Supporting Teachers to Better Serve English Learners: Addressing Systemic Challenges and Enhancing Instructional Practices in Los Angeles County

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Preface

This work was conducted by researchers at the Center to Support Excellence in Teaching (CSET) at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education. Dr. Laura Hill-Bonnet, Ph.D., serves as Associate Director, and Dr. Preetha Menon, Ph.D., serves as Senior Research Associate at CSET. This work was made possible through the generous support of the Greater LA Education Foundation (GLAEF) and the LA County Office of Education (LACOE). All three organizations share a deep commitment to the equitable education of students classified as English learners and aim to provide teachers with the necessary support to achieve this goal. The intention of this work is to illuminate the institutional structures that support sustainable collaboration and professional growth for teachers and administrators in LA County, ultimately promoting the highest level of academic achievement for their EL students

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Introduction

More than 3 million strong (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), teachers are collectively our nation's largest group of public intellectuals (Heck, 2022). The vast majority are a highly trained group and deftly skilled at doing what we consider the work of teaching: planning lessons and instructing their students in the subject they teach; assessing students' abilities, strengths, and weaknesses; and adapting lessons (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). And yet, we rarely treat them as such, adding tasks and responsibilities to their daily load that often act as impediments and obstacles to doing their job (Akiba, Byun, Jiang, Kim & Moran, 2023; Ingersoll & Collins, 2018; Santoro, 2021). According to a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center on job satisfaction among teachers, "Some 84% [of teachers] say they don't have enough time during their regular work hours to do tasks like grading, lesson planning, paperwork, and answering emails"(Lin, Parker & Horowitz, 2024). This is of particular concern for teachers in California where 1,112,535 English learners (ELs) constitute 19.01% of the total enrollment in public schools (California Department of Education [CDE], 2022) and adequate educational opportunities for ELs fall short (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb & Wishner 1994; Leider, Colombo & Nerlino, 2021; Rumberger & Gándara, 2004; Skrtic, 1991), not only in mainstream classrooms (Harper & De Jong, 2004; Lucas, Strom, Bratkovich & Wnuk, 2018; Villegas, SaizdeLaMora, Martin & Mills, 2018) but also in designated English language development (ELD) programs when they are inconsistently implemented (Villegas & Pompa, 2020).

Los Angeles (LA) County is an ideal site to further study this phenomenon—as the enrollment of EL students closely mimics that of statewide statistics (17.6% classified as ELs) and the teaching workforce is an experienced and knowledgeable group (with an average of 14 years of experience and credentialing levels comparable to state averages). Still, many teachers told

us that their experiences largely mirror the findings in the PEW study. They report having the training they need to teach EL students but often feel unsupported, overwhlemed, and left on their own to do so. According to one teacher,

The designation of teaching ELD students just kind of showed up on my schedule, and I was kind of like, alright, let's run with it, you know… and then, obviously, as the teacher, you do kind of like your internal reflection of like, "Okay, what am I gonna [sic] modify, like, am I gonna [sic] do vocab support? Am I gonna [sic] provide language to, you know, sentence frame [or] whatever". … But what I realized is no amount of anticipation actually prepares you till the kids are actually physically there. (High school math teacher)

And county staff are sympathetic to teachers' perspectives and need for support in implementing effective strategies saying, "One of the pieces of feedback that we've heard [is] a need for a collaborative, or a need for conversations, so that people … are gathered…for support, for ideas, for strategies" (Los Angeles County Office of Education Staff member Source).
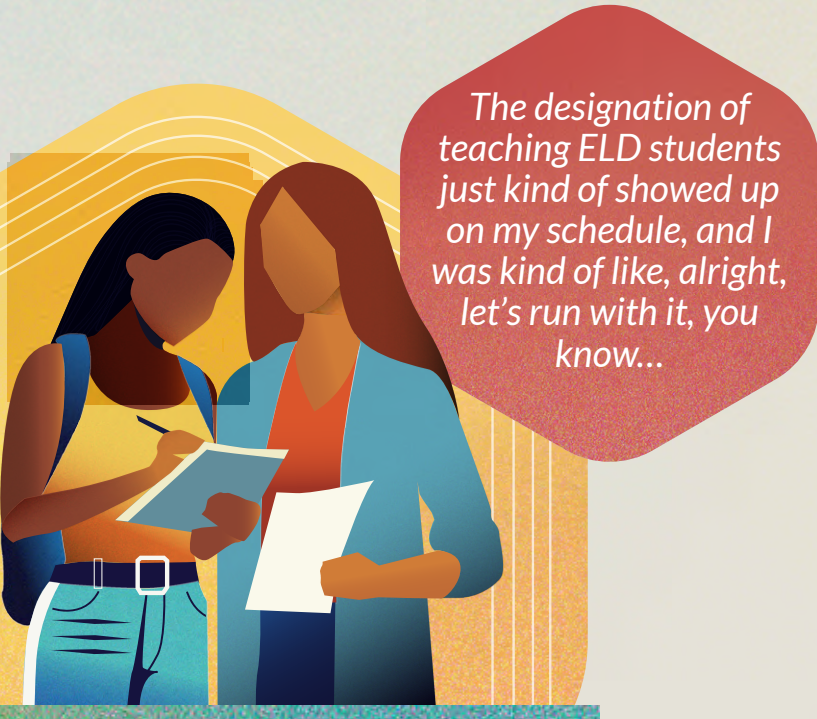
Indeed, when teachers do not have those levels of support or time to collaborate, the strategies they are using are not meeting the needs of students. When we asked students about their experiences in classrooms, they reported feeling disengaged. According to one high school student, this was some of their experience:

Student: "First, I didn't like the way the teacher teach [sic] the class. No, so I was like, because I didn't like the way he teach. So I didn't pay attention. So it was hard, and, yeah, I feel frustrated sometimes. I didn't know what was happening."

