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## Long Term English Language Learners: Failure is Not an Option

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Long Term English Language Learners: Failure is Not an Option

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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School of Education and Counseling Psychology

Dominican University of California

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**Signature Sheet**

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the chair of the master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Table of Contents

TITLE PAGE..... 1

SIGNATURE SHEET ..... 2

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... 4

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..... 5

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION..... 8

    TYPES OF ELL STUDENTS ..... 8

    FACES OF STUDENTS ..... 10

    STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM ..... 13

    PURPOSE ..... 15

    RESEARCH QUESTION ..... 15

    THEORETICAL RATIONALE..... 15

    ASSUMPTIONS ..... 17

    BACKGROUND AND NEED ..... 18

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ..... 19

    BILINGUALISM VS. ENGLISH ONLY ..... 19

    TYPES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS ..... 21

    BECOMING PROFICIENT IN ENGLISH ..... 23

    TEACHER PREPAREDNESS ..... 26

    STRATEGIES ..... 29

CHAPTER 3 METHOD..... 30

RESEARCH APPROACH .....	30
SAMPLE AND SITE .....	30
ACCESS AND PERMISSIONS .....	30
DATA GATHERING STRATEGIES .....	30
DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH .....	31
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS .....	32
DESCRIPTION OF SITE, INDIVIDUALS, DATA .....	32
QUESTIONS AND STUDENT RESPONSES .....	33
THEMES .....	37
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION /ANALYSIS .....	38
SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS .....	38
COMPARISON OF FINDINGS TO THE LITERATURE .....	39
LIMITATIONS/GAPS IN THE RESEARCH .....	40
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....	40
OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY .....	40
ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....	41
REFERENCES .....	42

**Abstract**

There is a sizable number of English Language Learners (ELL) that are not succeeding in schools and are academically “falling through the cracks.” The purpose of this thesis is to gather information that identifies reasons why students are not succeeding academically and which strategies individual teachers can implement to help these students attain academic success. The literature reveals that Long Term English Language Learners have lower levels of literacy and tend to drop out more frequently compared to native English speakers.

This is a qualitative study using a focus group at a middle school. Data were collected from individuals in a focus group. This study found six key strategies that could be used by teachers teaching English Language Learners to improve their students’ proficiency in English. Implications for future research include continuing to explore effective ways to support ELL students in becoming proficient in English in the elementary grades.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

English Language Learners' academic achievement is a hot topic right now, mainly because they are the fastest growing population in U.S. public schools (NEA Education Policy and Practice Department, 2008). In test scores they are performing at much lower rates than their English only (EO) peers (Samson, Collins & Center for American Progress, 2012). The rate in which ELLs are enrolling into public schools across the nation has school district leaders wondering how to best serve this population. It is reported that one in every four students in the U.S. is an ELL (Samson et al., 2012). The national average is 18% ELL growth, but some states are experiencing exploding growth: such as South Carolina with 610% growth between 2000 and 2011 (Horsford & Sampson, 2013).

### Types of ELL Students

Many think of immigrants when they hear the words ELL. However, the majority of these children are not immigrants to the U.S. In fact 75% of all ELLs currently enrolled in elementary schools were born in and are citizens of the U.S. Surprisingly, more than half of those 75% are even second and third generation citizens (Flannery, 2009). Most of the ELLs in the U.S. speak Spanish as their first language, and they make up 80% of all ELLs in public schools (Fishkin, 2010). The question is, why would a second or third generation student be considered ELL?

When students are enrolled in the public school system their parents or legal guardian must fill out a home language survey. If the parent writes a language other than English in any of the four spaces where a home language is required, the student is automatically considered an ELL and then tested to determine the student's English proficiency level. These children may not speak English when they enter kindergarten because their native language is spoken at home.

Thus when these ELL children enter kindergarten it is probable that they know fewer words in English than their EO peers.

As the students continue through the education system their “play ground” or social language usually sounds almost the same as an EO student. The idea that all ELLs are students that cannot speak English is not an accurate assumption. Students quickly learn oral English and many of the ELLs currently in the education system speak English almost as well as their peers, however many of them are far below grade level in reading and writing abilities (Mikow-Porto, Humphries, Egelson, O’Connell, Teague, & Southeastern Regional Vision for Education, 2004).

ELLs are an extremely diverse group of students. In the U.S. ELLs speak over 400 different native languages (Sanford, Brown, & Turner, 2012). While the majority of ELLs were born in the U.S., about 25% of elementary school ELLs immigrate to the U.S. (Flannery, 2009). Some of these students are very well educated in their native language (L1). These highly educated students are literate in their L1 and have an easy transition to become proficient in English (Ardasheva, Tretter & Kinny, 2012). They usually learn English quickly and then are no longer classified as an ELL. In contrast, many U.S. born ELLs who enter the public school system in kindergarten have parents who often have either extremely low literacy, or are so busy working to keep the family afloat that there is no literacy practiced in the household (Colorin Colorado, 2011).

Another example of the diversity among different types of ELLs are students who come to the U.S. from other countries that have had little or intermittent education and are basically illiterate in their L1. To give a better picture of the diversity, here are our some individual stories of ELLs. All names have been changed; each student has been given a pseudonym to protect the students’ identity.

## Faces of Students

Josh's (a pseudonym) first experience in a school was here in the U.S. It was apparent almost immediately that Josh could not read or write. He could only identify one letter of the alphabet in his native language: the letter A. At a meeting with his family, where his parents told me that they were not able to read and write in any language, I realized that all of Josh's academic support needed to take place in the classroom. Josh, like so many of my students, was just meeting his parents for the first time since he was an infant and his parents are illiterate and feel that they have no way to support their children academically.

Often my students' parents come from impoverished situations where there were limited to no opportunities for an education. In an effort to escape the cycle of poverty and provide a better life for their children they leave their child in the home country with family members and move to the United States for work. Years later, when the parents can, they bring their children to the U.S. Some parents have become legal citizens and bring their children to the U.S. legally, and others pay "Coyotes" (human traffickers) to sneak their children across the border in hopes of a better future.

Josh was a resistant learner. He used various techniques to avoid learning, and was extremely frustrated. I learned that Josh had spent his youth working. He smashed rocks along a riverbed instead of going to school. So by the time he got to my class he was a big, strong, and a completely uneducated 14 year old.

It took a tremendous amount of work, but I would not let Josh give up, and I continued to force him to learn. I remember sitting with him outside telling him that if he thought he was

frustrated by being illiterate at 14, wait until he was 18 or 20. Somehow I got through to him and he fought through his frustration and embarrassment of having to focus on learning the A, B, Cs.

When he finally left my class a year later he could read and write sentences in both English and Spanish. A few years later another student saw him and called to him, “Hey it’s the ABC boy.” Josh replied, in perfect English, “For your information, I can read now!”

Josh stopped by once after graduating from middle school to say hello. I taught him the alphabet in two languages and I got him writing sentences, but the questions remain: Did he ever get to the point where he was reading and analyzing grade level text? Does he have the skills to have a successful life? I know that Josh is intelligent and has the ability to learn, but did the education system provide proper interventions so he could learn? Since he did not qualify for Special Education testing due to lack of instruction and limited time in the country, any instruction he received had to come from his regular classroom teachers. It is very difficult for a classroom teacher to take the time to focus on one student’s needs while still meeting the needs of the rest of the class.

Josh was considered a newcomer when he immigrated to the U.S. He is one example of the 25% of ELLs who immigrate here as children, but he has siblings and nieces and nephews that were born here. They represent the 75% of ELLs who will enter kindergarten at a disadvantage, and if no interventions are put into place when they enter elementary school, could join the ranks of the Long Term English Language Learners by the time they reach middle school.

## Long Term English Language Learners 12

Long Term English Language Learners (LTELLs) are the focus of this study. At some point all ELLs who do not test out of the program become LTELLs. Therefore, one must keep in mind that the students who are highly educated in their L1, or whose parents are educated, usually test out of the ELL program in less than five years and are no longer considered English Language Learners. The LTELLs in middle and high school are typically struggling students who have had years of academic failure and frustration.

Jimmy (a pseudonym) is an extremely sweet child. He was born in California and has attended the same school district since kindergarten. He is tall and healthy looking. He has a great sense of humor and is an overall a pleasure to be around. However, academically he is the perfect representation of most of my LTELLs. His handwriting is difficult to read. He writes his letters in different directions and sizes. He does not follow the rules of capitalization, write on the lines, use punctuation, or follow spelling rules. He is in the eighth grade, reading at a second grade level and struggling academically.

He cannot understand what he is reading in his mainstream classes because his academic vocabulary, and vocabulary in general is extremely low. He is in all regular classes except an ELD class one period a day, and he is failing most of his classes. He simply cannot comprehend the reading assignments and has had years of failure. Each year it is the same struggle to just get by. He fights D's and F's and barely passes the year. Maybe he does not even pass, and he attends summer school and is simply promoted to the next grade level, falling further behind academically.

His mother is very concerned about his education, but she does not speak English so she feels that she cannot help him. Jimmy and his mother speak in Spanish. However, he cannot read or write in Spanish. He has had no formal education in that language. So while Spanish is

his home language, the only language that he has had any formal education is his second language (L2), English. His mother thinks that he is just lazy, and that he does not want to do well. I think that we have a system that does not provide interventions early enough.

Jimmy should have had interventions put in place in kindergarten and each grade level afterwards. He should have been given reading intervention-but we don't offer that class to students who are not special education students, and he was not provided with any interventions in elementary school.

Our current educational practices create a system of failure for these LTELL children, and after years of failure, and falling further behind academically these students just want to give up. The students internalize this failure as wholly their fault and feel that they are incapable of learning.

The majority of the LTELLs that I teach were born in the United States and have attended kindergarten through eighth grade in California. However even though they have attended school for eight years their literacy levels are between the first and third grade levels. These students usually do poorly on the California Standardized Tests, and are struggling to pass their classes. They speak English similar to their English Only peers, but usually cannot read or write at grade level. They typically cannot read or write in their L1, which leaves little to no skills to transfer from L1 to L2, and they tend to have many gaps in their skills and content knowledge.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Over five million ELLs are enrolled in American schools. Many states and school districts serving these children are not spending sufficient time or money to create comprehensive

programs based on successful practices that have been proven to provide ELLs with the education and interventions needed (Horsford & Sampson, 2013). Instead of creating specialized programs to provide these students with an education that accounts for the lack of English, routinely these children are simply mainstreamed and expected to sink or swim (Adams & Jones, 2006). It is amazing that after all that has happened historically and how far education has come in the past forty years, that ELLs are still not receiving the services that they are entitled to by law (Maxwell, 2013). This practice is creating LTELLs who feel like failures, and do not realize that they are not the failures. It is the system in place that has failed them (Wright, 2010).

ELLs are performing at much lower levels than their EO peers. In the “National Report Card” data collected shows that at eighth grade 76% of EOs were reading at or above grade level and that only 30% of ELLs were reading at or above grade level (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). This data is concerning because 75% of all ELLs are born in the US, and the ELLs in this data were in U.S. schools kindergarten through eighth grade. The students in this National Report Card data are LTELLs. They are usually placed in kindergarten with little pullout or focus on ELD and do not progress like their EO peers as a result.

It is not unusual for these students’ parents to have very low literacy skills and struggle with daily life. The LTELL can speak English close to the same ability as their EO peers, but they usually cannot read or write at grade level. Therefore they cannot access the grade level texts and usually cannot pass standardized tests.

There are a multitude of reasons that explain why ELLs are achieving far below their EO peers, and most ELLs suffer from the combination of a variety of disadvantages. Some reasons that contribute to ELLs lack of academic success are a lack of literacy in the home, lack of

English language services in school at their level, lack of quality instruction, lack of teacher training, and poverty (Samson et al., 2012).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the present study is to identify strategies that are effective in teaching literacy in English to LTELLs who have not demonstrated proficiency in reading and writing in English at grade level. For the purposes of this study, LTELLs refer to those who have met the qualifications of LTELLs. These are students who have been in U.S. schools five plus years, have scored between an overall 3 (Intermediate) to a 5 (Advanced) on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), but have not met the requirements to be reclassified to English Proficient.

### **Research Question**

What effective strategies can classroom teachers implement to significantly raise LTELLs literacy and vocabulary skills so that they can access core curriculum in their classes?

### **Theoretical Rationale**

The issue of providing an appropriate education for ELLs stems from the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the Civil Rights act of 1964, and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (Mikow-Porto et al., 2004; Wright, 2010). Examining the historical fight of minorities in general, one notices that ELLs' rights stemmed from the fight against the segregation of African American students, and for the right to an equal education for all (Wright, 2010). This fight started in 1886 and was not legally addressed until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Wright, 2010).

Communities of language learners and minorities living in the U.S. have been fighting for the right to provide bilingual education to their children for over a century. The 14th Amendment provides protection for language minorities as was shown in the *Meyers vs. Nebraska* case (Wright, 2010). Surprisingly, in that case parents were not even fighting to have to have bilingual education provided through schools, but for the right to provide L1 instruction as a supplemental activity outside the hours of the school day (Wright, 2010). The political movement to Americanize immigrants and the fight to maintain English as the only acceptable language taught in school has been upheld by the courts for the past 100 years. However, parents are protected by the U.S. Constitution to freely provide language and heritage instruction during non-school hours (Wright, 2010).

Since the 1970s, addressing the linguistic and educational needs of ELLs has been hotly debated in and out of the American court system. The Lau Remedies were a specific list of expectations that came out of the *Lau vs. Nichols* case of 1971 (Mikow-Porto et al., 2004; Wright, 2010). The families of Chinese American students attending school in the San Francisco Unified School District brought the case forth. The basic outcome led to expectations of how school districts would teach ELLs and eventually to the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, which mandates that educational institutions must take “action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs” (Mikow-Porto et al., 2004, p.15). This ruling clearly disallows mainstreaming students in English only classes with no support.

## **Assumptions**

The researcher's assumptions are described as follows. Students who are illiterate or have limited education in their first language usually have a harder time learning English compared to students that are well educated in their first language. Parents' levels of education directly affect the students' difficulty or ease in learning English. Students whose parents are illiterate or have low levels of literacy modeled in the household usually struggle in school. In contrast students whose parents are highly educated seem to flourish in school.

Socio-economically disadvantaged students who are living at or below the poverty level have a hard time focusing on learning English, as compared students who do not have to deal with socio-economic issues. Students with low-level skills tend to act out and fall increasingly behind academically compared to their peers, which leads to an acceptance of failure and apathy towards school. To get a student who is performing at low functioning levels to grade level takes individualized attention and early intervention produces better results.

Restrictions of the current education system do not provide teachers or students with time to work on the individual specific language and literacy needs of LTELLs. Most LTELLs do not receive any ELD instruction in elementary school. These students would benefit greatly by having early specific instruction in English starting in pre-school and kindergarten, and to have intense interventions put in place as soon as they are identified as ELLs.

## Background and Need

Many court cases since 1971 have argued for the rights of ELLs to receive an education that takes into consideration their unique needs (Wright, 2010). Despite the growth in the numbers of ELLs in the country, the controversy over how to teach them, and money allocated to states to provide them with an equitable education, not much has changed in the way ELLs are taught since the 1970's. The public opinion and political points of view have swung from one extreme to the other, first bilingualism was in, and then it was out. People have fought vigorously for and against different ideologies of how and what to teach to ELLs.

Many methods have been created and introduced, and arguably, in the end everything has come back full circle. In 1971 *Lau vs. Nichols* fought in court, and Lau won granting the right to have English taught to students at their level. That suit was against San Francisco Unified School district. The same fight is still happening today. This past April the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against the State of California for neglecting its responsibilities to teach English language development to ELLs. Jose Cardenas “blames the educational failure of students on the inadequacies of schools’ programs rather than on the students themselves” (Wright, 2010, para. 25). The adequacy of programs is an issue because no one is really assessing how well a program works, and in too many districts no program is even being used (Horwitz, Uro, Price-Baugh, Simon, Uzzell, Lewis, Casserly & The Council of the Great City Schools, 2009; Olsen, 2010b).

## Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Educating ELLs is a political topic; language, culture, failed immigration policies and patriotism are all combined with the opinions that inform lobbying efforts and proposed educational legislation (Salomone, 2012). Unfortunately, sound research has been ignored, and what remains is legislation that dictates how students “should” be taught with no real means to hold school districts accountable for providing an “appropriate” education (Ardasheva, Tretter, & Kinny 2012; Salomone, 2012). The courts have been dictating policy changes in the ways that ELLs have been taught for the past four decades and yet nothing has really changed (Salomone, 2012).

### **Bilingualism vs. English Only**

Even though bilingualism is often associated with advantages and benefits such as “better functioning of abstract representation, attention control, problem solving” and higher test scores (Ardasheva, Trotter & Kinny, 2012, p.771) there has been a strong push in the United States for “English Only” immersion programs. States such as California, Arizona and Massachusetts have passed such laws (Salomone, 2012; Tung, 2013). Typically, in the “English Only, or Immersion” scenario ELLs are mainstreamed in regular classes, given little to no support in their native language or ELD services, and are thrown into the educational system to sink or swim (Adams & Jones, 2006; Olsen, 2010b; Salomone, 2012). This practice was outlawed as an appropriate method to teach ELLs in 1974, but there is little accountability as to how that is enforced (Adams & Jones, 2006; Maxwell, 2013; Olsen, 2010b; Salomone, 2012). The best way to teach English to children who speak another language at home has been passionately debated and consensus still has not been reached on what constitutes best practices.

An antiquated idea is that when people come to the United States they should give up their language and culture, and assimilate. This idea assumes that a different culture or language is a negative that takes away from, instead of being a positive or enriching factor. In *Educating English Learners: Reconciling Bilingualism and Accountability* Rosemary Salomone argues that “the child’s home language [should] not [be viewed] as an inherent “deficiency” or barrier to social and economic advancement, as conventionally believed, but as a personal and national resource in a world where multilingual competencies carry political and economic currency” (Salomone, 2012, p.116). Another scholar adds, “A speaker of a language other than English should be seen not as a problem, but as part of the solution. We need to change the mindset from one in which bilingual education is seen as a remedial program for immigrant students to one in which it is seen as an enrichment program to help all students to be competitive in a global marketplace” (Nora, 2013, p. 7). The idea of respecting and valuing the ELLs’ home language and culture becomes more critical as policy moves teachers away from bilingualism and toward English Only models (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). The world is becoming more and more multicultural and multilingual, however our country is focusing more and more on an English Only model as the best way to teach the youth of America.

The consensus of experts in the field of English Language Development (ELD) is that across the nation a significant subgroup of ELLs considered LTELLs are being failed by the public school system (Adams & Jones, 2006; Maxwell, 2013; Olsen, 2010b; Tung, 2013). As stated in Flannery’s article, *A New Look at America’s English Language Learners*, more than 75% of all ELLs in elementary schools are born in the United States and the rates of ELLs enrolling in school districts across the nation is exploding (Flannery, 2009). ELLs who are born in the U.S. usually do not have any academic instruction or literacy skills in their home language

and therefore do not have the benefits usually associated with students who are bilingual and bi-literate (Ardasheva, Tretter, & Kinny, 2012). These ELLs usually enter kindergarten eager to learn. However, according to Cummings' threshold hypothesis, students with low academic levels in their home language (L1) and low levels of language in the target language (L2) usually are called "partial" bilinguals, and are likely to "experience academic disadvantages and have impoverished interactions with their educational environments" (Ardasheva, Tretter, & Kinny, 2012, p.717).

In contrast, students that are fully bilingual experience no such disadvantages and demonstrate proficiency in both languages, which is considered "additive." Therefore, these fully bilingual ELLs experience all of the positive attributes associated with bilingualism (Ardasheva, Tretter, & Kinny, 2012, p. 717).

### **Types of English Language Learners**

There are different types of ELLs, and certain groups achieve academic success in the public school system. Students who immigrate to the U.S. with high levels of literacy in their L1 and enter an appropriate ELD program are experiencing academic success. As well, students who slowly and steadily improve their English language skills over time by receiving appropriate supports are experiencing academic success. Some students may take longer than others, but the ELLs that are experiencing success eventually become Redesignated Fluent English Proficient (RFEPs) (Olsen, 2010b).

It is documented that students who entered public school categorized as ELLs and then become RFEPs actually out-perform their English Only peers (EO) on standardized tests in

English (Ardasheva, Tretter, & Kinny, 2012). Unfortunately, there is not much focus or research on those students who become RFEPs. Once they are reclassified they are no longer considered ELLs and they leave the statistical group. Thus, leaving only the statistical data of ELLs who for a variety of reasons are not yet proficient in English (Ardasheva, Tretter, & Kinny, 2012).

Research indicates that of the ELLs who enter elementary school together, on average 50% are reclassified and 50% become LTELLs (Olsen, 2010b). Usually ELLs' performance on standardized tests is the measure that determines if students are reclassified or stay on the ELD/remedial tract (Olsen, 2010b).

Unlike elementary school, standardized tests are primarily used to decide the course of study for ELLs in middle and high school. LTELLs' results on key standardized tests can put them on a trajectory that leads them to an academic "dead end" (Olsen, 2010b, p.6). ELD courses in middle and high school take the place of courses that count toward college criteria and electives, essentially excluding these students from being college ready when they finish high school (Olsen, 2010b). Diane Ravitch expresses that "the problem with using tests to make important decisions about people's lives is that standardized tests are not precise instruments" (Salomone, 2012, p.129). Echoing the sentiments of Ravitch and Olsen, linguist Jim Cummins argues that:

Federal and state testing policies create a "pedagogical divide in which 'poor kids get behaviorism and rich kids social constructionism,'"—in other words, "skills for the poor and knowledge for the rich." While lower-achieving students, many of them racial minorities and poor, get a steady diet of English and math via "teaching to the test,"

students in more privileged communities enjoy an enriching education including social sciences, the arts, science, civics, literature, and foreign languages. (Salomone, 2012, p. 130)

The data is clear. Reports on student success from U.S. schools show that EL students are not receiving and are not provided an adequate education (Horsford & Samson, 2013). It is hard for school district leaders to meet the need of ELLs, because they are not just one group of students with similar needs (Olsen, 2010b; Sanford, Brown & Turner, 2012). Salomone (2012) states that lumping all ELLs together as “one group for measuring accountability, and to expect all to become proficient in English within the same number of years is educationally unsound and fundamentally unjust” (p.130). Olsen (2010b) states in her report “Reparable Harm” that in 1999 two school districts in California identified various “typologies” of different kinds of ELLs.

‘Limited English Proficient,’ [which are] students with specific and differing needs: well educated newcomers, under-schooled newcomers, normatively developing English learners, struggling “Fluent English Proficient students,” and “Long Term Limited English Proficient” students. In this first published definition, Long Term English Learners were defined as: English Learners who have been in United States schools 7+ years, are orally fluent in English, but reading and writing below grade level and have low literacy in the home language, if any. (Olsen, 2010b, p.7)

### **Becoming Proficient in English**

Some researchers argue that we are not allowing students sufficient time to become fluent in English before deeming them academic failures. In most states students’ scores on standardized

tests, one measure for determining the academic success or failure of ELLs, count after the student has been in the country for only one year. It is neither logical nor feasible for a student to become proficient in English in one year (Adams & Jones, 2006). ELLs are usually considered LTELL after being in U.S. schools for five plus years; however research shows that it can take anywhere from five to seven years to become fluent in a second language (Mikow-Porto et al., 2004; Olsen, 2010b).

Ardasheva, Tretter, and Kinny (2012) argue that one issue in using the standardized testing of ELLs as a means to measure academic ability, is that students are tested on the mastery of content and language skills in English while still learning English; because the student is not fluent in English the results of the test are not necessarily an accurate dialogistic of a student's content knowledge (Ardasheva, Tretter, & Kinny, 2012).

Olsen agrees, and adds that a significant amount of time is not allotted before ELLs are expected to show competency on standardized exams in English. If assessments were changed to take into account a student's knowledge, and students were given assessments geared towards learning English instead of tests geared towards English Only students, it would be evident that ELLs are making more progress than it appears (Olsen, 2010b).

However, despite the success of some of the ELL groups, and despite the premature assessments, there is one group of ELLs that are truly being underserved - LTELLs. These students' progress is described as stagnant, and they are frequently called "ELD lifers" (Olsen, 2010a). They have disproportionate rates of dropping out of school, and they identify as not having the ability to be successful in school (Olsen, 2010b; Tung, 2013).

There are many reasons that these students are disproportionately failing academically in comparison to other ELLs. One reason is that most of these students were simply placed in

mainstream classes and never given any support in ELD (Olsen, 2010b). This is called the “sink or swim” method and it has proven ineffective for many ELLs (Adams & Jones, 2006; Olsen, 2010b).

This method was actually deemed illegal in 1974 in the infamous *Lau vs. Nichols* case. However, it is the method most often used by school districts across the nation. Many of the LTELLs are born in the U.S. and placed in regular kindergarten classes. They spend their primary years in mainstream classes with little to no ELD support (Olsen, 2010b). These ELLs are exposed to significantly less English than their EO peers and there is usually no intervention to counter the lack of English (Calderon, Salvin & Sanchez, 2011).

As the ELLs continue through the education system the educational gap becomes larger and larger, creating a feeling of failure and lack of interest in learning (Olsen, 2010b). One of the characteristics of LTELLs is a lack of interest and disengagement due to years of failure; this feeling of failure typically begins to become imbedded in the student psyche around fifth grade (Olsen, 2010b). These students frequently do not feel like they can succeed academically and as a result feel like they do not “belong in school” (Olsen, 2010b, p.26).

The reasons that LTELLs are not succeeding are numerous and multifaceted. ELLs typically come from families living in poverty and low literacy. It is established that “poverty substantially impedes these children’s ability to learn and to succeed in school” (Rebell, 2012, p.1). However, the research demonstrates that despite the poverty, the lack of literacy in the home, and the lack of access to bilingual education, the two most important factors in the academic success of ELLs are access to an English Language Development program and teacher preparedness (Adams & Jones, 2006; Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Francis & Vaughn 2009; Olsen 2010b; Tung, 2013). Many researchers reference the lack of appropriate

programming and the lack of teacher preparedness as the main factors that contribute to academic failure among LTELLs (Adams & Jones, 2006; Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Francis & Vaughn, 2009; Olsen, 2010b).

### **Teacher Preparedness**

As stated in *Succeeding with English Language Learners: Lessons Learned from the Great City Schools*, there is a national shortage of qualified English Language (EL) teachers, and the U.S. does not have any national standards for teacher preparation or instruction of ELLs (Horwitz et al., 2009). The sentiment that teachers are not prepared to teach ELLs is echoed over and over again throughout the literature.

As well, school districts have not put in place courses that support ELLs, and many ELLs are simply mainstreamed (Olsen, 2010b). Mainstream teachers are prepared to teach their subject matter to students who speak English, but most have not been trained to teach ELLs. While differentiation is now a standard practice, it is almost impossible to expect a teacher to be able to differentiate for such a wide range of students. Some mainstream classrooms have newcomers with limited to no education in their home language sitting side by side with honor students (Olsen, 2010b). This form of student programming leaves teachers feeling unprepared to meet the needs of ELLs (Adams & Jones, 2006; Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez 2011; Olsen 2010b). Teachers teaching in these types of situations “report feeling conflicted between providing services for ELLs and teaching the mainstream curriculum” (Olsen, 2010b; Wright & Choi as cited in English, 2009, p. 489).

Olsen states that research shows that placing ELLs into mainstream classes “produces (over time) the worst outcomes” for students (Olsen, 2010b, p.15). She goes on to state that students who are still considered LTELLs by the time they get to eighth grade perform lower than any other student group, and that the gaps in their education are obvious by fourth grade (Olsen, 2010b). Since the majority of these LTELLs were born in the U.S. and have attended U.S. elementary schools for their primary education, both Olsen (2010b) and Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez (2011) boldly blame elementary schools’ lack of ELL programs and failure to address the needs of ELLs as a direct cause in the “creation of” students with an LTELL status (Olsen, 2010b, p.38).

It is argued throughout the literature that the stronger students’ literacy is in L1, the more successful students are in acquiring literacy in English. However, with the current political climate, bilingualism is not being supported as a national means to teach English to ELLs. Adams and Jones (2006) write that because of the political changes to education policy in Massachusetts, bilingual programs were abandoned and in their place “mandated Structured English Immersion” is now “the only language program for ELLs” (p.16).

The State of Massachusetts moved from mandating bilingual support for ELLs for an initial period to immediately mainstreaming ELLs into general classrooms. Massachusetts passed legislation in November 2002 that dismantled bilingual education and forced districts to switch from a bilingual model to an immersion model. This means that instead of receiving bilingual instruction in Massachusetts ELLs can only be mainstreamed. These students are now in regular classes with little to no ELD support. The legislation went so far as to include a clause that allows for a school district to be sued if they “willfully refuse” mainstreaming ELLs. (Adam

& Jones, 2006 p.16) Adams and Jones, former bilingual teachers, state that “English monolingual educators lack the necessary knowledge base for planning and implementing effective educational programming for ELLs” (Adams & Jones, 2006, p.17). The sentiment that teachers are underprepared to handle providing ELLs with the instruction that they need and have a lack of understanding of language acquisition is a frequent theme in the research.

In many states there are no mandates that require teachers to take language acquisition classes, and in the states that do require teachers take courses many teachers still feel underprepared (Samson et al., 2012). Since experts concur that the classroom teacher makes the most difference on the outcomes of a student’s education, it is imperative that teachers are trained in research-based strategies that have been proven effective in progressing ELLs in their development of academic English and literacy (Samson et al., 2012).

There are recommendations as to how to solve the issues that create LTELLs. However, many of those issues are political and policy changes at the state and school district level need to happen in order to create changes in the system that will lead to those solutions.

As stated earlier, much of the literature points to teachers being underprepared to teach ELLs, (Francis & Vaughn, 2009) and frankly with the overwhelming majority of ELLs being born in the US, 75% (Flannery, 2009), and mainstreamed since kindergarten, many classroom teachers do not know which of their students are ELLs and which are not. Teacher development focused on EL instruction is key to creating teachers who are prepared to understand and meet the unique challenges of ELL students (Horwitz et al., 2009; Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010).

However, even with this research, several states have passed legislature that mandates instruction in EO classrooms (Salomone, 2012). Despite the constraints, lack of programs to

support ELLs and the absence of teacher development, the literature states that there are research proven strategies that individual teachers can use to increase English proficiency of their LTELL students.

### **Strategies**

The first strategy is for teachers to identify which of their students are LTELLs (Mikow-Porto et al., 2004; Olsen, 2010b). These students are mixed into most classes across the state (Calderon, Slavin, Sanchez, 2011) and many times teachers are not aware that the reason a student may not be succeeding is because he or she is still learning English.

After identification there are several key instructional strategies:

1. Explicitly teach vocabulary. Most importantly academic vocabulary, and in context when possible (Samson et al., 2012).
2. Create background knowledge and/ or access prior knowledge (Fishkin, 2010; Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010).
3. Model any expected outcome, and scaffold the lessons for ELLs with sentence frames (Sanford, Brown & Turner, 2012).
4. Create opportunities for students to engage in academic discourse where they will use academic language and discuss the lesson being taught (Fishkin, 2010).
5. Provide students with many guided opportunities to practice reading, writing, speaking and listening in English (Ottow, 2013).
6. Create scaffolded, relevant, rigorous lessons that are aligned with state standards. These children feel unintelligent, the last thing they need are lessons that promote those ideas. (Olsen, 2010b)

## Chapter 3 Method

### Research Approach

This study explores strategies that work with LTELLs in middle school who are unable to read and write at grade level in English after many years in local public schools. Data were collected through focus group discussions of approximately 18 middle school students in the greater San Francisco Bay area.

### Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects in research as articulated by the American Psychological Association (2010).

### Sample and Site

Target subjects were students classified as LTELLs based on their scores on the CELDT and the CST tests, and length of time in the United States school system.

### Access and Permissions

These students formed an intact group. The researcher is assigned as their teacher in a middle school setting. Data were collected through a series of conversations that addressed the researcher's teaching approach to teaching LTELLs.

### Data Gathering Strategies

The researcher observed student performance in classes over a period of six months, taking notes

on student behavior, attitude and English language proficiency. Additionally the researcher conducted a focus group discussion in which she explained to her students the purpose of her study, and solicited their feedback on approaches to teaching and learning English, reluctant behavior, and the disparity between skill level and expectations.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

Information was gathered using the data from the focus groups and classroom observations. The conversations were documented and notes were taken during the classroom observations.

Recurring themes from student responses and personal researcher observations were noted. Interview responses and observations were analyzed. Similarities and differences were identified and compared in order to determine what students believed were the most effective strategies in propelling them towards literacy and English proficiency.

Chapter 4 Findings

**Description of Site, Individuals, Data**

The students are all considered LTELLs in a middle school in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. The students are between 12 and 14 years of age and are currently in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Eleven of the eighteen students were born locally, and of those ten have gone to school in the same district kindergarten through 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Questions and Student Responses

Questions	Excerpted responses
<p>What had an effect on your opportunity to learn English in school?</p> <p>What were positive?</p> <p>What were negative?</p>	<p>.....6<sup>th</sup> grade because I didn't pay attention in class. The positive things.... people are helping me learn more English and understand better. Another positive thing is that in my house my parents help me ..... with my brother they put me to study. The negative things are that they didn't help me that much in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Another negative thing is that I had a chance in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, but I didn't really use that chance.</p> <p>[Positive] Reading, writing sentences or paragraphs.</p> <p>[Negative] being distracted by talking.</p> <p>The way I have learned more English is because I have a tutor. The positive things were that my parents always had wanted me to learn more <i>Ingles</i> than Spanish and they always gave me extra help by having a tutor. The negative thing is that when I was doing well in school they took me to Mexico and I almost never talked English. Now that I am back my mom is not [in the US] and my dad can't help me.</p> <p>The things that had an effect on my opportunity to learn English is speaking it...speaking in all classes and speaking to.. people.</p> <p>The things that had an effect on my learning English in school is speaking it. In all classes I speak English. I don't speak that much English at my home.</p> <p>Reading has helped me learn English.</p> <p>Having ELD has helped me to speak English. The negative is speaking to friends [Distracting one another].</p> <p>The things that [had] an effect on my opportunity to learn English in school is speaking it. Speaking in every class, speaking to . . . people, speaking [English] for asking a question. [Negative]It was hard to say some words; some people would not understand what you are saying.</p> <p>Helped [me] speak English. Negative things-distractions-noisy.</p> <p>The things that had an effect my opportunity to learn English in school is that ELD has helped [me] to speak English. The positive things are that they can put you in a special program so you can be higher with the others. The negative things are that students distract you and other students from learning.</p> <p>Something that has helped me learn English is reading and doing worksheets. Doing worksheets in my regular English class.</p> <p>Reading a lot and doing little worksheets and sometimes reading in groups helps me. I like to read because I like words.</p> <p>The effect I had was that I never turned in my homework and would get bad grades. The positive things that helped me learn English...the teacher in my school. [Negative] I didn't get some of the words the teachers would say.</p> <p>.....I never did my homework and had bad grades. The positives were I listened to all my teachers. The negatives.... I didn't try.</p> <p>The thing that [affected] me and my opportunity to learn English is that they put me in 1<sup>st</sup> grade when I was in Kindergarten. The positive.... they helped me... speak in my old school [This student feels if he got to stay in kindergarten he would be better prepared—he feels like he missed important basic instruction]</p> <p>[Negative] My friends talk to me.</p> <p>Nothing...positive. Negative things like everybody and everything we been doing.</p> <p>Some effects on my opportunity to learn English in school were my teachers when they explain it to me. Some positive things were that we would do projects and it would help me understand it better. Some negative things were that some days I would be absent and I wouldn't understand what the teacher would talk about.</p> <p>When teachers give me the definitions of words like in science and ELD. I got good vocabulary. I had bad grades because I did not understand the vocabulary.</p>

