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# Behind the Numbers: How Are English Language Development, Mainstream Teachers', and School Districts' Needs Met?

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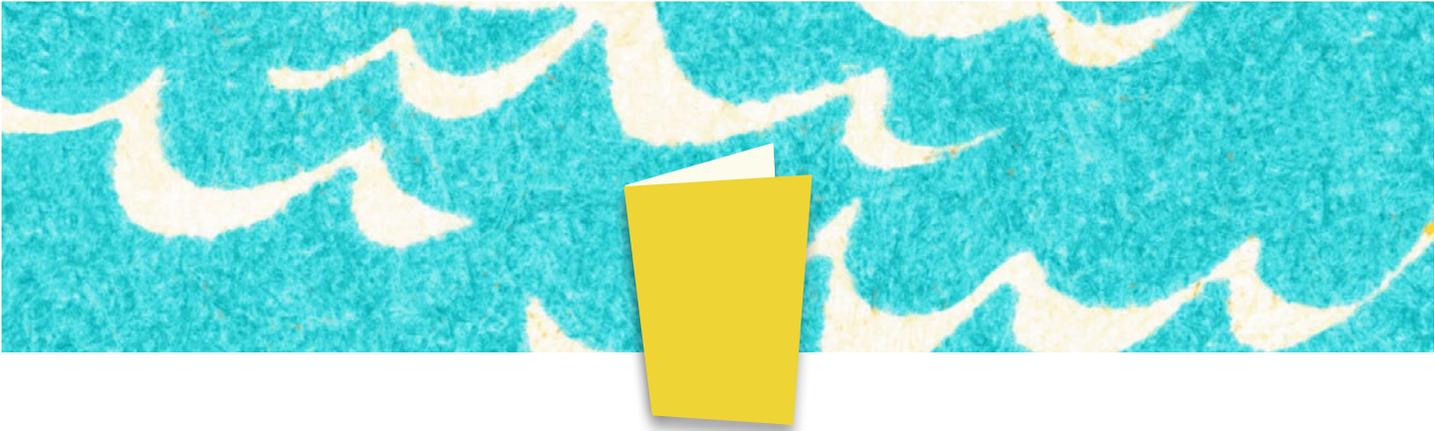


FEATURE

# Behind the Numbers

How Are English Language Development, Mainstream Teachers', and School Districts' Needs Met?

By Nagnon Diarrassouba, GVSU Faculty



Many researchers and practitioners in English language development (ELD) cite the increasing number of English learners (ELs) in US schools to justify their studies and works. The number of English learners has increased dramatically in the last two decades. Beyond using the increasing numbers to rationalize research, the production of professional documents, and the use of instructional and learning materials, very few researchers and practitioners have analyzed these numbers at local levels and the implications for teacher preparation programs. This article examines the US national, the state of Michigan, and the Grand Rapids metropolitan area English learner populations to demonstrate that national, state, and local decision makers and teacher training programs need to develop professional workshops and curricula for in-service and pre-service classroom practitioners.

### Analysis of the English Learner Demographic Data

The number of English learners in the US has been steadily increasing. The increasing attention to services for ELs, along with the increasingly diverse language backgrounds of this population today, presents a decidedly more challenging educational context for teachers.

The United States Department of Education (2014) shows that, over the last decade, approximately 8% of the student population has been receiving English language development services. Eight states have a percentage that approximates or is higher than that national mean, including California (30%), Texas (15%), Colorado (11.4%), and Florida (8.8%) (Wright, 2015, pp. 7-8). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015) also reveals

that most ELs are concentrated in urban centers, where they constitute 16.7% of the population. Suburban and rural school districts have substantially smaller percentages; 5.9% and 3.5%, respectively. This disparity is demonstrated in the particular case of the state of Michigan and the Grand Rapids metropolitan area.

### The Cases of Michigan and of the Grand Rapids Public Metropolitan School Districts

Michigan represents a case that is interesting in that nationally it is not a state that is recognized with significant EL population. As a matter of fact, Michigan is far from the national mean percentage, which is 10%. As shown in Table 1 below, the EL population in Michigan revolves around 3% and 4%.

