessment task. While a pre-assessment will assist me to get to know the participants' prior knowledge about what I will be presenting in each session, the post-assessment will guide me to plan for the subsequent session. In each session there are discussion questions that guide the progression of the training. Discussions will be taking place first in groups and then shared with the whole team. At the end of each session, the participants, who are teachers, will be tasked to reflect and connect learning from the training to their teaching practices and how they will be implementing their learning from the sessions in their classrooms.

Summary

Chapter Three has outlined the contextual development of the project. The context gave the design, timeline, setting, and audience. The project was modeled for presentation at a professional development setting where the audience were adults. The adults were teachers in a high school setting. These teachers interact with ELL students

on a daily basis in their school. This is because every classroom in the school has ELL students. Key parts of the project were discussed including ELLs' background knowledge, challenges, cultural and linguistic strengths. The section that stood out was on the conversation about what best practices and instructional strategies that teachers need to be acquainted with when interacting with ELL students.

Chapter Four is a reflection of the entire project. This is where I ask myself questions such as, what did I learn that can assist my future teaching practices? How can other educators gain from this project? How can I successfully implement aspects of this project in my classroom? What did I miss to include? What can I expunge from the project? What challenges did I face in the process of researching and writing the project? Chapter Four explains the future implications of the research findings to policy makers as well as their benefits to the teaching profession.

CHAPTER FOUR

Overview

English is not my first language. I have my own experience as an English Language Learner (ELL). I have taught in classrooms where the student population is comprised of ELLs. I have interacted many times with students who are English Language Learners while working as a substitute teacher. It is this experience that prompted me to base my project on closing the achievement gap with English Language Learners (ELLs). It is in this regard that my project aims to answer the research question: *What best practices and strategies can teachers use with English Language Learners to close the achievement gap?* In Chapter One, I described my long journey as an ELL. It was a turbulent journey where every available means was used by teachers and family members to ensure I could write and speak in English. I struggled and endured for so many years in order to make sense of the English language. It was never an easy undertaking. My journey has placed me in the shoes of ELL students. It is in this chapter that my research brought into the fore the labels, perceptions, and to some extent, neglect that ELLs go through during their learning. Knowingly or unknowingly, the terms that are used to refer to this subgroup of students are so limiting and demoralizing given that they do not inspire but serve to demotivate and diminish EL students' self esteem. A few years ago ELLs were referred to as Limited English Proficient (LEP), a label that profiled them as being "limited" and "deficient" just because they had an English language challenge (Harder & Varga, 2017).

This chapter explores some of the motivating terms that teachers and other educators can use in order to infuse a sense of inclusivity, hope and inspiration to ELLs.

For example, instead of the term ELL which connotes that one has to be English proficient first before being placed in the mainstream classroom, Multilingual Learner (MLL) is a more friendly and encouraging term. Equally, instead of the term ESL, a reference like New Language Program (NLP) is more elevating and motivating. The rationale is that ELLs must get quality education in all content areas and equally achieve like their counterparts who are English proficient. The demand for English proficiency should not be a limiting factor for them to learn and excel.

It is in Chapter Two, the literature review, where I have laid the foundation for my work in this capstone regarding ELLs and the achievement gap. In the literature review I have sought to answer the research question, *What best practices and strategies can teachers use will English Language Learners to close the achievement gap?* Before answering this question, I found it necessary to reflect on the achievement gap in American schools. During my research work, I realized there is a significant achievement gap between students of color and their white counterparts. The gap widens more between ELLs and their white peers when compared. It is important to mention that a great number of ELLs come from families that recently arrived in the United States of America from other countries where English language was neither spoken nor written, or it was minimally taught, spoken or written. It is because of this background that there arises risk factors that contribute to the underachievement of ELLs.

There is a need for teachers and other educators to be provided with teaching strategies they can use to ensure that English language learners (ELLs) receive the same quality and grade level education as their native English speakers. More attention to ELLs in classrooms ought to be prioritized so that their academic dream is achieved..

