**Elementary Teachers' Perspectives on English Learners' Academic Language Difficulties:**

**A Phenomenological Study**

Erika Pell-Lopez

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Erika Pell-Lopez

Approved by:

Dissertation Chair:     Chih-Hsin Hsu, EdD

Committee Member:  Sarah Everts, PhD

**Abstract**

English language learners (ELLs) impact the education system and account for 10.1% of public-school students in the United States. ELLs are outperformed by their non-ELL peers, causing achievement gaps. ELLs are outperformed in comparison to their native-English-speaking peers. Additional studies are needed to explore English as a second language (ESL) teachers' perceptions of ELLs' academic language learning difficulties. The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to describe elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties. The theoretical framework incorporated the theories of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and Zeeb et al.'s growth mindset. Elementary teachers' perceptions highlight scaffolding, knowledge of learners, and growth mindset as effective in teaching ELLs. Participants included 15 elementary ELL teachers teaching at least 5 years and possessing an English for speakers of other languages-related master's degree. Virtual questionnaires and interviews were used to collect perceptions of ELLs' difficulties with language. Data were analyzed via thematic analysis, and findings confirmed existing literature and extended knowledge of teachers' lived experiences of academic language difficulties. Common themes that were identified included knowledge of learners, scaffolding, and differentiated instruction (DI) to support ELL academic language acquisition. Future policy recommendations include increased knowledge of learners, effective strategy implementation, and evidence of DI targeting ELLs.

*Keywords:* English Language Learner, ELL, knowledge of learner

**Dedication**

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my parents and my daughter, for their unconditional love support, and examples. Alyssa, everything I do is for you. Papi and Mami you are my inspiration and were ELLs at a time when there was only an option to sink or swim. Thank you for swimming and paving the way.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The English language serves as a global language, aiding communication between people of different linguistic cultures (Fang, 2017). As the demographic norm of the United States diversifies, the learning needs of the students being educated in the United States diversify as well. Sanatullova-Allison and Robison-Young (2016) noted the population of the United States has changed radically. In 2019, 5.1 million students (10.4%) were English language learners (ELLs) in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). ELLs comprise a significant portion of the population of students educated across the United States, resulting in a significant population in education. The qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to determine the lived experiences and provide perspectives about ELLs with academic language learning difficulties. Inquiries were made about the lived experiences of English as a second language (ESL) teachers who teach ELLs to explore commonalities and shared meanings between the teachers. The potential benefits of further studies may equip elementary ESL teachers with the knowledge to increase academic language in ELLs, helping ELLs make the learning gains required for academic success.

Introduced in Chapter 1 is the qualitative phenomenological study focused on obtaining teacher perspectives and lived experiences with ELLs who experience academic language learning difficulties. In 2019, 5.1 million students in the United States were ELLs (NCES, 2022). With such a large percentage of immigrant students and students learning English as a second language, issues of how to teach, service, and facilitate learning for ELLs come to the forefront (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016).

The purpose of the study section was to preview the qualitative phenomenological research design. The significance of the study section expresses the possible effects the study can

have on ELLs, such as increasing knowledge of the perceptions of elementary teachers of ELLs with academic language learning difficulties. Research questions guided the research. Two main guiding forces behind the research, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) and growth mindset (Zeeb et al., 2020) were used in the conceptual framework to conduct research and examine findings. The definitions of terms section provides essential definitions for key concepts in the research study. Assumptions related to the research study are described. The study was limited to 15 elementary teachers of ELLs, specifically ELLs who have been in the United States for less than 2 years and are still in the process of learning English in Florida public schools. The qualitative phenomenological study consists of data via a virtual prequestionnaire, virtual interview, and virtual postquestionnaire. Limitations affecting the study are discussed. A chapter summary reviews content from the chapter.

## Background of the Problem

In 2019, ELLs made up 10.4% of the students in the United States or 5.1 million students (NCES, 2022). ELLs lack the necessary vocabulary to be academically successful (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). Building vocabulary is essential for ELLs (Gupta, 2019). ELLs usually have difficulty understanding and utilizing academic vocabulary to read and understand content-area texts (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) fluency takes approximately 5–7 years to acquire (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). Some ELLs struggle to acquire the academic language needed to make academic learning gains within 5–7 years. Another issue is academic progress not being made within the 5- to 7-year period, causing a widening learning gap between ELLs and non-ELLs. Without adequate academic language proficiency, ELLs may struggle with specific content areas and fail to make academic learning gains (Pereira & de Oliveira, 2015).

With an increasing immigrant student population who are inevitably learning English as a second language, issues of how to teach, service, and facilitate learning for ELLs come to the forefront (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). The rising ELL population requires educators to learn how to serve ELLs effectively while increasing academic language proficiency. Further information is explained in the literature review section of the research study.

Literature supports increasing vocabulary, which is essential for ELLs (Gupta, 2019). The issue is the learning gaps in state test outcomes between ELLs and non-ELLs continue to widen. What remains to explore is ELLs' academic language learning difficulties in response to ESL-related instruction through K–5 ESL teachers' perspectives. The qualitative phenomenological study was to gain elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of strategies for teaching ELLs having difficulty acquiring academic language and to close the gap in the literature.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem is ELLs in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful academically (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). Further studies were recommended for academic language acquisition (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). With the promising effects of language-based reading interventions on standardized indicators of academic language and reading comprehension, further research was recommended (Proctor et al., 2020). ELLs usually have difficulty understanding and utilizing academic vocabulary to read and understand content-area texts (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) fluency takes approximately 5–7 years to acquire (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). Some ELLs struggle to acquire the academic language needed to make academic learning gains within 5–7 years. Another issue is academic progress

not being made within the 5- to 7-year period, causing a widening learning gap between ELLs and non-ELLs. Without adequate academic language proficiency, difficulty exists for ELLs to make academic learning gains. The literature supports a discrepancy in achievement between ELLs and non-ELLs. Evidence shows ELLs are outperformed in comparison to native-English-speaking peers (Maarouf, 201ga9).

Research describes achievement gaps between non-ELLs and ELLs in both reading and mathematics (Maarouf, 2019). Building vocabulary is essential for ELLs (Gupta, 2019). ELLs usually have difficulty understanding and utilizing academic vocabulary to read and understand content-area texts (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). The qualitative phenomenological study was to describe ESL teachers' lived experiences with ELLs with academic language difficulties.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to describe elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties. The rationale for the qualitative phenomenological study was to discover perspectives on ELLs' academic language difficulties. The qualitative phenomenological study explored elementary ESL teachers' perspectives and lived experiences on academic language acquisition difficulties for ELLs. Elementary ESL teachers' perspectives on language acquisition difficulties can guide administrators in creating policies benefiting ELLs. A change in policy regarding academic language acquisition can facilitate academic progress for ELLs. The qualitative phenomenological study filled the gap in the literature on elementary ESL teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of teaching ELLs with academic language difficulties. Qualitative research searches for insight through descriptions, observations, and lived experiences (Hadi & Closs, 2016). Phenomenology is a design based on inquiry focusing on intellectual engagement and

making meaning of the lived experiences of human subjects (Qutoshi, 2018). A qualitative phenomenological research design was suitable for answering the research questions because the focus was on the perceptions and lived experiences of elementary ESL teachers. Through interviews, perceptions and lived experiences of ESL teachers were explored to interpret and discover commonalities shared meaning. Heidegger described phenomenology as understanding experiences through questioning (Quay, 2016).

A prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire collected data on the lived experiences and perceptions of elementary ESL teachers of ELLs with academic language learning difficulties. The goal was to understand elementary ESL teachers' perspectives on ELLs' academic language difficulties. Elementary ESL teachers' perceptions were utilized to help ELLs close the learning gap and yield academic success.

## Significance of the Study

The significance of the study was to provide information and increase knowledge on the perceptions of elementary ESL teachers of ELLs with academic language learning difficulties. Increasing knowledge of elementary ESL teachers' perceptions will positively impact the lives and learning process of ELLs and help to increase academic language acquisition. Academic language acquisition will help ELLs make the academic learning gains required for success. Furthermore, increased language acquisition will close the learning gap between ELLs and non-ELLs. Analyzing elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of ELLs with academic language learning difficulties has the potential to result in a significant change to how ELLs are educated. Interpreting ESL teachers' perceptions of ELLs with academic language learning difficulties can result in changes to ELL education policies and improve professional practice for elementary ESL teachers.

Positive implications for social change may result from the findings of the qualitative phenomenological research study. Over 4.7 million foreign-born individuals are registered in U.S. public schools from prekindergarten through postsecondary education, comprising 6% of the total student population in the United States (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2017). In addition, 20 million students in the United States are children of foreign-born parents (USDE, 2017). ELLs make up a large population of the students who are serviced across the country. The education of ELLs will have a direct impact on the future of the United States.

The study increased knowledge of teachers' lived experiences of ELLs who have difficulty acquiring academic language to increase learning gains and subject mastery. Problems regarding ESL teachers were exposed that influence academic language instruction. Exploration focused on what elementary ESL teachers suggest on effective academic language learning to increase success for ELLs. Teachers' perceptions of students have a direct impact on the education the students receive, requiring every teacher to be equipped with the knowledge necessary to be outstanding (Carley Rizzuto, 2017). In providing elementary ESL teachers' perspectives on ELL academic language learning difficulties, positive changes can be made to how ELLs are educated and the ultimate success of ELLs. When ELLs succeed, ELLs will enter the U.S. workforce better equipped to succeed as adults. Although ELLs present unique challenges to the education system in the United States, ELLs can develop into assets to the country as ELLs develop potential (USDE, 2017).

## Research Questions

This qualitative phenomenological study focused on elementary ESL teachers' perspectives and lived experiences of teaching ELLs with academic language learning difficulties. A focus on the perceptions of elementary ESL teachers was to positively impact the

lives and learning process of ELLs. The research aimed to determine what problems elementary

ESL teachers believe impact ELLs with academic language acquisition and which strategies

yield academic success. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are elementary teachers' lived experiences of teaching

English language learners who have difficulty acquiring academic language proficiency and

subject mastery?

Research Question 2: How is academic language instruction addressed and/or

implemented for English language learners according to elementary teachers' experience?

Research Question 3: What do elementary teachers of English language learners suggest

for effective academic language instruction in Florida public schools?

Each interview and postquestionnaire question was open-ended. Open-ended questions

allowed the elementary ESL teachers the freedom to express perceptions of the academic

language learning difficulties ELLs experience. Research questions were utilized to collect data

for the study. The prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire questions were utilized to

collect qualitative phenomenological data for this study and were linked to the research

questions.

## Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and growth mindset (Zeeb et al., 2020) were used in the

theoretical framework to conduct research and examine findings. The ZPD emphasizes the

distance between a student's independent level and the level of potential development when

guidance is provided by an adult (Menon, 2018). A *growth mindset* can be defined as believing a

person's abilities are flexible and anything can improve with exercise and practice (Zeeb et al.,

2020). Vygotsky's ZPD focuses on ELLs and the distance between the academic language the

student should acquire, and the role social interaction plays in academic vocabulary development. Vygotsky's theory of ZPD facilitates ELLs in acquiring the language necessary to be successful through proper support. Proper support from a teacher can help an ELL acquire the necessary academic language to be successful in school. Growth mindset is aligned with how to best help ELLs. If building a foundation in ELLs promotes the idea of working hard to achieve goals, then growth mindset practices can positively affect ELLs to both acquire the English language and make adequate academic progress. The growth mindset illustrates that belief in oneself determines growth. Students who possess the ability to learn know how to work hard to improve and possess a higher motivation to learn. Students having a growth mindset believe hard work and practice enable the ability to achieve goals (Zeeb et al., 2020).

The theories of Vygotsky's ZPD and growth mindset provided a structure for organizing and understanding the results of the data collected. The application of Vygotsky's ZPD and growth mindset supported the purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study: to describe elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs with academic language difficulties. The theoretical framework was aligned to the research questions because Vygotsky's ZPD and growth mindset allow students to acquire language independently and work hard, and then allow elementary ESL teachers the opportunity to scaffold instruction to help guide students to further acquire language. As elementary ESL teachers implement Vygotsky's ZPD and instill a growth mindset in students, ELLs will acquire the academic language necessary for success.

Vygotsky's ZPD and growth mindset were fundamental elements in creating the research instruments. The research instruments provided an opportunity to determine ESL teachers' perceptions of the reasons students are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful in school. The instruments provided the opportunity to discover the

problems elementary ESL teachers believe impact instruction of ELLs and which strategies are believed to increase academic success. Further detailed analysis can be found in the literature review.

## Definitions of Terms

The following definitions of key terms are intended to define terminology utilized throughout the research study. The definitions are presented to facilitate an understanding of the content of the research study. Terms are familiar to educators, although the terms may have multiple meanings, which have the potential to create confusion.

*Basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS)* are utilized in everyday and informal interaction. BICS are utilized with friends and family (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017).

*Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)* is a technical language proficiency and is required to understand classroom content (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017).

*English language learners (ELLs)* are a diverse group of students who vary in language, academic, and social–emotional needs (Colorin Colorado, 2019). ELLs are unable to communicate or learn effectively in the English language and require instruction to learn English as well as modified instruction in academic courses (Langdon & Saenz, 2016).

*Intervention* is defined as actions and/or strategies utilized to transform academic or behavioral outcomes; often used by teachers in a classroom (Greig et al., 2016).

*Language acquisition* occurs through a subconscious process with no attention to grammar rules (Hanci-Azizoğlu, 2020).

*Language learning* is a result of direct and explicit instruction with a focus on language rules (Orpella et al., 2020).

## Assumptions

Assumptions in research are necessary and unavoidable. The first assumption was ELLs have varying needs. Almost 100% of immigrants to the United States have one thing in common: Each immigrant possesses their own cultural and linguistic background, often different from the culture in the United States (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). Another assumption was teachers have a direct impact on student success. Teacher support has a direct effect on how a student progresses through the education journey in motivational resilience (Pitzer & Skinner, 2017). The assumptions were unavoidable due to the diverse needs of ELLs.

Assumptions can be understood through the research process but cannot be validated. During the research process, elementary ESL teachers being voluntary participants, were willing to share information about perspectives on ELLs' academic language difficulties. Teachers' names were not identified or linked to any responses shared in the research study, providing safety from bias or influence on the teachers participating in the study. Participants in the research study were willing to provide honest responses and cooperate in collecting information and best practices relating to ELL academic language difficulties.

## Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to 15 elementary ESL teachers of ELLs. The ELLs were limited to students who had been in the United States for less than 2 years and were in the process of learning English in Florida public schools. This study consisted of Internet-based data collection via a prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire. The qualitative phenomenological study allowed teacher participants to express perspectives and lived experiences of teaching ELLs with academic language difficulties. All participants in the research study were voluntary participants and had the opportunity to express personal perspectives regarding ELL academic language difficulties. Data collection took place virtually.

An email was sent to participants with information and directions regarding the research study. The email (see Appendix A) included informed consent (see Appendix B), the purpose of the study, as well as how the information would be utilized in the study. Prequestionnaires (see Appendix C) were administered and collected via Internet-based survey tools, such as Google Forms. Zoom conferences were scheduled for the interview portion of the study. Five days after each interview, a postquestionnaire was emailed so the participant would have the opportunity to share any final thoughts or new revelations since participating in the interview. Teachers' experiences with ELLs vary in Florida schools and specifically throughout the Miami-Dade County school district, as needs among ELLs are varied. The use of phenomenology in the research study allowed teachers to share lived experiences and personal perspectives of teaching ELLs in the classroom. Heidegger described phenomenology as understanding experiences through questioning (Quay, 2016). The questions in the prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire were essential to understanding.

The study spotlighted 15 elementary ESL teachers in Florida public schools, specifically in one of the largest school districts in the nation. According to the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE, 2020a), Florida is ranked third in the nation in the ELL population, with over 265,000 ELLs enrolled. The focus of this study was to gain teachers' perspectives on ELLs with academic learning difficulties. Although studies and strategies exist for how to best address ELLs with academic learning difficulties, the boundary of delimitation for this study included a focus on elementary ESL teachers' perspectives, with information gathered virtually. The time frame allotted for the study was as follows. The prequestionnaire required approximately 5 minutes to complete. Once the prequestionnaires were emailed, participants had 5 business days to complete and submit them. The Zoom interviews took place 1–3 weeks after the

prequestionnaires were returned and lasted 1 hour each. Five days after the interviews, a

postquestionnaire was sent out and required no more than 30 minutes to complete. Participants

had 5 business days to complete the postquestionnaires and submit their final thoughts to be

included in the study.

Transferability was required to transfer the information discovered in the qualitative

phenomenological study to other studies or circumstances. The qualitative phenomenological

study was conducted to explore elementary ESL teachers' perspectives and background

knowledge. Data collected through the research study may positively impact ELLs' academic

language acquisition process.

## Limitations

The limitations section includes information describing the design-related natural

limitations to the transferability and dependability of the results. Trustworthiness is a key

element in research. To establish trust, researchers need to be transparent about methods and data

(Pratt et al., 2020). Methods and data were shared transparently in the research, and participants

exited the study after receiving an email with a summary of the data results.

The data instruments provided insight into teachers lived experiences with ELLacademic

language difficulties. Open-ended questions were asked during the interviews and allowed

participants to express their perspectives. Data were then coded and analyzed (Tasker &

Cisneroz, 2019).

The setting of the study was unique because the study was conducted virtually and

investigated elementary ESL teachers' perspectives on ELLs' language acquisition. Although

many teachers are aware teaching ELLs is different from teaching native English speakers,

gathering teachers' perspectives on academic language difficulties was different as well.

The transferability of data results gathered through the research study was communicated through detailed descriptions of teachers' perspectives. A crucial function of the research is to feature the details of the human experience (Ghirotto, 2016). Fifteen elementary ESL teachers, the sample population, were representative of the total population of elementary ESL teachers. Three data collection tools were utilized—a prequestionnaire, an interview, and a postquestionnaire—and all three were administered virtually. Virtual data collection promotes trustworthiness, increasing the validity of results (Pratt et al., 2020).

Confirmability focused on proving neutrality to eliminate researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is a key element in research. To establish trust, researchers need to be transparent about methods and data (Pratt et al., 2020). Methods and data were shared transparently in the research, and participants exited the study after receiving an email with a summary of the data results.

**Chapter Summary**

As the demographic norm of the United States diversifies, the learning needs of students in the United States diversify as well. Sanatullova-Allison and Robison-Young (2016) noted the population of the United States has changed radically. Introduced in Chapter 1 was the qualitative phenomenological study focused on obtaining elementary ESL teachers' perspectives on ELLs with academic language learning difficulties. The problem was ELLs in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful academically (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). Further studies were recommended for academic language acquisition, considering research in academic vocabulary instruction can reveal effects for ELLs (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). With the promising effects of language-based reading interventions on standardized indicators of academic language and reading

comprehension, further research was recommended (Proctor et al., 2020).

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to describe elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs with academic language difficulties. The literature supports increased vocabulary and is essential for ELLs (Gupta, 2019). The issue was the learning gaps in state test outcomes between ELLs and non-ELLs continue to widen. What remained to be explored was ELLs with academic language learning difficulties in response to ESL-related instruction through K–5 ESL teachers' perspectives. The study includes the possible effects the results may have on ELLs.

Research questions are described as guiding questions in the research. The theoretical framework explained the two main guiding forces behind the research. Definitions of terms provided essential definitions for key concepts in the research study. Assumptions related to the research study were described. Scope and delimitations described the parameters for the study. Limitations affecting the study were discussed.

Provided in the following chapter is an analysis of literature related to ELLs and the unique challenges faced in educating ELLs. Information in the chapter is organized through a literature search strategy, theoretical framework, research literature review, gaps in the literature, and chapter summary.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Although ELLs present unique challenges to the education system in the United States, ELLs can develop into assets to the country as ELLs develop potential (USDE, 2017). The percentage of ELLs in U.S. public schools increased from 9.2% in 2010 to 10.4% in 2019 (NCES, 2022). The U.S. population comprises 13.6% immigrants, both documented and undocumented, who have immigrated to the United States for a better life (Radford, 2019). According to the NCES (2022), 10.1% of students in U.S. public schools were ELLs. The FLDOE (2020a) described the state as being ranked third in the nation in the ELL population, with over 265,000 ELLs enrolled. Increased immigration shows both the importance of, and impact ELLs have on the education system and the country.

Research suggests achievement gaps between non-ELLs and ELLs are steadily widening in reading and mathematics. Among ELLs in the nation, 75% are second- or third-generation immigrants, which implies issues that transcend language acquisition and may be related to sociocultural and/or demographic norms of ELL families and communities (Polat et al., 2016). The problem is ELLs in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful academically (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to understand teachers' perspectives on ELLs' academic language difficulties. The expectation for academic success does not diminish because a student is an ELL; ELLs are expected to perform on grade level after 2 years. By the time ELLs reach the 3-year mark, students are not the only ones held accountable; teachers are also held accountable for ELLs' academic progress (Gupta, 2019). This chapter provides an analysis of literature related to ELLs and the unique challenges faced in educating ELLs. Information in the chapter is organized through sections on literature search strategy, theoretical

framework, research literature review, gaps in the literature, and a chapter summary.

## Literature Search Strategy

This section provides the library databases and search engines utilized to search for and document articles relevant to the study of ELLs and gain perceptions of ELLs' academic language difficulties. In exploring the growing immigrant population, ELL impacts, ELL learning gaps, ELL policies, funding, language acquisition, technology, ELLs with disabilities, teacher experiences, and best practices for teaching ELLs, the intention of the literature review was to gain perspective for academic language difficulties. Searches were conducted for articles and studies focused on academic language difficulties in ELLs.

Included in this chapter is an analysis of literature related to ELLs having difficulty acquiring the language necessary to succeed academically. Search engines connect users to open-access resources and databases (Bonner & Williams, 2016). ERIC was utilized when EBSCO was unable to provide full-text articles. The keywords utilized in the search are *English language learners*, *ELLs*, *strategies for ELLs*, *ELLs in the United States*, *phenomenological study*, *CALP*, *literacy*, *academic vocabulary*, *sheltered instruction*, *skill transfer*, and *qualitative research*.

