Received: 22 January 2025 | Revised: 4 March 2025 | Accepted: 14 May 2025 | Published online: 29 May 2025

RESEARCH ARTICLE

International Journal of Changes in Education
2025, Vol. 00(00) 1–12
DOI: 10.47852/bonviewIJCE52025282

BON VIEW PUBLISHING

Undercover Advocates: Secondary Teachers Empowering English Learners in Mainstream Classrooms

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Abstract: This study examines the experiences of nine secondary content teachers who report high self-efficacy in working with English learners (ELs) in mainstream classrooms. As the number of ELs in US schools grows, many content area teachers feel unprepared to support these students effectively. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of culturally responsive pedagogy and teacher self-efficacy, this phenomenological study focuses on mathematics, science, and social studies teachers in Florida public schools. The research employs in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' perceptions and lived experiences. Significant themes that emerged from the analysis include (a) undercover advocacy, (b) ethic of care, and (c) leveraging student achievement data. A common thread woven through all narratives was the integration of students' native languages through translation and translanguaging practices while leading with empathy. Participants created more equitable learning environments for ELs in mainstream classrooms through multifaceted, often covert, advocacy efforts. Implications for teacher preparation programs and school districts are discussed, including professional development initiatives to cultivate teachers' asset-based ideologies toward ELs and improve their pedagogical practices. Recommendations for state and national policymakers include modifications to ESOL certification requirements. This research informs efforts to foster mainstream teacher preparedness and efficacy in working with linguistically diverse student populations.

Keywords: advocacy, English learners, mainstream classrooms, secondary teachers, self-efficacy

1. Introduction

The increasing number of English learners (ELs) in US schools presents unique challenges and opportunities for educators, particularly in secondary content classrooms with high language and academic demands. As of 2021, approximately 5 million ELs were enrolled in US public schools, representing 10.6% of the total student population [1]. Despite this significant presence, many content area teachers report feeling underprepared to instruct and support ELs effectively [2, 3].

Recent research has highlighted the critical role that mainstream teachers play in ELs' academic success [3–5]. However, less attention has been paid to how these teachers navigate institutional constraints and leverage their resources to advocate for ELs. There is a gap in research at the secondary level, where classrooms have a range of learners in a "mainstream" setting, with native English speakers and ELs who are long-term ELs (six or more years in an ESOL program and still not meeting state proficiency requirements to exit) alongside newcomers (recent arrivals to the country who may have limited or interrupted formal education). This study aimed to fill this gap by examining the experiences and strategies of secondary content teachers who demonstrate high self-efficacy in working with ELs. This article presents the findings of a study exploring how secondary content teachers in mathematics, science, and social studies describe their self-efficacy in working with ELs and their advocacy efforts on behalf of these students. Specifically, this research addresses the following questions:

1) How do secondary content teachers describe their self-efficacy in working with ELs?
2) What practices do secondary content teachers employ to advocate for their ELs?

By exploring these questions, this study enhances our understanding of effective strategies for supporting ELs in content area classrooms and informs teacher preparation and professional development efforts.

2. Literature Review

EL enrollment in US schools is surging. Researchers have recommended sheltered instruction to promote language and academic content learning [4, 6], contributing to the placement of most ELs in general education classrooms taught by teachers who do not have ESOL certification [7]. While several highly populated states have mandated that teachers acquire an ESOL endorsement, most teachers report feeling unprepared to teach ELs in their classes [2, 8, 9]. Additionally, endorsement requirements vary by state, district, grade level, and content area [10].

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The participants in this study were secondary mathematics, science, and social studies teachers, many of whom do not come directly from teacher preparation programs and pursue alternative routes to certification. Due to a teacher shortage in core subject areas [11], educators may enter the profession without the necessary knowledge and skills to work with multilingual learners. The context of state-level policies for ELs and teacher effectiveness is unique in Florida because Florida has mandated EL teacher education since the Florida Consent Decree was adopted in 1990 [12]. The Florida Consent Decree (or the META Agreement) mandate resulted from a class action lawsuit against the state of Florida for failure to make instructional accommodations for ELs in public schools. The list of remedies negotiated and signed by the Florida Department of Education included requirements to prepare all instructional and support personnel to work effectively with ELs to improve classroom practices in ways that result in more significant achievement for ELs.

Elementary and secondary teachers of English Language Arts and Reading must earn 300 hours (15 credits) for ESOL endorsement to their teaching certificate. Secondary content area teachers, in contrast, are only required to earn 60 hours (3 credits), which are usually offered on an asynchronous online platform through local school districts or state-approved providers.

2.1. Teacher background and contextual factors

While previous research has examined the impact of teacher background, including certification, advanced degrees, teaching experience with diverse students, and foreign language learning on student outcomes [13], these factors alone may not fully explain teacher effectiveness. Key findings suggest ELs benefit from experienced teachers [14] and those proficient in students' first languages [5, 13, 15]. When educators share knowledge of a second language other than English with their students, even richer pedagogical strategies are possible, such as employing translanguaging [10, 16, 17]. Teacher beliefs also play a significant role in pedagogical decisions and student interactions [8, 18–20].

Research on general education teachers indicates potential challenges in teaching ELs. These teachers may hold lower expectations, misunderstand second language acquisition and the time students need to acquire cognitive academic language, and believe ELs should not be integrated into mainstream classes [8, 21, 22]. Okhremtchouk and Sellu [2] concluded that while teachers may have positive attitudes toward ELs in their classes, they lack the confidence, knowledge, and critical skills to teach ELs effectively. Additionally, there is often a disconnect between teachers' perceived levels of preparation and knowledge and how frequently they put that knowledge into practice [10, 15].

