

ESL Teachers Having Students with Special Education Needs:  
The Needs and Challenges

Tuba Arabaci Atlamaz

tubaarabaci@gmail.com

Rutgers University

2017

### Abstract

In US schools, many English as a second language (ESL) teachers face the challenge of helping an ESL student who has also special education needs. Moreover, these ESL teachers along with other educators do not have enough guidance to serve these ESL students. One step to help these teachers is to understand their experiences with these students. Thus, this qualitative study aimed to understand what kind of challenges, support systems, and needs ESL teachers report while serving ESL students with special education needs. Six ESL teachers working in various schools in New Jersey were interviewed. Although the challenges and support systems were reported to be various, the needs were more or less the same. The data also revealed what kind of strategies ESL teachers used while serving these students. Implications were ESL teachers need more time to collaborate with other teachers; scheduling should be organized more appropriately, and ESL teachers need training on special education strategies.

*Key words:* ESL teachers, special education needs, ESL students

### ESL Teachers Having Students with Special Education Needs

“... We have a Korean- (Spanish-, or Portuguese- or Albanian-) speaking child who has been with us for two years. The child is having difficulty in reading textbooks and literature and in understanding math problems. We think there is something more than just learning English and want to have the child tested...” – De George, 2008, p. 278

“Pedro is an English language learner who has not yet developed the pre-reading skills needed to be successful in the first- grade classroom... Yet when he is given a grade-level reading assessment, it shows that he is behind his peers... on to the second grade... on to the third grade... The team decides that Pedro has a learning disability (LD). Pedro’s tragedy is that because public education “waited for him to fail” before placing him in special education, the best years for teaching him to read may have passed.” - Orosco & Klingner, 2010, p. 269.

These are two vignettes representing what many teachers are faced with in today’s diverse classrooms pertaining to English as a Second Language (ESL) students having special education (SE) needs. There is not a commonly agreed upon label for these students, but “SE-ESL students” is generally used to refer to them (Cloud, 1988). In the USA, one tenth of nearly 5 million ESL students (DeMatthews, Edwards, & Nelson, 2014) have some kind of disability (Nguyen, 2012); that number has most likely grown as the ESL population is constantly increasing. As a result of this increase, many teachers are facing increased expectations related to meeting the needs of this population. More importantly, these students may not be in substantial numbers in a given school or classroom, which hinders teachers/ schools from taking effective precautions or applying effective strategies to serve these students better. However, even if a school has only one SE-ESL student, the teachers and the school still need to provide this student

with high quality education in pursuant of meeting the expectations for “education for all” as part of human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2006; Raj, 2014).

Considering the recent recognition of the needs of SE-ESL students, it will not be surprising to see the scarcity of the research on their needs and the required actions to meet these needs. Unfortunately, educators face with several challenges pertaining to SE-ESL students that are really hard to be addressed. Among the most problematic issues is how to diagnose whether ESL students need special education intervention, or language support, or both. Research shows that decision makers tend to link students’ difficulties to their poor English language skills rather than a disability (if it is not an apparent one), and thus do not provide needed interventions (Sullivan, 2011). Or, they think the reason for failure is a disability and do not offer language support even though they need it (Liu, Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson, & Kushner, 2006). Thus, students may be misplaced and ESL students may be under or overrepresented either in ESL classes or special education programs (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; DeMatthews et al., 2014).

Another big issue is the training of teachers who will serve SE-ESL population. Most special education teachers are not trained to serve this group of students. Similarly, majority of the ESL teachers are not trained to help special education students. As a result, there could be a mismatch between the actual need of the student and the support she/he gets from the school and the teachers (Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson-Courtney, & Kushner, 2006). Moreover, although ESL teachers have an important role in supporting the SE-ESL students effectively, they are often left to work alone although they may have lack of special education pedagogy and support to serve these students competently.

At this point, it is important to hear ESL teachers' voices about their challenges and needs, so that teacher educators, principals, professional development (PD) providers can help them be prepared adequately for SE- ESL students. Due to the dearth of research on ESL teachers serving SE-ESL students, this study aims to reveal their needs and challenges, so that teacher educators and PD designers provide them with the appropriate knowledge and skills. The research questions are:

1. What challenges do ESL teachers in NJ public schools describe in meeting the needs of their SE-ESL students?
2. What do they report needing in order to better serve SE-ESL students?

### **Literature Review**

To search for studies on ESL teachers who work with SE-ESL students, I mainly used Rutgers University online library resources by combining the phrases "ESL education, ESL teachers, ESL students with disabilities, strategies, intervention, Response to Intervention". Limiting the search to peer reviewed and academic journals and starting from the most relevant ones, I chose the articles with a recent date. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research specifically focusing on ESL teachers' challenges and needs. Thus, studies were chosen based on their level of guidance to understand ESL teacher challenges, needs, and support systems. Hence, the studies were grouped as a response to the question of "How do these studies help me to explain the data?" Three broad categories are research on understanding challenges: "What is challenging?", research on understanding supports: "What is supporting?", research on understanding strategies: "What is happening?".

#### **What is challenging?**

The studies revealed that identification process is a major challenge for the teachers. Thus this section briefly cited research on the nature of identification process, the mainly studied topic pertaining to SE-ESL students. In a national study on SE-ESL education, the results showed that the number of SE-ESL students was 357,325 out of nearly 4 million ELLs in public schools in grades K-12 in 2001-2002 (Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Pendzick, & Stephenson, 2003). What is more eye catching in this report is that more than 55% of them were diagnosed as having specific learning disabilities (Zehler, et al., 2003).

“Specific learning disability

(A) In general.--The term ‘specific learning disability’ means a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

(B) Disorders included.--Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(C) Disorders not included.--Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. TITLE I / A / 602 / 30 (IDEA, 2004).

