

Understanding the Classroom Experiences of **Elementary English Learners** in Los Angeles County

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Executive Summary

Statistic: Students in Los Angeles County come from 156 unique language backgrounds (CDE, 2024-2025.)

"It is important to build a good relationship with students and provide many ways to practice English."

- Teacher of English Learners in L.A. County

Los Angeles County is home to about 10 million residents and is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the nation, educating more than 1.3 million K-12 students across 80 districts. Over 228,000 are English learners (ELs), underscoring a vital need for high-quality English language development (ELD). As California advances multilingualism through Prop. 58 and Global California 2030, the vision must match practice. Without systems of support, many elementary ELs risk becoming Long-Term English Learners (LTELs), often struggling academically due to stalled progress and unable to access advanced secondary courses, limiting academic opportunities. Ensuring ELs receive targeted, research-aligned instruction is not only a legal and academic responsibility, it is an equity imperative. This brief highlights findings from a 2025 study to understand the classroom experiences of elementary English learners and is designed to inform and guide those committed to advancing equity, academic excellence, and linguistic justice for all.

Findings

This research brief amplifies participants' teaching backgrounds with ELs, the strategies employed in the classroom, methods of connecting with students and families, and their needs to best serve their students. Findings are based on the analysis of a county-wide survey, which included 189 participants as well as focus group interviews with twelve educators. Participants were teachers, teachers on special assignment, principals, district-level administrators, resource specialists, and EL instructional coaches.

- 1:** Of the participants, 47% identified as having been English learners and nearly 70% reported speaking another language with sufficient proficiency to engage in conversation.
- 2:** Respondents indicate familiarity with ELD strategies but want training on differentiating instruction for ELs.

- 3: While many are aware of how ELs are classified and reclassified, some respondents are unfamiliar with these processes.
- 4: A majority of educators report that ELs have opportunities to develop their home language in school and stated they celebrate EL progress.
- 5: Teachers want to improve their practices in moving ELs to reclassification.

Recommendations

Schools can take actionable steps to better support ELs. From enhancing collaborative learning structures to elevating the visibility of student progress, these strategies are rooted in what teachers have identified as critical to student success. These recommendations align with California’s multilingual goals while addressing the needs educators expressed in the study. Implemented with intention, these steps can make a difference in supporting English learners’ academic growth and sense of belonging without overwhelming already stretched systems.

1: Prioritize Ongoing, Collaborative Professional Learning Focused on English Learners

Move beyond one-time workshops by establishing regular, structured collaboration time centered on ELs.

2: Strengthen Educator Understanding of English Learner Classification and Reclassification

Provide clear, consistent training on how ELs are identified and reclassified.

3: Celebrate Progress in English Language Development

Acknowledge ELs’ academic and linguistic growth publicly. Regular progress monitoring and visible recognition of reclassification help motivate students and validate their success.

4: Expand Access to Dual Language Immersion Programs

Promote dual language immersion (DLI) programs, leveraging the home language as an instructional asset.

5: Focus on Instruction

Help teachers broaden their toolkit with a reliable set of ELD strategies to differentiate instruction.



Introduction

As the most populous county in the nation, Los Angeles is linguistically and culturally diverse, shaping an educational landscape where language is an asset and an instructional imperative. The Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) is the second largest school system in the country. It oversees 80 public school districts, serving 1.3 million K–12 students (California Department of Education [CDE], 2023, 2025b), via the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE, n.d.-a). There are also approximately 360 charter schools, enrolling about 16% of public school students, underscoring the scale of diverse educational programs, options, and governance structures (Dale & Stokes, 2025; Public School Review, 2025).

Within LA County, there are 209,529 students who are considered English learners (ELs; CDE, 2025b). This demographic underscores the essential need for policymakers and educators to understand how ELs learn, how teachers are prepared, and how district and county leadership can bolster educational outcomes through high-quality support systems.

California public schools educate the largest number of ELs nationally. There are over 1.3 million students, or 17% of total enrollment who are designated as English learners, with over 2.2 million students, or 37%, speaking a language other than English at home (CDE, 2025b). In Los Angeles County, ELs speak not only Spanish (about 32%), but also Mandarin, Armenian, Cantonese, Korean, Russian, Vietnamese, Tagalog/Filipino, Japanese, Arabic, and Farsi, to name a few (CDE, 2025b). The breadth of linguistic diversity highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of English learners, the preparation of teachers, and how leaders can support these efforts.

The term *reclassified* is granted after an EL meets four requirements: (1) scoring an overall Level 4 on the English Language Proficiency Assessment for California (ELPAC), (2) a teacher evaluation, (3) a parent consultation, and (4) a comparison of student achievement against an empirically established range of performance in basic skills of English proficient student peers. Once these four criteria are met, the student is considered RFEP or Reclassified Fluent English Proficient.

What is the Difference Between English Learners and Multilingual Learners?

Federal Level

The U.S. Department of Education uses the term English learner (EL) in federal policy, particularly under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), formerly under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). According to ESSA, an English learner is a student (1) who is not yet proficient in English, (2) who was not born in the United States, (3) whose native language is not English, (4) who comes from a home where a language other than English is dominant, or (5) who has difficulty with English that affects academic achievement. This term is used federally for legal, funding, and accountability purposes, such as Title III programs.

State Level

California also uses the term English learner (EL) to align with the federal term in official documents, such as CALPADS and California Department of Education forms. Students are classified as ELs in California through the Initial English Language Proficiency Assessment of California (ELPAC) assessment and reclassified

California's progressive multilingualism policies reinforce this imperative. The California Education for a Global Economy (CA Ed.G.E.) initiative, Prop 58, empowers districts to develop research-aligned, community-informed language acquisition programs (CDE, 2025a). Global California 2030 ambitiously pushes for systemic changes, setting a goal to have half of all K-12 students enrolled in programs that develop proficiency in two or more languages, and by 2040, for 75% of high school graduates to earn the State Seal of Biliteracy (CDE, 2017).

Central to implementation across the county is the Los Angeles County Office of Education, which plays a leadership role in professional learning and technical support. LACOE's Multilingual Academic Support (MAS) Unit provides research-based professional development, supports Title III implementation, and coordinates district network meetings to build capacity for rigorous and asset-based instruction (LACOE, n.d.-b). LACOE also serves as a zone lead grantee for the state's Educator Workforce Investment Grant for Effective Language Acquisition Programs, facilitating broader statewide coordination of professional development (LACOE, n.d.-b).

Yet the socio-political context complicates these efforts. Immigrant communities and the ELs within them often face systemic inequities, from fluctuating federal policies to anti-immigrant rhetoric, which can undermine access, belonging, and educational continuity. These socioeconomic barriers intersect with language acquisition, as families may have limited time or resources to support language learning outside of school (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). Schools in LA County serve as critical anchors of support and opportunity, but they require well-resourced, equitable systems to do so effectively.

This research brief amplifies teacher perceptions across LA County, exploring how educators experience teaching ELs, the professional preparation and support available,

as Fluent English Proficient once they meet the state and local criteria. The California state system tracks ELs explicitly for accountability, reclassification, and funding to support students.