## Theoretical Framework

Explained in this section is the theoretical framework, or how the researcher approached the study. This study was informed by Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD. Vygotsky's ZPD emphasizes the distance between a student's independent level and the level of potential development when guidance is provided by an adult (Menon, 2018). The ZPD is made up of two main components: (a) a problem needs to be solved with assistance from an expert and (b) the novice can solve the problem if assisted (Castrillon, 2017). In the case of ELLs, the ZPD focuses on the distance between the academic language the student must acquire, and the role social interaction plays to

develop academic vocabulary. ZPD theory supports problems ELLs face in need of a resolution: (a) ELLs must acquire the language necessary to be successful and (b) with proper support from a teacher, an ELL can acquire the necessary academic language to be successful in school.

Growth mindset is another theory used to guide this research and is defined as believing a person's abilities are flexible and anything can improve with exercise and practice (Zeeb et al., 2020). If the mindset is a point of view, then growth mindset is what one thinks can determine one's growth. Students who believe they possess the ability to learn and know how to work hard to improve also possess a higher motivation to learn than students who believe abilities are unchangeable. Students who believe hard work and practice will allow students to achieve goals are said to have a growth mindset (Zeeb et al., 2020). A growth mindset is about resilience, and students who have a growth mindset possess grit. Grit is having passion and perseverance for long-term goals and working hard to reach those goals (Duckworth, 2013).

Studies indicate growth mindsets have a positive impact on education. In a study by Duckworth (2013), students who possessed grit had a higher graduation rate than students who did not, across the board, despite IQ. This means a student's mindset can allow the opportunity to be flexible when setbacks arise (Barbouta et al., 2020). A study by Frank (2018) found ELL teachers who possessed a growth mindset were better prepared to teach growth mindset strategies to ELLs. Possessing a growth mindset surpasses the simple idea that if one can dream something, one can achieve it; a growth mindset emphasizes the concepts of hard work and determination. Teachers who teach growth mindset strategies to students set high expectations, create a culture of growth, motivate, and build confidence (Frank, 2018). This theory aligns with how to best help ELLs. If building a foundation in ELLs promotes the idea of working hard to achieve goals, then a growth mindset positively affects ELLs both in acquiring the English

language as well as in making adequate academic progress.

The theories of Vygotsky's ZPD and growth mindset provided a structure for organizing and understanding the results of the data collected. Application of the dimensions of the ZPD and growth mindset supported the purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study, which was to understand teachers' perspectives on ELLs' academic language difficulties. The ZPD and growth mindset support social interaction as a tool to develop academic vocabulary. The theoretical framework was aligned to the problem statement as the theory provides an effective strategy in language acquisition that allows students the opportunity to acquire language on their own while teachers scaffold social interactions to further increase language acquisition. Figure 1 represents how incorporating Vygotsky's ZPD and growth mindset can positively impact ELLs who are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful. As teachers implement the ZPD and instill a growth mindset in students, they will acquire the academic language necessary for success. This combination allows students the opportunity to acquire language.

**Figure 1**

*Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Growth Mindset for English Language Learners*



Problem: English language learners (ELLs) need to acquire academic language and then teachers scaffold interaction to develop academic vocabulary.

Growth mindeset is incorporated in ELLs: If ELLs believe they will be able to learn English if they work hard, then they will eventually reach the goal.

ELLs develop vocabulary

The problem is ELLs in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the academic

language necessary to be successful academically (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). The theoretical framework aligned to the purpose statement because Vygotsky's ZPD and a growth mindset allow students to acquire language independently and work hard, and then allow elementary ESL teachers to utilize their lived experiences educating ELLs to scaffold instruction and help guide students to further acquire language. As teachers implement the ZPD and instill a growth mindset in students, the students will acquire the academic language necessary for success. As teachers implement growth mindset strategies with ELLs, the whole student is serviced, which enhances the academic experience. The ZPD allows students the opportunity to acquire language on their own and teachers to take the role of facilitators of social interactions conducive to language acquisition.

The study examined ESL teachers' perceptions of the reason for ELLs' difficulty acquiring the academic language required to be successful in school, the problems the teachers believe impact teacher instruction of ELLs, and which strategies teachers believe increase academic success for ELLs. What teachers think and feel has a direct impact on the success of students; as teacher perception evolves, so will knowledge acquired to determine the issues blocking language acquisition and which strategies work best to remediate the issue.

ZPD theory and growth mindset can be implemented to bring a well-rounded education experience for the ELL. When educators focus on the problem of ELLs' academic struggles and then take steps to address the problems in a systematic way, such as with scaffolding, educators can better help students in making academic learning gains. Scaffolding is included as teachers help learners structure information so students can better acquire new knowledge (Tran & Aytac, 2018). Integrating the students' cultural experiences to increase language acquisition, the intended result is for ELLs to acquire the necessary language for success (Shim & Shur, 2018).

Application of dimensions of the ZPD and growth mindset blend to support the purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study, which was to understand teachers' perspectives on ELLs' academic language difficulties. While the ZPD supports social interaction as a tool to develop academic vocabulary, a growth mindset provides ELLs with the fundamental belief achievement is possible with practice and belief in oneself.

## Research Literature Review

Literature varies from the growing immigrant population to learning gaps to the policies and regulations affecting the instruction of ELLs. Literature covers information about language acquisition, technology, ELLs who have disabilities, and teacher experiences, including culturally responsive teaching (CRT) professional development and best practices. To meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, literature must be reviewed to best address the problem of ELLs in the United States having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful academically (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016).

### Immigrant Population

The percentage of ELLs in U.S. public schools increased from 9.2% in 2010 to 10.4% in 2019 (NCES, 2022) Thirteen percent of the population in the United States are immigrants, both documented and undocumented, coming to the United States for a better life (Radford, 2019). Over 5 million public school students in the United States are ELLs (Carley Rizzuto, 2017). ELLs are the fastest-growing demographic of students enrolled in U.S. public schools (Orosco & Abdulrahim, 2017).

### *Types of ELLs*

ELLs are a diverse group of students and include undocumented immigrants, documented

immigrants, refugees, and second- or third-generation ELLs. Undocumented immigrants are immigrants who enter the United States without required documentation. Approximately 5.1 million children under the age of 18 are undocumented or have undocumented parents. Undocumented immigrants have less access to resources and fewer rights (Rodriguez, 2019). Documented immigrants are immigrants born in another country but who enter the United States legally.

Academic language acquisition is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2018), a *refugee* is a displaced person who left their native country because of fear of persecution or imprisonment because of race, ethnicity, religion, and/or political or social affiliation. A large population of ELLs are refugees. More than 60% in 2017 were younger than 14 years old and female (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Children who are refugees may have traumas because of the experiences of being a refugee, and the stressful situations experienced may impact language acquisition (Kupzyk et al., 2016). Life in the United States often is very different than in the ELL's native country, requiring the ELL to not only acclimate and learn a new language but also be immersed in new experiences, including rules and norms that may be unfamiliar to the student (Cho et al., 2019). Because of the difference between the student's native country and the United States, social–emotional learning is also different from what the refugee was taught in their native country (Cho et al., 2019). W. P. Thomas and Collier (1997) explained social–emotional learning is a critical component in language acquisition; therefore, it is imperative for teachers to get to know the ELLs. Refugees often have diverse skills, such as survival skills, resilience, and problem-solving skills (Cho et al., 2019). The skills the refugee possesses should be considered by the teacher and utilized as a bridge to the skills needed to gain academic language and succeed in the United States.

Some ELLs are second- or third-generation English learners. Second- and third-generation language learners are known as Generation 1.5, meaning students function between two linguistic and cultural identities (Lewis, 2016). Generation 1.5 students have both cultural and linguistic traits from multigenerational immigrants. Increasing evidence shows second-generation immigrants possess transgenerational trauma because of their relationships with first-generation immigrants (Kupzyk et al., 2016). Generation 1.5, students who function between two linguistic and cultural identities (Lewis, 2016), are performing below expectations in comparison to other immigrant subgroups (de Lourdes Viloria, 2019). Generation 1.5 ELLs learn English socially and do not possess the skills for academic language proficiency. Needs of second- and third-generation ELLs differ from those of other ELL populations because second- and third-generation ELLs have been educated in the United States. Second- and third-generation immigrants have a higher risk of both academic and health difficulties as well as a higher rate of unemployment (Kupzyk et al., 2016).

### *Growing Immigrant Population*

Increased immigration increases the importance of, and impact ELLs have on the U.S. education system and the country. Worldwide, the number of ELLs is increasing; educators must know how to teach ELLs effectively in ways inclusive of both the language and culture of the student (Gupta, 2019). The percentage of ELLs in U.S. public schools increased from 9.2% in 2010 to 10.4% in 2019 (NCES, 2022).

Focusing on the education of ELLs is an essential aspect of education in the United States. ELLs are the fastest-growing population of students in the U.S. school system (Shim, 2014). The number of ELLs continues to increase; the United States Census Bureau suggested, by 2030, 40% of the population of students will have a first language other than English

(Hallman & Meineke, 2016). Of the 347,069 students enrolled in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS, 2020a), the fourth largest school district in the nation, 61,704 are ELLs. ELLs in the state of Florida are assessed utilizing ACCESS (Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners) to assess progress in learning English; the annual assessment ensures progress in English is being made toward high-level achievement (MDCPS, 2019). MDCPS offer a variety of services to assist ELLs to make academic learning gains. Services offered by MDCPS include free tutoring for ELLs before and after school and on Saturdays for core subjects such as reading, math, science, and social studies. Additionally, MDCPS (2020b) offer supplemental software for explicit English language instruction to ELLs and provide opportunities for cultural field trips for immigrant students. The most recent data available show the K–12 English proficiency rate for ELLs, which was at 26% during the 2016–2017 school year, decreased to 24% during the 2017–2018 school year (MDCPS, 2018a). The rate at which ELLs acquire sufficient English to exit the English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) program decreased from 17% in 2016–2017 to 14% in 2017–2018. Regarding state testing, ELLs in Grades 3–5 achieved proficient levels on the ELA component of the Florida Standards Assessment and 46% proficiency in the mathematics component (MDCPS, 2018a). Each learner is important, but as the population of ELLs increases, greater focus must be on the best ways to reach and educate ELLs. The main factor that influences the ELL experience at school is the teachers who provide instruction (Shim, 2014). Teachers' beliefs and perceptions are critical to reaching and teaching ELLs. Teachers must be seen as a resource of knowledge to help determine the best way to educate ELLs.

### *Funds of Knowledge*

**ELL Impact at Home.** An adolescent who has been raised in an immigrant household

but is an ELL in the classroom naturally becomes the official translator at home. Adolescents coming from immigrant families are referred to as *immigrant adolescents* and are the people in the immigrant family responsible for not only learning to read and write in English but also navigating new social systems (Santos et al., 2018). Immigrant adolescent ELLs are impacting a changing world (Santos et al., 2018). These ELLs are not only responsible for learning English and making academic learning gains in the classrooms but also becoming linguistic and cultural resources for their families (Santos et al., 2018). As the immigrant population increases, so does the ELL adolescent population who are the middlemen in the decision making of immigrant households (Santos et al., 2018). Although research does not show the effects of immigrant adolescents as linguistic and cultural resources, they are being utilized as intermediaries (Santos et al., 2018). Teachers, schools, and school systems must be aware of the whole child and not solely the student's linguistic needs. Acquiring cultural competency is encouraged to best meet the needs of ELLs. Culturally and linguistically relevant vocabulary should be utilized to increase family support of the ELL as well as successful communication (Mindel & John, 2018).

   **ELL Impact in the Classroom.** The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated ELLs be educated with non-ELL classmates (Gottfried, 2016). According to the USDE (2017), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) continued the mandate. Every student in a classroom has an impact on the classroom. Gottfried (2016) suggested students placed in classrooms with other students who have similar needs, such as ELLs, increase achievement levels for all students in the class. Classroom diversity has neither a positive nor a negative effect on achievement levels (Gottfried, 2016). Gottfried suggested the key element for increased achievement is the similar needs of the students in the classroom and not diversity in the classroom. In mixed-classroom settings, a positive effect was found regarding ELLs in the classroom, specifically in

socioemotional skills (Gottfried, 2016). ELLs in a general education classroom have positive socioemotional effects on the entire class as they bring positive value to the classroom setting and should be utilized as a source for all students. Addressing ELL learning gaps will help ELLs make learning gains and positively impact classroom culture (Gottfried, 2016).

## ELL Learning Gaps

Although the number of ELLs has followed an increasing trend, the achievement gap between ELLs and native speakers has not closed. Evidence shows ELLs are outperformed by their native-English-speaking peers (Maarouf, 2019). While non-ELL groups have increased their proficiency in national reading averages by 4 points, ELL groups' proficiency rates are comparable to where the groups were when No Child Left Behind was started (Polat et al., 2016). Increased science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education has not yet helped ELLs close the learning gap (Maarouf, 2019). If an interdisciplinary approach such as STEM is not helping ELLs close the learning gap, educators must research where ELLs are having difficulty and how to best remediate the difficulty. Data about the achievement gap between ELLs and native English speakers are beneficial to educators in determining the learning issues. Once the learning issues are identified, educators can work to target the needs of and help ELLs increase academic proficiency and close the learning gap. Addressing and improving policies affecting ELLs will help decrease learning gaps between ELLs and native English speakers.

## ELL Policies

The FLDOE sets the foundation for policies and procedures for each district in the state of Florida. ELLs in Florida must be identified and assessed to ensure they receive immediate and proper services (FLDOE, 2020a). Students in MDCPS (2020b) are surveyed at the time of

registration and tested to ensure correct placement. All ELLs are entitled to program instruction

appropriate to personal level, including English language instruction as well as instruction in

basic subject areas (FLDOE, 2020a). Teachers of ELLs are required to be ESOL endorsed,

meaning teachers of ELLs are required to hold a certification in ESOL. ESOL strategies are

required when delivering instruction to ELLs (FLDOE, 2020a). Under ESSA, the USDE (2017)

required ELLs to be assessed annually to determine proficiency levels and provide

accommodations for state testing. The FLDOE (2020a), and specifically MDCPS (2020b),

administers the ACCESS 2.0 assessment to ELLs annually. ESOL programs must be monitored

at the district level as well as at the individual school level. ESOL programs must also be

evaluated and include comparisons between ELLs and non-ELLs regarding retention rates,

graduation rates, dropout rates, grade point averages, and state assessment scores (FLDOE,

2020a). ESSA mandates accountability for ELLs, to include goals and progress monitoring

(USDE, 2017). Policies affecting ELLs require funding for implementation.

**Funding ELLs' Education**

Funding for education is always an issue. From district funding to the budgets principals

need to balance annually, where money is best spent is always up for debate. Contrary to popular

belief, more funds should be spent on targeting ELL programs; specifically, a study conducted

by Jimenez-Castellanos and Garcia (2017) explained the schools that allocate more money to

base programs have higher ELL achievement. Funding needs to be increased to advance college

readiness for ELLs (Contreras & Fujimoto, 2019). For states to receive federal funding, annual

measurable achievement objectives for limited English proficiency must be met (USDE, 2018).

The FLDOE (2019) determined program budgets depending on the enrollment of full-time

equivalent (FTE) students. MDCPS count the number of FTE students three times a year; from

the FTE numbers, MDCPS determine budgets for schools and programs. For students and

schools to qualify for ELL funding, the students must be tested and coded as ELLs (MDCPS,

2018b). Ultimately, the goal for ELLs and ESL teachers is to increase language acquisition.

**Language Acquisition**

*Theories*

Different theories exist in ELL language acquisition. Krashen provided a monitor model

consisting of five interrelated hypotheses: the acquisition learning hypothesis, the monitor

hypothesis, the input hypothesis, the affective hypothesis, and the natural order hypothesis (Lai

& Wei, 2019). The language acquisition hypothesis explains that language acquisition is unique

from language learning. The acquisition comes subconsciously, as in the first language, and

requires meaningful interaction to develop. Learning aspects of the hypothesis come in the form

of formal instruction, as with a teacher providing explicit instruction (Krashen, 1982). The

monitor hypothesis describes the idea that before a person—an ELL, for example—speaks, the

person will scan to see if a mistake is being made (Krashen, 1982). The input hypothesis refers to

learners' understanding of comprehensible messages. Second language learners can comprehend

one step beyond the current level of language possessed (Krashen, 1985). The affective

hypothesis states ELLs who possess high motivation, self-confidence, good self-image, low

anxiety, and extroversion have a better chance of succeeding in second language acquisition.

Affective hypothesis coincides with the theory of growth mindset helping to guide this study.

Regarding natural order hypothesis, language acquisition has a predictable order (Krashen &

Terrell, 1988). Krashen (1981) theorized the idea of requiring meaningful and natural

interactions in the target language to promote language acquisition.

Terrell and Krashen (1988) suggested the natural approach to language acquisition

involves engaging ELLs in real-life experiences, so the students can experience the target language naturally (Matamoros-Gonzalez et al., 2017). The hypothesis by Krashen (1981) affects classroom environments because it provides a framework for language acquisition. Skilled teachers provide instruction of the target language to help language learners understand. ELLs are then required to participate in the learning process. When all stakeholders take an active role, successful language acquisition can be achieved.

W. P. Thomas and Collier (1997) found ELLs continued to experience lower levels of success than native English speakers. Even ELLs who attended well-implemented education programs designed for ELLs and spent at least 5 years in U.S. schools averaged between the 10th and 30th percentiles, contrary to native English speakers who typically finished in the 50th percentile nationwide (W. P. Thomas & Collier, 1997). Because of the findings, Thomas and Collier proposed the prism model theory based on four components of language acquisition. For ELLs to acquire language successfully, an intertwined process including language development, academic development, sociocultural process, and cognitive process must exist. The four intertwined experiences foster ELL success (Lynch, 2020). *Language development* refers to both the subconscious and conscious teaching of language, including oral and written language of the student's native language as well as the language being acquired (W. P. Thomas & Collier, 1997). *Academic development* includes schoolwork across all content areas; as grade levels progress, so does vocabulary development to higher cognitive levels (W. P. Thomas & Collier, 1997). *Social and cultural processes* refer to everything happening in everyday life for the language learner, including past, present, and future aspects of home, school, community, and society (W. P. Thomas & Collier, 1997). The *cognitive process* is the fourth and final aspect of the prism model, and Thomas and Collier explained the cognitive process as the natural process

developing from birth, through school, and beyond. Infants build upon the process through interaction with adults. First language development is crucial to second language development (W. P. Thomas & Collier, 1997). The prism model can help guide teachers to educate ELLs through a focus on interactions and language as well as be a guiding factor for lessons.

Vygotsky believed internal culture was the bridge between early and later development, explaining that people were conditioned by both society and culture (Demirbaga, 2018). Sociocultural theory, developed by Vygotsky (1978), describes instruction and learning should be related to a student's prior knowledge. Once teachers understand what a student already knows, teachers can build on that knowledge and help the student achieve a higher mental process. The theory suggests both suitable input and output are required during direct and explicit instruction for learning to happen (Castrillon, 2017). Vygotsky theorized higher order functions were developed by parents, peers, and culture, meaning learning derived from interactions with people. Sociocultural theory can guide language acquisition education in classrooms by guiding teachers to develop social experiences for ELLs to further develop language acquisition. With Vygotsky's theory of bridging a student's new knowledge to prior knowledge for effective outcomes, CRT can help guide teachers in bridging students' prior language knowledge to English language instruction.

### Types of Language Proficiency

Two main types of language proficiency are basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). BICS take approximately 2 years to acquire (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). BICS include informal language utilized with friends and family. Interpersonal language can help in the classroom because it is the type of language utilized to understand directions and instruction in the classroom. CALP takes more time and, at

best, takes 5–7 years to acquire fluency (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). CALP takes longer to acquire because it is more technical. Academic language is used in academics and therefore, it is imperative to learn to make academic learning gains. The differences between BICS and CALP are important when teaching ELLs; just because a student is learning to communicate in English does not mean the student is ready to be released into the academic world without support. Best practices for vocabulary development are discussed as follows. Technology can increase vocabulary exposure and practice.

**Technology and ELLs**

Technology has become an indispensable source in society (Filimon et al., 2019). As the world continues to change and the use of technology and social media platforms increases, educators of ELLs must consider that social media can enhance engagement in learning and practicing English. Krashen (1981) suggested meaningful interaction is required for learning. Technology has the potential to provide meaningful learning experiences for ELLs by providing students with different opportunities and platforms to practice English as the students are acquiring the language.

Educational games are gaining in popularity, specifically regarding culture and are designed to increase knowledge acquisition by students (Filimon et al., 2019). Tricky Genie is one example targeting improvement in the understanding of English texts (Filimon et al., 2019). Technology offers ELLs the opportunity to better understand what is going on in the classroom and can be utilized to improve comprehension and eventual academic success (Stairs-Davenport & Skotarczak, 2018).

*Apps*

Multimedia has become essential for teaching English as a second language (Zhang,

2017). Zhang (2017) conducted a study and determined technology is shifting the role of a student in the learning process from a passive recipient to an independent learner. ELLs can actively participate in language acquisition using different apps. Apps, such as Duolingo, Memrise, and Talk English are utilized by ELLs to practice English independently (Miller, 2020). The Duolingo app teaches the English language by skill, Memrise has user-generated courses, and Talk English is not only free for the user but also provides conversation practice with the ELL.

### Websites and Programs

Programs such as Imagine Learning promote language development and can be utilized as a part of classroom differentiated instruction (DI), as well as at home from any device (MDCPS, 2020c). Interactive websites provide additional opportunities for ELLs to actively participate in the language acquisition process. Websites, such as Starfall, English Media Lab, and English for Kids, provide engaging and meaningful learning for ELLs. Starfall provides literacy practice, English Media Lab has exercises for everything from grammar to pronunciation and is useful for all levels of English learners, and English for Kids uses games and songs to engage ELLs (University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries, 2020).

