

## WHAT DO MAINSTREAM TEACHERS THINK, KNOW, AND THINK THEY KNOW ABOUT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

Shannon M. Hilliker\*

Binghamton University, State University of New York (SUNY)

Alexandra Laletina

Binghamton University, State University of New York (SUNY)

Mainstream schoolteachers are returning to university programs for ENL (English as a New Language) extension certification to better support ELLs in their classrooms. This research article highlights what mainstream teachers think and know about the ELLs in their classrooms as they participate in professional development coursework and articulate their attitudes and beliefs surrounding ENL students. Answers to survey questions by the teachers gave an overview of their multicultural experiences and background. In addition, course submissions, individual interviews, and a focus group with the teachers revealed their understanding and ideas on three main topics: (a) students' linguistic experiences; (b) students' cultural background; and (c) students' motivation. The findings are important for teacher educators to consider as they develop curriculum and professional development for mainstream teachers working with ELLs.

*Keywords: attitudes and beliefs, extension certification, mainstream teachers, professional development*

**Recent** developments in English language education in New York State embrace two interconnected aspects—reconceptualization of who are English language learners (ELLs), and then integrating them into the mainstream classroom. New York State now uses the term “English as a new language (ENL)” to refer to the expanding multilingual population in the state. This change is a significant replacement for ESL (English as a second language). It accomplishes two educational goals: to focus on learners and their families that may speak multiple languages rather than one or two, and to acknowledge that the student population of the state is increasingly diverse and that students come to the classroom with different language needs based on the literacy level of their other languages.

In addition, this change in terminology was accompanied by a change in the time ELLs spend with an ENL teacher (called stand-alone ENL) and the time they spend in a classroom co-taught by an ENL teacher and a content area teacher or a dually certified content/ENL teacher (called Integrated ENL). There are now five English proficiency levels in assessing ELLs: Entering (Beginning), Emerging (Low Intermediate), Transitioning (Intermediate), Expanding (Advanced), and Commanding (Proficient). These levels designate how many contact hours students receive for English language support. For example, an Entering ENL student gets 3 units of study (540 minutes) a week: one unit (180 minutes) must be stand-alone ENL, one unit in integrated ENL, and the third unit is flexible, where the student receives either type, typically based

on his or her schedule and individual needs. An Expanding student, for example, gets one unit of study a week in Integrated ENL; the rest of the school day for that ENL student is spent in the mainstream or content area classroom(s).

Content area teachers do have some sort of knowledge about ESL students through experience, a class in their teacher education programs, and professional development. They do not, however, have the focused expertise of an ENL instructor. It is important for those in the field of TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages) to understand the needs of these mainstream teachers when they come back to school to seek dual certification, particularly when considering that they will be called on to provide Integrated ENL services.

The charge of New York State is to ensure that all students are successful and college or career ready. Increasing numbers and diversity among English language learners, coupled with policies concerning ELLs in the mainstream classroom, are not typical just of New York State. Other states across the country face similar issues and react with similar policies (de Jong, Harper, & Coady, 2013; Villegas & Lucas, 2011), which raises important questions about the preparation of mainstream teachers to work with linguistically diverse students. Data from several studies suggest that teachers largely feel underqualified to work with ELLs (Batt, 2008; Hansen-Thomas & Cavagnetto, 2010; Hansen-Thomas, Richins, Kakkur, & Okeyo, 2016; Newman, Samimy, & Romstedt, 2010; Pettit, 2011b; Reeves, 2006; Rubinstein-Avila & Lee, 2014) and hold a number of misconceptions about language learning (Pettit, 2011a; Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005). Professional development programs have been successful in changing teachers' beliefs about both ELL education and teachers' classroom practices of working with ELLs (Choi & Morrison, 2014; Kolano & King, 2015).

Schools of education need to be prepared to educate teachers not only through coursework, but also through professional development opportunities that deliver training to help ensure that teachers can support ELLs in their classrooms. Although extensive research has been carried out on the teacher knowledge base in general (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Grossman, 1990; Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 1989; Guerrero, 2005; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Shulman, 1987) and ESL teacher cognition (Franco-Fuenmayor, Padrón, & Waxman, 2015; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Gatbonton, 2008; Johnston & Goettsch, 2006; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Liu, 2013; Wright, 2010), there has been no detailed investigations of what mainstream teachers already know and what they need to learn to support ELLs in their classrooms. An exception to this is de Jong et al.'s (2013) framework of enhanced mainstream teacher expertise. To consider that perspective, this study engaged inservice teachers returning for ENL certification to explore their knowledge base about ENL students.

## Literature Review

Shulman (1987) proposed a model of the teacher knowledge base with nine interrelated components: content knowledge; general pedagogical knowledge; curriculum knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge; knowledge of learners (students) and their characteristics; knowledge of educational contexts; and knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values. Further discussions and research on teacher knowledge focused on pedagogical content knowledge, which is the blending of content knowledge and pedagogy and distinguishes teachers as both content specialists and pedagogues.

In the field of language teaching, teacher cognition (knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions) has been widely researched (see Borg, 2003, for an overview). It has been argued that pedagogical content knowledge is radically different from other content areas because language serves as both content and medium of instruction. In their study, Johnston and Goettsch (2006) highlight the dynamic and holistic nature of L2 teacher knowledge, observing that teachers' understanding of language was constantly changing as they processed and modified what they already knew. Although the authors discuss teacher

knowledge in three discrete categories borrowed from Shulman (1987)—content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of students—they conclude that “in reality these categories are melded together in complex and indeed inextricable ways to produce multifaceted, holistic accounts of, and actions in, language teaching” (Johnston & Goettsch, p. 461), as teachers “draw on all the various components of the knowledge at once” (p. 463). To emphasize the holistic nature of teacher knowledge in L2 teaching, Woods (1996) proposed the notion of BAK (beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge). It is interesting to note that novice and experienced second language teachers alike possess comparable kinds of teacher knowledge, although each group focuses on different categories within the knowledge base when it comes to teaching (Gatbonton, 2008): experienced teachers are more concerned with handling student output and providing language input, whereas novice teachers concentrate on student behavior and reactions. Novice teachers are also more likely to note the negative and overlook the positive in student behavior.