Multilingual Learner: Emerging Practice

Multilingual learner is a broader, asset-oriented term, increasingly used by researchers, teachers, administrators, and equity-centered organizations. It encompasses students who are learning more than one language, including those in dual language immersion programs, heritage language speakers, and English learners. Advocates who are globally minded also use the term to promote linguistic and cultural inclusivity. The term multilingual learner is gaining popularity among educators and policymakers, as it affirms multilingualism as a strength rather than a deficit in English.

Which Term Should I Use: English Learner or Multilingual Learner?

English learner matches federal and state accountability definitions. It is the term used in grant writing and funding, and it is also required for ESSA and Title III compliance. A multilingual learner emphasizes strengths and inclusive identity, aligning with asset-based education frameworks. Here is an example of how to use both terms in a sentence: This workshop session is designed to support multilingual learners, including those classified as English learners under California and federal guidelines.

and the leadership frameworks that shape their practice. By weaving qualitative narratives with demographic context and policy structures, the brief offers a multidimensional understanding of English language education across one of the nation's most complex and linguistically diverse regions. ***It is designed to inform and guide policymakers, district leaders, and community stakeholders committed to advancing equity, academic excellence, and linguistic justice for all students.***

English learners are not homogeneous. They include newcomers who have been in the United States for fewer than three years, long-term English learners (LTELs) who have not reclassified after six or more years of receiving structured English language development (Olsen, 2014), and students in dual-language programs who are developing proficiency in English and another language (Callahan & Gándara, 2014). This brief seeks to understand the preparation of teachers and the experiences of elementary English learners in LA County.

Description of the Methodology

This research brief aims to understand the classroom experiences of elementary English language learners. It employs a mixed-methods study, including a survey distributed across LA County and interviews with teachers and administrators, to provide findings, insights, and recommendations on how teachers and leaders can best support English learners. Data were analyzed and interpreted using SurveyMonkey and Atlas.ti. The list of participants spans a wide geographic area across LA County, encompassing 22 school districts, three Charter Schools, and the County Office of Education. Appendix 1 provides more details regarding the methodology.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How are elementary multilingual students supported in the attainment of English as well as another language?
2. What kinds of classroom elements uplift and enhance language learning?
3. How does the educational community and context contribute to multilingual learning opportunities and achievements?



The following sections highlight survey and focus group data clustered into five findings. The recommendations are based on the findings, which aim to support teachers and improve outcomes for English learners.

This work matters because it shows that numbers alone cannot capture the lived reality of multilingual learners, and stories alone cannot capture the scale of systemic inequities. By combining both, LA County schools and communities gain a fuller picture of how to ensure English learners have true access to education and equitable outcomes alongside all students.

Findings

Finding 1: Of the participants, 47% identified as having been English learners and nearly 70% reported speaking another language with sufficient proficiency to engage in conversation.

The survey and interviews asked participants about their students' and their own linguistic background. Additionally, the participants provided their demographic and educational backgrounds. The survey revealed that nearly half or 47% of the respondents were either previously English learners themselves or had experience as a student in bilingual or dual language immersion programs. The survey also revealed that 69% of the respondents speak another language fluently enough to hold a conversation, with Spanish and Mandarin being the most common. The linguistic background of educators is significant as the home languages spoken by EL students in LA County are largely Spanish (94%) and Mandarin (40%). Understanding teachers' linguistic backgrounds matters because bilingual educators empathize with the experience of learning a second language and value the assets of multilingualism.

One teacher who was classified as an English language learner in elementary school told us,

"I could never show what I knew because no one let me use my first language."

They then went on to explain the desire for today's English language learners to have a better experience.

Another shared, "I was once in their shoes, so I know they can do it if I did. That's why I hold high expectations."

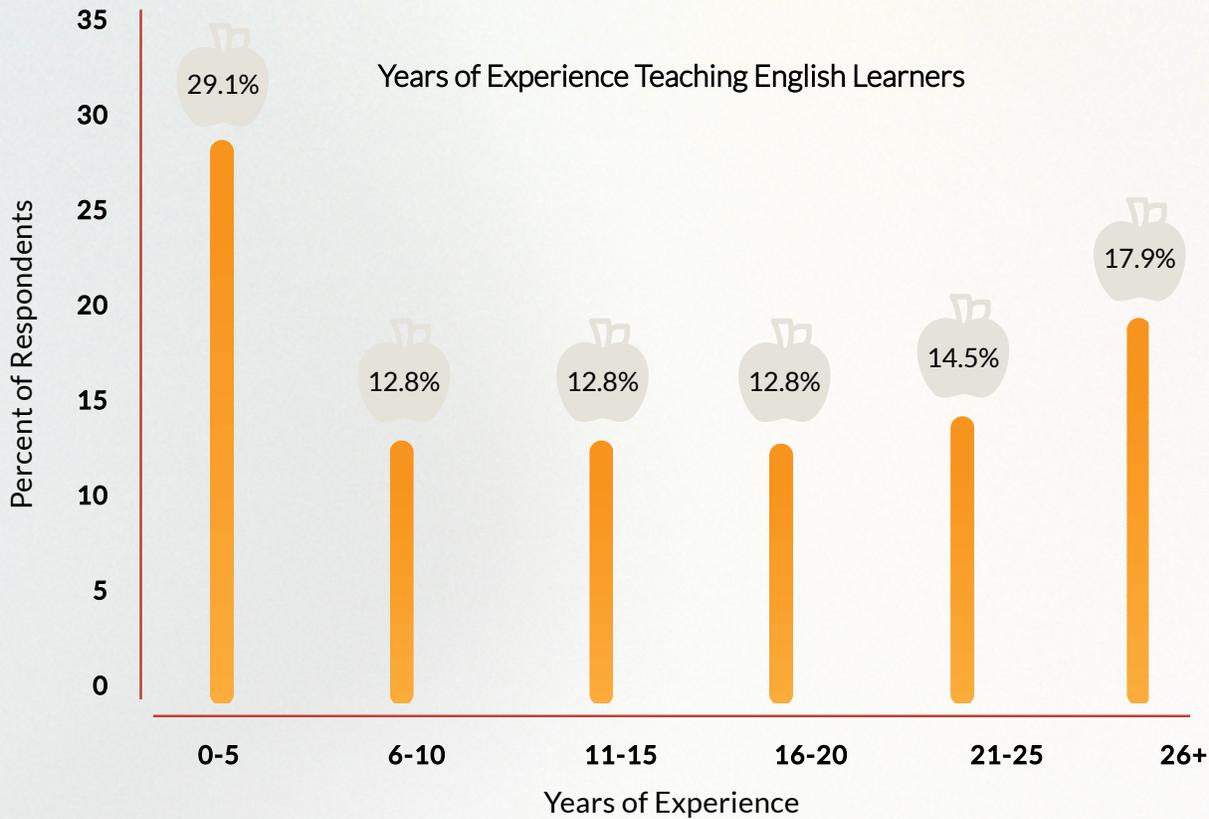
The survey provides valuable insights into the multilingual capabilities and credentialing of educators working with English learners in Los Angeles County. Sixty-seven, or 36%, of respondents indicated they held a Bilingual, Cross-Cultural, Language, and Academic

Development (BCLAD) credentials–27 have a BCLAD in Mandarin and 36 in Spanish. The other languages in which educators of the study hold BCLADs are French and Korean. The Bilingual, Cross-Cultural, Language, and Academic Development (BCLAD) authorization is an educational credential that allows teachers to provide specialized instruction in the students’ home language fostering native language proficiency along with English language proficiency across content areas.