### Social Media

The population of the world is changing and evolving. ELLs are not acquiring language only in a classroom setting or from conversations with friends. Social media has shifted to play impactful roles in the life of people and therefore affects the way people live and learn. According to global social network statistics, as of July 2020, Facebook had 260.3 million active users, Instagram had 108.2 million, and Twitter had 326 million. Social media is affecting language acquisition. Vygotsky (1978) suggested the foundation of core communication and

learning a new language is rooted in social interaction. A study by Aleissa (2017) described social media as a platform to observe culture and interact with native language speakers. Teachers of ELLs should recognize social media as a platform for authentic conversations and teaching tools fostering communication and language skills (Aleissa, 2017). On the contrary, social media platforms overall do not positively impact the enthusiasm an ELL has about learning English (Al Fadda, 2020a). Of the popular social media platforms, Instagram is the most effective for engaging students in both the English learning process and providing basic social English language acquisition (Al Fadda, 2020a). Instagram also provides ELLs with insights into U.S. culture and promotes social interaction (Al Fadda, 2020a).

The insights provided by social media can be utilized in cultural assimilation. Where immigrants and ELLs throughout history have had to sink or swim regarding language acquisition and culture assimilation, they now get a sneak peek into how life and language are used in the United States. Social media platforms can be a prequel into the life and norms of the United States even before arriving in the United States. Learning the slang utilized in social media can help build confidence in ELLs even before entering an academic environment in the United States. Despite easy access and being user-friendly, social media cannot take the place of instruction in a classroom or in-person social interaction, but it can help immigrants and ELLs have an idea of what is expected in the United States. Teachers can use social media to improve ELLs' academic language learning by incorporating the meaningful opportunities social media offers to engage in social interaction, creating a meaningful learning experience for the ELLs. Various methods exist for targeting ELLs with different needs.

**ELLs With Learning Disabilities**

As the number of ELLs increases, the number of ELLs who have learning disabilities

increases as well. No proven method or procedure exists that accurately identifies an ELL as

having a learning disability and then places the student in the correct learning environment (Burr

et al., 2015). ELLs, with or without learning disabilities, will not be educated effectively unless

their needs are known. When teachers do not have professional development to teach ELLs,

teachers can mistakenly instruct ELLs with a diluted version of the curriculum or misdiagnose

ELLs as having learning disabilities (Carley Rizzuto, 2017). Errors such as diluting instruction or

misdiagnosing ELLs can have long-term effects on student progress. Interventions designed for

students with disabilities (SWDs) are designed to help with processing, linguistic, or cognitive

disabilities and often do not help with learning a second language. Not only will interventions for

SWDs not work to acquire a second language, but interventions for SWDs can limit the

acquisition of a second language (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). The key element is correcting the

issue where there are limited resources and procedures in place for identifying and placing ELLs

who have learning disabilities.

ELLs who have learning disabilities, determined by utilizing various forms of data,

should be labeled as such. Each stage of the learning disability referral process should be looked

at and assessed with no bias. Every aspect of the student's needs must be evaluated, including the

classroom learning environment, the quality of instruction, and even factors of the student's life

before being in the current learning environment. Serious issues remain as related to ELLs in

research, procedures in place, and state resources available to ELLs who have learning

disabilities (Burr et al., 2015).

Little difference between states has been found regarding special education, and states

generally are guided by what is required at the federal level. Students who have a specific

learning disability in English normally manifest the same learning difficulty in their native

language (Scott et al., 2014). Educators are struggling to meet the needs of CLD students as no national consensus exists on how to meet the needs of CLD students before or during the specific learning disability (SLD) identification process (Scott et al., 2014). With no consensus on how to meet the needs of CLD students during the SLD process, educators are struggling to define effective practices to help students acquire language and make academic progress. Education decisions should be made without bias during the SLD process. As a consensus is developed, CLD students who are also identified as SLD can receive the strategies and instruction needed for success. Without proper labeling, a student's individual needs cannot be addressed, and academic progress cannot be reached to its fullest potential.

### *Determining ELL Disabilities*

According to the FLDOE (2020a), Florida school districts are responsible for the specific processes to determine if ELLs have a learning disability. ELLs in MDCPS must receive ESOL services, and assessments must be documented on the students' Individualized Education Programs. ELLs who are registered as having a disability must be coded as such, and the service for the disability supersedes anything in place for ELLs (MDCPS, 2020b). An ELL can be referred for learning disability testing, but an English language proficiency committee must be a part of the process. The purpose of the committee is to ensure insufficient language is not confused with a disability (MDCPS, 2020b).

### *Strategies for ELLs with Disabilities*

Strategies exist in teaching ELLs with disabilities. First, teachers must get to know the ELL with a disability. Not only is it important to know what the student file states, but teachers also need to understand who the student is and what skills the student possesses. Utilizing an additive approach, teachers can use the student's diversity as an asset (Cuba, 2020).

A research study by O'Connor et al. (2019) investigated teachers of sixth-grade students with learning disabilities when over half of the students were ELLs. Daily interactive vocabulary instruction was embedded into English language arts lessons. Vocabulary instruction included new word instruction in three 4-week units. The study indicated similar results for native language SWDs and ELLs with disabilities: Students who received interactive and explicit vocabulary instruction were able to maintain knowledge of the 4–24 words in the weeks after instruction (O'Connor et al., 2019).

To address students' needs, educators must understand where the students are academically. While learning a new language can be difficult for any student, learning a new language for an SWD can be especially challenging (Young et al., 2019). Carley Rizzuto (2017) cited Cochran-Smith (2004), Darling Hammond (2010), and Nieto (2009) to explain how ELLs are mistakenly placed in low-reading-ability groups after being labeled as poor readers when the reality is ELLs are still learning the language. Mislabeling and misdiagnosing students as poor readers wastes precious time vital in the English acquisition window in which students must develop a foundation in English that will allow them to succeed. If teachers are addressing the wrong issues, the students will not receive the instruction needed to reach their fullest potential. Teacher–student data chats can be utilized to properly evaluate students. As a teacher conducts a data chat with a student, the teacher can determine whether the ELL is learning English and might not necessarily be a bad reader. Data chats also give students a voice in the education process. By giving students a voice in the process, teachers are facilitating ownership in the students over the education goals being achieved. As students develop ownership in the process, they become invested in the progress being made and will work hard to achieve success.

### Regulations

ELLs can also have special needs. State and federal regulations leave teachers in a space where they are required to teach in a certain manner but also want to create a culturally responsive classroom where students can make progress (Stinson, 2018). Navigating between strict parameters and creating a creative and loving classroom can be difficult. Ever-changing state and federal regulations can create challenges for teachers as they are unequipped to handle the changes without professional development (Stinson, 2018). Although state and federal regulations are in place to help ELLs with disabilities, support, flexibility, and resources for educators often are lacking, which can end up causing negative results for the students.

In meeting all requirements, students are often pulled from general education settings where the students may be better able to progress (Stinson, 2018). Continuing teacher education, such as professional development, is essential to navigate through state and federal regulations; without the proper knowledge, teachers will be unable to meet student needs and guide students to meet their potential. For teachers to rethink how ELLs are educated, professional development is required, specifically when it comes to gifted ELLs and how gifted traits manifest in ELLs (Szymanki & Lynch, 2020). Professional development can increase teacher experiences.

**Teacher Experiences**

***Teacher Experiences and Perspectives***

Teachers' experience with and perspectives on ELLs have a direct impact on language acquisition, acclimation to life in the United States, and academic success. Research suggests teacher quality correlates with 10% to 15% higher ELL learning gains (Polat et al., 2016). Educators who teach ELLs in the state of Florida are required to be ESOL endorsed, according to Rule 6a-4.0244 (FLDOE, 2020b). The more teachers know about and understand the cultural and linguistic diversity of ELLs, the better prepared teachers are to educate ELLs. When educators

are aware of cultural similarities and differences, commonalities can be found, differences can be embraced, and true appropriate communication can begin for ELLs and allow for success (Hong et al., 2019). Once teachers can connect with ELLs and understand the needs of the students, teachers will be able to build relationships as well as facilitate the proper interactions where ELLs can thrive as students and acquire the academic language necessary for success. Teachers must get to know the students they are tasked with educating because the knowledge obtained makes for better teachers and better learners. When the teacher knows each student in the classroom, the teacher can utilize the commonalities and differences between the students as a tool for effective teaching and learning (Gupta, 2019).

The experience and knowledge teachers possess are fundamental elements in providing all students, but specifically ELLs, a proper and effective education. Teachers who have previous experience teaching ELLs, for example, are more effective in teaching ELLs than those with no prior experience. Educators who know and understand ELL-specific instructional strategies are better equipped to teach ELLs (Master et al., 2016). If teacher knowledge and experience have a direct positive impact on the success of ELLs, then teachers of ELLs should be given the proper professional development to ensure success. Proper professional development correlates with advances in student learning (Mullins et al., 2020). Just as students are not expected to sink or swim in the classroom, teachers should not be expected to sink or swim when teaching students. Students need teachers to go above and beyond to make content understandable as students are increasing their knowledge of the English language. The reality is inexperienced teachers will always be in positions to teach ELLs; the solution for inexperienced teachers is coaching cycles. Coaching cycles are an effective strategy for novice ELL teachers. Novice teachers can observe experienced ELL teachers' effective ELL strategies in action. Experienced teachers are allowed

to go into the novice teacher's classroom to observe and provide feedback. Through coaching cycles, novice teachers will obtain strategies for teaching ELLs to ensure improvement for both the teachers and the students.

### Culturally Responsive Teaching

Of Florida students, 28% speak a language other than English at home (Szecsi et al., 2017). A way to meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse learners is to create culturally responsive learning environments and for teachers to implement CRT in the classroom. CRT occurs when educators incorporate cultural diversity into instruction (Rockich-Winston & Wyatt, 2019). Specifically with ELLs, CRT exists when teachers utilize the ELL's native language and culture for instruction. CRT is about using an ELL's cultural and linguistic background as a learning tool as opposed to looking at the differences as a barrier to instruction and language acquisition. As teachers exercise cultural compassion and embed the ELL's cultural diversity as an asset in class, the ELL feels more comfortable and receptive to the new language and culture. Providing a comfortable learning environment, as in the case of CRT, will leave ELLs more susceptible to increased academic language. Teachers have advocated for additional language instruction and have encouraged extended services for ELLs who exited prematurely (Szecsi et al., 2017). Teachers who possess CRT approaches and acknowledge and embrace students' different backgrounds can better meet expectations.

Implementing successful CRT requires teachers to utilize the differences in ELLs' communication and learning styles as a tool for instruction. Teachers implementing CRT in the classroom can include multicultural literature in the lessons. Szecsi et al. (2017) concluded ELLs could benefit from a learning environment in which the native language is recognized and utilized to support English acquisition through bilingualism. Academic success is enriched by

CRT because it helps increase ELL knowledge and academic language acquisition. A study by

Portes et al. (2018) found student-centered cultural approaches to education, such as CRT,

benefit ELLs fundamentally and do not negatively affect the native-English-speaking learners in

the classroom.

### Professional Development

In any profession, some employees are outstanding, some are good, and some have room

for improvement; the same goes for the teaching profession. Teachers' perceptions of students

have a direct impact on the education the students receive; therefore, every teacher must be

equipped with the knowledge necessary to be outstanding (Carley Rizzuto, 2017). Some teachers

learn about the students and utilize the students' cultural backgrounds to differentiate and

instruct. There are also teachers without the necessary knowledge who are unwilling to

differentiate instruction for ELLs (Carley Rizzuto, 2017). Professional development can help

teachers improve literacy instruction for students and can help guide teachers to learn about the

individual students to connect what the student already knows to the student's goals and how the

student learns. The FLDOE (2020a) has made SALA online learning available for teachers in

Florida as a professional development program for teachers of ELLs. Making connections will

help students acclimate to the new culture and make academic progress. Carley Rizzuto (2017)

cited Nieto (2013) in explaining the concept of teachers' perceptions playing an important

element in student performance.

### Reflection

Reflection is the key to progress, especially in education. Teacher reflection is imperative

for improvement in the education provided to students. When teachers take the time to reflect on

what is being taught and how improvements can be made, that ultimately benefits students and

their achievement. Teachers who are willing to learn new strategies, reflect on personal practices, and take responsibility for what students are learning reap the rewards when students make academic progress (Andrei et al., 2019). Experiences and personalities of teachers influence how ELLs are taught (Hong et al., 2019). Self-reflection allows teachers the opportunity to modify instruction based on the various students' individual needs and ESOL levels in the classroom. Through reflection, teachers can look back on what was done and make accommodations for improvement.

Taking the time to reflect provides teachers the opportunity to analyze students' emotional needs as ELLs are adapting to a new culture and language. By taking time to reflect on how the classroom environment is affecting the students' acclimation, the teacher can modify the classroom environment to be a more culturally responsive classroom where the student feels welcomed and comfortable (Hong et al., 2019). It is only through reflection that a teacher can modify instruction and the classroom environment to meet the emotional needs of the students. As the ELLs acclimate to the new setting and instruction, the teacher should then continue to reflect on what is happening to ensure the students' changing needs are being met. Reflection also allows the teacher to identify strengths as a teacher and extend the strengths to alternative areas of instruction. The teacher can also identify areas for potential growth where professional learning could be beneficial for not only the teacher but also the students being educated.

### *Knowledge of Learner*

Not all students learn the same or at the same rate; this works the same for ELLs as not all ELLs acquire language at the same rate. Almost 100% of immigrants to the United States have exactly one thing in common: Each immigrant possesses their own cultural and linguistic background, often different from the culture in the United States (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). A

popular myth about ELL children is they acquire a new language quickly and with ease. Different factors contribute to language acquisition. For example, a student who is not proficient in their native language will usually take a longer period to acquire a second language. The formal education students receive in their native language has a direct impact on how students will learn a second language (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). Once again, teachers need to take the time to get to know the students in the classroom and investigate to learn the strengths and weaknesses of the students. As the teacher learns the ELL in the classroom is below grade level in the native language, the teacher can then begin to investigate why the student is below grade level and take the appropriate steps to remediate the issues for the student.

Another determining factor for how long it will take a student to learn a second language has to do with how the student is acclimating to the new culture (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). If an ELL is having a difficult time acclimating to the new culture in the United States, the student will have a difficult time being open enough to start acquiring a new language. When an ELL is acclimating nicely to the new culture, the student will be more open and excited about learning a new language and therefore be more successful at learning the new language. How different the student's native language is from the language being learned affects how quickly and easily a student can learn the new language.

Some languages are more closely related than others. For example, English is more closely related to Spanish and Dutch than to Arabic, Korean, or Vietnamese (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). Although progress can be made, acquiring language even in best-case scenarios takes time. Social and academic languages are acquired at different rates. BICS can take approximately 2 years to acquire (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017), while CALP takes more time, at best, 5–7 years to acquire fluently (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017).

Student engagement is an essential element for ELL success. All learners, especially ELLs, need to be engaged to reach their fullest academic potential. Language acquisition cannot take place if a student is not engaged in the learning process. Students will ultimately do better academically when they are completely and fully engaged in the learning process. A distinct relationship exists between a student's motivational resilience and the student's social context, resources, emotions, and achievement outcomes.

Teacher support also has a direct effect on how a student progresses through the journey in motivational resilience (Pitzer & Skinner, 2017). As educators learn about ELLs, educators can then facilitate learning interactions specifically for language acquisition where the student can engage in the learning process and achieve language acquisition and academic success. When a student can take part in the process of learning, the student can take ownership of the education the student receives and will be more committed to success. A best practice to keep students engaged in the learning process is for teachers to administer an interest and goal survey to the students. Instructors equipped with knowledge of the learners' interests and goals can create activities geared toward keeping students engaged in a manner aligned to the interest of each learner.

### Coteaching

A strategy school districts should consider for the instruction of ELLs is the use of co-teachers. In a time when the population of ELLs in the United States and, therefore, classrooms is increasing, teachers and school districts must change with the times. Coteaching is the most efficient way to foster teacher and student growth (Beninghof & Leensvaart, 2016). Coteaching has numerous benefits. In a coteaching model, ELLs have access to the general education classroom 100% of the day, both teachers have responsibility for instruction, and students

receive daily targeted language instruction in core subjects such as reading and mathematics (Beninghof & Leensvaart, 2016). Best practices can be implemented in a coteaching environment to increase academic language proficiency.

**Best Practices**

As the number of ELLs increases not only in the United States but around the world, teachers must be equipped with the knowledge of how to educate ELLs. Different best practices have been developed to help the learning process for ELLs. Teachers must take the time to get to know the ELLs, not simply learn names and where students are from, but get to know who the students are and the motivations the students possess (Gupta, 2019). As teachers learn about the students, teachers can then help guide students in connecting the knowledge they already possess to new knowledge being obtained. The whole child, not just the academic portion of every student, needs to be addressed (Tomlinson, 2016). By learning about the student's personal needs and experiences, educators can then connect with the student and guide the student in connecting the content being taught (Tomlinson, 2016). Because the skills ELLs have in the native language automatically transfer to English (Cuba, 2020), teachers need to be knowledgeable of the skills students already possess in the native language to not waste time teaching skills the student may already have.

Teachers should ensure classrooms are welcoming (Gupta, 2019) and inclusive of all students. When students feel welcomed in a classroom environment and are comforted by a caring teacher, students can grow and learn without fear of making mistakes they may feel would be embarrassing. A warm and compassionate teacher with good classroom management correlates with overall positive student outcomes, including achievement. The better the relationship between students and teachers, the higher the level of student engagement and,

therefore, the higher the student achievement is (Banse & Palacios, 2018).

Teachers should build background knowledge for students. The more students know about a specific subject or topic, the better they can understand what is being taught or read (Gupta, 2019). ELLs are not a category of learners, and so individual ELLs learn and process information differently. Multiple modalities should be utilized during instruction (Gupta, 2019). When teachers incorporate auditory, visual, and kinesthetic opportunities into lessons, teachers can reach all ELLs regardless of the learning style required for true understanding. To ensure students are learning, ongoing assessment is key (Gupta, 2019). Ongoing assessment is beneficial because it allows teachers to assess whether the instruction provided is effective for the learners in the classroom. Teachers should be engaged in the learning process with ELLs. As relationships develop, teachers can learn what works best for the ELLs and facilitate a learning environment conducive to language development and acquisition. All best practices will aid in language acquisition, but each comes second to the relationship teachers must build with ELLs. Without relationships between ELLs and teachers, true language acquisition potential cannot be reached.

### *Cooperative Learning*

**Differentiated Instruction.** Once a teacher learns about an ELL, DI can be implemented. DI is designed on the idea the instruction should be adapted to the needs of the student (Shareefa & Moosa, 2020). Tailoring instruction to student needs is essential when educating ELLs because no two learners are the same or have the same learning needs. Targeting instruction such as in DI allows teachers to teach students at each student's level and allows students the opportunity to make appropriate learning gains. Although DI is beneficial for all students, considerable planning is required on the part of the teacher. For DI to be successful, teachers

must preplan and know students academically as well as how the students learn best. As an

effective best practice for instruction for ELLs, DI allows for flexibility; students can be grouped

according to level or mixed ability grouping, as well as learning style. DI allows for students to

see peers progressing and provides the additional push for students to exceed expectations.

The DI teaching method facilitates a learning experience in which students can succeed at

their current level. Many times, ELLs do not see much academic success; DI provides an

opportunity for students to shine where they are academically. DI fosters the experience of

different modalities for students. A teacher and student may think the student is a visual learner;

through the experience of DI, the student and teacher may realize a kinesthetic experience works

better for the student. The method of targeting instruction known as DI is an excellent best

practice when implemented in the classroom; DI meets students at their current academic levels

and encourages growth. A study by Brown and Endo (2017) suggested DI is not as effective for

ELLs because DI addresses ELLs at a surface level and does not build academic language or

target prior knowledge.

**Cooperative Learning Groups.** Utilizing cooperative learning groups is an asset to all

classroom settings. Students learn best when engaged; group work is a fun way to engage

learners and facilitate a setting in which students can learn from each other. Mixed ability

grouping yields positive results; lower performing students can learn effectively from higher

performing peers (Alghamdi, 2019). When educators take the time to truly learn about ELLs,

then the educators can group students in mixed-ability groups where they can work cooperatively

and learn from each other. Bilingual peer-readers in cooperative learning groups can provide

ELLs with individual assistance from fellow students (Carley Rizzuto, 2017). Facilitating the

opportunities for students to utilize what the students already know to help other students make

academic gains is a helpful strategy and sets a foundation for the future global society.

Opportunities for interaction and discussion are fundamental for ELL progress. Interaction allows ELLs to practice the language being learned as well as the opportunity to apply what ELLs are learning (Gupta, 2019). Cooperative learning groups also provide ELLs with a smaller learning setting in which native English speakers can model language and activities without the pressure that comes with a larger classroom. Because ELLs often enter silent periods where they may not communicate in a larger classroom setting, smaller groups provide an opportunity for peers to work together, and ELLs can obtain clarification from the peers working in the group. Implementing cooperative learning groups in the classroom provides an opportunity for extension. Whereas the ELL might only be able to independently write "The cat is black," working in a small group can provide the ELL with the opportunity to see another student extend the sentence to "The black cat jumped onto the fence to chase the squirrel."

Learning groups provide ELLs with opportunities to develop vocabulary by interacting with students who utilize shades of meanings, for example, such as *pretty*, *prettier*, and *prettiest*, and/or homophones such as a bat utilized in baseball and a bat as in the animal who flies at night. The possibilities to utilize cooperative learning groups or groups of students working together are endless and have countless benefits for both the ELLs and the native English speakers in the classroom.

### *Culturally Responsive Teaching*

**Culturally Responsive Education.** A key strategy in educating multicultural classrooms is to implement culturally responsive education (Lew & Nelson, 2016). CRT allows the opportunity to feel comfortable in the learning environment. CRT teachers incorporate things familiar with a student's native culture. A basic element of CRT is for teachers to know what

students can learn; what teachers expect from students is linked to what students achieve. When students are comfortable, learning environments become places where students are free to discover, learn, and grow. Including CRT in the classroom allows students to connect prior cultural knowledge and native literacy skills as the English language is acquired (Carley Rizzuto, 2017). Knowledge of learners is critical to CRT as it can only exist when teachers take the time to learn about each student as an individual; learning about the student's cultural background as well as where the student is academically will assist in creating a culturally responsive classroom experience for the students. Providing students with culturally familiar classroom materials helps to activate background knowledge for the learners and has been found to improve problem solving (Orosco & Abdulrahim, 2017). If students are expected to make academic learning gains and acquire the English language, then the texts the students are utilizing need to be culturally relevant to the students (Liton, 2016).