To date, several frameworks on ENL teacher knowledge have been proposed (Fillmore & Snow, 2002; Téllez & Waxman, 2005). These frameworks highlight the role of language and culture in shaping educational experiences for bilingual students. Similarly, teaching standards for ENL teachers developed by professional organizations such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and the TESOL/CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) emphasize the importance of linguistic and cultural knowledge for ESL teachers (NBPTS, 2016; TESOL/CAEP, 2010). Téllez and Waxman (2005) contend that:

[I]t seems to us that these organizations have developed thoughtful and warranted goals for ELD [English Language Development] teachers. Our concern regarding the knowledge base for developing high-quality ELD teachers is not the standards themselves, but the failure of the various professional groups to prioritize among their standards. We believe that teacher preparation at either the preservice or in-service level could address only a fraction of the standards they promote given the time and resources available for teacher development. Educators have known for many years that the challenge in developing instructional goals is not what knowledge to include but what knowledge can be thoughtfully excluded. (p. 10)

In order to address the question of what knowledge and skills are essential and cannot be excluded for mainstream teachers of ELLs, de Jong and Harper (2005) and de Jong et al. (2013) proposed two frameworks of teaching expertise for mainstream teachers of ELLs: based on previous research, the authors identify what mainstream teachers may fail to know and what they need to know to work effectively with ELLs. Both frameworks focus on culture and language as the main knowledge domains. Knowledge of culture is analyzed within three interrelated contexts: foundations of literacy and the instructional role of language, cultural context of schools and mainstream instructional practices, and the cultural identity of bilingual learners shaped by their linguistic and cultural experiences. Each set of authors highlights that language and culture are processes—the means and goals of instructional practices. In other words, everything teachers and students do at school—routine practices, curriculum design, instructional tasks, assignments, and participation in instructional activities—is culturally constructed. These researchers suggest that teachers need to be able to learn about their bilingual students intimately as well as to be able to locate and access resources about students’ cultural and linguistic experiences. Finally, teachers are expected to be able to reflect on and deconstruct everyday school practices from a cultural perspective so that they can adapt them to create an ELL-inclusive learning environment.

Furthermore, studies on mainstream teacher knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions of ELLs (Batt, 2008; Hansen-Thomas & Cavagnetto, 2010; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2010; Pettit, 2011b;

Reeves, 2006; Rubinstein-Avila & Lee, 2014) conclude that more education about ELLs is essential to incorporate into teacher education curricula because mainstream teacher knowledge of ELLs is limited and widespread beliefs are oftentimes misguided.

Penfield's (1987) pioneering study on teacher beliefs about English language learners in the mainstream classroom revealed that most mainstream teachers do not perceive themselves as adequately competent to work with ELLs and hold a number of misconceptions about second language acquisition and ESL education in general. For instance, most teachers believed that ESL teachers should know the native language of their students and deliver instruction in that language. Student underachievement, however, was most often attributed to student laziness and lack of motivation.

In 2011, Pettit (2011b) published a review of research, examining the scholarship from 1987 to 2007 regarding teachers' beliefs about ELLs in the mainstream classroom. A common theme in the studies is that teachers misunderstand how long it takes children to develop second language skills and underestimate the role native language plays in second language acquisition, and as a result perceive ELLs in their classroom without much sympathy. Though length of teaching experience was not a consistent factor in predicting teachers' beliefs about ELLs, teacher training in working with ELLs consistently predicts more positive perceptions of ELLs and more open attitudes toward bilingual education. For instance, in Mantero and McVicker's study (2006), teachers who took at least three credit hours in courses that focused on ELLs had more positive perceptions about ESL students in their classrooms than those who did not have this type of professional development. Recent studies on teachers' beliefs support and extend the findings summarized in Pettit's (2011b) review. Teachers with more training received through a variety of ways have more accurate assumptions about ELL education and more positive views on ELLs (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2011; Pettit, 2011a).

### **Study Purpose**

The knowledge gap between what mainstream teachers know about ELLs and what they need to know based on conceptual frameworks proposed by de Jong and Harper (2005) and de Jong et al. (2013) brings into question the content of teacher preparation and professional development programs. What knowledge should either be included or excluded from initial teacher preparation and continuing professional development? Do novice and experienced mainstream teachers possess a comparable knowledge base about ELLs?

Gleeson and Davison (2016) argue that for professional learning to take place, inservice teachers need to experience any dissonance between their existing subject teaching beliefs, professional knowledge, and practices and those related to teaching ELLs. Similarly, Thompson and Zeuli (1999) maintain that professional development should begin with the premise that teachers are learners whose existing beliefs need to be transformed. For any professional development to be successful, the participating teachers need to be taken out of their comfort zone, yet supported in their thinking and learning. To date, most studies on mainstream teachers' beliefs about ELLs have relied on survey data to provide a broad picture of the mainstream teacher knowledge base in that area. De Jong and Harper's (2005) and de Jong et al.'s (2013) conceptual frameworks, for example, are based on research reviews and the authors' research with mainstream elementary teachers.

The study presented here seeks to examine inservice mainstream teachers' knowledge and beliefs about ELLs in greater depth in the context of contemporary language education policies. Because the participants are drawn from the pool of teachers who voluntarily return to school for more education, we explored the sources of dissonance within teachers' existing beliefs and knowledge that led them to pursue more professional development. Such a study should enhance our understanding of the

mainstream teacher knowledge base in relation to educating linguistically diverse students and provide teacher insight into the content needed for their professional development.

