# Training Educators to Understand the Needs of English Learners (ELs) in the PreK-12 Classroom

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Research shows that one in five students enrolled in U.S. public schools speaks a language other than English at home; the ratio is expected to be two in every five students by 2030.[1] Seven out of ten school age children who are immigrants, or have immigrant parents, speak another language other than English at home.[2] Thus, training is imperative for all educators across the nation to be better prepared to reach students whose first language is not English, or students more commonly known as English learners (ELs). A wealth of resources, training materials, strategies, and applicable ways to reach all students from diverse cultural backgrounds and at varying English proficiency levels are available on the ESOL in Higher Ed website at **www.esolinhighered.org** – every educator should bookmark this site as an essential professional resource.

Students enrolled in U.S. public schools speaking a language other than English at home

2010   2030
              (projected)
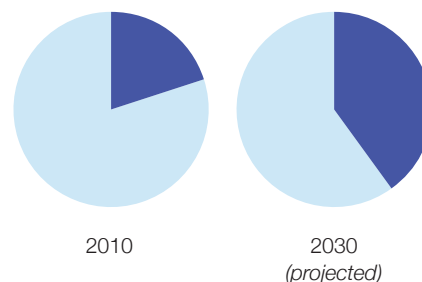
It is evident that ELs present numerous challenges in the PreK-12 classroom; therefore, all educators must be able to demonstrate the requisite competence and skills to serve all students from diverse cultural backgrounds. After all, a teacher's knowledge, experience, values, and culture play a vital role in the dynamics of every classroom. Every educator must also truly understand that "no two ELs have the same amount of grounding in their native language or are at the same stage of English language acquisition"[3]. Studies have shown that first language literacy has a positive effect on second language literacy; thus, understanding of how to plan lessons that build on ELs' literacy skills is not only essential, it is compulsory.

There are a variety of terms to characterize students whose primary language is not English, but who are learning it:

ELL	**E**nglish **L**anguage **L**earners
SAE	**S**tudents **A**cquiring **E**nglish
SLL	**S**econd-**L**anguage **L**earner
ESL	**E**nglish as a **S**econd **L**anguage
ENL	**E**nglish as a **N**ew **L**anguage
ELD	**E**nglish **L**anguage **D**evelopment
CLD	**C**ulturally and **L**inguistically **D**iverse
SLIFE	**S**tudents with **L**imited or **I**nterrupted **F**ormal **E**ducation
LEP	**L**imited **E**nglish **P**roficiency
NEP	**N**on-**E**nglish **P**roficient
PEP	**P**otentially **E**nglish **P**roficient

1 Shah, N. (2014). Educating immigrant students a challenge in U.S., elsewhere. *Education Week*. Jan. 2012.

2 Krogstad, J.M. (2014). Dept. of Ed. projects public schools will be 'majority-minority' this fall. *Pew Research Center.* Aug 2014.

3 Hill, J. (2006) *Classroom Instruction that Works with English Language Learners*. Virginia: ASCD.

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The bottom line is that the population of students whose primary language is not English in PreK-12 public schools continues to grow across the nation; yet, English to Speakers of Other languages (ESOL) training is not required for educators in every state.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) stipulates that all students, including ELs, access the core curriculum and meet specific measurable goals. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) serve as the benchmark for many states on what students need to know and be able to do at each grade level. However, best practices in ESOL to enhance teaching and learning for all students from diverse cultural backgrounds and at varying English proficiency levels is lacking in teacher preparation programs and licensure programs across the U.S. ESOL training is requisite in fostering ways to foster cultural awareness, literacy instruction, and language learning. The profession must seek ways to promote teachers' cultural and linguistic awareness in developing active and engaging lessons, appropriate assessments, and classroom activities for students at varying English proficiency levels in order to foster more meaningful teaching and learning in all content/academic areas.