> The designation of teaching ELD students just kind of showed up on my schedule, and I was kind of like, alright, let's run with it, you know…

Researcher: "Can I ask, how did the teacher teach the class? What was it that you didn't like about the way the teacher taught the class?"

Student: "Oh, because he was like he just told us like the drill work, and then he gave us like paper with exercise of basics. I don't even remember that. … I didn't like it, so I didn't do it."

To get to the heart of this problem, we asked ourselves the question, "In what ways and to what extent are the English language development programs serving multilingual learners in Los Angeles County's high schools?"

and, more importantly, "What supports do teachers need in instructional practices to best serve EL students?" We found in our quantitative data that teachers know and value a more comprehensive range of teaching strategies than they actually use. And the strategies they do implement, such as sentence frames and visual aids, are often less engaging for students (Grapin, Llosa, Haas, & Lee, 2021; Fenner & Snyder, 2017). According to our subsequent qualitative interviews, obstacles to implementing more engaging strategies included lack of time for adequate planning, lack of support from peers, and lack of access to collaboration with colleagues.

In this paper, we call for opportunities for teachers to develop reflective practice as a tool to gain ideas from experience, such as professional learning, and to take the learning into new experiences in their classrooms (Bohon, McKelvey, Rhodes, & Robnolt, 2017; Kolb,1984). This reflective practice cycle can be through intentional planning, collaborative learning environments (Borko, Jacobs & Koellner, 2010), and a shift in mindset on who is responsible for teaching students classified as ELs. We further argue that this can be accomplished through minor programmatic changes at the school and district level and not through a disruptive overhaul of entire systems.

Systemic Insights on EL Instruction and Learning in LA County

Table 1. EL Data 2024 to 2025 (California [CA] and LA County)

	Total English Learners (ELs)	Redesignated as Fluent English Proficient (RFEP)	Long-Term English Learners (LTELs)/ Ever ELs (% of ELs)
CA	18.4%	15.8%	53.8%
LA County	17.6%	19.4%	47.6%

Table 2. Student Data on College and Career Readiness (California [CA] and LA County)

	Total Cohort Graduation Rate	ELs Cohort Graduation Rate	Total Graduates Meeting UC/CSU Requirements	ELs Graduates Meeting UC/CSU Requirements	Total Drop out	ELs Drop out	Chronic Absenteeism ELs
CA	86.2%	72.5%	52.4%	26.6%	8.2%	17.3%	28.1%
LA County	84.4%	66.5%	59.8%	38.5%	9.2%	22.1%	29.3%

Table 3. Teacher Assignment Data Based on Credentials (California [CA] and LA County)

	Teacher Assignment— Complete Credentialed	Teaching Assignment— Incomplete Credentialed	Number of Teacher Hires for Multilingual Ed
CA	89.3%	5.4%	744
LA County	89.5%	5.2%	155

Setting the Stage: EL Achievement in LA County

Using available data on English Learner (EL) students in Los Angeles County, we analyzed key metrics such as graduation rates, dropout rates, and academic achievement alongside state-level comparisons on educator recruitment and retention (CDE, 2024). For the 2022 to 2023 academic year, LA County's student enrollment was 1,313,935—of which, 17.6% were classified as ELs and 19.4% were reclassified as fluent English proficient (FEP). This data mirrors what is seen at the state level, with an even higher percentage for redesignated ELs (see Table 1). Spanish was the primary language spoken, with 82.9% of students being native Spanish speakers (CDE, 2024).

Regarding teacher demographics in LA County, the average number of years of teaching experience was 14. The teaching workforce was predominantly white (44.6%), followed by Latinx (33.2%), and Black (7.4%) educators. The proportion of fully credentialed teachers in The proportion of fully credentialed teachers in LA County was comparable to the state average, indicating that educator qualification is not a cause for concern (CDE, 2024) (see Table 3).

Regarding academic achievement, 84% of all students statewide met the requirements for high school graduation. Among EL students, that number drops to 66%. However, when considering the specific requirements for CSU/UC admission, only 59.8% of all students in the state met them, with EL populations dropping dramatically to 38.5% (CDE, 2024) (see Table 1). Many EL students also struggle with chronic absenteeism (29.3%) and finishing high school altogether, with a dropout rate of 22.1% (CDE, 2024) (see Table 2). To better understand why, we synthesized the data collected from surveys, interviews, and discussions with teachers, students, and educational leaders. In the next section, we describe the methodology used for data collection and analysis. Then, we summarize our findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape for EL students in LA County. Lastly, in light of these findings, we offer targeted recommendations for schools, districts, and county leadership to address these gaps and improve outcomes for EL students.

Methodology of the Study

We distributed surveys across districts with the assistance of the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE): 192 participants responded, including high school teachers, instructional coaches, AND English learner (EL) coordinators for high schools from 20 districts. Of the respondents, 119 were high school teachers, while the remaining were school administrators or leaders. Additionally, student surveys were administered across three districts, garnering responses from 30 students. To gain further qualitative insights, we invited teachers and instructional coaches from the surveyed districts to participate in focus group interviews. Four teacher focus groups were conducted, with participation ranging from two to four teachers per group and one focus group of five students. Finally, two in-depth, semi structured interviews were conducted with administrative leaders from LACOE's Multilingual Academic Support Unit to gain a broader perspective on how the county addresses EL-related challenges.

The teacher surveys were designed to capture data on their experiences, access to professional support and resources, compliance with EL standards, instructional strategies, and overall attitudes toward EL instruction. Student surveys focused on capturing students' perspectives regarding their classroom experiences, instructional practices, and the level of support they received in their schools. Our focus group interviews aimed to understand the challenges and successes teachers and instructional coaches face when teaching ELs in various content areas and the experiences of the students in content area classrooms.