ELLs' inability to speak in English is not their own fault. Teachers need to be empathic and be ready to give them the support needed so that they grow academically. Most teachers tend to spend less time with ELLs in the mainstream classrooms. Research has found that many mainstream teachers hold deficit views towards ELLs in their classrooms (Garcia, 2015, as cited in Rizzuto, 2017). Closing the achievement gap between ELL students and their White counterparts requires a holistic, multifaceted approach from educators, ELLs' families, and school administrators. Because ELL students often come from low socio-economic status households, educators sometimes view them as less intelligent and less prepared for school than their peers (Lewis, 2020, p.14). By this deficit paradigm, Lewis (2020, p. 15) found that ELLs are often marginalized and denied the same access to education that their mainstream peers enjoy while at the same time, this negative discourse puts them at a disadvantage which makes them victims of institutional racism. This misunderstanding resulting from an English language deficit paradigm ought not be the basis for underachievement of ELL students. A radical mindset shift is necessary because ELLs need to feel valued, accepted and integrated fully into mainstream learning. Valuing them requires that teachers learn about their cultural background, language, and traditions that define who they are. Once an environment like this one is achieved, ELL students will start to look up to teachers and the emerging relationship will allow teachers to get to know them. There is every reason for acknowledgement that a good number of ELLs are talented academically but are only limited by the inability to express themselves in the English language.

Throughout this project I explore and share in detail research-based best practices and strategies that have been found to work for educators whose classrooms comprise of

ELLs. The main goal is to create equitable opportunities of learning for all students without regard to their linguistic backgrounds. It is possible that a student may not be able to speak in English but be quite knowledgeable in content areas such as science, mathematics, history, and social studies which they were taught in their primary language. These students come with a variety of skills and experiences from their countries of origin which they can share with mainstream students and teachers. The cultural and linguistic diversity that ELLs bring into schools and classrooms needs to be celebrated rather than being unsung.

When conducting my research, the factors I found include, but are not limited to, cultural differences such as eye contact, smiling, physical contact, and engaging in debates; English language proficiency demands; teachers' perceptions and cultural beliefs; family socioeconomic status; and teachers' training. After I created an understanding of the background of ELLs, I laid the ELLs' collected and outlined best practices for teachers and the instructional strategies they can use in their teaching in order to close the achievement gap between ELLs and their white counterparts. These best practices and strategies will be beneficial for teachers in their efforts to assist ELLs learn and excel. During my research work, I found that some of the best practices for teachers include honoring multilingualism, making ELL instruction culturally responsive, connecting with families of ELLs, having some background knowledge about ELLs and their families, incorporation ELLs funds of knowledge, encouraging social inclusion and collaboration, creating a positive learning environment, and professional development for teachers. My research revealed that non-linguistic representation, scaffolding with the native language, proper teacher communication with ELLs, assessing ELLs differently,

differentiating teaching for ELLs, using sheltered instruction to teach ELLs, use of technology, establishing a buddy system in the classroom and decreasing teacher- talk-time prove to be some of the best instruction strategies for ELLs. Bassegio (2018) argued that “misidentification of ELLs as students with learning disabilities by educators is not necessarily intentional, but is commonly as a result of lack of knowledge, training, and information available to the educators who interact with these English language learners” (p.7). Chapter Two henceforth helped to inform my research question. This collection of best practices and instructional strategies will be the basis of my professional development which I have explained in Chapter Three and intend to implement in the future.

Learning Experiences

Getting the resources necessary to build my capstone made me utilize various ways of gathering the necessary information. This sharpened my research skills because from it, I learned many ways of searching for important data from different sources. This led me to know many authors’ works, familiarize myself with research organizations in education such as WIDA and NEA, and where to go when I may need such information in the future. It taught me how to search for relevant information from different mediums. I came to learn that to succeed in research one requires a great detail of personal organization. The research taught me many organizational techniques that one needs to have to successfully do the research work; for example, once someone comes across pieces of material, making a decision on which one comes first, second, in that order until the last one requires organizational skill. From the research, I came to learn that time-management is a skill. Knowing the scope of the project from the start is necessary

in order to allocate time to every task of the project and stick to it. Sticking out of time puts you off balance while developing the project. Collaboration and getting feedback from others who go through the research is important. An outsider expert or a colleague who comes into the project to give suggestions on various parameters and findings of the project makes it more detailed and relevant. The research helped me gain skills on the use of online tools of writing such as Google Docs, Google Slides, Google Forms, transfer of files from Microsoft Word To Google Drive and converting files from Google Docs to PDFs in Word.

