

**Improving Literacy Skills Among Long-Term  
English Language Learners**

**Aproposition Paper**

**By**

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## Improving Literacy Skills among Long-term English Language Learners

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### Objectives:

- *To share the findings of a study that investigated middle school teachers' perceptions of the limited literacy skills among long-term English language learners (LTELLs).*
- *To make research-based recommendations that would improve literacy skills among LTELLs and increase student achievement if implemented.*
- *To initiate collaboration among the educators that will enhance pedagogical practices and programs to improve literacy skills among LTELLs.*

### Introduction

This paper is a summary of the findings and recommendations of a qualitative case study – *Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Limited Literacy Skills among Long-term English Language Learners* that I, Rachel Butiko, conducted as a requirement for a doctoral degree at Walden University. Although the focus of my project was to create awareness about LTELLs, my current professional goal is to use the findings to advocate for LTELLs to get the classroom support and instruction they need to develop grade-level literacy skills, improve their academic performance, and meet the state's ESL exit criteria.

*Long-term English Language Learners (LTELLs) are ELLs who have been enrolled in school in the USA for more than six years and have not met the exit criteria (Olsen, 2010; TEA, 2013)*

*LTELLs is a group of students that have a great impact on our current education system, yet little is known about them (Menken, Kley, & Chae, 2012).*

### The Problem

I conducted the study on the premise that most LTELLs did not have literacy skills to accomplish grade level tasks and could not meet standards on state assessments. An analysis of the 2014 - 2015 Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment of Standards (TELPAS) showed that 48% of ELLs in the district did not show growth in reading and writing. Also, the 2013 - 2014 Texas Assessment Performance Report (TAPR) revealed that 42% of the middle school ELLs did not meet the minimum standards on STAAR. The district has continued to experience an increase in the number of LTELL, and the school's end-of-year LPAC records showed that 60% of the ELLs were LTELLs.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to find out how middle school teachers perceived the limited literacy skills among LTELLs and how LTELLs impacted teachers' classroom instruction. Qualitative data were collected from six core content area teachers and analyzed to establish middle school teachers' perceptions of the limited literacy skills among LTELLs and their perceptions of LTELLs.

### Framework

Cummins' concept of second language acquisition (SLA) and Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD) provided the framework for the study. The ZPD Theory explained the role of teachers and classroom instruction in the development of literacy skills while the concept of SLA provided an in-depth understanding of the process involved in acquiring the literacy skills by students learning English as a second language.

### Analysis of the Findings

Teachers' lack of knowledge about LTELLs and SLA process and misconceptions about LTELLs were identified as the major factors that impacted LTELLs' academic achievement. The findings indicated that the lack of SLA knowledge resulted in misconceptions, and affected the quality of classroom instruction and the instructional support LTELLs received.

### Theme 1: A Lack of Knowledge about LTELLs and SLA

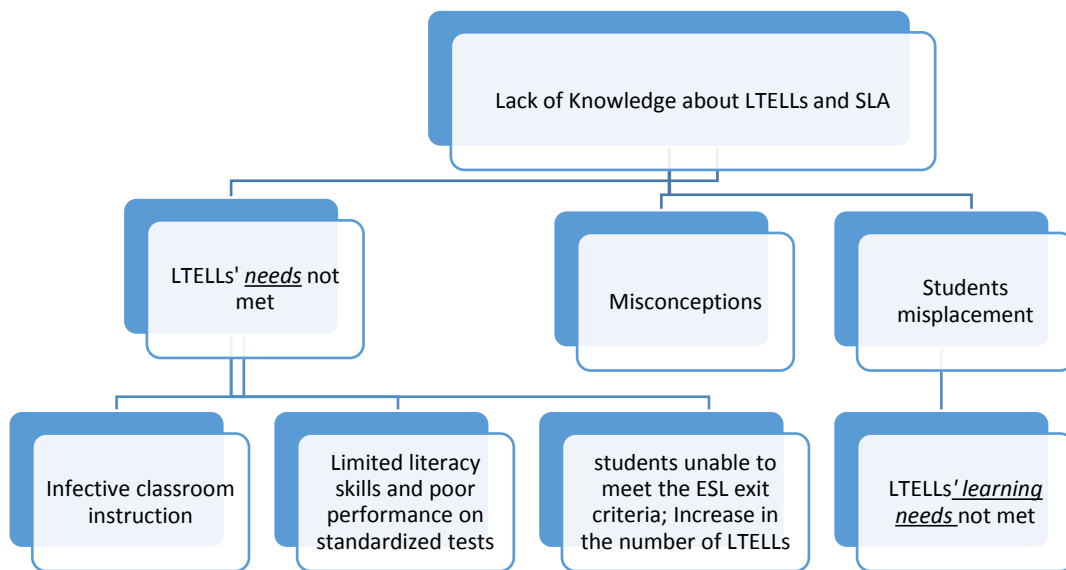


Figure 1. Effects of a lack of knowledge about LTELLs and SLA process.