Percentage of public school students who are English language learners (ELL) by state[4]

- Less than 3.0 percent
- 3.0 to 5.9 percent
- 6.0 to 9.9 percent
- 10.0 percent or more
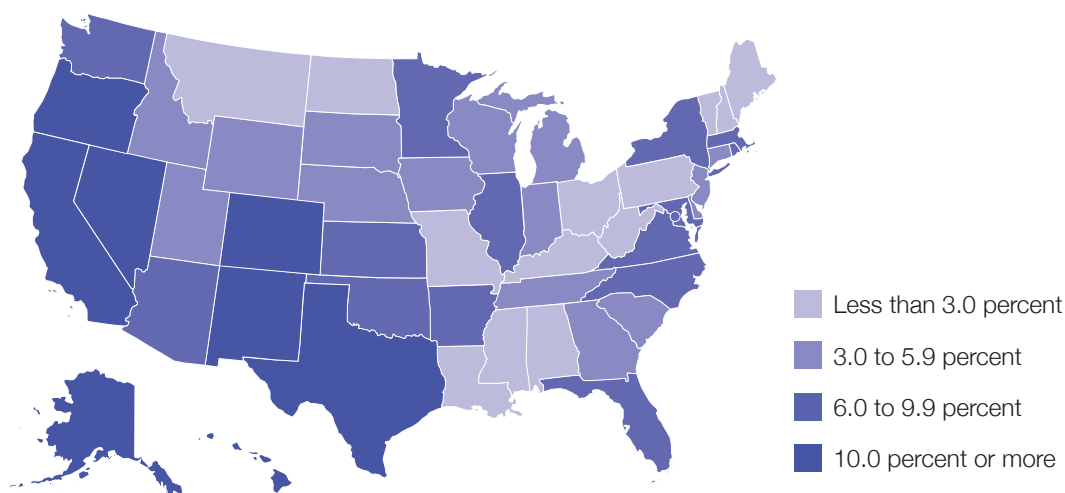
In looking at the educational system across the U.S., it is clear that all students merit teachers who understand their cultural and language perspectives. The Pew Research Center reported school districts across the nation to have had to 'boost English language instruction'.[5] Díaz-Rico described the need for all teachers to be intercultural and interlinguistic educators.[6] Nutta et al. claimed that if students' languages and cultures closely align with the language and culture of the school, the gap between students' abilities and the performance expectations will be small.[7]

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4 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2011-12. See Digest of education Statistics 2013, table 204.20.

5 Krogstad, J.M. & Fry, R. (2014). Dept. of Ed. projects public schools will be 'majority-minority' this fall. *Pew Research Center*. Aug 2014.

6 Díaz-Rico, L.T. (2014). *The crosscultural, language, and academic development handbook: A complete K-12 reference guide.* (5th Ed.) Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

7 Nutta (2014). *Educating English learners: What every classroom teacher needs to know.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 22.

Robert Muller, former Assistant Secretary of the United Nations, offered the following thoughts in the mid-1980s. His comments are still applicable in today's classrooms.

> A child born today will be faced as an adult, almost daily, with problems of a global interdependent nature, be it peace, food, the quality of life, inflation, or scarcity of resources. He will be both an actor and a beneficiary or a victim in the total world fabric, and he may rightly ask "Why was I not warned? Why was I not better educated? Why did my teachers not tell me about these problems and indicate my behavior as a member of an interdependent human race?" It is therefore, the duty and self-enlightened interest of governments to educate their children properly about the type of world in which they are going to live.

With this in mind, educators must recognize cultural differences and foster teachable moments in both social and academic situations. If teaching does not occur unless there is learning, then there must be a relationship between culture and teaching. Perkins shared that building on students' prior knowledge, which is built on cultural backgrounds and experiences, is the foundation for effective and efficient learning and teaching.[8] He continued to note that educators often consider interactions with and instruction of ELs challenging; yet, these interactions and teachings offer opportunities to learn and grow. Sometimes educators forget that they are first and foremost human beings; meaning that everyone has biases and prejudices. This is part of human nature, and as such, is not a negative occurrence. Negativity arises when educators are not aware of their biases and prejudices that adversely impact their interactions in the classroom. Perkins[8] also shared that multicultural education is composed of learning and teaching in which the primary goal is to promote the development of all students in reaching their potential and realizing that success and brilliance are present among all cultural groups. The ESOL in Higher Ed website at **www.esolinhighered.org** provides resources, research links, activities, and training materials to promote multicultural learning environments. For example, under the link 'Culture/Cultural Proficiency', scroll down to 'More Resources' and you will find slide show presentations on embracing diversity and ways to become a more culturally proficient educator. In addition, there is a culture template and rubric, along with a variety of video clips and links related to promoting a culturally diverse classroom.