What this reveals is that over two thirds of teachers participating in this survey and working with English learners are multilingual and bring empathy to their role. One teacher shared in a focus group interview, *“We give our extra time ... because we know what it feels like to be in their shoes.”*

Spanish dominates as the second language of participants in the survey, aligning with the top home language of ELs in the region. This noteworthy linguistic diversity among educators can be leveraged as a major asset in instruction, relationship building amongst students and their families, and even in the larger school community.

In addition to understanding the participants’ linguistic background, the survey asked about their years of experience working with English learners. Looking at the following bar chart, while nearly 30% are newer to the field (0–5 years), a majority have more than 10 years of experience, with a strong cohort of highly experienced educators who have 26 or more years of experience working with English language learners.



What can be interpreted from this information is that the majority of respondents have substantial teaching experience—over 58% of teachers surveyed have more than 10 years of experience teaching English language learners. There is also a strong base of longtime or veteran educators— with nearly 1 in 5, about 18%, having worked with ELs for over 26 years. In contrast to the veteran group of teachers, there is a newer cohort of teachers growing in the profession— about 29% of respondents are in their first 5 years of teaching ELs, indicating a notable group of newer educators entering the field. This mix of years of experience suggests a mature workforce with a wealth of historical context and institutional knowledge alongside a younger generation of teachers.

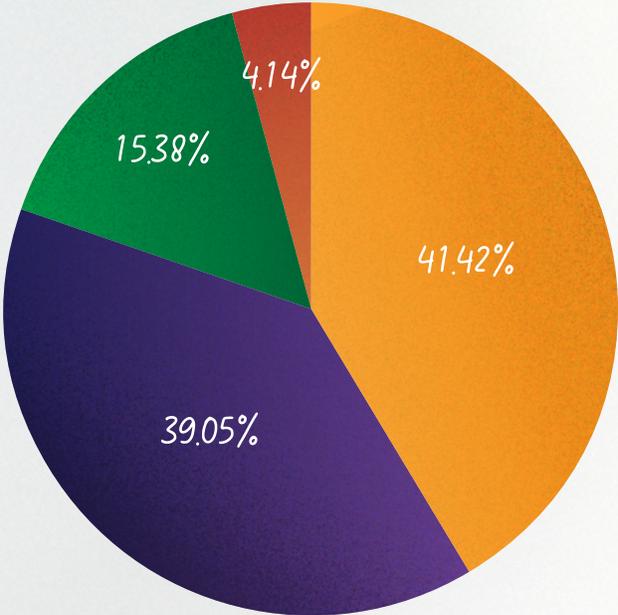
Finding 2: Respondents indicate familiarity with ELD strategies but want training on differentiating instruction for ELs.

The survey and focus group interviews asked questions about the kinds of teaching strategies used to support English learners along with teachers’ self-confidence and prior training.

Specifically, the survey asked which were the top two strategies educators found most effective for closing achievement gaps, and they responded as follows.

1. Drawing on students’ cultures, languages, and experiences (57%)
2. Engaging with families and communities (43%)

Teachers were asked about their level of confidence teaching English language learners and whether or not their ELs receive specific English language development (ELD) services, with 88% reporting that ELs receive dedicated English language development services. Yet, only 41% feel *very confident* teaching ELs.



Response Option	% of Respondents
Very confident	41.42%
Confident	39.05%
Somewhat confident	15.38%
Not at all confident	4.14%
Total	100%

However, looking at the chart on page 10, nearly 20% (about 1 in 5) of teachers expressed only partial or no confidence. Furthermore, 15% are *somewhat confident*, and 4% are *not at all confident* teaching ELs. While a substantial majority of educators are self-assured in their abilities to teach ELs, there is a significant minority who need more support, training, or experience. This finding of teachers needing more support and training will be discussed in more detail later in this research brief where teachers call for more professional development in ELD strategies and differentiation.

From the focus group interviews, a similar sentiment surfaced with the following comment.

"I had a day training session for ELPAC. It basically taught me how to pass the checklist. It was not worthwhile. It was about the test and not about how to teach my ELs."

The most commonly used ELD strategies teachers reported using when teaching English learners include the following:

- Sentence frames: used daily or several times a week by over 85% of respondents.
- Word banks or word walls: frequently used at about 86%.
- Modeling or demonstrating: over 90% reported using this regularly.
- Visual supports, such as photos and video: over 90% used daily.
- Student background integration: more than 80% use students' interests or backgrounds in lessons, and participants in the focus group interviews shared that they create personalized stories and math problems, enabling their students to see themselves in their school work

Understanding Designated and Integrated English Language Development (ELD)

Designated and Integrated ELD are essential to supporting English learners' academic and language growth. **Designated ELD** is a protected daily time for small-group instruction focused on how English works; grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, along with structured practice in listening, speaking, reading, and writing assessed through the ELPAC. It's like learning the rules of the game before playing.

Integrated ELD happens across all subjects: science, math, and history. Teachers embed language supports such as visuals, sentence frames, and collaborative discussions within lessons. English learners build both academic content knowledge and English proficiency alongside their peers.

Understanding these approaches matters because, without them, students may struggle silently, unable to show what they know due to language barriers rather than ability. When implemented effectively, Designated and Integrated ELD provide essential scaffolds, helping multilingual students access rigorous content and develop the academic language needed for higher-level learning.

Regarding instructional formats such as small group, individualized instruction, and pull-out groups led by the teacher or specialist, the results are as follows:

- Small group instruction: daily or weekly for 84% of educators.
- Individualized instruction: regularly used by over 75%.
- Pull-out interventions: used by a majority at 74%.

Participants were asked about their training needs to support ELs. Differentiation of instruction for ELD proficiency levels and Designated ELD were the top two areas in which teachers said they need more training.

Educators selected the following as top areas for professional development (selecting up to three):

1. Differentiation for ELD proficiency levels: 43%
2. Designated ELD instruction: 31%
3. Small group instruction: 30%
4. Integrated ELD instruction: 29%
5. Culturally responsive teaching: 21%
6. Writing and Reading strategies: ~28%
7. Oral production in class: 14%

These four top training needs are directly related to Designated and Integrated English Language Development. One participant shared,

“Teachers don’t necessarily want to teach Designated ELD ... it takes planning.”

There is a nuanced relationship here between the earlier data about instructor *confidence* and instructor *readiness*. While 80% of teachers feel *confident* or *very confident* in teaching ELs, over 40% of all respondents still request training in key instructional areas. This relationship can tell us that confidence does not eliminate the need and desire for growth with a large portion of teachers still seeking training in core ELD instructional practices. Further, this suggests a healthy recognition that confidence does not necessarily equal mastery. While confidence is high in general, it may be surface-level or context-dependent. According to survey and interview data,

teachers may know broadly what to do for ELs but need further assistance in how to implement strategies well, especially those pertaining to differentiation, Integrated and Designated ELD, and scaffolding. The implications here speak to the need for targeted professional development to bridge the gap between confidence and deep instructional readiness.