Two research questions guided the study: What do mainstream teachers who return to school for additional certification know and think about their bilingual students? How does this knowledge of students compare to what they need to know about these students?

Teachers' personal experiences help them relate to culturally diverse students (Marx, 2008). Because of this perspective, we think it is important to understand the personal linguistic and cultural experiences that may prompt teachers to question the relevance of their existing knowledge and skills and to seek further education and professional development.

## **Study Context**

The study took place during the 2016–2017 academic year, within the Clinically Rich Intensive Teacher Institute (CRITI) at one of the public research universities in upstate New York. The CRITI program, an advanced certification program, is partially subsidized by the New York State Department of Education to offer current teachers an opportunity to gain additional New York State certification in K–12 English as a second language (ESL). Participating teachers work in different school districts, which can be described as urban or suburban, within the same county. English language learners constitute less than 2% of the total student population. Some schools may have only one ELL, with the number of enrolled ELLs varying from year to year. Low enrollment of ELLs means that the resources to support ENL learning are not abundant. Some schools do not have permanent ENL teacher positions; at other schools, depending on need the position may be part time or short term. There are no special resource centers to support ENL learning. Thus, professional development through additional graduate coursework is one of the only local ways for mainstream teachers to broaden their knowledge base about ELLs.

It is noteworthy, however, that despite low ENL student enrollment the student population at the public schools in the county is pretty much homogeneous. The ethnic makeup of this population is as follows: White (76%), Black (9%), Hispanic (6%), Multiracial (9%), and Asian (3%). More than half of the student population (53%) comes from economically disadvantaged households, and 14% of students receive special education services. Thus, the student population is culturally diverse. By using the word "culture" we emphasize that race and socioeconomic background are socially constructed, overlapping entities.

Seventeen teachers were enrolled or are currently enrolled in CRITI coursework, and 11 of them volunteered to participate in this study. From the diversity perspective, they represent a homogeneous group, as they are all white women with a similar cultural demographic and education level; they do, however, differ in professional categories: they teach in different content areas and grade levels and have a range of teaching experience. Table 1 summarizes the participating teachers' background. All names are pseudonyms.

**Table 1.** *Participants' Demographic Information*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Number of Years as a Certified Teacher</b>
Amber	Math, ESL	Adults	8
Amy	Elementary	1	15
Anjie	Elementary	Pre-K	24
Emily	Earth Science	10	4
Erica	English	12	14
Hailey	Elementary	2	15
Jessica	Special Education	7	20+
Kristi	English	10, 11	15
Linda	Science	6	1
Sara	Reading	K-3	16
Tonya	Music	K-5	28

Although most of these teachers possess considerable teaching experience and ample teacher knowledge about students that is relevant to their content area, they were feeling that they needed more knowledge to support ELLs in their classroom. Whenever they spoke about ELLs, they referred to specific students they have worked with and/or are typical in their classrooms. The comments teachers made in the classroom and their passion and devotion to ELLs, in fact, prompted the development of the study. Hilliker (author 1) was teaching regular courses in the CRITI program and had met all the participants personally; the goal of providing them with appropriate knowledge about ELLs that would be relevant across different content disciplines and student age groups drove the study. In order to identify these missing funds of knowledge, both authors examined these participating teachers' existing knowledge and beliefs.

### **Study Methodology**

After the study proposal received Institutional Review Board clearance, Hilliker recruited participants and started data collection, which took place over two consecutive semesters and included different data sources. At the beginning of the study, participants filled in a questionnaire summing up their teaching background and experience working with English language learners. Teachers documented their reflections and thoughts throughout the coursework, which focused on second language acquisition, and how their readings and what they were learning related to their teaching. These reflections took the form of an initial beliefs inventory on specific topics prior to class discussion or were part of their online journaling course requirement. Online journals were devoted to teachers' reflections on their experiences with an international student or a conversation partner ("pen pal"). During the second semester each participant was interviewed individually, for about 40 minutes each. During the last week of each semester, all participating teachers gathered for a focus group interview. The questions used for the demographic information, focus group interview, and individual interviews are given in Appendices A-C.

The analysis of the questionnaire data includes descriptive statistics. Data analysis of the interviews, focus groups, and written reflections was ongoing throughout the study, using a constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We examined teachers' beliefs both within each participant's dataset and across participants and identified recurring patterns representing teachers' conceptions of ELLs.

We used two coding systems to code each data source: an analytic coding system (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) and a descriptive coding system (Huberman & Miles, 1994). We began by examining the data,

focusing on the first category in de Jong et al.'s (2013) framework: contextual understanding of bilingual learners linguistic and cultural experiences. We also coded data using open-ended, descriptive codes that we then further examined as a data set and recoded, collapsing and changing categories using a pattern-coding system.

This dual coding system provided a useful way to look at the data, both to investigate the phenomenon systematically and to remain open to other aspects of the teacher knowledge base. In particular, as we looked over the interviews and coursework materials, we noticed that the teachers had particular ways of talking about why ELLs succeeded or failed in their classrooms. We realized further that these assumptions about student learning were also related to teachers' knowledge and beliefs about ELLs. Coding was conducted separately by each author; the resulting codings were substantially similar, though minor differences were noted and subsequently examined separately.

## Findings

### Teachers' Own Linguistic and Cultural Experiences

The teachers in the ESL certification program have had varied, but what we would consider minimal, multicultural and foreign language experiences. In general, the teachers were surveyed about their foreign language learning experiences, time spent abroad or with international people, and access to information about ESL and multicultural education. Two teachers reported that they have an intermediate grasp of a foreign language, while the others reported an elementary level of foreign language; two of the 11 had no foreign language competence, although they indicated they took one college-level FL course. More specifically, four of the teachers had beginning proficiency in two different languages, while the other seven had exposure to just one. Five of the teachers took one FL class in college, while the rest took between two and six. All of the participants indicated that their FL classes focused on conversational use of the language, and three of them indicated that there had been a cultural aspect to their course(s).