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Educators must learn to be sensitive and aware of their own attitudes to communicate effectively with students, parents, and colleagues.[9] Building respectful, positive, and equitable learning environments is essential. Every teacher has a responsibility to and for all students' learning and this includes a mutual appreciation of and respect for diverse cultural groups. The process of becoming increasingly multicultural involves appreciating and developing multiple methods of believing, doing, evaluating, and perceiving; thus, a process of self-reflection, self-questioning, and self-study is required.[8] Professional development in ESOL focuses on these processes to embrace the diverse cultural perspectives that affect teaching and learning.

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8 Perkins, S. (2014). *Transforming challenges into opportunities: Becoming culturally proficient educators.* (25-38).

9 Grognet, A. (2014). Embracing cultural diversity: Implications for the classroom. (39-50).

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In addition, if culture is transmitted through language, then cultural patterns are reflected in language.[9] Thus, it is important for teachers to design and implement practical lessons to enhance language and literacy skills across all content areas. ELs must be exposed to unknown language forms and structures in order to comprehend; be engaged in meaningful communication; use new forms and structures with their peers; and express themselves understandably in English[7]. It is essential that every educator understand the theoretical underpinnings of second language acquisition processes and demonstrate both linguistic and cultural competence in the mainstream classroom. At the postsecondary level, little is known about ELs as a whole and even less is known about the pedagogical strategies to reach ELs in STEM education.[10]

Teachers face a major challenge in being able to structure classroom activities which reduce language barriers so that all students may participate, while at the same time maintain the rigor of the academic content area.[11] Academic data show that ELs lag behind their peers in academic achievement[12] and that ELs require teachers who understand their needs in learning the English language and who provide the support needed to maintain and develop their heritage languages.[13]

> Teacher language—what we say to students and how we say it—is one of our most powerful teaching tools. We cannot teach a lesson, welcome a student into the room, or handle a classroom conflict without using words.
>
> Our language can lift students to their highest potential or tear them down. It can help them build positive relationships or encourage discord and distrust. It shapes how students think and act and, ultimately, how they learn.[14]

"Literacy is needed to foster connections between school and home cultures"

So, why aren't all teacher education programs and school districts across the nation providing training in ESOL strategies and assessment protocol in order to promote an effective and positive learning experience for all students? The answer is not simple. However, it is clear that all educators must be knowledgeable of ways to create links between communities and schools, language and literate activities, literacy and content learning, and literacy and aesthetic engagement. Literacy is needed to foster connections between school and home cultures. Literacy is fundamental to personal achievement

10 Mein, E. and Esquinca, A. (2014). Bilingualism as a resource in learning engineering on the U.S. –Mexico border. Action in Teacher Education: The Journal of the Association of Teacher Educators. 36 (3) 247-260.

11 Minchew Deaton, C.C., Deaton, B., and Koballa, T. (2014). Teachers' awareness of their diverse classrooms. The nature of elementary teachers' reflections on their science teaching practice. *Action in Teacher Education: The Journal of the Association of Teacher Educators.* 36 (3) 211-233.

12 "Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education." *Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*. N.p., 15 Sept. 2014. Web. 09 Dec. 2014.

13 Uribe-Flórez, Araujo, B., Franzak, M. and Haynes Writer, J. (2014). Mathematics, power, and language: Implications from lived experiences to empower English learners. Action in Teacher Education: The Journal of the Association of Teacher Educators. 36 (3)234-246.

14 Denton, P. (2008). The power of our words. *Educational Leadership*, 66, (1), 28-31. Retrieved from: http://www.ascd.org/publications/education-al-leadership/sept08/vol66/num01/The-Power-of-Our-Words.aspx .

and this translates into economic success within the U.S. and across the nation.[15] Evans noted that children typically have a vocabulary of approximately 5,000 words by the time they are five years old. They have been making sense of their world from the day they were born by learning how to label the items in their environment, learning a functional language to negotiate relationships, and gaining exposure to literacy through structured and unstructured means. By age five, they have had a great deal of exposure to different types of language and literacies. School signals the beginning of formal academic literacy. If students are exposed to print, understand story structure, know how to use pictures to scaffold comprehension, have a well-developed vocabulary, realize that print carries meaning, and recognize that literacy can be used for many different purposes, they are farther along toward academic literacy and achievement.