From the content of the research, I gained in great detail a lot about English Language Learners (ELLs) including their backgrounds, learning challenges, and their immense strengths which they come with into classrooms. However, there is equally a lot I did not know about them. For example, formerly I did not have the statistics about academic performance and the various challenges that they face, but now I am more knowledgeable. From the research, I was surprised that American-born students were the majority of all ELLs. This had never crossed my mind before. What I knew was that all ELLs were foreign-born and just arrived in the United States. My research was not without its shortcomings, despite the far reaching findings that are likely to shape the future of policy making by educational stakeholders.

Limitations of my Research

My project had limitations. The first limitation was that the research question was too broad. I came to realize late into the project that I should have narrowed it more. This limitation has made me realize that I may have missed more details because of the time constraints allocated to the project. This limitation, however, is a learning opportunity

since I will be more careful and critical when choosing a research question, or when guiding someone to select a research question in the future. When the research question is too broad one is most likely to lose information that entails the details of the research since the variables to take into account become too many and challenging to handle. For example, I only mentioned about Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE), while in reality, this topic could have been an independent one from which to get my research question.

Another limitation to my research was that the research findings were directed to benefit English Language Learners. However, research has shown that these best practices and strategies for teaching ELLs are also applicable to the broader spectrum of students across all subgroups. Take for instance, activating prior knowledge; it is a strategy teachers will use not only for ELLs, but for non-ELLs as well. Another example: Differentiated instruction works for all subgroups of students and not for ELLs only. I would rather let teachers know that these are applicable in every classroom. They should not think of putting them into use only when they have ELLs in their classrooms, but can use them for all students.

The other limitation is that the findings of my research may not reach as large an audience as I anticipated. This is due to the fact that my audience would be available only when my school has professional development meetings and I have to request to be allotted time. I would have wanted my findings to reach a large audience of educators in other educational institutions besides where I would be teaching. I will be looking at how to make relationships with other schools so that they will be inviting me to present my findings from my research. My goal will be to make networks with various educators so

that I share with them my findings. I am hopeful they will find them helpful in their teaching. The last limitation is the assumption that most teachers are multilingual while that is not the case. The majority of teachers are monolingual and their language of communication is English. While I may want to use ELLs' home language to teach them, this may require having interpreters in the classroom, which may not be practical.

Despite the shortcomings from my research, the results from this capstone project will have far reaching implications to education policy makers on how teaching of ELLs should be conducted going forward.

Future Implications to Policy Makers

I am hoping that the findings from my research project will be a game changer to the extent that they will influence policy makers to bring changes into our academic curriculums that will shape the future of teaching English Language Learners (ELLs). If implemented properly, the results from this research have the potential to minimize or completely close the achievement gap. On a personal level, the findings will greatly influence my teaching into the future. I will seek to alter my lesson plans and instruction strategies to align them to the realities of my research. I will evaluate my daily interactions with ELLs so that I create new relationships that will positively impact my teaching.

Benefits to the Profession

The growing segment of children living in non-English speaking households creates an increasing demand for teachers prepared to serve English Language Learners (Quintero & Hansen, 2017). There is growing demand for teachers well prepared to teach ELLs. This is as a result of the rising number of students from diverse backgrounds

enrolling in learning institutions. Due to this shortage of trained teachers of ELLs, I am hopeful that current and future teachers will greatly benefit from the research findings of this project. The presentation of the results of this study during my professional development sessions will provide teachers with the requisite skills to make them effective in teaching ELLs in the mainstream. Equally, I am certain that by doing so, I will be bridging the shortage of ELL teachers.

Into the Future

My research puts into focus many aspects surrounding ELLs that affect their academic journey in many ways: learning challenges, background information, theories behind the challenges they face, and what teaching strategies can be used by teachers that will lead to closing the academic achievement gap. The research findings are expected to change the negative and limiting mindsets that some teachers and other educators may unknowingly have had towards ELLs. A deep understanding of ELLs will be the key that would unlock their academic success.

