

Original Paper

Teacher Perspectives of Professional Development and the Implementation of Instructional Practice for English Language Learners

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Abstract

An increasing number of U.S. teachers of English Language Learners (ELL) across the nation are not receiving adequate in-service training to provide instruction within students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky's ZPD is the difference between what a person can achieve when acting alone and what the same person can achieve when acting with support from someone else. ELL instructional practices should be implemented in ELL students' ZPD to ensure adequate academic performance. A lack of training is a local problem for a school district in the state of Florida. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of ELL teachers regarding the professional development trainings they received to teach ELL students within their ZPD. The two research questions focused on: (a) how elementary teachers implement instructional practices and resources to teach ELL students within their ZPD and (b) what their perspectives are of the professional development they were provided to teach ELL students. A purposeful sample of eight teachers of ELL students in the first through fifth grades participated in individual interview sessions. Using thematic analysis, data were analyzed using open coding and axial coding. The findings revealed participants' concerns regarding their knowledge and preparation, as well as the professional development they were offered for teaching the ELL students. An in-service training project was created to provide teachers of ELL students with more information regarding strategies, accommodations, and instructional implementation. This study may contribute to positive social change by highlighting areas of concern for further research. Providing in-service training may equip teachers with the skills and knowledge that they need to teach ELL students within their ZPD, which may result in better

educational outcomes.

Keywords

English Language learners, professional development, instructional implementation, teacher support, teaching instruction

1. Introduction

As an increasing number of students with immigrant and refugee status continue to enter United States (U.S.) public school classrooms, the education system is becoming more culturally, racially, and educationally diverse. Teachers require different knowledge and skill sets to meet the needs of many of these students. English Language Learner (ELL) students, for instance, require special services to attain appropriate levels of mastery in the English language and academics (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016). Rodriguez (2014) found that ELL programs grew by 60% making ELLs the fastest growing student group in the U.S. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), over 4.8 million (9.5 %) ELL students were enrolled in the 2014-2015 school year, an increase of 1 million from the 3.8 million (8.1%) in the 2000-2001 school year (Brown et al., 2018).

According to the Florida Department of Education (2019), there were a total of 265,000 ELL students in the state of Florida in 2019, speaking more than 300 different languages. The state ranked third in the United States in the size of the ELL population (Florida Department of Education, 2019). The problem is that the demand for services related to ELL needs is outpacing the in-service training of teachers who service this population. Nationally, only 29.5% of teachers who worked with ELLs in their classroom (both general education teachers and ELL teachers) reported that they had been properly trained (Rodriguez, 2014). In a survey conducted by Khong and Saito (2014), 87% of 422 mainstream kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) classroom teachers indicated they had received in-service training on how to adequately teach ELL students. This statistic questions both the quality of instruction and the teachers' understanding of how to teach ELL students (Kong & Saito, 2014).

O'Hara's (2020) research indicates that new teachers enter the classroom with limited information on meeting the needs of ELL students. Although new teachers have been exposed to accommodations for the ELLs, they often are lacking tools and strategies and exposure to ELLs. Although mentoring programs are generally provided to new teachers, they often do not emphasize the importance of the academic language development of ELLs (O'Hara et al., 2020). In another study, teachers of ELL students expressed frustration with their inability to assess the progress of individual students in standard-based curriculum and instruction, as the grading focused on the ability to reach standards and not the student growth (Kibler et al., 2016).

Although many teachers acknowledge that ELLs need modifications and accommodations, few understand how different types of accommodations may affect learning, particularly linguistic and instructional accommodations (Pappamihel & Lynn, 2016). In a survey conducted by Larsen (2013), 54% of the ELL teachers stated that they were not at all or were only marginally prepared to teach ELL

students (Larsen, 2013). In addition, Peercy et al.'s (2015) research indicated that many new and preservice mainstream teachers admit to feeling inadequately prepared to teach ELL students. This research shows the scope of the broader problem, which is inadequate and ineffective professional development provided to U.S. teachers of ELL students.