Scholars in the field agree that effective teachers of ELs have specialized knowledge about language, the content, how language works, and appropriate pedagogies to teach content [15, 23, 24]. For example, teaching mathematics to ELs requires a list of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and equations with numbers and words with precise meanings and a register with styles of meaning, modes of argument, and mathematical practices [25]. Teachers often do not receive preparation for this type of discipline-specific, linguistically responsive teaching (LRT) and focus instead on generic strategies [15, 26, 27]. Given the predominance of monolingual teachers working with students with vastly different backgrounds than their own [21, 28], professional development efforts must focus on training to foster teachers' asset-based ideologies toward ELs and enhance their pedagogical practice.

2.2. Frameworks for effective teaching of English learners

Although researchers are still defining and refining theoretical frameworks for effective content instruction for ELs, most emphasize knowledge of foundational linguistics, sociocultural context, and pedagogical content [4, 15, 23, 29]. These frameworks are primarily used in teacher preparation programs and focus on specific practices that presume students will learn in mainstream classes where English is the dominant language. In these settings, educators must actively leverage their students' linguistic and cultural diversity as an asset [15, 30, 31].

One widely adopted framework in traditional inclusion programs for ELs is the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) [4]. Finalized in 2000 with teacher input, SIOP provides a comprehensive tool for observing and evaluating lessons across 8 components. It uses a 5-point scale to rate 30 features of effective EL instruction, offering explicit feedback to help teachers improve their practice. SIOP is used in pre–K–12 settings and internationally, where content and language are taught simultaneously. While the model's creators have conducted empirical validation studies [32], large-scale independent research is still needed.

Another framework developed to identify critical features of instruction for ELs is LRT. As designed by Lucas and Villegas [23], LRT encompasses orientations, pedagogical knowledge and skills, and elements of practice associated with effective EL instruction. LRT is primarily used in pre-service teacher preparation programs and has not been widely adopted for in-service professional development. One unique element that does not appear in other frameworks studied is the "inclination to advocate for ELs." According to Lucas and Villegas [23], a linguistically responsive teacher understands the need to take action to improve ELs' access to social and political capital and educational opportunities. They hope to prepare teachers to believe they should speak up when they see students' languages devalued in school or observe inequitable access to learning opportunities. More recent studies on EL teacher advocacy have classified advocacy as either instructional or political, with considerations of reach beyond the classroom, school, or district [33, 34]. However, these studies focus on ESOL teacher participants, not secondary mainstream teachers.

While the LRT emphasizes a sociocultural understanding of student backgrounds and needs, the Developing English Language and Literacy through Teacher Achievement (DELTA) framework [15] successfully integrates this principle with more specific elements of pedagogical expertise to guide instructional practice. The DELTA instruments were developed and piloted in the 2007–2008 academic year by researchers at the University of Florida as part of a USDOE five-year grant before being used to observe graduates of their teacher preparation program who still resided in Florida. The theoretical foundation of this model includes three components: teacher knowledge of teaching and learning processes for ELs, including a deep understanding of the English language; teacher knowledge of ELs as learners, recognizing the role of culture and cultural norms, valuing funds of knowledge, and encouraging the use of home language; and teacher preparation, background, and experiences. The observation protocol was converted to a survey to measure critical competencies for teachers, and both instruments align with Florida ESOL educator standards.

2.3. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical constructs: culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and teacher

self-efficacy. CRP provides a framework for understanding how teachers can effectively support diverse learners, including ELs. Ladson-Billings [35] defined CRP as a teaching approach that uses the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. Gay [36] further developed this concept, emphasizing the importance of using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them.

In the context of teaching ELs, CRP involves recognizing and valuing students' linguistic and cultural resources, creating a supportive classroom environment, and employing instructional strategies that build on students' strengths [23, 37]. This approach is particularly relevant for content area teachers working with ELs, as it emphasizes the integration of language and content instruction [6, 24]. For CRP to be genuinely effective, it must be infused into curriculum, instruction, policies, and procedures.

Teacher self-efficacy, rooted in Bandura's [38] social cognitive theory, refers to a teacher's belief in their ability to successfully organize and execute courses of action required to accomplish specific teaching tasks in a particular context. Attention to teacher self-efficacy is vital because secondary teachers who have had opportunities to learn about strategies for teaching ELs may still lack self-efficacy in implementing them in their classrooms [8]. For teachers working with ELs, self-efficacy can significantly influence their willingness to adapt instruction, persist in facing challenges, and advocate for their students [39–42]. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy [42] identified three dimensions of teacher self-efficacy: efficacy for instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement. These dimensions manifest as confidence in using LRT strategies, managing diverse linguistic needs in the classroom, and engaging ELs in content area learning [29]. The intersection of CRP and teacher self-efficacy provides a robust framework for examining how secondary content teachers perceive their roles and enact strategies to support ELs.

3. Research Methodology

Qualitative research fundamentally emphasizes the importance of participants' perspectives on an issue, ensuring the representation of diverse viewpoints [43]. This phenomenological study aimed to investigate the perceptions of secondary content area teachers regarding high self-efficacy and effective practices for ELs in mainstream classrooms. The study focused on mainstream secondary mathematics, science, and social studies teachers in Florida's public schools. Participants shared their lived experiences through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed to elicit information about self-efficacy and effective teaching practices across the five teacher professional development standards for ESOL endorsement. By concentrating on secondary teachers, the study captured the experiences of educators who often prioritize their subject area expertise and consider English language instruction the domain of ESOL specialists.

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of secondary content teachers working with ELs. Hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as the methodological approach because it focuses on how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds [44]. It allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions, making it particularly suitable for examining teachers' self-efficacy and advocacy practices. Hermeneutical phenomenology goes beyond the description of the experience to include the researcher's interpretation of the meaning of the lived experience, including how the participants in the study view their experiences differently [45].