More research into the future that will continue to unlock the academic potential of ELLs is still needed. I would not say with finality that my research is enough to continue to be used into the future since circumstances keep on changing. I am sure more research will lead to more discoveries that will create more pathways to the academic success of English Language Learners. This research has revealed that teachers are at the center of closing the achievement gap. They are the ones whom this research targets most since they are the ones who will be tasked to implement these findings in order to register success. In that regard, there is a need for continuous training of teachers into the future so that they continue receiving more research-based skills that will enhance their

instruction techniques. I believe that I will be sharing with my teaching colleagues the knowledge I gained by conducting this research. In addition, I will be looking into opportunities that will thrust me into doing research in any area touching on English Language Learners.

Summary

By developing this capstone project, I came to appreciate the importance of research since this was my first time to carry out one of this magnitude. Despite the challenges I encountered in the process, I gained more than I expected. I have acquired in-depth knowledge about ELLs, I have learned how to use various online tools to conduct research, and I gained more skills in writing. To conduct a research of this scale is truly time consuming and takes a great deal of effort, but I am looking at how the results of the research will help many educators in their lifetime in the classrooms. More specifically, ELLs will be the greatest consumers of the research findings from this project for their academic achievement. While this research displayed a gloomy picture about the performance of ELLs and glaring learning disparities between ELLs and non-ELLs, future research is needed to find out if there have been any encouraging celebrations on the achievement gap. All is not lost since from my research question, *What best practices and teaching strategies can teachers use with English Language Learners to close the achievement gap?* I answered the question by putting together research-tested strategies and practices that teachers can utilize to realize better learning outcomes.

REFERENCES

A Guide to Involving English Language Learners in School-to-Career Initiatives (1998).

The Education Alliance at Brown University Collection. Brown Digital

Repository. Brown University Library. <https://doi.org/10.26300/vnmc-6285>

Aguilar, E. (2011, September). *20 Tips for developing positive relationships with parents*.

Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org>

Alexandrowicz, V. *Creating a positive classroom climate*. Esl and Cultures Resource.

Retrieved July 10, 2022 from

<https://sites.sandiego.edu/esl/creating-positive-classroom-climate/>.

Alberta Teachers Association. (n.d). *Moving toward cultural responsiveness-A guide for teachers*.

<https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Specialist-Councils/ESL-3-6%20Moving%20Toward%20Cultural%20Responsiveness.pdf>

Aljaafreh, A. & Lantolf, J. (1994, winter). *Negative feedback as regulation and second language learning in the Zone of Proximal Development*.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/328585.pdf?casa_token=gzu-TvZo-NEAAAAA:pdBdkplI3d0G4hJ9SGHWiRkHJmoFRKDstDJyDw2EnODkraCRrt5AVHc8Ec2tq8GoFeDifOWOEUuC_E519I9wbOejd9a

Alrubail, R. (2016): *Being mindful of cultural differences*. Edutopia.

<https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/being-mindful-cultural-differences>

Alrubail, R. (2016, July 07). *Equity for English- Language Learners*. Edutopia.

<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/equity-for-english-language-learners-rusul-alrubail>

American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Socioeconomic status*.

<https://www.apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status>

Arends, R.I. (1998). *Resource handbook. Learning to teach* (4th ed.). Boston, MA:

MacGraw-Hill.

- Batalova, J. & McHugh, M. (2010). *Top Languages Spoken by English Language Learners Nationally and by State*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/FactSheet%20ELL3%20-%20FINAL.pdf>
- Bassegio, K. (2018). *A silent crisis: The misidentification of English language learners as students with disabilities*. Regis University.
<https://epublications.regis.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1877&context=theses>
- Bates, B. (2019). *Learning Theories Simplified*. Sage.
https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/98828_book_item_98828.pdf
- Bennet, C. (2020, February 12). *ELL students' background knowledge as an academic fund*. Thought Co.
<https://www.thoughtco.com/ell-students-funds-of-knowledge-4011987>
- Bialik, K., Sheller, A., & Walker, K. (2018). 6 facts about English Language Learners in U.S. public schools. *Pew Research Center*.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/25/6-facts-about-english-language-learners-in-u-s-public-schools/>
- Botello, J., Lindberg, M., Mascarefiaz, L., Phillips III, J. H., Valk, A. (n.d.). *Best practices for serving English language learners*. Teaching Tolerance. Retrieved December 11, 2021, from
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/2017>
- Breiset, L. (2015). *What you need to know about ELLs: Fast Facts*. Colorin Colorado.
<https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/what-you-need-know-about-ells-fast-facts>

