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Phenomenological Study of Urban Elementary Teachers with Proficient English Language learners

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PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF URBAN ELEMENTARY TEACHERS WITH
PROFICIENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working in a large urban school district, where the achievement gap between English Language Learners (ELLs) and non-ELLs was smaller when compared to other schools within the district. The problem originated from the need to consider factors beyond teacher training that potentially influenced academic achievement. The research question guiding this study asked: What are the lived experiences of 4th grade teachers who have taught at identified elementary schools, where ELL students have demonstrated proficiency on the ELA portion of the state standards assessment? The framework in this study was based on previous research that utilized models rooted in social interactionist theory, sociocultural theory, and social constructivism.

Participants in this study were selected from Title I schools with the most narrow achievement gap between ELL sub-groups and non-ELL sub-groups, compared to other schools in the district. Purposive sampling was used to identify 10 participants, including at least one teacher from each of the five identified schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to answer the research questions.

Five themes emerged and included: (a) language as a barrier to traditional teaching methods; (b) student growth as a primary success; (c) using visuals and other non-verbal instruction; (d) small groups; and (e) building relationships with parents. The themes confirmed findings from previous research, aligned to the theoretical framework,

and the themes were used to inform effective teaching practices and guide future

research.

This work is dedicated to my children, Sean, Kristen, Shannon, and Kevin. You have made me stronger, better, and more fulfilled than I could have ever imagined. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CBI - content-based instruction

ELA - English Language Arts

ELD - English language development

ELL - English language learner

ELP - English language proficiency

EOC - end-of-course

ESOL - English speaker of other languages

FL DoE - Florida Department of Education

FSA - Florida State Assessment(s)

IDEA - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IEP - Individual Education Program

IRB- Institutional Review Board

LEP - Limited English Proficient

NCES - National Center for Education Statistics

PLC - Professional Learning Community

SIOP - Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

SBI - Standards-Based instruction

TLA - Teacher Language Awareness

UCF - University of Central Florida

WIDA - World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment

ZPD - Zone of Proximal Development

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Immigration trends, mobility shifts, and demographic changes over the last decade have greatly influenced the education landscape in public schools in the United States. These trends impact schools serving students identified as English Language Learners (ELLs). ELLs are students who are not yet proficient in English and require instructional support to fully access academic content in their classes (Whiteside, Gooch, & Norbury, 2017). Florida Statutes defined an ELL as

an individual who was not born in the United States and whose native language is a language other than English; an individual who comes from a home environment where a language other than English is spoken in the home; or an individual who is an American Indian or Alaskan native and who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on his or her level of English language proficiency; and who, by reason thereof, has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or listening to the English language to deny such individual the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English. (1003.56[2]; Blomberg, 2007, para. 1)

ELLs make up one of the fastest growing U.S. school populations (Florida Department of Education [FL DoE], 2018c; Malova, 2018), with some 4.7 million ELLs enrolled for the 2014 to 2015 school year (U.S. Department of Education [DoE] & National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). Making up approximately 9.6% of the school population (DoE & NCES, 2015), the ELL group increased numbers in 30 states (Malova, 2018). The number of students developing proficiency in English has been steadily increasing in schools in the southeast region of the United States (FL DoE, 2018c). Florida ranks third in ELL population,

with more than 265,000 ELLs enrolled in grades K to 12 and speaking more than 300 different languages (FL DoE, 2018c). Spanish is a primary native language spoken in Florida (FL DoE, 2018c).

Given the growing number ELLs in the country, helping these students achieve proficiency in English is a priority, particularly in states, such as Florida. Most ELLs require specialized instructional support to help them fully access and understand the academic content presented in their classes. Based on standardized achievement tests, many ELLs continue to score lower than their non-ELL counterparts, underscoring the continued problem in raising the achievement of ELL students (FL DoE, 2015).

Academic achievement for all students is the ongoing, primary goal. However, an achievement gap in reading/English Language Arts (ELA) and math between ELLs and native English-speaking students has continued to challenge K to 12 educators. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working in a large urban school district, where the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller when compared to other schools within the district.

This chapter introduces the research problem and why this problem is worthy of further examination. The chapter includes the following sections: (a) statement of the problem; (b) purpose of the study; (c) research questions; (d) research design; (e) definition of terms, and (f) assumptions and limitations. The chapter concludes with a summary of the study.

<u>Statement of the Problem</u>

To serve the K-12 student population, leaders of each state have developed common standardized assessments to measure proficiency in ELA, math, and science. Academic proficiency and achievement gains are measured by each state's standardized achievement test.

In Florida, the standardized assessment results for fourth grade students, including all sub-groups, for 2018 showed that students made improvements in ELA, mathematics, and end-of-course exams, with a 1% gain over the previous year (FL DoE, 2018b, 2018c). Furthermore, the improvement in fourth grade mathematics scores over the past four years of testing were more significant for Florida than for any other state (Scott, 2018).

Many schools exhibited gains in the state standardized assessment; however, not all student sub-groups reported higher scores. ELLs have demonstrated incremental increases in their achievement test scores between 2012 and 2014. The latest available performance charts (FL DoE, 2015) featured in Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the achievement gap. Figures 1 and 2, taken directly from the DOE, entitled "Reading Grade 4" are a composite of student performance, often referenced as ELA.
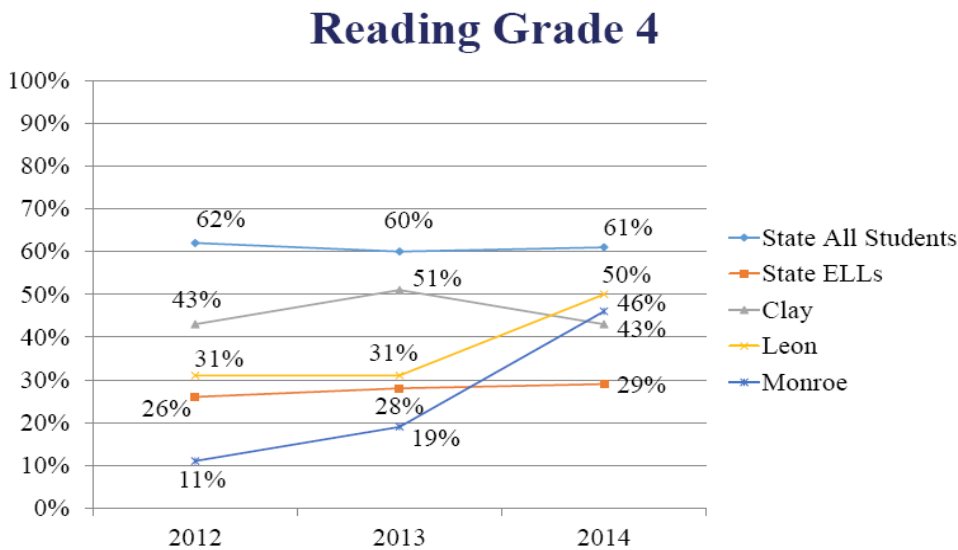
Figure 1. State Standardized Assessment, Reading Grade 4.

Note. From "English language learners update December 2015, Florida Organization of Instructional Leaders," by Florida Department of Education, 2015, slide 21 (http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7506/urlt/English-Language-Learners-Update.pdf).

Math Grade 4
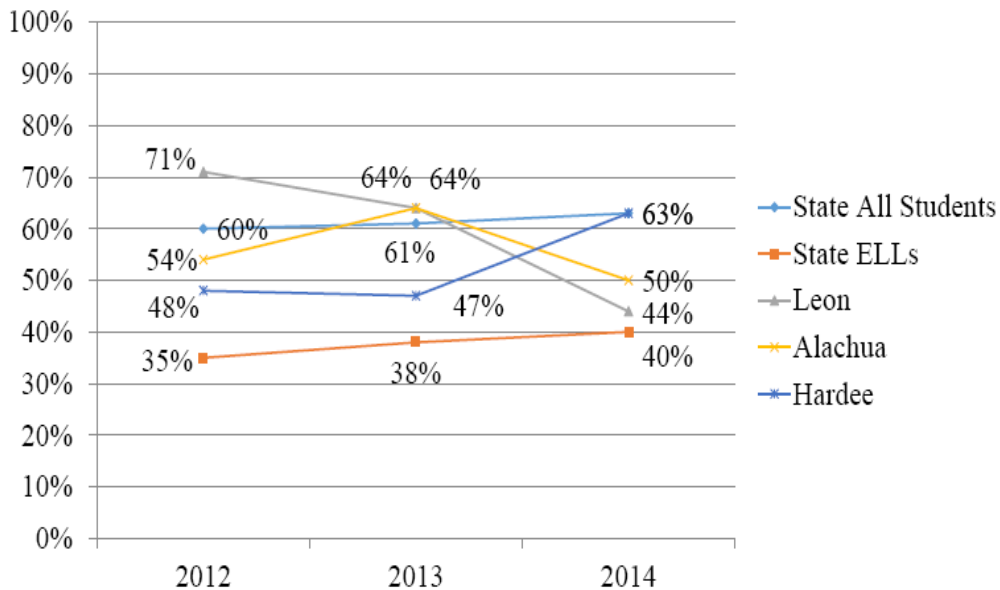
Figure 2. State Standardized Assessment, Mathematics Grade 4.

Note. From "English language learners update December 2015, Florida Organization of Instructional Leaders," by Florida Department of Education, 2015, slide 29 (http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7506/urlt/English-Language-Learners-Update.pdf).

These results indicate that there has been minimal improvement since 2012, and the ELL subgroup is performing significantly below the state average in Reading/ELA and in Math. As illustrated, 62% of all students were proficient in reading in 2012, 60% in 2013, and 61% in 2014, while only 26% of ELLs were proficient in Reading/ELA in 2012, 28% in 2013, and 29% in 2014 (FL DoE, 2015). Performance in math, though better than Reading/ELA, also indicated little change. In some cases, there were declines. Over the 3-year span, 60% of all students were proficient in mathematics in 2012, 61% in 2013, and 63% in 2014, while only 35% of ELLs were proficient in mathematics in 2012, 38% in 2013, and 40% in 2014 (FL DoE, 2015).

While the achievement gap between ELLs and English-speaking students is pronounced

in schools statewide, some schools have found ways to narrow this gap. In the past, there has not been an analysis of school level factors that contribute to narrowing the achievement gap in the state standardized achievement scores between ELLs and native English-speaking students in a single school district in southeast region of the United States. The present research examined school level factors that contributed to the achievement of proficient ELL students in fourth grade. This research studied several elementary schools in a large urban district with demonstrated success in closing the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs. This information was critical to identifying ways to support schools in adopting practices that narrowed the achievement gap between ELLs and native English-speaking students.

<p style="text-align:center"><u>Purpose of Study</u></p>

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working in a large urban school district, where the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller than the achievement gap that was identified in other schools within the district. With such a gap, educators have had to plan to address these needs, along with the anticipated increasing population of ELLs (Hansen-Thomas, Grosso Richins, Kakkar, & Okeyo, 2016). Teachers with ELLs in their classes must help the ELL students fully access academic content in the English language. General education teachers, typically, have limited training in supporting second language learners and face challenges associated with students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. This study considered factors, beyond teacher training that may influence ELL student achievement.

<center>Research Questions</center>

The study was guided by the following research question (RQ) and sub-questions:

Main RQ: What are the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers who have taught at identified urban elementary schools where ELL students have demonstrated proficiency on the ELA portion of the state standards assessment?

Sub-question (a): What are the primary successes/barriers that the teachers have experienced in teaching ELLs?

Sub-question (b): What lived experiences of fourth grade teachers highlight effective teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for improving ELL achievement to standards?

<center>Research Design</center>

To answer the research questions guiding this study and explore the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working in an elementary school where the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was narrowed in comparison to other schools in the large urban school district, the researcher used a qualitative phenomenological inquiry research design. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that phenomenological inquiry design was appropriate when the research questions suggested more than a cause-and-effect direction. Additionally, the problem of the achievement gap in reading (ELA) between ELLs and non-ELLs was well aligned to qualitative inquiry, yielding data on the common or shared experiences of the phenomenon, as well as the common or shared experiences of teachers planning and implementing effective solutions to the problem (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Purposive sampling was used to identify the elementary schools within the large urban district that served high performing ELLs. Purposive sampling is a technique often used in qualitative studies wherein the main consideration when selecting participants in the sample is their ability to provide rich information, if the eligibility criteria are fulfilled (Palinkas et al., 2015). The researcher used a detailed narrative (e.g., official records and documentation) of the schools within the large urban school district to determine the selected schools and participants. The sample consisted of 10 fourth grade teachers working in five elementary schools where the achievement gap in reading (ELA) between ELLs and non-ELLs was narrowed in comparison to other schools in the district.

To collect data, an interview guide, developed by the researcher, was used to conduct a set of semi-structured, in-depth phenomenological interviews. The semi-structured interviews, closely aligned to the research questions, focused on each participants' descriptions of their experiences, perceptions, and practices relating to the performance of the students who were ELLs. The researcher arranged for the interviews to be transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Following the transcription, the researcher employed a coding process to identify emerging themes for descriptive analysis of the results. The modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to analyze the data from the interview transcripts (see Moustakas, 1994). The goal of the analysis was to search for themes that accurately captured the lived experiences of the entire sample. The final output of the analysis was a composite description of the lived experiences of the entire sample, providing in-depth and rich information about the experience of educators who successfully narrowed the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs, as measured by student performance on statewide assessments of ELA.

<u>Definitions of Terms</u>

The following key terms and definitions are used throughout the research study:

Bias – Form of systematic error that impacts the outcome of research studies (Creswell, 2014).

Coding – Coding is the process of bracketing chunks of text data collected during an interview, focus group, or observation and separating the data into common themes and categories (Creswell, 2014).

English Language Learners (ELLs) – ELLs are students who are not yet proficient in English and require instructional support to access academic content in their classes fully. ELLs may or may not have passed English language proficiency (ELP) assessments. The subset of ELLs who have not yet achieved ELP, as measured by the particular assessment procedures of their state, are often referred to as limited English proficient (LEP) students (Whiteside et al., 2017). Students who have passed ELP assessments may need support in acquiring and using language in the classroom, particularly with the complex academic language that leads to successful high school graduation and higher education opportunities (Albers & Martinez, 2015).

In Florida, ELLs receive instruction based on the compliance with the "state and federal rules, regulations, the 1990 League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) et al. v. the State Board of Education (SBE) Consent Decree, and the 2003 Modification of the Consent Decree" (FL DoE, 2018c, para. 1). In Florida, ELL students are also entitled to Title III grant, which focuses on providing professional development for ELL teachers and engages in research to improve language acquisition and academic performance (FL DoE, 2018c).

Horizontalization - Process used to analyze data collected in qualitative research that organizes invariant constituents into themes and the constructs textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

Lived experience – Lived experience is a qualitative research term that means and understanding of research participants' human experiences, choices, and preferences and how those factors influence perceptions of knowledge and phenomena (Given, 2008).

Phenomenology – Phenomenology is the understanding the "lived experiences" of participants in a research study, through an extensive collection of qualitative data and analysis, where patterns and relationships of meaning emerge (Creswell, 2014).

Proficiency – Proficiency is an achievement designation indicating the attainment of scores in achievement Levels 3, 4, or 5, consistent with on- or above-grade-level performance (FL DoE, 2017). This operationalization of proficiency is based on both the state and federal regulations involving ELLs, which means that students are ready for the next grade level (FL DoE, 2018c).

Test adaptation – Test adaptation is a version of a test for ELLs that "'involves substantial changes to the original English test material, such as the replacement of a number of items with others that are more appropriate for either the culture or the language of the new test'" (Stansfield, 2011, p. 403).

Test transadaptation – Test transadaptation is a test version for ELLs, in which relatively minor changes are made to both versions (the test version and the translated test version) of the test to minimize the language differences (Turkan & Oliveri, 2014).

Translated test – A translated test is a type of test "in which only the language changes between the source English and translated target language versions of the test while the content or targeted constructs stay the same" (Turkan & Oliveri, 2014, p. 1).

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World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) *–* A consortium of state departments that has established expectations, standards, along with instructional and assessment resources to support language acquisition (Rojas, 2014).

Assumptions and Limitations

As in all qualitative research, various assumptions exist. The assumptions related to the research participants, the research environment, and the researcher biases are explained here.