3.2. Participants

The researcher's Institutional Review Board approved the study (#2023–103). The target population consisted of secondary (middle and high school) content area teachers (mathematics, science, and social studies) in public school districts in Southwest Florida. Employment data retrieved by request from the Florida Department of Education provided teacher names and email addresses by district and school. Participants were recruited and selected using purposive criterion sampling. All participants taught in mainstream secondary classrooms with ELs and reported high self-efficacy in working with these students. Mainstream teachers with ESOL co-teachers were excluded due to ESOL teachers' specialized expertise. Teachers of English language arts and reading were also excluded because they had more extensive training (five three-credit courses, or 300 hours), whereas mathematics, science, and social studies teachers in Florida require only one three-credit course (60 hours) to earn their ESOL endorsement.

An invitation to participate was emailed to 3,174 eligible teachers across three types of districts classified by EL population: high (21,500 ELs), medium (11,500 ELs), and low (7,000 ELs). Recruitment followed a three-step procedure: an initial email explaining the study purpose, importance of participation, and confidentiality assurances with a signup link; a follow-up email two weeks later; and a final reminder one week after that. Methods to encourage participation included making the appeal nonthreatening, emphasizing the research's significance, and reiterating the confidential nature of participation.

Teachers who self-identified as highly effective at teaching content and language to ELs completed a brief demographic survey and provided their contact information for an interview. This survey collected information about their ESOL endorsement, credentialing, the highest degree attained, the Title I status of their school, the number of EL students for whom they assigned grades, and their perceived level of principal support. These factors were included based on empirical literature demonstrating their contribution to teacher efficacy levels when working with ELs [13].

The final sample consisted of nine secondary content teachers representing mathematics, science, and social studies. To obtain diverse viewpoints, participants were selected with a range of demographic characteristics, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, current position, years of experience, and employment across different-sized districts. This sample size aligns with recommendations for phenomenological studies, which suggest 3–15 participants [43]. After conducting interviews with these nine participants, a saturation point was reached where no new information would add to established themes. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities and the names of their districts and schools. Detailed participant demographics are displayed in Appendix A.

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Each participant engaged in a one-on-one interview lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and practices related to working with

ELs. The protocol questions aligned with the five ESOL standards for teachers in Florida and the competencies assessed in the validated DELTA instrument (Appendix B). Protocol questions helped guide the participants in describing their efficacy regarding social and cultural dimensions, content area teaching methods, language and literacy development, curriculum and classroom organization, and assessment. Key areas of inquiry included their educational backgrounds and experiences with language learning, perceptions of self-efficacy in working with ELs, instructional strategies used to support ELs in content area learning, and challenges faced.

The interview protocol was piloted with experts in the field to receive constructive feedback for revisions before conducting the first interview. In-depth interviews were selected as the primary data collection method due to the researcher's insider status. As a former secondary teacher and instructional coach for mainstream content area teachers of ELs, the researcher is familiar with the beliefs, values, rules, and customs that define the secondary school research setting and also possesses unique insights to interpret, critique, and draw inferences or conclusions about information learned in a way that an external researcher might not be able to accomplish [46]. Having a common frame of reference helped build productive relationships and facilitate data collection.

All interviews were conducted through the Zoom video conference platform from October to early November 2023. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis followed the approach outlined by Creswell and Poth [43], involving several iterative steps. The process began with carefully reading and re-reading each transcript to become thoroughly familiar with the content and to grasp an overall sense of the data. Following this, initial notes captured descriptive details, linguistic nuances, and conceptual insights. As the analysis progressed, significant statements were highlighted to indicate recurring patterns and connections, and initial codes were generated. These codes were assigned to segments, and then the documents were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software program ATLAS.ti to assist with storing, indexing, sorting, and coding data. The preliminary codebook was applied to the entire dataset on the platform. The first set of 41 codes was later grouped into broader units to represent underlying concepts. Emergent themes were developed and reviewed for internal consistency and coherence. The next step involved searching for patterns and relationships across these emergent themes, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the data. Throughout this process, each theme's alignment with the study's research questions and theoretical framework was carefully considered. Finally, the initial themes were refined and consolidated into the final three overarching themes that contributed to an overall understanding of the data.

Peer debriefing enhanced trustworthiness. Credibility was established by supporting assertions and findings with specific evidence, such as in vivo quotes, and prolonged engagement with the data. Data were triangulated from the transcripts, interview notes, and a reflexive journal.

4. Findings

Upon complete analysis of the transcripts and researcher's notes, the following three primary themes emerged from the data: (a) undercover advocacy, (b) ethic of care, and (c) leveraging student achievement. These themes were determined based on patterns of references and codes from data analysis of interview transcripts and their connection to the study's theoretical framework and research questions. To enhance readability and clarity, transcript excerpts included in this section were edited by replacing word repetitions with ellipses. . . and inserting square brackets [] for words added for clarification. Grammar errors were not corrected.

4.1. Theme 1: Undercover advocacy

Analysis of the interview data revealed how secondary content teachers engage in "undercover advocacy" to support ELs in mainstream classrooms. This advocacy involves subtle but intentional efforts to work around institutional barriers and meet the needs of EL students. Three sub-themes emerged: (1) linguistic advocacy, (2) resource advocacy, and (3) instructional advocacy. These themes are grounded in the teachers' ethic of care and their leveraging of student achievement to validate their approaches.