Burnham, K. (2020, July). *Five culturally responsive teaching strategies*. Northeastern University Graduate Programs. <https://www.northeastern.edu/graduate>

Bylund, E., Abrahamsson, N., Hyltenstam, K. (2012, June). Does first language maintenance hamper nativelikeness in a second language? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*.
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/studies-in-second-language-acquisition/article/abs/does-first-language-maintenance-hamper-nativelikeness-in-a-second-language/12B4CCC663B75492B9A6C0758A94122D>

Capps, R., Fix, M., Murray, J., Ost, J., Passel, J., & Hewantoro, S. (2005). *The new demography of America's children: Immigration and the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED490924.pdf>

Carnock, J. T. (2016). Counterproductive: *When the "English Learner" label works against students*.
[America.https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/counterproductive-el/](https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/counterproductive-el/)

Clardy, A. (2005). *Andragogy: Adult learning and education at its best*. Retrieved December 11, 2021. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED492132.pdf>

Colorin Colorado. (n.d.). *Using informal assessments for English language learners*.
<https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/using-informal-assessments-english-language-learners>

Colorin Colorado. (n.d.): *What is scaffolding and how does it help ELLs?*
<https://www.colorincolorado.org/faq/what-scaffolding-and-how-does-it-help-ells>

Content Based Sheltered Instruction. (n.d.). ESOL CPD-Module 4.

https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/esol/cpd/module4/docs/mod4_cbsitext.pdf

Crumpler, T. P., Handsfield, L. J., & Dean, T. R. (2011). Constructing differently in language and literacy professional development. *Research in the Teaching of English, 46*, 55–91.

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ939066>

Daniel, M.S. (2014, Spring). Learning to educate English language learners in pre-service elementary practicums. *Teacher Education Quarterly*.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1078517.pdf>

Derderian-Aghajanian, A. & Cong, W. (2012, March). *How culture affects on English Language Learners' (ELL's) outcomes, with Chinese and Middle Eastern immigrant students*.

https://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_5_March_2012/20.pdf

Deussen, T. (2008, November). *What teachers should know about English language learners*. Education Northwest.

<https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/what-teachers-should-know-about-instruction-for-ells.pdf>

Drew, C. (2019, May 9). *Sociocultural theory of learning in the classroom*. Helpful

Professor. <https://helpfulprofessor.com>

Echevarria, J. (2017). *Reflections on teaching multilingual learners*.

https://www.janaechevarria.com/?page_id=60

- Fink, L. (2018, January). *Culturally responsive teaching in today's classrooms*. National Council of Teachers of English. <https://ncte.org>
- Freeman, D., Freeman, Y. (n.d.). *Types of ELLs*. The University of Texas at Brownsville. <https://davidandyvonnefreeman.com/pdfs/types-of-learners.pdf>
- Fry, R. (2007, June). *How far behind in math and reading are English Language Learners*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic>
- Garcia, E. & Cuellar, D. (2006). *Who are these linguistically and culturally diverse students?* Teachers College Record, 108(11), 2220-2246. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Bryant-Jensen/publication/288825263_The_Demographic_Imperative_Introduction_to_Thematic_Issue_on_English_Language_Learners/links/5684
- Garcia, O., Kleifgen, A. J., Falchi, L. (2008, January). *From English Language Learners to Emergent Bilinguals*. Equity Matters. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524002.pdf>
- Garcia, S. & Tyler, B. (2010). *Meeting the needs of English language learners with learning disabilities in the general curriculum*. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Shernaz-Garcia/publication/233354810_Meeting_the_Needs_of_English_Language_Learners_With_Learning_Disabilities_in_the_General_Curriculum/links/
- Goel, T. (2017, August). *Why we need Learning Theories*. Designed for Learning. <https://tarunagoel.blogspot.com/2017/08/why-we-need-learning-theories.html>
- Hanover Research (2017, February). *School-Based strategies for narrowing the achievement gap*. Hanover Research.

https://www.wasa-oly.org/WASA/images/WASA/1.0%20Who%20We%20Are/1.4.1.6%20SIRS/Download_Files/LI%202017/May-%20School-Based%20Strategies%20for%20Narrow

Harder, E., Shannon, M. V. (2017, September 27). *ESL, ELL, FLNE? How do we describe students whose first language isn't English?* America's Promise Alliance.