The survey also asked about the amount of classroom time devoted to Designated ELD and the times varied.

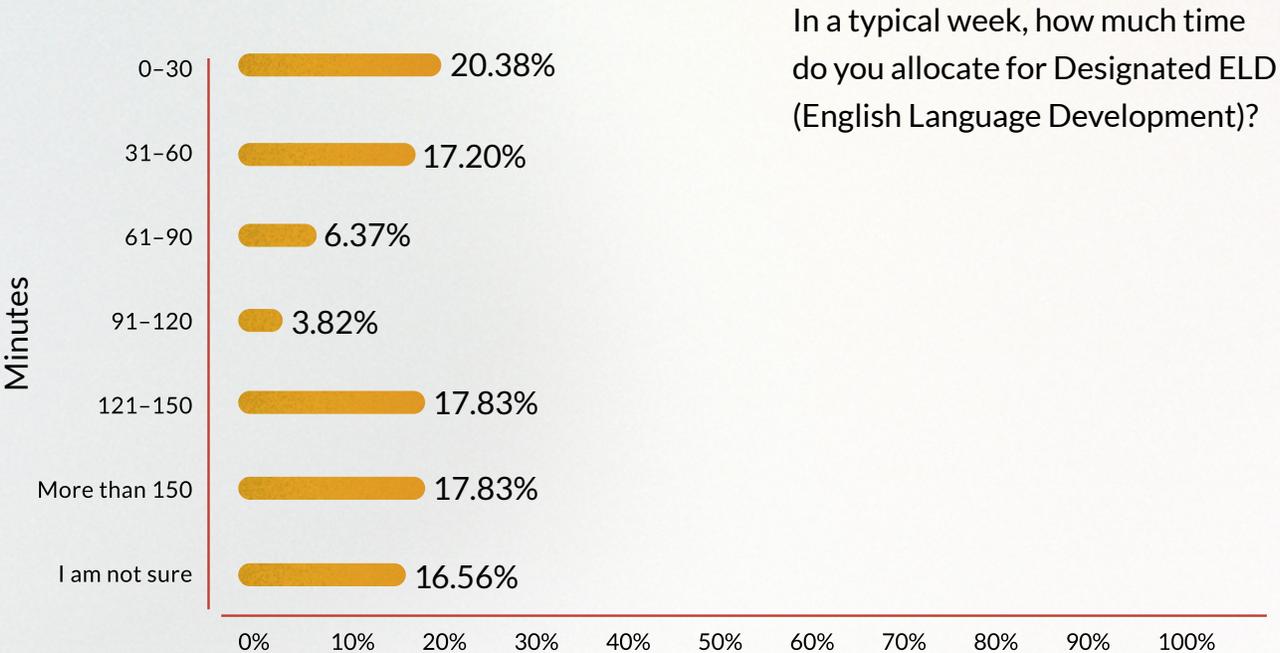
- 20% taught 0 min to 30 min per week
- 18% taught more than 150 min per week

The California Department of Education states that Designated ELD time is not an add-on or an after school class, rather a protected time within the school day vital to the development of critical English and content area achievement (CDE, 2022).

Survey responses indicate that 20% of teachers are teaching ELD about 30 min per week, while 18% taught more than 150 min per week. Focus group participants elaborated on their efforts at providing Designated ELD time.

“We group our students by their English language proficiency level according to the ELPAC. ... We try to keep it to two proficiency levels per class. ... It’s a lot of work, but it’s ideal for Designated ELD.”

The following graph below shows how many minutes per week educators allocate for Designated ELD.



Another participant noted that it is during Designated ELD time when EL students have space and time to practice in smaller groups.

“Getting our students to speak more and practice the language ... structured student interactions are big.”

During one focus group interview, participants stated their district requires daily Designated ELD blocks (often 30–45 min) using programs like *Systematic ELD*, *Language Power*, *HELLO*, or *Summit K12*. Students are grouped by proficiency level, rather than grade level, and teachers share students during Designated ELD time.

“When students practiced structured conversations, you could see them blossom. They were actually speaking throughout the whole period.”

The survey asked about the support and curriculum that teachers have access to, specifically for ELs.

- 72% indicated they have access to curriculum materials tailored for ELs

Survey participants were then asked a follow-up question about their confidence level in using their English learner curriculum.

- 43% feel confident using the material, but 31% are only somewhat confident using the material

Additionally, participants were asked about English learner access to materials in their home language.

- 59% said ELs have access to materials in their home language

One teacher shared that they strive to have books and signage in the language of the students in the classroom and allow students to show what they know in their home language.

“We make sure that newcomers see their language in the classroom ... one student floored us when she articulated that no one had ever let her show what she knew. Now, she feels confident and motivated.”

Another teacher echoed the intentionality of allowing students to use their first language in class.

“Valuing their first language has been impactful because it builds relationships and eases the transition to English.”

Many focus group participants across districts noted that the Project GLAD (Guided Language Academic Development) and SDAIE (Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English) strategies are especially effective for English learners. Others heavily emphasized the value of integrating the students’ home language into the classroom, even if the teacher does not speak or understand the language. Additionally, incorporating a level of cultural understanding by displaying images or cultural symbols in the classroom helps foster meaningful relationships with newcomer students and English language learners. Teachers discussed intentionality in selecting books and activities that reflect student identities.

“We chose books where students of Mexican or Asian descent could see themselves ... bringing in culture they can relate to.”

One teacher described creating content-level, grade-level materials with text differentiated for the student at a beginning level of English proficiency. She wanted to avoid stigmatizing younger-level texts for upper elementary students.

“I wasn’t going to give him baby books ... so I created my own materials through music and topics he loved.”

This demonstrates how teachers are creating and differentiating materials and instructions for students at varying levels of English acquisition.

In summary, teachers want ongoing, targeted professional development to better support ELs and the time to plan differentiated lessons according to EL proficiency levels. They seek to foster a deeper cultural and linguistic understanding of their students. Finally, they are looking for collaborative strategies and not just compliance-driven mandates.

3: While many are aware of how ELs are classified and *reclassified*, some respondents are unfamiliar with these processes.

Participants were asked about their knowledge of English language learner classification as well as how English learners get reclassified. For teachers of ELs, understanding the initial

identification as an English learner, or classification, and then how to exit the English learner status and become reclassified is critical because these designations determine students' access to services, supports at school, and coursework as they move from elementary to secondary school.

In terms of instructional placement and support, classification determines the type and intensity of ELD instruction a student receives. Teachers who understand the classification process are better equipped to interpret assessment data from the ELPAC and tailor instruction accordingly (Gándara & Orfield, 2010).

Reclassification signals a student as proficient in English and grants them full access to the general education curriculum without any limitations that may be imposed by English learner status. Teachers who are aware of the criteria for reclassification—which in California include English proficiency test scores, teacher input, and academic benchmarks—can advocate and point to data for their students to reclassify when ready (Umansky et al., 2015).