The first assumption was that the participants and the researcher brought integrity and forthrightness to the research. The researcher made a conscious effort to arrange and facilitate an environment that was free from judgment and bias, helping the participants to remain as honest and open as possible. To further encourage forthrightness, the researcher reminded the participants that the audio recordings, the transcripts, and the presentation of results were confidential and would not include their real names or identities. The real name of the school was also not included in the description of the research context or in the presentation of findings.

Another assumption of the study was that the sampling and data collection methodology accurately explained the purpose of the research. The researcher used archival records to determine that the selected schools demonstrated higher state assessment achievement scores among ELLs compared to other schools in the said district. In addition, the researcher used records provided by the school district to ensure that the teachers in the sample were responsible for classes that have narrowed gaps in the state assessment scores between ELLs and non-ELLs.

There were also several limitations to this study. Limitations included considerations of sampling factors, researcher bias, and data constraints. The researcher of this study was, at the time of study, a school principal in the same district where the study was conducted. This might have potentially contributed to bias that could have interfered with the research (Morse, 2015).

However, the researcher made every effort to avoid bias and ensure the trustworthiness of the research by being conscious of the dynamics with the prospective and verified participants. No participants were coerced or forced to take part in the study by the researcher or the participants' supervisors. Another limitation of the study was that ELL students who enroll in school have various levels of previous schooling and background experiences. Although they may have similar experiences, as ELLs, prior educational background and levels of language proficiency vary greatly and may have introduced a limitation to the study (Nutta et al., 2017). These limitations were considered as a part of the research process, and adjustments were made to ensure data collection was not impacted by coercion or bias (see Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the problem, related to the achievement gap in reading/ELA between ELLs and English-speaking students. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working in a large urban school district, where the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller when compared to other schools within the district. The research questions guiding the study centered on perceptions, experiences, and practices or fourth grade teachers in five schools in a large urban school district about their perceptions, experiences, and practices that narrowed the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs.

The chapter briefly discussed the phenomenological research approach that was utilized to respond to the research questions and included a brief overview of the qualitative data analysis, including coding, bracketing, and theme development that were a critical parts of the research process. To collect data, an interview guide, developed by the researcher, was used with to conduct a set of semi-structured, in-depth phenomenological interviews. The modified Stevick-

Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological method of analysis was to analyze the data from the interview

transcripts (Moustakas, 1994) to identify themes that were generated by the participants.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is comprised of several sections that provide a comprehensive summary of characteristics of ELLs, along with the challenges encountered and relevant recommendations of experts and leading researchers. A working theoretical framework has been developed as a foundation to explain the phenomena of the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working with ELLs who have demonstrated proficiency. This theoretical framework was used to extend the current body of literature related to supporting ELLs in schools.

The literature review begins with a summary of the characterization of ELLs so that a definitive understanding of ELLs is established. This introductory description is followed by a section that describes the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) expectations that are composed of principles that support language development and principles of effective instruction (Rojas, 2014). This section is meant to clarify the range of instructional and learning challenges associated with the ELL population.

The theoretical framework that supports this research study is based on social interactionist theory, sociocultural theory, and social constructivism. These combined theories align with the language acquisition process of ELLs because of the social context of language development, language proficiency, and effective classroom practices (Dewey, 1916; 1938; Vygotsky, 1962; 1978; Piaget, 1937; 1954; 1941; 1972; 1974). These theories provide the structure needed to explore the lived experiences of teachers with students who have demonstrated proficiency.

The theoretical framework provides the structure for the subsequent sections that summarize the related research. The first section begins with a description of the role of principal and teacher perceptions and the impact on the development of ELLs. This section is followed by

an explanation of teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners and the demands of standardized assessments, along with predictors of reading achievement. The final sections of the literature review includes effective teaching practices and professional development that supports teachers in using effective teaching practices.

Characterization of ELLs

ELLs are students who are in the process of acquiring English language and are not yet proficient in English. ELL students require instructional support to access academic content fully in their classes. ELLs may or may not have passed ELP assessments. The subset of ELLs who have not yet achieved ELP, as measured by the particular assessment procedures of their state, are often referred to as LEP students (Whiteside et al., 2017). Students who have passed ELP assessments often need support in acquiring and using language in the classroom, particularly with the complex academic language that leads to successful high school graduation and higher education opportunities (Albers & Martinez, 2015).

World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Expectations

To fully address the needs of ELLs, World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA), a consortium of state departments, has been established to develop expectations and standards, along with instructional and assessment resources. WIDA expectations are based on the following principles that support language development, as explained by Rojas (2014):

1. Students' languages and cultures are valuable resources to be tapped and incorporated into schooling.
2. Students' home, school, and community experiences influence their language development.

3. Students draw on their metacognitive, metalinguistic, and metacultural awareness to develop proficiency in additional languages.

4. Students' academic language development in their native language facilitates their academic language development in English. Conversely, students' academic language development in English informs their academic language development in their native language.

5. Students learn language and culture through meaningful use and interaction.

6. Students use language in functional and communicative ways that vary according to context.

7. Students develop language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing interdependently, but at different rates and in diverse ways.

8. Students' development of academic language and academic content knowledge are inter-related processes.

9. Students' development of social, instructional, and academic language, a complex and long-term process, is the foundation for their success in school.

10. Students' access to instructional tasks requiring complex thinking is enhanced when linguistic complexity and instructional support match their levels of language proficiency (Rojas, 2014, pp. 42-43).

These standards-based principles are relevant for ELLs who are expected to meet the standards for developing social and academic language, as well as the language of math, science, social studies, and language arts (FL DoE, 2015, 2018b). ELD is supported and enhanced by the principles of effective instruction (Nutta et al., 2017; Rojas, 2014) including the following:

Principle 1. Instruction focuses on providing ELLs with opportunities to engage in discipline-specific practices which are designed to build conceptual understanding and

language competence in tandem. Learning is a social process that requires teachers to intentionally design learning opportunities that integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening with the practices of each discipline.

Principle 2. Instruction leverages ELLs' home language(s), cultural assets, and prior knowledge. ELLs' home language(s) and culture(s) are regarded as assets and are used by the teacher in bridging prior knowledge to new knowledge, and in making content meaningful and comprehensible.

Principle 3. Standards-aligned instruction for ELLs is rigorous, grade-level appropriate, and provides deliberate and appropriate scaffolds. Instruction that is rigorous and standards-aligned reflects the key shifts in the CCSS and NGSS. Such shifts require that teachers provide students with opportunities to describe their reasoning, share explanations, make conjectures, justify conclusions, argue from evidence, and negotiate meaning from complex texts. Students with developing levels of English proficiency will require instruction that carefully supports their understanding and use of emerging language as they participate in these activities.

Principle 4. Instruction moves ELLs forward by taking into account their English proficiency level(s) and prior schooling experiences. ELLs within a single classroom can be heterogeneous in terms of home language(s) proficiency, proficiency in English, literacy levels in English and student's home language(s), previous experiences in schools, and time in the U.S. Teachers must be attentive to these differences and design instruction accordingly.

Principle 5. Instruction fosters ELLs' autonomy by equipping them with the strategies necessary to comprehend and use language in a variety of academic settings. ELLs must learn to use a broad repertoire of strategies to construct meaning from

academic talk and complex text, to participate in academic discussions, and to express themselves in writing across a variety of academic situations.

Principle 6. Diagnostic tools and formative assessment practices are employed to measure students' content knowledge, academic language competence, and participation in disciplinary practices. These assessment practices allow teachers to monitor students' learning so that they may adjust instruction accordingly, provide students with timely and useful feedback, and encourage students to reflect on their own thinking and learning. (Rojas, 2014, pp. 30-33).

These principles of effective instruction inform the teaching practices that support ELLs. In summary, teachers should be adept at assessing and using language proficiency levels to design sound instruction. Teachers should be familiar with and use students' native language to increase English language proficiency. Instruction should be focused on alternative ways that enhance thinking, speaking, listening, reading and writing in order to maximize learning.

Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of this study and to examine the research questions, a multi-pronged, integrated theoretical framework was developed. This framework consisted of models rooted in social interactionist theory, sociocultural theory, and social constructivism. This framework includes: sociocultural theory (Lee, 2015), a theory based on Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) model, constructivist theory (Chaiklin, 2003; Wadsworth, 1996), and differentiated instruction practices, based on interactionist-constructivist theories of Dewey (1916/1985, 1938), Piaget (1937/1954, 1972), and Vygotsky (1962, 1978). Each of the aforementioned models contribute to the theoretical framework, established for this research. Figure 3 provides a matrix to explain each pedagogy and practice.

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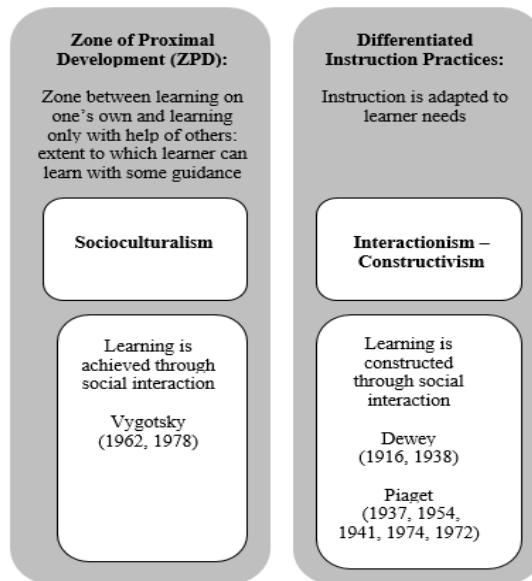
Figure 3. Integrated social constructivist framework for ELL teaching and learning.

Social Constructivism

Mvududu and Thiel-Burgess (2012) distinguished between the personal constructivism view of the discovery function of learning as individually constructed meaning held by Piaget and Inhelder (1941/1974) and the extended view of learning as a view that is focused on the cultural, historical, and social interaction of the individual learner, rather than the individual's experience alone (Vygotsky, 1978). Mvududu and Thiel-Burgess (2012) elaborated with the following:

> Whether knowledge is viewed as socially situated or whether it is considered to be an
> individual construction has implications for the ways in which learning is conceptualized.
> Such question[s] [as] "how can the constructivist theory encompass both the collective
> activity and the individual experience to take into account the important classroom social
> interactions that are so much a part of the entire educational process?" underlie the

complexities involved in translating the diversity of perspectives on constructivism into a common set of principles that can be operationalized. (p. 110)

From social constructivist perspective, learning is achieved through social interaction and learning (i.e., meaning) is constructed by learner. Social interactions influence cognitive development, stimulate higher-order thinking, and facilitate the construction of meaning through interactive problem-solving with learning occurring through collaboration with others (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). In these respects, dual-language programs assist ELLs in gaining academic and social proficiency in English and another language and in course content (González-Carriedo, Bustos, & Ordóñez, 2016; Meyer, 2017). This aspect of the framework was utilized to consider the value of teaching methods, relative to the needs of the teachers' students.

<center>The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Socioculturalism</center>

From Piaget's (1937/1954, 1972) perspective, learning occurs through the learner constructing knowledge from the environment and from interacting with others. Vygotsky (1962; 1978) extended this view to include that learning occurred in the zone between what the learner could achieve without any help and what the learner could achieve with help, a zone where the learner learned with some help. In ZPD, the ELL acquires new content and achieves language proficiency through social interaction. First, Chaiklin (2003) explained the following:

> [This] zone is not defined a priori but reflects the structural relationships that are historically-constructed and objectively constituted in the historical period in which the [learner] lives. One can say that the zone for a given [development] period is normative, in that it reflects the institutionalized demands and expectations that developed historically in a particular societal tradition of practice. (p. 7)

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The notion that historical construction is normative is coupled with the understanding that the context is an institutionally standardized one. Second, the ZPD is one of development, whereby learning or meaning is "historically and materially constructed. Historically refers to the functions are constructed through the history of human practices; materially refers to the functions are developed as a consequence of tasks and interactions" (Chaiklin, 2003, p. 6). The operative is interaction, as according to this integrated sociocultural-constructivist perspective, the learner constructs meaning through interaction with others. This arm of the framework was used to explain the complexity of language acquisition and the support needed for ELLs.

Differentiated Instruction Practices and Interactionism-Constructivism

The history of differential instruction dates back to the one room schoolhouse where children with varied levels of knowledge and skill were taught in the same setting. With the changing demographics in today's school, discovering and using appropriate instructional methods for all students is necessary (Suprayogi, Valeke, & Goodwin, 2017). The inception of differentiated instruction occurred in 1997 alongside the birth of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; de Jesus, 2012). De Jesus (2012) emphasized the practice of including all students in regular classrooms through team teaching by special education and general education teachers. Researchers and practitioners discovered that all teachers needed to provide various instructional strategies and content to accommodate an array of student differences within the classroom. By differentiating instruction and adapting instruction to meet each student's individualized learning styles and needs teachers could increase all students' learning and academic success (Subban & Round, 2015). Differentiated instruction, its concepts, and associated strategies were later modified and implemented not only within inclusion classrooms but also in most traditional classrooms. Thus, differentiated instruction is implemented by using

varying learning resources, assigning different tasks, scaffolding strategies, and using other practices (e.g., cooperative learning; Tahiri, Bennani, & Idrissi, 2007).

Tahiri et al. (2007) defined differentiated instruction as pedagogical practices that teachers used to develop the potential to get learners out of difficult situations, provide content adapted to learners' preferences, cover all competencies, direct the learner to the most appropriate learning path, and make the learning situations and activities more meaningful. According to scientific literature, differentiated instruction represents a method for educators to adjust and appropriate their teaching to the diversity of their students' learning. This process requires teachers to meet the students at their learning levels, provide a variety of methods and support according to individual needs, and guide students on the appropriate learning path to ensure a better understanding and acquisition of knowledge.

Tomlinson's (2014) explanation of instructional differentiation starts with determining every child's learning preferences, followed by developing a plan to support them. Additionally, she emphasizes the importance of increasing the rigor of instruction, so students are learning at a higher level rather than lowering expectations for struggling students. Ensuring that each student successfully masters the standards through differentiated instruction is more effective than using a single strategy for all students (Tomlinson, 2014). In other words, the theoretical framework of differentiated instruction proposes that one instructional method does not work for all students' learning needs. Rather, effective instruction requires that educators remain flexible to adjust to the varying abilities of the students in their classroom. Tomlinson (2014) explained that allowing students to make choices and set learning goals and using data to drive the instruction is key to successful differentiated instruction. Although differentiated instruction began as a means of meeting the individualized needs of ESE students, it has become an instructional norm for effectively meeting the needs of all students, including the unique needs of ELLs. Yet, effective

differentiated instruction for ELLs is also greatly dependent upon the perceptions of administrators and teachers.

In the same way that learning is constructed and achieved through the interaction with others in the ZPD model and the dual language program model, so is learning considered interactive and constructed in the practice of differentiating instruction. Specifically, differentiated instruction is implemented in the classroom as it is informed by transactional constructivism (Dewey, 1916/1985, 1938; Vanderstraeten, 2002). Glanz (2009) stated, "Constructivism is not a theory about teaching and learning per se; rather, it is a theory about the nature of knowledge itself" (p. 2). Dewey (1916/1985, 1938) conceived of development or learning, at the most primitive levels, as a phenomenon comprised of an individual acting in or on its environment and transacting with that environment by constructing and by reconstructing those transactions (Vanderstraeten, 2002). A matter of stimulus and response, then of the coordination of the internal and external stimulus-response, reaches "'conditions that have to be met in bringing the transaction to a successful issue'" (Dewey, as cited in Vanderstraeten, 2002, p. 235). In this respect, through an interactionist-constructivist lens, the learner must be part of a dynamic process and constantly adapt to new conditions. In particular, in a constructivist teaching context practicing differentiation, whereby "the powers of learners are released and directed" (Dewey, as cited in Vanderstraeten, 2002, p. 57), the ELL, in particular, is nevertheless an active rather than passive learner constructing his/her own meaning/knowledge through interaction.

This framework emphasizes the theories that can be used to explain the responses needed to address the diverse needs of ELLs and the varied supports needed while developing language proficiency. These theories served as the blueprint that guided the research focus related to descriptive phenomenological methods, as used in this study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). In this

way, the researcher was able to examine the lived experiences and effective practices of teachers with a proven record of success with ELLs through this theoretical framework.