By triangulating data from multiple sources—including county and state data; surveys; interviews; and focus group discussions with educators, students, and educational leaders—we aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the English Language Development (ELD) programs serve multilingual learners in Los Angeles County's high schools. Two significant limitations of the dataset in this study include the small number of total respondents and the need for input from site and district-level leadership, which may provide additional nuance to some of the pressures educators across the system face. However, with this initial study seeking to explore the experiences of teachers and students, particularly in districts with high EL populations, we were able to garner some important insights.

In the following sections, we highlight data from the surveys and focus group interviews. Next, we address the discrepancies between the reported performance and the instructional practices and experiences shared by teachers and students. Finally, we offer recommendations based on our findings to improve the support and outcomes for EL students in LA County.

Findings

Teacher Confidence and Training: Insights Into EL Instruction Across Content Areas.

Among the 119 high school teachers who responded to the survey

Years of Experience	Percentage
15 to 20 years	23%
6 to 10 years	25%

The distribution of subjects taught was as follows:

Subject Taught	Percentage
English	46%
Math	29%
Science	23%
English Language Development (ELD)	21%
History	18%
Other subjects	28%

Figure 1. Data Displaying Positive Mindset and Training of Teachers (N = 119) Who Took the Survey

Percentage of Teachers who have Adequate Training
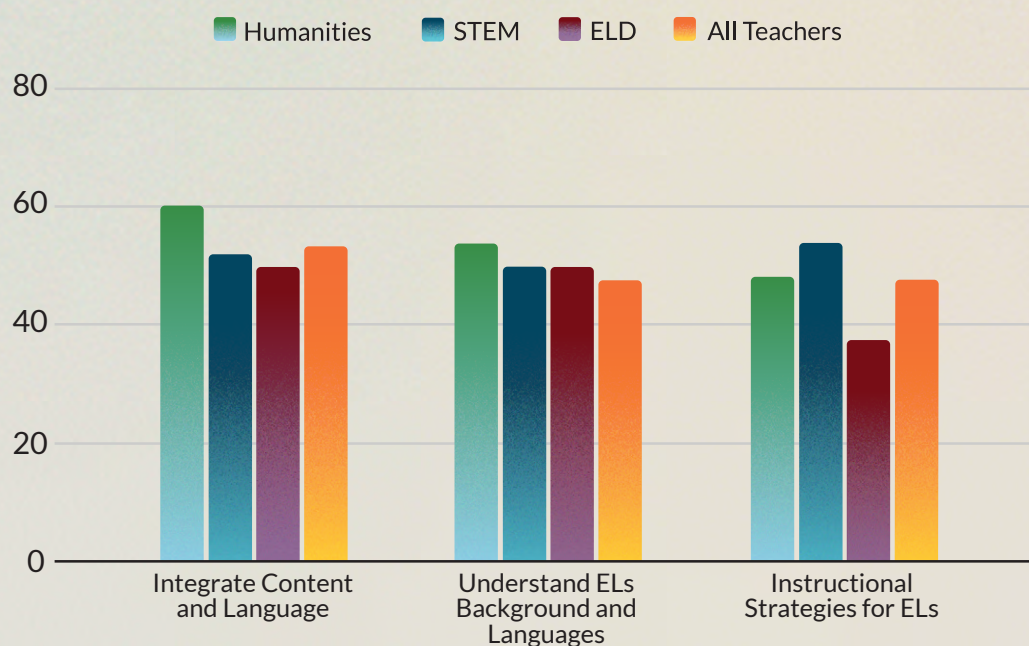
Figure 1a: Percentage of teachers Who Have received adequate training in teaching ELs, categorized by subject type.

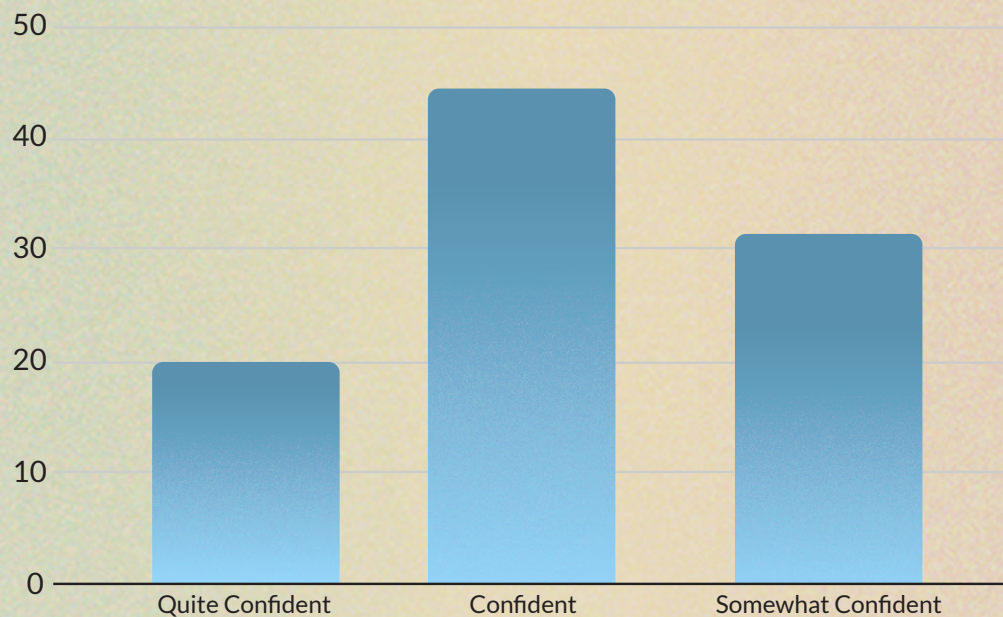*Figure 1b. Percentage of teachers who expressed confidence in teaching ELs.*