Avoiding Long-Term English Learner status is crucial for accessing secondary courses and ultimately achieving academic success. When students remain classified as an English learner for six years or more, they are typically labeled Long-Term English Learners (LTELs). Students classified as LTELs experience lower academic outcomes, limited access to rigorous coursework, and higher dropout rates compared to peers who are reclassified in a timely manner and under six years. Teachers' awareness of this issue can help move students forward in their acquisition of English and ultimately prevent them from being placed in remedial tracks in secondary education (Olsen, 2014; Umansky & Reardon, 2014). For these reasons we wanted to learn more about teachers' understanding and awareness of classification and reclassification.

Questions were asked specifically about teachers' familiarity with the process of classifying English learners as well as reclassifying them, which is the goal for English learner students.

Response Option	% of Respondents
I am very familiar and could train others	29.07%
I am familiar but not confident enough to train others	33.14%
I am somewhat familiar	29.07%
I do not know how ELs are classified	8.72%

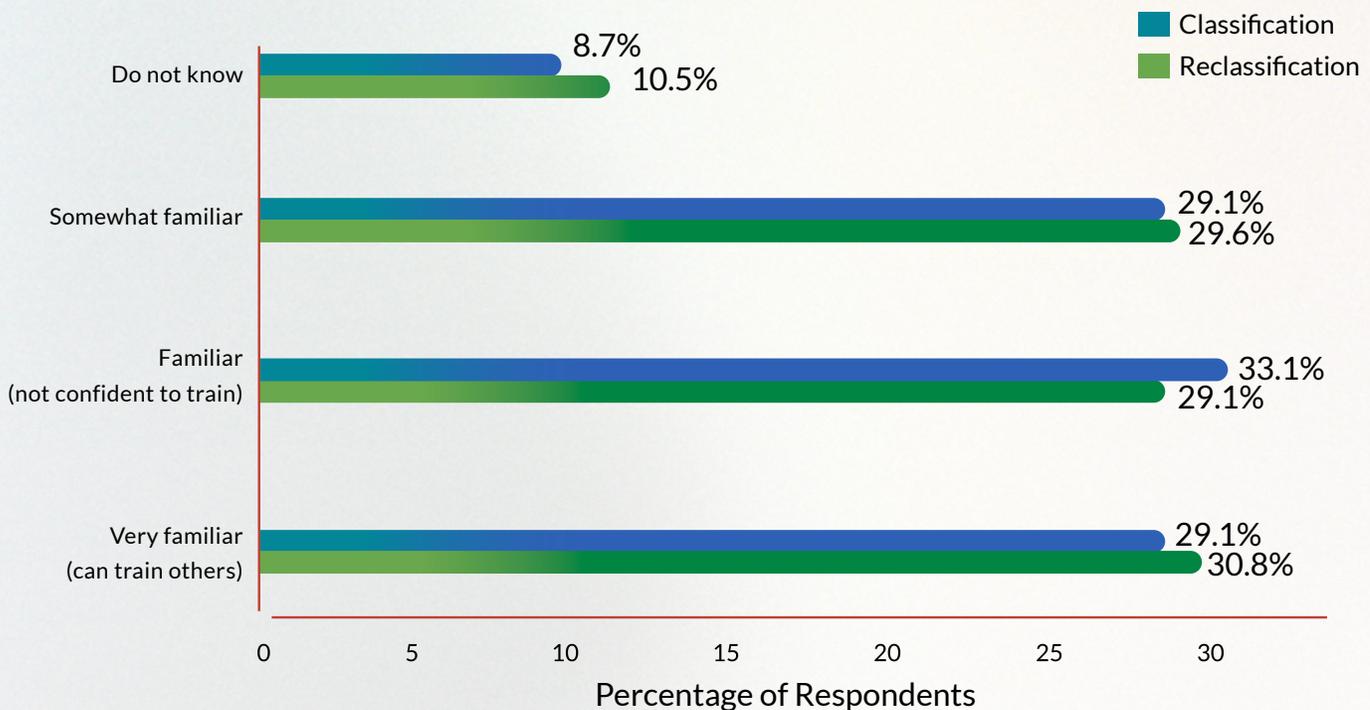
How much do you know about how ELs are classified?

While 62% feel confident in their understanding of the classification process, only 29% feel confident enough to train others, and nearly 9% lack a basic understanding of how English learners are classified.

Participants were then asked about how English learners are reclassified or exited from English learner status.

Response Option	% of Respondents
I am very familiar and could train others	30.81%
I am familiar but not confident enough to train others	29.07%
I am somewhat familiar	29.65%
I do not know how ELs are reclassified	10.47%

Teacher Knowledge of EL Classification vs. Reclassification



How much do you know about how ELs are reclassified?

While awareness of reclassification is slightly higher, nearly 40% of educators are only somewhat

familiar or less, and 1 in 10 respondents say they don't know how reclassification works at all. These two questions indicate that while many teachers are exposed to the EL classification process, less than one third feel confident enough to train others. A significant minority, about 1 in 10, are unfamiliar with key procedures which may affect accurate student placement, monitoring of student progress, and support and may even delay reclassification.

Teachers of ELs must understand classification and reclassification because these processes directly influence access to rigorous coursework, equity in college preparation, and long-term academic trajectories. Delays in reclassification often track students into limited opportunities, preventing them from fully engaging in secondary pathways that prepare them for higher education and beyond. When teachers understand classification and reclassification processes, they can better support multilingual learners in moving toward full access, academic equity, and future success.

4: A majority of educators report that they celebrate EL student progress, leverage the home language for learning, and provide opportunities to develop their home language in school.

Across both focus group interviews, a powerful narrative emerged: teachers and districts throughout Los Angeles County are making intentional, heartfelt efforts to celebrate the progress and reclassification of English learners. These celebrations serve a dual purpose: to recognize genuine academic achievement and to inspire motivation among students and their families.

At the school level, teachers described creating special certificates for students who demonstrated growth on the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). These certificates were often presented at end-of-year awards assemblies, where students could take pride in seeing their hard work acknowledged publicly. For many English learners, this recognition represented their only academic award of the year, making the moment deeply personal. In classrooms, educators found creative ways to make progress tangible, organizing pizza parties, small-group celebrations, and recognition boards to highlight reclassification milestones.

Teachers intentionally “pumped up” the importance of reaching English proficiency, helping students understand that reclassification was not just a label but an accomplishment that opened doors to future academic success.

At the district level, celebrations took on an even larger scale. Many districts hosted reclassification ceremonies designed to honor the achievement of students who had reached English proficiency. In one district, more than 300



students were recognized in a single year during a districtwide event. Administrators described going “all out” with food trucks, Kona Ice stands, music, and family invitations, transforming the ceremony into a community celebration. The emphasis on joy and recognition reflected a broader cultural shift in district leadership. Under new multilingual program directors, districts began making EL success a visible and celebrated part of their educational identity, and reclassification became a proud community milestone rather than an administrative update.

Students also experience profound pride when they achieve milestones. In one district, teachers described the joy of reclassification:

“Two of my students reclassified this year, and one who had been stuck at Level 1 moved up to Level 2. The kids felt so proud.”

Such moments illustrate the transformative impact of recognition and how progress in language learning builds confidence and motivation.

