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Spring 2023

## **Analyzing the State of ESL & ELL Education Programs**

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### **Abstract**

The history of America's education system for ESL teachers and their EL students is long and troubled. This paper aims to educate future teachers and non-teachers about the history behind the issues the field of ESL teaching is facing. This paper also seeks to inform readers about what progress has been made regarding these problems, as well as to guide readers on what they can do to help the ESL teaching sector combat these issues. If we continue to abandon our country's growing EL student population, then we are overlooking a massive, destructive hurdle to the future development of our nation.

*Keywords:* english language learners, english as a second language, bilingual education, esl teachers, COVID-19

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## **Introduction**

In today's America, 67.3 percent of public-school teachers have at least one EL student in their classroom, but only 15 percent of those teachers hold any level of certification in ESL teaching (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022, Table 209.42). This statistic is one of many that reflects the silent epidemic of neglected EL students. A systemic mistreatment of the program that affects most of the 22.6 percent of students who speak a language other than English at home (ChildStats, 2019). In a country that has a rapidly growing number of non-English speakers, it is vital that we have a healthy sector of teachers prepared to educate them. Unfortunately, as it stands, the English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching sector is in dire straits. An array of internal and external issues plague ESL teaching and hinder the ability of English Learner (EL) students to grow into well-educated and productive citizens. The purpose of this paper is to analyze these issues and present them in an easily digestible way to prospective ESL teachers so that they have a better understanding of the state of their profession. The information provided in this report will hopefully motivate teacher candidates to consider taking up ESL teaching as a focus or as a part of their education. Also, this paper will serve to encourage any non-ESL teachers to support legislation aimed at improving the doctrine. The problems faced by ESL teaching are vast. This paper aims to dive into the history behind how ESL teaching got to its current position; how the ESL teaching sector fails its students; how the education system as a whole fails its ESL programs; and how some of these issues may be solved. It is only with the collective support of legislators, educators, and constituents alike that we may begin to repair this broken system and equip some of our nation's most vulnerable students with the knowledge and experience they need to fulfill their version of the American dream.

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## **History**

To understand why the system is broken, we must learn how the system broke in the first place. Non-English education in the states before the 20th century is poorly documented. Most education was done in the common language of the local community. For example, the first Kindergarten was conducted entirely in German, which is fitting considering the concept of the Kindergarten is borrowed from Germany (Watertown Historical Society, 2022). By the middle of the century, however, it was clear that several issues in education, particularly poverty, needed to be tackled at the federal level.

## **ESEA**

These rising pressures forced President Lyndon B. Johnson to sign into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) on April 9th, 1965 (Paul, 2016). ESEA's many titles addressed a variety of issues, from library access to education for the homeless, but most notably for our purposes is Title III. Title III, later known as the Bilingual Education Act (BEA), was at that point the largest piece of legislation aimed directly at assisting English learner and immigrant education programs. Before ESEA, and the funding and guidance it provided, the situation in the EL field was dire. In California, for example, almost fifty percent of Spanish-speaking students dropped out before Eighth grade (Petrzela, 2010). Even after the ESEA invested federal funds and support into bilingual education, progress was slow. A 1969 study, four years after ESEA and only a year after Title III was amended into the BEA, showed that only twelve programs across the entire country could accurately be labeled as bilingual education programs (Flores, 1969). All of these programs were centered around large urban populations, and none of them were particularly effective or successful. That same study notes that, "the New York City program serves three-tenths of one percent of the 250,000 Puerto Rican children.

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Chicago's program is limited to a student enrollment of thirty-five and to a staff of four teachers” (Flores, 1969).

If ESEA and its many amendments did anything extraordinary for EL teaching, it was that it catapulted the issue into the public conscience. Before ESEA, many non-Educators did not even know that addressing ESL teaching was a problem. After ESEA, support for legislation regarding ESL teaching grew dramatically. Most notable is the 1974 case of *Lau v. Nichols*, a Supreme Court case that ended with a sharp crackdown on school districts who did not take measures to equalize education between EL and non-EL students (Stewner-Manzanares. 1988). Even twenty years after the BEA was passed, financial focus on EL programs was fixated on, “transitional bilingual education programs” which often had nearly as many non-EL students as EL students due to their focus on primarily English and curriculum content learning (Stewner-Manzanares. 1988). By the late 1990s much of the BEA’s funding to ESL programs went specifically to “dual language (DL)” programs. DL teaching is much like traditional immersion teaching, but with a focus on, “developing bilingual skills, academic excellence, and positive cross-cultural and personal competency attitudes for both groups of students” (García & Sung, 2018). DL programs are great for getting EL students to interact with English-speaking students and develop reading skills in both languages, but DL programs neglect EL students who have minimal English experience—particularly recent immigrants—and cannot be effectively implemented in school districts with particularly high or low levels of EL students (Dorner, 2016).