Therefore, teacher training on ways to reach students whose first language is not English will ultimately lead to improved home/school connections and increased literacy skills. Literacy skills only have to be learned once; they will then be applied to other languages learned in academic settings.[16] On the ESOL in Higher Ed website, there are several resources under the link titled 'language and literacy (Applied Linguistics)' in which pre-service teachers and teachers in the PreK-12 classroom may access to learn more about characteristics of language, second language acquisition theories, a variety of literacy strategies, video clips on treating errors in the classroom and on supporting reading and language comprehension, as well as links to research on ways to understand language as a system.

In looking at the few states who offer teacher preparation in ESOL, Florida leads the way in ESOL training for PreK-12 teachers. All elementary, exceptional student, prekindergarten/primary, middle grades English (5-9), and English (6-12) teachers must have fifteen semester hours, or the equivalent, to cover the five ESOL areas specified in the Consent Decree and State Board Rule 6A-4.0244. Teachers who are not primary language providers must also meet specific requirements to comply with the Consent Decree in order to meet the needs of ELs. Any teacher of a basic subject area, (e.g., math, science, social studies, computer literacy), assigned to instruct ELs must complete three semester college/university credit hours. In addition, Florida school administrators, school psychologists, and

15 Evans, L. (2014). Applying literacy strategies for ELs in the classroom. Introduction. 117-120. In Govoni, J. (Ed.) *Preparing the Way: Teaching ELs in the PreK-12 classroom.*(2nd ed.). Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishers.

16 Krashen, S. (1996). Under attack: The case against bilingual education. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates. In Govoni, J. (Ed.) *Preparing the Way: Teaching ELs in the PreK-12 classroom.* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishers.

guidance counselors must obtain sixty points of district in-service training or three semester college/university credit hours in ESOL-approved course work (FLDOE). California, Arizona, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania also provide ESOL training for teachers. Pennsylvania initiated efforts in teacher preparation programs a few years ago to align to its English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS). California has offered the Cross-cultural, Language, and Academic Development (CLAD) certificate for teachers of English learners for many years. Texas requires specific training for ESL teachers and offers some university preparation in ESOL. Massachusetts is one of the more recent states to mandate ESOL training for core-content teachers by 2016. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reported ELs to be the fastest growing group of students in the state. Teacher training will include an understanding of the social and cultural issues that contribute to and impact the schooling of ELs; how children and adolescents acquire English as a second language; and practical research-based protocols, methods, and strategies to integrate subject area content, language, and literacy development - per the expectations of the Massachusetts English language Development World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) standards. Thus, support of ELs' success is based on the 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for English language Arts and literacy and Mathematics and other Massachusetts content standards.[17] Minnesota recently passed a requirement for ESOL training that will be ongoing this coming academic year. In general, many states encourage professional collaboration between the ESL specialists and mainstream teachers across grade levels.

   Schools reflect or mirror society; yet, even with a diverse student population, English is the primary language of instruction in classrooms across the nation.[18] So, how do teachers effectively teach **ALL** students in the same classroom? How do they prepare for diverse learning styles? How do they adapt to the varied English proficiency levels? How do teachers make a difference for all students from diverse cultures and varied English proficiency levels? The bottom line is that professional development or coursework in teacher preparation programs must occur in order to be responsive to the needs of all students. "At the heart of teacher effectiveness is the teacher's ability to understand the individual profiles – the strengths and weaknesses –of every student in the classroom."[19] A teacher's

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17 "Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education." *Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*. N.p., 15 Sept. 2014. Web. 09 Dec. 2014.

18 Parkay, F.W. & Stanford, B.H. (2010). Becoming a teacher. 8th ed. NJ: Merrill-Pearson Education. In Govoni, J. (Ed.) *Preparing the Way: Teaching ELs in the PreK-12 classroom.* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishers.

19 Crawford-Brooke, E. (2013). Empowering teacher effectiveness: Five key factors for success. Lexia Learning.

ability to apply appropriate instructional strategies determines the effectiveness of the lesson and that a teacher's level of pedagogical expertise and mastery in using instructional materials are essential to quality instruction. Therefore, collaborative efforts by teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders are needed to empower teachers to be highly effective in teaching and assessing English learners.

Fillmore and Snow identified five factors to support teachers in becoming more aware of students' needs.[20] They consist of being:

a communicator

an educator

an evaluator

an educated human being

an agent of socialization.