Teachers across schools emphasized that these acts of celebration carried motivational and emotional significance. Recognizing students for their progress toward reclassification validated their determination and effort, strengthening their academic identities and sense of belonging. These moments also embraced families into the school community. Parents who attended district events described feeling proud and inspired by their children’s success in English language acquisition, reinforcing partnerships between home and school.

Teachers repeatedly emphasized that EL students are eager to learn but often constrained by structures that limit their ability to express knowledge. One educator recalled an empathy interview in Spanish with a newcomer:

“She floored us with her articulation and her vocabulary in Spanish when she expressed that no one let her communicate her knowledge ... she could never express what she actually knew of the topics because she didn’t speak English.”

This story accentuates the importance of valuing students’ first languages as valid tools for learning, rather than treating them as obstacles. Students bring rich knowledge and cultural capital that often goes untapped if schools focus solely on English.

Parents play a critical role in sustaining home languages while navigating a new education system. Teachers shared how districts engaged families through ELAC (English Learner Advisory Committees) and parent workshops, but also how families often also struggle to know how to support their children:

“Parents sometimes don’t know how they can help. [Providing] workshops with parents so they know how to better support their kids at home would be huge.”

Families are deeply invested in their children’s bilingual futures. One participant described newcomer orientations with parents conducted in their home language:

“I told the family, I’ll equip you to walk away with a lot of useful info ... what students are learning, how discipline works, and how to support language at home.”

Parents also need reassurance that maintaining their home language benefits, rather than hinders, English acquisition. One educator explained:

“We’ve made it a point ... to talk about valuing home language and the importance of parents still talking to them in their native language.”

Survey data echoed these qualitative findings. Teachers reported that reviewing student progress toward reclassification was a regular practice not only for tracking growth but also for acknowledging effort and improvement. Many respondents highlighted that school- and district-level recognition programs boosted both student engagement and family involvement. The data revealed that educators viewed reclassification as a shared win, one that symbolized the collective efforts of students, families, teachers, and administrators.

Educators described how intentional gestures such as providing translations, displaying multilingual sentence frames, or choosing culturally relevant literature all communicated respect and belonging. One teacher reflected:

“Creating an environment where students see their language and where they see themselves in their space honors them.”

Such recognition supports not only language acquisition but also social-emotional well-being, which is particularly critical for newcomers who may be navigating trauma, migration, or loss. For some participants, the celebration of English learners’ achievements has evolved from a routine acknowledgment to a visible community-centered practice. Through certificates, assemblies, classroom parties, and districtwide events, educators are affirming multilingualism as a strength and positioning language growth as a celebrated cornerstone of student success.

Dual Language Immersion Programs

In exploring how schools support the development of both English and students' first languages, the study examined the presence and scope of dual language immersion (DLI) programs across participating districts. Among the 26 educational organizations represented, nearly 76% reported offering a dual language immersion program designed to promote biliteracy by developing proficiency in both the home language and English.

Survey data revealed that DLI programs span a wide range of languages, reflecting the linguistic richness of Los Angeles County. The languages offered include Arabic, Armenian, Cantonese, Mandarin, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Of the 179 respondents, 136 indicated that their districts currently offer a dual language immersion program (75.98%), 15.64% reported not having one, and 8.38% were unsure. These findings suggest that more than three quarters of educators work in districts actively implementing bilingual instructional models.

Among the districts offering DLI programs, Spanish and Mandarin emerged as the most common languages of instruction. Spanish programs accounted for 91.91% of responses, followed by Mandarin at 64.71%. Other languages represented smaller yet significant programs, including Korean (8.09%), French (7.35%), and Armenian (5.88%), while Arabic, Cantonese, and Vietnamese each accounted for less than 2.5%. Tagalog, Hmong, and German were not represented in this dataset. The strong representation of Spanish and Mandarin aligns with the region's demographic and cultural diversity, while the smaller programs reflect localized community language needs.

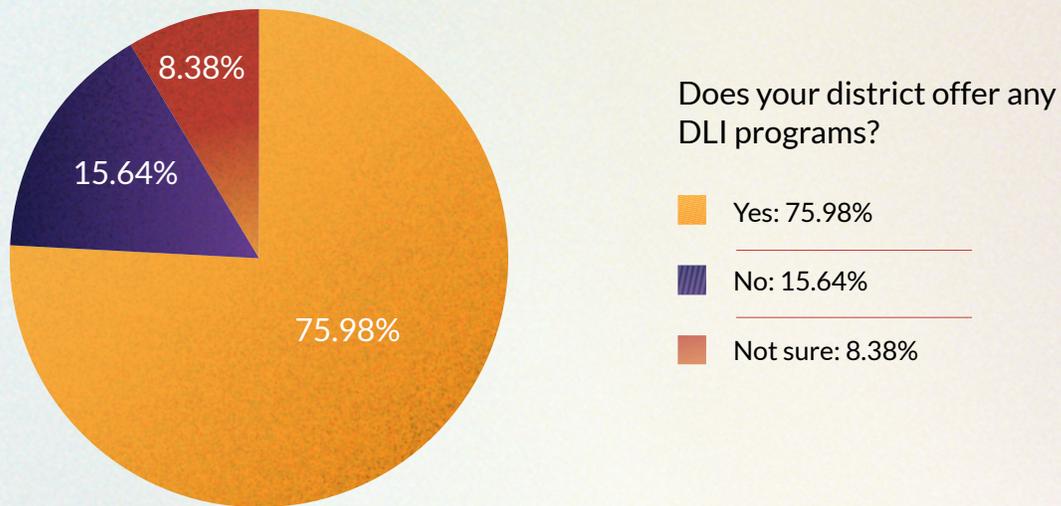
Beyond dual language immersion programs, the study also explored whether English learners (ELs) have opportunities to continue developing their home language within school settings. When asked this question, 72% of educators affirmed that such opportunities exist at their schools, 13% responded that they do not, and 15% were unsure. This indicates that although a majority of schools provide pathways for maintaining and enhancing the home language, nearly one in four respondents reported either a lack of access or uncertainty about available support.

Overall, these findings reinforce a strong and growing commitment among districts to multilingual education. However, they also highlight uneven awareness and access to opportunities for heritage language development. While dual language immersion programs are increasingly common, ensuring equitable access and clear communication about these programs remains an important next step in advancing language equity across school systems.



The study sought to learn about different programs at school sites that support the development of the first language as well as English. The study revealed more about districts offering dual language immersion programs.