Table 1  
Michigan ELD Population, 2002-2013

Year	Percent
2002-03	3.2
2007-08	3.00
2008-09	3.6
2009-10	3.5
2010-11	3.5
2011-2012	3.7
2012-2013	4.1

Source: National Center of Education Statistics, 2014

However, the national percentages overshadow the influx of population in particular regions in various parts of the state, particularly in the Grand Rapids metropolitan area. As shown in Table 2 on page 23, it appears that the

demographics for English learners, along with students known as culturally and linguistically different (CLD) or ethnolinguistic students (Pérez & Guzman (2002), has been steadily increasing. Even rural districts such as Caledonia, where the population was seemingly homogenous, the number of CLD has risen from 0 in 2001-2002 to 8% in 2011- 2012. Conversely, the largest enrollments of ELs and CLDs remain an urban and suburban phenomena. For instance, Grand Rapids Public Schools has witnessed an unprecedented soar in its EL and CLD demographics between 2001-2002 and 2011-2011, rising from 15% of ELs and 72% CLDs to 20.5% and 79%. In the suburbs of Grand Rapids, Kentwood has had an unprecedented growth in the EL population, going from 2% in 2001-2002 to 15% in 2011-2012. Similar percentages have been shown in districts such as Godwin Heights and Wyoming. Table 2 also indicates that suburbs that are perceived as inhabited by upper middle class, such as East Grand Rapids, enroll less ELs and CLD students.

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## National, State, and Programmatic Endeavors Addressing Teacher Training for English Learners

Given the growth of ELs, reforms and even transformations of teacher preparation programs in colleges, universities, and professional development workshops at state and school district levels need to be reinforced and implemented. In this section, I briefly focus on endeavors at the national and state levels with the passing of laws and the production of teacher preparation materials (essentially textbooks), and end with reforms led in teacher preparation programs at the college level with the case of the TESOL program at Grand Valley State University.

### National Endeavors

At the national level, the Lau vs. Nichols Supreme Court ruling of 1974 constitutes the landmark for the official creation of bilingual and ELD programs together with districts attempts to accommodate ELs. The court ruling was interpreted in various ways and for the most

Table 2

Diversity Comparison: Grand Rapids and Neighboring Districts' School Demographic Percentages

<i>School District</i>	<i>School Year 2001-2002</i>	<i>School Year 2011-2012</i>	<i>School Year 2001-2002</i>	<i>School Year 2011-2012</i>
	ELs*	ELs*	CLDs**	CLDs**
Caledonia Community	0	0.07	3	8
East Grand Rapids Public	1	0.04	6	9
Forest Hills Public	2	0.01	6	15
Godfrey Lee Public	24	32.4	58	89
Godwin Heights Public	n/d	13	n/d	73
Grand Rapids Public	15	20.3	72	79
Kentwood Public	2	15	37	58
Wyoming Public	8	14.3	28	59

\* English learners \*\* Culturally and/or linguistically different students

Source: IJELP, 2014 Volume 9

part ELS did not partake in mainstream instructional processes, but were secluded in self-contained rooms until they became proficient in English (Curtin, 2009). For many, particularly those in upper high school grades, that seclusion meant inability to graduate with a regular high school diploma. Conversely, Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act, Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, mandates that all schools receiving federal funding implement high quality education to all students allowing them to pass state proficiency tests. In the same vein, Title III, Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012) aims at ensuring that “English learners and immigrant students who are non-native speakers of English achieve language proficiency and meet the same standards as their English-speaking peers in content areas” (Diarrasouba & Johnson, 2014, p. 46). As many states receive funding from the federal government and given that they have significant numbers of ELs, they were left with little to no choice but to ascertain that this specific category of students receive adequate instruction. Publishers and other experts also started producing materials and arguing for the need to provide regular teachers with adequate professional training.

### State and Publisher Endeavors

Following federal government efforts to provide all students with equal opportunity to become proficient in English and in academic disciplines, publishers and experts in the area of ELD started producing materials. For the most part, recent efforts have focused on sheltered English instruction programs in which ELD specialists and regular teachers receive training allowing them to teach not only English learners but also native English speaking students. Some of the most well-known teaching approaches

developed over the last two decades are the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE), and the Differentiated Learning or Instruction. All of these approaches claim to focus on providing teachers, particularly the regular and disciplinary teachers, with the knowledge and skills allowing them to teach not only content but academic English in a heterogeneous classroom setting. Recently, the proponents of a number of these teaching methods have recognized the complex nature of English learners, who may not only be challenged with academic contents but also be experiencing some developmental issues. For instance, Echevarria, Voght, and Short (2012) in the fourth edition of Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model have written a chapter that deals with how to teach English learners that may be identified as special needs students, thus making their approach interdisciplinary or cross disciplinary. Researchers have also been giving attention to that issue and making recommendations for improving teacher training (Reed, 2013; Rodriguez, 2009.)