The results of this study revealed that most middle school teachers lack basic knowledge of LTELLs and SLA process. Participants did not know the LTELLs in their classes. Due to the lack of knowledge about LTELLs and their learning needs, participants reported that they did not provide any explicit support for LTELLs. Knowledge of SLA is crucial and necessary to inform classroom instruction and provide support for ELLs; especially LTELLs. This finding was aligned with Téllez and Manthey (2015), who found that most teachers working with ELLs do not have adequate knowledge about the SLA process.

## Theme 2: Misconception About LTELLs

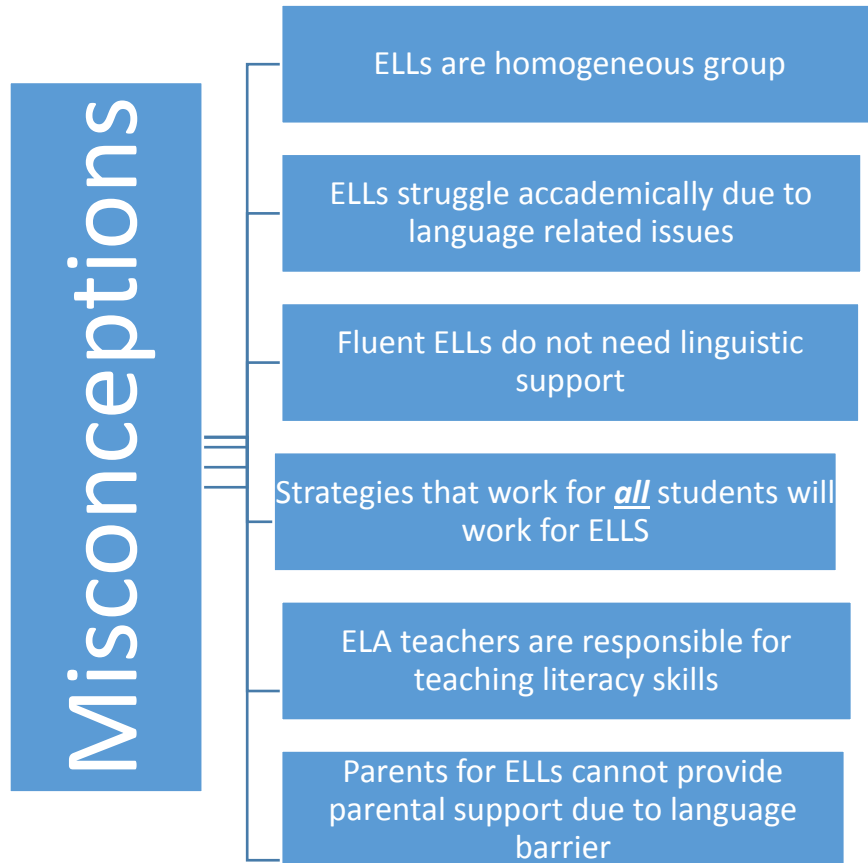


Figure 2. Teacher's misconceptions about LTELs

### Summary of the Findings

#### A lack of knowledge about LTELs and SLA

- Most middle school teachers lack basic knowledge about LTELs and are not aware of this group of students.
- Most mainstream teachers were not prepared or trained to teach LTELs.
- Professional development was provided but did not address the learning needs of LTELs

*Flores, Kleyn, and Menken (2015) found that teachers and administrators at secondary level did not understand the learning needs associated with LTELLs due to a lack of knowledge of SLA. It takes 2 - 5 years for ELLs to acquire the basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and 5 – 8 years to acquire the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) with appropriate intervention (Cummins, 2011). Some students take longer depending on the curriculum they were exposed to, their personality, motivation, and home environment (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Teachers working with ELLs should understand the SLA process and know about language acquisition to avoid misconception. The lack of adequate knowledge about SLA resulted into misconceptions, which had an adverse impact on student achievement and development of literacy skills.*