Figure 1c. Percentage of teachers who felt Prepared to teach ELs in Their content areas.
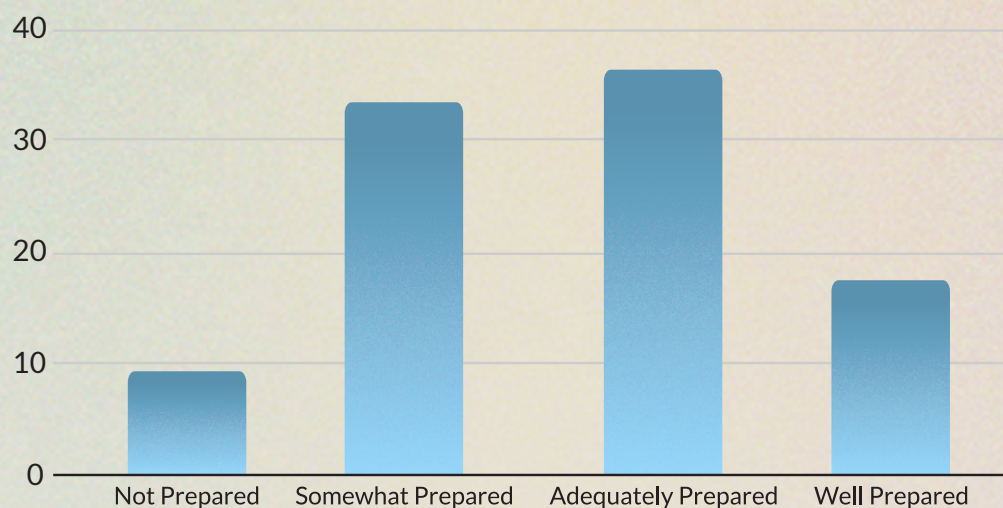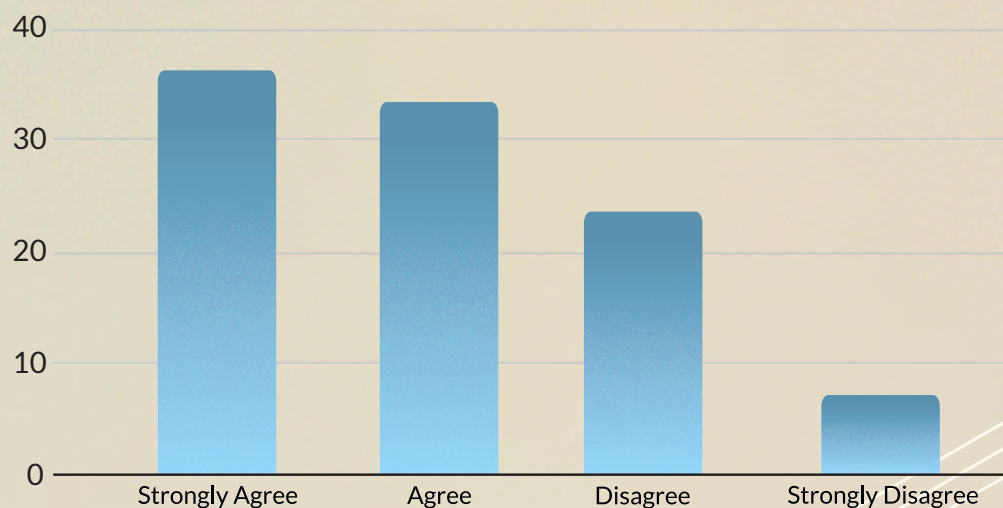

Figure 1d. Percentage of teachers who feel that children from different family backgrounds can reach the same academic level.

Regarding training and instructional preparedness, 47.6% to 53.2% of all teachers reported receiving adequate training to support EL instruction **(see Figure 1a)**. Notably, 66% of teachers expressed confidence in teaching ELs, suggesting a generally high level of self-efficacy in addressing the needs of EL students **(see Figure 1b)**. Around 54.7% of teachers indicated preparedness in teaching ELs in their content areas **(see Figure 1c)**. Also, 68% of all teachers reported having access to curriculum and instructional materials tailored for ELs, and 69% agreed that their students can reach a high academic level irrespective of their home backgrounds **(see Figure 1d)**. These findings highlight a generally positive outlook among teachers regarding their preparedness and confidence in supporting EL students, with a majority feeling equipped with the necessary training, resources, and belief in their students' potential to achieve academic success.

In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative feedback from teachers further highlights the importance sustained professional development played in shaping their effectiveness in EL instruction. One teacher noted, *"Three to four years' worth of monthly workshops on both leadership and instruction have provided me with most of my professional knowledge, and it was a very unique experience."* Another shared, *"A whole year of professional development around reading instruction for secondary students has transformed the way I approach teaching."* Furthermore, another teacher shared, *"We do have a curriculum guide, a pacing guide as well. And, of course, the textbooks do give guidance on how to modify for ELs, through the course of different trainings that I've gone through LACOE (Los Angeles County Office of Education)."* These accounts underscore the districts in LA County that supported and emphasized the importance of structured, ongoing professional development in improving teacher learning for EL instruction.

Discrepancies Between Teacher Beliefs, Training, and Instruction
While teachers expressed confidence in their preparedness and access to resources, we also identified significant gaps in implementing effective instructional practices. In the following sections, we describe how, despite their training and confidence in EL instruction and access to curriculum, the teachers' implementation across content areas varied.

Even though the teachers had access to professional development and learning opportunities tailored to support ELs, as seen in the previous graphic **(see Figure 1a)**, only a smaller percentage of teachers use instructional methods that support ELs, such as the use of home language supports (12.5%) and building background knowledge to support understanding of ideas (21.4%) **(see Figure 2a)**. Even with adequate training, the instructional strategies used by the teachers tend to focus more on using sentence frames (37.3%), with ELD teachers using them the most (55.6%). Overall, fewer teachers relied on the use of visual aids (29.1%) and use of home language supports (12.7%) **(see Figure 2b)**.