<p style="text-align:center">The Role of Principal and Teacher Perceptions</p>

In addition to instructional practices that emphasize comprehensible instruction, based on progressive levels of language proficiency and culturally responsiveness, previous research has indicated that principal and teacher perceptions played a critical role in successful learning for ELLs. Padron and Waxman (2016) examined elementary school principals', teachers', and community members' perceptions of ELL programs. The surveys indicated that one of the most challenging aspects of implementing their second language programs was the lack of professional development for second language teachers. The authors suggested that this may have been a faulty set of priorities that distorted principal and teacher perceptions of the needs of ELL students. Additionally, Padron and Waxman (2016) collected responses to open-ended questions that showed that principals agreed on the need for districts to establish and communicate a "consistent vision" (p. 136); implement "consistent expectations" (p. 136); and establish "a set philosophy, goal, and purpose of the Bilingual program" (p. 136). One principal suggested, "A clear mission of how bilingual children should be taught needs to be established" (Padron & Waxman, 2016, p. 137). Yet, hiring qualified, experienced staff was the most cited issue by principals related to effective ELL instruction. These two studies demonstrate the critical nature of conflicting communication that impacts teacher and principal perceptions. These studies highlight the importance of maintaining achievement of ELLs as a serious need.

Hansen-Thomas et al. (2016) examined teachers' perceptions from a different perspective. They considered teachers' attitudes toward inclusion of ELLs in regular classes and found that lack of time to differentiate instruction and professional inadequacy were two barriers to the

effectiveness of their work. The results of the surveys used in the study indicated that teachers

believed communication with the ELLs was challenging and affected their students' ability to

learn. Many teachers believed that their students were reluctant to ask questions or take risks

speaking English due to fear of making mistakes. Teachers also encountered difficulty in

ensuring that the students comprehended what was being read and spoken in class. Another

concern that was identified in the study was the teachers' frustration with their limited ability to

communicate with ELLs because of distinct differences in native languages (Hansen-Thomas et

al., 2016). Finally, the survey results showed that teachers perceived that parental support and

involvement was insufficient and likely impacted interactions with students and their families

(Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016). These results clarified the importance of teacher perceptions. The

meaning teachers attach to their perceptions of ELLs should be considered when examining the

role of the teacher in influencing the academic performance of students.

Kibler and Roman (2013) confirmed the importance of ELL teachers' belief in their

students' ability to learn and achieve high academic standards. ELL teachers' positive mindset

begins with acceptance of ELL students' presence in the classroom and their perception that their

presence positively impacts the learning community. Some participants indicated that

professional development helped to improve their positive mindset and acceptance of ELL

students within their classroom (Kibler & Roman, 2013). A growth mindset (Dweck, 2014) may

be a considerable influence on the success of ELLs in school.

Tellez and Manthey (2015) built on Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theoretical framework

by conducting a qualitative study about ELL teachers' perceptions and evaluation of "the

effectiveness of their school's ELL strategies" (p. 115). Tellez and Manthey (2015) documented

the relationship between teacher efficacies, "school culture and focus" (p. 115) and teacher

perceptions of programs for ELL students. Teachers rated the overall ELL program low and the

strategies high. Teacher participants also communicated their perception of being unprepared to effectively implement the ELL program. Findings of the study indicated that schools with strong collective efficacy were also inclined to exhibit strong ELD practices. In conclusion, research indicated that the relationship between efficacy and instructional practice was crucial to increasing the effectiveness of ELL instruction.

This research identified the ways that perceptions, beliefs, and practices interact with and impact school culture and student performance. These areas are likely to impact ELLs and the practices used in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, as discussed in the next section, particularly as related to performance on standardized, state-wide assessments.

Effective ELL Teaching and Learning Programs, Methods, Models and Strategies

Some researchers have focused on teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms in general as it impacts ELL language and content learning. With a comprehensive collection of research that described culturally diverse classrooms, Ovando and Combs (2018) championed an active, inquiry-based, interdisciplinary teaching style in an inclusive, cooperative learning environment. Special emphasis is placed on ESL content learning through sheltered instruction, which the researchers found as more effective than ESL pullout, giving ELLs more access to curriculum while they learn English.

Campbell and Filimon (2018) conducted an action research study to examine the effects of strategy-focused writing instruction on the argumentative essay-writing skills of 47 linguistically diverse seventh-grade students. Researchers focused on ELA teachers concerned with delivering essay writing instruction to their ELL students while still meeting the needs of their proficient English-speaking students. The researchers found that strategy-focused instruction, significantly increased students' overall writing performance as measured by pretest

and posttest. A specific focus on effects on and predictors of reading achievement in elementary

through high school, Florida-specific, grade level-specific, content-specific teaching, and learning

for ELLs was found (Campbell & Filimon, 2018).

Other researchers have focused on grade level and/or content-specific teaching and

learning for ELLs in classrooms. Henry et al. (2014) researched the premise that English

proficiency dictated ELLs' performances on mathematics assessments. They investigated the

predictive power of English proficiency on mathematics scores at an elementary school. The

results of the correlational study, using 177 Mathematics scores from a state assessment for Grade

3 to 5 ELLs, the researchers determined by performing multiple linear regression analysis, that

English proficiency was a statistically significant predictor of mathematics scores, with

mathematics scores increasing with English proficiency. Solari et al. (2014) investigated literacy

growth in Grades 3 through 10 using 1,011,549 scores from three high-risk groups, including

ELLs, students with a specific learning disability, and ELLs with learning disabilities. Measuring

growth trajectories in spelling, fluency, and reading comprehension, and controlling for

socioeconomic status and/or free lunch status, the researchers found that all three at-risk groups

began the year at substantially lower levels than their general education peers. Students with free

lunch status performed significantly lower than their peers who do not qualify for free lunch. The

researchers concluded that socioeconomic status had a significant impact on achievement,

especially for ELLs with disabilities.

Researchers have investigated ELL learner characteristics and predictors of ELL

achievement. Foorman et al. (2015) examined predictors of success in comprehending written

language for development and assessment and revealed the following:

- Unlike oral language, which is mostly acquired naturally through practice within a

  community setting, written language is acquired artificially "because the graphemes

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and their relation to phonological units in speech are invented and must be taught by literate members of the community" (Foorman et al., 2015, p. 5).

- Although mastery of the alphabetic principle is a necessary condition for literacy, it is not sufficient for understanding written text, which requires word meaning knowledge, of "pronunciation, spelling, multiple meanings in a variety of contexts, synonyms, antonyms, idiomatic use, related words, etymology, and morphological structure" (Foorman et al., 2015, p. 6) for total comprehension.

- Comprehension depends not only on word meaning knowledge but also on syntactic awareness of word position, phrase construction, and other linguistic devices conveying meaning.

These findings are important because students use these skills in daily oral language exchange, in reading comprehension activities, and in informal and formal, standardized assessments. Wolf and Faulkner-Bond (2016) further studied the constructs of assessments used to determine ELL proficiency status. The researchers examined the types of language proficiency measured, as well as the relationship between each type of language proficiency and content assessment performance in three U.S. states, including Florida. The researchers found significant variations in the presence of academic and social language in the three assessments, as well as variations in social language proficiency, academic language proficiency, and content assessment performance.

In a study that focused on student performance in specific grades, Seethaler et al. (2016) researched the impact of dynamic assessment for predicting individual differences in year-end, first-grade mathematics calculation and word-problem performance, as a function of LEP status. Assessing 129 LEP students and 163 non-LEP students at the start and at the end of the school

year, the researchers determined that LEP status was an adequate predictor of performance, when utilizing dynamic assessment.

To identify the various factors that contribute to student success, Kritzer (2015) focused on two grade levels (kindergarten and fifth grade). The author also studied Hispanic ELLs and the relationship between initial primary language fluency and ELA achievement. Kritzer found a significant link between level of initial language proficiency and ELA proficiency. Expanding the research to include more subject, Subedi and Howard (2017) studied 88,654 students and 653 teachers in culturally diverse classrooms, of whom were 34,599 students and 150 teachers at the elementary level. The researchers determined that race, learning ability and disability, and English proficiency, among other factors, had an impact on reading achievement. Additionally, reading achievement could be predicted by teaching experience, academic degree, and teachers' ratings of student performance, the effects being highest at the elementary level. In a convergent parallel mixed-methods study of Hispanic ELLs and language achievement, Salman (2017) compared ELLs' academic achievement in Mathematics and ELA to those of non-ELLs in a one-way Spanish immersion school in the Midwestern United States. Salman also examined the impact of using Spanish as an instructional tool on ELLs' academic achievements. The researcher found that there was no significant difference between ELLs and non-ELLs in either Mathematics or ELA. The teachers who were interviewed responded to the results of the study by confirming that using ELLs' first language as an instructional tool was an excellent suggestion.

The results of these studies emphasize the skills necessary for ELLs to be proficient and also show the importance of supporting ELLs to effect academic achievement. The next section shows the practices thought to be effective in supporting improvements in academic achievement for ELLs.

Effective ELL Teaching and Learning Programs, Methods, Models, and Strategies

Existing research has addressed effective ELL teaching and learning programs, methods, models, and strategies for the mainstream classroom and ELLs in those classrooms in general. Clayton (2013) identified a set of effective practices for teaching ELLs, including the following: providing many opportunities for developing vocabulary, presenting ideas written and orally, encouraging students to expand on their thinking, requiring students to practice English by asking probing questions. One successful model is the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model, which provides lessons and curriculum content, while also building students' English language skills. In other words, implementation language development standards are related to effective instruction of all content areas (FL DoE, 2015; Koura & Zahran, 2017).

Lindahl and Watkins (2015) studied the critical component, teacher language awareness (TLA), for increasing the effectiveness of ELL instruction. The TLA "user domain" addresses teachers' proficiency in English and their perceptions related to their methods of communicating and relating with speakers of other dialects and languages. The TLA "analyst domain" relates to teachers' knowledge about language, such as phonetic and "metalinguistic awareness." The TLA "teacher domain" also included effective classroom strategies and practices, which were most often addressed in professional development.

Malova (2018) found evidence contesting the practices suggested by Lindahl and Watkins (2015), such as integrated reading-writing instruction for elementary school bilingual students. Malova conducted a comparative case study on integrated reading-writing instruction following adoption of Common Core State Standards. The researcher used video-recorded observations of writing instruction, interviewed teachers about their perspectives and critical knowledge for five fourth grade ELA teachers in classrooms with emergent bilingual students. The researcher

discovered that teachers paid particular attention aspects of writing that were explicitly stated in the assessment rubric and identified several disadvantages integrated reading-writing instruction (e.g., lack of creativity; a lack of genre variety; and a weak alignment to fourth grade developmental level, the absence of an accurate gauge of writing performance, and an assessment rubric and anchor paper mismatch). For integrated reading-writing instruction to add value for bilingual learners, the researcher and participants determined that the instruction would require adaptations to the rubric, content, and assessment stages.

In contrast, Durrance (2014) provided support for dual-language education as a practice for increasing student achievement in ELP. Due to Durrance's research, the author proposed a policy for implementing a One-Way Dual Language Program for schools with an ELL population greater than 30% to improve ELL English language and content proficiency, human capital by enabling ELLs the same rights to becoming productive citizens, and the achievement gap.

In another approach, Koura and Zahran (2017) made recommendation for implementing the SIOP model for the improvement of student-teacher teaching skills and self-efficacy. In the mixed-methods study, Koura and Zahran examined the impact of these dimensions on 22 EFL student teachers. The researchers found that the experimental group using the SIOP model outperformed the control group not using the SIOP model in EFL teaching performance; the effect of the SIOP model on student teachers' teaching skills and self-efficacy was significant in motivating the student teachers, giving them opportunities to make decisions, and allowing for them to be creative in their EFL approaches.

Meyer (2017) supported the effectiveness of the SIOP model, as well as dual language instruction for ELLs. However, Meyer's causal-comparative design used archival data to compare the effectiveness of SIOP with the effectiveness of dual-language immersion on the reading comprehension achievement levels of third grade ELLs from seven elementary or K-8

Florida Public Schools. As the dependent variable in the study, the Florida Comprehensive

Achievement Test revealed that SIOP model was statistically, significantly more effective than

dual language.

Focusing on differentiated instruction as the primary strategy for improving ELL language

and content proficiency, Coady et al. (2016) conducted a mixed-methods study that supported the

use of differentiated instruction for improving primary school ELL academic achievement.

Examining the beliefs and practices of two teacher graduates of a teacher preparation program

that included second language training, the researchers found that although "teacher graduates

working with ELLs in primary classrooms with low numbers of ELLs used some generic

accommodation strategies and just-in-time scaffolding techniques …, they rarely instituted

specific ELL practices to facilitate the English language development of ELLs" (p. 340). The

researchers concluded that preservice teachers must have preparation in differentiated instruction

to prepare them as teachers who engaged in inclusive practices for ELLs. Islam and Park (2015)

also support the need to differentiate instruction to allow ELLs to be successful in school. The

teachers in the study demonstrated the ability to build capacity to serve all students, including

ELLs.

These studies highlight the various strategies, programs and methods that have been found

to be successful in supporting ELLs. These strategies are well aligned to the theoretical

framework that has been used to examine the research questions of the study. The next section

describes the professional development that teachers need to support ELLs, in alignment with the

theoretical framework, predictive factors and effective practices.

Professional Development for ELL Teachers

Although teachers face the shared responsibility of educating ELL students, teachers need support in the form of relevant professional development. Principals often choose the professional development delivered in their schools and many principals have limited knowledge about programs for second language learners. Therefore, many principals are unprepared to guide teachers in the right direction (Padron & Waxman, 2016).

According to Tomlinson, Brimijoin, and Narvaez (2008), professional development starts by assessing the explicit needs of the entire instructional staff. Assessing the needs of teachers and instructional staff requires the observation of staff members' overall strengths and areas that require the most support. Providing the most effective professional development requires administrators to "think big and begin small" (Tomlinson et al., 2008, p. 73). A major component of any professional development is to address the greatest area of need to meet the goal of teachers transferring directly into their classroom instructional practices. Furthermore, principals must focus professional development activities on issues related to language learning and instruction to provide guidance and support to their teachers. Principals must have the critical knowledge needed to support teachers in working with ELLs. Principals must have an understanding of the appropriate implementation of effective second language programs to support their teachers in the implementation of those programs. They also must determine the type of professional development that will have the most positive impact among their teachers and students. To accomplish this feat, principals must increase their knowledge of how ELL programs should be implemented within their professional learning communities and what research supports specific programs (Padron & Waxman, 2016).

Murphy and Haller (2015) conducted a qualitative study concerning teachers' perceptions of their knowledge of how to provide effective instruction to ELLs. Murphy and Haller found that many teacher participants perceived that their lack of skills and knowledge inhibited their effective facilitation of ELL students' proficiency in Common Core State Standards. Therefore, the authors suggested supporting ELL teachers through increased professional development related to aligning curriculum with the Common Core State Standards and bolstering these efforts through increased collaboration among colleges, districts, and schools (Murphy & Haller, 2015). Murphy and Haller (2015) advocated for community and political involvement in maintaining accountability and support for teachers as they plan and implement effective instruction that leads to the increased achievement of ELL students.

Islam and Park (2015) advocated for professional development to aid ELL teachers with effective instructional planning and delivery "that allow ELLs to achieve the literacy needed to succeed in school" (p. 38). De Jong et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of developing teachers' understandings of the instructional processes of language and culture so that they could more effectively increase ELL learners' inclusion and engagement in learning. Therefore, effective professional development for teachers of ELLs must include scaffolding and differentiating instructional strategies at varying levels of proficiency necessary for making instruction more comprehensible for ELLs at varying proficiency levels (de Jong et al., 2013).

These studies demonstrate the need for meaningful, authentic, focused professional development that teachers can use to support ELLs, as they develop oral and written language, along with reading comprehension.

Summary

ELL students have various language, academic, social, and cultural needs that impact school performance, particularly academic achievement. Meeting the complex challenge of increasing the academic achievement of ELLs required an examination of the perceptions of administrators and teachers, the best practices of effective ELL teachers, and the effective professional development of ELL teachers. The need to prepare teachers effectively and efficiently for the challenge of addressing the growing population of ELLs is critical (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016). ELLs may come from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that are unfamiliar to teachers; yet, teachers must learn about their students' prior schooling, home lives, and community cultures to identify the background that their students bring to various learning tasks. Additionally, cultural experiences can influence students' participation, engagement, and learning in the classroom (de Jong et al., 2013; Islam & Park, 2015). De Jong et al. (2013) asserted that the "three dimensions" (p. 91) of ELL teacher proficiency were "contextual understanding" (p. 91) of ELL's "linguistic and cultural experiences" (p. 91) "knowledge and skills related to the instructional role of language and culture in schools for ELLs and navigation of educational policies" (p. 91), and "mainstream practices to ensure ELL – inclusive learning environments" (p. 91). Therefore, as de Jong et al. (2013) and others advocated, developing these dimensions should be done to increase the effectiveness of ELL instruction and to improve the achievement of ELL, ELP, and content proficiency.