## Long Term English Language Learners 34

<p>Starting now, what would make a difference for you in this class, in helping you become proficient in English: reading and writing at grade level?</p>	<p>Something that will help me become proficient in this class is to pay attention and ask for help in anything that I don't understand to the teacher.</p> <p>Reading and writing more often.</p> <p>What would help me to start reading and writing at grade level is reading more and practicing writing.</p> <p>Things that might make a difference in class . . .</p> <p>I need to read more and also to fix my handwriting.</p> <p>It would help my grade able to move.</p> <p>We should write and read more.</p> <p>Things that can help me to become proficient in English by reading and writing at grade level are if in class we practice reading more and also practice more writing.</p> <p>Reading for about 25 minutes, writing.</p> <p>Writing and reading more.</p> <p>A difference that would help me to be proficient in writing is reading and practice writing.</p> <p>It can be reading in a proficient level.</p> <p>What would make a difference for me in this class and helping me become proficient in English is to read more at home.</p> <p>Do assignments then reading.</p> <p>Reading more and writing more at home.</p> <p>Sitting alone.</p> <p>Something that would make a difference in this class is that we do a lot of writing and reading. That would help me improve.</p> <p>Be ready to learn and try to use everything I learn here. I learn a lot in this class.</p>
<p>What interventions have you found effective or supportive in helping you learn?</p>	<p>Interventions that help me learn is a study card . . . a teacher taught me by myself so I could focus better.</p> <p>Reading advanced books and looking in a dictionary words that I don't know.</p> <p>To watch TV with closed captions and watching educating things and helping me.</p> <p>No response.</p> <p>. . .[it] is supportive when the teachers walk around.</p> <p>[Interventions] Last year in academic intervention you reminding me what to do. Mr. K is my academic coach he makes me check in with my teachers.</p> <p>Helping with work, you work with me one on one.</p> <p>Things that are helping me to learn are to read in class, practice more the writing and playing games, watching videos, and also the home works that help me practice, do activities.</p> <p>Using a dictionary when reading a book.</p> <p>The interventions to support me learning is get a dictionary and find the words I don't know.</p> <p>An intervention that has helped me is the teacher explaining.</p> <p>My interventions would be movement or using objects.</p> <p>I have found supportive intervention helping me learn when my teacher helps me or explains stuff to me.</p> <p>Do more work and do my homework.</p> <p>In my old school they put me in speech and that help me, a lot movement.</p> <p>Nothing was supportive or found effective.</p> <p>I haven't had any interventions. [This student was mainstreamed in elementary and has been in ELD for all three years of middle school]</p> <p>They teach me in different versions or methods.</p>

## Long Term English Language Learners 35

<p>Describe how you learn. Describe situations where you felt successful, where you understood what you needed to do in school and felt confident.</p>	<p>In math I take notes and I actually understand what the teacher teaching or what he is explaining. He helps me one to one.</p> <p>I feel more successful in history.</p> <p>I understand in science because of the way Ms. Avalos explains the thing in funny ways and gives examples with people in the class.</p> <p>Situations that felt successful are to work together. In Mr. Shannon we work together on paragraph.</p> <p>I learn when I'm not distracted and when I'm paying attention. We feel successful because we work together.</p> <p>I learn by power point and taking notes.</p> <p>By reading Advance books. By getting help in English and ELD because it helps me to learn.</p> <p>The things that how I learn is by watching it, hearing it. A situation when I felt good was in Math class with Mr. K's class when the teacher was showing us some examples on the board and writing the steps and then I understood what we needed to do, and by hearing and I felt confident what I was learning in school and in other classes.</p> <p>Taking notes.</p> <p>Taking notes. [I assume these two students answered this question together.]</p> <p>A situation where I felt successful was when I learned to read and write better.</p> <p>I need to read more and write essays better.</p> <p>I learn when I take notes or read. I feel successful in science because I feel like everything is easier and she gives examples.</p> <p>When the teachers talked to me personally and taught me how. Teach me one on one.</p> <p>In English I am good Mr. W helps me, and he explain it real good.</p> <p>I don't learn anything. I never felt successful and confident. [This child is depressed and these discussions brought this issue to light and he is now receiving counseling.]</p> <p>When I felt like I understood something I would be happy because I would actually understand it.</p> <p>When I got a good score on the SRI. I went back and read the information again. I focus on important things.</p>
<p>As a group, how can we support each other to access information, and make it fun and meaningful?</p>	<p>We could support each other to access information and make it fun and meaningful is to make games of words that we don't know and we could play as a group.</p> <p>By helping each other on tasks.</p> <p>By having to work with the team and trying by our selves then talking it [over] in our team and working with other people every time.</p> <p>To teach others and teach fun. So you can really understand it.</p> <p>We could make it fun and meaningful by working together and not distracting each other.</p> <p>As a group we can support each other to access the information by going to the library and doing research.</p> <p>By helping each other.</p> <p>We can support each other to access information by others to help you if you need help and by teaching it fun so you can understand it. You can do it meaningful by showing each step so they can understand everything really well.</p> <p>Using note cards, taking notes, videos,</p> <p>Note cards, note, and video.</p> <p>We can support each other to access information [by] playing jeopardy.</p> <p>By helping each other and be really serious during that time.</p> <p>As a group we support each other to access information because we can talk to each other and share answers.</p> <p>We can talk and share each other's answers.</p> <p>By working and talk that could make it up.</p> <p>I do everything alone in ELD. Nothing is fun even when I go on field trips or go out of the country.</p> <p>We can make learning fun by doing projects with friends and doing fun projects.</p> <p>I don't know.</p>