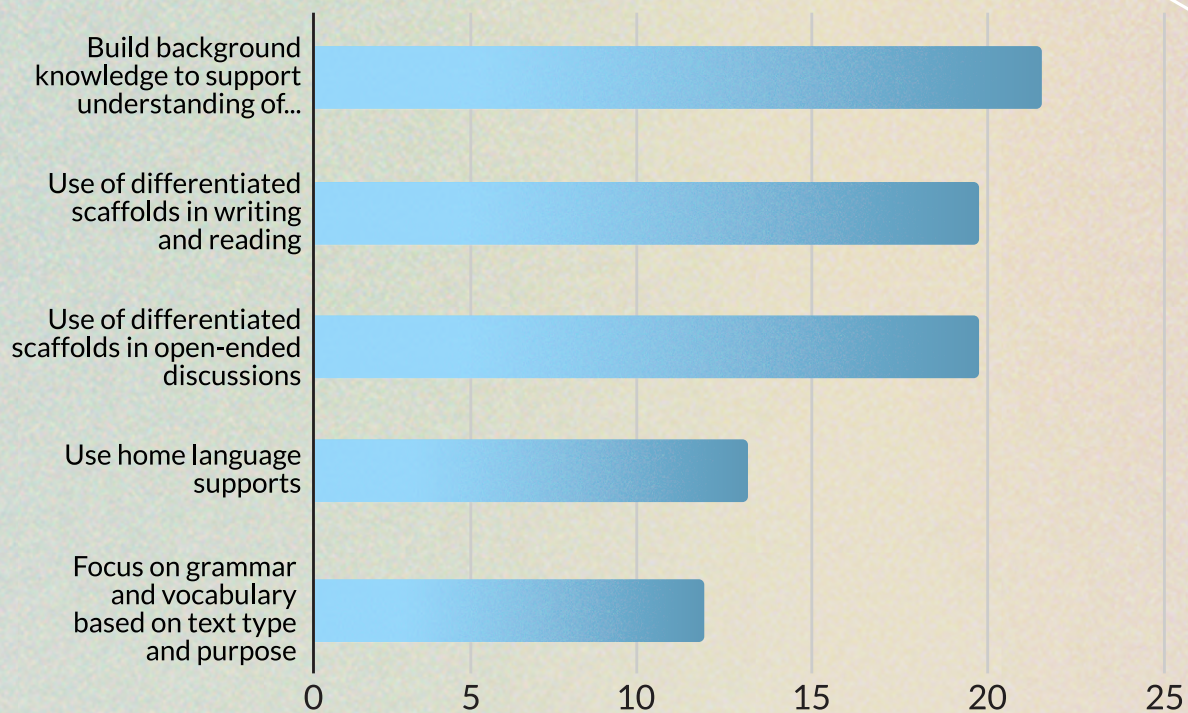## Percentage Tailoring Instruction for ELs

Figure 2a. Data showing the percentage of teachers who used different strategies to tailor instruction for ELs.
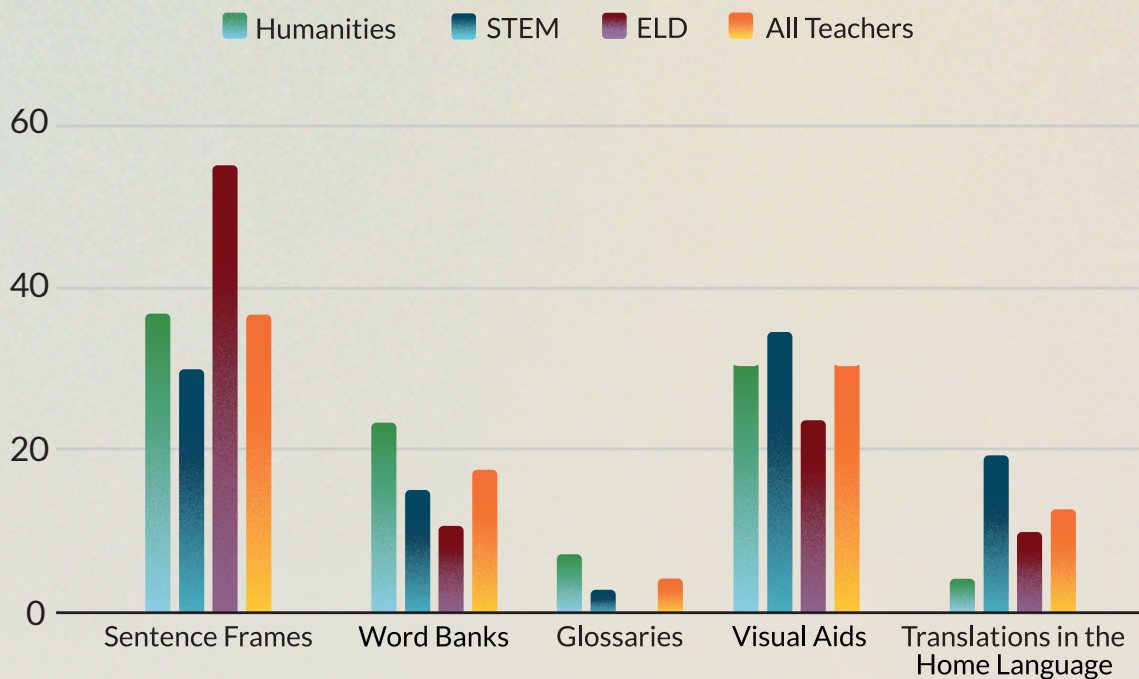
Usage while teaching ELs

Figure 2b. Percentage of content teachers who use different strategies to teach ELs.