In other words, most of the ESL students were diagnosed as having a “specific learning disability”, as they were not having other disabilities that could be diagnosed apparently.

Other studies conducted on identification revealed that SE-ESL students generally are overrepresented or underrepresented in special education classrooms (Artiles et al., 2005; DeMatthews et al., 2014). For example, examining the rates of identification from the perspective of ethnicity, De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, and Park (2006) reported that minority and English language learners were overrepresented in the special education programs: 22.3% of the students (n=3973 out of nearly 87,000 students) in the district where the study was conducted were SE-ESL students. More importantly, the overrepresentation seems to be an ongoing feature in schools. As an example, Linn and Hemmer (2011) conducted a relative risk ratio analysis for

31 school districts in Texas, Education Service Center Region 1, for a 7-year period (from 2004 to 2010). They found that ELLs were highly overrepresented in this 7-year period despite diminishing constantly. However, they just explained this decrease as a result of re-identification of the students, as overrepresentation led to several other challenges for schools as well. As for underrepresentation, Johnson, Lessem, Bergquist, Carmichael, and Whitten (2002, as cited in Linn & Hemmer, 2011) found out that ESL students were not placed for special education although they needed. Moreover, they examined the probability of being represented in special education, and they concluded that ESL students were unlikely to be placed in special education programs compared to the students with no risk factors.

Kangas (2014) examined what education was provided for SE- ESL students after they were referred to special education services. Collecting data through observations, interviews and artifacts, Kangas found out that scheduling- prioritizing special education services over ESL services- led to conflicts and competing between special education and ESL services. Non-ESL teachers were not aware of the ESL students' needs and were unable to provide accommodations for them. Moreover, all of the participating educators except two did not have education or training on ESL, while all of them had to get professional development on special education. This disparity resulted in ignoring the importance of ESL instructional strategies. In other words, while teachers were able to address special education needs, they could not address linguistic needs, which hindered students from getting what they needed thoroughly.

These studies also examined the identification procedures, especially the ones that led to misidentification of these students for ESL or special education programs. For instance, misperceptions about the students' skills in a given grade level, language proficiency of the students, and type of program provided to the students influenced the identification process

(Artiles et al., 2005). Examining the databases of 1998-1999 school year in California school districts, Artiles et al. (2005) found out that students' low level of proficiency in their native languages were mainly resulted in overrepresentation in special education programs. Ferlis (2012) conducted a research on the ESL teachers' perceptions of Latino students' identification and pre-referral process for special education. She also investigated the strategies used for identification and instructional supports and intervention for helping these students. Interviewing six ESL teachers, the author found out that time constraints, language related misconceptions, and lack of assessments in native language were the most challenging issues while helping these students.

Additionally, lack of expertise in both second language education and special education contributed to teachers' misidentification of SE-ESL students (Zehler, et al., 2003). Dusett (2012) examined what kind of assessments were used for referral by special education and ESL teachers and what factors contribute to their decision making process for referral. Sixteen participants out of 67 from three school districts in Western New York State responded the survey. The data revealed that teachers did not have adequate knowledge about the assessments and teachers mainly looked at poor or low academic achievement in written tasks and inability to follow or comprehend directions while referring a student to a special education program. Additionally, Fernandez and Inserra (2013) investigated how teachers' knowledge of the referral process and students' acculturation influenced the identification processes. They concluded that lack of knowledge regarding students' acculturation and language learning led to misidentification of students as well as lack of efficient support provided to ESL and SE-ESL students.

Another aspect of identification process is the presence of appropriate state and district policies. Unfortunately, many educational policies were unable to cover issues related to SE-ESL students, which also obstructed teachers or educators to provide sufficient support for these students (DeMatthews et al., 2014). Conducting interviews and analyzing documents in districts in US-Mexico border, DeMatthews et al. (2014) indicated that educators could not make use of the policies, as they lacked of guidance for this specific population. Furthermore, officials who were leaders in the educational agencies did not have enough education or training on SE-ESL students, and they had time constraints and limited resources to support teachers so that they could help SE- ESL students more profoundly. Similarly, Scott, Hauerwas, and Brown (2014) investigated the state policies and documents about culturally responsive education and Response to Intervention for specific learning disabilities in 50 states' websites. They found out that "majority of states have not provided specific regulation and/ or guidance regarding CLD students beyond what is found in federal special education regulations" p.179). They also indicated that creating a collaborative atmosphere among all stakeholders was highly crucial to support the needs of this student population.

Following a naturalistic inquiry approach, Delgado (2008) investigated one bilingual teacher's instruction to understand her beliefs about her one SE-ESL student. Although the data collection methods were not clearly described, apparently observation and follow up conversations were used to collect data. The study revealed that this SE-ESL student could not get enough support from the special education due to language barriers and could not improve his skills quicker due to lack of parental support.

Overall, although the studies were on identification process, they revealed several concerns for ESL teachers. Institutional policies, assessment strategies, teachers' beliefs about

language related issues were all influential factors that may lead to misidentification of the ESL students. Unfortunately, this leads to more challenges for ESL teachers like lacking enough support from other teachers and having difficulties to find balance in the time spent for the ESL students and the SE-ESL students. Thus, this study aimed to reveal how ESL teachers would reflect on the identification process in line with their challenges, needs, and support systems.

