

**The Psychosocial, Cognitive, and Educational Perspective on the Complex Needs of English Learners and their Educators**

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# THE COMPLEX NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS AND THEIR EDUCATORS

## **Abstract**

English Language Learners are the fastest growing population in U.S. public schools. This group of students brings rich culture, language, and experience to their classes. Unfortunately, English Language Learners often do not get the chance to share much from their backgrounds because of the language barrier among themselves, their classmates, and their teachers. Learning new content is challenging for most students. However, learning content and learning the language of instruction at the same time can be nearly impossible without proper supports. Educators are challenged by federal and state standards to have all of their students reach the same goals and objectives but have not received sufficient training in how to accommodate and modify lessons for varying language proficiency levels. English Learners have very diverse backgrounds and needs and require specialized instruction to learn the language and overcome barriers.

*Key Words:* English Learners, academic success, achievement gaps, teacher preparedness, specialized instruction

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# THE COMPLEX NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS AND THEIR EDUCATORS

## The Psychosocial, Cognitive, and Educational Perspective on the Complex Needs of English Learners and their Educators

### **Introduction**

Educators have always faced a plethora of challenges and barriers in educating the students who come through their classroom doors each year. Students have learning disabilities, social and emotional problems, different learning styles, and even problems outside of school that greatly impact their ability to find success in the rigorous curriculum that state departments of education have created for schools. Every one of these challenges affects the way a teacher is able to engage with his/her students. Furthermore, there is an additional barrier for many students in the United States. Almost 10% of public-school students in grades kindergarten through twelve are classified as an English Learner (EL) or English Language Learner (ELL), according to the National Center of Educational Statistics (Institute of Education Sciences, 2021).

Educators are attempting to teach complex curriculum and content standards to students who are simultaneously learning the English language. The number of English Learners has grown 2.3% between the 2017-2018 school year and 2019-2020 school year according to the Office of English Language Acquisition (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). U.S. schools and educators were not prepared for this rapid increase of ELs in schools. The U.S Department of Education's NCES (2000) indicated only 12.5% of teachers with ELs in their classes had received more than 8 hours of training over three years.

The needs of English Learners are unique and extremely complex partially because of how diverse a group of students they are. There are over 400 different languages spoken by English learners in U.S. public schools. The most common languages spoken by ELs during the 2019-2020 school year were Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Vietnamese (U.S. Department

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Education, 2023). Even if an educator is a multilingual speaker, there is a very high possibility that he/she will not speak all of the languages represented by the ELs in her classes. The challenges for teachers oftentimes can seem insurmountable when educating ELs. Identity, language and culture all have an impact on how well an English Learner can do in school (Creagh, 2016; Finley, 2018). If a child has moved to the United States at a young age, the student may not remember much of the home country and may adapt more easily than a student who comes to the United States during his/her high school years. However, learning new routines can be very challenging when it has not been a part of the child's schooling in the past. Teachers have to be flexible and understanding of how the loss of L1 (first language) culture can negatively impact an English learner (Diaz et al., 2016; Ridley et al., 2019). Additionally, English Learners may not be literate in their first language. ELs may have had trauma in their past that will affect them in the United States. Some ELs carry the burden of not having any immigration status and being worried for the safety of their families. And more likely than not, ELs may have parents who also do not speak English and cannot offer any assistance academically.

Teachers have been tasked with ensuring an equitable education for all students – including English Learners. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires all states “to assess the English language proficiency of ELs, provide reasonable accommodations on them on state assessments, and develop new accountability systems that include long-term goals and measure of progress for ELs” (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Therefore, school districts and their educators are being monitored by the federal Department of Education on whether or not the ELs in their schools are growing academically. Unfortunately, most teacher preparation programs and teacher professional development do not provide the training needed on how best

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to instruct English Learners. Preparing to teach ELs can be very challenging for even the most experienced teacher (August & Blackburn, 2019). Educators need to know what the best strategies are to instruct the linguistically diverse students that are in their classes. Modifying curriculum and making accommodations based on a student's language need is complex (Echevarria et al., 2017). Most textbooks that schools use are not meant for emerging bilinguals. Even literacy programs in the younger grades do not take into consideration the particular needs of English Learners. Furthermore, teachers need to be confident in their own ability to teach their students. When a high sense of self-efficacy is absent in a teacher, that educator may become frustrated and unwilling to take on the responsibility of educating ELs (Villegas, 2018). Educators need to be given the time to self-reflect on their needs and the needs of their English Learners. Preparation can help educators embrace their English Learners and empower them in reaching high expectations set for all students, regardless of language ability.

The goal of this paper is to analyze the needs of both English Learners and the educators who teach these students at the K-12 level through psychosocial, cognitive, and educational perspectives. Additionally, this paper will seek to answer the question "Do the educators of English Learners have the prerequisite skills to meet the unique and complex educational and social needs of this group of students?"

### **Literature Review**

#### **Teacher Preparation**

As the number of English Learners continue to increase in the United States, along with more rigorous accountability standards for states and school districts, more focus is being placed on whether or not teachers have been prepared through their teacher preparation programs or are

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receiving the necessary professional development to give them the skills needed to engage and instruct English Learners in the mainstream classrooms. Unfortunately, researchers are finding that the answer is no. Teachers are not prepared or being trained to modify the curriculum to make it accessible for all students regardless of language proficiency level. The Education Commission of the States' report from 2014 explains that the majority of states do not require any training in ELL strategies for general education teachers (Education Commission of the States, 2014). The Education Commission of the States is a non-profit group that provides educational trends and data to state legislators and state education officials to support them in creating educational policies (Education Commission of the States, 2014). Only 5% of all teachers in the United States in the 2019-2020 school year had a major, minor, or a certificate in ESL (English as a second language) according to the Office of English Language Learners (United States Department of Education, 2023).