When the teachers were asked about their experience with multicultural education, two of them said they had never had a course that focused on multicultural education, four stated they had had a whole course on multicultural education, and six said that a unit or part of a course in their previous teacher education curriculum had been focused on multicultural education. In addition, teachers were asked about coursework with a TESOL focus: six of them have had two courses (including the one they were enrolled in for the CRITI program) and four have had one course, but the others had not had a full TESOL-focused course.

Thinking about their access to foreign people and cultures, two teachers indicated that they had studied abroad—one was in the Peace Corps for more than a year and the other for a short-term holiday break. Ten of the teachers have traveled abroad for intervals ranging from a week up to more than a year total in another country. Two of the teachers had traveled to Canada, two other teachers had traveled to Europe and Canada, two to Asia and Canada, one to Canada and Latin America, and three had been to four continents. Because the travel abroad experience is unique in their life, they remember it vividly when they reflect on second language learning or interacting with foreigners, and often referred to these international experiences as a way to relate to ELLs. Two of the teachers had taught outside of the United States—one in Paraguay and the other in Taiwan. Finally, teachers were asked if they ever had an international friend or pen pal. Ten out of the 11 participants have had an international friend and four of them have had more than one international friend. Three of the teachers indicated that they had an international pen pal prior to the start of the study.

## Teachers' Understanding of ELLs' Linguistic Experiences

Although teachers have a different depth of understanding of ELLs' linguistic experiences, they all shared the viewpoint that language is a barrier for ELLs' learning and that all ELLs in general need extra support in building vocabulary and grammar accuracy. It came as a surprise to them to learn and observe that ELLs may have a range of proficiency levels. Two teachers made these comments about their interaction with their international pen pal at the end of the course: "I was surprised to find that Mike was a very competent speaker of English. He does not speak what I would call 'fluent English,' but he is clear in his message" (Emily); "After taking this course, I think my most important takeaway is that we need to differentiate according to the ESL learner's needs (Hailey)." Linda, another participant, questioned whether her conversation partner would be able to understand one of Mark Twain's novels and deconstruct racial stereotypes. Furthermore, though some teachers realized that they needed to adapt their instruction to their ELLs, they viewed ENL adaptation as requiring the inclusion of vocabulary and grammar teaching in their instructional goals: "When teaching ELLs I would certainly attempt to correct improper grammar, as appropriate," Jessica noted.

All participating teachers held on to the standard American English concept as some sort of bar that their non-native speakers needed to meet. When asked to reflect on their conversation partner's language, teachers immediately noted whether their international pal produced error-free English. Grammar accuracy is the primary criterion by which they assessed a person's command of language. As an example, Emily's comment was that whatever "roughness" is present in an international pal's writing is labeled as nonstandard grammar:

The student claims her English is not as it could be, and I have noticed some grammar errors. For example, the student stated that "My English is not good as well as it should be." A little awkward to say, [but] with more experience such grammar mistakes will be corrected.

As ELLs progress in their coursework they develop a more nuanced understanding of a language learning continuum and other issues a language learner may experience. In her initial journal, Sara commented at first that her partner's English was "pretty good," while in her later journals she was more able to identify specific problems:

I don't believe that she is very comfortable with English since the responses I have gotten back from her are very short and to the point. She has not asked any questions about me, so the conversation is very forced and awkward. Most of her writing is in the present tense and does not flow well but I am able to understand it. It reminds me of when I am communicating with my Spanish student in my classroom. I only converse in the present tense because I can't remember all of the rules that happen when I need to conjugate the verbs. I wonder if she is having similar difficulties communicating in English.

In general, toward the end of the first semester of study in the program, teachers attempted to identify specific reasons for their international pal's linguistic production and offered detailed explanations of the reasons there may be for inaccuracies or deficiencies—e.g., lack of interest, discomfort in talking about a topic, lack of vocabulary. Several participants had observed that their pen pal may have confused personal pronouns or omitted articles in his or her writing, yet only one teacher could relate these "errors" or "mistakes" to L1 interference.

Although participants could often relate to their own experience learning a foreign language and recall effective language learning strategies, they frequently could not discern the difference between L1 and L2 learning and mistakenly assumed that what works for a native speaker will be effective for ELLs. For instance, Linda reflected on what strategies would help her pen pal to use articles properly:

He often drops the word “the” in most of his sentences. In about a dozen emails he has only used “the” twice. It does not interfere with the meaning of his message, but it forces me to read through it at least twice. When I read it aloud it sounds awkward. I think that when he is writing a message he should be reading it back to himself aloud. This works for any type of writing that someone else will read. I am a native English speaker and I still do this. I intentionally do this when I know my email is going to be sent to a professor or I am writing a paper I need to turn in. This is good practice for everyone because as you are writing, you may not catch your mistakes right away.

Erica suggested that her international pal should join an internet youth forum of interest or read popular lifestyle magazines to “hone her ‘street language’ to sound American.” She did not explain, however, how to find those forums or to get access to magazines.

### **Teachers’ Understanding of ELLs’ Cultural Experiences**

Culture is one of the broad, overarching concepts teachers use to talk about ENLs. As we noted above, toward the end of the course participating teachers attempted to identify specific reasons for their international pal’s linguistic patterns. Often, those reasons included psychological or cultural factors. In general, then, when teachers talk about their ENL students they tend to attribute any striking differences between their expectations and students’ behavior to culture. For instance, after an initial contact with their conversation partner, two teachers reflected that:

She is very quiet and possibly lacks confidence in her English. However, as she is from Jordan, this could be completely cultural. (Sara)

She doesn't seem very enthusiastic about what she is studying and doesn't go into much detail. It makes me wonder why she just doesn't tell her parents she wants to be a flight attendant and go to another career. I'm assuming it's a culture thing with respect for her parents' wishes. (Amber)

Each teacher failed to acknowledge that being enthusiastic is her own cultural expectation, one that may not necessarily be part of her partner’s communication norm. Amber, however, interpreted her partner’s communication with a reference to cultural expectations in parent-child relationships.