The review of literature related to effective ELL instruction indicated that ongoing research was need in order for administrators and teachers to increase the quality of ELL instruction within U.S. schools. However, there has been limited research conducted, to date, specifically focused on fourth grade ELL proficiency on state standards assessments and the

instructional practices their teachers employ. This study was conducted with the intent to fill this

gap in the literature, by defining the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers, along with the

effective methods and programs they use to influence learning and proficiency in ELLs.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working in a large urban school district, where the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller when compared to other schools within the district. This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the study's methodology, including the key procedures of the study. The sections in this chapter are the following: (a) research questions, (b) research design, (c) population and sample, (d) materials an instrument, (e) data collection, (f) data analysis, (g) trustworthiness, and (h) limitations. The chapter concludes with a summary of the most important sections of the methodology.

Research Questions

The following research question and sub-questions guided the study:

Main RQ: What are the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers who have taught at identified urban elementary schools where ELL students have demonstrated proficiency on the ELA portion of the state standards assessment?

Sub-question (a): What are the primary successes/barriers that the teachers have experienced in teaching ELLs?

Sub-question (b): What lived experiences of fourth grade teachers highlight effective teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for improving ELL achievement to standards?

<u>Research Design</u>

The answer to the main research question was guided by exploring the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers in elementary schools where achievement gaps in reading existed between ELL students and non-ELL students. The study was conducted in a large urban school district using a qualitative phenomenological inquiry research design. Phenomenological research is the systematic study of the lived experience of people, particularly about a phenomenon considered new, unexplored, complex, or lacking in more detailed understanding (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological researchers delve into the experiences of individuals through nonjudgmental questioning and continuous probing (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that when researching specific phenomena that suggested more than associated with more than a cause-and-effect relationship, the direction for the study was best served by the phenomenological approach. Using this approach, an open-ended manner of inquiry was deemed appropriate for the study. Furthermore, an achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs lends itself to qualitative inquiry, which can yield data on the common or shared experiences of the phenomenon as well as the common or shared experiences of teachers planning and implementing effective solutions to the problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological research design would best capture the lived experiences of educators who successfully narrowed the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs because the research design was designed to probe the experiences of individuals without being influenced by personal judgments (see Moustakas, 1994).

Population and Sample

The population of this study included fourth grade, elementary teachers in a large urban school district in the southeast region of the United States. The sampling frame was teachers who taught in an urban, elementary school with high performing ELLs when compared to other schools in the large urban school district. From that sampling frame, the sample consisted of 10 fourth grade teachers working at Title I elementary schools where the reading achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller when compared to other schools in the same school district.

Table 1

Sampling Procedures

Steps	Actions
1	Analyze school district level data
2	Identify Title I Schools
3	Identify schools with high ELL populations
4	Determine schools that have narrowed the achievement gap
5	List the five schools with the gap
6	Identify the teachers in the five schools who teach ELL students

Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to identify the elementary schools within one of the large urban school districts in the southeast region of the United States that served high performing ELLs and the teachers who served as the participants of the study. Purposive sampling is a technique often used in qualitative studies, wherein the main consideration when selecting participants in the sample is their abilities to provide rich information (Palinkas et al., 2015). The

researcher used a detailed narrative based on official records and documentation of the schools within the large urban district to show the factors for selecting the school and the participants.

The researcher determined five schools in the large urban district based on ELL achievement scores in the 2016 to 2017 and 2017 to 2018 school years. To determine the five schools in the district, the researcher analyzed which schools had the most improvement in the ELL scores between these two school years and had the smallest achievement gap. Based on these criteria of Title I, high ELL (50% or higher) schools, the researcher shared the inclusion criteria, and then was granted permission for the schools that served as the setting of this study.

After the schools were identified, the researcher identified the fourth grade teachers with the highest levels of student proficiency on the state standardized assessment and recruited them for the study. To determine which teachers were eligible to be part of the study based on the specific purpose of this study, the researcher specified certain eligibility criteria. First, all participants must be certified by the state in which they are employed. Second, all participating teachers should be educators of both ELL and non-ELL students at the fourth grade level. Last, all participating teachers should be full-time and have at least two years of experience teaching in the elementary school. All teachers' records were screened to identify participants who had narrowed the achievement gap between ELL and non-ELLs from 2016 to 2017 and 2017 to 2018 school years, as measured by the state standardized assessment.

Data saturation occurred when it became apparent based on the responses of the subsequent participants that information had already been broached or described by other participants (see Francis et al., 2010). Based on the analysis of previous researchers regarding when data saturation occurred, a sample size of 10 was determined as the minimum needed for interview-based studies (see Francis et al., 2010). Hence, this study consisted of 10 fourth grade teachers working in an elementary school where the reading and mathematics achievement gap

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between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller in comparison to other schools in the large urban school district.

However, data saturation was not guaranteed with the initial target of 10 participants. Data saturation can occur when less than or more than 10 participants, depending on the individual responses of the participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). The implication of the lack of preciseness of data saturation in qualitative studies was that the final sample could be smaller or larger based on the impression of the researcher during the interview and the preliminary analysis during the process of conducting the interviews. The final sample size consisted of 10 fourth grade teachers.

Materials and Instrument

In qualitative research studies, the researcher is considered the primary instrument that will facilitate the successful implementation and completion of the study (Bresler, 1995). The qualitative researcher plays a central role in ensuring that the selection of participants is appropriate, the data that collected are rich and relevant to the research questions, and the data analysis are accurate and consistent with the adopted method of choice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given these responsibilities, the qualifications and skills of the researcher are of the utmost importance (Bresler, 1995).

A short demographic questionnaire was provided at the beginning of the interview (see Appendix B). The main material for this study was an interview guide, developed by the researcher to conduct a set of semi-structured, in-depth phenomenological interviews (see Appendix D). The interviews focused on participants' descriptions of their experiences, perceptions, and practices relating to students' performances who were high performing ELLs. The interview guide served as a valuable tool that allowed for basic consistency in the protocol

during the actual interview, and the researcher used flexibility to deviate if additional probing was necessary to capture the lived experience of the participants.

Framed by the research questions of the study, the questions from the interview guide were developed based on the integrated social constructivist framework for ELL teaching and learning and the literature review. The questions derived from the theoretical framework and were based on social constructivism, the ZPD and socioculturalism, and differentiated instructional practices and interactionism-constructivism. The questions derived from the literature review were based on the role of principal and teacher perceptions; teaching in multiculturally diverse classrooms; ELL learner characteristics and predictors of ELL achievement; effective ELL teaching and learning programs, methods, models, and strategies; and professional development for ELL teachers.

To ensure that the quality of the interview guide was reflected in the questions, the guide was reviewed and evaluated by an expert panel. This panel included four experts in qualitative research, along with a single teacher to validate the quality of the questions. The researcher approached these experts by personally requesting their involvement in the field test of the interview guide. The panel was provided with the list of questions and a short background of the study, with the specific instructions to review all the questions and make the appropriate suggestions to improve clarity, alignment, and utility of the interview questions. The final interview guide was modified based on these suggestions of these experts.

Data Collection

The staff from the Research, Accountability, and Grants Department (RAGD) of the school district assumed responsibility for contacting the individuals who met the criteria for participation. Research guidelines pertaining to inclusion criteria were provided at the time, and

the district obtained permission from the participant so the researcher could contact them, after receiving participants' contact information from the department, with further details.

Once the participants were selected using purposive sampling and agreed to participate in the research, the RAGD office provided the researcher with the contact information for the participants. The researcher then contacted the individuals to arrange the agreed upon date, time, and place of the individual semi-structured interviews. At the same time, the research description and a copy of the consent form was provided to the participants so that it could be previewed prior to the actual interview. The schedule of the individual interviews was audio recorded in a voice recorder to enhance the organization of the process of conducting interviews. A reminder was given 1 day before the scheduled interview to confirm the date, time, and place of the agreed schedule for each participant. The researcher encouraged the participants to contact the researcher immediately for cancellations or changes in the schedule.

At the beginning of the semi-structured interview, the researcher provided the participant with a written copy of the informed consent form that had previously been provided to each participant. Several minutes were provided to allow the participant to read the entire informed consent form. Before signing the document, the researcher gave each participant the option to ask questions so that they had a reasonable amount of information about the study prior to consenting. No participant was forced or coerced to sign the informed consent form. The researcher maintained each signed form in a confidential file.

After the informed consent form was signed, the researcher began the interview by reminding the participant that the conversation would be audio-recorded. The information about the audio-recording also was included in the informed consent form. The participants also were informed that the audio recordings would not contain their real names, and an alphanumeric code was used as an identifier in place of their names. After consent was verbally affirmed in addition

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to the written consent, a brief test of the audio recording equipment was completed. The audio recording device was checked prior to beginning the interviews and twice during the interview to prevent issues with recording and/or detect malfunctioning equipment.

For the actual interview, the questions were based on the interview guide that was developed and validated using an expert panel. Because the interview was semi-structured, the researcher used the guide as the basis for the interviews. The researcher used the predetermined questions as a guide while using flexibility to probe with depth and specificity when needed.

The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, depending on how each participant responded to the main questions and the follow-up questions. The researcher did not impose judgments or preconceived notions during the questioning process, allowing the experiences of the participants to develop naturally. The researcher developed and maintained an atmosphere of acceptance and nonbias to encourage participants to remain as honest as possible with their responses to the interview questions.

The researcher encouraged the participants to contact the researcher through email if there were corrections to their responses or if they had other concerns about the study. The participants were informed about the process of member checking following the completion of the transcription process. Each participant was provided with his or her transcribed interview (see Appendix D). The researcher instructed the participants to read the entire document and evaluate whether the transcription was reflective of their experiences. Corrections or suggestions for modifications were encouraged if the textual summary did not reflect their true lived experiences. A summary of the data collection procedure is presented in the Table 2.

Table 2

Data Collection Procedure

Steps	Description
1 - Participant Contact	District representatives will contact eligible school principals
2 - Scheduling	Individual schedules of the interviews will be set
3 - Informed Consent	Discussion of the contents of the informed consent form
4 - Interviews	Data collection without judgment or preconceived bias
5 - Member Checking	Transcripts will be sent to participants for verification

Data Analysis

The interviews transcripts were transcribed by a professional transcription service, Rev.com, in preparation for the phenomenological analysis. The transcripts included the entire interview, including the main questions and the follow-up questions asked by the researcher. The transcripts included the alphanumeric code that was assigned to their transcripts. In instances where specific names or locations were mentioned during the interview, this information was redacted in the transcripts.

A coding process was used to identify emerging themes for the descriptive analysis of the results (see Moustakas, 1994). The coding strategy was grounded in the process of generating open codes based on the careful analysis of the meaning of a given line in the interview transcript. For every line in the transcript, one or more codes was assigned depending on the content of the data for each participant. These codes represented a segment of meaning that was easily organized for clustering and thematic analysis.

The modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to analyze the data from the interview transcripts (see Moustakas, 1994). The first step of the analysis was phenomenological reduction, wherein the researcher set aside personal biases and preconceived opinions about the phenomenon. Phenomenological reduction also encompasses the process of horizontalization,

the organization of invariant constituents into themes, and the construction of textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization involves listing all the units of information in the transcript for each participant by assigning labels called invariant constituents. The organization of invariant constituents into themes involves the generation of clusters based on similarity and interrelationships. The construction of textural descriptions involves the synthesis of themes in the form of a description for each participant and the entire sample (Moustakas, 1994).

According to Moustakas (1994), the creation of textural description comes in various stages. The first stage involves the imaginative variation wherein different perspectives are considered. The next stage is the creation of textural description, which is the generation of structural description, focusing on the "how" aspect of textural descriptions. The final output of the analysis is a composite description of the lived experience of the entire sample, providing in-depth and rich information about the experience of educators who have successfully narrowed the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs.

To protect the data from being misused and being exposed to individuals who have no involvement to the study, all materials will be destroyed after the study has been approved and published and after 5 years. The interview transcripts and digital audio recordings will be permanently deleted from the hard drive, without any backups. The informed consent forms and other researcher notes will remain locked in a cabinet/drive for 5 years, which will then be shredded/deleted. Table 3 shows the data analysis process summary.

Table 3

Data Analysis Process

Steps	Description
1 - Reduction	Setting aside personal biases and preconceived opinions
2 - Horizontalization	Listing all the units of information to assign labels
3 - Clustering into themes	Generation of clusters based on similarities
4 - Imaginative Description	Focuses on the different perspectives of the experiences
5 - Structural Description	Focuses on the "how" aspect of textural descriptions.
6 - Composite Description	Lived experience of the entire sample

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings of this qualitative phenomenological study, several strategies or criteria were implemented in various stages of this study. The trustworthiness of this study was ensured through four criteria: (a) credibility, (b) confirmability, (c) dependability, and (d) transferability (see Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). These four criteria are identified and discussed in this section.

Credibility refers to the degree to which a study can be reasonably considered as true and an accurate representation of the lived experience of the participants (Shenton, 2004). To address issues pertaining to credibility, member checking was implemented after the initial analysis was completed. The individual textural description for each participant was sent through email. The researcher instructed the participants to read the entire document and assess whether the analysis was reflective of their experiences based on the individual interview that was previously conducted. Each participant was given 1 week to respond to the email and was informed that no reply would mean that no modifications were needed. Another strategy that was used was to establish the credibility of the findings was reflexivity, which was the transparent identification of the biases of the researcher that could be relevant to the study (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As a school principal in the same district where the study was conducted, the researcher recognized

the potential for bias. However, the researcher avoided bias by emphasizing voluntary participation and that refusal or withdrawal would not lead to any adverse professional consequence for the participants. Furthermore, the researcher offered to meet the participants at a site, away from the school campus, to minimize the appearance of any pressure to provide desirable responses.

Dependability is the extent to which the results of a qualitative study can be considered stable over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Shenton, 2004). To establish the study's dependability, the researcher ensured that the analysis process was consistent with the standard practice in phenomenological analysis (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Specifically, the researcher ensured that the data analysis was consistent with the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method by developing textural and structural descriptions that are individualized and composite descriptions which were then synthesized to describe the essence of the experiences (see Moustakas, 1994).

Confirmability is defined as the extent to which a qualitative study can be regarded as objective and independently verified by other researchers (Shenton, 2004). According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), confirmability is different from dependability because the former is more based on establishing neutrality, whereas the latter is more focused on demonstrating stability. To enhance the degree of confirmability of this qualitative study, the researcher created an audit trail to show how the study was conducted and how study processes were implemented at every key phase. For instance, the researcher created a record that documented how the findings were developed and reported, showing that the findings were based on the data and not on the personal views of the researcher.

The transferability of a qualitative study is upheld when the results of the study can have relevance outside the sample and context (Shenton, 2004). To enhance the transferability of this

study, the researcher generated in-depth descriptions of the selected schools in a large urban district, so that other researchers could have a clear idea on where the data came from. Providing rich details about the research context enhanced the transferability of the study because misuse of findings could be avoided if readers could see the similarities and differences between the study and other situations.

Limitations

There were also several limitations to this study. Limitations included considerations of sampling factors, researcher bias, and data constraints. At the time of the study, this researcher was a school principal in the same district where the study was conducted, which might contribute to bias that could interfere with the analysis and results of the research (see Morse, 2015). However, the researcher made every effort to avoid bias and to ensure the trustworthiness of the research by being conscious about the dynamics with the prospective participants. These limitations were part of the research process, but additional efforts were dedicated to correctly field the data (see Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working in a large urban school district, where the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller when compared to other schools within the district. Phenomenological research is concerned with understanding a phenomenon from the perspectives of only a few individuals by delving into their inner thoughts and experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological research design was used to best capture the lived experience of educators who successfully narrowed the achievement gap between ELLs

and non-ELLs because the research design was designed to probe into to experiences of individuals without being influenced by personal judgments (see Moustakas, 1994).

The population of this research study included elementary teachers in a large urban district in the southeastern region of the United States. Ten teachers in schools who successfully narrowed the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs in a large urban district were purposively selected to participants in this study. Participants met eligibility criteria and provided rich and highly relevant insights about the research study.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to analyze the data from the interview transcripts, utilizing the key steps of phenomenological reduction, coding of data, clustering of themes, and the creation of textural descriptions (see Moustakas, 1994). The final output of the analysis was a narrative that described the lived experience of educators who successfully narrowed the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working in a large urban school district, where the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller when compared to other schools within the district. The study was guided by the following RQ and sub-questions:

Main RQ: What are the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers who have taught at identified urban elementary schools where ELL students have demonstrated proficiency on the ELA portion of the state standards assessment?