Additional literature addresses the problem of the confidence of the teachers of English Learners. When educators have not been given guidance, support, or a framework to assist them in their lesson planning on how to make their content comprehensible and meaningful for English Learners, they do not have the confidence to do so (Villegas, 2018). A teacher who lacks confidence in herself/himself may not have a positive attitude towards English Learners. Through the Language Attitude of Teachers' Scale, researchers found that teachers who had a positive outlook toward English Learners were those who had received more training in best practices and strategies for ELs (Stairs-Davenport, 2021). Furthermore, when confidence in teaching ELs is lacking, those teachers may remove the responsibility of educating those ELs and rely on bilingual or certified ESL teachers. When this happens, these teachers will make little to no effort to modify their curriculum to meet the language needs of their students

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(Villegas, 2018). There needs to be collaboration between general education teachers and ESL teachers to share the best practices and strategies for teaching English Learners (Marsh, 2018). The success of all English Learners is the responsibility of all staff in a school. Creating a shared sense of responsibility will increase the confidence in the teachers of ELs so that they are able to meet the language and content needs of their students.

In a study conducted by Stairs-Davenport (2021), mainstream K-12 teachers were surveyed about differentiating instruction for English Language Learners. Stairs Davenport (2021) found that teachers want to know and need to be given the skills to honor and build upon English Learners' existing strengths. Educators should not ever look at a group of students through a deficit lens – meaning those students are lacking in an area that will prevent them from finding success in a classroom (Villegas, 2018). In order to not have a deficit view, teachers of English Learners need to know how to help ELs (especially newcomers – those brand new to the country and language) thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. Fenner et al. (2017) explains that those educators who value students' home languages and cultures and do not see them as barriers to education can use them in a way to increase academic performance by ELs. Culture and language are at the core of every human being. Teachers should not forget that when an EL comes to the United States into their classroom, he/she can be experiencing a completely new world. Culture is tied to a student's ability to acquire the new language and content to which they are being exposed. Teachers need to use a student's home language and culture to further enhance their lessons for all of the students in their classrooms including native English speakers.

Teachers who have a multicultural classroom need to be able to relate the content of their course to the cultures of their students. Geneva Gay is one of many scholars who introduced the



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idea of culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2018) stated that “by seeing, respecting, and assisting, diverse students from their own vantage points, teachers can better help them grow academically, culturally, and psycho-emotionally.” Not only do teachers of English Learners need to know how to differentiate instruction based on language levels, but these educators also must be knowledgeable about what affect culture has on learning. According to Vigil (2023), culturally responsive teaching is a method in which teachers make connections in their lessons to their students’ cultures, languages and life experiences. Culture is a cognitive construct. Losing one’s culture will not only affect a student’s social and emotional well-being, but they will lose any of the background knowledge and sensemaking that could have helped them make connection with the content they are learning.

Lucas and Villegas (2010) created the Framework for Linguistically Responsive Teaching that listed language-related knowledge and skills that all teachers need to know if they have English Learners in their classrooms. Educators need to be aware of sociolinguistic consciousness, value linguistic diversity and always advocate for ELs (Lucas & Villegas, 2010). Through this awareness teachers will be able to build relationships with their ELs and create welcoming school environments. Furthermore, professional programs that focus their attention on culturally responsive and linguistically responsive teaching will be able to create preservice programs that will address these skills that all teachers need to have in order to teach English Learners (Stairs-Davenport, 2021).

Baker et al. (2014) also indicated the specialized knowledge and skills to help students acquire proficiency and content area knowledge in English. This includes using visual and verbal supports, providing opportunities to interact with peers in English, allowing ELs to use their home language, culture and knowledge to enhance their learning (August & Blackburn, 2019).

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Furthermore, many states have adopted the WIDA Standards framework to support equitable access to high quality learning opportunities for multilingual learners. WIDA (World Class Instructional Design and Assessment) is a consortium of states and schools that develops and supports standards, assessments, research and professional learning for English Language Learners. The 2020 WIDA English Language Development Standards reflect “the belief that multilingual learners are best served when they learn content and language together in linguistically and culturally sustaining ways” (WIDA, 2020). Learning the English language and the grade-level content cannot be separated. Teachers need to be able to blend the two by creating language and content objectives together.

### **English Learner Academic Performance**

Despite growing literature addressing the needs of school-aged English Learners, their academic needs are still not being met (Santibanez & Gandara, 2018; Wissink & Starks, 2019). Students are not being provided the same opportunities for success in school and, therefore, cannot perform at the same level as their English-speaking peers (Roy-Campbell, 2012). Academic performance affects students’ desire to attend school, ability to graduate on time, and to become part of the workforce. The Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights has mandated since 1968 the use of the Civil Rights Data Collection survey. This survey analyzes educational equity and opportunities for students and any factors that may affect them. English Learners are a specific subgroup of students that they investigate. The Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) reported that English Learners who were chronically absent (which means a student who has missed 10% or more of the school year) increased by two percentage points during the 2015-2016 school year from 13.4% to 15.6% (U.S. Department of Education OELA, 2022). This means that more than 15% of all English Learners missed more

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than 10% of the entire school year. Chronic absenteeism has been proven to negatively impact academic performance. Schools need to identify why this number is growing. In the 2017-2018 school year, one in six ELs were reported to be chronically absent (U.S. Department of Education OELA, 2022). There are many factors that can be attributed to chronic absenteeism. One of the major contributing factors is that many school-aged English Learners are tasked with assisting their families during the school day. Roy-Campbell (2012) addresses how many ELs act as interpreters for their parents at the hospital, social security office, bank, or post office which often outweigh the importance of attending school.