**Native Language.** No consensus exists on the right way to teach English as a second language. In the past, sink or swim was utilized as an ELL instructional model. Researchers disagree on whether to utilize a student's native language as the student learns English as a second language. Alzamil (2019) conducted a study to determine the practices yielding the best results when teaching English as a second language when the native language was Arabic. The researchers found the teachers did not utilize Arabic to teach English; English was more beneficial when learning the English language. Arabic could be used to communicate important information, but English should be primarily utilized. The consensus was when learning English, English should be the primary method of communication, while Arabic should be used only in extremely important cases (Alzamil, 2019).

Contrary to the findings of Alzamil (2019), native languages can be used to support

English language instruction. Students who receive some instruction in their native language can achieve higher levels in reading in English than students who do not receive support in their native language (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). Total isolation in the English language does not seem to follow a CRT practice. By utilizing a student's native language in English instruction, a teacher can help the ELL connect information already known to the new information the ELL is learning. When students can learn a new language with help from their native languages, students are better equipped to transfer information already possessed to understand new information. Planning and knowledge of learners are essential elements when deciding whether to include or exclude a student's native language during the English acquisition phase. Although there are times when ELLs can utilize their native language as a crutch, teachers want to utilize a student's native language as an asset in making the classroom environment culturally responsive.

### SIOP Model

A method for teaching ELLs is the sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP) model. The SIOP model is a research-based instrument utilizing different activities to develop language in a second language (Al Fadda, 2020b). SIOP provides support in learning content through English systematically without acquiring a proficient fluent language (Castrillon, 2017). This model has eight interconnected components, including lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice and application, lesson delivery, and review and assessment (Echevarria et al., 2004). Language and content objectives must be introduced before instruction. Objectives for language are necessary because both teachers and ELLs benefit from having clear language objectives explained and posted during lessons, which helps to ensure everyone knows the lesson goals (Echevarria et al., 2004). These objectives help to ensure teachers meet the specific needs of ELLs and help ELLs to know and

understand what is expected by the end of the lesson. An ELL teacher can simply write the objectives on the board; providing students with objectives allows the students to understand the purpose of the lessons being instructed. Each component of the SIOP model is designed to target ELLs and meet ELLs' academic and linguistic needs, including language acquisition. The SIOP can be utilized by teachers to make content easier to understand for ELLs and increase ELLs' potential for academic success.

### Vocabulary

An essential element in acquiring English as a second language is vocabulary development. More reading does not equal greater vocabulary acquisition (Alghamdi, 2019). Alghamdi (2019) found students acquired an increased amount of vocabulary during reading classes, specifically during group work. Intentional vocabulary instruction increases vocabulary learning (Goldstein & Randolph, 2017). Best practices yielded the best results when educators were aware of the students' learning styles (Alghamdi, 2019). Building vocabulary is essential for ELLs (Gupta, 2019). Increasing vocabulary has its own best practices, but even something as simple as when a teacher slows down what is being said or taught and/or repeating until a student understands can help bring meaning to vocabulary for ELLs. For ELLs to succeed academically, they must increase both communicative vocabulary and academic vocabulary; breaking words up into smaller parts can help students acquire the meaning of the words being learned.

Vocabulary education has three tiers. Tier 1 consists of basic vocabulary; Tier 2 includes high-frequency words and words with multiple meanings; and Tier 3 includes low-frequency words and context-specific vocabulary, including academic language (Neugebauer & Heineke, 2020). Vocabulary tiers are vital for teachers to know because the tiers provide a framework for planning vocabulary instruction. Intentional vocabulary instruction increases vocabulary learning

(Goldstein & Randolph, 2017). Students must also know the tiers because as ELLs learn more words, the ELLs will be better prepared to understand what is being read and taught academically.

Knowledge of tiers can also help ELLs understand current placement in language acquisition and what the next expected goal in language acquisition should be. Knowledge of tiers can create ELLs' personal engagement in the learning process. English learners usually have difficulty understanding and utilizing academic vocabulary while reading content-area texts (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). ELLs lack the necessary vocabulary to be academically successful. In a study by Jozwik and Douglas (2017), results indicated ELLs who received explicit academic vocabulary instruction, possessed self-regulation, participated in cooperative learning structures, and received Tier 1 instruction had the support necessary to develop academic vocabulary. Explicit academic vocabulary instruction, combined with self-regulation procedures and cooperative learning structures, served as a form of Tier 1 or universal instruction to support academic vocabulary development (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017).

**Morphemes.** Morphemes are the smallest meaningful word part made up of prefixes and/or suffixes and the root words. As ELLs increase morphological awareness, they can connect meanings to words they hear or read to increase their understanding of English. For example, once students learn the prefix *un* means under, they can combine what they know with what is unknown to infer meaning. A relation exists between teaching ELLs morphological analysis and increased scores in vocabulary (Davidson & O'Connor, 2019). ELLs could benefit from explicit instruction of morphological rules. Students who learn and understand the rules develop word awareness and develop learning as a strategic process as opposed to random word and language instruction (Montelongo et al., 2018).

**Frontloading Vocabulary.** Frontloading vocabulary occurs when a teacher teaches students words before the lesson, so students are equipped with the knowledge necessary to understand the lesson. As teachers know and understand the individual students, teachers can navigate teaching new vocabulary as opposed to teaching words the students may already know and understand. Research suggests benefits of frontloading vocabulary exist for both ELLs and native English speakers. Implementing the strategy of frontloading vocabulary is conducive to an integrated classroom setting and supports learning for all learners, but it works particularly well for ELLs with disabilities (Cuba, 2020). Introducing vocabulary first, as in frontloading vocabulary, allows students to learn keywords, which will better equip the students to learn and understand the concepts being taught in class. By utilizing strategies beneficial to all learners in a classroom, teachers can create a seamless learning environment inclusive of all learners where all types of students can learn and work together to make academic progress.

**Cognates.** ELLs benefit greatly from cognates. The English language has many words similar to words of other languages (Gupta, 2019). Explicit cognate instruction has a positive effect on English language acquisition (Williams et al., 2019). When teachers take the time to point out similarities in English and the student's native language, it helps increase the ELL's vocabulary and comprehension. Cognates help ELLs connect words with which they may already be familiar with words they are learning. The connection between what students know and what is being taught will help ELLs make meaning of new words. A fun best practice for cognates in a classroom setting is for teachers to create a word wall of words the ELLs are learning and cognates from the students' native language. A cognate word wall can make the classroom and overall learning experience personal for the students. As an extension to the cognate word wall, visual illustrations can provide yet another scaffold for the student. Using

similar words, such as with cognates, can also be beneficial to native English speakers by helping them make connections to a foreign language. As students learn from each other, an enhancement to classroom dialogue takes place and, therefore, enriches vocabulary in the classroom and between students.

**Gap in Literature**

The percentage of ELLs in U.S. public schools increased from 9.2% in 2010 to 10.4% in 2019 (NCES, 2022). The qualitative phenomenological study gained teachers' perceptions of strategies for teaching ELLs having difficulty acquiring academic language and closed the gap in the literature. The purpose of the prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire was to focus on gaining teachers' perspectives on ELLs' academic language difficulties. Data obtained from the study assisted in closing the gap in literature regarding ELLs.

## Chapter Summary

An overview of the scholarly knowledge of ELLs was provided. The problem is that ELLs in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful academically (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to understand teachers' perspectives on ELLs' academic language difficulties. Vygotsky's ZPD supports social interaction as a tool to acquire academic vocabulary development. A growth mindset provides ELLs with fundamental mentalities, supporting the idea that if the ELL works hard, the ELL will be able to achieve goals, including learning English academic language.

The increased immigrant population results in ELLs having a direct impact on U.S. education best practices. Best practices include DI, strategies for English language acquisition, and supporting ELLs with learning disabilities. The literature identifies major gaps for ELLs.

Little research has explored the impact immigrant adolescents have as the people in immigrant families responsible for not only learning to read and write in English but also navigating new social systems. School funding has a direct impact on ELL achievement. Increased numbers of ELLs mean an increased number of ELLs with disabilities, requiring effective instruction based on need.

Teacher experiences and perceptions can lead to best practices necessary to better educate and reach all ELLs. Getting to know ELLs is a fundamental element of ELL success; by learning about each learner, teachers can create learning opportunities for students to grow and succeed. Because skills transfer to English as the language is acquired, it is important for teachers to know and understand the skills the students already possess (Cuba, 2020). It is important to note not all ELLs will learn at the same rate, and even though the ELLs may be acquiring BICS, that does not mean the students' CALP is where it needs to be for the students to be independently academically successful. Best practices, such as DI, student engagement, vocabulary development, and morphological awareness, can help ELLs develop skills needed to increase vocabulary and achieve academic success.

Literature has not explored the reasons for ELLs having difficulty learning. This study explored ELLs' academic language learning difficulties in response to ESL-related instruction through K–5 ESL teachers' perspectives. Chapter 3 describes the methodology utilized in the study, which included 15 participants who each completed a prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

In 2019, 10.4% of students, or 5.1 million, were ELLs in the United States (NCES, 2022). Although ELLs present unique challenges to the U.S. education system, ELLs are assets to the country as they develop potential (USDE, 2017). Educating ELLs is a challenge; the students who are in the ELL population are not. CALP takes approximately 5–7 years to acquire fluently because CALP is technical in manner (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). Building vocabulary is essential for ELLs (Gupta, 2019). CALP is used in academics and imperative to learn in making academic learning gains. The qualitative phenomenological research study explored why ELLs in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful.

Virtual prequestionnaires, interviews, and postquestionnaires provided the framework to answer the research questions. The answers to the research questions provided information on the reasons ELLs are struggling in MDCPS. Discovered information will help serve the over 4.7 million foreign-born students registered in U.S. public schools. Foreign-born students comprise 6% of the total student population in the United States. Also, 20 million students in the United States are children of foreign-born parents (USDE, 2017). The priority of teachers of ELLs is to determine how to best educate ELLs and help students reach their fullest potential. The education of ELLs has a direct impact on the future of the United States.

The problem is ELLs in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful academically (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). Further studies were recommended for academic language acquisition. Additional studies in interventions in academic vocabulary instruction can investigate the effects on ELLs (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). With the promising effects of language-based reading interventions on

standardized indicators of academic language and reading comprehension, further research was recommended (Proctor et al., 2020).

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to describe elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties. The qualitative descriptive phenomenological research study focused on the perceptions of the teachers of ELLs to positively impact the lives and learning process of ELLs. The goal was to understand what problems teachers of ELLs believe impact instruction for ELLs and which strategies teachers perceive yield academic success. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are elementary teachers' lived experiences of teaching English language learners who have difficulty acquiring academic language proficiency and subject mastery?

Research Question 2: How is academic language instruction addressed and/or implemented for English language learners according to elementary teachers' experience?

Research Question 3: What do elementary teachers of English language learners suggest for effective academic language instruction in Florida public schools?

The research design and rationale section describe the appropriateness of the qualitative phenomenological method for the research study. The role of the researcher section discusses how the researcher's lived experiences could impact the study as well as the outcomes of the study. Research procedures include information specifically about the research: (a) population, (b) sample, (c) recruitment, (d) participation, (e) instrumentation, (f) data collection, and (g) data preparation. Data analysis includes the collection and organization of data, as well as how the data were analyzed. The reliability and validity section establishes the credibility and validity of the study. Ethical procedures describe the procedures to ensure the protection of human

participants. The chapter summary ends the chapter with a focus on the struggle of ELLs in acquiring the academic language necessary for success and gaining elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of strategies for teaching ELLs having difficulty acquiring academic language.

## Research Methodology, Design, and Rationale

Results from the qualitative phenomenological study were intended to help guide language acquisition education to improve ELLs' academic progress. Qualitative research searches for insight through descriptions, observations, and lived experiences (Hadi & Closs, 2016). A phenomenological approach was essential to obtain perceptions of elementary ESL teachers regarding the students, problems, and strategies to increase academic success for ELLs. Phenomenology places a researcher in roles as both observer and interpreter of things in the natural environment while trying to understand the phenomenon (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Qualitative phenomenological research was utilized to understand the experiences of elementary ESL teachers, as well as the events, issues, and problems affecting language acquisition and academic progress. The phenomenological design is based on inquiry, focused on intellectual engagement, and making meaning of the lived experiences of human subjects (Qutoshi, 2018).

A qualitative phenomenological research design was suitable for answering the research questions because the focus was on elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences with ELLs. Heidegger described phenomenology as understanding experiences through questioning (Quay, 2016). meaning questioning is essential to understanding. The prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire provided the opportunity to discover teachers' perceptions of the issues ELLs are having in acquiring academic language. The qualitative phenomenological research design was pivotal in sharing the insights and perceptions of teachers of ELLs. Perceptions of the problems that impact as well as the strategies elementary ESL teachers believe increase

academic success for ELLs were discovered.

The sample size of the qualitative phenomenological study was 15 elementary ESL teachers. The 15 elementary ESL teachers were teachers of ELLs who had been in the United States less than 2 years and were still in the process of learning English in a Florida public school. Instruments—prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire—were administered to ensure a complete review of the perceptions of elementary ESL teachers. The problems believed to impact teacher instruction and the strategies teachers believe increase academic success for ELLs were discovered.

Other qualitative research designs exist, such as case studies, narrative, and ethnography, but were not suitable for this study. A case study examines a system over time (Range, 2019), while the purpose of this study was to describe elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs with academic language difficulties. The focus of the study was on obtaining teachers' lived experiences and not on a system, making case study an inappropriate choice. Narrative research is chronological in nature and tells the story of an individual (Range, 2019). A narrative was not appropriate for this research study because the study focused on 15 ESL teachers' perceptions of why ELLs have difficulty acquiring the academic language required for learning gains and subject mastery. Ethnography is another qualitative research type, focusing on human society as a culture (Nicholas, 2019). Ethnography was not appropriate to implement in this research study because the focus was not on culture or people but on the difficulty of academic language acquisition.

The utilization of a qualitative phenomenological research approach allowed insight into the perspectives and lived experiences of the elementary ESL teachers through questioning (Quay, 2016). Phenomenology is a design based on inquiry focusing on intellectual engagement

and making meaning of the lived experiences of human subjects (Qutoshi, 2018). The questions asked of the participants enabled discovery of teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of the issues affecting ELLs' language acquisition. The intellectual engagement during the interviews contributed meaning and clarity to what works best for ELLs.

**Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher in a qualitative phenomenological research study is to investigate the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of research participants. An observer can obtain real-world information and perceptions to interpret the information from lived experiences. The most important role of a researcher is to gain access to thoughts and details of the human experience (Ghirotto, 2016). My role as the researcher was to gain access to the lived experiences of the educators to discover what is impeding ELLs' academic language acquisition. Interviews took place to gather data on elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of ELLs, the process of acquiring the language necessary for academic success, problems impacting instruction, as well as which strategies the elementary ESL teachers perceived to increase academic success for ELLs.

The study was conducted virtually with participants employed by MDCPS, the fourth largest school district in the nation. I was an MDCPS elementary school teacher of ELLs for more than 3 years, am ESOL endorsed, and have a master's degree in curriculum and instruction with a specialization in ESOL. I had no personal relationships with the elementary ESL teachers who participated in the research study but have had professional relationships with the elementary ESL teachers. Although I worked at the same school as the participants, I did not work in the same grade level as any of the participants. I had no authority over the elementary ESL teachers who participated in the research study. No conflicts of interest due to sharing a

work environment existed, and incentives for participation in the study were not offered. The

elementary ESL teachers and I worked in the same environment, but because no personal

relationships or power positions were involved, no ethical issues existed. Electronic

communication and recorded interviews via Zoom were transcribed into Word documents. Data

obtained from the interviews were coded, input, and organized in Excel. NVivo was utilized to

confirm manual coding.

Arrangements to manage and control variables undermining the reliability of data and

validity of interpretations and conclusions were made. If at any point the research was

compromised, data collected were analyzed to determine the impact. Any compromised activity

would have been reported.

### Research Procedures

The sample was 15 elementary ESL teachers in a Florida public school. Participation was

voluntary. Participants responded to a prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire focused

on elementary ESL teachers' perspectives of ELLs who have difficulty acquiring academic

language, what problems the teachers perceived impact elementary ESL teacher instruction, and

which strategies the teachers perceived increase academic success for ELLs.

**Population and Sample Selection**

The sample population was 15 elementary ESL teachers in a Florida public school.

Florida has the third largest population of ELLs in the nation (FLDOE, 2020a). The unique

population of students at the school is composed of 94.3% minority students (FLDOE, 2020a);

36.6% of the students in the school are ELLs levels 1–4 receiving instruction in the ESOL

program (Ellevation, 2020). Elementary ESL teachers working at the school who educate ELLs

maintain education certification as well as ESOL certification.

Three criteria allowed elementary ESL teachers to participate in the research study. The 15 elementary ESL teachers who participated needed to be an educator of ELLs for a minimum of 5 years, be ESOL endorsed, and work at the MDCPS school site. Voluntary participation in the research was essential for the research to be considered both valid and reliable (Kılınç & Fırat, 2017).

Interviews were used to seek a deeper understanding of the human experience (Bearman, 2019). The participants in the study responded to a prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire to determine elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of ELLs who are having difficulty acquiring academic language. Questions were designed to inquire about elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of the problems the students are having that inhibit progress and strategies the teachers perceive to increase academic success.

Site permission (see Appendix D) was requested from the MDCPS school district via email. Permission was granted. Procedures for recruiting participants began with a list of elementary ESL teachers who teach ELLs. A search in the MDCPS system was conducted to determine teacher eligibility for the research. Eligible teachers for the research study were elementary ESL teachers who had taught ELLs for a minimum of 5 years, were ESOL endorsed, and worked in the MDCPS school in the study. Teachers were contacted via an MDCPS email that explained the teachers met eligibility to participate in a research study. If the elementary ESL teacher chose to participate, the teacher responded to the email. A consent form for participation was then sent via email. Signed consent was required for the teachers to participate in the study.

Personal information about the participants, such as names and work locations, was coded with a numeral to ensure confidentiality and protect identities. The numerals replaced the

participants' names in both the research study and consent forms. Only the researcher and the researcher's chairperson knew the participants' personal information. Any information connecting participants with the study remained with the researcher and was not shared without written consent from both the researcher and the participant. Information gathered in the research study may be used in any capacity to improve ESL instruction.

Each participant first received a prequestionnaire developed to provide foundational information regarding the teacher to determine the grade being taught and the number of years of teaching experience. After the prequestionnaire, the interview process began. The interview explored each elementary ESL teacher's perception of ELLs, the problems the students face, as well as strategies the teacher believes increase academic success for ELLs. Once the interview phase of the study was concluded, each participant received a follow-up postquestionnaire. The postquestionnaire provided the opportunity to share any additional information or opinions the elementary ESL teacher deemed pertinent for the instruction of ELLs or the overall study.

**Instrumentation**

The instruments utilized to gather information in the study were developed specifically for the study. New instruments needed to be developed because of the nature of the research. Previously existing instruments could not be used for the qualitative phenomenological study because other instruments did not target the specifics of what was being researched. Questions were developed to focus specifically on elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of the struggles ELLs are having during academic language acquisition. Data instruments included a prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire aligned with the research questions to understand elementary ESL teachers' perspectives on ELLs with academic language difficulties.

The questions for the prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire were developed

based on information gathered through the literature review as well as three subject matter experts (SMEs) who provided feedback for the questions (see Appendix E). Specifically, to determine elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs with academic language difficulties, the SMEs were experts in the field of ESOL. For the research study, each SME had at minimum a master's degree with a component in ESOL and had taught ELLs for a minimum of 5 years. Questions were designed to be research-based and focus on elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of the struggles of ELLs. The questions were developed with input from the SMEs. SMEs can process what is known to improve programs (Mofrad, 2016). The SMEs utilized known information from expertise in ESOL to improve the questions and align the questions to the lived experiences of teachers of ELLs.

The SMEs included one ESOL chairperson for MDCPS and two elementary ESL teachers who held master's degrees with an ESOL component, were ESOL endorsed, and had taught ELLs for a minimum of 5 years. Experts contributed to the development of the prequestionnaire questions and argued teacher experience was essential for valid results and opinions on academic language acquisition difficulties. The SMEs helped design the questions to be straightforward and based on teacher experience. Interview questions were developed based on research found in the literature review with input from SMEs to ensure alignment (see Appendix F) with the research questions. Alignment between the research questions and the interview questions was suggested by the SMEs. Unaligned questions were deleted from the interview.

Heidegger described phenomenology as understanding experiences through questioning (Quay, 2016), meaning questioning is essential to understanding. Questionnaire and interview questions were designed to answer the research questions. Eligible teachers for the research

study were elementary ESL teachers who had taught ELLs for a minimum of 5 years, were

ESOL endorsed, and worked at the MDCPS school site. The teachers were contacted through

MDCPS email for participation. The prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire were

administered virtually. Virtual data collection ensured the results were reliable and valid and

facilitated the ability to collect and understand the results. Virtual data collection facilitated

confirmability. Confirmability focuses on proving neutrality to eliminate researcher bias

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Virtual data collection promotes trustworthiness and is a key element in

research. To establish trust, researchers need to be transparent about methods and data (Pratt et

al., 2020). Methods and data were shared transparently in the research, and participants exited

the study after receiving an email with a summary of the data results.

### Expert Panel

Questions were validated by three experts in the field, including one ESOL chairperson

for MDCPS and two elementary ESL teachers who held master's degrees with an ESOL

component, were ESOL endorsed, and had taught ELLs for a minimum of 5 years. Researchers

suggest using three to five SMEs provides sufficient consistency among results (Zamanzadeh et

al., 2015).