4.1.1. Linguistic advocacy

Participants consistently advocated for their EL students' linguistic needs, often going against official policies or expectations restricting students' native languages as a resource for learning. For example, Christine ignored district directives not to use students' native languages. She explained:

> *I want to give them a foundation when we get into ancient history, and if I don't give it to them in their native language, they might struggle. But what I've also found is that they have a really, I've had kids with really strong backgrounds already in geography and oral history... So I give them—although I'm not supposed to—I give it to them in their native language.*

Cindy described how and why she uses the native language as a bridge to new content learning:

> *If a student can explain it to me or write it, even if it's in their native language, I know they're understanding. So all I all they need to do is learn the English, because the concept is there, and so that's where I try to build in vocabulary. Have them try to write about it. It's a struggle for the older kids. But that's what I try to do. I know they understand me and can explain it to me. They can't explain it to the state yet. Notice I said "yet" because they will get there eventually.*

Eva referred to her linguistic discourse with students as using Spanglish: "I can go and ask . . . them the questions in Spanish, and they'll be able to explain it to me, whether it's in Spanish, or English, or a mix of Spanglish at this point." Maria described her translanguaging practices:

> *I think more than English or Spanish, we're speaking Spanglish there. That is, I think what we have like I will be saying something in English and they will say, "What you say?" So I have to go back. Or they will answer in one word in English, and then they resume in Spanish and I will do the same thing.*

Laura and Dan relied on translating to promote comprehensible input for their students. Laura described her on-the-spot translating in class:

> *If I end up seeing something that is a bit confusing for someone, I will literally open up another tab on my computer and go English to Spanish, and then you know, comes up, I will copy a section, paste it in, and then the Spanish version comes up, and the kids read it, and they go, "okay." So that's going to be normally just for like my little instruction things, if I don't know enough to, you know, explain what I don't know. And then otherwise, I can take, like rubrics for one pagers that I have. And honestly, just do Google Translate, and it makes me a whole document in Spanish. So more often than not, I try to make sure I at least have whatever the rubric is for something that we're working on in the native language. And that tends to be pretty easy and pretty quick also. So it's not the end of the world, I end up doing quite a few things on the fly, there just isn't enough time to prep for it otherwise.*

4.1.2. Resource advocacy

Teachers often went to great lengths to secure and provide resources for their EL students, sometimes bending the rules or using personal time and money to do so. Eva took the initiative to create bilingual textbooks by assembling notebooks from English and Spanish language versions of her science textbook:

> *I was a little naughty at the end of last school year, and I asked, or I just snuck Spanish science books into my book order, even though I didn't get permission for that. But they got ordered. And so I tore out the pages and hole-punched them. So, it's like English Spanish, English Spanish.*

Maria described staying late to access a copy machine so her students could work on their math problems with pencils and paper, not just on a computer. She also purchased additional resources, such as licenses for a computer-based math program.

Another math teacher, Caleb, noted that his school had recently switched from block scheduling to 46-minute periods, making it challenging to offer personalized support to his struggling ELs. To make up for this lost instructional time, he offered personalized tutoring after school on Zoom. He was not compensated for this work, nor did he seek acknowledgment from his administrators.

Christine described many challenges she has faced in advocating for her students, including the mandate that she not use their native language in instruction. She noted the overcrowded classes and "warehousing" of EL students, with her class size reaching 45 students. She asked administrators to purchase books for the school library in the students' native languages, and the response was that they could read picture books. One of her remarks demonstrates a personal social justice stance in the face of institutional challenges:

> *And whenever I'm in front of my kids, I do my best. So, I close my door and teach. And when I had interns, I said, "Close your door, teach, don't listen to any of that, you know, chatter, just close your door and teach." So that's what I do.*

4.1.3. Instructional advocacy

Participants advocated for their EL students by adapting instruction and assessment practices, often diverging from prescribed curricula or district expectations. Laura explained how she modifies her in-class assessments to help compensate for her newcomers having to take all their district and state assessments in English:

> *I think it's good to assess them via many different methods and I have that one unfortunate situation that I can't get around, you know, I have to still be able to do that. So, hopefully, those other things help bring up their grades a little bit.*

Reese described how he takes the district curriculum and adapts it to meet his students' needs:

> *You know what, my kids are not going to get that. I just need, I need to put in more visuals. So, for example, we were doing industrialization. And it was kind of toward the end of the quarter. And I'm like, You know what, let me fix this.*

Dan reviews their assessment results, reteaches the areas where they have struggled, and then creates another quiz with that content. He noted, "I think it's about the fairest factor I can come up with for them." Eva checks her students' comprehension after each lesson, but she will speak privately with her ELs to determine if they need more resources and time before taking an assessment: "I'll go to Alondra, and I'll go to Carolina and say, 'Okay, how do we feel? Are we understanding it? Do you need more resources?'"

Teachers frequently mentioned small groups as an instructional scaffold for their learners. Cindy uses small group centers with rotations. "I have found that when I chunk it in little pieces, in workshops or in centers, they seem to be grasping it a little bit better." Laura noted that the students practice their speaking skills through small group work: "When they're working in groups, they have to communicate with each other... whether that's lab stations or other activities that I do." She combines small group work with peers, fewer questions, and extended time to support her students.

> *Okay, so just basically, extended time always ended up being something because it tends to take longer for them to do projects, translating back and forth. Also, sometimes, if necessary, I can modify the volume of assessment questions, I don't necessarily have to give them 50 questions, I can, you know, figure out what they know, in 30. So, I can kind of take that down a little bit. Extended time, oh, small groups. So, if we're working, some type of assessment, and the whole group is working, you know, I can kind of pull them aside almost like small groups, to be able to kind of just have conversations and see where they are.*

The teachers' strategic navigation of system constraints while maintaining high academic expectations aligns with CRP's emphasis on academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness [35, 36]. Their actions illustrate how educators can serve as agents of change within their classrooms, creating spaces where students' linguistic and cultural resources are valued as integral to the learning process.