Another major achievement gap between English Learners and native English speakers in the K-12 setting in the United States is that only 63% of ELs graduate from high school as compared to the national average of 82% (Institute of Education Sciences, 2021). This linguistically, culturally, and educationally diverse group of students are oftentimes expected to have the knowledge to read and comprehend texts at their native English peer level which ends in frustration, behavior problems, and finally dropping out of school because they do not have the necessary language proficiency to be successful in school (Roy-Campbell, 2013). U.S educational policies are now reliant on standardized assessments for all learners which have been proven to be extremely difficult for ELs. According to Short et al. (2018), English Learners have to do double the work by learning the language of instruction and the core subjects at the same time but are not given sufficient time to get to the intermediate or advanced proficiency levels before having to partake in critical assessments.

Parra et al. (2014) examined the psychological impact on English Learners when they are placed in mainstream classrooms with native-English speaking students. Parra et al. (2014) posit that there has been a lack of attention on what is happening to students psychologically when

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they cannot comprehend what their teachers are saying and are unable to communicate with their peers. This study interviewed immigrant families who were living in the United States for 5 or fewer years. Parra et al. (2014) found that the elementary-aged English Learners in the study experienced anxiety, anger, fear of school, and eating and sleeping problems. The parents of these ELs reported that their children called themselves dumb and worthless because they could not get anything correct during the school day. Day after day these feelings affect the social emotional well-being of ELs and impact their academic performance (Parra et al., 2014).

Research also shows that English Learners are often misidentified as having a learning disability or go unidentified because of their English language status (Marsh, 2018). The WIDA Consortium reported that 50% of ELs compared to 39% of general education students were identified as having a learning disability (WIDA, 2017). Through the required standardized assessments, ELs fare worse than their native-English speaking peers. Therefore, they more often than not are recommended for special education services. According to WIDA (2017), “the majority of ELLs who are identified as having a learning disability are classified as having a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) that involves language and literacy or as Speech and Language Impaired (SLI), indicating a psychological processing disorder, yet this category has been increasingly questioned as subjective.” ELs’ background knowledge, culture, and language are different than their peers which may lead to these unnecessary labels.

The ability to read and write in English Learners’ first language influences (negatively or positively), their second language acquisition and success in the general education classes. Researchers found that a learner’s vocabulary knowledge in their first language does affect their listening comprehension in a second language (Vandergrift & Baker, 2015). This largely affects English Learners in the middle and high school grade levels. In these grades, teachers are not

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explicitly teaching reading skills since those fall under the standards of the elementary ages. Middle and high school ELs who are illiterate in their first language then do not have transferable reading and writing skills from L1 (first language) to the L2 (second language). These learners are at a great disadvantage academically (Takanishi & Menestrel, 2017).

Some English Learners are identified as long-term English Learners (LTELS). Long-term English Learners have been in an English language development program for more than 5 years. These students are identified as LTELs because they have not met the reclassification requirements to be exited or to be not classified as an EL in their school district. These students have been educated in English-only instruction for years in the United States yet are not increasing their proficiency levels and oftentimes are barely passing each grade (Uysal, 2023). Long-term English Learners are at a stagnant level and need intense language intervention. LTELs often have better verbal skills in English than they do with reading and writing skills. Because of this, there are assumptions made that LTELs “know” English and should be able to access and engage with the content in the general education classes, but the language barrier still remains, and their academic performance is subpar (Uysal, 2023).

### **Specialized Instruction for ELs**

English language challenges are often not just related to students showing that they know and comprehend the content or daily lesson. There are many barriers that are invisible to their teachers and native-English speaking peers. That is why specialized instruction for English Learners is not just “good teaching”. It is a multi-faceted approach that researchers have found must include teachers’ feelings toward teaching ELs, knowing what kind of learner each EL is, and receiving pedagogical training on how to teach ELs (Li et al., 2019). Although many educators hear that “best practices for English Learners is just good teaching”, this idea may be

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leaving out many important instructional strategies that benefit English Learners. Stephen Krashen is a renowned linguist and educator who created the theory about the affective filter in 1975. The affective filter is a student's level of comfort with the new language which affects (negatively or positively) the student's willingness to participate in a classroom (Krashen, 1975). According to Marsh (2018), social and emotional factors that impact English Learners' education must be at the forefront of instruction. English Learners who feel comfortable and welcome in a school and class environment will have a lower affective filter, and these students will be more likely to engage in the class activities which will result in acquiring more language and understanding of the content.

Echevarria et al. (2017) developed the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model. They stated that "implementing language objectives can be a powerful first step in ensuring that English Learners have equal access to the curriculum even though they may not be fully proficient in the language." (Echevarria et al., 2017, p.32). SIOP was developed over a seven-year period of working with teachers to create a sheltered instruction framework. This model eventually became an eight-step lesson planning and procedure guide to assist general education teachers in instructing the ELs in their content area while simultaneously focusing on language objectives to increase their ELs language proficiency. Following the ideas of Krashen (1975), the SIOP model centers on making content comprehensible for English Learners.

The components of specialized instruction for English Learners through the SIOP Model are lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice and application, lesson delivery, and review and assessment. Each component helps a teacher improve their instruction and make their content comprehensible for ELs while also helping ELs learn the English language. The 2020 WIDA ELD standards state "that multilingual learners are

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best served when they learn content and language together in linguistically and culturally sustaining ways” (WIDA Standards, 2020). Educators can build EL student’s confidence and success by enhancing EL engagement and thus promoting proficiency in English.