## Long Term English Language Learners 36

<p>What else would you like to see in place that we have not discussed, but you feel would help you become better students, and become proficient in reading and writing English at grade level?</p>	<p>I think what will help me be good student is to pay attention and get help in home more and do flash cards so it could help me.</p> <p>I think that what we do is good. I don't think we have talked about other important people.</p> <p>I think we should really learn something then we can move to something else. Or maybe we can have a test to see what we have learned.</p> <p>The teacher can help me improve my work.</p> <p>I think I would be a better student by not spacing out and doing my homework and trying my best.</p> <p>I would like to do nothing else.</p> <p>Reading about 20 minutes every day. Writing more.</p> <p>I could become a better student by helping me what I need help so it helps me to become a proficient in reading and writing English at grade level.</p> <p>Giving us worksheets, giving us notes.</p> <p>Reading for about 25 minutes, writing more.</p> <p>I would like to see how to set up an essay.</p> <p>Yes, I will just need to practice more reading and writing.</p> <p>I would talk more to the teachers to encourage students to get a better education.</p> <p>We should talk to teachers by encouraging kids to go to tutoring.</p> <p>Nothing every thing is good. Reading more and writing a lot.</p> <p>I would like to see nothing.</p> <p>Something we should do is read once a week in class for the whole period.</p> <p>Read more in school.</p>
<p>On the following lines write anything you feel has helped or hindered (not let you) learn English, or anything else that you feel is important.</p>	<p>What had not help me learned is not pay attention and watch TV and get distracted by little things.</p> <p>Reading has helped me succeed.</p> <p>Not having my mom kind of bothered me because my dad comes back from work like at 5:00 and cannot help me on my work my aunt is the one that helps me more than anyone.</p> <p>I . . .</p> <p>I think school is the thing that has helped me with my English.</p> <p>None.</p> <p>English has helped me a lot.</p> <p>Things that have help me in English and other classes are when we practice more and when the teachers explain it and give examples and the steps.</p> <p>Use a dictionary when reading a book, giving us notes.</p> <p>Something that helped me is planning how to write my paragraph.</p> <p>My parents and my teachers.</p> <p>I feel that Mrs. DZ has helped me on my English and I feel like I get better at it when she highlights words we don't understand.</p> <p>I felt like afterschool programs were helping.</p> <p>No I think everything I think I learn the thing I need to.</p> <p>Nothing helped and nothing ever will.</p> <p>Something that has helped me is how we write everyday or read in class.</p> <p>Everything we learn.</p>

## Themes

After reviewing the student responses and examining common threads, I created a list of overall statements that emerged from the students' written responses. The strategies identified as effective in propelling LTELLs towards grade level literacy are as follows:

1. Focusing on reading and writing in English, both in class and at home.
2. Receiving specific instruction of vocabulary with definitions in any subject area along with direct teaching of the meaning of terms in context and other uses of the words.
3. Working one-on-one with the teacher. Students reported learning best when the teacher took the time to explain concepts or assignments individually, and then help them to complete the task.
4. Modeling by the teacher. When the teacher modeled the task at hand with step-by-step instructions the students had a clear vision of what they needed to do and felt capable to complete the task.
5. Speaking with other students in English in all their classes builds oral English skills.
6. Taking learning seriously. Students reported that when they took the learning seriously and did not waste time or deviate from the lesson, they learned significantly more.

## Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

### Summary of Major Findings

The major findings were that these LTELLs do want to learn and that certain strategies help them to tune into to learning and progress their English proficiency, rather than tuning out and remaining permanent LTELLs. The students stated over and over the importance of teachers modeling the steps needed to perform the task. This helped the students feel confident, and allowed them to successfully complete classwork and learn the lesson's objective.

Students also echoed each other by saying that when their classroom teacher worked with them one-on-one they learned more. During the one-on-one time, the teacher explained the task, corrected any mistakes they were making, and showed them how to do the work step-by-step. Students reported that these instructional strategies made a significant difference in their success in completing and understanding the learning goal.

Students seemed to understand the importance of being able to access academic vocabulary to increase their English comprehension. Many students stated that when the teacher explained the definitions and uses of vocabulary in context, it helped them in terms of confidence, literacy skills, and the ability to complete class work.

Students expressed the importance of working in groups and having the ability to collaborate on assignments. While speaking with their classmates in English about the task at hand, students gained fluency and confidence in speaking in English. However, they stressed it was best not to work with friends because friendship groups tended to have off topic conversations.

Students repeated the importance of reading and writing everyday to increase their literacy and proficiency in English. They seemed to believe that these were important ways to improve their literacy. Students stated that their greatest hindrances in progressing in English are off-task talking, tuning out, fooling around, not doing homework and not taking classwork seriously.

### **Comparison of Findings to the Literature**

Findings from the study reflected findings in the research literature. I was unaware that my students, like so many across the nation, went through elementary school with little to no ELD services. Many of the students in the focus group are struggling in school. Twelve of the students in the focus group had at least one F on their first semester report card. Not surprisingly, even though the students in the study group were labeled English Learners (LEP) when they entered elementary school, none of them remembered receiving ELD support in the primary grades. It is only since they enrolled in middle school that they received ELD services. Our current school administration is aware of the importance of supporting all ELD students with ELD classes and created an ELD program where all ELLs are provided EL instruction. This is not the case in many schools across the state and nation (Olsen, 2010b; Mikow-Porto et al., 2004). Many of the students' self reported effective strategies were the same effective strategies discussed in the literature.

### **Limitations/Gaps in the Research**

This was a small study, and the students are young. The study group age range is twelve to fourteen years old. It is possible that they had a hard time expressing their experiences and may not have fully understood the questions.

The research, due to time constraints, was limited. To come to more conclusive evidence the study group would need to be larger, the duration longer, and the questioning more in-depth.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The education system is not providing sufficient supports for ELD students early on where it could make a dramatic difference. As stated by Olsen in *Reparable Harm* (2010b), the system does not help the ELD students who sink instead of swim in mainstreamed classes. This system makes students believe that it is their fault that they are unsuccessful. These students have been told it is because they are unmotivated, but really it is because no interventions were put in place to help them swim instead of sink. Future research needs to focus on how to change the system that creates failing, depressed, and hopeless Long Term English Language Learners.

### **Overall Significance of the Study**

Every middle and high school in California has LTELLs. Creating a system that does not produce them requires district and school leaders to change policies and current practices. This will take time and the combined efforts of many people.

The significance of this study shows that consistent focused lessons with the above mentioned strategies provide the students the opportunity to be and feel successful. This helps propel them towards English proficiency.

These students lack vocabulary, practice reading and writing, and most importantly they have usually struggled in school year after year and they lack the feeling of being successful. These students need rigorous lessons set up in a way that they can learn and feel successful. The more successes these students have the more engaged they become in school, and with the hope that they can succeed they start to swim in the success instead of continuing to sink in despair.

### **About the Author**

The author has been teaching English language learners in the greater Bay Area for over ten years. She has taught adult education, high school and middle school. She is passionate about teaching English Language Development. She loves comparing and discussing ideas, languages and ways of being in the world.

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