### **Quality of classroom instruction affected student achievement**

- Most teachers focused on teaching content vocabulary and not academic language and used strategies that did not enhance literacy development.
- Some teachers did not teach writing skills that students required to exit the ESL program.
- Teachers did not provide LTELLs with linguistic support because most LTELLs had well developed BICS and were within the SLA continuum. Most of them performed better than non-LEP students in their classes.
- Teachers' positive attitudes and high expectations about ELLs had a positive impact on student achievement.
- LTELLs had a two-fold impact on the classroom instruction:
  1. ELLs changed their classroom instruction negatively due to a lack of reading comprehension skills, the inability to apply metacognitive skills, limited vocabulary, and limited writing skills. Thus, ELLs slowed classroom instruction due to limited academic vocabulary.
  2. LTELLs did not impact their classroom instruction because the ESL students in their class were the same as other students, and their learning needs were similar to other students' learning needs. This misconception impacts students' development of literacy skills.

*Teachers should know that ELLs are learning content and acquiring academic language simultaneously (Ascension-Moreno, Kleyn, & Menken, 2013), and this process impacts the pace they accomplish tasks or show mastery of content. Teachers should create a classroom environment that promotes the development of both general and content-specific language (Cummins, 2011, Himmele & Himmele, 2009). LTELLs have unique learning needs that should be addressed for them to be successful. They need support in academic vocabulary and how to read and produce complex sentences (Ascension-Moreno et al. 2013). The presence of LTELLs in the classroom necessitates the need for instructional differentiation (Harvey & Teemant, 2012).*

### **There is student misplacement of LTELLs due to lack of knowledge and policies.**

- Teachers attributed students' lack of academic success or development of literacy skills with limited language proficiency and never considered a possibility of learning disability.
- LTELLs who were placed in classes with behavioral special education classes did not perform well.

## **Teachers have a lot of misconceptions about LTELLs due to lack of knowledge of second language acquisition process**

- 1. Parents of ELLs cannot provide parental support due to the language barrier.** Parental involvement of parents of ELLs was limited or denied due to the misconception that parents for ELLs have limited English proficiency and would feel uncomfortable or intimidated because the parent conferences are held in English. This misconception denied parents the opportunity to provide parental support and participate in decision-making for their children.

*It is important for educators to note that not all parents to ELLs are limited in English (Greenfield et al., 2010). Despite parents' level of education or proficiency in English, parents of ELLs have high expectations for their children and can still provide parental support irrespective of the language barrier (Pereira & Gentry, 2013). Teachers need to be culturally sensitive and build relationships with both parents and students. A healthy relationship with parents translates to students' strong academic achievement (Olvera, 2015).*

- 2. ELLs who are fluent did not need support.** The assumption that LTELLs who are fluent in English and academically strong do not need linguistic support lead to the underdevelopment of literacy skills among ELLs. This finding is similar to Olsen (2010b).

*Educators should be aware that most LTELLs were born in the USA and they are fluent in verbal skills, but they lack academic language needed for academic success (Olvera, 2015). Teachers often assume that LTELLs should excel academically due to their native-like basic oral communication skills. Although most of the LTELLs possess BICS, they lack CALP; the ability to process the academic language associated with academic achievement (Cummins, 2011). They need linguistic support and targeted instruction to build academic language.*

- 3. ELLs are a homogeneous group.** Teachers, the district, and state treated ELLs as a homogeneous group. There was a degree of success among LTELLs, but their success was not noticed because the ELLs were treated as one group. Both the district and state treat ELLs as a homogeneous group when reporting student performance. This assumption limits teachers' ability to meet ELLs' varied learning needs Teachers did not know the LTELLs in their classes.

*LTELLs are not homogeneous; some remain emergent bilinguals while others make slow but steady progress toward English proficiency (Olsen, 2010). ELLs are the most diversified group among the student population, and they all have different learning needs (Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Olsen, 2010b). ELLs born in the USA need academic language support while those new to the country need support in both basic communication skills and academic language. According to Olvera (2015), a one-size-fits-all approach does not meet LTELLs learning needs. The Texas Assessment Performance Report (TAPR) (TEA, 2015) on ELLs' performance is the most inclusive data. It treats ELLs as a homogeneous group and does not differentiate data for LTELLs and those new to the country. According to Maxwell (2012), there are no statewide policies on reporting requirements that would separate LTELLs from the general ELL category. Disaggregating students' performance data is necessary to help educators determine if they are*

meeting students' needs (Hosp, Hosp, & Dole, 2011). ELLs are not a homogenous group of students because ELLs have varied learning needs and language proficiency.