### Content Validity

Content validity links abstract concepts, such as those found in qualitative

phenomenological studies, and measurable information (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015). Testing for

content validity demonstrates the research covered everything being explored. The questions

utilized through the prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire effectively covered

questions needed to determine elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of why ELLs are having

difficulty acquiring academic language. Establishing content validity was completed by asking

the three SMEs the questions developed based on the literature review and input from the three

SMEs as a pilot group. Questions were asked, and answers were recorded. Once answers were

recorded, a Zoom meeting was held to discuss the findings as well as adjust any questions that

may not have directly focused on discovering elementary ESL teachers' perspectives on ELLs'

academic language difficulties.

### Prequestionnaire

Questionnaires consist of questions for the purpose of gathering information (McLeod,

2018). Initially, no prequestionnaire existed; SMEs suggested that, because teacher experience is

vital in education and specifically with ELLs, questions to determine teacher experience were

vital to the interview process. Based on the suggestion, a prequestionnaire was developed. The

prequestionnaire was developed with straightforward questions designed to provide demographic

data. SMEs contributed to the development of the questions and argued teacher experience was

essential for valid results and opinions on ELLs' academic language acquisition difficulties.

Questionnaires (see Appendices C, G, & H) were supported by the research. Teachers who know

and understand ELL-specific instructional strategies are better equipped to teach ELLs (Master et

al., 2016).

### Interview

A Zoom meeting was scheduled for the interview portion of the research study. See

Appendix G for interview questions. Face-to-face data collection, as in interviews, results in

more sincere answers and less misleading results (Kılınç & Fırat, 2017). Phenomenology is a

design based on inquiry focusing on intellectual engagement and making meaning of the lived

experiences of human subjects (Qutoshi, 2018). Interviews provided the inquiry in the qualitative

research study. Interview questions were developed based on research found in the literature

review with input from SMEs to ensure alignment with the research questions. SMEs suggested alignment between the research questions and the interview questions. Unaligned questions were deleted from the interview. Questions were designed to be open-ended. Obtaining open-ended answers from participants leads to discovering why a participant feels a certain way (McLeod, 2018). Open-ended questions were used to facilitate an open dialogue exchange to promote the free expression of lived experiences. Interview questions were aligned to research questions.

*Postquestionnaire*

After the interview, the participant completed an open-ended postquestionnaire (see Appendix H) to allow the opportunity to share any further or final thoughts and add any other information the elementary ESL teacher wished to share. Kılınç and Fırat (2017) explained electronic environments are conducive to allowing participants to express perceptions. Tasker and Cisneroz (2019) concluded the outcomes of open-ended questionnaires are responses that have real meaning. One of the best ways to produce generative responses is to utilize open-ended questions (Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019). The postquestionnaire consisted of one open-ended question (see Appendix C).

**Data Collection**

Virtual data collection took place in the spring of 2021. Digital research is expanding research in general by making it more accessible. Location does not matter; scientists and researchers can collect data through virtual research environments instead of being confined by physical location (Clivaz, 2019). An eligibility email was sent to potential participants. The volunteer participants then received an email with information and directions regarding the research study. Information in the email included informed consent, the purpose of the study, as well as how the information would be utilized in the study.

Once consent was received, the prequestionnaire was emailed to the participant. Google Forms is a useful way to achieve objectives and promote discussion (Glover, 2020). The prequestionnaires were coded and analyzed. Google Forms was utilized for the prequestionnaire. Questions in the prequestionnaire referred to grades taught, years of teaching, demographic composition of the students taught, and experience teaching ELLs. The purpose of the prequestionnaire was to provide demographic data and background information for the study. Participants had 1 week to complete the survey before a Zoom conference was scheduled.

Once all participants completed and submitted the prequestionnaires, virtual interviews were conducted via Internet-based recorded Zoom meetings. One conference per workday was scheduled over the course of 3 consecutive weeks to facilitate all participants. Interviews were flexible, providing the opportunity for analysis and placing the viewpoints of the participants as the focus of the research (Young et al., 2019). Virtual Zoom meetings followed the interview protocol (see Appendix I). The Zoom interview reviewed consent and demographic questions. Specific interview questions, aligned to the research questions, were asked. The virtual interview was recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. Five days after participating in the interview, participants received a postquestionnaire via email allowing the opportunity to share any final thoughts or new revelations since participating in the interview. Postquestionnaires were coded and analyzed.

Prequestionnaire data, interview recordings, and postquestionnaire data were stored safely, in complete confidentiality, and were not shared. Participants exited the study after receiving an email with a summary of the data results. Transcripts were sent to respective participants providing the opportunity to review everything the participant stated and add information or edit what was stated. Accuracy was ensured by inviting participants to review

their transcripts. Gratitude was expressed to each participant for participating in the study and sharing personal thoughts. Data collected were coded and organized in Excel. Excel was utilized to code, categorize, and identify themes. NVivo data analysis was used alongside manual coding. SMEs conducted member checking on the data analysis.

**Data Preparation**

Data collected in the study included the perspectives of elementary ESL teachers about why students are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary for success, which problems impact elementary ESL teacher instruction, and which strategies increase academic success. Qualitative phenomenological research was utilized to understand the lived experiences of ESL teachers as well as the events, issues, and problems affecting language acquisition and academic progress. Qualitative phenomenological research promotes bonding between the researcher and the participants (Alase, 2017).

## Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted via Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step analysis process. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis presents information that is understood and descriptions of themes and patterns from a data set. The analysis process includes understanding the data, generating initial codes, searching for commonalities, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and producing the report.

Data collected from prequestionnaires were coded and analyzed. The Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding and analysis. Notes were taken about the answers the participants shared. Answers were categorized to find similarities and differences among the teachers' answers. The postquestionnaire open-ended question was coded and analyzed. Open-ended questions allow participants to express their perspectives. The coding and data analysis

brings to light interesting data (Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019).

Once all the information was collected from the prequestionnaires, interviews, and postquestionnaires, the data were reviewed and analyzed. The next step was to code the data. Data from the questionnaires and interviews were organized in Excel. Excel was used to code, categorize, and identify themes. NVivo is a data analysis tool and was utilized as well as manual coding. Once the data were coded, themes within the coded data were searched. The themes were then reviewed and defined. The final step was to organize and write up the data and share the findings.

## Reliability and Validity

The goal of a qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the human experience. Qualitative research methods view the world in an abstract form and focus on the subject's view of reality (Dodgson, 2017). Qualitative research constructs theory (Shufutinsky, 2020). Phenomenology is described as the study of how the world or situations appear (Shudak, 2018). Heidegger described phenomenology as understanding experiences through questioning (Quay, 2016). The prequestionnaire, interview, and postquestionnaire were designed to answer the research questions. The focus was to obtain reliable and valid teachers' lived experiences and perspectives affecting ELLs with academic language difficulties. The qualitative phenomenological research explored the ESL teachers' lived experiences through questioning the issues affecting ELLs' academic language acquisition.

Credibility ensures confidence in the findings of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Research questions were validated by SMEs in the field, including one ESOL chairperson for MDCPS and two elementary ESL teachers who held master's degrees with an ESOL component, were ESOL endorsed, and had taught ELLs for a minimum of 5 years.

Open-ended questions allowed for insights of the participants lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties. The most important role of a researcher is to feature the details of the human experience (Ghirotto, 2016). The lived experiences of teachers and perceptions of academic language acquisition difficulties were derived from open-ended questions.

Voluntary participation in research is essential for the research to be considered both valid and reliable (Kılınç & Fırat, 2017). Member checking was utilized between SMEs to ensure credibility. A transcript was sent to each respective participant, providing the opportunity to review everything the participant stated as well as to add information or edit what was stated. Participants were invited to review their transcripts to ensure accuracy. SMEs conducted the member checking on the data analysis.

Transferability establishes the findings of the research have application in other contexts through thick and detailed descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The rich and detailed information collected through interviews provided information on elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of the issues affecting ELLs. Interviews gathered data on elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of ELLs acquiring the language necessary for academic success, problems impacting instruction, as well as which strategies increase academic success for ELLs. Interviews are used to seek a deeper understanding of the human experience (Bearman, 2019) and are utilized in qualitative phenomenological research. Data in the research study were collected digitally and via the Internet. Virtual data collection increases the reliability and validity of the participants' responses.

Dependability of the research works to show the findings of the research are both consistent and have the possibility of being repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). SMEs oversaw the research as an inquiry audit to ensure the findings of the research were consistent and can be

repeated in the future. Allowing outside audit promotes transparency and dependability in the research study.

Confirmability focuses on proving neutrality to eliminate researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is a key element in research and is essential in qualitative phenomenological research, which fundamentally relies on the lived experiences of human subjects. To establish trust, researchers need to be transparent about methods and data (Pratt et al., 2020). Methods and data were shared transparently in the research, and participants exited the study after receiving an email with a summary of the data results.

**Ethical Procedures**

Protecting human participants is the number one priority of research. The research did not begin until Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix J) had been received. The IRB protects the rights and well-being of human subjects from risk in research (Liberale & Kovach, 2017). Different levels of informed consent were obtained to conduct the study, first by the MDCPS school district and second by the elementary ESL teachers participating in the study. The National Institutes of Health described informed consent as written, signed, and dated communication resulting in participation (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, 2019). Fifteen elementary ESL teachers volunteered to participate in the study. Each participant received an individual email containing information and directions regarding the research study, such as informed consent, purpose of the study, and how the information obtained in the study would be used. If teachers wished to share information about a student in the research study when explaining their perceptions, the teacher could not provide any student information. All participants were interviewed individually. Prequestionnaire data, interview recordings, and postquestionnaire data were stored electronically, in complete confidentiality, were not shared,

and will be destroyed after 3 years. All IRB guidelines were followed throughout the research study.

## Chapter Summary

The research methods were outlined and addressed. The research questions aligned with the problem statement and purpose statement. The larger population and sample population were identified. The role of the researcher was addressed. Data collection and analysis were detailed per instrument. The research methodology concluded by addressing the reliability and validity as well as ethical procedures. The research findings and data analysis results from the research study are reviewed in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results

English language learners in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the language necessary to become academically proficient (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). Building vocabulary is essential for ELLs (Gupta, 2019). Many ELLs experience difficulties building vocabulary, as well as reading and understanding content-area texts (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). Many elementary ELLs are struggling to make academic learning gains within 5–7 years (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). These students are outperformed in comparison to native-English-speaking peers (Maarouf, 2019). More research is recommended to fill the gap in the literature regarding the lived experiences and perceptions of ESL teachers regarding the academic language difficulties of ELLs (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017; Proctor et al., 2020).

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to describe elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs with academic language difficulties. The purposive sample of elementary ESL teachers ($n = 15$) in one Florida public school was focused on the academic language difficulties of ELLs. Utilizing thematic analysis of the transcripts of semistructured interviews, the lived experiences and perceptions of the ESL teachers were explored and interpreted to answer the following guiding research questions:

Research Question 1: What are elementary teachers' lived experiences of teaching English language learners who have difficulty acquiring academic language proficiency and subject mastery?

Research Question 2: How is academic language instruction addressed and/or implemented for English language learners according to elementary teachers' experience?

Research Question 3: What do elementary teachers of English language learners suggest for effective academic language instruction in Florida public schools?

The first section is a discussion of the processes of data collection. The second section is a description of the characteristics of the participants and presents the results of the thematic analysis. The data analysis section includes the strategies applied to eliminate or reduce bias. The results section describes the themes resulting from the lived experiences of the ESL teacher participants. Reliability and validity describe the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of the study. The final section provides a summary of the results and addresses the research questions.

## Data Collection

No deviation from the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3 occurred. Informed consent was collected from the teachers ($n = 15$) immediately prior to the prequestionnaire and interviews. Every person who signed a consent to participate in the research study received a prequestionnaire via Google Forms. Initially, 17 participants consented to participate in the research study, but only 15 participants completed and submitted the prequestionnaire and ultimately participated in the research study. Once the prequestionnaire was submitted, a Zoom meeting was scheduled for the interview in accordance with the participant's availability.

Once the participant agreed to a scheduled date, the semistructured interview was organized. Each semistructured interview was conducted and recorded using Zoom and lasted approximately 1 hour. The semistructured interview allowed the researcher to ask open-ended questions and for the participant to answer the questions freely and communicate insights regarding teaching ELLs.

Each participant received an email with the respective transcript for member checking. Asking the participant to review the transcript for accuracy is essential for the collection of raw data. Member checking also provided each participant the opportunity to add information or edit

what was stated. Reporting the exact words of each participant ensured no information was distorted and what the participant said during the interview was expressed; however, this approach could be a source of confirmation bias. Participants made no requests to correct or add information. Each participant exited the study after receiving an email with a summary of the data results.

All IRB guidelines were followed throughout the research study. IRB approval was obtained from MDCPS prior to beginning the research study. The participant-observer received a certificate of completion of protection of human research participants training. Procedures were implemented throughout the study to ensure confidentiality, including coding participant names numerically. The benefit of the study of elementary ESL teachers' perspectives can guide administrators in creating policies benefiting ELLs.

Participants who volunteered for the research study each received a consent form and a Google Forms prequestionnaire, and after the participant's results were submitted and saved electronically, a Zoom interview was scheduled. The Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed to determine themes in the study. Both the interviews and transcripts were saved electronically. Five days after the participant was interviewed, a postquestionnaire was emailed in which the participant had the opportunity to share any final thoughts or new revelations since participating in the interview. The results of the postquestionnaire were stored electronically. The prequestionnaire data, interview recordings, and postquestionnaire data were stored electronically, were not shared, and will be destroyed after 3 years.

## Description of the Participants

The minimum requirements to participate in the research study were elementary ESL teachers who teach in an MDCPS school, have a master's degree with an ESOL component, be

ESOL endorsed, and have taught ELLs for a minimum of 5 years. Table 1 outlines the

characteristics of the purposive sample of participants ($n = 15$), all of whom were experienced

and proficient in teaching ELLs; therefore, they were assumed to have equivalent backgrounds

and similar lived experiences. Their length of teaching experience ranged from 5 to 30 years.

Between them, the teachers had taught all of the elementary grades, ranging from kindergarten to

sixth grade, and they had taught many subjects, including reading, language, arts, writing, math,

science, and social studies. Most of the teachers taught English mainly to Hispanic students, but

some reported they also taught English to students of other races (e.g., White, African American,

Pacific Islander).

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

| Participant | Current grade level taught | Previous grade level experience | Current student demographics | Previous student demographics | Experience teaching English language learners |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | 2nd | K, 2nd, 5th | 13 girls, 8 boys, 7–8 years old, Hispanic/Latino, 1 White non-Hispanic, 1 Black non- Hispanic | Males/females, 5 to 12 years old, Latino Hispanic, Asian, European, Arab, non-Hispanic | 5 years |
| P2 | 1st | 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th | 11 boys, 2 girls. 11 of the 13 are ESOL levels 1–2 | ESOL level 1 students | "I would say I am proficient in teaching students who are English language learners." |

| Participant | Current grade level taught | Previous grade level experience | Current student demographics | Previous student demographics | Experience teaching English language learners |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P3 | 3rd | • K: all subjects<br>• 2nd: all subjects | ESOL, ESE, Gifted | ESOL, ESE, Gifted | 14 years |
| P4 | 2nd | • K: all subjects<br>• 2nd: all subjects | • 14 boys, 9 girls. All Hispanic. 14 of the 23 students are ESOL levels 1–4<br>• 8 ESE students, one of them gifted, one with modified curriculum, and the rest participate in resource class | Mostly Hispanic students, ESOL students | 15 years |
| P5 | 4th | 3rd, 4th, 5th | White and Hispanic | White, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and African American | "Several years." |
| P6 | 4th and 5th | • K–4th: reading and math | 16 boys, 11 girls. 10 of the 27 students are ESOL levels 3–4 | More boys than girls, majority ESOL levels 3 and 4 | "I have been teaching for 15 years. As a result, I have gained great experience teaching students who are English language learners." |

| Participant | Current grade level taught | Previous grade level experience | Current student demographics | Previous student demographics | Experience teaching English language learners |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| P7 | 3rd | K–5th | Cambridge and ELL | Cambridge and ELL | 10+ years |
| P8 | 3rd | • 1st: all subjects<br>• 2nd–3rd: ELA and all subjects | 100% Hispanic/ Latino | 88% Hispanic/ Latino, 5% White, 5% African American/Haitian, 2% Asian or other | 26 years |
| P9 | 3rd | K–6th: all subjects | Mostly Hispanic | Mostly Hispanic | 30 years |
| P10 | 3rd | • Spanish<br>• 4th: all subjects<br>• 3rd: math, science, social studies | Low to middle income, mostly Hispanic | Mostly Hispanic | 24 years |
| P11 | 4th | 1st, 3rd, 5th: reading, language arts, writing, math, science, social studies | ESE and ESOL | Cambridge, ESE, ESOL, EFL | 6 years |
| P12 | 5th | • K: all<br>• 2nd: reading<br>• 3rd: all<br>• 5th: all | 9 boys, 12 girls, 95% are Hispanic | Mostly all Hispanics | 10 years |

| Participant | Current grade level taught | Previous grade level experience | Current student demographics | Previous student demographics | Experience teaching English language learners |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P13 | 5th | • 4th–8th: language arts, reading, social studies, science<br>• 9th–11th: reading | • 10 ELLs level 1–4<br>• 8 ESE/inclusion<br>• 7 regular education<br>• 1 student with a 504 | ESE, ESOL, Cambridge, and regular diploma students | 12 years |
| P14 | 4th | K–5: all | • 68% of student population is African American, 31% Hispanic, 1% White<br>• 92% of students receive free/discounted lunch | Mostly Hispanic, White, and Indian | "I have a great deal of experience teaching ELLs." |
| P15 | 5th | 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th | 98% Hispanic | Hispanic | 17 years |

*Note.* EFL = extended foreign language. ELA = English language arts. ELL = English language learner. ESE = exceptional student education. ESOL = English for speakers of other languages.

## Data Analysis

Though no deviation from the data collection plan occurred, the data analysis plan approved by the IRB was modified. After reviewing the literature, the participant-observer realized that in the context of education research, phenomenology is limited to interpreting the

personal meanings the participants give to their lived experiences (Friesen et al., 2012; Guillen, 2019; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). This strict phenomenological logic was not applied to analyze the interview transcripts. However, bracketing did not apply to the study because the interview questions and interpretation of the answers were underpinned by a theoretical framework derived from a review of the literature. It is therefore essential for the participant-observer to reiterate in more explicit detail how the transcripts were interpreted from the semistructured interviews based on a theoretical framework. Following the interview guide and utilizing standard questions ensured no bias in the interview process.

The interview transcripts were interpreted by conducting a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an approach utilized to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report themes in a particular data set (Scharp & Sanders, 2018). However, no clear agreement exists on how researchers can rigorously apply the method and evaluating trust in the research process is difficult when the reader does not know or understand how the researcher analyzed the data (Nowell et al., 2017). According to the American Psychological Association (2020), in the context of qualitative analysis "there may be more than one valid and useful set of findings from a given data set" (p. 4), implying that, after conducting a thematic analysis using the same set of data, different researchers may draw different conclusions.

*Thematic analysis* is defined as a technique for identifying, analyzing, arranging, describing, and reporting a data set *(Scharp & Sanders, 2018, p. 1)* where each theme captures a pattern regardless of whether it captures the majority experience. Therefore, thematic analysis was the appropriate approach for interpreting the interview results. Two approaches can be used in thematic analysis: inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning involves extracting semantic themes from the data and identifying emergent patterns in the meaning of

what the participants said. Deductive reasoning involves devising a template of underlying

themes based on theoretical considerations prior to analysis (Braun et al., 2019). In this study,

the participant-observer did not identify emergent themes by inductive reasoning but identified

the presence of descriptors of preexisting themes by deductive reasoning, underpinned by a

sound theoretical framework, specifically the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, 1987) and the growth

mindset (Zeeb et al., 2020).

The interviews were analyzed via thematic analysis. Irrelevant, superficial, or repetitive

quotations that did not answer a specific question were excluded from the analysis. Personal

information about the participants, such as their names and work locations, were coded

numerically to ensure confidentiality and protect identities. Each quotation was coded with

another label to identify a secondary theme that indicated a specific manifestation within the

primary theme. Table 2 shows the connections between the primary and secondary themes.

**Table 2**

*Primary and Secondary Theme Connections*

| Primary theme | Secondary theme | Code for secondary theme |
|---|---|---|
| Zone of proximal development | Knowledge of learner | • Building on prior knowledge<br>• Seeing the growth |
| Constructivism and communicative language teaching | Classroom environment | • Classroom environment<br>• Communicating and engaging with students |
| Independent learning | Support at home | • Importance of home learning<br>• Home learning is not important |

| Primary theme | Secondary theme | Code for secondary theme |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Students' self-beliefs (self-concept, self-efficacy) | • Growth mindset<br>• Encouragement | • Knowing the student<br>• Giving reassurance<br>• Giving encouragement<br>• Giving positive reinforcement<br>• Giving praise and having patience<br>• Alleviating depression<br>• Alleviating embarrassment<br>• Alleviating anxiety |
| Teaching materials | Effective materials | • Help from stakeholders<br>• Use of dictionaries<br>• Use of flashcards<br>• Use of labels<br>• Use of technology |
| Problems | Knowledge of learner | • Home environment is not ideal<br>• Transitioning from home language to English<br>• Lack of books<br>• Lack of dictionaries<br>• Lack of materials hinders progress<br>• Lack of parental support<br>• Lack of practice<br>• Lack of prior knowledge<br>• Lack of textbooks<br>• Lack of vocabulary<br>• Lack of writing materials<br>• Little motivation to learn English<br>• Lack of time<br>• Technological difficulties<br>• Lack of support<br>• Too much testing |

| Primary theme | Secondary theme | Code for secondary theme |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Differentiation | Knowledge of learner | • Adjusting to different levels<br>• Parental involvement<br>• Pairing different levels<br>• Peer sharing<br>• Personalizing instruction for each child<br>• Silent period<br>• Small groups<br>• Reservations about differentiation |
| Scaffolding | Effective strategies | • Planning<br>• Modeling<br>• Setting rules and boundaries<br>• Changing the framework<br>• Creating a structure<br>• Going through the steps<br>• Using technology |

Participants in the study consisted of 15 elementary ESL teachers having master's degrees with an ESOL component, were ESOL endorsed, and had taught ELLs for a minimum of 5 years. Therefore, participants had experience teaching ELLs and guiding students in acquiring academic language and were aware of the differences between social versus academic language. Participants noted academic language acquisition would increase students' learning and understanding of content. Participants were coded numerically from P1 to P15 to ensure confidentiality. The quotations are coded by participant identifier.