Academic language is very complex for English Learners. If an EL does not understand the vocabulary that a teacher is using, the learner will not connect to the background knowledge that they may have, and then will not be able to learn the topic (Roy-Campbell, 2013). Slower rate of speech is also associated with comprehensible input. Teachers may not realize how fast they speak when explaining a new concept or giving directions which cause ELs to become lost and unable to participate or follow along. Visual aids and modeling increase ELs ability to make meaning of new words (Marsh, 2018). Educators can self-reflect on what type of language they use in the classroom. Idioms, slang, and complex sentence structure are barriers to comprehension for English Learners. ELs also benefit from linguistic supports such as sentence starters and sentence frames. These are especially beneficial when having class discussions. These academic phrases are not as easy to use as social language. By providing them to the students, ELs will actively participate more (Fenner et al., 2017).

Teachers can also use English Learners’ background knowledge and prior experiences. Teachers can do this by investigating the culture and previous educational experiences of their ELs. Educators and school counselors may have to reach out to the families with interpreters to get specific educational information, but having this knowledge will assist teachers in connecting the culture of their English Learners to what they are studying in their classes (Echevarria, et al., 2017). Teachers will be able to find materials outside of the typical textbooks related to their English Learners. The ELs will make connections to their background knowledge which in turn

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will help them understand the instruction. Furthermore, seeing themselves and their culture in their education will increase their feelings of acceptance and lower their affective filters.

### **External Factors Impacting ELs in School**

English Learners in the United States are not only diverse because they speak more than 400 different languages, but they also have many different life experiences that educators should recognize. Newcomers are the fastest growing student group in U.S. school systems. Some of these newcomers may be identified as Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). These students are immigrants or refugees who come to U.S. schools lacking academic skills and preparation and often need specialized support (Auslander, 2022). Although SIFE ELs are a small percentage of ELs (around 10 to 20%), they have even more challenges than just learning the language (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). Some of these students may be unaccompanied minors. They may have experienced war, resettlement, and other atrocities leading to them not being in school for multiple years. They may have urgent social and emotional issues that require intervention by multiple school personnel. Although these students may be having multiple gaps in their education, they can still reach their fullest potential if educators are able to see past their faults and find the best methods to fill in those holes of their education. According to Custodio and O'Loughlin (2020), characteristics of SIFE ELs include: being much older than their grade-level peers because of their weak academic skills and lack of academic records, having additional language needs than can be met in ESL programs, having little to no literacy skills in either L1 or L2, and often being isolated from their mainstream peers.

Research has also shown that socioeconomic status (SES) plays a significant role in the success of English Learners (Hanus, 2016). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) the poverty rate for English learner households is 23% which is 10 points



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higher than their native-English speaking peers (Institute of Education Sciences, 2021). Living in poverty, regardless of language ability, is not just a financial hardship. Children in poverty often lack social and emotional resources and have a challenging home life. The stress acquired from living in poverty can affect a child's ability to learn and focus in school; inadequate food and healthcare can lead to chronic absenteeism. These factors make it even more challenging for children to succeed in school (Misbah et al., 2017; Santibanez & Gandara, 2018). English Learners in poverty are no different. ELs who are refugees may have arrived in the United States with no other belongings than those they were carrying that day. Their parents most likely do not speak any English and have a difficult time finding a job to make an income for their families. Although there are programs for the resettlement of refugees, the stipends only last for so long. Because of this, the older children in these families feel it is their responsibility to help with family expenses. These students choose to drop out of school so that they can become employed to support their families financially. It is important to note that English Learners have considerably lower education attainment than non-ELs but are more likely to be employed (Velez et al., 2016). Forty-three percent of ELs ages 16-18 are employed as compared to non-ELs at 36% (Velez et al., 2016). Educators who understand the socioeconomic status of their ELs will recognize signs of need and areas where they may be able to intervene to help these families. A student sleeping in class may not be acting lazy or disrespectful. This student may have worked the overnight shift to help support his/her family financially. Secondary aged English Learners understand the hardships that their parents went through to get them to the United States with the hope for a better and safer life. Students will take on the burden of getting a job while trying to go to school because they want to give back to their families as much as possible

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(Hanus, 2018). This is especially true when they are able to communicate in English and their parents are not.

Additionally, the families of English Learners may not understand how the U.S education system functions. They may not understand their role or their responsibilities in getting their children to attend school on a regular basis. It is imperative that schools make the home to school connection for these families (Besterman et al., 2018; Lavandez, 2011). Increasing parental involvement for ELs is paramount for their academic achievement. According to Tarasawa and Waggoner (2015), schools can and should involve English learner families in decision-making processes, provide them with information about their children's academic progress and offer them opportunities to volunteer in school activities. Schools will have to find the best ways to communicate with their EL families. Translator and interpreter services need to be readily available in order to make the connections to school seamless and less stressful for the families who do not speak the language. The EL students should never have to interpret a meeting between staff and their parents. It is also important to note that a recent report published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) stating that there is a common misconception by school personnel that the families of English Learners are not interested in their children's education (Takanishi & Menestrel, 2017). However, another report found that the parents of English Learners reported receiving less communication from schools than English-speaking parents even though they wanted their children to succeed in school just as much as the English-speaking parents report receiving less communication from schools than non-EL parents (Takanishi & Menestrel, 2017). This lack of communication can result from schools not having translation or interpretation services that are easily accessible. The linguistic barriers become even more of a hindrance to families who are new to the country and do not

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fully understand how the educational system functions in the United States (Takanishi & Menestrel, 2017). Perceived and real cultural differences between families and the schools also affect parental involvement in the education of ELs. Parents of some ELs assume teachers and staff have the expertise and take full responsibility in educating their children due to their own cultural beliefs and deference toward educators in their home countries. Research by Tarasawa and Waggoner (2015) supports the idea that school administrators and teachers who understand these barriers experienced by English learners and reach out to their EL families to find ways for them to participate in their children's education will see the academic success of their ELs increase.