Districts Offering Dual Language Immersion Programs

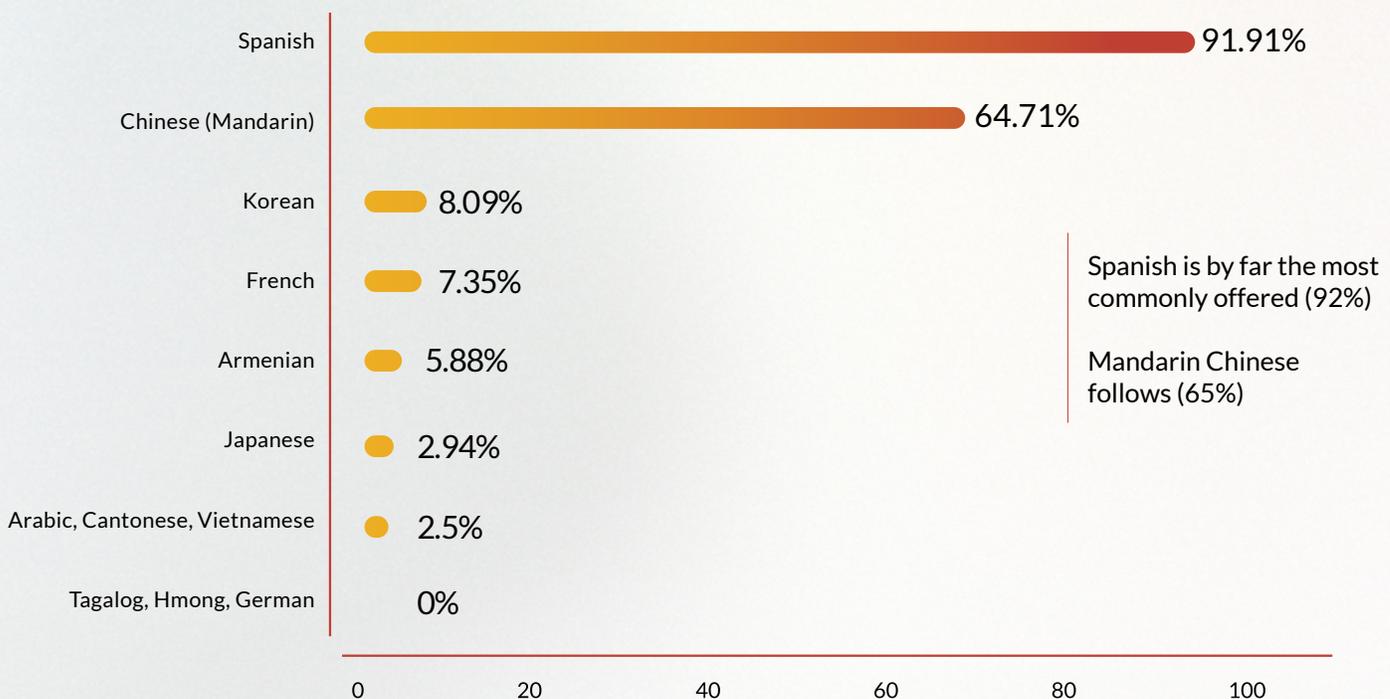


This shows that over three fourths of educators are in districts with active dual language programs.

Languages Offered in DLI Programs

Respondents were allowed to choose multiple options. Among the 136 who said their district offers DLI, the following languages were selected. Several respondents work in districts that offer more than one language program and selected multiple languages.

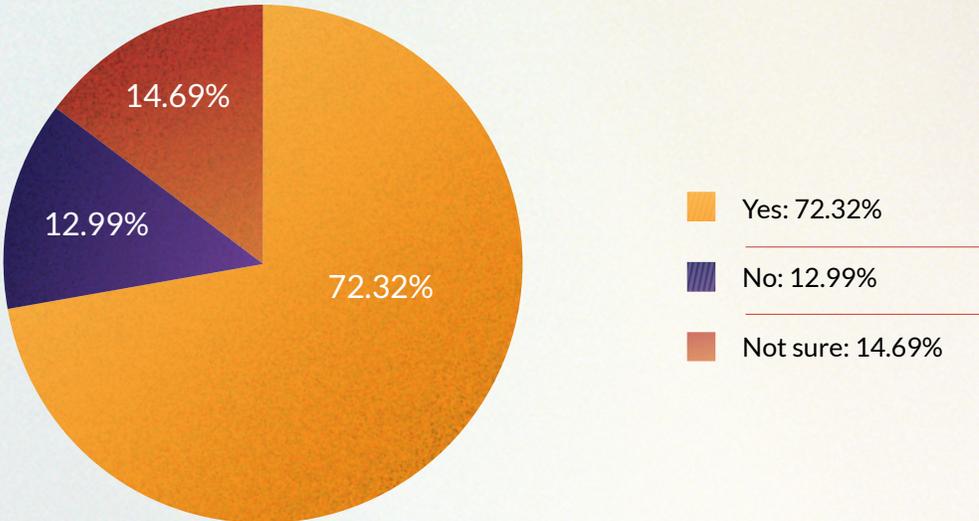
Languages Offered In Dual Language Immersion (DLI) Programs



Spanish and Mandarin are by far the most common languages in dual language programs. The high presence of Mandarin (65%) reflects the multilingual diversity of certain LA County districts. Smaller programs exist for Korean, French, and Armenian, aligning with specific local communities. The language offerings reflect the linguistic diversity of LA County, especially in urban and multicultural districts.

Outside of housing a dual language immersion program, the study sought to determine whether students had opportunities to learn and develop their home language at school.

Do your English learners have the opportunity to learn and develop their home language in school?



A strong majority (72%) of educators report that ELs do have opportunities to build on their home language in school. However, nearly 1 in 4 respondents either said “No” or “Not sure,” suggesting inconsistency in access or awareness of these opportunities. While dual language programs and heritage language support may be widespread, they’re not universal, and not all educators are fully aware of them.

5: Teachers want to improve their practices in moving English learners to reclassification.

When teachers were asked what they would wish for to support English learners, focus group participants shared a range of ideas, all grounded in a deep commitment to helping multilingual students succeed.

One of the most consistent wishes was for ELD coaches to be present at every site. Teachers emphasized the value of expertise in providing timely instructional support. As one teacher put it, *“At least an ELD coach at every site ... so teachers get the help they need in the moment.”* Participants explained that such coaches could model effective teaching strategies, coteach lessons, and help spread best practices across schools more efficiently.

Another theme that emerged was the need for time to collaborate and observe colleagues. Many teachers expressed a desire for professional learning that allows them to see high quality instruction in action. One participant said, *“More opportunities to see how people are doing it in the classroom ... with real students. That would be nice.”* Teachers viewed collaboration and peer observation as powerful tools for learning new approaches and enhancing instructional consistency across grade levels.

Several participants highlighted the importance of resources specifically designed for newcomers, students who are new to the country and learning English for the first time. *“Something that would really help our newcomers ... resources to develop their language and support them academically,”* one teacher noted. Educators also emphasized the need for translation tools and reliable technology, such as iPads and functioning Chromebooks, to support multilingual classrooms and bridge communication gaps more effectively.

The issue of class size and staffing was another recurring topic. Teachers, especially in dual immersion programs, shared that large class sizes and the reduction of classroom aides made it difficult to provide differentiated, small-group instruction. One teacher summarized this challenge simply: *“If we can have teacher’s aides, bodies in the classroom for small group instruction, that would be lovely.”*

Participants also requested high-interest, age-appropriate materials for English learners, noting that available resources were often either too basic or not engaging enough. One teacher explained, *“Materials that are high interest but valid for their age level ... I had to create my own when a fifth grader came as a newcomer.”* Teachers wanted access to developmentally appropriate materials so that students could stay motivated and challenged at every grade level.

Professional development was another area where teachers sought improvement. They wanted training that was practical, inclusive, and strategy-focused, rather than limited to procedural checklists. As one participant explained, *“We want GLAD not just for ELD classes, but throughout the school day and for everybody.”* Another added, *“Not just ELPAC checklists. We need real strategies.”* Teachers felt that effective professional development should equip all educators, not just specialists, with tools to support English learners in every classroom.