4.2. Theme 2: Ethic of care

Teachers' empathy and understanding of EL challenges drove their advocacy efforts. An ethic of care was a predominant theme woven throughout the interviewees' narratives. An ethic of care entails fostering a supportive learning environment, showing empathy toward students, and considering their overall well-being. Centering members from marginalized groups is critical to this commitment [47]. When responding to questions about their educational

backgrounds and pedagogical practice, all nine teachers exhibited high degrees of empathy for their students. They acknowledged the challenges students have linguistically, academically, and in their personal lives, and such empathy influenced their outlook and daily interactions with their students. Christine, a high school social studies teacher, noted:

> *This is the first year that I've had kids tell me how many of their parents have been deported. And it just is heart-breaking to me. And their dad was arrested and their dad got deported. It's always their dad's gotten deported... really, this is the first year I've had that many. Just kids that are just there. It's like, it's like a death in the family. But in my experience, my English learners, they make me laugh every day. They are. They're not perfect. They're kids, but they have gratitude. They're silly, they care about each other. I love English learners, you know, I think they're amazing. I'm in total awe of them because I couldn't do it. I would be terrified to go to another country and not know the language. And I tell them every day how much courage they have, and I tell them every day, "I'm so proud of you."*

The participants frequently switched to Spanish when relating their interactions with their students. They emphasized how important it was to use the students' native languages to build trust and rapport and also enable students to understand their content. Caleb, a high school math teacher, reported:

> *So, if you're able to connect with us, we need to know that and that's when he knows that man, this teacher is trying to at least speak to me in some way. And instead of saying positive, he said positive, or instead of minus, he said menos. You know what I mean? It's that he said "tienes algunas preguntas?" that's like do you guys have any questions you know what I mean, he's trying, and I think that a lot of my students that me trying to do things like that has helped them to understand that I will try anything in my power to give you the best opportunity.*

Helen teaches middle school science in one of her district's most highly EL-populated schools. She also noted how she uses her limited Spanish to communicate with her students and shows she does not espouse an English-only approach like some of her peers:

> *There's basic commands I've memorized, basic greetings, things like that. For me, it's just I would have to like actually sit there, you know, a little Duolingo here and there, but it's mostly for me just a lot of gesturing, broken sentences and they know my español es malo, they know but the kids know that I try. You know, I'm a teacher that tries and I don't say, "Why aren't you speaking English" because it's not like that. It's nice because the kids they'll correct you, they try to help you because they know that you're trying.*

Cindy, a former EL, explained why she uses Spanish with her high school math students:

> *I always went with my gut instinct and I always spoke to the kids in their mother tongue just because that's how my parents spoke to me. So, I thought that would be setting the scene for comfort. Because when people speak to me in Spanish it is very comforting to me. So, I thought I could do that for the students.*

Eva, another teacher who was an EL herself, similarly uses Spanish even though most of her students are native English speakers. "Yes, we do want them to learn English, but I also don't want them to get behind in just like their subjects. Right? Because they deserve to get the same education as kids who do speak English."

Reese used the word "empathy" as he answered the question about what experiences he believed best prepared him to be an effective teacher of ELs:

> *In 2010, I actually moved to South Korea and taught at an international school in South Korea for four years... I know exactly what they're feeling when you are sitting in a place where the language is not your own. Some of the foods, some of the radio, some of the, you know, just the day-to-day life is not your own. And numerous times in South Korea, I'd be kind of looking around, and there would be this, okay, where am I going because some of the letters would blend together. And there'd be some little local person that would, in their very broken English, offer to help and try to get me to where I need to be. And so, I think that really gave me a sense of empathy for our kids.*

4.2.1. Personal experience with languages other than English (LOTE)

One sub-theme also emerged for this dimension: personal experience with languages other than English (LOTE). This was one of the most cited experiences, preparing the participants to be effective teachers of ELs. This factor contributed to their caring and affirming approaches. Three teachers are native Spanish speakers, two teachers learned Spanish in school, and one is fluent in four languages from studying, traveling, and working abroad. The other three teachers had studied another language in college and did not feel proficient but were getting by with what they called "broken Spanish" and help from translating tools.

Three of the teachers were ELs themselves. This status influenced many areas of their practices and perceived sources of self-efficacy, from demonstrating empathy for students to engaging in translanguaging. Maria related a poignant experience she had recently that reminded her of how she felt as a newcomer to this country:

> *I think my own experience, I understand how frustrating it is to be in a place where you wonder what is going on? And you don't know. I just recently went to a Brazilian restaurant. Right. And I guess I forgot how, how I felt 20 years ago when I just came here and didn't understood any words. Because everybody there were talking, hard to guess. And I was trying to catch what is going on here. And it kind of refreshed my memory to help my students that way. Because I had to realize, you know, it the struggle that you felt the frustration that you feel at the beginning. So, I guess that's what I can correlate and relate to my students' experience because I understand that, that is what I think it makes me feel connected to them. Because it is frustrating, and I see in their, their faces.*

Eva, a third-year teacher, believed that having Spanish as her first language and being the daughter of Mexican immigrants helped her specifically with the EL students who speak Spanish. She acknowl-

edged that she did not receive the help she needed when she was a student, and she wants her students to have a better experience:

> *So I am able to connect with them on a different level really, more specifically, like I understand how sometimes the homework I give might be a little complicated, and their parents aren't always there to help. But when I can touch base with them before they leave my class, at least, and I can say, hey, here are additional resources. Because I know when I was in your shoes, I needed a little bit more help and there was nobody there to help me. Not because my parents didn't want to help me it's because they couldn't help me. And at least back in the day, I didn't have Google, right? I just kind of had to figure it out.*

The evidence from these participant narratives demonstrates that empathy and personal understanding of EL experiences are powerful drivers for culturally responsive practices.