Communication and interaction norms are perceived as part of a cultural heritage only in cases when they are positively or negatively loaded. When ELLs are quiet and obedient in the classroom, teachers interpret it as positive cultural behavior. In contrast, as Kristi observed, when a male student defies female teachers’ authority, the teacher sees it through the cultural lens of gender roles. Culture rather than students’ personalities or any other factor becomes the primary explanation for students’ behavior.

Teachers with more experience working with ELLs capture a more complex understanding of cultural norms and students’ lifestyle, and their impact on students’ learning with respect to different identity dimensions—gender, for instance. Thus, Amy, a teacher who worked with a brother and a sister from a Middle Eastern background, was able to observe how culturally different parental expectations may be linked to a child’s gender and learning. According to her observations, education was a parental priority for the male student, whereas it came secondary for the female student. This was noted when the male student came to class with prepared homework, but the female student was rarely able to do her homework because she was busy doing household chores the night before.

In general, in these mainstream teachers’ views, parental involvement is often a factor that could contribute to ENLs’ success, but is missing due to the alleged poor English skills of the parents. Teachers tend to generalize when they talk about students’ parents: If students are poor English language learners, then their parents are not good at English either. Tonya thought that if one student’s parents could not express themselves in English, then all ELLs’ parents are poor English speakers. Sometimes teachers would

acknowledge how false this thinking is when asked about parents' occupations. In most cases, though, teachers could recall just one or two instances of interacting with ELLs and/or their parents.

When we asked the participants to reflect on how ENLs and their parents may contribute to their classroom and share their culture, they most often spoke about explicit outward cultural manifestations, such as food and clothing exhibitions during a cultural fair. In one participant's view, learning about other cultures involves learning about food, holidays, and other outward manifestations of difference:

Most things we have read and learned about this semester tie in the idea of culture being extremely important for many reasons. There are so many little things we do not know, but taking the time to learn about other cultures with our classes will help us to motivate all students. Our students have been very into studying other cultures this year in third grade in our building. Christmas Around the World was a time when students shared holiday customs from their country and teachers planned videos, snacks, and making a project around each holiday learned. Third graders also had an ethnic breakfast where students bought in foods from their countries. This is always very popular and we are expanding this school wide for next year. For writer's workshop, students are currently researching and writing reports about other countries. It has been amazing to see their interest in one another grow as well as their skills. Due to our cultural diversity in our building, I feel our school is already on the right track to celebrating diversity and making all feel welcome. (Sara)

Participants talked about validating students' culture, but none of the teachers could explain what it would involve beyond comparing and contrasting with American customs and traditions.

### **Teachers' Understanding of ELLs' Motivation and Engagement**

As we have discussed earlier, the primary goal of the study was to explore teachers' understanding of ELLs' linguistic and cultural experiences. However, as we were analyzing data, the topic of motivation and engagement was frequently brought up by the teachers, both in its own right and in connection to ELLs' language learning and cultural experiences.

Participating teachers saw motivation as one of the most important factors in successful language learning. They named several possible sources of motivation: learning for the sake of learning new things and skills; learning with the prospect of getting a better career opportunity through improved bilingual competence; learning something of a personal interest; learning a language with a desire to integrate into the target language community (either short term through travel or long term); and participating in target language community practices (listening to music; watching TV shows and films).

Teachers stated that language learning happens best when students are included in immersion experiences such as traveling and L2 use in real-life settings, including listening to songs in L2 or watching television. Amy and Erica observed ELLs doing these activities, but they did not perceive that the ELLs were already deeply immersed in the language environment every day.

Of particular interest is the way teachers spoke about motivation. They tended to describe students as either motivated or not motivated: "The students were motivated to please the teacher and were greatly encouraged to participate and were always praised for their efforts" (Hailey); "If a student likes how the program is designed/structured/implemented, then they are more likely to be motivated within the program" (Kristi); "I've seen students come in very low but motivated to learn and make huge gains and then others come in with smaller deficits with no motivation [and] make smaller gains" (Hailey).

From these teachers' perspective, lack of motivation is the main reason for student failure. Hailey suggested that students are to blame for not succeeding, either due to lack of motivation or because "as a learner, you need to be aware of your aptitude for learning. You also need to have strategies for your

areas of weakness.” According to Erica, teachers expect students to be motivated to learn by seeking and accepting help, which they take as evidence of motivation. Vickie recalled her contrasting experiences with two students, one of whom was seeking help and thus was described as motivated and smart, whereas the other student was not:

We switched a student out of my class and into a remedial English class. The girl struggles with English, but she is also uninterested in working. My new student, whose L1 is Arabic, is interested in learning so he accepts help, but more importantly, he *seeks* help. He is also quite smart.

Thus, from one participant’s perspective, a motivated student is interested in the content, engaged in the classroom activities, self-directed in his or her learning, and smart.

Another teacher, Anjie, recalled her second language learning experience. She described herself as being motivated because she “was challenged to learn new things.”