Sub-question (a): What are the primary successes/barriers that the teachers have experienced in teaching ELLs?

Sub-question (b): What lived experiences of fourth grade teachers highlight effective teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for improving ELL achievement to standards?

Chapter 4 includes a description of the relevant demographic characteristics of the study participants, followed by descriptions of the implementation of the data collection and data analysis procedures described in Chapter 3. Next, this chapter includes a presentation of the results, which are organized by research sub-question. This chapter concludes with a summary.

Demographics

Several eligibility criteria were used to identify the teachers who participated in this study. First, all teachers were certified teachers in the state where they were employed. Second, all teachers were educators of both ELL and non-ELL students at the fourth grade level. Next, all teachers were full-time teachers who had at least two years of experience teaching in elementary

school. All teachers' records indicated that they were responsible for a class that had a narrow academic achievement gap between ELL and non-ELLs from the 2016 to 2017 and 2017 to 2018 school years, as defined by the selected large urban district.

A sample size of 10 was chosen because data saturation was achieved with 10 participants. Data saturation was determined to have occurred because analysis of the ninth and 10th participants' interviews did not yield any information that had not been broached by previous participants, in accordance with the definition of data saturation provided by Francis et al. (2010). The following subsections include brief descriptions of participants' backgrounds in their own words and are compiled in see Appendix C.

Teacher 1

At the time of study, Teacher 1 was in her third year of teaching and had been surprised by administrators' request that she should teach ELLs:

> This is my third-year teaching, my first year of teaching fourth grade. The last two years I taught third. Prior to that, when I was at [university's name omitted] doing my internship. I taught first grade for the first part of my internship and then fourth grade for the second half of the first part . . . . I was actually asked by the administration team to teach ELLs just out of the blue. It was a summer thing. They were like, "Hey, we have a unique opportunity for you. You interested?" I was like, "Well, what does that entail?" "Well, you know, it's just a little bit of ..." I didn't really get a straight answer, so I was like, "Sure, why not." It was my second year, so I was ready to do something different that hadn't been done in a while. I found that I actually very much enjoyed it. (personal communication, January 25, 2019)

Teacher 2

Teacher 2 felt close to her students because English was her second language as well, having moved to the continental United States from Puerto Rico:

I have been teaching for eight years. I've been teaching kindergarten, second, third, fourth and fifth. This is my fourth year in fourth grade . . . . For my bachelor's degree, I took a course, and I got a bachelor's degree with an extension in bilingual studies . . . . I love fourth grade. The curriculum is very rigorous . . . since I am Puerto Rican, and I speak the language, I think I have a little advantage above some of my other peers because I could actually relate to some of my students and as an ESL [English second language] student myself, growing up, I can really relate to my students and, like I said, I have the advantage of explaining to them in their own language so they feel comfortable and they're not resistant. (personal communication, January 25, 2019)

Teacher 3

Teacher 3 taught in a school where most of the students were ELLs, and teachers often worked with students who spoke no English when they first arrived in the school:

I have my bachelor's and master's degrees in ESE (Exceptional Student Education) Education, K - 12, and I am also certified to teach Elementary Education. My first five years at [school's name omitted] I taught an ESE self-contained class with low incidence disabilities, autism, mental disabilities, behavioral disabilities, you name it, I probably taught them . . . . Our school's population is over 75% ESOL, so it's pretty much inevitable that you're going to have ESOL students in your classroom . . . I absolutely love [teaching fourth grade]. I'm a big fan of challenging content, so the more challenging for me, the better because it really gets the kids thinking . . . . The most challenging has

definitely been when you have students who don't speak any English at all . . . . But, again, because I know so many accommodations when it comes to students with disabilities, I use that same expertise and apply it to students with language barriers. (personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Teacher 4

Teacher 4 taught at the same school as Teacher 3 and reported similar experiences in teaching students who knew no English:

This is year number 21 teaching. I've taught all years here at [school's name omitted]. Third grade for two years, fifth grade for one year, and then the rest of my experience has been with fourth grade . . . . our ELL population is so high that we kind of didn't have a choice. Yeah, like over half of our population is ELL, and they're just in everybody's classroom. So, I didn't have a choice. And then instead of taking all of the ESL classes, I just got certified . . . . I've students that have come in speaking no English at all. Back before the bilingual days, they would come in, and they wouldn't speak the language at all, and then by the end of the year, it's like amazing because it's like miraculous how they're fluent by the end of the year. (personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Teacher 5

Like Teacher 2, Teacher 5 believed she had an advantage in teaching ELLs because she was Haitian and could understand some Haitian Creole; moreover, she had grown up in a home where a language other than English was spoken:

My first year of teaching was back in 2010. This is my seventh-year teaching. Two years in second grade and this is my fifth year in fourth. I've been at [school's name omitted]

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since 2010 . . . . [My first-year teaching], I literally had a class of mostly Haitian speaking

Creole students or Spanish speaking students that didn't speak much English . . . . it wasn't

easy, but the one advantage I had and still have over most teachers is that I'm patient

myself, so even though I'm not fluent, I do understand it and I can speak, just not fluently.

I can't speak in sentences, but I can relate to those kids who come over from Haiti on a

regular basis and even the Spanish speaking side of it, I know what it feels like to grow up

with a second language in a home. (Teacher 5, personal communication, January 30,

2019)

Teacher 6

Teacher 6 grew up in Pennsylvania and began teaching in the Orlando area with little

knowledge of how to teach ELLs; she described her first years of teaching as a process of

learning, growing, and "soaking up" the knowledge she needed:

I've taught a first-grade classroom, a combined first and second grade classroom together,

did several years in third grade, and then this is my first year as a fourth grade teacher . . .

. I think sort of by accident in a way. I mean I came to Orlando and I knew there was a

big population of ELLs, but I was sort of not really aware of how many there were. So it

was sort of a surprise, sort of a shock, and I think in speaking to my colleagues, speaking

to my administrators, I've really sort of just soaked up all the information I can about

teaching ELLs, and I think that's really helped me with them. (Teacher 6, personal

communication, January 31, 2019)

Teacher 7

Teacher 7 had experience teaching ELLs who also had learning disabilities, and she

described the experience as "wonderful":

This is the only school I've taught at, so I've only taught in low population or low

expectation schools . . . . I've had wonderful experiences . . . Currently in my class, out of

38 students total, but between both blocks, 31 of them are Hispanic, and then about half of

that are LY, so we do a lot of visuals, total body responses, arm . . . It really has to be

modified for our students, because their language proficiency isn't there in English, but it's

also not there in Spanish, or the language that they speak. (personal communication,

February 5, 2019)

Teacher 8

Teacher 8 taught at the school she had attended as a child. Her school had a high ELL

population, and she found she could relate easily to the Spanish-speaking students but found it

more challenging to understand the experiences of students from other cultures:

I began with teaching kindergarten about six years ago and that was at a Title 1 school,

called [school's name omitted] in [district name omitted]. And when my principal was

moved to [current school], I decided to go with her, and I also attended this school as a

child . . . . I fell in love with fourth grade and I've been ever since. About two years ago, I

graduated with my specialist degree and I was moved into the instructional reading coach

position . . . . So, ELL students this year, the majority of my class is about maybe, I would

say 12 out of 18 are ELL students. So as a high population of ELL is naturally at

[school's name omitted], I'm constantly considering their needs when I'm lesson planning

. . . . So, [my] first year teaching, I had a Russian student, I can relate to those that speak

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Spanish a little bit even though I don't speak Spanish, but the Russian student, I had no

idea. (Teacher 8, personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Teacher 9

Teacher 9 was an experienced teacher who was encouraged by the successes of her high-

performing students:

I've been teaching for 12 years. I've taught fourth grade at [school's name omitted] for 10

. . . . we group the students by ability level. For the past six years, I've received, I guess,

our top performers. This year I don't have a high ELL population but the last two years I

did, and I just hold them to the same rigor. I don't water down the content, I set high

expectations, and I feel like that has truly helped them shine and make the gains that

reflects in my data. (personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Teacher 10

Teacher 10 was in her 10th year at her current school, and although the experience of

teaching had involved negative aspects, her overall experience was one of success and

achievement for students:

I have been teaching at [current school's name omitted] since 2010. I was blessed to stay

with [current school] . . . . It has its ups and downs . . . . I've been teaching ELL for eight

years . . . . Majority of my students are English language learners . . . . My first year here

was in November 2010, and my student, [name omitted], I remember that was her first

year learning a new language. I actually bumped into her a month ago, and to see that

transformation of eight years was a great experience. She was quiet when I taught her,

but she was a hard worker, and to see her even recognizing me after all these years and to

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talk about her progress was great. She's always wanted to be a teacher. That, to me, was

what stood out. (personal communication, February 5, 2019)

<center>Data Analysis</center>

The interviews were transcribed by the professional transcription service, Rev.com, in

preparation for the phenomenological analysis. Transcripts were deidentified through the

removal of teachers' names and other identifying details, including school where employed. The

modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to analyze the data from the interview

transcripts (Moustakas, 1994). The first step of the analysis was phenomenological reduction,

wherein the researcher set aside personal biases and preconceived opinions about the

phenomenon. Phenomenological reduction also entailed the process of horizontalization, the

organization of invariant constituents into themes, and the construction of textual descriptions

(see Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization entailed listing all the units of information in the

transcript for each participant by assigning labels called invariant constituents. The organization

of invariant constituents into themes entailed the generation of clusters based on similarities

among invariant constituents. The construction of textual descriptions entailed the synthesis of

themes in the form of a description for each participant and the entire sample (see Moustakas,

1994). Descriptions of teachers' individual experiences were given in the demographics section,

using evidence from the data, and the description of the entire samples' experiences is

summarized below. Table 4 indicates the emergent themes and their frequencies.

Table 4

Data Analysis Themes

Theme	
Theme 1: Language as a barrier to traditional teaching methods	40
Theme 2: Student growth as a primary success	34
Theme 3: Using visuals and other nonverbal instruction	23
Theme 4: Small groups	18
Theme 5: Building relationships with parents	17

Results

This presentation of the results of the data analysis is organized by research sub-question. The primary research question was the following: What are the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers who have taught at identified urban elementary schools where ELL students have demonstrated proficiency on the ELA portion of the state standards assessment? The primary research question was addressed by answering the two sub-questions. Results associated with the first sub-question indicated the primary successes and barriers teachers have experienced in teaching ELLs. The results associated with the second sub-question outlined the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers that highlight effective teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for improving ELL achievement to standards. Themes were supported with evidence from the data in the form of direct quotations, in which teachers described their lived experiences in their own words. This method of presentation was used to allow participants to speak in their own voices to strengthen the credibility and confirmability of the results of the data analysis.

The first sub-question was the following: What are the primary successes/barriers that the teachers have experienced in teaching ELLs? Two themes emerged to answer this sub-question. Discussion of the themes follows, including evidence from the data.

<u>Theme 1: Language as a barrier to traditional teaching methods.</u>

Data indicated that traditional teaching methods, such as lecturing, drilling, independent reading and work, and giving verbal directions, were often ineffective with ELLs. Teacher 1 cited whole-group lectures as a traditional teaching method that was ineffective with ELLs:

> These kids had a harder time sitting for whole group because there wasn't a lot of instructional value for them. They didn't really understand the language, so me standing there for 30 minutes just talking to them wasn't effective . . . . regular whole group which is usually between 30, maybe 45 minutes if it's the first day of a lesson, doesn't work for these kiddos, especially if I have the ones that are still in Tier III where they're just like brand, brand new and they're still learning letter names and sounds. (personal communication, January 25, 2019)

Teacher 2 had also found lecturing unsuccessful with ELLs: "Standing up in front of the classroom and just talking and teaching and preaching, that hasn't been successful for me. I've tried it. I stand up and I just lose 90% of my audience" (personal communication, January 25, 2019). Teacher 2 found the traditional method of having students work independently on worksheets unsuccessful: "I found worksheets are not successful, like doing a lot of worksheets and just reading a book and handing in a worksheet instead of just, you know, having the kids talk about it and involve themselves in the book" (personal communication, January 25, 2019).

Teacher 3 described her experience of surprise when, as a new teacher, she first

encountered a student who spoke no English, so could not be given verbal directions:

One year, I had a new student. He came in and he's smiling, he's happy, but he didn't say

anything. So, I said okay, come on in, get this out, get that out and he's just looking at me

smiling. I said again, come inside, sit down. Now, this was my first-year teaching so

when he's not doing anything I ask, I'm thinking, why aren't you doing anything? I was

getting kind of frustrated. Then I realized, and I came to learn, he didn't know English.

So, he's happy and smiling, but he didn't understand a word I was saying. That's a special

experience, because as a first-year teacher you realize, okay, I really need to step my

game up. (personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Teacher 3 stated that the traditional "drill and kill" teaching method was often ineffective with

ELLs: "Just doing something a hundred times doesn't necessarily mean that the students are going

to learn it" (personal communication, January 30, 2019).

Teacher 5 described the bewilderment and discouragement teachers might experience

when, like Teacher 3, they first encountered a student who knew no English:

I know a lot of times, and I'm guilty of it too, which is crazy, but a lot of times when we

get a new kid in our classroom they can be from another country and the first thought you

think of is that how are you going to be able to help that kid, and especially teachers who

don't have a Caribbean background or whatnot, that's the first thing they think of when

they see a kid like that walk into their room. It's like, how are you going to be able to help

them, you're not going to have the time and whatnot. (personal communication, January

30, 2019).

Teacher 7 described the barrier language created:

With vocabulary instruction of trying to explain and build the background knowledge

schema, making inferences, and our students don't have the language in English to even

build that background knowledge when we're trying to find context use for words in the

text. (personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Teacher 7 also described ELLs' English-language abilities as a barrier to the traditional teaching

method of asking students to work independently:

I've seen some teachers do a model where they're like, "Okay, this is your task for the day.

Go ahead and go through them." Some teachers kind of expect the students to be able to

do it independently. I haven't found that with my ELL students. (Teacher 7, personal

communication, February 5, 2019)

Teacher 8 had experienced students' lack of English-language proficiency as a barrier,

and she reported that a compounding barrier to traditional teaching methods occurred when

students could not read in their native languages:

The challenges that I'm facing are when they come to us without any language, not even

in their home language. So, when they can't even read in their home language and then

you're in a fourth grade classroom, now I have such a wide gap. (personal communication,

February 5, 2019)

Teacher 8 further reported that the method of peer instruction was only partially effective with

ELLs because it helped them to learn English but not the subject matter:

Just pairing [ELLs] up with a buddy and let them go [is ineffective]. I see that sometimes

when I'm walking through that there's not enough attention being paid to, okay, yes, they

can communicate, but academically how are we bringing all of them up? It's not just the

other student's job to teach them. So, and then they're only learning the language. They're

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not learning the material. So, I think there's a nice balance in there. (personal

communication, February 5, 2019)

Teacher 9 stated that ELLs did not benefit from the traditional teaching method of "just

straight textbook" (personal communication, February 5, 2019) or instruction, in which students

learned independently by reading textbooks. Teacher 10 reported an experience consistent with

Teacher 9's by saying the following of ELLs' abilities to learn from English-language textbooks:

In regard to ELL, I think that even with [book] passages being lengthy, that could be a

struggle because if they're not at that level, or they're not understanding the content, then

to expect them to read said lengthy passages, is the struggle. (personal communication,

February 5, 2019)

Teacher 10 added that in addition to lengthy passages in English-language books being

challenging for ELLs, traditional vocabulary instruction could be difficult: "Vocabulary is some

of the things that they do struggle with. I think that's one of the ones that they haven't mastered,

so they find that as a challenge: the vocabulary content" (personal communication, February 5,

2019).

Theme 2: Student growth as a primary success.

Teachers described their successes in the classroom in terms of the growth they had seen

in their ELLs over the course of a year or over multiple years. Teacher 1 experienced one of her

most important successes in getting an extraordinarily shy and sensitive student to "open up" over

the course of a year:

There was a young man that I had last year that looped with me this year who was super

shy. I mean this kid was super, super shy, really challenging as far as communication

with myself and other students. He was very emotional. Things hit him really hard. If he

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got a poor grade on something, he would cry probably for 5 minutes. It was very difficult

for him, the transition. This year it's like looking at another child. He's opened up so

much more. He's speaking a lot more in English and his data from the beginning of the

year went up 85 points. He jumped from a K level to a second grade level and it was like

holy Toledo. I couldn't believe it. He's just so much more communicative with me now.