4. **ELLs struggle academically because of language-related issues.** Teachers were hesitant to refer LTELLs for response to intervention (RtI) process. This misconception led to misplacement of ELLs and failure to provide right interventions.

*According to Cummins (2011), teachers without the knowledge of SLA associated ELLs' academic struggles with limited English proficiency only. Teachers should be able to decipher when a student is struggling due to other reasons and provide appropriate intervention and not to assume that all ELLs struggle in class because of limited English proficiency. Thompson (2015) found that 35 % of students who were classified as LTELLs also qualified for special education.*

**NOTE:**

***Teachers should consider other possible reasons why LTELLs are struggling in class and provide appropriate support or intervention. It might be true that ELLs struggle in class due to limited language proficiency, but it does not apply to all ELLs.***

5. **ELA teachers are responsible for teaching literacy skills.** This misconception had a negative effect on the development of literacy skills among LTELL. Writing is not taught across the curriculum. Most students did not meet the ELS exit criteria due to poor performance on the writing section of TELPAS.

*Language and literacy should be integrated across the content by all teachers (Ascension-Moreno et al., 2013; Himmele & Himmele, 2009). All teachers have a responsibility of educating and teaching ELLs language (English, 2009). ELLs flourish when teachers realize that they need to improve their instructional practices and develop a sense of shared responsibility (Harvey & Teemant, 2012). Core content area teachers can support LTELL to develop language and literacy skills if they view themselves as language and literacy teachers teaching language through content. Literacy skills should be an essential component of student academic achievement.*

6. **ELLs are like any other students.** Most teachers did not differentiate instruction for ELLs because they believed that teaching strategies they used and worked with other students were effective for all students including LTELLs.

*LTELLs' major learning need is academic vocabulary (Himmele & Himmele, 2009) and the English sentence structure, but most teachers overlook this need. LTELLs have different learning needs, but teachers overlook these needs due to a lack of knowledge. Although the LTELLs might be fluent and perform at the same level as their peers, they still lack the academic vocabulary, and that is why they are still classified as limited English proficiency (LEP) students (Ardasheva & Trotter 2012).*

**Most LTELLs did not exit the ESL program due to discrepancies in the ESL exit program and administration of assessments used to determine students exit**

- Some LTELLs were linguistically functioning at grade level and passed STAAR reading, but they were still classified as LEP because they had not met the ESL exit criteria.
- Some LTELLs did not exit the ESL program due to the poor administration of TELPAS writing and OLPT, and poor writing skills. Administration of TELPAS and OLPT did not provide students with opportunities to do well. Teachers did not give ELLs enough time to complete their writing samples that were used for TELPAS rating, and OLPT was administered under unfavorable conditions for students to focus.

*These findings show that fluent LTELLs were still classified as ELLs because of discrepancies and the rigid ESL exit criteria (Estrada & Wang, 2013). ELLs who receive any form of accommodation on STAAR reading and writing cannot exit the ESL program even if they pass the test (TEA, 2016). Yang, Urrabazo, and Murray (2001) described the Texas ESL exit criteria as unrealistic and made it difficult for some ELLs to exit the ESL program. Hakuta, Butter, Witt (2000) observed that 36% of native speakers would never be able to meet the exit criteria, and Thompson (2015) found that most students who were labeled as LTELLs had met at least some of the measures necessary for exiting the program. Yang et al. (2001) observed that the lack of the cognitive ability and higher-order thinking skills hindered the academic progress of some of the LTELLs. Cummins (1989) and Maxwell (2012) emphasized the need for ELLs to be exposed to a well-structured rigorous curriculum that develops students' critical thinking, second language acquisition, and development of literacy and grade-appropriate vocabulary skills. LTELLs need instruction tailored to help them meet the exit criteria. Ziegenfuss, Odhiambo, and Keyes (2014) found that 75% of LTELLs were orally fluent and had met some sections of the exit criteria, but poor writing skills limited their chance to exit the ESL program. Educators working with ELLs need to understand that acquisition and development of academic language is a complex process that requires much support.*