## Discussion

Mainstream teachers participating in the study were familiar with concepts of multicultural education and inclusion and highly valued multilingualism. When they talked about English language learners in their classrooms they pointed out that language and culture are the two most powerful factors that affect their learning; they also recognized that both language and culture can work as barriers to learning or resources. They never, however, talked about culture and language as interrelated and interdependent entities. Instead, discussions of language revolved around structuralist conceptions of language as a system and the need to master the grammar system and learn the vocabulary, whereas culture was viewed as behavior manifestations. One of the most popular beliefs about second language acquisition is the importance of learning vocabulary because it gives the possibility to translate from L1 to L2 and interact. Cultural connotations and existence of cultural and linguistic lacunae do not fit with this view. This finding suggests that there is a need to advance a broader concept of culture, one that would transcend traditions, customs, and rituals and encompass language, communication, ideology, and cultural mindset beyond the traditional setting of foreign language studies and TESOL.

The connection between the theory of multicultural education and practice is another piece that is either missing or ill addressed in teacher preparation and teacher professional development. Teachers have a consensus about the value of multicultural education, yet they have difficulty articulating what specific strategies it implies. Their understanding, however, of culture is apt to be at a surface level because it focuses exclusively on either student behavior manifestations or explicit cultural material differences in such activities as food, clothes, and holidays. Teachers do not deconstruct daily classroom practices from either linguistic or cultural perspectives. De Jong and Harper (2005) point out that every activity in the classroom is linguistically mediated and culturally loaded, including such practices as lining up or show-and-tell activities. When teachers attribute students’ reluctance to seek help to lack of motivation, they may overlook that perceptions of teacher-student relationships differ from culture to culture. In some cultures, for instance, it is not common practice to initiate conversations with the teacher.

Participating teachers work in primarily white high-poverty school districts. Given the similarity of socioeconomic status and race, students’ native/home language becomes the main distinctive characteristic. ENL students are perceived as “different” and in need of targeted support based on their ability to speak a language other than English. As a point of interest, in their end-of-semester reflections teachers affirmed that ELLs and English native speaking students share a lot in common in terms of what they need to support their language development. Teachers indicated that ELLs’ targeted support is applicable to the whole classroom. What teachers did not see before is the diversity in their classroom that stretches beyond being born in a foreign country and being able to speak a foreign language.

Motivation is a widely used and broadly researched concept in educational psychology that refers to a wish to engage and persist in an activity. In teachers' practice, however, it acquires an attributive or descriptive meaning stripped of its research-proven characteristics. Students are described as motivated or not motivated without any specific reference. There has been an increased interest in the study of motivation in second language learning in the past decade (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015). Modern theories of L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) take a holistic approach to students' involvement in L2 learning and shift emphasis from the environmental factors to students' identity. According to these theories, what matters in L2 learning are the student's ideal image of the self that he or she strives to achieve (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) and current social relationships that the student is willing to invest in (Norton, 1997, 2016) rather than external or internal elements of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Teacher preparation and teacher professional development programs need to provide enhanced expertise to teachers on motivation and equip them with specific strategies on how motivation can become part of their daily teaching instead of being expected from a student.

Mainstream teachers' ideas about educating ELLs do appear contradictory in relation to the topics of culture, language, and student motivation, but several reasons can account for this. First, because teachers are lacking the background knowledge that would enable them to identify what is happening in their classrooms, they try to explain what they observe by a term they feel best suits the circumstances. Second, the concepts of culture, language, and motivation are broad, interdisciplinary, and widely researched. It is thus of little surprise that teachers may have confounding ideas. The very fact that these teachers' talk about ELLs revolves around topics of culture, language, and motivation testifies to the fact that they seek more knowledge on these issues. And teachers did find an immediate connection between research they are exposed to in CRITI and their ELL experience. As teachers reflected on their learning experiences in the program, they stated that they are experiencing difficulty reading research literature related to second language acquisition and ELL education. As Kristi noted, "Even as an English teacher and with a somewhat stronger background in the jargon of grammar and semantics, much of the description of the nine components in the article was a stretch."

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of teachers returning to university coursework for an extension ESOL certification and to explore their beliefs about ENL students in their mainstream classrooms. Because this returning population of teachers is a relatively new demographic, it is essential to understand their needs and tailor the graduate-level curriculum to address them. The study results extended our understanding of what teachers know and think about ENL students. Despite limited multicultural experiences, mainstream teachers are capable of confirming that culture and language are the most prominent characteristics of ENL students and that mainstream curriculum and mainstream teaching techniques do not always work with this student population. In addition, the teachers want to incorporate ESL students and their rich experiences into the classroom. Teacher preparation and professional development courses need to provide preservice and inservice teachers with both an enhanced understanding of how culture and language play out in the classroom and specific teaching strategies to address culture and language there. The practicum experience required of these teachers may be an important space to explore such strategies with the support of university faculty and a ENL teacher mentor.

Further research might consider the connection between teachers' beliefs and teaching practice with respect to including ENL students in the mainstream classroom. It may be beneficial to investigate to what

extent teachers enact their beliefs about ENL students and multicultural education in their teaching. Given their degree of sensitivity to multiculturalism and multilingualism, they may be implementing successful strategies without consciously attributing them to ENL teaching techniques.