(personal communication, January 25, 2019)

Teacher 2 spoke of the success of student growth as rewarding:

It's just amazing how when the students come in in August or September, they have no, no

knowledge of the language. They're just nonverbal in English and it's all gestures and

ESOL strategies, a lot of pictures. The most rewarding thing is when that student in May

when they end the school year, they are fluent in English and they can just communicate

with you. My heart is just so big because they grab the language so easily. (personal

communication, January 25, 2019)

Like Teacher 1, Teacher 3 spoke of success with a particular student:

There's one student I have this year, she came from a bilingual classroom last year and she

has made the most growth that I've seen. She's just really blossomed. She said to me the

other day, [name omitted], because of you I want to be a teacher when I grow up! You

would never know that she comes from a non-English speaking home, for example, her

mom does not speak any English at all, and you'd never know because she just has come

so far in an English-only classroom. She works so hard. She's really a success story

because she started out this school year below grade level, and in just half of a year she's

gone up to on grade level. (personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Teacher 4 experienced the success of student growth as "miraculous":

I've had students that have come in speaking no English at all. Back before the bilingual

days, they would come in, and they wouldn't speak the language at all, and then by the

end of the year, it's like amazing because it's like miraculous how they're fluent by the end

of the year. (personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Like Teacher 4, Teacher 5 spoke in general terms of the pride she felt in the success of

seeing students acquire the English language in her classroom over the course of a year:

Successes would be, watching the kid mature throughout the year, whether they make a

year's worth of growth, they might not make grade level but to know that they made a

year's worth or some even made more than a year's worth of growth under me. To watch

a kid finally understand something or to watch a kid--they came in not knowing English

and then towards the end of the year they gained the language. (personal communication,

January 30, 2019)

Teacher 6 spoke of being "moved to tears" by the success of one student:

As far as successes, I can speak on one student that I had. She moved me to tears at the

end of the year. So, I had her last year, she's in my class again this year because I've

looped from third to fourth grade, and she came to me at Meet the Teacher Night last year,

and it was August sometime, and I said, Hi, I'm [name omitted]. How are you?" And she

couldn't even say hi to me. At the end of the school year she had earned a five in both

ELA and in math. (personal communication, January 31, 2019)

Teacher 6 also gave an overall characterization of student growth and success as "rewarding" and

"awesome":

I think just ultimately, it's a very rewarding experience. I mean I really enjoy watching

them grow, because I feel like they struggle, and we know that about them, and then it

seems to me like one day or one week it just sort of all clicks and it comes together, and

that's the rewarding piece because you have struggled through so much with them and that's where it's just like, "This is awesome." (personal communication, January 31, 2019)

Teacher 8 described narrowing the achievement gap as "incredibly rewarding." Teacher 8 stated, "When it comes to the successes it is incredibly rewarding to see that gap narrowing. I would say it kind of, it's a springboard, it makes you want to do more" (personal communication, February 5, 2019).

For Teacher 9, the success of student growth was the reason she did her job: "I just think it's really rewarding to see how much they've grown from the beginning, when they start off as third graders and the progression. Ten months is just amazing, and that's why we do what we do" (personal communication, February 5, 2019).

Like other participants, Teacher 10 described student successes as "very rewarding," and further characterized it as "amazing":

There's [*sic*] students that you could definitely see a big change in them, and to see that big change, as a teacher, is a very rewarding experience. Even my students last year, I was really fortunate to have my group last year that I also taught my combo class from second and third. They were my third graders. So, they got looped in with me in fourth grade, and to see that big transformation within that 2-year span that change and where they are at, is amazing. (personal communication, February 5, 2019)

<div align="center">Second Sub-question</div>

The second sub-question was the following: What lived experiences of fourth grade teachers highlight effective teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for improving ELL achievement to standards? Three themes emerged to answer the research question. Discussion of the themes follows, including evidence from the data.

Participants reported that effective teaching strategies and methods for ELLs included use of visuals during instruction, as well as use of hand gestures and other nonverbal cues to reinforce and clarify directions. Teacher 1 taught students to associate objects and concepts with gestures, as well as words:

> I'm very expressive when I talk, so I use a lot of hand gestures with my voice. So, if I say door, I'll typically point at a door, or I'll use my hands. And when we're talking about the different operations, for example, like addition, subtraction, multiplication, I'll do something with my arm, and I'll make them cross their arm so that they know that means multiplication and then they know that this means division, and things like that. So, they have that in their brain, and I'll see them doing it during tests. It's really funny. They'll stand there and they'll make little signals with their arms and their hands and stuff. (personal communication, January 25, 2019)

Teacher 1 further reinforced instruction with pictures: "Most of my word wall has pictures to go along with whatever it is that we're practicing" (personal communication, January 25, 2019).

Teacher 2, like Teacher 1, relied heavily on gestures and pictures: "I use a wide range of strategies. I use a lot of pictures. I use a lot of big gestures, and when I speak, I use hands, like when I say one, I use the one. It's all visuals" (personal communication, January 25, 2019).

Teacher 3 relied on visuals, graphics, and hands-on learning to overcome the language barrier:

> I know so many accommodations when it comes to students with disabilities, I use that same expertise and apply it to students with language barriers. I use so many visuals, like pictures; color, I love color; graphics, I use so many real objects. For example, we're

about to do a unit on rocks, so I bought an entire rock set to have them do hands on

learning . . . . If you look on the side of their desks, they all have little reference things and

materials that are right there, hands on. A lot of hands on artifacts, a lot of real objects. A

lot of physical movements too. We were doing moon phases and we had a different

movement for each phase. When you put it all together, it really makes connections.

(personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Teacher 3 had also diverged from premade lesson plans to make instruction more engaging with

images:

I used to have this mindset that if someone else made a lesson plan, I have to do their

lesson plan because they made it. I'm starting to realize that I don't. I can change it to

meet the needs of my students. So, certain subject area where the content was kind of

boring for me even to teach, I started downloading it at home and making all these

changes and adding pictures and adding music and just making it fun. I think honestly the

most successful would just be making learning fun. (personal communication, January 30,

2019)

Teacher 4 asked students to draw pictures to convey their meaning when they had

difficulty expressing themselves in English:

Drawing. Like if they're trying to tell me something, and they can't get it to me, or I can't

get them to understand, sometimes you have to draw a picture. It's like this is what I

mean, and they get it. That helps sometimes. (personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Teacher 7 gave examples of gestures used effectively to convey directions:

During whole group instruction, we do a lot of body movements, so for summary, I would

say, like, put my arms out extended and say, "This is our full story," and then we wrap our

arms and say, "Summary." That's just training them to know that a summary is only the

smaller part of story that we go and talk about only the key details are inside, things like

that. We do different things like when we're talking about main idea, I do topic in one

hand, point in the other hand, they clap them together, so it equals the main idea. On

testing, I see sometimes students doing this little hand movements and things to remind

them. (personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Teacher 7 also remembered a drawing exercise as a particular success:

One big success that we had is when we were going over academic vocabulary. We make

kind of an active vocabulary sheet that has the word, and they draw a picture next to it,

next to the definition, and that's helped them make a lot of connections. (personal

communication, February 5, 2019).

Teacher 8 was proud of her success in using technology and visuals to instruct the Russian

student who was described in the demographics section of this chapter. She said of her success

with this student who began in the school knowing no English:

My first year I used an iPad that I brought from home and all the words that we used I

would just swipe pictures. So, then eventually [the Russian student] was swiping pictures

and she turned out to be my highest student and because she was motivated. When it

comes to, at [name omitted], a lot of my directions that are on my smart board are pictures

and that helps all students. So, I don't even have to write out words. I use a lot of pictures

for what I want in the classroom. (Teacher 8, personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Teacher 8 also imitated the use of objects to convey meaning to ELLs:

I always think back to the kindergarten and they didn't know what like lawn mower. So, I

got a chair and I'm pretending it's a lawn mower. So, there are a lot of acting. So, then

we all grab a chair, we're all pushing the lawn mowers, so now they all remember lawn

mower and probably associate it with the chair but just anything, it could be the silliest

thing, but it just helps them act it out and understand what the word means. (personal

communication, February 5, 2019)

Similarly, Teacher 9 used technology and visuals:

For the ELL learners, visual representation, integrating technology into the classroom,

those kinds of things have really helped. I have used "realia" to teach various skills. For

example, when we introduced capacity and measurement, I brought in examples of what a

gallon looks like (milk jug) etc., and had students line up in the front of the class (act-out)

to show what a yard, a foot looks like. I also started using Podcasts in the classroom to

hold discussions (getting them to talk), and it also helps to reinforce the skill of the week.

(parenthetical interpolations were added by the participant during member-checking)

Theme 4: Small groups.

Data associated with this theme indicated that creating small groups in classes was more

effective than trying to instruct the whole class at once (e.g., by lecturing). Teacher 1 reported

that breaking the class into groups allowed students to receive more one-on-one support and also

contributed to student engagement:

It was a lot more small [*sic*] group instruction rather than whole group instruction . . . . It's

just so frustrating for the both of us, because you're sitting there, kind of like, "Okay, well,

can someone give me an answer to this question?" And it's just like, stares. So, for them,

I'll introduce the topical group, maybe spend 15 minutes on it, maybe, and will

immediately come to small group. That's pretty much a method I employed last year,

mostly, because I did have the shelter class, and more than half of my students were

within that first-year range. And so, they really needed that small group, one-on-one

support. (personal communication, January 25, 2019)

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Teacher 2 would break her class into small groups to monitor progress by walking the room:

I monitor a lot. I walk around. I walk to each table and I'm asking questions. I had my students paired up together. I'm all over the place instead of just standing up there, you know. I'm more involved with small groups . . . . That is when the kids work together in groups, in small groups, no more than four. I usually put, the kids are working together in pairs or partners, or in threes or fours, and they're collaborating and discussing whatever the content is. Working together to solve a problem. (personal communication, January 25, 2019)

Teacher 4 used the buddy system to accommodate a student, who

came in at the beginning of the year, and she was terrified, which I can't even imagine. She was terrified. She didn't speak the language at all, but thankfully, there were enough kids in my class that spoke both languages, English and Spanish, so I was able to partner her up with somebody who was able to help her out a lot. And then by the end of the year, she was fluent. (personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Teacher 5 described her grouping and pairing of students as "strategic":

It's a lot of partnering up. It's learning how to match up certain kids with others. Sometimes if I have a Haitian speaking Creole kid who just might have just come into the country, I try to match him up with another kid that's very similar to him or her, have the same background. A kid that might be on a little higher end. A kid that might be fluent in both languages so they could still assist that kid, but not be too far behind on what they're trying to do. I try to be strategic with how I group my kids, in terms of, who can rub off on each other, who will mesh, what kids will be willing to help someone else and not feel like it's holding them back. (personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Teacher 6 described the buddy system as a way for students to feel "safe" speaking

English with a peer:

The most effective [instructional strategy]? I would say working in small groups. So,

when I teach reading, I have a group of ELLs, and I think that using material that is I

guess lower grade level, so like a kindergarten and first grade to start them with the

vocabulary to explicitly teach that vocabulary because it's a huge piece, and that's where

they're comfortable too. So, they're more willing to speak English with you and with their

peers when they're in that small group, because it's safe. (personal communication,

January 31, 2019).

Teacher 8 also reported that she relied heavily on pairing students:

Always the buddy system, get [ELLs] comfortable with someone too. They always have

a buddy, buddy that shows them where to go, what to do, that might be able to speak with

them in their home language a little bit, even if they can't read it. (personal

communication, February 5, 2019)

When Teacher 10 paired students, she would place a student with higher English

proficiency together with a student with lower proficiency:

I usually do pair with students that are medium to low, to medium to high, depends within

that group, or sometimes just a little of vice versa or students that they haven't worked

with yet, so they get a little bit familiar with them and their learning style . . . . Some days

I have them working in pairs, sometimes I have them working in threes, or no more than

four. It does depend, but I feel like that that would be the most successful strategy in

helping them learn. (personal communication, February 5, 2019)

<u>Theme 5: Building relationships with parents.</u>

Data indicated that building relationships with ELLs' parents was challenging because the parents might not know English and might be uncomfortable visiting the school but engaging with ELLs' parents was both personally rewarding and an effective instructional support. For Teacher 1, relationships with parents were one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching ELLs:

> I loved it so much. There was just something so rewarding, and the parents were so grateful. They would come into teacher conferences and say, "My kid is just talking up a storm about this, this and this and this." And, you know, I've become such good friends with my parents from last year because they carried with me into this year, and they were just so thrilled, and I was so thrilled to be with their kids again. They were like, "We're so happy you're with us again." (personal communication, January 25, 2019)

> Teacher 2 spoke of working closely with a mother to get an ELL "out of her shell":

> I get involved with the mom and we try to support each other. I work one on one with [the student], and I speak in her language. I also explain to her, in Spanish, some of the things, but then it's all when I ask her to respond to me, I want her to respond and repeat my words in English . . . . I work closely with the mom right now trying to get her out of that shell. (personal communication, January 25, 2019)

> Teacher 5 believed that her experience as an ELL allowed her to relate to students and their families exceptionally well:

> The one advantage I had and still have over most teachers is that I'm Haitian myself, so even though I'm not fluent, I do understand it and I can speak, just not fluently. I can't speak in sentences, but I can relate to those kids who come over from Haiti on a regular basis and even the Spanish speaking side of it, I know what it feels like to grow up with a

second language in a home. I know what it feels like for parents not to be able to help me or parents that want to help, but they can't relate to you because of the language barrier. I know what it feels like for parents not to be in the house because they're working or there's one parent in the house. I know what all that feels like. (personal communication, January 30, 2019)

Teacher 6 spoke of communicating with ELLs' parents as the most significant challenge she faced but added that she had succeeded in communicating by using translation apps:

I would say easily the first challenge with working with ELL students is speaking to their families. I think it's very difficult to communicate with them. I use the app on my phone called Class Dojo that translates for us, but I find they're very reluctant to come into school to speak to me, and I can imagine it's very intimidating because they don't know the language necessarily, and they're not sure if they'll have a translator, and our culture of school is so different. So, I think talking to the families and communicating with them is difficult. (personal communication, January 31, 2019)

Teacher 7 also used electronic apps as translators to build relationships with parents:

Communicating with parents, that's a big challenge that we have. I do speak Spanish, but I was raised here, so I don't have all the academic vocabulary in Spanish, so it's sometimes hard to convey to the parents what they can do at home to help support the students with things like theme and main idea when it's hard for me to explain it. . . . what I typically do is I will use Google Translate. I send home almost a cheat sheet for parents on how to work it, and then I just translate it into Spanish, and then I'll send it home. (personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Teacher 9 not only spoke of ELLs' parents as supportive but also cited the language barrier as a challenge when communicating with them:

The parents are really supportive, and they're really involved. But sometimes I guess the

communication to the parents, I guess, would be the most challenging because I do not

speak a second language . . . . Just trying not to have that be a setback and just trying to

engage them and communicate with them the best that I can. I do a weekly email and I

translate it, I go to Google translate, so sometimes they're respond back to me in Spanish

and I'll just go to Google translate, copy and past [*sic*], and just kind of respond that way.

(personal communication, February 5, 2019)

<u>Summary</u>

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived

experiences of fourth grade teachers working in a large urban school district, where the

achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller when compared to other schools

within the district. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 fourth

grade ELL teachers. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the modified

Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method described by Moustakas (1994).

One primary research question and two sub-questions were used to guide this study. The

primary research question was the following: What are the lived experiences of fourth grade

teachers who have taught at identified urban elementary schools where ELL students have

demonstrated proficiency on the ELA portion of the state standards assessment? The primary

question was answered by answering the two sub-questions. The first sub-question was the

following: What are the primary successes/barriers that the teachers have experienced in teaching

ELLs? Results indicated that the primary success teachers experienced was student growth over

the course of a year, in terms of language acquisition, academic success, and "opening up." The

primary issue was the language barrier, which often prevented ELL teachers from using

traditional instructional methods, such as lecturing to the whole class, assigning independent

work, or assigning textbook passages to teach material to students. The second sub-question was

the following: What do the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers highlight about effective

teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for improving ELL achievement to

standards? Results indicated that using visuals and other nonverbal instruction (e.g., hand

gestures, body language, and drawing), breaking classes into small groups or dyads, and building

relationships with parents were all effective ways of instructing ELLs. Chapter 5 includes

discussion, interpretation, and implications of these results.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Summary of the Findings

This research study addressed the academic achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs by exploring the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers with a proven record of narrowing the achievement gap. Participants who were included in the study identified methods and strategies that they have utilized to effectively implement state standards to decrease the achievement gap between ELLs and their non-ELL peers.

Improving the academic achievement of ELLs poses a challenge for most schools (Malova, 2018), but there is evidence that some teachers successfully overcome this challenge, even with limited specialized training. Schools, within the large urban district, included in this study, were identified because there was evidence that they had narrowed the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs. The researcher used qualitative phenomenological inquiry research design for this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify and explore the lived experiences of teachers who have narrowed the achievement gap. The researcher discovered factors that may overcome barriers to teaching ELLs and positively influence ELL student achievement.

Using the of the sociocultural theory (Lee, 2015), the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1962), constructivism (Chaiklin, 2003; Wadsworth, 1996), and differentiated practices of interactionist-constructivism (Dewey, 1916/1985, 1938; Piaget, 1937/1954, 1972; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), the researcher formed a theoretical framework that focused on learning through social interaction. The researcher employed this framework (Figure 3), along with existing literature presented in Chapter 2, was then employed to develop the interview guide and the research questions, which included the following:

Main RQ: What are the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers who have taught at identified urban elementary schools where ELL students have demonstrated proficiency on the ELA portion of the state standards assessment?

Sub-question A: What are the primary successes/barriers that the teachers have experienced in teaching ELLs?

Sub-question B: What lived experiences of fourth grade teachers highlight effective teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for improving ELL achievement to standards?

Based on the analysis of the findings presented in Chapter 4, five themes emerged to answer the research questions. For Sub-question A, the themes included (a) language as a barrier to traditional teaching methods and (b) student growth as a primary success. For Sub-question B, the themes included (a) using visuals and other nonverbal instruction, (b) small groups, and (c) building relationships with parents. These are discussed in detail in the following sections, as well as the limitations, recommendations, and implications of the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section discusses each theme alongside the existing literature presented in Chapter 2. The integrated theoretical framework is also examined based on findings. The first two themes answer the first sub-question of the study: What are the primary successes/barriers that the teachers have experienced in teaching ELLs?

Theme 1: Language as a Barrier to Traditional Teaching Methods

In teaching ELLs, almost all participants agreed that language was the most challenging barrier that they encountered, especially when using traditional teaching methods. Indeed,

Hansen-Thomas et al. (2016) described the results of survey data that revealed communication with ELLs as one of the major obstacles to the educational progress of the students. This finding was unsurprising, considering the academic demands relative to the English language proficiency of the ELLs (Blomberg, 2007). Teachers are expected to help students learn academic content while simultaneously helping to improve students' language proficiency (Nutta et al., 2017). As described by the participants in this study, traditional teaching methods, comprised mainly of lecturing, drilling, independent reading and work, and giving verbal directions, showed little impact on ELLs' academic performance or language development.

The participants described whole-group or whole-class lecturing as one of the traditional teaching methods that provided little value for ELLs. Participants described how students ended up confused or inattentive when they simply talked for extended periods in front of the class, because the ELLs did not understand what teachers' lectures. Lee (2015) worked alongside experienced ESL teachers in a program that targeted ELLs and found that interactive learning communities were much more effective than the traditional whole-group lecture setup. She argued that the interactive setup allowed students to grow confident in speaking English, and even established stronger relationships among the students (Lee, 2015). The role of teachers as facilitators of learning, instead of simply lecturers, was emphasized in this type of setup and was also supported by several previous studies (González-Carriedo et al., 2016; Lee, 2015; Subban & Round, 2015).

González-Carriedo et al. (2016) proposed that ELLs learned better when they could interact with other students, formulating their own questions and responses, instead of teachers giving them answers through lectures. They also found that the ELLs were more successful when they could relate new concepts to their own experiences. Likewise, Subban and Round (2015) stated that the student interaction and collaboration allowed students to feel more confident as

they contributed to the discussion, instead of listening to the teacher's lecture. Similarly, Silverman et al. (2016) argued that, in the traditional lecture setup, the teacher completed 75% of discussions alone, and this setup hampered the development of ELLs. They also argued that a setup where students could talk more would give them opportunities to practice the lessons and skills that they learned and those that they were still developing (Silverman et al., 2016).

Along with the research that identified interactive arrangements and student dialogue as favorable over the traditional whole-group lecture setup, independent work given to ELLs was identified as another pedagogical concern. The participants in the current study explained that that ELLs struggled with independent instructions and/or independent work. This finding was supported by Islam and Park (2015), as their participants also emphasized the challenges that they faced with ELLs who had difficulty following instructions. They stated that, just because an ELL student was already conversing with friends in English, did not mean that they were fluent in higher level academic language (Islam & Park, 2015). The theory of ZPD perfectly complemented this finding as well, as the optimal learning zone was purported to lie between what the student could learn independently and what the student could learn with guidance from a teacher (see Murphy & Haller, 2015). As the traditional methods of whole-group lectures and independent work were challenged by the language barrier, the goal became to provide scaffolding or progressively guide students through modeling and providing support when needed (González-Carriedo et al., 2016).

The participants in the current research reported that repetitive drilling was another strategy, with limited results, when used with ELLs. The participants noted that simply practicing a lesson or skill repeatedly did not automatically translate into learning. One participant noted that this practice of repetitive drilling could be particularly frustrating for teachers, as they kept repeating the same information in English to students with little success.

Subban and Round (2015) opposed this finding, stating that the repeating of instructions or vital points of a lesson helped students retain information. However, their study included other strategies in addition to repetition, which could mean that repetitive drilling alone would not be as effective.

The participants in the current study described little value in using complex text with ELLs. Conversely, Tellez and Manthey's (2015) participants stated that, although complex text could be challenging for students, they aimed to not just enhance reading classes but also enhance mathematics for students to learn to tackle word problems. The skill of writing is associated with complex reading, as one of Malova's (2018) participants stated, "Good readers are the best writers" (p. 112). Rojas (2014) pointed out that one of the goals of the CCSS was for students to negotiate meaning from complex texts, which entailed using textbooks. However, she also stated that students could use scaffolding if they struggled with the text (Rojas, 2014). Likewise, Koura and Zahran (2017) argued that the use of textbooks, although necessary, should be accompanied by other strategies. These studies showed how using lengthy and complex textbooks was a challenging but necessary part of ELL education that required additional guidance on the part of the teachers to assist the ELLs. Nutta (2018) describes using leveled and modified texts to help ELLs comprehend grade level content.

Although some school leaders provided translations and adaptations for texts and exams to alleviate the problems of the language barrier (Turkan & Oliveri, 2014), these techniques did not always work. In the present study, one participant noted how some ELLs could not read in their own native language. Pairing the ELL with an English-speaking student of the same background was only partially successful in alleviating the language barrier problem, as well. From the present study, one participant noted how the buddy system helped students learn the language but not the content of the lessons needed in class. Coady et al. (2016) study results

revealed when teachers utilized the small group setup they used students' ability levels and personalities as grouping criteria. Although, the ELLs were included in small groups, they were unsupervised in the desired outcome and scaffolding was not provided for content learning or targeted English language development, thereby resulting in lack of academic performance. Wolf and Faulkner-Bond (2016) provided an explanation for this finding by differentiating between academic language and social language. They found that ELP assessments, along with other academic assessments, mostly measured academic language, so the social language garnered from peer instruction was not as effective in improving academic skills for ELLs. Furthermore, Blazer (2015) found that some courses focused too much on English language acquisition, ignoring the actual material within the lessons, which considerably lowered students' academic performances in these courses.

In sum, the lack of knowledge of the English language posed a challenge for ELL teachers (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016), especially when traditional methods relied heavily on English language usage. These methods included whole-group lectures, independent work, repeated drilling, and complex texts. In the present study, the theoretical framework included constructivist models that were contrary to these traditional methods (see Chaiklin, 2003; Dewey, 1916/1985, 1938; Echevarria et al., 2008; Meyer, 2017; Piaget, 1937/1954, 1972; Torres-Guzmán, 2007; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wadsworth, 1996). Although these methods were challenging for ELL teachers, previous researchers revealed how these methods were sometimes necessary for the academic advancement of ELLs (see Rojas, 2014; Subban & Round, 2015; Tellez & Manthey, 2015). Even nontraditional methods, such as peer instruction and native language translation or adaptation, were influenced by the language barrier problem, as some ELLs could not even read in their native language. Peer instruction only provided support in the development of social language but not in the development of academic language acquisition

(Wolf & Faulkner-Bond, 2016). Just as there were numerous barriers for ELL education, there also appeared to be success factors, as discussed in Theme 2.

Theme 2: Student Growth as Primary Success

In the present study, most participants reported success stories in their ELL teaching career. Because many ELLs began as timid and sensitive students who were not confident in speaking, several research participants believed that transitioning and "opening up" to the class were significant accomplishments. Robinson, Maldonado, and Whaley (2014) relayed similar insights on differentiated instruction, where the goals of each student differed according to their progress. Researchers noted that this type of instruction allowed students of varied developmental levels to succeed and feel accomplished (Robinson et al., 2014).

One participant shared an anecdote where one particular ELL grew more confident and communicative over a single school year, resulting in the teacher feeling impressed with the student's transformation. Another participant even described the transition as "miraculous." Malova (2018) emphasized the fourth grade level, the level examined in this present study, as a critical stage in childhood development for literacy. Likewise, Solari et al. (2014) found that teachers of ELLs in lower levels could narrow the achievement gap more than those in the higher levels. They presented the Matthew effect, which was when ELLs could not catch up to their traditional English-speaking peers in academics and noted how this effect was more evident in higher grade levels (Solari et al., 2014). As the fourth grade was identified by these two studies as critical points in literacy development and academic achievement, it made the success of transitioning and "opening up" to the class more meaningful for the teachers, as evidenced in the present study's findings.

Success also came in the form of inspiration. In the present study, one participant shared

how a student told her that she aspired to be a teacher just like her when she got older. Kibler and

Roman (2013), similarly, emphasized how ELL teachers' positive mindsets and beliefs that they

had strong positive impact on the students and in the community were success factors. Teacher

self-efficacy was emphasized in other previous studies to have a vital role in the development of

ELLs (Bandura, 1977; Koura & Zahran, 2017; Murphy & Haller, 2015). The success and growth

of ELLs created a cycle where teachers were inspired to improve and do more with their teaching,

which affected student performance (Clayton, 2013; Kibler & Roman, 2013). Tellez and Manthey

(2015) further expanded the role of efficacy, stating that collective efficacy, meaning school-wide

efficacy or teachers' beliefs in their schools' strategies, was as important as individual teacher

efficacy. In the current study, several participants revealed how rewarding it was for them when

their strategies worked, allowing a struggling student to develop and succeed, further inspiring

teacher and student alike to do more. The most notable of these strategies are discussed in the

following sections, answering the present study's second sub-question: What lived experiences of

fourth grade teachers highlight effective teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for

improving ELL achievement to standards?

<center>Theme 3: Using Visuals and Other Nonverbal Instruction</center>

Participants of the present study enumerated strategies and methods utilizing visual and

nonverbal instructions, which were purported as effective, especially considering the students'

language and communication limitations. Torres-Guzmán (2007) agreed that these nonverbal

cues, visual aids, and manipulatives, when paired with verbal instructions, promoted learning in

ELLs. The first strategy involved using big hand gestures and acting, with which students could

associate the lessons. One participant even stated that she would see students doing the gestures

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during exams. Islam and Park (2015) agreed that body language and gestures were effective

strategies for ELLs. They also added using facial expressions and intonations as important

strategies (Islam & Park, 2015). With these nonverbal forms of communication, ELLs need not

rely on their English proficiency to understand the content of the lessons. These gestures and

acting also could assist in their vocabulary building as they associate the acts with words that the

teachers use. Murphy and Haller (2015) noted role-playing and using visuals were two of the

practices identified by teachers as the most effective in developing the literacy skills of ELLs, as

students used cues to learn the meaning of words and practice these cues through role-play or

acting.

Aside from gestures and acting, other visual cues (e.g., word walls) were also found

effective in developing ELLs' skills and knowledge. One participant stated that her word wall

used pictures to help students' practice, as they saw this wall every time that they entered the

classroom. González-Carriedo et al. (2016) defined word walls as an effective strategy for ELLs.

Researchers further noted how teachers let students assist in creating the word wall, displaying

their most used words in the lessons, which gave them a sense of ownership over the word wall

(González-Carriedo et al., 2016). In the present study, one participant revealed that the word wall

was one of the inclusive accommodations that was used. She stated that strategies used with

students with disabilities also applied to ELLs. These strategies worked with ELLs because

language proficiency develops at different rates and through different avenues for different

students, and some might need more accommodations than others (see Rojas, 2014; Nutta et al.,

2017).

Differentiation, which was a part of the present study's integrated theoretical framework

(Dewey, 1916/1985, 1938; Piaget, 1937/1954, 1972; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), was one of the most

utilized strategies for students with special needs, as it allowed for flexibility and adjustment of

the lessons to meet each student's needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Participants of the present study reported changing premade lesson plans to accommodate the needs of their ELL students. Differentiation is supported by several previous studies (Clayton, 2013; Islam & Park, 2015; Kibler & Roman, 2013; Koura & Zahran, 2017; Lee, 2015; Murphy & Haller, 2015; Robinson et al., 2014; Subban & Round, 2015). Rojas (2014) and Nutta et al. (2017) emphasized the need for teachers to attend to the diversity within a classroom.

Clayton (2013) suggested that teachers should adjust instruction, by anticipating the obstacles that ELLs might face. Taking this recommendation a step further, Islam and Park (2015), Koura and Zahran (2017), Lee (2015), Robinson et al. (2014), and Subban and Round (2015) suggested cultural sensitivity and integrating cultural competencies into the lessons. An example would be to utilize cultural folktales that students might be familiar with in the lessons (Islam & Park, 2015). Kibler and Roman (2013) suggested teachers should incorporate some native words into the lessons, so that ELLs might feel more included. One participant in Murphy and Haller's (2015) study stated that she used her Italian knowledge to help her Latino students, and they appreciation the connection the teacher made. Although the cultural aspect of differentiation was not mentioned by any of the present study's participants, they did state they empathized with their ELL students; some of them also came from other cultural backgrounds, indicating a level of cultural sensitivity and differentiation that has been highlighted in the existing literature.

Aside from cultural differentiation or accommodation, there are other ways to capitalize on ELLs' interests. Participants of the present study reported that using real artifacts and objects, technology, and physical movements and activities made their lessons fun for ELLs, which enhanced students' learning. These functional and interactive strategies made lessons meaningful for ELLs, which allowed them to learn language more easily (see Rojas, 2014). Likewise, Islam

and Park (2015) advocated using total physical responses that required students to sing, act, and promote kinesthetic learning. Subban and Round (2015) further stated, "Different means of presenting information meant that the students' working memories were not overloaded" (p. 123), which meant that diverse strategies, such as the ones presented in this study, would assist ELLs as they struggled with content and language proficiency.

Using technology was supported by several previous studies, as well (González-Carriedo et al., 2016; Koura & Zahran, 2017; Lindahl & Watkins, 2015; Silverman et al., 2016; Tahiri et al., 2017). PowerPoint, iMovie, Smart Board, and massive open online courses (MOOC) were proposed to act as scaffolds to meet the needs and interests of ELLs (González-Carriedo et al., 2016; Lindahl & Watkins, 2015; Tahiri et al., 2017). In the present study, participants reported using iPads, Smart Boards, and podcasts in their lessons, which made it easier to facilitate discussions and increase student motivation.

In sum, visual, kinesthetic, and other nonverbal strategies were reported as effective in teaching ELLs. These included using gestures, acting, physical movements, word walls with pictures, differentiation, real artifacts or objects, and technology. These strategies were also supported by the existing literature. The success of these strategies lay in that teachers made lessons fun and interesting for ELLs, which then enhanced students' learning (Subban & Round, 2015). These strategies also emphasized the present study's integrated theoretical framework which used constructivism or allowing students to construct meanings or knowledge based on their own experiences (see Dewey, 1916/1985, 1938; Piaget, 1937/1954, 1972; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978).

Theme 4: Small Groups

Aside from visual and nonverbal strategies, participants of the current study reported that using small groups were effective for ELLs. As stated in the first theme, whole-group lecturing was found to be ineffective by virtue of the fact that ELLs had trouble understanding the English language. Using small groups, then, allowed students to discuss the lessons among themselves. This strategy was well-supported in the literature (Murphy & Haller, 2015; Robinson et al., 2014; Subban & Round, 2015; Torres-Guzmán, 2007), as it allowed students to engage and become actively involved in the lessons (Murphy & Haller, 2015). Torres-Guzmán (2007) emphasized how it also helped ELLs' social development, which they might struggle with as they came from entirely diverse backgrounds than most of their traditional classmates. The collaborative aspect of small groups was also emphasized, as it allowed the sharing of diverse ideas and cooperation (Murphy & Haller, 2015; Robinson et al., 2014).

The small group setup not only created an academic environment but also a friendly learning community that allowed students to help each other learn (Lee, 2015). In the present study, participants noticed that the small group setup was more comfortable for ELLs and created a "safe space" for them to practice speaking in English. Hansen-Thomas et al. (2016) presented comparable results; their participants stated that their students hesitated to speak to them in English due to a fear of making mistakes. These findings showed the importance of small group sessions. Subban and Round (2015) suggested using time allowances for both whole class teaching and small group sessions, something that one of the participants in the present study also suggested.

Like small groups, the participants also reported "buddies" as effective for ELLs, especially new ones. Participants stated that they often paired struggling ELLs with higher

English proficiency but also shared the same cultural background to assist the struggling student. González-Carriedo et al. (2016) supported this strategy; they revealed how these pairs created meaning together through their discussions and activities. Blazer (2015), Lee (2015), and Silverman et al. (2016) showed support for this finding by stating that more experienced ELLs should be paired with newcomer ELLs, not just for academic or language support, but also for better engagement. Campbell and Filimon (2018) proposed the peer review process, which allowed partners to read each other's writing, and then give feedback. They found this process beneficial for both the reader and the writer, as the writer gained a unique perspective through the lens of the reader, and the reader developed critical evaluation skills (Campbell & Filimon, 2018).

These small group strategies emphasized the value of social interaction, as proposed by the present study's integrated theoretical framework (see Chaiklin, 2003; Dewey, 1916/1985, 1938; Echevarria et al., 2008; Meyer, 2017; Piaget, 1937/1954, 1972; Torres-Guzmán, 2007; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wadsworth, 1996). Many struggling ELLs were found to be segregated from their English-speaking peers (Blazer, 2015), which deprived them of the benefits of interacting with more proficient English speakers. In this theme, the study's findings, along with the existing literature, strongly supported using small groups with more proficient English speakers to assist their ELL peers.

Theme 5: Building Relationships with Parents

Building relationships with ELLs' parents and families was the last theme, and it presented a challenging, but beneficial, strategy for ELL teachers. Participants stated that communicating with families could be challenging because some parents not speaking English at all and/or being uncomfortable in visiting the school. Hansen-Thomas et al. (2016) similarly stated that although parental involvement was a vital part of their children's education, ELL

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parents' low English proficiency might hinder this involvement, as they might struggle with communicating with teachers. One participant in the present study also stated how ELLs might struggle more because their parents could not help them study at home, as parents or families lacked the English proficiency required for the academic work.

In finding ways to overcome this challenge, the present study's participants emphasized technological advancements that they used to communicate with families. They reported using translation applications in their computers and other devices to communicate with the parents, whether personally or through e-mail. This process not only helped them communicate better with the parents but also showed the parents and the ELL that the teacher valued students' native language and culture (Kibler & Roman, 2013).

The value of parental involvement was supported by several existing studies (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Kibler & Roman, 2013; Malova, 2018; Rojas, 2014). Rojas (2014) expressed how students' home-life was a major factor of their development, especially regarding language. Conversely, Malova (2018) stated that familial support helped motivate students. This construct was also evident in the present study, as participants reported working closely with parents to encourage their child. Kibler and Roman (2013) presented "bilingual parent literacy nights" (p. 20), where teachers met with parents to provide information and strategies on how to help their children through reading and writing with them. Likewise, Clayton (2013) stated that teachers should get to know their students' family backgrounds, as well as their parents' expectations, to set clear and suitable goals for students. Previous research, along with the present study's findings, indicated the importance of parental involvement, even if the communication might pose a challenge at times.

To summarize the key findings of the study, the first sub-question was focused on the successes and barriers that ELL teachers experienced. In response, the first theme outlined how

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students' low English proficiency posed as a barrier, especially when traditional teaching methods were utilized. Rather than using traditional methods, such as lecturing, drilling, and independent work, the participants consistently reported using alternative methods, as described in Themes 3 and 4. The second theme outlined how students' growth and successful transition within one school year were successes. The second sub-question focused on the lived experiences of the ELL teachers that highlighted effective teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for improving ELL achievement. The third theme centered on using visual and nonverbal instructions to overcome the language barrier, and teachers were successful in helping ELLs learn through their own experiences and constructions. The fourth theme highlighted that working in small groups worked well with ELLs, especially when they were grouped with higher English proficiency students who could assist. The fifth and last theme outlined that parental involvement, although challenging, was also helpful in encouraging ELLs. The following section discusses the limitations of the present study.

Limitations of the Study

As this researcher utilized the phenomenological method, purposive sampling was used to select participants involved in the phenomenon to provide the most relevant information. Purposive sampling, although often used in phenomenological studies, require caution in simplifying the data, as the selected sample may not represent the general population (Palinkas et al., 2015). The themes and perspectives provided by the participants might also not be indiscriminate to other populations, such as other races, institutions, and locations. The researcher worked as a school principal in the same district as the participants, which might have been a source of bias for the study. However, the researcher took precautions as described in Chapter 3 to avoid such bias to remain objective.

Another limitation was the qualitative nature of the study, which provided insights but not statistics about the phenomenon. The phenomenon studied was the academic achievement of ELLs and, as such, should only be considered for the specific group of ELLs. The findings of the study might not be applicable to other groups of students, such as traditional students or other students with special needs. Even within the group, not all strategies presented might be effective for all ELLs, as Turkan and Oliveri (2014) emphasized when they presented the diversity of ELLs. The insights provided in this study bring forth several recommendations for future studies discussed in the next section.

<div align="center">Recommendations</div>

The insights provided by the participants in the study suggested three overarching strategies to overcome the challenges they encountered with ELLs that were validated instructional methods that could help in closing the academic gap in reading and mathematics. These strategies, which were the use of visual and nonverbal instructions, the use of small groups, and the establishment of relationships with ELLs' parents, were examined individually by prior quantitative research (see Campbell & Filimon, 2018; Silverman et al., 2016; Solari et al., 2014; Whiteside et al., 2017; Wolf & Faulkner-Bond, 2016) but never explored collectively. Future researchers should examine the collective influence of these strategies on ELLs in a quantitative manner, to establish correlation. Experimental groups may be utilized to compare these three strategies, as well, to establish causal relationships.

Using traditional teaching methods with ELLs was presented as an obstacle in the present study. However, some previous researchers presented opposing views, such as the effectiveness of repetitive drilling (Subban & Round, 2015) and the necessity of reading dense texts (Tellez & Manthey, 2015). Future researchers can investigate whether these traditional methods are

detrimental for ELLs and how these can be used to support other instructional methods in classrooms with ELLs. Other researchers can investigate if an effect of the strategies can be measured on variables other than academic achievement, such as social development, an important domain in childhood development (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). As the population of ELLs in the country continues to grow (FL DoE, 2018a), more quantitative studies will provide quantitative evidence on the purported effective teaching strategies for their development.

<u>Implications</u>

The insights provided by the participants in this study imparted several implications on practice, theory, and social change. For ELLs and their parents, the results of this study imply that the language barrier poses a problem, especially when the parents are not proficient in English. The impact of this finding needs to lead to ways a school district can provide translation combined with language lessons to include families in the school culture. The finding that parental involvement is an effective strategy also implies that parents should not hesitate to communicate their expectations with the teachers, as well as ask for updates or strategies that they can use at home to assist their children.

For teachers, the results indicated that strategies might be used to overcome the challenge of the language barrier. Teachers must be aware of the English proficiency levels of their ELL students to gauge how much accommodation that they need and provide appropriate differentiation. Collaborative workshops and sharing of best practices will also benefit teachers as they learn from each other (see Murphy & Haller, 2015).

Murphy and Haller (2015) noted how the CCSS did not provide clear definitions of a curriculum or strategies that teachers should utilize for ELLs. The findings of this study showed that teachers used different strategies, and sometimes even had to modify the lesson plans for

their ELL students. Policy makers need to be more aware of the needs and challenges of ELLs to create a standard for curricula and strategies for instructing them.

Regarding the methodological implications of this study, the qualitative research provided insights and a deeper understanding of the challenges that ELL teachers faced, as well as how they could overcome those challenges. The integrated theoretical framework was also supported by the findings. These findings indicated the application of this integrated framework in future studies would be useful in future studies investigating ELL education.

<u>Conclusion</u>

The increase of ELLs in U.S. classrooms and the noticeable achievement gap between these students and non-ELLs called for a deeper investigation on the barriers and successes their teachers faced, as well as how effective teachers overcame the barriers (FL DoE, 2015; Malova, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers working in a large urban school district, where the achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs was smaller when compared to other schools within the district. The study found that increasing language proficiency was a primary priority for the participants. Participants also reported success regarding growth the ELLs showed had in a short amount of time. Three overarching strategies were identified by the participants as having contributed to this success. They included: the use of visual and nonverbal instructions, the use of small groups, and the establishment of relationships with ELLs' parents/families. When utilized properly, these strategies were purported to narrow the achievement gap between ELLs and their traditional English-speaking classmates, thereby ensuring that all students had equal opportunities to learn and succeed in school.

This research supports policy initiatives and efforts to address the problem of low-performing ELLs. For example, one group of educators has suggested testing ELLs in their native languages (Florida PTA Resolutions Committee, 2018). Another group of educators has suggested language translation accommodations, by way of test adaptation, test translation, or test transadaptation, which will consider and make adjustments for the diverse ways ELLs perform on tests (Turkan & Oliveri, 2014). Some states have considered applying for waivers to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, which would

> allow for (states) to bypass mandates to identify schools with significant achievement gaps between student sub-groups, include ELL students' proficiency scores in the states' accountability system, and provide some students the state assessment in their native language. (Burnette, 2017, para. 2)

Other efforts are occurring at the school and classroom levels, where teachers plan and implement programs, methods, models, and strategies to support comprehension and content proficiency for ELLs. The results of this current research can be used to guide researchers and practitioners, classroom teachers and school leaders. Above all, continued attention to the academic, language, and social needs of ELLs will result in improved achievement and better outcomes for this group of students. ELLs, a growing group of students, need and deserve innovative supports that improve language proficiency that leads to content mastery.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Fourth Grade Instructor,

My name is Tracy Webley, and I am working on my doctoral dissertation through the National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative at the University of Central Florida. I have been granted permission by the office of Accountability, Research, and Assessment to conduct my research at elect Title I elementary schools within this district.

The title of my research study is *Phenomenological Study of Urban Elementary Teachers with Proficient English Language Learners.* This phenomenological study is designed to determine the beliefs and practices of fourth grade teachers who have a proven track record of meeting the academic needs of English Language Learners.

Because you have met the criteria stated above, I am requesting that you take part in my study. The interview takes around 30 - 45 minutes and is very informal. I am simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on being a teacher of English Language Learners. There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to our research and findings could lead to greater understanding of this topic.

If you are willing to participate please suggest a day and time that suits you and we will do our best to be available. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Sincerely,

Tracy Webley
Doctoral Candidate
University of Central Florida

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Demographic Survey

Thank you for answering the following questions.

1. What is your current position title?

   _____

2. How many years have you taught?

   _____

3. What grade levels have you taught?

   _____

4. What subjects have you taught?

   _____

5. How do you classify your position at your current school of employment?

   o Full-time teacher
   o Part-time teacher

6. Where did you receive your teaching degree?

   _____

7. In what areas are you certified?

   _____

8. What is your highest level of education?

   _____

9. What is your class demographics?
   o White – total number _____
   o Black – total number _____
   o Hispanic – total number _____
   o Other – total number _____

10. What is your age?

    _____

11. What is your race?

    _____

12. Do you speak another language? _____ What language

    _____

13. What is your gender? Male - _____ Female - _____

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY RESULTS

Demographic Survey Results

Teacher:	Current Grade:	Years of Teaching:	Certifications:	College:	Highest Degree:	Age:	Race:	Languages:	Gender:
1	4	2	K-6, ESOL, Reading Endorsement	UCF	BS	30	H	Spanish	F
2	4	8	K-6, ESOL	Ashford University	Masters	54	H	Spanish	F
3	4	7	K-12, ESOL, ESE	FSU	Masters	29	C	None	F
4	4	20	K-12, ESOL	Florida A & M University	Masters	42	B	None	F
5	4	7	K-6, ESOL	UCF	BA	30	B	Haitian Creole	M
6	4	5	Pre K-6, ESOL	West Chester University	BS	28	C	None	F
7	4	2	K-6, ESOL, ESE	UCF	BA	31	C/H	Spanish	F
8	4	6	K-6, ESOL,	MAT @ Belhaven	Specialist	35	C/H	None	F
9	4	12	K-6, ESOL, Reading Endorsement	St. John's University	Masters	40	Asian	None	F
10	4	8	K-6, ESOL, Reading Endorsement	UCF	Masters	33	C	None	F

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions –

Main RQ: What are the lived experiences of fourth grade teachers who have taught at identified large urban elementary schools where ELL students have demonstrated proficiency on the ELA portion of the state standards assessment?

Sub-question (a): What are the primary successes/barriers that the teachers have experienced in teaching ELLs?

Sub-question (b): What lived experiences of fourth grade teachers highlight effective teaching programs, methods, models, and strategies for improving ELL achievement to standards?

Data (and possibly the rationale)	Main interview questions	Prompts and elicitations
Ice breaker and background	Purpose of the interview is…	
Responsibilities	Tell me about your teaching background.	Tell me about some teaching experiences.
Perspective	How would you describe your experiences as a fourth grade teacher?	How did you become a teacher of ELL?
Experiences	Tell me about your experiences teaching students who are ELL.	Are there any specific experiences as an ELL teacher that stand out to you?
Experiences	Describe some successes or challenges working with ELL students? How do these successes or challenges influence your teaching?	How do you think your own teaching techniques influence student learning? Do you have any examples you want to share?
Beliefs and value (beliefs and values that guide your instructional practices)	Tell me about the strategies you use when working ELLs students?	What teaching strategies have you found most successful? What teaching strategies have you found not successful?

Perception	Tell me about any supports or trainings you have received form your school or district.	What strategies do you routinely use?
Member-checking	Is there something you want to share about your experiences working with ELL students that I have not asked you about. Paraphrase what I heard about the main data.	

APPENDIX E: MEMBER CHECKING

Good morning <Participant Name>!

Thank you again for participating in my research! A critical part of the study is ensuring that you have the opportunity to review the transcripts from the interview and comment on them for their accuracy and completeness. To facilitate this process, I have attached the transcript here for your review. **I ask that you please review. If you wish, please feel free to make comments. If you do not have any changes, please respond to this email indicating such.**

Again, your insight is valuable, and I so appreciate your time!

If you have any questions, please just let me know. Have a great rest of your school year!

Thank you so much for your help.

Tracy Webley
Doctoral Candidate
NUSELI Scholar
University of Central Florida
College of Education and Human Performance
321-438-9133

APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of Central Florida
Institutional Review Board Office of Research
& Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board**

         #1 FWA00000351, IRB00001138

   To: **Tracy Webley**

   Date: **December 09, 2018**

Dear Researcher:

On 12/09/2018 the IRB approved the following modifications / human participant research until 12/08/2019 inclusive:

           Type of Review: UCF Initial Review Submission Form
                           Expedited Review Category #6 and #7
                           Adult Participants; n=10
            Project Title: Phenomenological Study of Urban Elementary
                           Teachers with Proficient English Language
                           Learners
             Investigator: Tracy
           Webley IRB Number:
                           SBE-18-
          14545
       Funding
          Agency:
          Grant Title:
          Research ID: N/A

The scientific merit of the research was considered during the IRB review. The

Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at https://iris.research.ucf.edu .

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 12/08/2019, approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a signed and dated copy of the consent form(s).

All data, including signed consent forms if applicable, must be retained and secured per protocol for a minimum of five years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained and secured per protocol. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Jennifer Neal-Jimenez on 12/09/2018 07:54:42 PM EST Designated

Reviewer

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