Family engagement and parent education were also emphasized to support English learners. Teachers envisioned workshops that would help families better understand how to bridge the

continuity of learning at home. One teacher shared, *“Workshops with parents so they know how to better support their kids at home—that would be huge.”*

Finally, teachers explained the need for culturally responsive practices and a deeper understanding of students’ backgrounds. *“How much do we really know about our newcomers’ families? ... We need to be culturally responsive, and pair that with visuals and gestures,”* one participant reflected. This comment emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing the diverse cultural experiences that students bring to the classroom.

Beyond high-quality, age-appropriate material resources to support English learners, teachers want to continue learning and building their own capacity to improve outcomes for their students. Their expressed wishes for ELD coaches, dedicated collaboration time, opportunities to observe effective practices, and expanding their knowledge of culturally responsive approaches speak to their aspirations to be more effective in the classroom. Coupled with smaller class sizes and parent workshops, these practices are designed to create more equitable, engaging, and supportive learning environments for multilingual students.



Recommendations

While data and policy provide important context for understanding English learners in Los Angeles, the lived experiences of students and their families are central to any meaningful discussion. The voices captured in interviews with educators highlight not only the challenges ELs face but also the resilience, cultural richness, and aspirations that families bring to schools (González, et al., 2005). Here are five recommendations based on the voices and findings from our data analysis.

The intent is to offer manageable and actionable steps that district leaders, school administrators, and educators can take to support English learners better. Many of these actions do not require additional funding, rather a strategic reallocation of existing planning and professional development time. From enhancing collaborative learning structures to elevating the visibility of student progress, these strategies are rooted in what teachers themselves have identified as critical to student success. They are designed to align with California’s multilingual goals while addressing persistent gaps in instructional practice, educator knowledge, and family engagement. Implemented with intention, these steps can make a meaningful difference in supporting English learners’ academic growth, English language development, and sense of belonging without overwhelming already stretched school systems.

1: Prioritize Ongoing, Collaborative Professional Learning Focused on ELs

- Move beyond one-time workshops by establishing regular, structured collaboration time centered on English learners.
- Support teams should focus on instructional strategies, student progress, and reclassification.
- Include opportunities for peer mentoring, particularly to tap into the strengths of experienced educators. Instructional learning rounds could frame a culture of learning from one another.

2: Strengthen Educator Understanding of EL Classification and Reclassification

- Provide clear, consistent training on how ELs are identified and reclassified. Ensure that all teachers, not just EL specialists or those conducting assessments such as the ELPAC, understand how these processes impact instruction and student outcomes. *Every educator on campus should own this EL knowledge and be part of the road to successful student reclassification.*
- Schedule annual all staff training to share classification and reclassification criteria
- Revisit EL progress multiple times per year ahead of the ELPAC assessment and then analyze results to inform designated ELD time.

3: Celebrate Progress and Milestones in English Language Development

- Acknowledge and honor ELs' academic and linguistic growth publicly.
- Regular progress monitoring and visible recognition of reclassification help motivate students and validate their success in front of the school community.

4: Expand Access to Home Language and Dual Language Programs

- Promote dual language immersion (DLI) programs that use the home languages of students as instructional assets.
- Create opportunities for families to access workshops, translated materials, and guidance in their native language to build school-home partnerships.

5: Invest in Instructional Supports Beyond Materials

- Address teachers' needs by building their capacity beyond the top two listed ELD strategies.
- Help teachers broaden their toolkit with a reliable set of ELD strategies and approaches to differentiating instruction.
- Create a team mindset and goal, utilizing the resources and personnel to collectively monitor progress, support, and celebrate English learner reclassification.

Connecting to Secondary Schools: Application to the K-12 Setting

This section connects early English learner support for elementary students as they progress into middle and high school. The skills, access, and equitable structures established in elementary grades directly influence later outcomes such as reclassification, long-term English learner status, and college readiness. By examining continuity and articulated practices across grade spans, we highlight how aligned K-12 systems sustain language growth and academic success for multilingual learners.

- **Elementary level:** Focus on equitable access to dual language programs, prevent misclassification into special education, and strengthen early foundations in both English and home languages. Focused ELD instruction and timing are critical in moving ELs to reclassification to avoid LTEL status in middle and high school.
- **Middle and high school:** Prioritize integration of content and language instruction, provide systemic collaboration structures, and ensure ELs graduate with pathways to college and career readiness.
- **Systemwide:** Recognize that ELs' success is a shared responsibility across all teachers, not just ELD specialists. By aligning professional learning, staffing, and instructional practices from early childhood through secondary education, LA County can create a cohesive and equitable K-12 continuum for multilingual learners.

In Closing

The voices of students, families, and teachers make clear that multilingual learners are not empty vessels but carriers of knowledge, identity, and resilience. Their stories highlight the importance of valuing home languages, celebrating progress, and strengthening family engagement. By listening to and amplifying these voices, schools can ensure that educational strategies are grounded in lived realities and cultural strengths.

We thank the many teachers who generously shared their experiences, insights, and hopes for supporting English learners across Los Angeles County. Their voices reveal both the tremendous dedication in our schools and the pressing need for focused, intentional action. Our hope is that the information presented here urges us all to not just talk about improving outcomes for English learners but to act collaboratively and boldly. *This is our collective responsibility.*



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Appendix 1

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the complexity of teaching and learning experiences for English learners in Los Angeles County. By collecting and analyzing survey data alongside focus group interviews and triangulating these findings with public-facing district data, the research team sought to develop a holistic understanding of the opportunities and challenges in supporting multilingual learners across the county.

Research Questions

1. How are elementary multilingual students supported in the attainment of English as well as another language?
2. What kinds of classroom elements uplift and enhance language learning?
3. How does the educational community and context contribute to multilingual learning opportunities and achievements?

Participants and Data Sources

The participant pool was drawn from a convenience sample of PK–elementary educators in Los Angeles County who had self-identified at professional workshops hosted by the Los Angeles County Office of Education Multilingual Academic Support Unit. A total of 189 survey responses were collected with consent and acknowledgement that they were participating in a research study using Survey Monkey. The survey consisted of 53 items including multiple choice questions, open-ended questions, and rating scales, combined with demographic questions to better contextualize participants' responses.

To complement the survey data, participants were given the option to also participate in focus group interviews. The research team conducted five focus group interviews with 12 educators representing a range of professional roles, including classroom teachers, teachers on special assignment, instructional coaches, and administrators across multiple districts. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, lasted approximately 45 min to 60 min each, and followed a semistructured interview protocol designed to elicit teachers' preparation, pedagogy, and perspectives on multilingual student achievement.

Data Integration and Triangulation

The convergent design involved analyzing quantitative and qualitative data separately before comparing results for convergence, complementarity, and divergence (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach enabled the research team to identify not only patterns across data sources but also nuanced differences in perspectives. The triangulation of surveys, interviews, and district-level data enhanced the validity of the findings and allowed for a more comprehensive interpretation of teacher experiences (Mertler, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

In line with the approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained across all data collection and reporting processes.



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