**NOTE:**

*ESL students have been associated with lack of success. The findings of this study show that with appropriate intervention, proper student placement, identification of students' learning needs, and quality classroom instruction, most LTELLs are capable of being successful, meeting the ESL exit criteria, and graduating from high school.*



## Recommendations

These recommendations are aligned with the district's goal, and mission for every EL enrolled in the district

### ***Mission***

*To provide a quality education with the highest expectations for culturally and linguistically diverse students, so that they are academically successful and prepared to be productive members of a multicultural and multilingual society.*

### ***Goal***

*ELLS will progress a minimum of one level of proficiency in English each school year, achieve a rating of Advanced High in proficiency in English within four years, meet the ESL program exit criteria. and become fully integrated into the general education program*

1. The principal should consider a school-based professional development to equip teachers with the basic knowledge about LTELLs and SLA. Teachers cannot provide effective classroom instruction for LTELLs when they lack knowledge about LTELLs and SLA (Olsen, 2010 Cummins, 2011).
2. Creating awareness among LTELLs is critical. LPAC representative should hold regular meetings with LTELLs to discuss the exit criteria and what they should do to exit the ESL program, and explain the implication of their LTELL status on their academic progress (Ascension-Moreno et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2012).
3. Restructure the current literacy program and start a school-wide literacy initiative that would increase student achievement. Writing should be taught across the curriculum, and teachers should address the four components of language and literacy acquisition; listening, speaking, writing, and reading as they teach both content and academic vocabulary. LTELLs should be enrolled in a literacy course that is connected to all core subjects (Menken and Kleyn, 2010). The Literacy class should focus on teaching academic vocabulary, critical thinking, and literacy skills and equip students with strategies they can use in other classes (Maxwell, 2012).
4. Create a school-based task force to assess and evaluate the needs of LTELLs, ensure that teachers provide quality classroom instruction and linguistic support to LTELLs, use strategies that enhance the development of academic vocabulary and literacy skills (Harvey & Teemant, 2012), increase student achievement, and monitor students' progress (Irvin et al., 2010)
5. Conduct a needs assessment among teachers and involve the district ESL and teacher development departments to develop campus-based, ongoing job-embedded professional

- development with a focus on strategies that work for LTELLs. Teachers should seek to increase and deepen their knowledge about LTELLs, their learning needs, facts about ELLs and SLA process through book studies, PLCs, PDs, and research. School administrators can initiate ELL-focused book studies and encourage core content area teachers to attend ELL-focused PDs (Irvin, Meltzer, Dean, & Mickler, 2010). The best way to address LTELLs' learning needs involves regular conversation within the building by bringing together core content area teachers to explore and share best practices (Walker & Edstam, 2013).
6. Train teachers on how to administer oral language proficiency test (OLPT). OLPT should be conducted in an environment that allows students to focus, students should be given enough time to respond to TELPAS writing prompts, and school administrators should oversee OLPT testing and TELPAS writing.
  7. The district ESL department should provide in-class support for teachers who are not well equipped to teach LTELLs.
  8. ELLs should be scheduled in small-size classes, and if possible, they should not be placed in the same class with special education students with behavior issues.
  9. LTELLs that score advanced on listening and speaking skills, but continue to score beginning or intermediate level on TELPAS reading and writing for two consecutive years should be referred to RtI committee.
  10. Develop a school culture that is inclusive of all parents and involves parents of ELLs in decision- making process (Irvin et al., 2010).

### **Conclusion**

My goal is to create awareness among the educators; to have a better understanding of LTELLs and their learning needs, identify misconceptions teachers have about LTELLs and realize how misconceptions impact students' achievement. Teachers should know their responsibility in educating LTELLs and engage in meaningful collaborations to find a way to meet LTELLs' learning needs, and set specific goals for them.

Finally, ESL programs should be organized and managed per the state, and federal guidelines and the focus should be to improve students' literacy skills. The state and federal fund the ESL program under Title III., therefore, policies governing the establishment of ESL program, student classification, identification and placement, academic achievement, retention and promotion, state assessments, and the students' graduation plan should be observed. Teachers should be aware of Article 19 TAC Chapter 89, Subchapter BB - Texas Education Agency.

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