### **Analysis**

#### **Educational Perspective**

The educational perspective is at the forefront of this paper. A common theme throughout the literature is how the achievement gap between English Learners and their native English-speaking peers is growing. All teachers want their students to succeed. Teachers are passionate about the subjects that they teach and have learning objectives and goals for their students to reach. Unfortunately, teachers have not been given the right training and tools to modify the curriculum to meet the language needs of their ELs (Marsh, 2018). English Learners require specific and specialized pedagogical approaches. If teachers have not been instructed in these methods, they will struggle in trying to get their English Learners to reach the academic goals that are set for all their students. It is important to note that teachers of English Learners need to keep firm goals but have flexible means in getting their English Learners to reach them. No curriculum should be eliminated when teaching English Learners. Villegas (2018) found that

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teachers “water down” the curriculum when they do not know how to change it linguistically or when the teachers believe that the learners cannot comprehend the content.

Furthermore, school administrators and teachers are bound by laws and regulations that must be followed to help English Learners acquire the English language and academic content at the same time. The U.S. Department of Education monitors the growth and academic achievement of English Learners. If negative growth is observed, school districts will be placed on school improvement plans. The goal is for all students to meet grade level standards which are then assessed through standardized means. Teachers of ELs will be held accountable for their performance on these exams. Educators who have not learned the pedagogy for English Learners will feel overwhelmed and frustrated attempting to teach ELs.

Albert Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory has been used many times to describe how prepared teachers feel in their abilities to instruct their students. This theory can be used in reference to English Learners’ confidence in their ability to use the English language. Bandura’s definition of perceived self-efficacy is “Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes” (Bandura, 1997, p.71). If one has high self-efficacy, he/she believes that they can perform well. If a person has low self-efficacy, he/she believes that he lacks the ability to perform well. Thus, both teachers and English Learners need to have high self-efficacy. First, teachers should believe in their ability to use best practices to instruct ELs. Second, ELs should have the confidence in their ability to read, write, listen, and speak in English to find success in school.

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There are four experiences in Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory. These are performance accomplishment, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and emotional and physiological states. Performance accomplishment refers to one's ability to reflect on what he/she has been able to accomplish. If the person believes that his/her performance was satisfactory or above this will lead to self-efficacy. Vicarious learning is when one analyzes the behavior of others and adjusts his/her own actions and behaviors. This can lead to improvement and thoughts on where one needs to acquire additional knowledge. Through vicarious learning, one can reach self-efficacy. Bandura also believes that verbal encouragement affects self-efficacy. When a person receives praise for the work he/she has done, self-confidence will build, and self-efficacy will follow. Finally, emotional and physiological states affect self-efficacy as well, according to Bandura. He states that we cannot believe in ourselves and our abilities if we are in a negative emotional state. Self-doubt, self-loathing, stress, and fear will inhibit the ability to reach goals, especially self-efficacy.

Bandura believes that when a person has reached self-efficacy, especially in relation to teaching, a teacher's behavior and performance will excel. Teachers will believe in their ability to instruct and engage all of their students and help them find success with the content that they are teaching. English Learners who have reached self-efficacy with their ability to use the English language will also find success and be more confident linguistically.

Themes of how to accommodate curriculum and increase student engagement were also present in the literature. Educators can differentiate their instruction to meet the diverse linguistic abilities of their English Learners. Modifying assignments will make them more accessible for students at lower proficiency levels. Students will become more engaged in their classes, thus, interact with and acquire more of the English language (Auslander, 2022). The students will

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reach self-efficacy more quickly. As their language skills develop, English learners will be able to complete higher order thinking activities in English and will eventually perform better on state assessments (Fenner et al., 2017).

### **Cognitive Perspective**

Another overarching theme is language acquisition. Language acquisition and cognition are interrelated aspects of human development (Weinert, 2022). Language is the means with which humans communicate and gain knowledge. Thus, language is directly linked to cognitive abilities such as memory, attention, and problem solving. Because of this, English Learners who are not given the right tools or ability to access the language at their proficiency level, will be negatively impacted in terms of the cognitive perspective (Finley, 2018). ELs who are immersed in the English language all day at school yet are not able to comprehend anything they are learning will not develop the problem-solving skills that one would if he or she knows the language of instruction and communication.

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development emphasizes the importance of cultural and social interactions for learning. He believed that learning is a collaborative experience, and that social negotiation is essential for building knowledge and understanding new ideas (Gowrie NSW, n.d.). Thus, those students who are not able to interact with their teachers or other students will not be able to build knowledge or understand new concepts. Vygotsky's theory can be applied in the classroom to help students grasp difficult concepts in a way that is not the standard memorizing of facts through a strategy called reciprocal teaching. During reciprocal teaching, students and teachers work together to clarify and understand a new concept by summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting which precede students attempting to use the new concept on their own. These social interactions to

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facilitate learning required by Vygotsky's theory would occur through this method.

Unfortunately for English Learners who are not able to participate in the reciprocal teaching method because they cannot communicate in the language being used, many will miss out on key cognitive developmental actions.

The stress of listening to content in a new language and attempting to translate into a first language hinders cognition. Educators may not realize how challenging it can be for English Learners to concentrate throughout the entire school day without having a break from hearing another language. ELs are trying to construct meaning from verbal input constantly. ELs with a low English proficiency level will have great difficulties with listening comprehension. When textbooks are in English, signs are in English, announcements are in English, and directions are in English, these can lead to a sensory overload for English Learners and inhibit their cognition (Hanus, 2016).