Each theme consisted of a uniquely coded section of text (e.g., a phrase, sentence, or paragraph). After coding and identifying the primary themes, the mutually exclusive manifestations within each primary theme were coded as secondary themes (e.g., by discriminating between positive and negative attitudes). Table 3 defines the nine primary themes

based on keywords that were chosen prior to the thematic analysis, underpinned by a review of the literature.

**Table 3**

*Primary Themes*

| Theme | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| Zone of proximal development | Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) states a learner cannot complete tasks and achieve goals independently, without assistance. The ZPD is defined as the distance between a knowledgeable other person (e.g., a teacher) and a learner. An ESL teacher should know how to fill this gap, to improve student learning and understanding, from the place where it is to the place where it needs to be. Teachers who understand how the ZPD works can more easily prepare instruction and guidance for children (Vygotsky, 1978). |
| Constructivism and communicative language teaching (CLT) | In CLT, students are expected to construct knowledge out of their own experiences and be actively involved in the learning process, unlike traditional educational approaches in which the students play a passive, receptive role (Dos Santos, 2020). |
| Independent learning | An ESL teacher should encourage students to learn to use the English language outside the classroom (e.g., at home; Darnis, 2020). |
| Self-beliefs (self-concept and self-efficacy) | Self-beliefs are beliefs in oneself. An ESL teacher should encourage every student to develop a positive self-concept (i.e., positive perceptions, ideas, and thoughts about one's academic abilities) and encourage every student to develop self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in one's ability to complete tasks and achieve goals efficaciously; Cvencek et al., 2018). |
| Teaching materials | An ESL teacher should use a wide range of teaching materials to help students acquire and develop their English language skills (Zhang, 2017). |
| Problems | Problems include a wide range of barriers, challenges, and deterrents that may hinder or prevent an ESL teacher from implementing their chosen strategies (Toliboboeva & Mirzakhmedova, 2021). |

| Theme | Definition |
|-------|-----------|
| Differentiation | An English as a second language (ESL) teacher should use a wide variety of teaching techniques and lesson adaptations to instruct a diverse group of students with diverse learning needs in the same classroom according to the students' individual needs (Graham et al., 2021). |
| Motivation | Motivation is the internal driving force (Sakka et al., 2022). |
| Scaffolding | Scaffolding breaks up learning into chunks (Rababah & Almwajeh, 2018). |

Figure 2 presents a conceptual model to explain the rationale underlying the primary themes. The ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) is assumed to be bridged by a strong growth mindset. A student's growth mindset is assumed to be linked to their self-concept, self-efficacy, motivation, and independent learning, and to be positively influenced by the beneficial pedagogic philosophies, activities, and strategies of the teacher (including constructivism, communicative language teaching [CLT], differentiation, scaffolding, and teaching materials; Zeeb et al., 2020). On the other side of the model, the ZPD may be negatively influenced, or possibly even eliminated, by a variety of practical, social, and environmental problems experienced by both teachers and students, including deterrents, challenges, and barriers.

Throughout the collection and analysis of qualitative data, reflection occurred upon the contribution to the process and identified issues influencing outcomes. Deductive reasoning was applied to achieve congruency between the underlying theory and the semantic or latent meanings of the qualitative data. NVivo 12 Plus qualitative data analysis software was combined with traditional manual methods of classifying themes, to conduct a detailed and rigorous qualitative analysis. Each theme consisted of a uniquely coded section of text (e.g., a phrase, sentence, or paragraph) that was covered by one of the definitions in Table 3 and/or the

relationships in Figure 2. After coding and identifying the primary themes, the mutually

exclusive manifestations within each primary theme were coded as secondary themes by

discriminating between positive and negative attitudes.

**Figure 2**

*Conceptual Model of the Theoretical Framework Underpinning the Thematic Analysis*



NVivo provided a convenient digital platform to store, manage, examine, and classify

qualitative data. The autocoding process was useful to search for specific keywords in the

interview transcripts. However, NVivo did not automatically analyze the data reflexively because reflexivity requires the subjective judgments of the participant-observer rather than the mechanical and inflexible processes of computer software.

Participants described various themes affecting ELLs' academic language acquisition. From filling in the learning gaps in the ZPD to utilizing various strategies to provide instruction, participants implemented various skills to help ELLs acquire the academic language necessary for success. An essential element used to reach ELLs is knowledge of learner, which appeared in most of the themes. When educators have knowledge of learners, educators are better able to gear instruction to what works for the learner as an individual.

## Teachers' Lived Experiences

Participants' teaching experience ranged from 5 to 30 years, teaching White, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and African American students, including both ELLs and non-ELLs. All teachers participating in the study taught in MDCPS, the fourth largest school district in the nation (MDCPS, 2020a). According to the FLDOE (2020a), Florida is ranked third in the nation in the ELL population, with over 265,000 ELLs enrolled.

Participants were asked to share their personal lived experiences, to address Research Question 1: What are elementary teachers' lived experiences of teaching English language learners who have difficulty acquiring academic language proficiency and subject mastery? The two most common results from the teachers' lived experiences were the importance of knowledge of learner and support and the difference those components make for ELLs. P2 explained:

Knowing your students is so important. For example, I know if a student just arrived in the country, they may have nothing. Many of these students come from other countries,

third-world countries, and they don't have the resources needed for success. They don't

have the same things in their country, so a lot of things are new to them. The parents and

the students may not even know what they need to succeed here in their new country and

school. Knowing this type of information about my students helps me to help them.

P1 described her personal lived experience relies on getting to know her students. She explained,

"Getting to know my learners, getting to know their background, their home life up and then

using that knowledge to change framework to provide effective support." Knowledge of learners

also helps the academic component for ELLs to transition to acquire academic language. P5

explained, "You have to know your students so that you can pick a strategy of whatever may

work for that student. I try hard to reach every child."

According to participants' lived experiences, support was a key component described as

affecting academic language proficiency and subject mastery. Support from the school and

district is just as important as support at home, and the reality is that sometimes both aspects are

limited. P14 explained:

My personal lived experience, I've seen a little bit of everything. From, you know,

having a classroom of only 15, I've had students come up to classrooms, sometimes we

don't even fit; it could be up to 30 students. And again it's, it's the lack of support. Also,

the way that they come. Some come without wanting to come, having to run out of their

country, and it's just dealing with that. The emotional side too.

P2 described, "There is limited to no help at home because parents don't have the language and

cannot reinforce at home what the students are learning in class."

**Themes**

The following is an interpretation of the themes derived via thematic analysis. Interviews were aggregated to identify each theme.

### Zone of Proximal Development

A common theme among participants was the importance of the ZPD. Most of the teachers reported they attempted to fill this gap to improve student academic language acquisition, learning, and understanding, exemplified by P1:

> I meet them where they are and assess where they are and when they come in, and that comes with years of experience, I believe. The more that you're exposed to the ESOL population, the more you have to meet them where they are, or if not, you can provide a little what's missing and so that they can make that connection and they can hopefully get to as close as possible if not to where you want them to go, but as close as possible. Some of them make it and some of them, you know, struggle with bridging that gap.

Almost half of the teachers spoke about the need to build on prior knowledge; for example, P3 explained, "ELLs' prior knowledge can bring that, and then from there, you go ahead and piggyback on that." This notion coincides with the theme of bridging the gap between what the students know and what the students need to know to be successful. Eight of the teachers explained they liked seeing the growth of students across the ZPD.

### Constructivism and Communicative Language Teaching

Most of the teachers who participated in the research study enjoyed and were committed to helping students to learn, socialize, and communicate, as well as having an impact on student growth, underpinned by constructivism and CLT. None of the teachers referred to the traditional grammar–translation method of language teaching. The teachers explained they tried to create a welcoming, friendly, and cooperative classroom environment, exemplified by communicating.

"I'm aware that providing students with the opportunity to use social language and placing them in environments where they feel safe to communicate with one another and practice their social language increases the academic language and their buy-in," stated P3. P8 explained:

> I make sure that they are comfortable and that they are in a caring environment. They learn to care for each other. I try to make it a safe environment, where they know that everyone learns that they are there.

> Each teacher spoke about how they enjoyed communicating and engaging with students

in different ways.

> It's talking to their peers instead of using their native language to practice their English. I feel like talking, it's a factor, even if it's not coming out right. Then practice listening to others speak too because sometimes they understand you speak, but then they're afraid to speak back because they don't know how it's going to come up. And I tell them, "It's okay, even if you make mistakes." (P6)

> I feel like I have made a positive impact. Just teaching, going back to the basics with phonics. I really take the extra time every week just to make sure that they know what the skill is. And as long as they understand the skill, then we can move forward. Vocabulary is also important, so we will do practice with vocabulary. (P8)

> Four of the teachers spoke about the challenge of teaching students at different levels.

Some teachers overcame this challenge by differentiating instruction, as reflected in Table 3. Six of the 15 participants discussed scaffolding.

### *Independent Learning*

A common theme in the research study was the importance of homework correlating with the progression of academic language acquisition. On the theme of the importance of

independent learning, P6 explained:

> They're getting practice here in class, but if they don't do the practice at home, then it's
> not going to be fully done, like they're just getting half of the practice, or even less if
> they're even doing the work here in class.

### Students' Self-Beliefs

Teachers in the research study described how they help students overcome their lack of self-esteem and self-confidence and build up their self-concepts and self-efficacy to improve students' self-beliefs. Encouragement from the teacher reinforces a student's self-belief and increases motivation. Among the participants, 87% emphasized knowing the student personally was very important, as reflected by the following explanation from P7:

> You have to look at the whole child; not only in my teaching reading language arts to this
> child, I need to look where you come from, what's your family structure. So you really
> need to get to know these students and their families.

### Teaching Materials

Classroom and teaching materials included dictionaries (P9, P10); flashcards (P5); labels (P1, P9); and technology, including computer software such as i-Ready (P3, P9), iPads (P5), and laptops (P10). P5 highlighted, "An increase in technology has really helped." However, no standardized use of technology occurred by all of the teachers. Each teacher seemed to choose their favorite materials. The teachers agreed the provision of teaching materials in the classroom was dependent on their stakeholders. For example, P2 described, "Most administrators are willing to provide you anything that your students might need."

### Problems

The most frequent theme derived from the interview was problems. Problems emphasized

that the ZPD may be negatively influenced, or possibly even eliminated, by a variety of practical, social, and environmental problems experienced by both teachers and students. The teachers elucidated many problems, based on their lived experiences. The first set of problems was associated with the background knowledge of ELLs.

> The greatest deterrent for ELLs to acquire academic language is their lack of prior knowledge and experiences. Well, we need to provide them with that prior knowledge, so we need to change the framework in which we present what we want to get across and actually do, like, pre-lesson and provide them with that prior knowledge. (P7)

The second set of problems was due to the home environment of many of the students not being conducive to learning English. Transitioning from the home language to the English language was seen as a deterrent. One teacher explained, "It's making that transition to have them feel comfortable enough to participate in English to feel that they're speaking it properly, where they are able to then actively participate in class" (P3). Lack of parental support in the home environment was considered by all the teachers to have a negative influence on ELLs. "Some of my students don't have the support at home that they need. The parent cannot give them the time to write, provide a time for support, or even, like, know they if they can help" (P4). Due to a lack of parental support at home, the students do not have enough practice in speaking and reading English.

> If they don't practice, then they are not acquiring the daily learning practice that they're getting in school, and of course, then they're not going to be able to read. If they don't practice, if they don't read daily, then that can affect their learning. (P6)

The third set of problems perceived by the participants to have a negative influence on language learning was associated with the school environment. "I think the pacing guide

compacts too much in a short time . . . all subjects are being rushed" (P5).

Teacher participants elaborated on further problems affecting ELLs. Two additional problems perceived as affecting ELLs were lack of resources and the amount of standardized testing the students are required to take. Insufficient resources to adequately address the needs of ELLs negatively affects academic language acquisition. A research participant noted standardized testing changes the focus of reaching ELLs to focusing on teaching to the test.

### Differentiated Instruction

Among participants, 27% focused on the importance of DI as the key strategy to address academic language acquisition. Participants noted academic language acquisition would increase students' learning and understanding of content. P2 explained that personalizing instruction through DI for each child according to their needs will increase academic language acquisition.

### Knowledge of Learners

Knowledge of learners was found as a theme to address academic language acquisition. When educators of ELLs have knowledge of the learners, the educators can provide direct academic language instruction utilizing the ELLs' learning styles, whether visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. Knowledge of learners can also assist in academic language acquisition to group students correctly as well as provide students with appropriate academic language acquisition intervention. Among the participants, 73% described knowledge of learners as an essential element for social–emotional support during academic language acquisition.

### Strategy

Strategies used most often to address academic language acquisition vary greatly among teachers. Of the participants in the research study, 47% cited the use of visuals as the strategy utilized most often to facilitate academic language acquisition. Visuals varied from pictures and

illustrations to videos, modeling, and having students acting out vocabulary words for other students.

## Results

Interviews were conducted to discover elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties. Figure 3 presents a conceptual model based on the findings of the study. The model was adapted from Figure 2 in light of the lived experiences and perceptions of the teachers interpreted through the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. The top section of the model describes the interpretation of participants' interviews, the middle section represents the ZPD, and the bottom section addresses Research Question 2, factors affecting language instruction.

**Figure 3**

*Conceptual Model Based on the Results of the Thematic Analysis*

| | |
|---|---|
| Building on prior knowledge | Planning |
| Seeing the growth | Modeling |
| Communicating and engaging with students | Setting rules and boundaries |
| Classroom environment | Going through the steps |
| Adjusting to different levels | Importance of home learning |
| Pairing different levels | Using dictionaries, flash cards, labels, and technology |
| Peer sharing | Help from stakeholders |
| Small groups | Personalizing instruction for each child |
| Silent periods | |

Positive influence

Growth mindset

Knowing the student

Giving encouragement, reassurance, praise, patience, and positive reinforcement

Alleviating depression, embarrassment, and anxiety

Zone of proximal development

Where the student is

Where the student needs to be

Negative influence

| | |
|---|---|
| Home environment is not ideal | Lack of materials (books, dictionaries, writing materials, technology) hinders progress |
| Lack of parental support | Administration is not supportive |
| Transitioning from home language to English | Lack of time |
| Lack of vocabulary | Technological difficulties |
| Little motivation to learn English | Too much testing |

*Note.* The top rectangle discusses the interpretation of the participant's interview, the middle of the figure represents the zone of proximal development, and the bottom rectangle addresses Research Question 2, factors affecting language instruction.

Research Question 1: What are elementary teachers' lived experiences of teaching English language learners who have difficulty acquiring academic language proficiency and subject mastery? The experiences and perceptions of the teachers were generally consistent with Vygotsky's ZPD because the teachers discussed how they bridged the gap between where the student is and where the student should be by building on prior knowledge, seeing the growth, and communicating and engaging with the student. The findings for Research Question 1 indicated academic language instruction is addressed and/or implemented by the teacher attempting to positively influence the growth mindset of the students by the commitment to a constructivist paradigm and CLT. Moreover, the findings revealed the teachers used scaffolding to positively influence the language learning of the students, including processes such as planning, modeling, setting rules and boundaries, creating a structure, and going through the steps.

Results for Research Question 1 indicated academic language instruction was addressed and/or implemented by highlighting the importance of independent language learning at home, the use of a variety of teaching materials (e.g., dictionaries, flashcards, labels, technology), and the need for help from stakeholders. Furthermore, the teachers supported the growth mindset of the students by knowing the students personally, giving encouragement, reassurance, praise, patience, and positive reinforcement. Attempts were also made to help alleviate the students' emotional problems, including embarrassment, depression, and anxiety.

Research Question 2: How is academic language instruction addressed and/or implemented for English language learners according to elementary teachers' experience? The teachers perceived the ZPD may be negatively influenced, or possibly even eliminated, by a variety of practical, social, and environmental problems. Participants in the study shared

suggestions for effective academic language instruction.

Research Question 3: What do elementary teachers of English language learners suggest for effective academic language instruction in Florida public schools? The experiences and perceptions of the teachers were generally consistent with the notion of the importance of DI to facilitate academic language acquisition as well as knowledge of learners and implementing strategies. When teachers can educate students where the students need help—for example, in the case of academic language acquisition, instructing students with the learning strategies yielding the best results for the individual learner—the students will be better able to acquire the academic language necessary for academic success. An essential theme was knowledge of learners, which was utilized to address academic language acquisition for ELLs as well as the social–emotional support ELLs need while acquiring a new language. Although strategies to assist ELLs in acquiring academic language vary, the use of visuals was a common theme.

## Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are terms that traditionally do not apply to qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Lichtman, 2014; Merriam, 2014). Consideration of the multidimensional concepts of reliability and validity are more applicable for quantitative researchers concerning evaluating the constructs and scales measured with tests and surveys (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Heale & Twycross, 2017; Surucu & Maslacki, 2020; Taherdoost, 2016). In the context of qualitative research, trustworthiness is the equivalent concept to validity and reliability. Trustworthiness correlates to how well the researcher establishes the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the qualitative findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017; Rheinhardt et al., 2018; E. Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The participant-observer was responsible to examine the trustworthiness of every step of collecting

and analyzing the interview transcripts (Lichtman, 2014).

**Credibility**

According to Rheinhardt et al. (2018), credibility is the truthfulness of the research findings. The credibility of the findings of the study was first established by the participant-observer immersing herself in the interview transcripts for a long period of time and searching diligently for convergence and divergence among the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants within and across each primary and secondary theme. Credibility was also achieved through reflexivity, meaning that during the process of collecting and interpreting the qualitative data, the participant-observer reflected upon her contribution to the process and identified any issues that may have influenced the outcomes (Palaganas et al., 2017).

Credibility was ensured during the data analysis process when the researcher found convergence and divergence among the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants until data saturation was reached and no new themes were discovered. Themes were coded and organized in Excel, and NVivo was utilized to autocode. For example, interviews were transcribed, participant responses were organized by themes, and conclusions were drawn.

In the context of reflexivity, the participant-observer used NVivo to provide a convenient digital platform to store, manage, examine, and classify the qualitative data. The autocoding process was useful to search for specific keywords in the interview transcripts. However, NVivo did not interpret the data reflexively because reflexivity requires the subjective and flexible judgments of the participant-observer to identify the nuances of meaning within the interview transcripts, rather than depending on the mechanical and inflexible processes of computer software (Cypress, 2019; Mather et al., 2018). To analyze the data reflexively, the participant-observer tried to use NVivo with "understanding detail, intentionality, and thoughtfulness"

(Humble, 2012, p. 122).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability, the extent to which the findings were shaped by the respondents and not by the participant-observer, was achieved by selectively reporting the verbatim quotations of respondents to identify each primary and secondary theme. Member checking, asking participants to see if the interview transcripts are accurate, was used for the collection of raw data. Reporting the exact words of each participant ensured the participant-observer did not distort what the participants said during the interviews; however, this approach could be a source of confirmation bias. Many qualitative researchers consciously or unconsciously commit confirmation bias because they selectively report only the quotations they agree with and/or those they believe to be important, while ignoring those quotations they disagree with and/or believe to be unimportant (O'Brien et al., 2014). Confirmation bias is a threat to the trustworthiness of qualitative research in academic journals. To avoid confirmation bias, the participant-observer used bracketing, so it is possible she was unconsciously or consciously influenced by her personal prejudices (Galdas, 2017; Giorgi, 2008; O'Brien et al., 2014). The participant-observer attempted to achieve confirmability through the use of deductive reasoning to interpret the verbatim quotations and to give an underlying meaning to the perceived levels of support the teachers gave to Vygotsky's (1962, 1978, 1987) ZPD and the growth mindset (Zeeb et al., 2020).

**Dependability**

Dependability, showing the findings are consistent and could be repeated, was achieved through saturation, meaning that after a certain number of interview transcripts had been analyzed, further coding was not productive because no more new information could be obtained

(Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2017). The sample size to achieve saturation depends to a large extent on the homogeneity of the population from which the participants were drawn. Guest et al. (2006) concluded if the population from which the participants are drawn is homogeneous, then "a sample of six interviews may be sufficient to enable the development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations" (p. 78). Because the participants in the current study were homogeneous, meaning they came from equivalent backgrounds in elementary education, and had similar lived experiences and perceptions associated with teaching ELLS, a small purposive sample ($n = 10$) was sufficient to achieve saturation. However, a larger sample size ($n > 30$) would probably have been necessary if the participants came from heterogeneous education backgrounds and had a more diverse range of lived experiences and perceptions (Mason, 2010).

Dependability was also achieved by conducting an expert review with SMEs. Participants were given the opportunity to review the respective interview transcripts. Participants exited the study after receiving an email with a summary of the data results. The SMEs included one ESOL chairperson for MDCPS and two elementary ESL teachers who held master's degrees with an ESOL component, were ESOL endorsed, and had taught ELLs for a minimum of 5 years. SMEs received the data analysis to verify reliability. After reviewing the data analysis and coded transcripts from the interviews, each SME agreed with the data analysis and found the analysis was consistent with what the participants communicated during the interviews.

**Transferability**

According to Rheinhardt et al. (2018), transferability is concerned with how the qualitative findings can be applied to other situations. Lichtman (2014) suggested transferability is equivalent to external validity, implying the findings should apply to a larger population.