The problem at Snowflake Mountain Public Schools (SMPS, a pseudonym) is that teachers of English Language Learner (ELL) students are not receiving sufficient professional development to help them meet the instructional needs of ELL students within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the difference of what individuals can accomplish on their own versus what they can do with the assistance of another (Danish et al., 2017). In successful learning processes, the adult's assistance is adapted to the child's ability, meaning that the adult typically offers greater assistance in the beginning; the assistance gradually fades as the child becomes more capable (Clara, 2017). ELL students might benefit from being taught within their ZPD, as they need assistance when first learning a new language. If the ELL students are not provided with proper accommodations and instructional practices within their ZPD, the ELLs often continue to struggle in their academic performance, regularly underperforming in relation to their native English-speaking peers (Szpara, 2017). According to the bilingual department chair at SMPS, there is a current gap between what teachers are being trained to teach the students and how they should be prepared to meet the instructional needs of ELLs within their ZPD.

2. Method

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to research the perspectives of elementary teachers of ELL students regarding the professional development trainings they received to teach ELL students within their ZPD. Also explored were how the teachers of ELLs implement instructional practices in their classrooms to teach ELLs within their ZPD. The need for this study was based on the gap between what teachers are being trained to teach ELLs and how the teachers are implementing instruction in the classroom to meet the needs of their ELLs within their ZPD. If a teacher is not trained correctly, and a student fails to learn to read adequately as a child, social and economic advances in the future will be difficult (James, 2014).

Tellez and Manthey (2015) stated that the Latino population constitutes the largest group of ELLs (80-85%) and thus serves as a proxy for the assessment of ELL achievement. Latinos have the lowest level of education and the highest dropout rate (Tellez & Manthey, 2015). According to Rodriguez (2014), about 40-50% of 15 to 17-year-old Hispanic students were below grade level, which may indicate poor retention. In addition, Hispanics have the lowest level of bachelor's degree completion among ethnic groups (Rodriguez, 2014). Calderon and Zamora (2012) associated the low success rate with diminished quality of life students who do not complete high school, including lower standards of living and possible criminal activity (Calderon & Zamora, 2012). In summary, children with poor

English skills are less likely to succeed in school and beyond (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016). To reverse this trend, research regarding the in-service training of ELL teachers and strategies for implementing proper instructional practices of all content areas for ELL students is warranted.

The following research questions addressed the basic qualitative study:

RQ1: How do the elementary teachers of ELL students implement instructional practices and resources used to teach ELL students within their ZPD?

RQ2: What are elementary teachers' perspectives of the information they receive at the professional development training provided to teach ELL students within their ZPD?

2.1.1 Participant Selection

The criteria for this study were that the participants must be elementary teachers of ELL students; a participant could either be a mainstream classroom teacher with ELL students in it or a teacher of only ELL students in the classroom. In addition, the participating teachers must have either had their ELL certification or be currently working to obtain ELL certification. Participants of this study must have attended at least one ELL professional development. The number of years the teachers had been teaching was not an exclusionary factor in this study. It was necessary to have an array of teachers with varying years of experience because this explored the amount of professional development and number of professional development attended had any bearing on their implementation of instruction for ELL students.

2.1.2 Data Collection

Data were gathered through semistructured interviews of participants. Fifteen teachers were asked to participate in one-on-one interviews. The collection of data from interviews allowed me to find common themes. The data were obtained from semistructured interviews of the teachers of ELL students. Semistructured interviews allow a researcher to begin questioning the participant by using planned interview questions; however, they also give the researcher the flexibility to explore themes that may arise during the interview. Interviews allowed for gathering of detailed information about a phenomenon that may not be observable (Creswell, 2012). The interviews were conducted via Zoom, one-on-one, and used semistructured open-ended questions. One-on-one and open-ended questions allowed the participants to best voice their experiences and opinions, unconstrained by any perspectives (Creswell, 2012). The interviews were conducted in a quiet place away from any interruptions.

3. Results

Data was collected, transcribed, and analyzed from eight semistructured interviews via Zoom. Forty teachers at two different schools that were approved by both the principals and the District of SMPS, were emailed and invited to participate in the study; however only eight teachers agreed to participate. All eight of the volunteer participants met the criteria for participation and were able to schedule and complete the interview at a time of their convenience. The teachers ranged from first grade to fifth grade, with seven out of the eight of them teaching well over a decade. The eighth teacher was

currently teaching in her sixth year. Teachers are identified in the study by the first letter of their last name. Table 1 includes research participant demographics.