By the same token, many states have recognized the need to provide regular classroom teachers with adequate training allowing them to not only comply with federal mandates but also to integrate ELs in instructional and learning processes. Ballantyne, Sanderman, and Levy (2008) divide states into five major categories in relation to professional preparation and continuous training required of regular teachers. These states rank from those who have specific course or certification requirements to those that have no obligations. Only seven states require that regular teachers be certified or have completed significant amount of coursework dealing with sheltered instruction. Seven-

*Teacher preparation programs need to embrace interdisciplinary or cross disciplinary approaches, if they want to educate their candidates to be adaptable to various teaching and learning contexts.*

teen states expect their teachers to have graduated from, or taken courses from, an approved teacher preparation program. Michigan belongs to that category. As a matter of fact, Michigan asks that teachers fulfill the requirements of a reading diagnostic course to maintain their current (or renew their) teaching certificate.

## Programmatic Endeavors: The Case of the Grand Valley State University TESOL Program

Teacher preparation colleges have been meeting the requirements of their states in various ways. While some have included specific courses dealing with ELD issues, others have developed entire programs. This is the case of the College of Education (COE) at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), where undergraduate as well as graduate programs are specifically designed to meet the needs of pre-service and in-service teachers. The Differentiated Learning, the Reading, and the Teaching of English to Speakers or Other Languages (TESOL) are such programs. The latter constitutes the subject of this discussion.

Given districts' and teachers' needs, the (COE) at GVSU has reformed its existing TESOL program and has obtained the approval to create an undergraduate minor. In reforming the program, a number of considerations were taken into account including the interdisciplinary aspect of courses offered and school districts' needs. In addition to linguistics courses, which are tailored to meet practitioner needs, the program has moved to integrate second language theory and special needs population issues into one class. In a similar vein, the assessment course has been modified to include ELs' testing and evaluation issues. The program did not have a course that dealt with technology integration and usage. Existing technology courses geared toward elementary and secondary school teachers have

been adapted to meet the needs of classroom practitioners who are, or would be, teaching not only English learners, but also native speakers of English. Contributing to its commitment to satisfy the requirements of school districts and of practitioners providing services to ELs, two new courses have been developed: one that deals with teaching content in a heterogeneous learning context, and the other focusing on bilingualism and the development of bi-literacy. While these courses can be offered on campus and/or hybrid format, they are usually delivered on site either at the district main offices or at a school. In spite of these various efforts to meet teacher professional needs, improvements are needed to provide practitioners with knowledge and tools to be effective in a heterogeneous professional context.

## Recommendations

Given the increasing number of English learners, even in areas that once were ethnically homogenous, there is a pressing need to train in-service as well as pre-service teachers to provide adequate support to English learners. The federal government has set the frame to integrate ELs in the mainstream classroom with two important laws: Titles I and III. States like Michigan, which are refugee and immigrant friendly, should focus on providing their teachers with the knowledge and tools allowing them to be effective in heterogeneous classroom contexts. Though Michigan has required reading diagnostic courses to teachers as part of the renewal for their professional certificates, that effort remains insufficient. The state needs to require significant course work from its teachers in the areas of ELD or TESOL. School districts have been requiring a number of their teachers to train in sheltered instructional methods. However, for the most part, that professional development has focused on only one teaching method: the SIOP. Additionally, there are no follow ups to ensure



that teachers truly implement that teaching method and do not experience difficulties in its implementation in their daily instructional processes (Hilliker, 2015). Furthermore, the SIOP is limited on a number of aspects. Although its proponents have integrated special education issues in their most popular textbook entitled *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model*, that text does not take into consideration parameters such as culture and other external factors that may affect learning. Besides, focusing training on just one method does not appear to be inclusive of various teaching approaches. Districts with high concentration of ELs need to go beyond the one teaching method model to require that their teachers be conversant in a number of instructional, materials, and curricula development approaches.

Teacher preparation programs need to embrace interdisciplinary or cross disciplinary approaches if they want

to educate their candidates to be adaptable to various teaching and learning contexts. Specifically, they need to develop inter or cross disciplinary certificates. The GVSU–COE model may be a good starting point, but it too has limitations that may need to be corrected. For example, many courses need to be offered either online or in hybrid format, as many teachers are in remote areas and experience difficulties attending face-to-face classes. The College of Education needs to further develop endeavors that aim at providing teachers with inter or cross disciplinary academic and professional training. The efforts to create inter or cross disciplinary certificates must be encouraged while strongly promoting existing programs. While further discussion is needed in ways to meet training needs of teachers who serve English learners, implementing the few recommendations in this article could assist in fulfilling the requirements of states and school districts.

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