However, transferability could not be achieved by generalizing the qualitative findings from the small sample of teachers ($n$ = 15) to the entire population of teachers in the United States who teach ELLs. The purpose of the research was not to generalize the findings to a population of educators but to generalize the findings to education theory. The amount of data required to generalize to a theory is much less than the amount required to generalize to a population (Stangor, 2015). Emphasis was given to generalizing how the lived experiences and perceptions of the teachers converged or diverged in the context of the underlying theory outlined in Figure 1, specifically Vygotsky's (1962, 1978, 1987) ZPD and the growth mindset (Zeeb et al., 2020). The participant-observer thereby complied with the current trend of qualitative researchers to not simply describe the lived experiences and perceptions of people but to verify or expand on an existing theory or generate an entirely new theory (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Grbich, 2019).

**Chapter Summary**

Interviews were conducted to discover elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties. Findings for Research Question 1—What are elementary teachers' lived experiences of teaching English language learners who have difficulty acquiring academic language proficiency and subject mastery?— demonstrated the lived experiences of ESL teachers yielding the best outcome for ELLs acquiring academic language is teachers' knowledge of learners. Teachers' lived experiences revealed teachers positively influenced the growth mindset of students through the commitment to the constructivist paradigm and CLT. Utilizing scaffolding positively influenced the language learning of the students. Academic language instruction highlighted the importance of independent language learning at home, including the use of a variety of teaching materials (e.g., dictionaries, flashcards, labels, technology), inclusive of all stakeholders. Furthermore, the teachers supported the growth

mindset of the students by increasing their knowledge of learners. Attempts were also made to help alleviate the students' emotional problems, including embarrassment, depression, and anxiety.

In response to Research Question 2—How is academic language instruction addressed and/or implemented for English language learners according to elementary teachers' experience? —the teachers perceived the ZPD may be negatively influenced, or possibly even eliminated, by a variety of practical, social, and environmental problems. The experiences and perceptions of the teachers were generally consistent with Vygotsky's ZPD because the participants discussed how they bridged the gap between where the student is and where the student should be by building on prior knowledge, seeing the growth, and communicating and engaging with the student.

In response to Research Question 3—What do elementary teachers of English language learners suggest for effective academic language instruction in Florida public schools? —the experiences and perceptions of the teachers were generally consistent with the notion of the importance of DI to facilitate academic language acquisition as well as knowledge of learners and implementing strategies. An essential theme was knowledge of learners, which was utilized to address academic language acquisition for ELLs as well as the social–emotional support ELLs need while acquiring a new language. Chapter 5 includes an interpretation of the findings in the context of the literature, limitations of the findings, and the practical implications of the findings.

**Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

English language learners have difficulty acquiring the language necessary for academic success; therefore, expanding vocabulary is critical to help ELLs make academic learning gains (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to describe elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties. The purposive sample of 15 elementary ESL teachers from one MDCPS public school focused on the academic language difficulties of ELLs. Through thematic analysis of the transcripts of prequestionnaires, semistructured interviews, and postquestionnaires, the lived experiences and perceptions of the ESL teachers were explored and interpreted to answer the guiding research questions.

The findings of this study confirmed Vygotsky's ZPD and found how essential scaffolding and knowledge of learners are to ELLs' academic language acquisition. Furthermore, problems affecting ELLs emerged from the study. Effective strategies were found in the study that indicated how paramount the instructor's scaffolding, remediation, and knowledge of learners are for ELLs to make academic learning gains. A growth mindset and strategies such as building on prior knowledge yielded positive results for ELLs acquiring academic language.

The findings and interpretations of the results are compared to the literature reviewed; suggestions for future research are then provided. The implications for leadership include a description of the potential social change, as well as implications for educational leadership resulting from this study.

**Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions**

The peer-reviewed literature analyzed in Chapter 2 of this study highlighted the need for more investigation into the lived experiences and perceptions of ESL teachers regarding the

academic language difficulties of ELLs (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017; Proctor et al., 2020). Research

suggested ELLs in the United States have difficulty acquiring the language necessary to become

academically proficient (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). Building vocabulary is

essential for ELLs (Gupta, 2019). Many ELLs experience difficulties building vocabulary,

reading, and understanding content-area texts (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). ELLs are struggling to

make academic learning gains within 5–7 years (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017). ELLs are

outperformed by their native-English-speaking peers (Maarouf, 2019).

Insufficient literature exists on the lived experiences and perceptions of ESL teachers on

the academic language difficulties of ELLs (Jozwik & Douglas, 2017; Proctor et al., 2020). This

study was designed to confirm existing literature while extending the knowledge by exploring

elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties.

Themes such as scaffolding, knowledge of learners, problems, and DI through deductive

reasoning emerged via the data analysis. A theoretical framework, which included Vygotsky's

(1962, 1978, 1987) ZPD and growth mindset (Zeeb et al., 2020), guided the study. Throughout

the process of collecting and analyzing qualitative data, the researcher reflected on the process

and identified factors influencing outcomes. After coding and identifying primary themes,

manifestations within each primary theme were coded as secondary themes. An essential element

in both the primary and secondary themes derived from the study to reach ELLs was knowledge

of learners. The participants discussed a variety of issues about ELLs' academic language

acquisition. Participants implemented a variety of instructional strategies, including scaffolding,

to help ELLs acquire the academic language necessary for success. Scaffolding is included as

teachers help learners structure information so students can better acquire new knowledge (Tran

& Aytac, 2018). When educators possess knowledge of their students, they are better equipped to

tailor instruction to the learners' unique needs, such as implementing DI in the classroom (Shareefa & Moosa, 2020).

The theoretical framework was guided by the ZPD. The ZPD indicates that knowing where students are, where they need to be (Vygotsky, 1978), and having a growth mindset can increase outcomes for students (Zeeb et al., 2020). The theories of ZPD and growth mindset can assist ELLs in acquiring the academic language required for success. Knowledge of learners formed the basis of the theoretical framework. Knowing which problems and challenges are impeding student progress enables teachers to address the unique needs of each student in the classroom (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). When teachers possess knowledge of their students, they can assist the students in progressing from where they are to where they need to be and motivate them through the development of a growth mindset. Teachers can positively influence student language acquisition by utilizing constructivism, CLT, differentiation, independent learning, scaffolding, and appropriate teaching materials (Darnis, 2020; Dos Santos, 2020; Graham et al., 2021; Rababah & Almwajeh, 2018). Educators who are knowledgeable about learners can also help students develop a positive self-concept and sense of efficacy, motivate students, and guide them toward independent learning.

**Research Question 1: Teacher's Lived Experiences Teaching ELLs**

Interviews were connected to the first research question centering on the participants' lived experiences regarding the greatest deterrent for ELLs' academic language acquisition. Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD emphasizes the gap between a student's independent level and the amount of possible growth when guidance is provided by an adult. A growth mindset is described as a belief that a person's talents are malleable and that anything can be improved with practice and exercise (Zeeb et al., 2020).

The most frequent theme derived from the interviews was problems. Educators can better assist students in achieving academic learning gains by focusing on ELLs' academic difficulties and then taking steps to address them systematically. Problems ranged from background knowledge, home environment, parental support, school environment, resources, and testing. Knowledge of learners, such as problems impeding progress, can help teachers address needs specific to the ELLs in their classrooms. Students will ultimately do better academically when they are fully engaged in the learning process. Pitzer and Skinner (2017) described a distinct relationship between a student's motivational resilience and the student's social context, resources, emotions, and achievement outcomes. Teacher support also has a direct effect on how a student progresses through the student journey in motivational resilience.

Of the participants, 40% stated scaffolding was a useful strategy to address ELLs' academic language acquisition difficulties; in breaking up learning into chunks, language acquisition becomes a more feasible task for students. Scaffolding is an example of a strategy educators can implement to better help students make academic learning gains. Implementing scaffolding in the classroom can help teachers structure information so students can better acquire new knowledge (Tran & Aytac, 2018).

Participants supported the literature when they repeatedly highlighted knowledge of learners as an essential theme to assist ELLs. Participants stated as a teacher discovers that an ELL performs below grade level in their native language, the teacher can explore the reasons for the gap in progress and take appropriate measures to remediate the learning loss. This conclusion supports the research that states a determining factor for how long it will take a student to learn a second language has to do with how well the student is acclimating to the new culture (Kim & Helphenstine, 2017). Krashen (1981) suggested meaningful interaction is required for learning.

Participants in the present study described CRT as a positive aspect of the classroom

environment because it connects students' culture to the classroom. CRT is a type of instruction

that incorporates cultural diversity (Rockich-Winston & Wyatt, 2019).

The experiences and perceptions of participants in this study were generally consistent

with Vygotsky's ZPD. Participants discussed how they bridged the gap between where the

student is and where the student should be. As ESL teachers build on prior knowledge, see the

growth, and communicate and engage with students, students are better able to acquire the

academic language necessary for success.

### Theme 1: Scaffolding

The findings derived from the interviews were consistent; teachers used scaffolding to

positively influence the language learning of students, including processes such as planning,

modeling, setting rules and boundaries, creating a structure, and going through the steps.

Scaffolding helps learners structure information and provides students the opportunity to better

acquire new knowledge (Tran & Aytac, 2018). Results derived from Research Question 1

showed academic language instruction was addressed or implemented by highlighting the

importance of independent language learning at home using a variety of teaching materials, such

as dictionaries, flashcards, labels, and technology, and the need for help from stakeholders.

Technology can provide ELLs the opportunity to learn and practice English at home. Technology

has the potential to provide meaningful learning experiences for ELLs by providing students

with different opportunities and platforms to practice English as students are acquiring the

language. Krashen (1981) suggested meaningful interaction is required for learning. In this

modern era, technology provides meaningful interaction for students. Technology offers ELLs

the opportunity to better understand what is going on in the classroom and can be utilized to

improve comprehension in language acquisition and eventual academic success (Stairs-Davenport & Skotarczak, 2018).

### *Theme 2: Knowledge of Learner and Growth Mindset*

This study confirmed the findings of Zeeb et al. (2020), who explained how important a growth mindset is in educating ELLs and guiding ELLs in the process of acquiring the academic language needed for success. Participants in the present study supported the growth mindset of the students by knowing the students personally, giving encouragement, reassurance, praise, patience, and positive reinforcement. The literature describes growth mindset to include hard work and determination. Teachers who teach growth mindset strategies to students set high expectations, create a culture of growth, motivate, and build confidence (Frank, 2018). The teachers also attempted to help alleviate the students' emotional problems, including embarrassment, depression, and anxiety. Students' self-beliefs, self-concepts, and motivation were the primary themes present during the interviews, which developed a secondary theme of growth mindset and encouragement.

Knowledge of learners can assist teachers in knowing where the students are so the teachers can help the students achieve their goals. Scaffolding can be implemented in the classroom to target students' learning needs (Tran & Aytac, 2018). When teachers develop growth mindsets in students, they are positively influencing not only the academic language acquisition process for the students but also the students' lives. Growth mindset illustrates that the belief in oneself determines growth. Students who possess the ability to learn, and know how to work hard to improve, possess a higher motivation to learn. Students having a growth mindset believe hard work and practice will enable the ability to achieve goals (Zeeb et al., 2020).

**Research Question 2: ELL Instruction**

The second research question explored how participants addressed and/or executed academic language education for ELLs based on their teaching expertise. Shim (2014) described the importance of teacher influence in the classroom. One main factor that influences ELLs' experiences at school has to do with the teachers. Shim stated teachers' beliefs and perceptions are critical to reaching and teaching ELLs. Results from the present study support previous literature because the participants agreed teachers must be seen as a resource of knowledge to help determine the best way to educate ELLs. Zeeb et al. (2020) described how students are positively influenced by the beneficial pedagogic philosophies, activities, and strategies of their teachers (including constructivism, CLT, differentiation, scaffolding, and teaching materials), which the teachers in this study elucidated based on their lived experiences.

Results from the study described instructional strategies as fundamental to student progression. The results support Master et al.'s (2016) finding that teachers who know and understand ELL-specific instructional strategies are better equipped to teach ELLs. The present study deemed CRT as critical in ELL education. CRT occurs when educators instruct by incorporating cultural diversity (Rockich-Winston & Wyatt, 2019). A way to meet the needs of the linguistically and culturally diverse learner is to create culturally responsive learning environments and for teachers to implement CRT in the classroom.

### Theme 1: Problems

The focus of this study was on a problem discovered in the literature that indicated ELLs in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful academically (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). The participants perceived the ZPD may be negatively influenced, or possibly even eliminated, by a variety of practical, social, and environmental problems. Participants in the study suggested effective

strategies for academic language instruction. Lack of support, motivation, materials, and time were noted as some problems that negatively affect ELLs' academic language acquisition. Instead of having proper support at home, ELLs are tasked with the responsibility of learning to read and write in English and navigate new social systems (Santos et al., 2018). Immigrant adolescents are not only responsible for learning English and making academic learning gains in the classrooms, but many also often become linguistic and cultural resources for their families (Santos et al., 2018). Serious issues remain related to resources available to ELLs who have learning disabilities (Burr et al., 2015).

### *Theme 2: Scaffolding to Address Learning Needs*

Research has determined teachers who are willing to learn new strategies, reflect on personal practices, and take responsibility for what students are learning reap the rewards when students make academic progress (Andrei et al., 2019). Scaffolding was a primary theme that evolved as an effective strategy secondary theme to address learning needs. The literature described scaffolding as an effective strategy to help teachers help students structure information so the students can better acquire new knowledge (Tran & Aytac, 2018). Effective strategies include planning, modeling, setting rules and boundaries, changing frameworks, creating structure, following steps, and utilizing technology effectively. Participants described the classroom environment, a part of CRT, as directly affecting student academic language acquisition. In a study by Jozwik and Douglas (2017), results indicated ELLs who received explicit academic vocabulary instruction, possessed self-regulation, participated in cooperative learning structures, and received Tier 1 instruction had the support necessary to develop academic vocabulary. Technology offers ELLs the opportunity to better understand what is going on in the classroom and can be utilized to improve comprehension in language acquisition

and eventual academic success (Stairs-Davenport & Skotarczak, 2018).

Participants in the study concluded a variety of problems, deterrents, challenges, and barriers prevent ELLs from acquiring the academic language required for success. Scaffolding should be used in classrooms to address students' needs effectively. The problems and scaffolding themes correlate to the theoretical framework in that when a teacher has knowledge of learners and knows and understands what problems are affecting student progress, then they can utilize scaffolding to address the students' learning needs.

**Research Question 3: Effective Academic Language Instruction**

Participants made suggestions for effective academic language instruction in Florida public schools. Research indicated once a teacher learns about an ELL, DI can be implemented. DI should be adapted to the needs of the student (Shareefa & Moosa, 2020). DI allows teachers the opportunity to teach students at their level to foster academic improvement. Brown and Endo (2017) explained all students benefit from DI, but considerable planning is required on the part of the teacher. For DI to be successful, teachers must preplan, know students academically, and understand how the students learn best. As a best practice for ELLs, DI facilitates the opportunity for flexibility; students can be grouped according to level, mixed-ability grouping, as well as learning style (Brown & Endo, 2017).

Vygotsky (1978) suggested the foundation of core communication and learning a new language is rooted in social interaction. In mixed-classroom settings, Gottfried (2016) found a positive effect regarding ELLs in the classroom, specifically in socioemotional skills. Gottfried suggested ELLs in a general education classroom have positive socioemotional effects on the entire class; ELLs bring positive value to the classroom setting and should be utilized as a source for all students, meaning ELLs can teach about different cultures and diversity. Utilizing an

additive approach, teachers can use the students' diversity as an asset (Cuba, 2020).

Multiple modalities should be utilized during instruction (Gupta, 2019). When participants in the present study incorporated auditory, visual, and kinesthetic opportunities into lessons, the teachers reached all ELLs regardless of the learning style required for true understanding. Cuba (2020) noted benefits of frontloading vocabulary exist for both ELLs and native English speakers. Frontloading vocabulary is conducive to an integrated classroom setting and supports learning for all learners but works particularly well for ELLs with disabilities (Cuba, 2020).

### *Theme 1: Differentiation*

The experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study were consistent with the importance of knowledge of the learner, implementing strategies, and DI to facilitate academic language acquisition. Differentiation was a primary theme that evolved into the secondary theme of knowledge of learners. Adjusting to different academic and language levels, pairing students by ability, providing the opportunity for peer sharing, personalizing instruction for each student, understanding ELLs' silent periods, and implementing the use of small groups in the classroom are crucial to ELLs' successful academic language acquisition.

### *Theme 2: Knowledge of Learners*

When teachers can educate based on the needs of the students and instruct students with the learning strategies yielding the best results for the individual learner, the students will be better able to acquire the academic language necessary for academic success (Alzamil, 2019). Knowledge of learners was an essential theme resulting from the study to address academic language acquisition for ELLs and the social–emotional support ELLs require while learning a new language. Although strategies to assist ELLs in acquiring academic language vary, visuals

were a common strategy used by the participants.

Two effective strategies emerged to enhance ELLs' academic language acquisition process: DI and knowledge of learners. DI is designed to address the individual learning needs of students, while knowledge of learners provides teachers with the knowledge of what the student's individual needs are. The DI and knowledge of learner themes correlate to the theoretical framework in that when a teacher has knowledge of learners, the teacher will be better prepared to address student's individual learning needs.

The ESL teachers' lived experiences support the literature. The study highlights the important roles of Vygotsky's ZPD, scaffolding, knowledge of learners, problems, and differentiation in supporting ELLs' diverse learning needs. The research study's interpretations, inferences, and results were supported by the literature, lacked bias, and were not dependent on the researcher's prior knowledge.

## Limitations

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is synonymous with validity and dependability. Trustworthiness relates to how well the participant-observer established the qualitative results' credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). The participant-observer was responsible for verifying the veracity of each step in the collection and analysis of interview transcripts (Lichtman, 2014). During the instrument development process, every effort was made to guarantee the resulting tools were acceptable and trustworthy; the instruments were not tested beyond this study. The questions in the study were constructed using research to focus on elementary ESL teachers' perceptions of the difficulties facing ELLs. Three SMEs provided feedback for the questions (see Appendix E) to ensure the questions were unbiased, clear, reliable, and valid. Although every attempt was made to assure

instrument reliability and dependability, determining whether the instruments were confirmable outside the setting of this study without further testing was difficult.

To ensure the findings were credible, the interview transcripts were reviewed systematically, looking for convergence and divergence among the participants' lived experiences and perceptions within and across each primary and secondary theme. Credibility was also established through reflexivity, in which the researcher reflected on her contribution to the process and highlighted any concerns that may have impacted the findings when collecting and analyzing the qualitative data (Palaganas et al., 2017). Credibility was established throughout the data analysis process until data saturation was reached and no new themes were detected. Themes were coded and arranged in Excel. Autocoding was performed using the NVivo program. For instance, interviews were transcribed, replies from participants were grouped thematically, and conclusions were formed.

Confirmability was obtained by reporting the respondents' verbatim quotations to identify each primary and secondary theme. Member checking was used to authenticate raw data. By reporting each participant's remarks, the participant-observer verified what was truly stated by the participants was not altered in any way.

Dependability was achieved through saturation. The participants in the study were homogeneous, and a small purposive sample of 15 participants was sufficient to achieve saturation. Dependability was also achieved by conducting an expert review with the SMEs. Participants were given the opportunity to review their respective transcripts. Each participant exited the study after receiving an email with a summary of the data results.

Transferability could not be accomplished by extrapolating qualitative findings from a small sample of teachers to the total population of teachers in the United States who teach ELLs.

The purpose of the research was not to generalize findings to a population of educators but to generalize findings to education theory. The emphasis was on generalizing how teachers' lived experiences and perceptions coincided or varied within the framework of the theory. The study adhered to the trend among qualitative research to not simply describe participants' lived experiences but to expand on existing theory.

The findings in the research study fully supported the literature while extending knowledge by exploring elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties. Participants in the study were educators in Florida and shared their lived experiences teaching ELLs in MDCPS. Recommendations are made as follows for supporting academic English acquisition across the state of Florida, the United States, and globally.

## Recommendations

ELLs require support in acquiring academic language proficiency. Generally, knowledge of learners, scaffolding, and differentiation were essential to supporting ELLs through their academic language difficulties. To address students' needs, educators must understand where the students are. Teachers need to take the time to get to know the students in the classroom and investigate their strengths and weaknesses. Although the participants in the study were educators in Florida and therefore shared their lived experiences teaching ELLs in MDCPS, recommendations are made for supporting academic English acquisition across the state of Florida, the United States, and globally.

### Knowledge of Learners

Knowledge of learners has a pivotal role in the classroom and specifically with ELLs. Knowing where the student is personally and academically, as well as in their language acquisition journey, will help teachers target instruction geared to support the student's

individual needs. Teachers should educate students where the need exists. If ELLs are provided instruction with effective learning strategies targeting an individual learner's needs, then the ELL will be better able to acquire the academic language required for academic success.

**Scaffolding**

Participants in the study agreed scaffolding should be used to support ELLs' academic language acquisition. By implementing scaffolding and effective strategies, teachers can support ELLs in their language acquisition journey (Tran & Aytac, 2018). During the implementation of scaffolding in the classroom, teachers are aware of their students' current levels and assist them in advancing beyond those levels. The process of scaffolding involves the gradual release of responsibility for learning. This strategy provides students with support and meaningful access to information, and as their confidence grows, support is slowly removed. For instance, when an ELL begins learning English, the teacher may read everything to the student and go as far as to make connections between the information presented and any prior knowledge the student may already possess. The instructor may then frontload vocabulary. The teacher may then utilize visual aids to aid student comprehension. Once the student begins to comprehend, the teacher will gradually withdraw support; for instance, the teacher may stop reading everything for the student and permit the student to work in small groups.

**Differentiation**

Differentiation should be implemented to address ELLs' academic language acquisition struggles because no two learners are identical or have identical learning demands. DI enables instructors to educate students at their levels and enables students to achieve suitable academic advances. By utilizing differentiation, teachers can reach learners where they are and support the students in the process of learning English as a second language.