<https://www.americaspromise.org/opinion/esl-ell-or-flne-how-describe-students-whose-first-language-isnt-english>

Hatchett, D. (2015). *Closing the achievement gap: the critical importance of parental engagement.* Oxford Education.

<https://educationblog.oup.com/primary/closing-the-achievement-gap-the-critical-importance-of-parental-engagement>

Hilliard, P. (2015). *Performance-based assessment: Reviewing the basics.*

Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/performance-based-assessment-reviewing-basics-patricia-hilliard>

Hill, K. (2020). *Honoring all their languages.* Ascd.

<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/honoring-all-their-languages>

History.com Editors. (1974, August 21). *The equal educational opportunities act takes effect.* History.

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/equal-educational-opportunities-act-1974-signed-into-law-nixon>

Knestruck, J. (2012). *The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and why it matters for early childhood learning.* NWEA. <https://www.nwea.org>

- Kongsvic, J.(n.d.). *What is SIOP?* TESOL trainers: Education
[consultants.https://www.tesoltrainers.com/siop1.html#/](https://www.tesoltrainers.com/siop1.html#/)
- Krashen, S. (2009, July). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*
<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu>
- Lee, M. S. (2015, September). *Implementing the sociocultural theory while teaching ESL.*
<https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=space>
- Lewis, A. L. (2020). Deficit discourse and its effects on English Learners. *Bethel University.*<https://spark.bethel.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1396&context=etd>
- Lubin, M. (2021). *6 ESL teaching techniques to cut TTT and get your students talking.*
FluentU.<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/educator-english/esl-teaching-techniques/>
- MacLeod, S. A. (2019). *Constructivism as a theory for teaching and learning.*
<https://www.simplypsychology.org>
- Miller, R. (2011, May 25). *The importance of culturally responsive teachers.* Huffpost.
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-importance-of-cultura_b_787876
- Minnetesol. (n.d.). Labels as limitations. <https://minnetesol.org/archives/3886>
- National Education Association (2020). English Language Learners: What you need to know.<https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/english-language-learners-what-you-need-know>
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom.* Cambridge University Press.
<https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=NSIMZp9XkHoC&oi=fnd&pg=PA5&ots=1ZUJKirEOp&sig=0IE9utBsXxC3VNSV3HxnQxJtVdA#v=onepage>

Nunes, L. K. (2021, May 2). *What is TTT when teaching English?* Bridge Universe.

<https://bridge.edu/tefl/blog/what-is-ttt-when-teaching-english/>

Office of Language Acquisition.(n.d.). *High school graduation rates for English learners.*

https://ncela.ed.gov/files/fast_facts/20200916-ELGraduationRatesFactSheet-508.pdf

Owens, W. C. & Wells, P. S. (2021). Elementary content teacher perceptions regarding their ELL instructional practices. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice.*

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1300273.pdf>

Peyton, J.K., Ranard, A. D., McGinnis, S. (2001). *Heritage languages in America preserving a national resource.*

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Joy-Peyton/publication/272698659_Heritage_Languages_in_America_Preserving_a_National_Resource/links/5e177860458159aa4c2b4fb/Herita

Quintero, D. & Hansen, M. (2017). English Learners and the growing need for qualified teachers.*The Brookings Institution.*

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/06/02/english-learners-and-the-growing-need-for-qualified-teachers/>

Rafa, A., Erwin, B., Brixey, E., McCann, M., Perez Jr, Z. (2020, May 27). *50-State comparisons: English learner policies.* Education Commission of Teachers.

<https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-english-learner-policies/>

Ramsaran, N. (2022). 4 effective strategies for supporting newcomer English Learners.

Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/4-effective-strategies-supporting-newcomer-english-learners>

Reflections on Teaching English Learners. (n.d.). *Components of the SIOP model*.