## References

- Batt, E. G. (2008). Teachers' perceptions of ELL education: Potential solutions to overcome the greatest challenges. *Multicultural Education, 15*(3), 39–43.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Boo, Z., Dörnyei, Z., & Ryan, S. (2015). L2 motivation research 2005–2014: Understanding a publication surge and a changing landscape. *System, 55*, 145–157.
- Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language Teaching, 31*, 81–109.
- Bransford, J., Brown, A., & Cocking, R. (1999). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Choi, D. S.-Y., & Morrison, P. (2014). Learning to get it right: Understanding change processes in professional development for teachers of English learners. *Professional Development in Education, 40*(3), 416–435.
- Coady, M., Harper, C., & de Jong, E. (2011). From preservice to practice: Mainstream elementary teacher beliefs of preparation and efficacy with English language learners in the state of Florida. *Bilingual Research Journal, 34*(2), 223–239.
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- de Jong, E., & Harper, C. (2005). Preparing mainstream teachers for English-language learners: Is being a good teacher good enough? *Teacher Education Quarterly, 32*(2), 101–124.
- de Jong, E. J., Harper, C. A., & Coady, M. R. (2013). Enhanced knowledge and skills for elementary mainstream teachers of English language learners. *Theory Into Practice, 52*(2), 89–97.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2009). *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Fillmore, L. W., & Snow, C. E. (2002) What teachers need to know about language. In C. T. Adger, C. E. Snow, & D. Christian (Eds.), *What teachers need to know about language* (pp. 7–54). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Franco-Fuenmayor, S. E., Padrón, Y. N., & Waxman, H. C. (2015). Investigating bilingual/ESL teachers' knowledge and professional development opportunities in a large suburban school district in Texas. *Bilingual Research Journal, 38*(3), 336–352.
- Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly, 32*(3), 397–417.
- Gándara, P., Maxwell-Jolly, J., & Driscoll, A. (2005). *Listening to teachers of English language learners: A survey of California teachers' challenges, experiences, and professional development needs*. Santa Cruz, CA: Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning.
- Gatbonton, E. (2008). Looking beyond teachers' classroom behaviour: Novice and experienced ESL teachers' pedagogical knowledge. *Language Teaching Research, 12*(2), 161–182.
- Gleeson, M., & Davison, C. (2016). A conflict between experience and professional learning: Subject teachers' beliefs about teaching English language learners. *RELC Journal, 47*(1), 43–57.
- Grossman, P. L. (1990). *The making of a teacher: Teacher knowledge and teacher education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

- Grossman, P. L., Wilson, S. M., & Shulman, L. S. (1989). Teachers of substance: Subject matter knowledge for teaching. In M. C. Reynolds (Ed.), *Knowledge base for the beginning teacher* (pp. 23–36). New York, NY: Pergamon.
- Guerrero, S. M. (2005). Teacher knowledge and new domain of expertise: Pedagogical technology knowledge. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 33(3), 249–267.
- Hansen-Thomas, H., & Cavagnetto, A. (2010). What do mainstream middle school teachers think about their English language learners? A tri-state case study. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 33(2), 249–266.
- Hansen-Thomas, H., Richins, L. G., Kakkar, K., & Okeyo, C. (2016). I do not feel I am properly trained to help them! Rural teachers' perceptions of challenges and needs with English-language learners. *Professional Development in Education*, 42(2), 308–324.
- Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (1994). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 428–444). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Johnston, B., & Goettsch, K. (2006). In search of the knowledge base of language teaching: Explanations by experienced teachers. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 56(3), 437–468.
- Kanno, Y., & Stuart, C. (2011). Learning to become a second language teacher: Identities-in-practice. *Modern Language Journal*, 95(2), 236–252.
- Kolano, L. Q., & King, E. T. (2015). Preservice teachers' perceived beliefs towards English language learners. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 24(2), 3–22.
- Kubanyiova, M., & Feryok, A. (2015). Language teacher cognition in applied linguistics research: Revisiting the territory, redrawing the boundaries, reclaiming the relevance. *Modern Language Journal*, 99(3), 435–449.
- Liu, S. (2013). Pedagogical content knowledge: A case study of ESL teacher educator. *English Language Teaching*, 6(7), 128–138.
- Mantero, M., & McVicker, P. (2006). The impact of experience and coursework: Perceptions of second language learners in the mainstream classroom. *Radical Pedagogy*, 8(1).
- Marx, S. (2008). Popular white teachers of Latina/o kids: The strengths of personal experiences and the limitations of whiteness. *Urban Education*, 43(1), 29–67.
- NBPTS (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards). (2016). *English as a New Language standards* (2nd ed.). Retrieved from <http://www.nbpts.org/wp-content/uploads/ECYA-ENL.pdf>
- Nespor, J. (1987). The role of beliefs in the practice of teaching. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19(4), 317–328.
- Newman, K. L., Samimy, K., & Romstedt, K. (2010). Developing a training program for secondary teachers of English language learners in Ohio. *Theory Into Practice*, 49(2), 152–161.
- Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity, and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 409–429.
- Norton, B. (2016). Identity and language learning: Back to the future. *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(2), 475–479.
- Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(3), 307–332.
- Pavlenko, A., & Norton, B. (2007). Imagined communities, identity, and English language learning. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 669–680). New York, NY: Springer.
- Penfield, J. (1987). ESL: The regular classroom teacher's perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(1), 21–39.
- Pettit, S. K. (2011a). Factors influencing middle school mathematics teachers' beliefs about ELLs in mainstream classrooms. *IUMPST: The Journal*, 5, 1–6.
- Pettit, S. K. (2011b). Teachers' beliefs about English language learners in the mainstream classroom: A review of the literature. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 5(2), 123–147.

- Reeves, J. (2006). Secondary teacher attitudes toward including English-language learners in mainstream classrooms. *Journal of Educational Research*, 99(3), 131–142.
- Rubinstein-Avila, E., & Lee, E. H. (2014). Secondary teachers and English language learners (ELLs): Attitudes, preparation and implications. *Clearing House*, 87(5), 187–191.
- Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 1–21.
- Téllez, K., & Waxman, H. (2005). Preparing quality teachers for English language learners: An overview of the critical issues. In K. Téllez & H. Waxman (Eds.), *Preparing quality educators for English language learners* (pp. 1–22). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- TESOL/CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation). (2010). *Standards for the recognition of initial TESOL programs in P–12 ESL teacher education*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL International Association. Retrieved from [http://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/advocacy/the-revised-tesol-ncate-standards-for-the-recognition-of-initial-tesol-programs-in-p-12-esl-teacher-education-\(2010-pdf\).pdf?sfvrsn=4](http://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/advocacy/the-revised-tesol-ncate-standards-for-the-recognition-of-initial-tesol-programs-in-p-12-esl-teacher-education-(2010-pdf).pdf?sfvrsn=4)
- Thompson, C., & Zeuli, J. (1999). The frame and the tapestry: Standards-based reform and professional development. In L. Darling-Hammond & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice* (pp. 341–373). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2011). Preparing classroom teachers for English language learners: The policy context. In T. Lucas (Ed.), *Teacher preparation for linguistically diverse classrooms: A resource for teacher educators* (pp. 35–52). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching: Beliefs, decision-making and classroom practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, T. (2010). Second language teacher education: Review of recent research on practice. *Language Teaching*, 43(3), 259–296.