4.3. Theme 3: Leveraging student achievement data

Teachers used their students' academic success to justify their advocacy efforts. Laura noted:

> *We are very lucky; we have always been within the top three or four in the district for our biology scores. So... I'm very transparent with [the district science coordinator]. I tell her, you know, you put some cool things in here, I'm totally not going to use them on Monday, you know, right now. And she's like, you do you, whatever you're doing was working...*

Every teacher, at least once in their interview, referenced the state assessments administered at the end of the year. Their course curricula, district assessments, and pacing guides are designed with these assessments in mind. Aside from acknowledging the difficulty of ELs to take tests that are all in English and the need for students to practice writing responses in English, seven out of the nine teachers were proud to provide data about how well their students perform. They had passing rates, growth rates, school grades, and individual student stories to share.

Reese and Laura mentioned that they communicated with the district content coordinators that they would not use their suggested materials and had this leeway because of their student passing rates.

Eva also reported having flexibility in modifying or adapting her curriculum because her students were performing well on their district benchmarks. Her principal supported her efforts: "Now, I'm not going to toot my own horn, but our science scores are where the state wants us to be. And so she's like, keep doing what you're doing. So we're there at the 44% and above science."

Reese works in one of the lowest-performing schools in the district, yet his US history team has one of the highest passing rates. He understands how much they can do in their native languages:

> *My kids are really smart. It's just a language block. And then once that language block starts to fade or eventually gets removed, then their true intelligence is going to shine even more so because they're able to do it in Spanish. And they're able to do it in English, or they're hearing it in Creole and then in English, or whatever the language is, you know, ... in May when they take the end-of-course exam, I've had kids pass the EOC for seven straight years. And this last year, we last year's class, we had a record, we had eight kids pass the US History EOC in English with the paperback dictionary, and one of the kids actually came to our country in January, and was able to do it.*

Caleb explained how he uses data to assess his students' and his performance. "I have seen where I've had quite an effect on some of our English learners, where I would say percentage-wise... once having me, were able to secure a pass of about 37% of all my English learners." He also moved students up levels, another growth indicator for state assessments. "For English learners who were not proficient before, that is a good way to get them from a level two to a level four, from a level one to a level three." The success of their EL students further reinforces a positive outlook and feelings of self-efficacy.

5. Discussion

Self-efficacy, based on self-perception of competence, significantly influences teachers' approaches to instruction [29, 42]. This study found that teachers could effectively communicate with their ELs using various strategies, regardless of their proficiency in students' native languages. The study's findings identified numerous instances of mastery experiences, recognized by Bandura [48] and Pajares [49] as the most effective method for developing self-efficacy. More experienced teachers reported acquiring numerous approaches through extensive fieldwork, which aligns with research suggesting that ELs benefit from experienced teachers [14, 40]. Younger, ethnically diverse teachers with proficiency in LOTE also demonstrated efficacy in teaching ELs.

Despite challenges such as a lack of resources and support, participants reported confidence in their abilities to teach ELs. Their students' achievements further reinforced a positive outlook and feelings of self-efficacy [48]. Even when administrators told them that newcomers' assessment scores "don't count" in their school grade calculations, they persevered and pushed students to higher levels of achievement. These teachers displayed high physiological affective self-efficacy, experiencing positive emotions and low anxiety and stress levels when teaching. They reported they enjoy teaching and find it to be a rewarding experience.

Positive feedback and comments about their performance from colleagues, supervisors, or students were the primary sources of social persuasion experiences. Research has suggested that social persuasion reinforces self-efficacy when teachers confront existing challenges [42]. However, participants had limited access to vicarious experiences like observing other teachers or attending workshops, which are fundamental professional learning activities enhancing teachers' work with ELs [28, 50].

Findings indicated additional contributing factors to teachers' definitions of self-efficacy, most notably proficiency in a language other than English (LOTE). This is consistent with prior research findings indicating that teachers with language proficiency in their students' first language predict positive differential effectiveness with ELs [13, 15]. When educators share knowledge of a second language other than English with their students, even richer pedagogical strategies are possible, such as employing translanguaging [17, 51]. Additionally, teacher beliefs are prominent in pedagogical decisions, instructional practices, and student interactions [18, 20, 22, 40]. The findings reinforce the importance of LOTE and contradict the numerous studies showing a monolingual bias or fixed monolingual orientation restricting mainstream teachers [21, 52]. Even those participants lacking LOTE held culturally and linguistically affirming views of their students.

Experts advocate for utilizing students' native languages and cultural backgrounds as educational resources [4, 15] and explicitly connecting concepts to students' experiences [32, 53]. In this study, teachers extensively used translating and translanguaging strategies to support higher-order thinking and clarify content concepts. This cross-linguistic approach reflects a growing recognition of students' home languages as resources rather than obstacles [16, 51, 54]. However, the "undercover" nature of these practices suggests a disconnect between research-based best practices and institutional policies, placing teachers in challenging ethical positions.

Participants recognized that ELs need modifications to instruction and testing accommodations [55] beyond the state-approved word-to-word dictionaries and extended time. Coady et al. [15] and Reeves [9] concluded that teachers in their studies implemented instructional accommodations that take little effort, such as extra time, dictionaries, and translation. Findings revealed that the participants in this study were more prepared with accommodations used throughout their lessons. They understood their EL students needed extra time to gain access to the content curriculum while developing language skills and did not simplify their instruction [55]. They used group work, scaffolding, and translated assessments to enable their ELs to demonstrate knowledge according to their levels of language proficiency.