Stephen Krashen's 5 Hypotheses of Second Language Acquisition is another theory that explains how learners can acquire a second language (Krashen, 1975). The five hypotheses are: The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis where Krashen says there is a difference between learning the language and acquiring the language subconsciously and consciously. The Monitor Hypothesis is when the learned system of language begins to check and correct the acquired system of language. The third is the Natural Order Hypothesis. This is when language learners develop the rules of language. The fourth is the Input Hypothesis where learners are able to understand language that is slightly above their level (also known as comprehensible input). Finally, the Affective Filter Hypothesis is when influences such as motivation and stress inhibit the success of language acquisition. Although all of these hypotheses affect how a learner acquires a new language, the cognitive perspective on language learning focuses on the need for

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the affective filter for English Learners to be low in order to grasp new concepts. Affective factors that influence language acquisition include motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-esteem. Negative attitudes such as stress, boredom, and lack of motivation create the affective filter. The higher the affective filter, the less likely a student will be able to absorb “comprehensible input” (Wiik, 2023). Krashen’s theory of comprehensible input is that language learners are able to understand language input that is somewhat higher than their current level of language. Teachers and English Learners should identify factors that contribute to a high affective filter and find ways to decrease them within the class setting so that ELs can acquire the language.

### **Psychosocial Perspective**

Another theme in the research is the importance of culture and belonging for English Learners in schools leading to the psychosocial perspective. Social and cultural factors influence language learning. English Learners benefit from interacting with their peers in order to learn the language (Misbah et al., 2017). These social interactions should be both with speakers of the same language level and with more capable peers. When schools or classrooms do not embrace the culture and language of ELs, they may feel isolated and not able to make connections with the teacher or other students. This sense of isolation is detrimental not only for language learning, but also for their sense of belonging. Kaplan (2010) stated that “the basic premise underlying a social psychological perspective of second language acquisition is that language is a defining characteristic of the individual”. When students are unable to communicate with others, they may lose their sense of self.

Additional themes in the literature include ways for educators to incorporate their students’ cultures into their curriculum and classroom. Educators want to encourage their ELs to share their culture with the class. These strategies will result in ELs identifying with the class



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and feeling like part of the group (Gay, 2018). Educators can create designated times throughout the day to help their English Learners interact with others in English. By providing models and conversational scaffolds, ELs at any proficiency level will be able to have that socialization with their classmates and begin to learn and interact with the language. Language learning will occur when social and cultural factors are met for English Learners.

Directly related to the psychosocial perspective is Maslow's Theory of Hierarchical Needs. This theory of human motivation can explain why some English Learners are able to thrive in school and some are not. Maslow's hierarchy has five levels of need: physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-realization. In order to move to the next level, all other needs have to be met. Physiological needs include the basic human needs of air, food, water, clothing, and shelter. When any student, regardless of EL status, does not have these basic needs met, they will not be able to engage fully in their education. The second level of need is safety. Humans need to have a feeling of personal security and good health. The third level is belonging. People have to have friendship, a sense of connection, and family. Next in Maslow's hierarchy is the need for esteem. Humans require respect, status, recognition, and self-esteem. Finally, once all of the other needs are met, is self-realization. This is the desire to become the best one can be. This is when a person is motivated to reach goals and set more. A person will be motivated when all of these needs are met.

Thus, when thinking about language learning from the psychosocial perspective, we have to look at the need of belonging. When English Learners, especially if they are brand new to the country, enter a school and cannot speak the language nor understand anything about the culture, they will feel like outsiders. All humans, according to Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs, require a sense of belonging. Teachers and school administrators should work with the ESL

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teachers to understand how best to create a welcoming school environment for all cultures and languages. Schools do their very best to ensure that students have their basic needs met of food, water, clean clothes and shelter. The focus must also be on assisting students in making friends and feeling that sense of connection. Furthermore, focus should also be on English Learners' self-esteem. Confidence to use a new language is very difficult to achieve, especially for middle and high school students who just want to be like their other classmates. School counselors and teachers can act in ways or do certain activities with ELs to help boost their self-esteem and feeling of respect. The ultimate goal is to get students motivated to learn and achieve their goals. Motivation affects academic success. Those students who are motivated, whose needs have all been met, will be successful in school (Bower, 2017). English Learners, whose needs have been met, will also be motivated. As their needs are met, they will begin producing the language and performing in class.

### **Ethical Implications**

If the needs of English Learners and their educators are not met, there will be significant adverse impacts or ethical implications. The issues that arise are the result of both unequal educational opportunities and poor quality of education. Equal educational access is a constitutional right for the citizens of the United States. Education is an opportunity for all and should be the same for all students in US schools. This problem is similar to racially segregated schools during the civil rights movement. However, this type of discrimination is in a much less visible way. Non-English-speaking students are not being prevented from attending certain schools or separated into different classes or wings of a school. What is happening is that their educational and emotional needs are not being met in an equal way. This is a much more subtle

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form of discrimination but does ultimately lead to English Learners receiving an unequal education.

As a result of unequal education, English Learners can become less interested in learning and develop negative feelings toward school. This can lead to them misbehaving in school and eventually dropping out. Lower educational attainment has many long-term effects for students and society. English Learners may leave school before they have acquired basic reading and writing skills in English. This is going to affect their employability and ability to obtain high-paying jobs. The result can be unemployment which can either continue their position in the cycle of poverty or start a new generation in this cycle which is very challenging to exit. The inability to work or to find suitable employment can increase the risk of participation in illegal activities; those with lower educational rates are more likely to be incarcerated (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020).