These elements, along with current research and data, point toward the need to prepare the way for all teachers in planning, teaching, evaluating, assessing, and interacting with students, parents and others at all grade levels. Mainstream teachers play a crucial role in ELs' language development by effectively communicating the academic content.[21] Appropriate ways to foster English proficiency at varied levels are requisite to everyone's success. In essence, there is a strong need for educators to be more knowledgeable, skilled, and competent in meeting the needs of ELs; yet, without proper support and resources, teachers cannot effectively meet these needs.[22]

The tools available on the ESOL in Higher Ed website are invaluable for all educators across all grade levels and academic content areas. Be sure to check out **www.esolinhighered.org** and be prepared to reach all students from diverse backgrounds and at varying English proficiency levels. Poole, Summers and Ban provide resources to foster ways for all classrooms to promote student-centered learning; create supportive environments; and offer ways for continuous evaluation of educational practices with diverse materials, media, and technologies.[23, 24] Their slide show presentations provide a comprehensible overview of ways to maximize learning and expand teacher knowledge in using technology with ELs. In addition, there are video clips on ways to determine if learning is inhibited by a learning disability or a language barrier. Links are available on ESOL methods, curriculum, and lesson planning for all

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20 Fillmore, Lily Wong, and Catherine E. Snow. "What Teachers Need to Know About Language." ERIC. Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC., n.d. Web. 16 Dec. 2014.

21 Nutta (2014). *Educating English learners: What every classroom teacher needs to know.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 22.

22 Kelly-Jackson, C. and Delacruz, S. (2014). Using visual literacy to teach science academic language: Experiences from three pre-service teachers. *Action in Teacher Education: The Journal of the Association of Teacher Educators.* 36 (3) 192-210.

23 Ban, R. & Summers, R. (2014). Expanding teacher knowledge: Using technology with English learners. (169-176).

24 Poole, G. (2014). Maximizing learning in an ESOL-infused classroom: Instructional dynamics and management. (151-168).

teachers across subject areas in the PreK-12 mainstream classroom. Poole provides an overview of the differences between a traditional classroom and today's classroom in promoting student diversity. In addition, she provides slide show presentations on ways to create lessons with modified content and language objectives for all students. The key principles for developing a philosophy of teaching are presented, along with a reflection on national and state standards in planning effective lessons.

It is a significant task for content area teachers to meet the needs of all students from diverse cultural backgrounds and at varying English proficiency levels. So, the most prevalent question to ask is, is it feasible? I firmly believe it is. First, educators must realize the need to be more informed of ways to help students from diverse backgrounds and at

"All educators are ultimately responsible for preparing all students to be productive citizens in the global workforce."

varying English proficiency levels to reach their potential. In other words, every educator must be able to demonstrate competence in cultural diversity, linguistic awareness, ESOL strategies, and assessment practices. Next, it is essential to remember that all educators are ultimately responsible for preparing all students to be productive citizens in the global workforce. The CCSS identify and convey the knowledge and skills for students to be successful in society. These standards, along with the TESOL/NCATE Standards, WIDA Standards, and individual state standards should guide all educators in supporting ELs' acquisition of English and making learning more meaningful. Standards act like anchors which direct and support planning and development of effective lessons to empower all students. Perkins wrote 'imagine the societal impact of self-actualized students developing into self-actualized citizens. These self-actualized students will be empowered with social awareness, creativity, critical thinking, decision making, and problem-solving skills. All students could be armed with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be change agents and effective leaders in an increasingly diverse and interdependent world'.[8]

The American cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1901-1978), stated 'never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.' Educators have the ability to transform and shape young minds, attitudes, and educational practices. The National Education Association (NEA) Report (2014) affirmed that teachers are beneficial to school reform as 'teachers are assigned and considered agents of change they are advantaged by contextual expertise... and serve as conduits of change… (6). Envision all teachers across the nation trained on ways to modify lessons and assessments to support students from diverse cultural backgrounds and at varying English proficiency levels. The end result would certainly change the landscape of today's classroom. Teachers would have a stronger knowledge base and the requisite skills to be able to implement lessons, strategies, and assessments to support the social and academic development of all students. There are multiple resources to understand ways to foster teaching and learning in today's classroom to serve as a foundation for all educators to acquire the skills and training in promoting cultural and linguistic competence. The need to reach all students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is clearly a national challenge.

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ESOL in Higher Ed is a resource to assist educators and ELs. It provides curriculum materials, evaluations, activities, and consulting services for educators, administrators, and teacher preparation programs. ESOL in Higher Ed also provides a centralized location of current educational policies, practices, and news within the EL community.

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