Table 1. Research Participant Demographics

Participant	Course	Grade level	No. of years as a teacher
Teacher P	All subjects	4	6
Teacher G	Reading and language arts	5	17
Teacher L	Reading and language arts	5	15
Teacher W	All subjects	5	22
Teacher H	Math and science	5	14
Teacher V	All subjects	1	18
Teacher M	All subjects	2	28
Teacher J	All subjects	3	15

The data analyzed and reported came from interviews of volunteer participants. The data was present to help determine the perspectives of the elementary teachers of ELL students on Professional Development trainings they receive to teach ELLs within their ZPD. This study also collected data on how teachers implement instructional practices to the ELLs within their ZPD. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. Six themes were identified using a priori coding: (a) accommodations, strategies, and resources; (b) differentiated instruction; (c) technology; (d) professional development; (e) student data and evaluation; and (f) vocabulary. Three additional themes emerged inductively: (a) translation, (b) educational websites, and (c) intervention. Table 2 includes a complete list of deductive themes and subthemes.

Table 2. Deductive Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
accommodations, and resources	strategies, bilingual dictionaries and visuals, unaware of location
differentiated instruction	small groups, modifications
technology	Imagine Learning
professional development	not enough ELL PDs, Wonders Reading
student data and evaluation	PDs didn't cover this topic, small groups CELLA, i-Ready, classwork, WIDA, small group, Imagine Learning
vocabulary	modified, translated

Note. ELL = English Language Learner; PD = professional development; CELLA = Comprehension English Language Learning Assessment.

Theme 1: Professional Development

Professional Development for the teachers of ELL students were the biggest takeaway from all of my interviews. A common concern found among all the participants was that there are not enough PDs for teachers of ELL students. To participate in this study, the criteria was that the volunteer had to have attended at least one ELL professional development in the past year. During the interviews, 100% participants mentioned that they had not been to a professional development specifically focused on ELL students within the past year. Only one out of the eight of the participants had ever been to an ELL-specific focused professional development. Seven out of the eight participants attended a professional development this year for a new reading program called Wonders Reading Program. The Wonders Reading Program was a 2-day professional development and had an ELL component on the second day that lasted for 1 hour. Seven participants each stated this was the ELL professional development they had attended this past year. The eighth participant just completed her ELL endorsement this year and took her courses to be the equivalent of a professional development for the ELL professional development criteria to participate in the study.

Participant Concerns. Many of the participants commented that the PDs do not train them in ELL lesson planning, or assessments; they mainly focus on a few accommodations for the curriculum that was the component of that professional development. One participant explained her concerns stating that the last time she was truly trained in ELL was 14 years ago in college. As diverse as this county is, she is surprised there is not more assistance with the ELLs. There are no recertification requirements for ELLs. If she had not been teaching ESE students for so many years, she would not have felt prepared with the ELL students. Another participant added that if the district offers a professional development that covers ELLs, it should include hands-on examples for teachers to do with their students, and they should be longer than an hour because there is so much to cover. Most of the participants commented that there are not enough PDs for ELL students. Another participant stated that they are not trained enough to teach ELL students properly. One participant, who has only been teaching 6 years, took things from a different angle than many of the other teachers regarding ELL PDs. This participant also commented that teachers definitely need more training when it comes to ELL students, especially in this district where students come from different parts of the world. However, it is hard to choose an ELL professional development when a new reading program comes out, or a new area that you will be teaching because teachers want to prepare themselves for that other core subject over an ELL professional development. Topics that most of the participants found the PDs they attended did not sufficiently cover were: how to better assist and instruct ELL level 1 students, how to accommodate ELL level 1 students, where to locate the resources, and how to accommodate and instruct ELLs in other core subjects such as math, science, and social studies.

Theme 2: Differentiated Instruction

When asking the participants how they differentiate instruction for ELLs within their ZPD, the answers varied around four common answers: visuals, small groups, modified work, and translation. Modifying the work for ELLs was the answer of five out of the eight participants, visuals and a small group were both mentioned by three out of the eight participants and translating the materials, verbally since they spoke the same native language, or by using textbooks that are translated such as a Spanish math book, was mentioned by two out of the eight participants. One participant stated that she will be able to differentiate with her ELL students more during small group because she will be able to “act things out” and “use more visuals”. Two of the teachers mentioned using small groups to teach vocabulary to the ELLs by providing them a more basic definition, rather than one that is very detailed with words. Another participant mentioned breaking things down using the technique of chunking, as well as many visuals and matching assignments instead of providing full answers; adding that this depends on the students’ ELL level.

Participant Concerns. A concern among the participants regarding differentiated instruction was how to instruct ELL students of different levels in the same classroom. One participant mentioned that she is unaware of how to do small groups with ELL level 1 students because she feels that they cannot work independently enough if she were to take the higher ELLs into a small group. According to 100% of the participants, this is not a topic that teachers are trained in or an area that is even discussed at the PDs.

Theme 3: Technology

When participants were asked about using technology in the classroom for ELLs the responses varied greatly. Seven of the eight participants have technology available to them, however, one participant stated that they have not implemented technology yet in the classroom and another participant said they use technology but have not yet this year due to a lack of access to laptops in the school. i-Ready and Imagine Learning were mentioned as technology programs used, but availability and usage varied. The i-Ready program is used throughout the district for reading and math with minimum time limits placed on students. ELL students level 2 and higher are encouraged to use this program to help improve their reading. The Imagine Learning program is an ELL- focused computer program that helps ELL students with reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English. This program can be used at all ELL levels; however, the district has only bought licenses for the ELL level 1 students in the schools. This program is highly advised for the ELL level 1s to use throughout the year, instead of the i-Ready reading program.

Participant Concerns. One of the biggest concerns regarding technology is that aside from the Imagine Learning program, there is no other computer-based program for ELL students. Since the district is only covering the licenses for the ELL level 1 students, teachers are feeling that the ELLs of other levels are not receiving the proper accommodations. Imagine Learning also, only focuses on reading, leaving out other important core subjects such as math, science, and social studies.

Another concern was the lack of access to computers, either in their classroom or lab time. Finally, the

participants were not all aware of the Imagine Learning program, or whether or not the program was even being utilized this school year. Only three out of the eight participants used Imagine Learning in their classroom, two other participants don't use the program at all, and one participant did not know whether or not it is still being used in the district. One of the participants wanted professional development for ELL technology programs and another participant mentioned wanting to know where to find programs for ELL students to use in the classroom and at home.

Theme 4: Accommodations, Strategies, and Resources

All the participants (100%) mentioned visuals and extended time regarding accommodations for the ELL students. Only five of the participants mentioned the use of bilingual dictionaries, and five participants mentioned modifying the student work to help accommodate the students' needs. One teacher admitted to not using ELL strategies to teach her students. The common strategies mentioned throughout multiple interview questions, were visuals, modifications, and extended time. While these techniques are help implement instruction for ELLs, and for ELLs to comprehend what they are learning. There are many more ELL strategies than using visuals and modifying the student work.

Participant Concerns. One participant acknowledged that she did not use ELL strategies daily; however, the participant thought that the visuals that were used in the classroom among all students, were accommodating the ELL students. When asked "What strategies did you learn from the PD?", six out of the eight participants commented that they did not learn strategies from a professional development. One participant mentioned learning the ELL strategies from her Masters in Reading, another participant commented using strategies that she had always used with her Exceptional Student Education (ESE) students.

Theme 5: Student Data and Evaluation

When asking the participants "How do you evaluate ELL students to ensure they are learning within their ZPD", many of the participants responded with: modified assessments, and/or small group or one-on-one assessments. A common theme for this answer was for the teachers to assess the ELL students orally, either having the students read out loud for fluency or comprehension. The participants mentioned assessing the ELL students using fewer questions, bilingual dictionaries, and extra time. The participants were then asked what sources they used to collect the data. All eight of the participants responded by stating that they use student data, however, they all use different sources to drive ELL instruction. Three of the eight participants use i-Ready data while only one mentioned that they use the scores from the Florida State Assessment (FSA). Two participants use an ELL test (WIDA and CELLA) for student data, while another participant uses the students' ELL level to modify instruction. Additionally, the teachers were using regular in-class assignments to evaluate the students. Imagine Learning was not mentioned as one of the data sources among seven out of the eight participants, even though the program monitors all of their work and progress in the areas of Literacy, Vocabulary, and Grammar, and it records the students reading orally. One participant mentioned wanting to learn how to use Imagine Learning data to drive instruction.

Participant Concerns. The participants' biggest concern in this area was that they were not being trained on how to assess and/ or evaluate the ELL students. They were not informed on what tools, resources, and/or strategies they can use to collect this data. One participant even mentioned that the lack of information at the PDs doesn't just affect the teachers, but it affects the students even more. If they don't have trainings for ELLs, the ELLs will not show the gains that they are capable of because they are not being taught effectively. This participant concluded by stating that there is not enough training and teachers do not have the background or training to know how to effectively teach them.