Retrieved November 25, 2012, from <https://www.janaechevarria.com>

Restifo, D. (2021, June). *Best free learning websites and sites*. Teaching and Learning.

<https://www.techlearning.com>

Richards-Tutor, C., Aceves, T., & Reese, L. (2016). *Evidence-based practices for English*

Learners. (Document No. IC-18). Retrieved from University of Florida,

Collaboration for Effective Educator, Development, Accountability, and Reform

Center website: <http://cedar.education.ufl.edu/tools/innovation-configurations/>

Rizzuto, K. (2017). Teachers' perceptions of ELL students: Do their attitudes shape their instruction? *School of Education, Monmouth University*.

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/ESSA-Evidence-Guides/Rizzuto_Teachers_Perceptions_of_ELL_Students_Do_their_attitudes_shape_their_instruction.pdf

Robinson, J. (2019, February). *Why professional development matters*. National

Education Association. <https://www.nea.org>

Sanchez, C. (2017, February). *English Language Learners: How your state is doing*.

<https://www.npr.org/sections>

Schwartz, J. (2021, October 21). *10 strategies that support English language learners*.

Edutopia.

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/10-strategies-support-english-language-learners-across-all-subjects>

Schwartz, L. (2020). Helpful online resources for teaching ELLs.

[Edutopia.https://www.edutopia.org/article/helpful-online-resources-teaching-ells](https://www.edutopia.org/article/helpful-online-resources-teaching-ells)

Shabani, K., Khatib, M., Ebadi, S. (2010, December). *Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development: Instructional implications and teachers' professional development*. Canadian Center of Science and Education.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1081990.pdf>

Shapiro, S., Ruecker, T., Johnson, N. E., & Tardy, M. C. (2014, June). *Exploring the Linguistic and Institutional Contexts of Writing Instruction in TESOL*, 400-412.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43268057.pdf?casa_token=tF2FFOYyUagAAAAA:FjyuMbYZH7V49e0ZCa_iInU1Q58gNfjirkoCu7mAkxXALVF8P5I_V_LXc8sA95FKoYO70154A5Uf6ukoWaURm2kMaVnbZM1UHsBbIhBQP8vHZy3C8V-Q

Suarez-Orozco, C., Todorova, I., Louie, J. (2001, June). *The transnationalization of families: Immigrant separations and reunifications*.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED463339.pdf>

Snyder, S. (2017, February). *Supported's First Guiding Principle: ELS bring many strengths to the classroom*. SupportEd. <https://getsupported.net>

Sugarman, J. & Geary, C. (2018, August). *English learners in Minnesota*. Migration Policy Institute.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/EL-factsheet2018-Minnesota>

Sutter, A. G. (2012). Closing the achievement gap with family-school partnerships.

University of Texas.

<https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/ETD-UT-2012-05-5505/SUTTER-MASTERS-REPORT.pdf?sequence=1>

Tatyana (n.d.). Labels as limitations.

Title VI, civil rights act of 1964. (n.d.). U.S. Department of Labor. Dol.Gov.

Retrieved December 12, 2021, from

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasam/regulatory/statutes/title-vi-civil-rights-act-of-1964>

Thompson, G., Moore, Jones, S. (2019). 8 great ways to close the achievement

gap. *Istation*. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoliteracy/istationmarch2019newsletter>

Tomlinson, A. C. (2017, April 16). *7 reasons why differentiated instruction works*. ascd.

<https://www.ascd.org/blogs/7-reasons-why-differentiated-instruction-works>

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Interaction between learning and development. From *Mind and*

Society, 79-91. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<https://innovation.umn.edu>

Walker, R. A. (2010). *Zone of proximal development*. Sciencedirect.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/zone-of-proximal-development>

WIDA Consortium. (2009, September 10). *WIDA focus on formative assessment*.

<https://edu.wyoming.gov/downloads/federally-funded-programs/title-iii/wida-focus-formative-assessment.pdf>

Yvonne, F., Freeman, D. (n.d.). Types of ELLs. *The University of Texas at Brownsville*.

<https://davidandyvonnefreeman.com/pdfs/types-of-learners.pdf>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). English learners in public schools.

Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

Retrieved May 31, 2020, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf>