

COMMENTARY

The Case for EL Specialists

AUTHOR

[Eugene García](#) | Arizona State University

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[English language learners](#) (ELLs) continue to outpace the non-ELL population in K–12 school enrollment, with the largest increases observed in regions with traditionally low numbers of ELLs. These ELL enrollment increases collide with a long-standing shortage of bilingual and ESL teachers nationwide, and particularly in regions where ELL enrollment is high. As budgetary constraints impact school support for professional development, ELLs are routinely placed in mainstream classrooms, full-time or for the majority of their school day, with teachers who have little or no ELL preparation. Nearly 50% of all ELLs receive minimal (fewer than 10 hours) or no special services, particularly in those states with limited teacher certification regarding this population.

[This study](#) raises the issue of whether specialists are needed for this population. Specialist (as opposed to mainstream teachers exposed to some minimal elements of instruction related to ELLs) seem to be most effective in developing pedagogical language knowledge and skills that allow them to support ELLs' language and literacy development, and access to high-quality, age-appropriate content.

KEY PARAMETERS FOR EFFECTIVE PREPARATION FOR TEACHERS OF ELLS: THE CASE FOR SPECIALISTS

Our own [review of research](#) as well as that [by others](#) like [Ester J. De Jong](#) supports the development of specialists. Teaching ELLs is more than a toolkit of language teaching techniques. Instead, teachers need to be advocates for their ELLs by drawing on their linguistic and cultural resources during language, literacy, and content instruction. An additive bilingual perspective and bilingual practices are central for ELL achievement, even for teachers who are not bilingual. ELLs' knowledge and experiences are encoded in their native language practices and language and identity are closely related. Credential programs and professional development must therefore foster:

- A foundational understanding of the role that ELLs' linguistic and cultural resources play in content learning;
- Advocacy for and engagement in multilingual practices to ensure students interact, interpret, and perform the language practices essential for simultaneous language and content learning;
- Teachers need to counter deficit narratives about bilingual children and youth.

In my own state, current Arizona Instructional and professional development models threaten effective and equitable instruction for ELLs. Generic training of all teachers to serve ELLs has had [no positive effects](#) and observed negative effects on classroom climate; teacher reported instruction capacity, and student outcomes. California and Illinois are examples of states requiring specialist training acknowledged by state-level credentials. The present study and research on effective teaching for ELLs support this policy.

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Stanford Graduate School of Education

520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444

Stanford, CA 94305

Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org