### **What is happening?**

Although there are challenges for ESL teachers, several studies focused on instructional interventions and strategies employed to help these SE-ESL students with a view to showing what could be done. Not having a common definition on SE-ESL education, schools described in each research study have their own way of helping SE-ESL student. For example, Klingner and Vaughn (1996) investigated the effects of reciprocal teaching of reading comprehension on SE-ESL students, and revealed that the two groups receiving instruction in cross-age tutoring and cooperative groups improved their reading skills compared to their previous test results. To state it differently, SE-ESL students benefited from interactions with their more expert peers. In addition to this, Haager and Windmueller (2001) examined whether early reading intervention for ELLs prevented their identification as SE-ESL students. They found out this intervention not only diminished the rates for identification as SE-ESL, but also helped ELLs improve their reading skills (Haager & Windmueller, 2001). Another investigated strategy was Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) implemented for SE-ESL students (Sáenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). Sáenz et al. (2005) used Reading: The Comprehensive Reading Assessment Battery to assess the effects of PALS for SE-ESL students, and asserted the students engaged in PALS improved their reading level more than those who did not engaged in this strategy.

Moreover, some other studies examined how Response to Intervention strategies can be enhanced with culturally responsive pedagogy and used to help teaching SE-ESL students. Response to Intervention (RtI) is “a multi- tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs” (“What is RTI?” n.d.). Brown and Doolittle (2008) indicated that in Tier 1, each student gets high-quality and appropriate instruction. If students do not make progress, they get more intensive support as part of general instructions in Tier 2. Finally, if some students still stay behind the mainstream students, they have individualized intervention as part of Tier 3. Thus, in order to yield better results in serving SE-ESL students, RtI should be culturally responsive (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Liu et al., 2008; Orosco & O'Connor, 2014). For example, in their case study of one special education teacher with Latino SE-ESL students, Orosco and O'Connor (2014) found that the success of the SE-ESL students depended on the amount of culturally responsive instruction that was included to address their diverse cultural and linguistic capitals.

In sum, these studies tried to emphasize the importance of purposefully designed strategies for SE-ESL students that helped ESL teachers and other professionals to provide the required support for SE- ESL students. These studies would be beneficial to understand how participants in this study would reveal the support systems and their needs to help these students. In other words, due to the scarcity of research specifically designed to reveal ESL teachers’ reports of support and needs, these studies would help the researcher to interpret the data.

### **What is supporting?**

The literature cited in this section would review how ESL teachers’ were helpful in determining the students’ needs and how they shaped their instruction to serve these students better. Several researchers have reported on the important role that ESL teachers can play, and

the need to collaborate with other teachers to serve these students better (Bos & Reyes, 1996; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Ortiz, Robertson, Wilkinson, Liu, McGhee, & Kushner, 2011; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). For example, Ortiz et al. (2011) examined how ESL students were referred to the special education services and found out that most of the students were misdiagnosed. More importantly, the documents and artifacts provided by ESL teachers were very detrimental in the identification process and prevented the referral team from getting wrong decisions. As a result, they concluded that ESL teachers had a huge role in helping to diminish the disproportionate referrals of ESL students to special education programs (Ortiz et al., 2011).

Although not investigated frequently, collaboration between ESL teachers and professionals was found to be rewarding. Salem (2016) conducted interviews with seven educators consisting ESL teachers, paraprofessionals, and speech/ language pathologists and a school psychologist working in two schools where they were attended a pilot initiative, the English Language Learner/Special Education Collaborative Problem Solving Process. The interviews conducted after this collaborative initiative revealed that teachers understood the necessity for collaboration. Moreover, teacher training on ESL and special education were crucial to help students better through appropriate instruction and valid assessments and diagnosis.

In addition to these, it is crucial to understand ESL teachers' beliefs to understand how they are willing to help these students. Bos and Reyes (1996) conducted in-depth interviews with a Latina teacher examining how her beliefs and personal experiences shaped her way of teaching and supporting these SE-ESL students. More specifically, her background knowledge in language learning, training, and expertise as well as her knowledge on special education shaped

her teaching: Mixing communicative and direct methods of teaching with the inclusion of first language and cultural capital of the students into the curriculum.

At this point, pre-service education for ESL teachers is also essential. Although there is not an empirical study on pre-service ESL teachers getting support for special education, Rodriguez and Carrasquillo (1997) proposed a framework for bilingual special education teacher training. The six essential elements of bilingual special education teacher preparation programs are listed as

1. Provide theoretical/practical knowledge of bilingual education and bilingualism as instrumental functions;
2. Utilize a variety of assessment procedures;
3. Include the concept of culture as a core value for the development of students' cultural identity and self-concept;
4. Provide extensive training in the planning and delivery of instruction to promote academic achievement;
5. Familiarize prospective teachers with the concept of professionalism to maintain a high level of competence and integrity in the profession; and
6. Provide a field experience component in which theory is applied in the bilingual special education classrooms. (pp. 99-100).

In line with this framework, conducting a survey for 100 participants, teachers, administrators/ supervisors, clinicians, and professors/ researchers, Rodriguez (2005) found out that participants considered “the areas of language proficiency, assessment, culture, planning and delivery of instruction, and professionalism as important components in the preparation of bilingual special education teachers” (p. 1963). However, these components were rated

differently among the participants, which indicated that there was still a lack of agreement among the stakeholders about which components were as crucial as the others.

In conclusion, studies cited in this section were about how ESL teachers made use of strategies they had learned and how these teachers could be prepared effectively. The lack of research on ESL teachers' strategies and other issues like collaboration resulted in not understanding these teachers' needs thoroughly. As a result, this study aimed to reveal the stories of these ESL teachers, so that it could provide suggestions for teacher educators and PD designers.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The aim of this study was to learn more about the challenges and needs that ESL teachers face in meeting the needs of SE-ESL students. A basic qualitative design was used, because it helps researchers understand "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Thus, a qualitative design for this study was highly practical. Moreover, the flexibility of qualitative research strategies enables researchers to probe for additional details when initial questions do not provide full elaborations. This is not allowable when using a quantitative approach (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2012). As a result, this design helped the researcher elucidate what challenges the ESL/bilingual teachers and what kind of needs they report to serve the students better.

### **Research Site**

Considering the limited amount of SE-ESL students in each school, the study will focus on the individual teachers teaching in various schools in New Jersey. As a result, the study was not conducted in a specific research site.

### **Sample**

A purposeful sampling strategy (Merriam, 2009) was used to recruit participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is to select the participants who will provide the most detailed information about the issue so that the researcher can discover, understand, and gain insight on the particular topic (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Additionally, given the limited numbers of ESL teachers serving SE-ESL students, convenience sampling was used. Convenience sampling is a type of purposeful sampling in which the researcher selects the participants from the most convenient group available to the researcher (Merriam, 2009).

For this study, I initially contacted the ESL teachers I knew from my Master's degree program, and asked them whether they had SE-ESL students. Two of my friends said they had SE-ESL students, and agreed to participate in the study. I also asked them to refer me to other ESL teachers that had SE-ESL students, and one of them gave me another teacher's name. I also asked my colleagues in my doctoral cohort and reached out three more participants. As it was already difficult to find ESL teachers having SE-ESL students, my only criterion for sample selection was to be an ESL teacher having first-hand experience of teaching an SE-ESL student (who was either referred or in the process of referral). Totally, I had six participants teaching at various grade levels in New Jersey.

### **Data Collection**

In order to get rich information from the participants, semi structured interviews were conducted. Interviews are appropriate for "obtaining a special kind of information" that cannot

be acquired through observation (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). In other words, participants reveal more in depth and personal data about a specific issue. Moreover, interviews are ideal for investigating people's feelings and their interpretations of the world (Merriam, 2009). Among three types of interviews, the most appropriate one for the current study was semi-structured interview. This type of interview guides the researchers on the topics to be asked and provides them flexibility to add or subtract questions depending on the flow of the interview (Merriam, 2009). To establish the ethical conduct of the investigator (Merriam, 2009), I got IRB approval, which legitimized the processes in the study. Apart from this, I refrained from directing participants to give answers in a particular way based on my own assumptions on SE-ESL education.

The interviews for this study were conducted during 2015-2016 school year. After the participants agreed to take part in the study, I gave them to choice for in-person or online meetings, considering travel and time concerns for both the participants and me. Thus, I scheduled online interviews either on Skype or FaceTime or phone, depending on the participants' choice. I audio-recorded all of the interviews both in my phone and in my computer. The interviews lasted 10- 30 minutes, during which I took notes.

### **The Interview Protocol and Pilot Interview**

The purpose of this study was to learn the needs and challenges of the ESL teachers who had SE-ESL students either referred or in the process of referral. Hence, I initially created a 12-question interview protocol including background questions and questions about their experiences teaching students with special needs. After getting feedback on the protocol from my peers and professor, I revised the protocol by deleting the background questions and combining the rest of the questions into four broader, more open-ended questions. By revising the questions, I intended to keep the interview shorter, but with the potential to gather richer content. Finally, I

had four broad questions asking about teachers' general experience with these students, challenges, needs, and the support they expected from the other members in the school (Appendix A).

Upon revising the protocol, to pilot the interview process, I contacted my classmates from my Master's degree (they are all ESL/ Bilingual teachers right now) and asked them whether they had SE-ESL students and/ or know someone who had any students like this. One of them said she had one such student and agreed to do a pilot interview with. Thus, we arranged a time for a Skype interview, as we both had busy schedules and lived far apart. To record the interview, I used the QuickTime audio recorder, and took notes while she was speaking. Piloting the interview helped me to improve the interview questions. For example, it is highly essential to hear about the specific examples to learn more about the situation. Thus, in the actual interviews I asked for examples if the participants did not provide them. Additionally, sending the questions prior to the interview was helpful to get more detailed information and examples.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to understand the challenges and needs of ESL teachers serving SE-ESL students. The data source for this study was the semi-structured interviews. I used narrative analysis to examine the data. Narrative analysis focuses on "the stories people tell" (Merriam, 2009, p. 202). Although the data was analyzed through a lens of a particular discipline (Merriam, 2009), narrative analysis is also advantageous to encounter with various analytic strategies (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 203).

I transcribed all of the interviews in a Word document, and then organized my notes with each participant transcripts (Hays & Singh, 2012). The second step is to explore the data through reading it, writing memos, and developing a codebook (Creswell and Plano- Clark, 2007, p.

129). A code is described as the “label or tag that “chunks” various amounts of data based on the defined case or unit of analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 299). Codes can be generated while reading over the data (i.e. inductive coding) or before beginning to examine the data (i.e. deductive coding) (Merriam, 2009). Hence, I used both deductive and inductive reasoning to develop the codes (Merriam, 2009).

I read each participant’s interview, and then color coded each relevant statement. After a couple of days, I read each transcripts question by question, and color coded the relevant statements. Each time I read the codes, I filled the table I prepared to write down the codes that I saw in the data. Firstly, I wrote my deductive codes: challenges, support systems, and needs. Then, I added the inductive codes under each title. During reading over the data, various sub-codes emerged, so I grouped them into broader codes. Moreover, the data revealed another major code: strategies. Although the study questions were not asking about strategies, I thought it was worthwhile to share what kind of strategies they used in their teaching journey. The Table 1 shows the major four codes which were comprised of broader and sub-codes. Apart from this, I needed to code several statements under more than one major code. For example, I coded the statement “I do not have an aid” both as a challenge and as a need, as it was uttered as a challenge by one interviewee and as a need by another one. In other words, I identified codes that were appropriately descriptive of the data, exhaustively encompass all relevant data, mutually exclusive, and congruent or at the same conceptual level (Merriam, 2009, p. 186). Therefore, I constantly checked the appropriateness of the codes for the specific data segment and wrote memos when necessary in order not to lose an important inference about the data.

Finally, to increase the credibility of the data and to ensure its reliability, I used member checks (Merriam, 2009). I sent the interview transcripts to the participants and ask them to edit if

they think it was necessary. All of them agreed with the transcriptions. I also kept journals and memos to serve as an audit trail (Merriam, 2009). In addition to these, I provided “rich and thick descriptions” to contextualize the study so that other researchers could see the transferability of the research design and findings (Merriam, 2009).

Table 1

Major Codes	Broader Codes	Sub-codes
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Student body related</li> <li>- ESL teacher related</li> <li>- Institution related</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the severity of the disability,</li> <li>- Students’ low L1 proficiency</li> <li>- Conflicts among SE-ESL and non- SE students</li> <li>- ESL teacher’s lack of knowledge about special education,</li> <li>- lack of time to collaborate with other teachers</li> <li>- Scheduling</li> <li>- Moving around various locations</li> <li>- Multiple grade and proficiency levels at the same time</li> <li>- Lack of parental support</li> </ul>
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Student body related</li> <li>- ESL teacher related</li> <li>- Institution related</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students helping each other, siblings</li> <li>- ESL teachers together discuss</li> <li>- Admin</li> <li>- Special ed teacher</li> <li>- Content area/ mainstream teachers</li> <li>- Parents</li> <li>- supervisors/ other teacher in the district or hotlist</li> </ul>
Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Institutional needs</li> <li>- Personal needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An aid</li> <li>- time / scheduling</li> </ul>

		- training/ PD
Strategies	- strategies to meet the needs	- grouping - modifying lessons and tasks - talking to other professionals - making use of any available support systems (like peers, siblings, special education teachers, online resources)

**Findings**

The study aimed to find out ESL teachers challenges, needs, and support systems while serving SE-ESL students. Thus, the findings grouped by the major deductive codes; challenges, needs, and support systems, and one inductive code: strategies. Having implemented narrative analysis, the findings will be discussed under the headings of “What is challenging?”, “What is supporting?”, “What is missing?”, and “What is happening?”

***What is challenging?***

The first research question asked about the challenges of ESL teachers. All of the ESL teachers recounted challenges similar to great extent. The challenges revealed in the interviews were categorized as student body related, ESL teacher related, and institution related. All of the six participants shared that their lack of knowledge about special education was a big challenge for them. Although they stated they were trying to do the best they can, they still mentioned they were not educated or certified in this field. For example, one teacher stated her inability to help the students quickly due to her lack of knowledge on special education:

“...because I’m not trained you know I got only one class “Inclusive teaching” at R, but I am not trained particularly in Special ed. And I do not have the... like the certain things... I do not feel comfortable knowing the things and try quickly like rephrasing something or asking them say things instead of writing or something like that. I do not have a tool kit of like how to

deal with special education students. It is a lot harder for me. Because I do not have like the automaticity that a special ed teacher would have in terms of how to ... in the moment... How to help them.”

Similarly, another teacher who had a severely autistic child recounted an event that she could not help the kid as she did not have a training on that issue, and needed others’ help:

“... So we had to have other people hold him. It was not possible for me to approach him in any way that I am aware of. I am sure people who have the proper training would be able to do it.”

Relevant to this issue, teachers also struggled with the types of disabilities, their severity as well as their language proficiency at various levels both in English and in their first languages. Several teachers mentioned the lack of L1 skills created problems for teaching, as the students could not transfer their L1 skills while learning English.

“..... student in sixth grade actually lacking language, his native language proficiency, he is from France and he does not have a lot of reading and writing skills in his native language. So, that s created a problem in a lot of areas...”

Teachers also tapped into how severity of the disability levels and student behaviors stemming from their disability affected their way of teaching. Several teachers felt that they repeated themselves a lot, which sometimes led to conflicts among the students, as one teacher stated “Other students once in a while they roll their eyes and say come on let’s move on to something else.” Or they were baffled which student to help, as one teacher recounted,

“when we were independently working like worksheet for example I need to sit with her and do entire worksheet with their, but other kids have their questions and they want to do it right and it definitely takes time as you need to go to the other students.”

Moreover, they also struggled with the behaviors of the students stemming from their disabilities. For example, one teacher expressed that she felt bad about her students, as she could not finish any hands- on project or art work on time due to her behaviors and feelings.

“She gets very easily distracted it takes her ten times longer than other to finish something because she is distracted she can’t focus, she does the thing very slowly and she is very particular about how it should be. That is very challenging I mean almost every lesson with her almost unfinished if she is required to do work as opposed to listening...”

In addition to these challenges, these ESL teachers struggled with the scheduling and time issues. Several teachers recounted that they were working in small districts, as a result of which they moved among schools. Moreover, as they had to teach multiple grades and multiple proficiency levels at the same time, they felt frustrations to differentiate and modify their instruction to meet all the needs. They also could not find time to collaborate with other teachers unless they initiated it or they had the opportunity to meet them (in the teachers’ room or in the hallways).

One final challenge mentioned by several teachers was the parental support. Sometimes parents were resistant to accept that their child special education support, which delayed the referral process that already took nearly a year to determine the actual need. One teacher said the parents of the severely autistic child refused to send him to another center that was more specialized to help autistic children. Thus, the administrators forced this ESL teacher to help the kid, stating “It has to be done”, leaving her without support. Another teacher said the parents agreed to get support for her child a year after the school suggested for referral process.

***What is supporting?***

When it comes to support, ESL teachers had different responses. Although not many of them were contented about the level of support, they were able to name at least one or two supports they received. To begin with, ESL teachers were not able to get administrative support for their SE-ESL students. They were sometimes forced to have these students in their classrooms or they were not provided with effective scheduling or other resources and materials. As a result, they could not find time to collaborate with other teachers, especially if they had multiple grades at the same time, which also left them alone.

“I do not fit into the regular schedule that the regular teachers have. Once a month all first grade teachers get together and have a meeting whole day and I once a month there is instead of faculty meeting we have a grade level meeting we all get together. Separated by grade level something given to talk about but since I am ESL teacher I have cross grades, I’m kind of left out and do not fit into any category nicely. There is a lot I miss because I do not get... into those groups.”

More interestingly, if an interaction occurred between mainstream and ESL teachers, it was generally mainstream teachers’ coming and asking for advice for modifications. Along with this line, ESL teachers reported more support from special education teachers in that whenever they found the time they asked for their advice, but none of them mentioned that they had regular meetings with special education teachers let alone mainstream/ content area teachers. As for the parents, just one teacher mentioned that they got support from the parents but after a year of suggestion for referral. Another striking finding was that support could also come from peers and siblings. For example, one teacher said “they were peers nearly four years, so they love each other and support each other”. Moreover, several students had siblings or twins in the same ESL class but did not have any disabilities, so they helped each other to resolve the problems or do

the assignments together. Another support comes from the hotlists or emails in that one teacher said the hotlist, containing supervisors and other teachers around the district was “the most helpful support she had”.

***What is missing?***

Interviews revealed that ESL teachers had institutional and personal needs. Most of the participants wished that they could have someone else in the room, so that they could freely move among the students around the classroom. For example, one teacher said a bilingual paraprofessional would be a great assistance. Moreover, teachers implied that not having an aid led to challenges. For example, while describing a challenging situation the teacher said “I do not have an aid in the room” implying that she could handle the situation as long as an assistant was there to help.

Apart from this, the teachers mentioned the needs for materials and resources. Several of them said they knew they had to modify their materials, but it was really difficult and time-consuming to find relevant materials, and then modify them by grade, proficiency or disability level. For example, one teacher said:

“I do not have any particular materials I do. I can but money and budget to get them, I end up creating and finding things online because I do not find texts or anything but sometimes I envy the teachers that have something specific to follow.”

They also reported to the need to have more interaction with the other teachers. They indicated that ESL teachers did not know much about what was going on in other classroom. Once the students referred, ESL teacher saw them infrequently and they did not know what kind of things they learned or did in other classrooms. For example, one of them stated,

“... But I feel like there is not a lot of cross over like I have a student who is classified and he gets pulled for reading support and speech. Or other gets pulled for reading support and math support. I do not hear from the math support teacher; I do not hear from the reading resource support teacher. I do not know what the speech teacher does with him every day. I do not have interaction or dialogue with him about his abilities or his progress or certain things. So I want to have that. It would really require a lot of effort on my end to track them down and ask those questions. Because on the administrative level there is no system or schedule or anything in place to allow that happen naturally.”

Considering none of the teachers had prior training on special education in depth, they needed to have more training on special education. A couple of them mentioned that they had attended workshops about SE-ESL students, several of which were very superficial and not helpful at all. For instance, one of the participants said,

“I have gone to workshops, I have actually gone to specifically on teaching ESL students with special needs but the person run the workshop did not give very clear information about how you know it is language proficiency you know how long a special needs a separate ... so basically after the whole workshop she said you really don't, there is no clear cut answer you know so dependent on the student and the subjects and the material.”

### ***What is happening?***

Although the study did not explicitly aim to find what ESL teachers' strategies used to help these students, all of the teachers shared what they did to handle the situations and to serve these students as much as they could. Thus, it would be important to acknowledge and share their efforts. In line with the interview questions, ESL teachers made use of strategies that worked best with the students at that specific incidents, but they still regretted not being supported

enough or trained about special education. They also tended to reflect on their strategies in that they tried to examine what worked with the students what did not, so that they could use it or do not use it for the next time.

Among the mostly mentioned strategies, teachers tended to modify their materials by “avoiding to make them feel left out” or oversimplifying the material for not to give “baby work”. They paid special attention to those students’ characteristics and needs. Hence, they tried “to sit with them” and explain the topic one-on-one or modify the tests or tasks to make them appropriate for these students. Moreover, they tended to get help from other ESL students and paired them together. For example, one teacher explained her grouping strategy and the reason behind it:

“Sometimes I pair her with her brother so they work on sty together so that it is done a little faster. So maybe she is not doing it on her own not getting to the end of the it. I want her to see what is the end product to realize what the lesson is about to talk about it. So that is what I do sometimes I pair her with her brother or with another student in the class so that is it get done with her help one other thing that I know ...”

Additionally, they gave time to finish the activities or chose activities that these SE-ESL students could participate easily. Apart from these, they asked for help and materials from special education teachers like “manipulatives” as one participant stated, “The special ed teacher was supportive. She gave me her manipulatives, whatever she had in her classroom to work with him.” and other strategies that worked in the special education classroom or search online to create materials on their own, as one teachers mentioned, “I end up creating and finding things online because I do not find texts or anything”.

Finally, knowing students' dominant language (i.e. their L1) and translating when necessary was reported to be another asset in that one teachers said, "Fortunately, I speak Spanish, so I can translate when needed".

## **Discussion**

The study investigated the challenges and needs of ESL teachers having SE-ESL students as well as the support they get from other professionals. Moreover, the data also revealed the strategies they used to help these students. Although the research on ESL teachers' needs and challenges were not abundant, the results did not differ from the previous studies that were conducted on identification or referral processes. To begin with, the major challenge was reported as the identification process (e.g. Artiles et al., 2005; Duset, 2012; Kangas, 2014). Furthermore, the ESL teachers mentioned they realized that something was going on with these students, but referral process took long time to determine the actual need (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Moreover, the ESL teachers in this study were asked to wait for a while so that they could say that the problem was not stemming from language, as the ESL teachers in Salem (2016)'s study stated that they were not seen as the primary experts to decide on the referral process.

Along with the challenges, they indicated their needs and the support they got from their colleagues or families. Similar to the results found in the literature (e.g. Bos & Reyes, 1996; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Ortiz et al., 2011), ESL teachers could not collaborate with other teachers due to time constraints and lack of interest from other teachers. Although ESL teachers were willing to have more information about what their colleagues were doing in their classrooms, they could not find a common planning time to discuss these issues. They reported exchanging emails as a way to get information, but they looked for more in person conversation. For example, one teacher found herself "lucky", as she had a cubicle which was

adjacent to a special education teacher, so that she could easily discuss whenever an issue came up.

Another important finding was about the training of the ESL teachers. None of the teachers were certified or took courses discussing the special education methods, assessment or strategies in depth during their undergraduate years or certification period. Not many of them attended ongoing PDs or workshops other than the ones offered during conferences. These results were seen in the research indicating that ESL teachers did not receive high quality pre-service or in-service education about SE-ESL students (Rodriguez & Carrasquillo, 1997; Ortiz et al., 2006). No matter how much they lack of the required knowledge for special education, these teachers were trying their best to help these students better. Depending on their level of language proficiency they modified their materials, tasks or their way of delivery or created new materials for their SE-ESL students. Moreover, they sought advice from their colleagues through face to face interaction, through hotlists or online search for further resources. Although teachers did not mention whether they tried to be culturally responsive or not (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Liu et al., 2008; Orosco & O'Connor, 2014), several of them recounted that they acknowledged the cultural differences, especially when parents resisted to accept the disability. One teacher acknowledged why parents did not want their kid to be put into the referral process: “a lot of times it is shameful in their culture... that brings shame on the family and we do not want that to be the case.” None of the teachers stated that their students referred to special education improperly (i.e. over-representation). On the contrary, these teachers were complaining about not placing these students as soon as possible (i.e. underrepresentation) or not having enough support, training, or materials.

### **Implications**

All in all, in order to provide SE-ESL students high quality education in par with the basic human rights, all of the stakeholders are responsible to improve the quality of the education. Although being a small scale- pilot- study, the data revealed that ESL teachers were challenged with SE-ESL students due to lack of specific knowledge on teaching strategies, lack of collaboration among the teachers, and were in need of constant support from administration, special and mainstream teachers as well as time and resources. Thus, administrators have a great role in designing such kind of opportunities for these teachers. Administrations should be educated about the ESL students and SE-ESL students, and should implement appropriate scheduling practices as well as provide opportunities for any kind of in-service educational services. They should also encourage collaboration among the teachers and provide these teachers with necessary equipment, materials, or time to attend PDs or workshops.

Apart from this, considering the importance of pre-service education, teacher educators should incorporate ESL strategies to the special education training programs, and vice versa. More importantly, pre-service education for content area and mainstream teachers should provide adequate training for both ESL and special education strategies. Moreover, ESL teachers should look for more opportunities to improve their teaching strategies and to incorporate families and community members into the schooling process as much as possible.

### **Limitations**

Although the number of participants were enough for a qualitative data, I did not add any other data collection methods aside from interviews. Conducting surveys about demographics and other perceptions would have revealed important data about teachers' experiences with these students. Moreover, I did all of the interviews online, which hindered me from seeing them in person. Apart from this, I failed to ask more follow up questions to get deeper information from

the participants. Although I sent out the transcripts, I could have sent my coded interpretations to the participants so that I could triangulate my findings.

### **Conclusion**

Despite being a small study with several limitations, ESL teachers expressed their challenges and needs that adds to the literature that ESL teachers need more time to interact with their colleagues and need support of an aid who will help over for the behaviors or to keep them on track. Additionally, they needed training on special education, as many of the stated they were aware of their inability to serve them appropriately and these students needed someone trained on special education to help them. The lack of collaboration among the ESL teachers and other professionals were also prevented ESL teachers' improving their strategies. None of the teachers had the opportunity to hold a common planning time or a meeting to discuss the relevant teaching strategies. At this point, this study can shed light on the ESL teachers' challenges and needs, so that not only administrators but also teacher educators and PD designers can take into account while they are trying to provide ESL teachers with the maximum support they can. There are bunch of efforts, but more should be done in pursuant to provide equitable human rights to these students.

## References

- Artiles, A. J., & Ortiz, A. A. (2002). *English language learners with special education needs: Identification, assessment, and instruction*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Artiles, A. J., Rueda, R., Salazar, J. J., & Higareda, I. (2005). Within-group diversity in minority disproportionate representation: English language learners in urban school districts. *Exceptional Children, 71*, 3, 283.
- Bos, C. S., & Reyes, E. I. (1996). Conversations with a Latina teacher about education for language-minority students with special needs. *The Elementary School Journal, 343-351*.
- Brown, J. E., & Doolittle, J. (2008). *A cultural, linguistic, and ecological framework for response to intervention with English language learners*. Retrieved on June 21, 2015 from [http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/edu\\_fac/79/](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/edu_fac/79/)
- Cloud, N. (1988). ESL in special education. *ERIC Digest*. Retrieved on June 21, 2015 from <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9210/special.htm>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano-Clark, V. L (2007). Analyzing data in mixed methods research. In J. W. Creswell, & V. L. Plano-Clark. *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (pp.128-135). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Delgado, R. (2008). The instructional dynamics of a bilingual teacher one teacher's beliefs about English language learners. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 7*(1), 43-53.
- DeMatthews, D. E., Edwards, D. B., & Nelson, T. E. (2014). Identification problems: US special education eligibility for English language learners. *International Journal of Educational Research, 68*, 27-34.