Poor quality of education is also a result of this problem going unresolved. Educators need the tools and trainings to meet the needs of all of their students. With the population of English Learners increasing every year, educators, more than ever, have to know holistically how best to work with their ELs. When they do not, the students are not only not learning grade level content or acquiring the English language, but they are also suffering socially and emotionally. English Learners feel socially isolated in schools where their culture and language are not welcomed or acknowledged. This can lead to the inability to cope when one does not feel accepted. When a student cannot cope with challenges in or outside of school, stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues will surface. As a result of not feeling like part of the school, these students may not feel comfortable or even know about resources in and outside of school that exist to help them.

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It is also important to note that educators are always considering ethical implications of what is occurring educationally in their schools. They take a professional oath to act morally and ethically when planning, teaching, and interacting with their students. Hence, knowing what students need to succeed yet not being able to provide that to them is detrimental to their view of their professional responsibilities. These ethical implications contribute to the negative viewpoints from the psychosocial and cognitive perspectives related to this problem. Fair and quality educational opportunities are attainable if all stakeholders involved are prepared and given the best tools and resources.

English Learners bring rich culture and diverse backgrounds to school communities. If ELs are not welcomed into the schools and not asked to share their ideas and cultural experiences within their classes, generations of native English-speaking students will miss out on the opportunities to learn more about the world and become more accepting and understanding of different cultures and diverse ways of life. At the same time that ELs are sharing their cultures, native English-speaking students can be sharing traditions and ways of life that are new to ELs. These social interactions among diverse groups of students can positively impact society if the opportunities exist.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The field of education is inundated with policies that are constantly changing because of updated research or because of the changes in political powers. With the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, the states were given more say in how to show that their students are succeeding academically rather than having a federal one-size fits all model. While states and educators applauded this, more policies have to be updated as the demographics of the student body in the United States is changing. Policies protecting the educational rights of English Learners came to

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the forefront in 1970 and have since been updated when the Office of Civil Rights wrote a memorandum that ELLs had to be given equal educational opportunities and schools must:

Where the inability to speak and understand the English language excludes national origin minority group children from effective participation in the educational program offered by a school district, the district must take affirmative steps to rectify the language deficiency in order to open its instructional program to these students (U. S. Department of Education, 2000).

What is problematic is that there are no specific guidelines as to what constitutes the “affirmative steps” states, districts, and schools have to take in order to ensure that the language barrier does not inhibit equal participation in educational opportunities.

There have also been significant case laws declaring that school systems must provide students with instructional supports to help them overcome language barriers. Even most recently on January 20, 2021, President Biden signed the executive order on “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government” (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021). This order aims to advance equity in education and provide all students with the same opportunities to reach their full potential. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Education granted \$120 million toward professional development projects related to the improvement of instruction for ELs in October 2022 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). In February 2023, \$18 million in federal grants were awarded to teacher preparation programs for teachers of color whose focus was on preparing more bilingual and multilingual educators.

There is starting to be a shift in focus toward the academic success of English Learners. As much as federal grants will help, states still have the control over rules and regulations related

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to teacher certification requirements and program models in schools for English Learners.

Because one in four students will be identified as an English learner by the year 2025 according to the National Education Association (2020), it is essential that educational policies now reflect this shift in demographics. Educators are extremely skilled at meeting the needs of their students; however, the complex needs of English Learners have not been at the forefront of education. Schools, administrators, teachers, and law makers must start developing systems to best teach English Learners. Educators need support to focus on the four domains of language – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – while helping students learn to use them in both the social and academic contexts. Educators’ self-efficacy will be enhanced once they have learned English language teaching strategies.

In order to establish beneficial policies for teachers and English Learners, needs assessments of various groups should be completed. Teachers, administrators, families, English Learners, school counselors and community members have to come together and discuss what is missing and hindering ELs in achieving academic success. Teachers may say that they do not have enough time nor strategies to teach ELs. Administrators may believe that there needs to be less focus on standardized tests. The English Learner students may express how they do not feel welcome in the school and how they wish that their culture and language was more represented. EL families have a different, yet invaluable viewpoint of what may be barriers to education for their children. EL families may say that it is just the language, however, the parents of ELs may also explain how their children could not read or write in their first language. EL families may express that their children ask them for help, but the EL parents also lack the educational skills to complete assignments. Listening to all stakeholders who may have an effect on the EL population success in school will help guide new policies.

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The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has to ensure appropriate funding, if not an increase in funding, for more programs that work with English Learners. More funding can be allocated to recruiting and hiring bilingual staff within school districts. Bilingual staff will break down the walls of communication between schools and families which will increase EL participation in school which has so many benefits. Additionally, the DOE should offer current teachers the ability to obtain their ESL teaching certificate with no cost to the teachers. This type of certificate is an add-on to teacher's main certifications and can be accomplished in an accelerated time frame. There also need to be set policies and laws for textbook developers to include beneficial strategies and accommodations for all English language levels. School districts spend federal money on books; therefore, the DOE can require these books to have specific parameters to meet the needs of English Learners.

State departments of education should change their policies for Pre-Service Teacher Programs (PTPs) in universities that mandate what required courses and field work placements (i.e. student teaching) are needed to become certified to teach. English Learners have to be incorporated into all education courses in some way. Methods courses can explain how to include culture and first language into various lesson activities. Foundational education courses can discuss linguistics and theories on second language learning. Field work, both observations and student-teaching, should require working with English Learners. Real experience will give new teachers the opportunity to recognize what strategies can work with ELs. PTPs can redesign lesson templates required for their student teachers to now include both language and content objectives. This practice will have new teachers recognizing how they can incorporate language skills into all of their lessons while teaching the content at the same time.