---

\*Corresponding author: [hilliker@binghamton.edu](mailto:hilliker@binghamton.edu)

## Appendix 1—Demographics

*Last name, First name*

*Gender*

*Ethnicity*

*Current school district*

*What subject(s) do you teach?*

*What grade(s) do you teach?*

*How long have you been in this position?*

*How many years have you been a certified teacher?*

*What is/are your area(s) of certification?*

*Which other language(s) do you speak? How would you describe your level of proficiency—  
i.e., French (elementary), German (intermediate), Spanish (advanced)?*

*How did you learn about this program?*

*What interests you most about this program?*

*Name one thing you would like to learn in this program.*

*What are your short-term career objectives?*

*What are your long-term career objectives?*

*How many graduate-level courses have you taken that included instruction on teaching ESL students?*

0

1, including this one

2

3 or more

*Please list names of TESOL courses you have taken (approximate titles).*

*Please list the names of courses that had some content related to TESOL.*

*How many professional development hours (in conferences, workshops) have you had that focused on ESL students in the last year?*

Fewer than 5 hours

6–15 hours

16–25 hours

More than 25 hours

*What kinds of information were presented in the professional development you received? Check all that apply.*

Assessment information

Classroom management information

Cultural information

Diagnostic information

Linguistic information

Pedagogical information

Other \_\_\_\_\_

*How many ESL students do you have this year?*

- Fewer than 5
- 6–15
- 16–25
- 26–35
- More than 35

*How many classroom periods (or hours) per day do you work with ESL students?*

- 1
- 2
- 3 or 4
- 5 or 6
- 7 or more

*Compared to last academic year, would you say that this year you are teaching (check all that apply):*

- A few more ESL students
- Significantly more ESL students
- More ESL students with fewer skills in English
- More ESL children whose parents are involved in their schooling

*Tell us about approximately how many ESL students you have from these general regions of the world:*

- Africa
- Asia
- Eastern Europe
- India
- Latin America
- Middle East
- Western Europe

*From what country would you say the majority of your ESL students or their parents come?*

\_\_\_\_\_

*How many college or university courses in a foreign language have you taken?*

- 1
- 2
- 3 or 4
- 5 or 6
- 7 or more

*How would you describe the focus of the language courses you have taken? Check all that apply.*

- Conversational
- Cultural
- Literary
- Semantic
- Blend
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

*In terms of your experience with multicultural education, which statement best applies?*

- A unit or part of the course focused on multicultural aspects of education.
- The whole course explored different aspects of multicultural education.
- I have never had any formal experience in learning about multiculturalism.
- I took a multicultural or ethnic literature course.
- I took a history course focusing on an ethnic culture.

*Have you studied abroad?*

- Yes
- No

*For how long did you study abroad?*

- One to three weeks on a special class project
- A summer or winter break
- An academic year
- More than a year
- N/A

*Where did you study abroad? Check all that apply.*

- Africa (country: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Canada
- China
- Eastern Europe
- France
- Germany
- Italy
- Korea
- Mexico
- South America (country: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Spain
- United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Ireland)

*Have you traveled abroad? Check all the countries you have visited.*

- Africa (country: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Canada
- China
- England, Scotland, Ireland
- France
- Germany
- Greece
- Italy
- Japan
- Korea
- Mexico
- Russia
- South America (country: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Spain

**Appendix A—Demographics** (continued)

*How much time—if you added it all up—would you say that you have spent abroad?*

- One to three weeks
- A month
- Three months
- Four to six months
- About a year
- More than a year

*Did you ever teach outside the United States?*

- Yes
- No

*Where?*

---

*Have you ever had an international friend?*

- Yes
- No

*From where?*

---

*Have you ever had an international pen pal?*

- Yes
- No

*From where?*

---

*Which of the following statements apply to your classroom? Check all that apply.*

- ESL students offer different cultural perspectives to whatever we are studying.
- ESL students make it difficult to get through a lesson.
- ESL students enrich my lessons linguistically.
- ESL students help other students learn.
- ESL students take up more time than my “regular” students.
- ESL students hinder other students’ learning.
- ESL students rarely do their homework.
- ESL students apply themselves to their work.

## **Appendix B—Focus Group Questions**

In what ways could you be more supported in teaching ESL students?

What factors contribute to ESL student success?

What factors contribute to low performance of ESL students?

What are your attitudes toward including ESL students in classroom activities?

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

What has been your formal instruction on the topic of ESL students?

In informal hallway or lunchroom conversations among teachers, what kinds of comments do you hear about ESL students?

How would you characterize their contributions to the class as a whole as well as other students' learning?

What contributions do the parents of ESL students make to the classroom? School?

How would you describe the interactions you have with parents of ESL students?

If you could give advice to ESL parents and possibly students about success in school, what would you say?

What activities could you devise to allow students/parents to share their culture in your classroom?

Can you speak to the general behavior of ESL students in your classroom, compared to that of native English speakers? Do you feel these behaviors are a result of not understanding the culture of the classroom? Not understanding activities? Not being able to communicate?

What cultural differences have you noticed that impact the classroom (positive and negative)?

If you were told you would have three more ESL students next year, how would you react? How would you prepare?