**Next Steps**

Additional research should be conducted to corroborate the findings of this study to determine the efficacy of the themes identified in assisting ELLs on their language learning journey. The present study focused on 15 participants who taught ELLs in Miami-Dade County. Conducting research outside of the county might enhance results and confirm themes resulting from the present study. Further studies in various locations, across the United States and globally, utilizing the researcher-created data collection instruments might enhance the results' reliability, dependability, and confirmability. Further research on the influence of knowledge of learners on ELLs' language acquisition would add depth to the study's findings and improve English language acquisition instruction globally.

Elementary ESL teachers' perspectives on language acquisition difficulties can guide administrators in revising policies to benefit ELLs. A change in policy should include progress monitoring regarding academic language acquisition and can facilitate academic language progress for ELLs. Kim and Helphenstine (2017) stated knowing which problems and challenges are impeding student progress enables teachers to address the unique needs of each student in the classroom. Policies should include increased knowledge of learners, increased proof of effective strategy implementation in the classroom, as well as evidence of DI specifically targeting ELLs in the classroom. Policies that include DI would ensure teachers reach learners where they are and support the students in the process of learning English as a second language.

## Implications for Leadership

A positive impact on ELL education and teacher perceptions may derive from the results of this study.. Expressed teacher participant lived experiences will positively affect future teacher ownership of effective strategies and increase implementation of the resulting themes, improving

ELL academic language acquisition. When teachers believe that a strategy works efficiently and effectively, it will increase teacher buy in and positively affect student academic progress.  In implementing the themes derived from the lived experiences of the teachers who participated in the study, leaders can effectively improve the English language learning process for ELLs. Participants attributed effective instruction to include knowledge of learners; as leaders motivate teachers and implement policies that include knowledge of learners, leaders will improve the English language learning process for ELLs. A positive social change within the ELL that may benefit not only the learner's family but also society occurs when the learner develops a growth mindset and shifts from problem solving to improvement. A growth mindset can increase outcomes for students (Zeeb et al., 2020), and leaders in education should promote the development of growth mindset in students. By developing a growth mindset in ELLs, educators are affecting not only the ELLs' lives and education but also the impact ELLs have on society. Lessons and themes derived from the study can be applied to further research and guide administrators in making decisions and teacher leaders who impact teachers and students directly.

**Research**

The results derived from this study extend knowledge by describing elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of ELLs' academic language difficulties. To meet students' needs, educators must first understand where students are (Young et al., 2019). When educators focus on ELLs' academic struggles and then take deliberate steps, such as scaffolding, to address student needs, educators can more effectively assist students in making learning gains (Tran & Aytac, 2018). Negative influences deter ELLs from academic language acquisition; as educators increase knowledge of what is impeding progress, educators implement positive influences such

as effective strategies to target each student's specific needs. A positive social change within the

ELL that may benefit not only the learner's family but also society occurs when the learner

develops a growth mindset and shifts from problem-solving to improvement. The shift in growth

mindset helps ELLs acquire academic language and develop as lifelong learners.

**School Administrators**

Teachers' beliefs and perceptions are crucial for ELLs to be reached and taught. Teachers

must be viewed as a source of knowledge who can assist in determining the most effective

method of educating ELLs. Appropriate professional development is associated with significant

gains in student learning (Mullins et al., 2020). To fulfill the requirements of linguistically and

culturally varied learners, educators must build culturally responsive learning environments and

apply CRT in the classroom. CRT occurs when educators impart knowledge while incorporating

cultural diversity (Rockich-Winston & Wyatt, 2019). Increased professional development and

support could improve the learning process for ELLs and positively impact their lives. A positive

social change for ELLs would increase their academic language acquisition. Teachers who are

equipped with the most effective strategies for assisting learners would have the greatest impact

on students, assisting them in reaching their full potential.

**Teacher Leaders**

Teacher leaders must spend time collaborating with their teacher team to learn their

teaching styles and the needs of their students. Teachers must spend time in the classroom

getting to know their students and conducting investigations to discover learners' strengths and

limitations. When a teacher leader and teacher team become aware an ELL is performing below

grade level in the native language, the teacher team may begin researching the reasons for the

student's substandard performance and the appropriate methods for resolving the student's

issues. Additionally, teacher leaders should foster growth mindsets, both in their teacher team and in students, by developing a personal relationship with them and providing encouragement, reassurance, praise, patience, and positive reinforcement. Teachers must be lifelong learners.

Educators who are familiar with and understand ELL-specific teaching practices are better prepared to educate ELLs (Master et al., 2016). DI is critical while educating ELLs because no two students are alike or have the same learning demands; this strategy enables teachers to educate students at their level and enables students to make acceptable learning progress. A positive social change within the ELL that may benefit both the learner's family and school culture will develop with increased knowledge of learners. Increased knowledge of learners not only helps students make academic language acquisition and learning gains but also increases growth mindset in students, encouraging a more positive school culture.

## Conclusion

Knowledge of learners, scaffolding, and DI are essential to ELLs' academic language acquisition. Although problems exist that inhibit the language acquisition process for ELLs, research provides leaders in education with strategies to meet ELLs' needs. Results indicated knowledge of learners is an essential theme in addressing academic language acquisition. Scaffolding can assist teachers in structuring information in the classroom, allowing students to acquire knowledge, such as the English language, more effectively. DI allows teachers the opportunity to teach students at the students' levels and allows students the opportunity to make learning gains. The implications of the study are intended to develop a positive social change within the ELL that may benefit not only the learner's family but also society; this change occurs when the learner develops a growth mindset and shifts from problem solving to improvement. Leaders can benefit from the participants' lived experiences. Lessons and themes derived from

the study can be applied to further research and guide administrators in making decisions and

teachers who impact students directly.

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**Appendix A**

**Recruitment Letter**



Recruitment Letter

Date: March 22, 2021

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral student at American College of Education. I am writing to inform you about an opportunity to participate in a dissertation research study.

Here is some of my dissertation information:

- Title: Elementary Teacher Perspectives on English Learners' Academic Language Difficulties: A Phenomenological Study
- The purpose of the proposed qualitative phenomenological study will be to describe elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences of students who are English Language Learners' academic language difficulties.

Criteria for participation:

Three criteria exist allowing elementary ESL teachers to participate in the research study.

- Teachers eligible for participation will educators of students who are English Language Learners for a minimum of 3 years.

- Participants must be ESOL endorsed.

- Participants must work for Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

Your participation in the study will be voluntary. If you wish to withdraw from the research at any time, you may do so by contacting me using the information below.

I may publish the results of this study; however, I will not use your name nor share identifiable data you provided. Your information will remain confidential. If you would like additional information about the study, please contact the following

**Candidate Contact Information:**

**Erika Pell-Lopez**

**(786)261-8466**

**Epell16@dadeschools.net**


**Chair Contact Information:**

**Dr. Chih-Hsin Hsu**

**Chih-Hsin.Hsu@ace.edu**


If you meet the criteria above, are interested in participating in the study, and would like to be included in the potential participant pool, please email me the completed Informed Consent.


Thank you again for considering this dissertation research opportunity.

## Appendix B

### Participant Informed Consent

**Prospective Research Participant:** Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

### Project Information
**Project Title:** English Language Learners in Miami, Florida: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study
**Researcher:** Erika Pell-Lopez
**Organization:** American College of Education
**Email:** epell16@dadeschools.net    **Telephone:** (786)261-8466
**Researcher's Faculty Member:** Dr. Chih-Hsin Hsu
**Organization:** American College of Education
**Email:** Chih-Hsin.Hsu@ace.edu

### Introduction
I am Erika Pell-Lopez, and I am a doctoral candidate student at American College of Education. I am doing research under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Chih-Hsin Hsu. I will give you some information about the project and invite you to be part of this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research. This consent form may contain words you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information, and I will explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them then.

### Purpose of the Research
You are being asked to participate in a research study which will assist with understanding gain teacher perceptions of strategies for teaching students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) having difficulty acquiring academic language. This qualitative study will examine teacher perceptions of why English Language Learners in the United States are having difficulty acquiring the academic language necessary to be successful academically.

### Research Design and Procedures
The qualitative phenomenological study will focus on population sample size of 15 English as a second language teachers who teach students who are English Language Learners. The 15 teachers of students who are ELLs, must be elementary ELL teachers who teach in a Miami-Dade County Public School. The participants in the study must also have a master's degree with an ESOL component, be ESOL endorsed, and have taught students who are ELLs for a minimum of 5 years. The qualitative phenomenological study will discover elementary ESL teachers' lived experiences teaching English Language Learners with academic language learning difficulties. After participants agree to participate and sign the consent to participate, they will receive a pre-questionnaire via Google Forms. The pre-questionnaire will provide the study with basic background information. A Zoom interview conference will then be scheduled beginning a week after the pre-questionnaire is received by the researcher. Each participant will participate in one Zoom interview, with all interviews taking place within 1 to 3 weeks. Interviews should take

approximately one hour each.  Five days after the interview, participants will receive a post-questionnaire that will require no more than 30 minutes to complete and allow participants to share their final thoughts.

**Participant selection**
You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as a teacher who teaches students who are English Language Learners. Your perception of issues affecting students who are ELLs is invaluable to the research.

**Voluntary Participation**
Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions and you do not have to participate.  If you select to participate in this study, you may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

**Procedures**
We are inviting you to participate in this research study.  If you agree, you will be asked to respond to a pre-questionnaire, participate in a recorded Zoom conference and respond to an open-ended post-questionnaire. The type of questions asked will range from a demographical perspective to direct inquiries about the topic of students who are ELLs.

**Duration**
The pre-questionnaire portion of the research study will require approximately 5 minutes to complete.  The Zoom conference will take place 1 to 3 weeks after the pre-questionnaire and will require 1 hour of your time.  5 days after the interview a post-questionnaire will require no more than 30 minutes to complete.  At the end of the research study, I will email you a summary of the results.

**Risks**
The researcher will ask you to share personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion if you don't wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

**Benefits**
While there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation is likely to help us find out more about the issues affecting the academic progress for students who are ELLs. The potential benefits of this study will aid advancing education for students who are ELLs.

**Confidentiality**
        I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the researcher. Personal information pertaining to participants such as names and work locations will be coded with a number to ensure confidentiality and protected identities. The coded numeral will replace participant's name in both the research study and consent forms. Only the researcher and the researcher's chairperson will know the participant's personal information. Any information connecting participants with the study will remain with the researcher and will not

be shared without written consent from both the researcher and the participant. Information gathered in the research study may be used in any capacity to improve English as a second language instruction. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee.  The data collected will be kept in an encrypted computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not have a direct correlation, which directly identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your number is, and I will secure your information.

**Sharing the Results**
At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. A respective transcript review will be sent to each participant providing each participant with the opportunity to review everything the participated states as well as proving the opportunity to add information or edit what was stated. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**
Participation is voluntary.  At any time, you wish to end your participation in the research study, you may do so without repercussions.

**Questions About the Study**
If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact me at epell16@dadeschools.net or by phone (786)261-8466. This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions of this group, email IRB@ace.edu.

**Certificate of Consent**
I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age.  I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Participant #: _____

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant were answered to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.  A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print or type name of lead researcher: _____

Signature of lead researcher: _____

I have accurately read or witnessed the accurate reading of the assent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm the individual has freely given assent.
Print or type name of lead researcher: _____

Signature of lead researcher: _____

Date: _____

Signature of faculty member: _____

Date: _____
**PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.**

**Appendix C**

**Prequestionnaire Questions**

1. What grades do you teach?

2. How many years have you been teaching?

3. What is the demographic composition of the students you teach?

4. How much experience would you say you have teaching students who are English language

learners?

**Appendix D**

**Site Permission Consent**

3/24/2021

Mon 3/22/2021 12:25 PM

To:
Cc

Hello

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) is the 4th largest school district in the United Sates with almost ½ million students and over 50,000 employees.
At M-DCPS, we encourage research and we support our employees to pursue higher educational degrees, and we do work with many universities and research institutions across the nation. To that end, we have established clear and STANDARD procedures to review research applications (please see link below)

http://oer.dadeschools.net/ResearchReviewRequest/ResearchReviewRequest.asp

I am writing on behalf of                    She has a preliminary site approval from her school. She needs at least a conditional approval from the IRB at the American College of Education (ACE). I have worked with several students, as recently as February 2, 2021, from the ACE who provided ACE IRB approval before getting final approval from M-DCPS.
I hope this information will help getting Erika her ACE IRB approval so she can complete her application and approval from M-DCPS.
Sincerely;

Director and Chairperson
M-DCPS, Research Review Committee

Dissertation Site Permission

Sun 4/11/2021

**To:** 

**From:** 
**Sent:** Monday, March 22, 2021 2:02 PM
**To:** 
**Cc:** 
**Subject:** FW: Dissertation Site Permission

Good afternoon,

Please be aware that ████████████████ as shared her dissertation proposal with me and, given District approval of her research, it can be conducted at our school site.
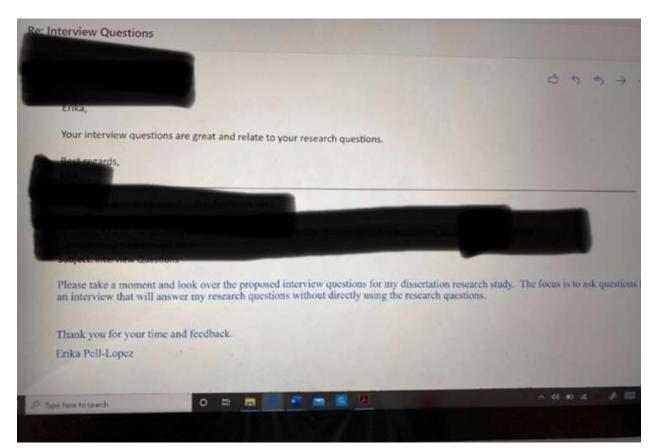
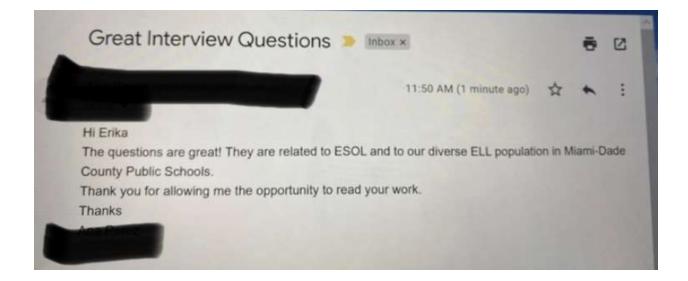Thank you, in advance, for your assistance.

## Appendix E

## Subject Matter Expert Responses



Look great to me!

Get Outlook for iOS

From: Pell-Lopez, Erika <epell16@dadeschools.net>

Subject: Interview Questions

Please take a moment and look over the proposed interview questions for my dissertation research study. The focus is to ask questions in an interview that will answer my research questions without directly using the research questions.

Thank you for your time and feedback.

Erika Pell-Lopez

**Research Question One:** What are the perceptions of teachers of English Language Learners who have difficulty in acquiring academic language to be successful in Florida public schools?

Re: Interview Questions

Erika,

Your interview questions are great and relate to your research questions.

Best regards,

Subject: Interview Questions

Please take a moment and look over the proposed interview questions for my dissertation research study. The focus is to ask questions in an interview that will answer my research questions without directly using the research questions.

Thank you for your time and feedback.

Erika Pell-Lopez

---

Great Interview Questions   Inbox ×

11:50 AM (1 minute ago)

Hi Erika
The questions are great! They are related to ESOL and to our diverse ELL population in Miami-Dade County Public Schools.
Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to read your work.
Thanks

**Appendix F**

**Interview Question Alignment**

| Research Question One: What are elementary teachers' lived experiences of teaching English Language Learners who have difficulty acquiring academic language proficiency and subject mastery? | Research Question Two: How is academic language instruction addressed and/or implemented for English Language Learners according to elementary teachers' experience? | Research Question Three: What do elementary teachers of English Language Learners suggest for effective academic language instruction in Florida public schools? |
|---|---|---|
| Interview questions linked to research questions. | | |
| What do you feel is the greatest deterrent for students to acquire academic language? | What is your personal lived experience as an ELL teacher? | What strategies have been most effective and have yielded the best results? |
| How do you feel that the deterrent affects the acquisition of academic language? | How do you feel you have impacted ELL academic language acquisition? | What strategies do you use the most often? |
| | What have you done as a teacher that has made the greatest impact for ELLs regarding student growth? | What socioemotional support have you had to use? |
| | How do you feel that your lived experience as a teacher has impacted academic language acquisition? | |
| | In your experience, at what level of preparation do your ELLs enter your class? | |
| | What materials, if any, do your students lack in preparation for class? | |
| | How does missing materials affect student progress? | |
| | How do you as a teacher facilitate any needs the students may have regarding | |

|  | class materials? |  |
|  | How do you fill in the gaps between where the students are and where they need to be academically? |  |
|  | How does the level of completed home learning affect student language acquisition and or academic progress? |  |
|  | What else do you perceive impacts teacher instruction? |  |
|  | Why do you feel that it impacts teacher instruction to the degree that it impacts language acquisition? |  |
|  | What learning challenges have you witnessed from your students who are English Language Learners? |  |

**Appendix G**

**Interview Questions**

1.  What do you feel is the greatest deterrent for students to acquire academic language?

2. How do you feel that the deterrent affects the acquisition of academic language?

3. In your experience, at what level of preparation do your ELLs enter your class?

4. What is your personal lived experience as an ELL teacher?

5. How do you feel you have impacted ELL academic language acquisition?

6. What have you done as a teacher that has made the greatest impact for ELLs regarding
   student growth?

7. How do you feel that your lived experience as a teacher has impacted academic language
   acquisition?

8. What materials, if any, do your students lack in preparation for class?

9. How does missing materials affect student progress?

10. How do you as a teacher facilitate any needs the students may have regarding class
    materials?

11. How do you fill in the gaps between where the students are and where they need to be
    academically?

12. How does the level of completed home learning affect student language acquisiton and or
    academic progress?

13. What else do you perceive impacts teacher instruction?

14. Why do you feel that it impacts teacher instruction to the degree that it impacts language
    acquisition?

15. What learning challenges have you witnessed from your students who are English language

learners?

16. What strategies have been most effective and have yielded the best results?

17. What strategies do you use the most often?

18. What socioemotional support have you had to use?

**Appendix H**

**Postquestionnaire Question**

What additional information would you like to share regarding students who are English

Language Learners?

**Appendix I**

**Interview Protocol**

| Interview Protocol |
|---|

Script prior to pre-questionnaire:

I'd like to thank you for volunteering to participate in the research study. As I discussed with you earlier, my study seeks to will be to understand elementary school teacher perspectives on students who are English Language Learners' academic language difficulties.

[Review consent form]

The following questions will be asked virtually via a questionnaire and utilized to record demographic information as well as teacher experience.

| What grades do you teach? | How many years have you been teaching? | What is the demographic composition of the students you teach? | How much experience would you say you have teaching students who are English Language Learners? |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |

Script prior to interview:

The following questions will be asked virtually via a Zoom interview with the purpose of seeking to understand elementary school teacher perspectives in students who English Language Learners' academic language difficulties.

[Review consent form]

Prior to today, you completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission (or not) to record our conversation. Are you still okay with me recording (or not) our interview today? ___ yes ___ no

If yes: Thank you so much for participating my research study. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or want me to stop recording, I ask that you please let me know.

If no: Thank you for informing me. I will only take notes of our virtual interview.

Before we begin the interview portion, do you have any questions?

If yes: [discuss questions]
If no: [continue to the interview]

If you think of any other questions during the interview, please do not hesitate to ask.

| Begin Interview | | |
|---|---|---|
| What do you feel is the greatest deterrent for students to acquire academic language? | What is your personal lived experience as an ELL teacher? | What strategies have been most effective and have yielded the best results? |
| How do you feel that the deterrent affects the acquisition of academic language? | How do you feel you have impacted ELL academic language acquisition? | What strategies do you use the most often? |
|  | What have you done as a teacher that has made the greatest impact for ELLs regarding student growth? | What socio-emotional support have you had to use? |
|  | How do you feel that your lived experience as a teacher has impacted academic language acquisition? |  |
|  | In your experience, at what level of preparation do your ELLs enter your class? |  |
|  | What materials, in your experience, do your students lack in preparation for class? |  |
|  | How does missing materials affect student progress? |  |
|  | How do you as a teacher facilitate any needs the students may have regarding class materials? |  |
|  | How do you fill in the gaps between where the students are and where they need to be academically? |  |
|  | How does the level of completed home learning affect student language acquisition and or academic progress? |  |
|  | What else do you perceive impacts teacher instruction? |  |
|  | Why do you feel that it |  |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | impacts teacher instruction to the degree that it impacts language acquisition? | |
| | What learning challenges have you witnessed from your students who are English Language Learners? | |

| |
|---|
| Once the interview has been completed.<br><br>Thank you so much for participating in the interview and sharing your lived experiences as a English as a second language teacher for students who are English Language Learners.<br><br>In five days, you will receive a post-questionnaire via email to be completed on Google Forms. It will be one open-ended style question that will allow you the opportunity to share any final thoughts you may come up.<br><br> |
| Script prior to post-questionnaire.<br><br>Post-questionnaire will be emailed to allow the participant the opportunity to answer an open-ended question to share any further or final thoughts and add any other information the teacher wishes to share. |
| What additional information would you like to share regarding English Language Learners? |

## Appendix J

## Institutional Review Board Approval



April 08, 2021

To : Erika Pell-Lopez
    Chih-Hsin Hsu, Dissertation Committee Chair

From : Institutional Review Board
    American College of Education

Re: IRB Approval

"Elementary Teacher Perspectives on English Learners' Academic Language Difficulties: A Phenomenological Study"

The American College of Education IRB has reviewed your application, proposal, and any related materials. We have determined that your research provides sufficient protection of human subjects.

Your research is therefore approved to proceed. The expiration date for this IRB approval is one year from the date of review completion, April 08, 2022. If you would like to continue your research beyond this point, including data collection and/or analysis of private data, you must submit a renewal request to the IRB.

Our best to you as you continue your studies.

Sincerely,

Becky Gerambia
Assistant Chair, Institutional Review Board