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Policy changes have to include veteran teachers who may have obtained their teaching license before there was the drastic increase in ELs in the United States. These teachers deserve to be given the time and opportunity to attend professional development and trainings so that they can instruct all of their students. These professional developments have to focus on how ELs' background and cultural experiences impact the way that they learn. Moreover, policies should give teachers the time to explore the cultures of the students in their buildings and develop ways to incorporate them in the school to create a welcoming school environment.

One last, yet extremely invaluable, policy change would be the creation of newcomer academies. Newcomer academies are not entirely new policies, however, there are very few across the country. These are schools that new English Learners with little to no English skills attend for six months to one year before matriculating into the main school within a district. Newcomer academies are staffed with teachers who are certified in both content areas and ESL. Students have small class sizes where content is modified to the lowest level of language yet keep the content goals the same as their English-speaking peers (Auslander, 2022). A school like this will help newcomer ELs learn the basics of communication and how school works in the United States. This will give students time to acclimate to their new environments and help reduce the culture shock that they may experience. These academies can also help identify previous literacy skills in their first languages. Teachers can be more aware of the type of background knowledge that these students have and identify any gaps in education these students might have. All of these policy recommendations will benefit not only the English Learners but also the teachers, schools, and communities.

### **Summary**



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The goal of this paper was to explore the complex, emerging problem related to the achievement gap of English Learners in U.S. public schools and to examine the pre-requisite skills teachers of ELs need to have to help meet the unique needs of English Learners. Through the research, common themes of teacher preparation, ELs' academic performance, specialized instruction, and external factors surfaced. Each of these topics can be analyzed individually to gather even more information on how to close the achievement gap for English Learners.

The idea of teacher preparation and professional development on the strategies and teaching techniques to modify curriculum for English Learners was at the forefront of the research. Educators have been tasked with a multitude of responsibilities in the schools to make sure that their students perform on standardized testing. These high demands on teachers can often seem insurmountable and then to add on the responsibility of teaching a challenging content to students who do not know the language can seem impossible. Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy was also intertwined with the research on teacher preparation and English Learners. Most educators of ELs have not received sufficient training in how to teach ELs and thus, do not feel able to do so (Roy-Campbell, 2013). With Bandura's theory, these teachers often have low self-efficacy and cannot adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of the English Learners in their classrooms. This can lead to an implicit bias that teachers do not realize is impacting the expectations they hold for their ELs. When teachers do not believe ELs can understand content, they may lower or remove learning standards which result in unequal educational opportunities.

The idea of culturally responsive teaching was also examined. Educators can have students from all over the world, speaking many different languages with very different background experiences. English Learners and their classmates will benefit immensely if these

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students have teachers who are knowledgeable in how to incorporate culture and make connections to their students' lived experiences. Teacher preparation programs and professional development within the schools can address this area and show authentic ways to integrate language and culture into their curriculum. Educators will require more time, resources, and support in order to learn how to be culturally responsive (Gay, 2018).

It is also important to state again that 25% of students in the United States will be classified as an English Learner by 2025 (National Education Association, 2020). This sub-group is getting larger and larger every school year. So, when the achievement gap is so large, educators must act now to prevent this from growing even more. ELs are not performing at the same level as their English-speaking peers. Learning a language and content such as biology or calculus at the same time is extremely challenging. When the language of instruction is unknown, an EL struggles to make sense of anything that a teacher is asking them to do. In order to succeed academically, ELs have to feel connected to their teachers, classmates, and schools. If they cannot communicate with anyone during the school day, they lose the motivation to learn the language and then learn the academic content areas. Krashen's theory of the Affective Filter shows that stress and anxiety will affect the ability to learn the language. When ELs do not feel a sense of belonging, their affective filter will increase, and no learning will occur. The achievement gap will only continue unless educators act now to be aware of the best practices to teach English Learners.

Specialized instruction for English Learners was also discussed throughout the research. The SIOP model gives detailed steps on how to create lessons that teach both content and language at the same time (Echevarria et al., 2013). Focusing on lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice and application, lesson

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delivery, and review and assessment, teachers will be able to overcome that barrier for students who are learning the language of instruction and the material at the same time. However, in order to use this specialized instruction, teachers need time and proper resources to integrate these strategies into their class lessons.

Furthermore, there are so many external factors that teachers have no control over that still impact their English Learners academically. As stated previously, ELs have varying background experiences. Some may have moved to the United States with their families because of a new job, others may have been living in refugee camps because their towns fell during times of war. No matter what, the social-emotional needs of English Learners will affect them in school. Being proactive and having special school and community resources to help students navigate these issues will not only help the students but will help the school community as a whole. ELs may be living in poverty. They may lack support from parents because either they do not speak the language or are working multiple jobs. External factors require support from as many professionals inside and outside the schools as possible.

Finally, as this problem was analyzed through the cognitive, psychosocial and educational perspectives, themes of socialization and the feelings of belonging emerged. Vygotsky's and Maslow's theories reflect the need of cultural and social interactions in order to facilitate language learning. Schools that create welcoming environments and that encourage students to share their cultural experiences will see ELs learn the language and succeed academically.

To conclude, the federal government is beginning to allocate funds to increase teacher preparation to meet the diverse needs of English Learners. Research is also increasing on whether or not teacher preparation programs are dedicating substantial time to instruct teachers

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on the specialized instruction required of ELs. But at this time, do the educators of English Learners have the prerequisite skills to meet the unique and complex needs of this group of students? The answer is no. Policies and funding are beginning to focus on the achievement gap of ELs, but state departments of education should have specific requirements for current teachers and those learning to be teachers on the instructional strategies for English Learners.

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