As a teacher highlighted in the following quote:

I was trained pretty heavily in a lot of the strategies that one would use with ELs. So, for example, doing sentence stems for writing or doing close paragraphs, or I did a lot of direct instruction. Because at least [in] the program I went through, the research said direct instruction [is] the best way to catch up. (ELD specialist)

I think that the other English teachers, like I said, they're more likely to say this kid doesn't belong here, and send him back down than they are to reach out for help on how to serve the kid.

Furthermore, when pressed for the reasons for how teachers approach instruction, an ELD teacher reiterated the following:

They (content teachers) have a hard time distinguishing, or they've never attempted…that really get[s] at the kernel of what is difficult for the student. Is it translation or is it lack of knowledge, or is it lack of English? … My perception is, if teachers could even be aware that you could distinguish the two, that you can address them differently.

Lack of Site Support/Collaboration

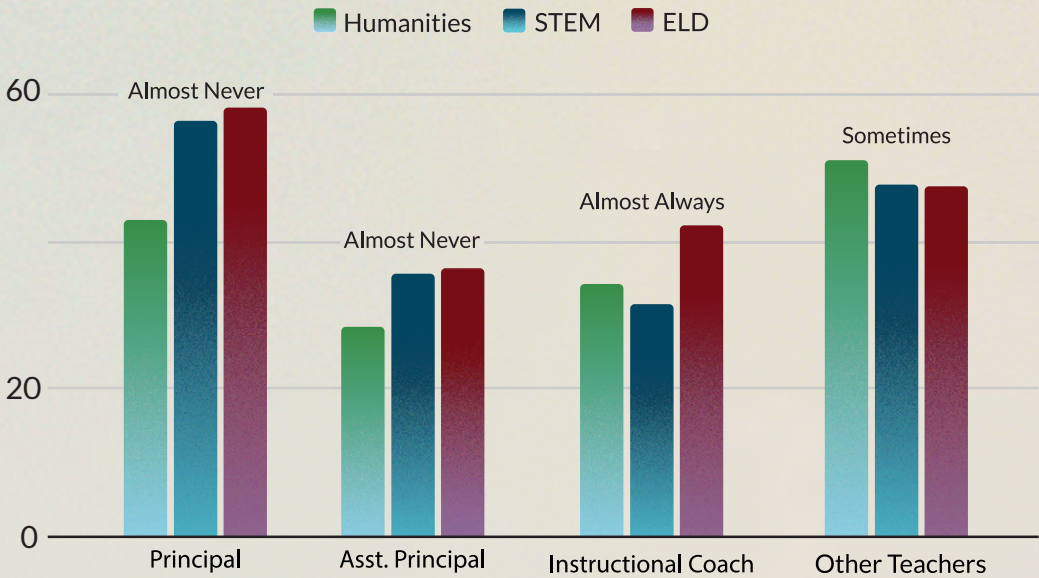## Who Supports You When You Face Challenges in Teaching ELs in the Classroom?

Figure 3a. Data showing who teachers turn to when faced with challenges in teaching ELs.

Percentage of Teachers Who Get Advice About Instructional Challenges Regarding ELs
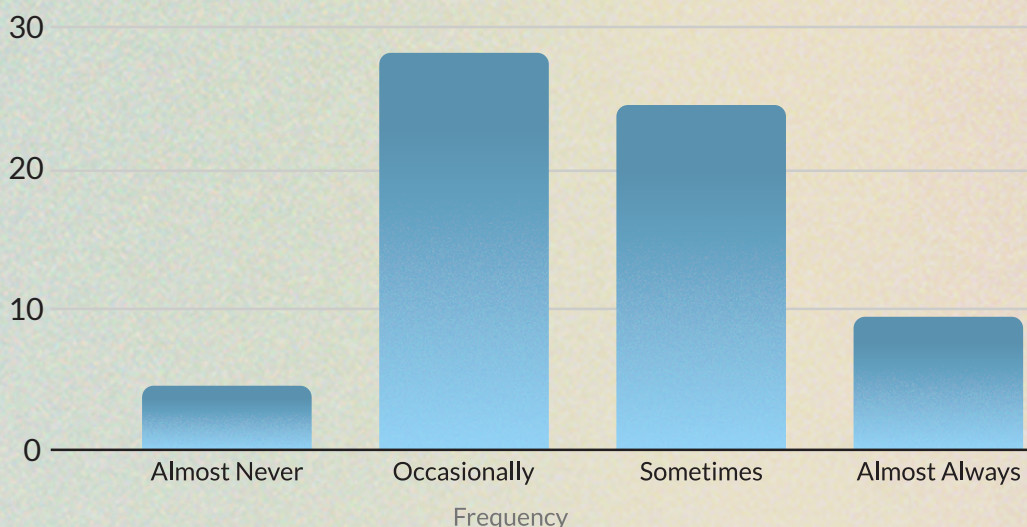

Figure 3b. Data showing the percentage of teachers who get advice about instructional challenges regarding ELs.