Theme 6: Vocabulary

Participant responses to the question, "How do you teach vocabulary to ELL students" elicited multiple strategies. One of the vocabulary strategies used is drawing pictures and using visuals. This was mentioned by five of the eight participants, while all the participants discussed shortening or modifying the assignment for ELL students. Another strategy mentioned by participants was acting out the word or modeling it for the students. Finally, a strategy mentioned was to translate the vocabulary words to the students' native language and possibly add student background and knowledge of the vocabulary word, to help them comprehend its meaning.

Participant Concerns. A common concern regarding translating for the ELL students was the fact that most materials translate into Spanish, but no other languages such as Russian or Mandarin. Most translating can be done with Google Translate, bilingual dictionaries (if the school or student has their native language dictionary), and the teacher orally translating, but this can only happen if the teacher speaks the same language as the student. Visuals help the students to identify the meaning of a word, however, even visuals can lead to a misunderstanding of the meaning.

4. Discussion

This research study was focused on discovering the ELL teachers' perspectives of professional development and their implementation of instructional practices. From the research findings, a PLC was created to address the teachers' knowledge of resources, strategies, and accommodations for implementing instructional practices for ELL students within their ZPD. The PLC provides participants with the time to collaborate and develop more effective ELL instructional practices. If effective, this PLC will lead to an increase in ELL student academic achievement. In addition, this PLC program may be valuable to other schools in the district in assisting ELL teachers.

4.1.1 Limitations

The research also has limitations. One of the limitations of this project is a lack of time. One of the greatest benefits of a PLC is that is ongoing and requires follow-up activities and reflection while collaborating, unlike professional development which focuses less on collaboration and more on direct instruction from a presenter. However, due to the format of a PLC, sessions have a shorter time frame than a professional development. It is difficult to include reflection and collaboration of previously implemented topics (follow-ups), as well as introduction and collaboration of new topics, within the

4-hour time of a PLC session.

Another limitation is teacher attendance. The PLC will be scheduled for Wednesdays after school. Wednesdays are early release days, where the students leave at 2:00 p.m.; however, the teachers must remain until 3:25 p.m. There are often many conflicts on these Wednesdays such as grade-level meetings, conferences, and after-school commitments. It is the only time that the whole school has the same planning time, and it is often a competition to use this time slot. Although teachers who are committed to wanting to better their ELL teaching knowledge may find a way to attend most of the PLCs, it is not guaranteed they will be able to make every one of the meetings, especially because they are not five consecutive Wednesdays.

4.1.2 Implications for Future Research

An alternative way to address the problem at the school of study could include implementing a long-term professional development program that continues throughout the entire school year on scheduled professional development training days instead of a PLC. When scheduling trainings to take place on professional development days, it allows the duration of each session to be longer and could allow more information to be disseminated per session as they are usually longer than a PLC session. This will also allow the participants an opportunity to fully share best practices and reflections on what they are implementing in the classroom, based on what they had learned during the previous professional development sessions. Finally, professional development would allow for the opportunity to involve other schools as professional training days align district-wide. Expanding to other schools will allow for the sharing of best practices, and the use of resources, strategies, and accommodations. Consequently, this will increase ELL teacher knowledge and overall student proficiency in academic achievement.

4.1.3 Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of elementary teachers of ELL students regarding the professional development trainings they received to teach ELL students within their ZPD. Also explored were how the teachers of ELLs implement instructional practices in their classrooms to teach ELLs within their ZPD. Based on current literature (Rodriguez, 2014) and the findings from this study, it is evident that there is a need for professional development to address the concerns of the teachers of ELLs regarding their perspectives of feeling unprepared to teach the ELL students. The findings showed that the participants felt unprepared with strategies, accommodations, and resources for the ELL students. They were also concerned that topics were not sufficiently covered at the PDs as they focused more on core subjects. Some of the participants felt uninformed about the professional development provided. Participants expressed surprise that in a country as diverse as the U.S., there is not more ELL support, PDs, or resources. The concern the participants expressed was that there are not enough PDs for the teachers of ELLs, and it is causing a disservice to ELL students because the teachers do not have the background or training to know how to effectively teach them.

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