Teachers' efforts to secure and create bilingual materials reflect culturally responsive teaching [36]. These actions demonstrate a commitment to equity beyond prescribed job duties, reflecting Ladson-Billings' [35] concept of teachers as cultural brokers and advocates. The lengths to which teachers go, including staying late, using personal funds, and ignoring language-restrictive district policies, raise questions about the systemic support provided for EL education in mainstream settings.

5.1. Implications for K-12 practice

There is a clear need for better alignment between district and school policies and research-based best practices for EL instruction. Policies that recognize and support using students' native languages and cultural resources could empower teachers to advocate more openly and effectively for their EL students. Advocacy efforts were primarily restricted to individual classrooms or departments without far-reaching changes on a larger scale. Restrictive policies and conditions hindered teacher advocacy efforts [34].

Investing in bilingual paraprofessionals and high-quality native language resources would alleviate the time teachers spend translating their materials inside and outside the classroom. This support would cultivate a more supportive environment for teachers and students, potentially reducing the need for "undercover" advocacy when teacher actions conflict with school or district policies. It should be noted that these teachers' actions are supported by empirical evidence and the Florida Consent Decree. Targeted professional development in EL instruction for all content area teachers could build a shared understanding of effective strategies [28]. School leaders can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all students by providing teachers with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to support their ELs.

5.2. Implications for teacher preparation programs

Teacher preparation programs in higher education must evolve to meet the needs of increasingly diverse US classrooms [10, 22]. The findings underscore the need for EL instruction for all pre-service teachers, not just those specializing in ESOL. This preparation should align with the TESOL standards for pre-K–12 teacher preparation programs, particularly standard 1, which emphasizes knowledge of English language structures, language use, second language acquisition, and language processes to help ELs acquire academic language and literacies specific to various content areas.

Content area teachers need sophisticated knowledge of the language of their discipline, which can be particularly challenging at the secondary level [10]. While language objectives are a defining feature of sheltered instruction models like SIOP [4, 53], they are not present in all pedagogical frameworks for teaching ELs [15, 23]. In this study, none of the participants prepared lessons with language objectives. They showed limited understanding of instructional strategies involving grammar and oral language development—findings that align with prior empirical studies of teacher practices with ELs in mainstream classrooms [7, 28, 29]. Only one participant knew her students' language proficiency levels, yet this information is readily available to teachers through their learning management systems.

Teacher preparation programs should emphasize specific pedagogical competencies, including:

1) explicit instruction on developing discipline-specific academic language beyond vocabulary development [6],
2) strategies for promoting inquiry, proper use of language structures, and opportunities for meaningful academic discourse [4, 25],
3) methods for accessing and interpreting language assessment data to effectively differentiate instruction according to proficiency levels [27], and
4) skills for creating comprehensive learner profiles considering students' backgrounds, native language proficiency levels, family contexts, interests, and goals [7, 15, 54].

The participants' strong ethic of care highlights the importance of developing cultural responsiveness and empathy in pre-service teachers [5]. Teacher preparation programs should nurture these qualities through curriculum and field experiences [18, 40]. The beliefs held by pre-service teachers regarding multilingualism, especially in the classroom, are likely to influence their actions as future educators [18, 49, 54] and advocates [23, 33, 34].

Stronger pre-service preparation would reflect the increasing acknowledgment that language acquisition is not merely a matter of combining structures and components of a language but, instead, a communicative and academic process that emerges from numerous interpersonal interactions. By cultivating these competencies early in their careers, teachers will be better equipped to support the academic success of their ELs.

5.3. Implications for state and national policymakers

The state-defined ESOL requirement for secondary content teachers of mathematics, science, and social studies in Florida does not necessarily equate to success in the classroom. They must take one 3-credit (60-hour) course in teaching methods not specific to their grade level or content area. If they did not take this course in a teacher preparation program through a Florida university, once hired, they are enrolled in this course through their district's chosen online platform. These courses lack the rigor, interaction with peers, and application to practice needed to prompt a change in attitudes or behaviors. Teacher interview participants confirmed that most of their expertise was developed through actual teaching experience to compensate for their needs not being met by completing state certification requirements. As a result, teachers may not see any

relevance in this training after years of successful experience with ELs. Furthermore, content area teachers are not accountable for the progress of their ELs in the state's annual language assessment and are primarily concerned with their discipline-specific assessment results.

Based on these findings, it is arguable that the state-defined preparation standards for secondary content teachers are insufficient to prepare them for classroom success with ELs. State-level officials should consider changing the endorsement requirements and incentivizing the completion of a full ESOL endorsement of 300 hours (15 credits) to provide more comprehensive preparation. If this approach is not feasible due to resource constraints, restructuring endorsement requirements to include mentoring and experiential learning experiences would be a valuable alternative.

Rather than passive engagement in asynchronous modules, professional development should incorporate active learning facilitated by experienced ESOL specialists or university faculty who can lead training sessions, conduct classroom observations, and provide targeted feedback. Collaboration between policymakers and educators could ensure that training focuses on identifying the language demands of curricula [6, 54] and developing carefully sequenced learning activities to develop language skills more strategically [4, 29, 53].

Policymakers should integrate teacher advocacy efforts into policy reforms to drive meaningful change. Given teachers' firsthand experiences with the shortcomings of current training, their advocacy could inform the development of more effective, practice-based professional learning opportunities. Teachers can amplify their voices through professional engagement within and beyond their local districts. State and national nonprofit teacher organizations focused on language education serve as valuable platforms for this transitive form of advocacy [34], offering conventions, advocacy committees, legislative updates, and networking opportunities with educators at all levels.

These organizations empower teachers to document classroom realities with substantial data while connecting with researchers to translate these experiences into policy recommendations. Direct engagement in school boards, public comment periods, and advisory groups provides access to decision-making discussions, especially when policymakers are invited to observe classroom environments firsthand. When these advocacy strategies are systematically implemented through collaborative efforts, educators can influence policy development that addresses the genuine needs of linguistically diverse students.

6. Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of nine content area teachers who self-identified as effective with ELs in secondary mainstream classrooms. These teachers demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness in overcoming institutional constraints while fostering strong relationships with their students based on care and respect. Their adaptability and high expectations underscore important implications for teacher preparation programs and school systems working to address achievement gaps between ELs and their English-proficient peers.

6.1. Limitations of the study

The recruitment survey yielded a low response rate, resulting in an uneven distribution of participants across the three population-density districts (five from medium-population districts and two each from high- and low-population districts). Given Florida's political climate at the time of the study, including "non-binary" as a gender option in the survey appeared to discourage some potential participants. The absence of compensation, noted by several survey respondents, likely limited participation. Although the final sample was balanced across subject areas, participants were confined to those in Southwest Florida who self-identified as having high self-efficacy with ELs in mainstream, non-bilingual classrooms, further narrowing the study population.

6.2. Recommendations for future research

While this study contributes to the limited existing research on effective practices enacted by mainstream classroom teachers of ELs, several recommendations for future research could expand scholarly knowledge on this topic. These recommendations may also validate existing studies, benefiting secondary teacher quality and EL student achievement.

First, the interview protocol for this study aligns with the DELTA framework and the broader survey instrument [15], which was also designed as a classroom observation tool. Future research could extend into classrooms to verify teacher-reported practices by directly observing teacher–student interactions. Examining the instructional methods of teachers who identify as successful with ELs would provide particularly valuable insights.

Second, while this study explored each teacher's classroom context, it did not extensively investigate the institutional circumstances that support or limit culturally responsive practices. An ecological approach could situate content area teachers within their broader sociocultural, political, and economic environments, offering a more comprehensive understanding of contextual influences.

Finally, a limitation of this study was its small sample size and restricted geographic scope. With nine participants recruited from three school districts in Southwest Florida, replicating this study in similar and different geographic locations would strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

This study reveals the critical role that individual teachers play in advocating for ELs within mainstream content classrooms. While this research was conducted in Florida, numerous states are also experiencing exponential increases in EL populations [1]. Cultivating teachers who embrace an asset-based philosophy, are committed to developing and sustaining culturally responsive practices, and advocate for equitable resources and outcomes will help eradicate the structural inequities perpetuating achievement disparities for EL students.

Ethical Statement

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support this work are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Author Contribution Statement

Carla Huck: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration.

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How to Cite: Huck, C. (2025). Undercover Advocates: Secondary Teachers Empowering English Learners in Mainstream Classrooms. *International Journal of Changes in Education*. https://doi.org/10.47852/bonviewIJCE52025282

Appendix A

Participant Background Demographics

Participant	Subject/level	District size	Gender	Age range	Ethnicity	Years of teaching	Native language
Cindy	Math/HS	Small	F	51–60	Hispanic	30 years	Bilingual
Caleb	Math/HS	Medium	M	21–30	Black	4 years	English
Maria	Math/HS	Medium	F	41–50	Hispanic	9 years	Spanish
Helen	Science/MS	Large	F	41–50	White	26 years	English
Eva	Science/MS	Small	F	21–30	Hispanic	3 years	Bilingual
Laura	Science/HS	Medium	F	41–50	White	14 years	English
Christine	Social St./MS	Large	F	51–60	White	38 years	English
Reese	Social St./HS	Medium	M	41–50	White	18 years	English
Dan	Social St./HS	Medium	M	51–60	White	22 years	English

Appendix B

Alignment of Interview Questions with Florida ESOL Standards and DELTA Items

	Interview question	ESOL Standard	DELTA Item
1.	Please tell me about your educational background and experience in your field.		Part I: 1, 2, 3, 9
2.	What experiences do you believe best prepared you to work with English learners?		Part III: 1
3.	Do you use your students' cultural backgrounds and native languages as a resource in teaching? Can you provide an example of a student who has been successful in your class because of this practice?	Social and cultural dimensions; content area teaching methods	Part II: A.3, A.4, A.9, B.12
4.	Could you describe a lesson you taught recently and the strategies you used to make the content comprehensible for your ELs? How did you assess student comprehension?	Content area teaching methods	Part II: B.2, B.3, B.4, B.5, B.6, B.8, B.10, B.11, B.12
5.	How do you integrate opportunities to use listening, speaking, reading, and writing through your content-based lessons?	Content area teaching methods	Part II: B.1, B.7, B.9
6.	In what ways do you explicitly teach aspects of the English language, such as grammar, prefixes/suffixes, or pronunciation, through the delivery of your disciplinary content?	Language and literacy development	Part II: C.2, C.3, C.4, C.11
7.	Please describe any reading or writing strategies you have found effective. How do you determine if they are effective?	Language and literacy development	Part II: C.7, C.8, C.9, C.10
8.	How do you manage your time and resources to include your ELs of all proficiency levels?	Curriculum and classroom organization	Part II: D.1, D.2
9.	Do you have flexibility in modifying/adapting curricular materials? Please explain.	Curriculum and classroom organization	Part II: D.3, D.4, D.5, D.6, D.7, D.8, D.9
10.	How often do you collaborate with other educators (e.g., ESOL teachers, paraprofessionals, reading resource teachers) to support your ELs?	Social and cultural dimensions; curriculum and classroom organization	Part II: A.5, D.10
11.	Describe how you use assessment tools to monitor student comprehension and adjust instruction.	Assessment	Part II: E.1, E.2, E.3, E.4, E.5, E.6
12.	Are there any final comments you would like to make before we end this interview?		

Note: The DELTA instrument was developed by Coady et al. [15].