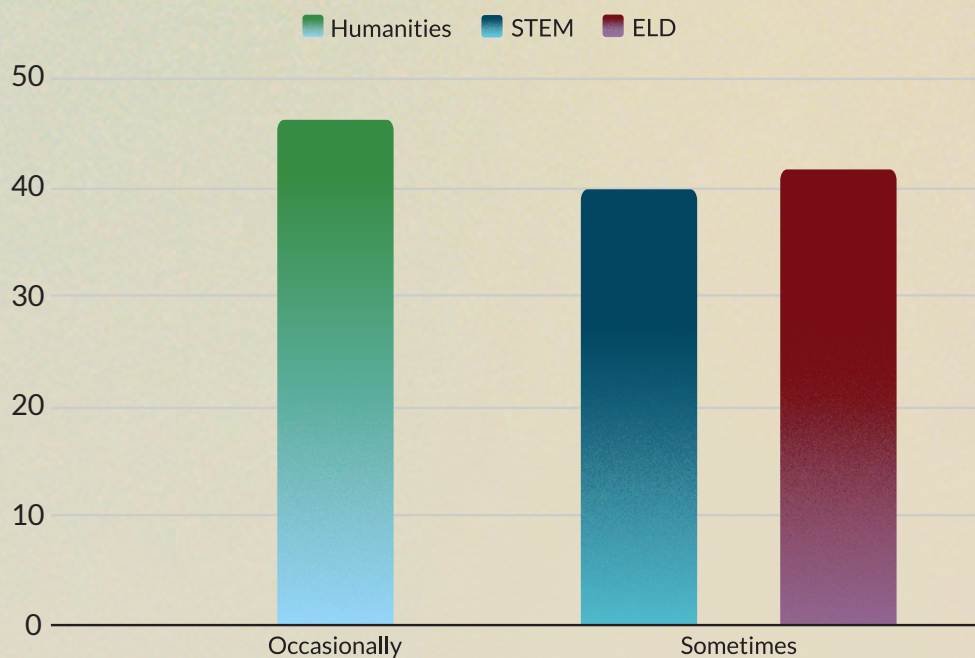## Co-Developing or Designing Lessons Across Classrooms

Figure 3c. Data showing the percentage of teachers who engage in codeveloping or designing lessons across classrooms.

Teachers frequently turned to their instructional coach for support when encountering challenges teaching ELs, with 32% to 42% doing so almost always. In contrast, 47% to 51% sometimes sought assistance from fellow teachers **(see Figure 3a)**. Notably, very few teachers

sought help from school leadership, as only 27% to 37% reported reaching out to the principal or vice principal. Regarding instructional challenges for ELs, only 29% of teachers occasionally sought advice from colleagues and a mere 25% did so sometimes **(see Figure 3b)**. Additionally, content teachers rarely engaged in collaborative lesson development, with only 40% to 45% participating in codeveloping or codesigning lessons across classrooms **(see Figure 3c)**.

One of the factors impeding collaboration over time was the diminishing frequency of such sessions. As one teacher observed, "We had a really good collaboration schedule...we've gone from collaboration every week, to every other week, to once a month." Another challenge includes the hesitancy of colleagues to collaborate with the ELD specialists or coordinators as well as a lack of awareness of how to leverage their knowledge or services. The following quotes underscore this dilemma:

I can understand why some of the teachers are not willing to even coordinate with each other. They just don't. They don't all work in lockstep...So as a specialist, I think that is one of the things that I would love to offer. (ELD specialist)

I think that the other English teachers, like I said, they're more likely to say this kid doesn't belong here and send him back down than they are to reach out for help on how to serve the kid. That is generally what they do. I have one English teacher who reaches out to me who says I need help serving the student like, please go over their essay with them. I will do that, and I will. I will stop my lessons to do that. I have no issue doing it. (ELD specialist)

When asked about her role as an ELD coordinator, one teacher explained how challenging it has been to balance her classroom work and continue to support content teachers.

It's still, like, I'm a chicken running around with my head cut off because I'm like helping the counselors with students but also helping the teachers with curriculum. And so it does get kind of overwhelming at times. And then, like, I thought about it, I don't wanna [sic] leave the classroom because I love working with the students. And so it's just like, you know, not sure. I always feel like I'm being pulled in different directions." (ELD specialist)

I can understand why some of the teachers are not willing to even coordinate with each other. They just don't. They don't all work in lockstep...

These findings highlight challenges and opportunities in supporting English Learners (ELs) across content areas. Notably, 66% of all teachers expressed confidence in

teaching ELs, and more than 53% received adequate training; gaps persist between training, beliefs, and actual practices. Despite access to EL-specific resources, strategies including home language support and leveraging background knowledge are underused. Teachers often rely on sentence frames and struggle to distinguish between translation issues and content gaps—a challenge emphasized by ELD specialists.

Collaboration between teachers and EL specialists is limited, with few codeveloping lessons or seeking advice. While instructional coaches provide support, few teachers turn to school leadership, and inconsistent collaboration schedules add to the problem. EL coordinators, balancing classroom duties and supporting colleagues, feel stretched thin. Although confidence and resources exist, improving EL strategy implementation through coaching and fostering collaboration are critical for more effective EL instruction (Desmione & Pak, 2017).

To uphold academic rigor for all, educators must provide appropriate linguistic supports, allowing ELs to engage in challenging content without reducing rigor (Murphy, 2020). Differentiating between academic content and language skills combined with targeted language scaffolding can promote academic and linguistic growth. Ongoing professional development, collaboration with ELD specialists, and supportive conditions for planning are essential for preparing ELs for long-term success. The next section offers recommendations addressing these issues at the classroom and school levels.

Recommendations

In synthesizing recommendations, we draw on institutional theory, which frames embedding social structures—rules, norms, practices, and routines—into everyday operations (Scott, 2001). This approach is particularly useful for addressing the scalability and consistency of ELD programs in districts in Los Angeles County, offering insights into how best to support teachers and students. The recommendations revolve around three foundational tenets: 1) establishing a conducive learning environment; 2) institutionalizing roles and responsibilities; and 3) creating productive organizational routines and norms (refer to Figure 2).

Figure 2. Representation of the Tenets for Institutionalization

Structures/Enviroment

Maintaining & Scalability of Practices

Organizational Routines and Norms

Team Roles and Responsibilities

1. Positive Sustainable Structures and Environment

To scale ELD programs successfully, creating a positive and sustainable learning environment is essential. A critical first step is prioritizing EL instruction at every administrative level. Prioritizing resources, attention, and support for ELD programs at the district and school level is a critical element in improving outcomes for ELs.