- De Valenzuela, J. S., Copeland, S. R., Qi, C. H., & Park, M. (2006). Examining educational equity: Revisiting the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. *Exceptional Children, 72*(4), 425-441.
- Dusett, H. A. (2012). Language or disability?: Representation, identification, and assessment of ELLs for special education in Western New York State. *Department of Language, Learning, and Leadership*. (Doctoral dissertation, State University of New York at Fredonia).
- Fernandez, N., & Inserra, A. (2013). Disproportionate classification of ESL students in US special education. *The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language 17*(2), 1-22.
- Ferlis, E. C. (2012). *ESL teachers' perceptions of the process for identifying adolescent Latino English language learners with specific learning disabilities* (Doctoral dissertation, Virginia Commonwealth University).
- Freeman, R. (2007). Reviewing the research on language education programs. In O. García and C. Baker (Eds.), *Bilingual Education an Introductory Reader* (pp. 3-18). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Guest, G., Namey, E. E., & Mitchell, M. L. (2013). *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.
- Haager, D., & Windmueller, M. P. (2001). Early reading intervention for English language learners at-risk for learning disabilities: Student and teacher outcomes in an urban school. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 24*(4), 235-250.
- Hays, D. G. & Singh, A.A. (2012). The basics of qualitative data management and analysis. In Hays, D. G. & Singh, A.A. *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings* (pp. 292-336). New York: Guilford.

- Kangas, S. E. (2014). When special education trumps ESL: An investigation of service delivery for ELLs with disabilities. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 11(4), 273-306.
- Klingner, J. K., & Vaughn, S. (1996). Reciprocal teaching of reading comprehension strategies for students with learning disabilities who use English as a second language. *The Elementary School Journal*, 275-293.
- Linn, D., & Hemmer, L. (2011). English Language Learner Disproportionality in Special Education: Implications for the Scholar-Practitioner. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 1(1), 70-80.
- Liu, Y. J., Ortiz, A. A., Wilkinson, C. Y., Robertson, P., & Kushner, M. I. (2008). From early childhood special education to special education resource rooms identification, assessment, and eligibility determinations for English language learners with reading-related disabilities. *Assessment for Effective Intervention*, 33(3), 177-187.
- Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nguyen, H. T. (2012). General education and special education teachers collaborate to support English language learners with learning disabilities. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 21(1), 127-152.
- Raj, C. (2014). Gap between rights and reality: The intersection of language, disability, and educational opportunity, *Temple Law Review*, 87, 283- 338.
- RTI Action Network (n.d.). *What is RTI?* Retrieved on June 21, 2015 from <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/what/whatisrti>

- Rodriguez, D., & Carrasquillo, A. (1997). Bilingual special education teacher preparation: A conceptual framework. *New York State Association of Bilingual Education Journal*, 12, 98-109.
- Rodriguez, D. (2005). A conceptual framework of bilingual special education teacher programs. In *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism* (pp. 1960-1969).
- Scott, A. N., Hauerwas, L. B., & Brown, R. D. (2014). State policy and guidance for identifying learning disabilities in culturally and linguistically diverse students. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 37(3), 172-185.
- Sáenz, L. M., Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. (2005). Peer-assisted learning strategies for English language learners with learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 71(3), 231-247.
- Salem, L. S. (2016). English language learners and special education: One district's journey through the collaborative problem solving process (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln)..
- Sullivan, A. L. (2011). Disproportionality in special education identification and placement of English language learners. *Exceptional Children*, 77(3), 317-334.
- Orosco, M. J., & Klingner, J. (2010). One school's implementation of RTI with English language learners: "Referring into RTI". *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 43(3), 269-288.
- Orosco, M. J., & O'Connor, R. (2014). Culturally responsive instruction for English language learners with learning disabilities. *Journal of learning disabilities*, 47(6), 515-531.
- Ortiz, A. A., Wilkinson, C. Y., Robertson-Courtney, P., & Kushner, M. I. (2006). Considerations in implementing intervention assistance teams to support English language learners. *Remedial and Special Education*, 27(1), 53-63.

Ortiz, A. A., Robertson, P. M., Wilkinson, C. Y., Liu, Y. J., McGhee, B. D., & Kushner, M. I.

(2011). The role of bilingual education teachers in preventing inappropriate referrals of ELLs to special education: Implications for response to intervention. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 34(3), 316-333.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2006). Language policy and linguistic human rights. In T. Ricento (Ed.), *An introduction to language policy, theory, and method* (pp. 273-291). Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.

Zehler, A. M., Fleischman, H. L., Hopstock, P. J., Pendzick, M. L., & Stephenson, T. G. (2003). *Descriptive study of services to LEP students and LEP students with disabilities. Special topic report #4: Findings on special education LEP students*. Submitted to U.S. Department of Education, OELA. Arlington VA: Development Associates.

**Appendix A- Interview Protocol**

Hello (the name of the participant):

First of all, I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you. As you know, this interview is conducted for a study aiming to determine the needs of English as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers who have students in need of special education. The interview will last approximately for half an hour. I would like to learn about your experience with these students, the challenges you have faced, and your needs in serving these students. So, shall we start?

1. Tell me about a student who is an ELL and in need of special education you have in your class?

Probes: a. What is it like to teach a student with special needs?

b. Tell me a session you had with this student.

2. What are the challenges of teaching an ESL student with special needs?
3. What is the level of the support you get from the administrator/ general education teachers/ special education teachers?
4. What are your needs?

Probes: a. What would be the most helpful support for you to serve these students better?

b. The program you graduated from? Professional development you could attend?