However, prioritizing ELs requires more than administrative commitment; one major challenge is that "content teachers don't see themselves as language teachers," an ELD coach reiterated. Addressing this gap demands professional development (PD)

that provides clear guidance on integrating ELD into content-area instruction. Further, an environment should be available for all educators that is conducive to planning lessons that integrate ELD standards in classrooms and addressing ELs' diverse needs, such as newcomers, long-term English learners (LTELs), and at-risk students. Lastly, the environment must be equipped with sufficient human resources. Often, teachers stressed the need for additional help in their content area classrooms, such as paraeducators and instructional aides. Providing additional staffing, such as instructional aides or team teachers, can alleviate the burden of classroom management, allowing teachers to focus more on teaching content.

2. Opportunities in Professional Learning Collaboration (PLC) to Foster Sustained Learning

Professional learning collaboration (PLC) offers a critical avenue for sustained teacher development, especially in ELD instruction when there is already a robust history of professional development (PD). However, merely increasing the frequency of PD sessions is not enough. There's a need for more "targeted PD," specifically geared toward the dual role of teaching both content and language. Training must address specific content areas (e.g., math, biology) and teach educators how to integrate language acquisition strategies into those subjects. Further, if provided with targeted PD, paraeducators and aides would also be able to more effectively assist teachers and engage with students, particularly those who require additional language support.

Another issue identified is the lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities in certain school sites. Some districts use a coordinator for EL compliance, while instructional coaches handle classroom support in content areas. While the former may have more expertise in ELD, the latter may have less expertise in integrating content and language. To ensure that teachers receive appropriate and specialized support, we recommend having a mentoring model between content- and ELD-specific coaches.

Coteaching and mentoring models provide valuable and sustained support for teachers, which can be achieved through a PLC. It is a cooperative and interactive approach to professional development and learning in which educators who share common goals, interests, or challenges work together to enhance their knowledge, skills, and practices and to learn and grow collectively. The collaborative nature of the approach encourages active participation, sharing of ideas and experiences, and mutual support among the members. The ultimate aim is to improve professional practice, enhance student outcomes, and foster a culture of continuous learning within the participating community.

3. Productive and Tailored Organizational Routines and Norms

Creating productive organizational routines is another key tenet of institutionalization. One of the primary concerns teachers raise is the lack of time for collaboration and reflective practice. Regular collaboration is critical for reflecting on instructional strategies, sharing best practices, and developing lesson plans that integrate ELD and content standards and practices.

Creating routines around consistent feedback and collaboration can also foster sustained learning and reflective practice. Schools/districts should institutionalize regular PLC meetings and ensure that teachers have time built into their schedules to collaborate on ELD strategies. This could include coteaching models, where content-area teachers partner with ELD specialists to design and deliver lessons.

Finally, some schools, like those offering career technical education (CTE), already integrate ELD into content areas like biology or biomedical science, offering a model that could be expanded. Expanding this integrated approach could help EL students engage more deeply with both language and content, improving their academic engagement and performance.
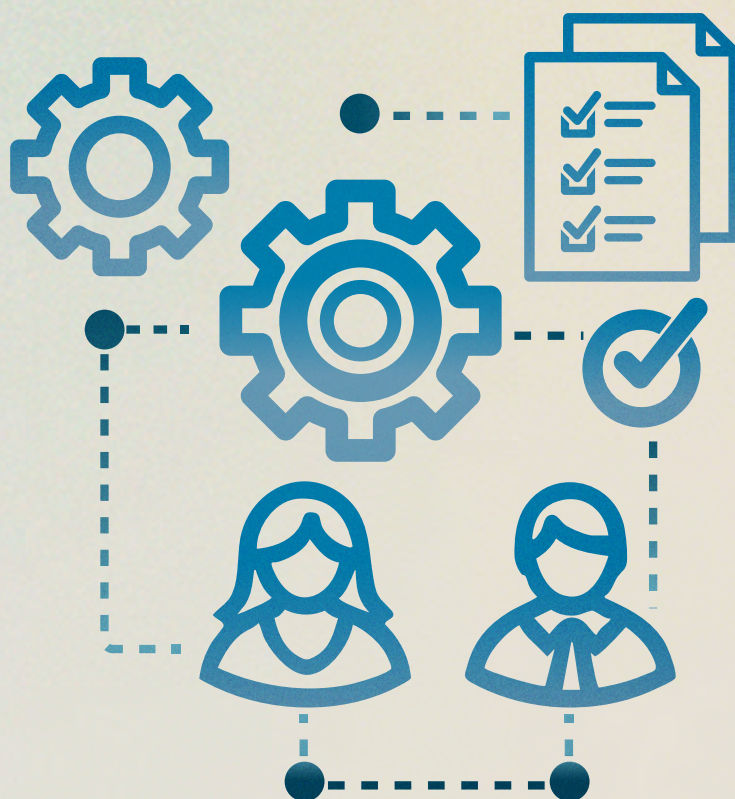
Conclusion

Teachers are working hard, *very hard*, at meeting the needs of their students with some notable levels of success. But in this effort, teachers still struggle to maintain high levels of rigor and engagement for their students. While they are aware of what many researchers would consider best practices for ELs, many struggle not only with implementing these strategies but also with meeting the increasing demands on their time and energy, which then act as obstacles to their primary responsibility—teaching. This corroborates national findings that educational opportunities for ELs are lacking in comparison with those of their English-dominant peers and explains that while teachers know and value a broader range of strategies, they often rely on those that are less engaging for students. In short, the challenges teachers face in supporting English learners (ELs) are complex, and their struggles may not align with common assumptions. But by applying institutional theory as a framework, districts in LA County can create the conditions necessary for effective ELD instruction, focusing on three key areas: establishing a sustainable learning environment, enhancing professional collaboration, and creating productive routines. Prioritizing ELD at all levels of administration, providing targeted professional development for content-area teachers, and clarifying the roles of instructional staff will build a stronger foundation for EL instruction. By institutionalizing structures that support sustainable collaboration and professional growth, schools can ensure that both teachers and ELs receive the support they need to succeed, ultimately leading to more consistent and effective instruction.

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