## **NCLB**

By the turn of the century, it was abundantly clear to many that there needed to be a renewed focus on bringing EL students up to speed with the rest of the classroom. Rather than

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throwing money at the issue and setting down regulations that helped the few and not the many. President Bush's response to this and the overall reinvigorated interest in education as a whole was the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. On the surface, the NCLB was simply a reauthorization of the ESEA with a fresh coat of paint, but content-wise the NCLB attacked ESL learning in an entirely different way. No Child Left Behind focused on raising the English proficiency level of all EL students; fitting considering that by the year 2000 the U.S. had seen a steady increase in percent of its residents who were immigrants and only just shy of half of those people—49%—were English proficient (Thu, 2009; Budiman, 2020). NCLB cracked down on EL programs who were ineffective at raising English proficiency mostly through its rigorous standardized testing procedure (Thu, 2009). Especially with access on the internet, local communities could monitor the success of their district's ESL program by simply looking up their schools' test scores. This meant that school districts had pressure from both the federal and state governments, as well as the community and the constituents, to improve their ESL programs like never before (Thu, 2009). NCLB was not perfect however, its testing system was unforgiving at best, and downright cruel at worst. Low English proficiency (LEP) students were often required to take tests that they could not even read the instructions for, and they were expected to make similar yearly progress as their non-LEP peers, despite their obvious disadvantages (Thu, 2009). This added undue pressure on students and teachers alike. These students who could not pass the strict yearly testing benchmarks were, and are, often unjustly viewed as, "lazy and lacking motivation to learn" (Wong, 2022). This is reflected in the social status of their teachers. Due to 'relatively' poor academic progress and a general lack of understanding, ESL teachers are far too often, "looked down upon..." and "not respected" even by their non-ESL educator counterparts (Wong, 2022).

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## **ESSA**

Although these issues are still present today, their effects have been partially abated by ESSA. ESSA, or the Every Student Succeeds Act, was President Obama's 2015 reauthorization of ESEA. ESSA, unlike NCLB, shifted the authority of how to gauge EL academic progress away from the federal government and towards the states. This has allowed the states to set regulations that better fit each state's own particular situation, rather than struggling to meet national standards. ESSA also expanded academic progress monitoring for EL students even beyond what NCLB did, as well as providing a crucial \$60 million in funding for ESL as a whole. ESSA is not without its issues. It was notably ineffective at diminishing the damage the COVID pandemic did to the ESL program, it has no measures in place for combating stigma against EL students and their teachers, and it has done nothing to stem the constant bleed in the ESL job market. Even by 2021, six years after the introduction of ESSA, the ESL teaching job market was projected to shrink six percent by 2031 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). This shortage has a wide range of consequences. For example, ESL teachers are being pulled disproportionately from their classes to cover other classes (Fenner, 2022). This causes many last-second schedule shifts and other inconsistencies that stress EL students out and add the ever-expanding list of pressures they face on a day-by-day basis (Fenner, 2022).

## **Resources**

It is clear that the ESL sector of teaching suffers from a persistent lack of much-needed resources. In an article published by *Education Week*, former teacher and reading specialist Liana Loewus (2016) described the struggles ESL teachers contend with in securing the proper material for teaching the curriculum. In the article she quotes a current ESL teacher stating, "Publishing companies are very often focused on the core and general education, and ELL

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becomes a supplement... There's linked-in support, and you see handbooks that go along with [the curriculum], but they haven't been intentional'" (para. 19). A common frustration among ESL teachers is the lack of access to content at a proper comprehension level. Often middle and high schoolers are provided material that has been, "dumbed down..." and does not allow for students to express what they already know (Loewus, 2016, para. 28-32).

For school districts in areas with low EL student levels, the problem is often substantially worse. Teachers in these districts describe EL students as being, "kind of on the back burner'" with ESL teachers often not having the time, resources, or motivation to collaborate with the non-ESL teachers with whom the EL students often spend most of their time (Sugimoto, 2021). A study published by Aurora University found that, similarly to Loewus' report, EL students are often given books far below their level (O'Brien, 2019). Even more alarming, however, is that EL teachers are often not provided any reading material from the district at all, instead having to find those resources on their own (O'Brien, 2019). EL teachers far too often report spending the overwhelming majority of their prep periods and other additional time to gather and prepare these readings for their students (O'Brien, 2019). As stated above, EL teachers are often seen by other educators and administrators as being ineffective. No doubt, this ineffectiveness is only exacerbated by having no time to prepare standard lessons or simply take a break during school hours.

All these issues are large enough challenges to tackle on their own, but when the pandemic wiped out in-person teaching, ESL educators were in hot water. On top of all the challenges faced by teachers during the COVID pandemic, such as distractions at home and students struggling to adapt mentally to being removed from the social aspect of school, many ESL teachers first had to figure out how to even contact their students. EL students are far more

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likely to come from families who do not have the financial resources to access the internet (Takanishi, 2017). Therefore, during COVID, it was often up to the school or even the teachers themselves to provide laptops or other electronic devices so students could attend classes and complete homework (Richards, 2020). Alongside the significant financial strain on the districts and their faculty that caused, sometimes teachers could not even contact the EL students' families in the first place. Often, even if families could be reached, speaking to them in English or a language the ESL teachers could understand was a significant barrier that slowed down the process of getting EL students back on their feet (Richards, 2020). We are still feeling the shocks of the COVID pandemic to this day, and the damage it caused to the education of our millions of EL students has yet to be fully realized. One thing is for sure, the COVID pandemic was just one factor that further exposed the deep-rooted issues the ESL field has been facing.

### **Significance**

When given the right resources and not hindered by structural and social stigma, ESL teachers and their programs are all the difference for their students and the community. In a case study by professor of education Guofang Li (2018), researchers found that when ESL programs took extra steps to incorporate their students' cultures into the lessons not only did the academic ability of their students improve, but so too did the local community's views of the education program (pg. 63-76). But that sense of preserving culture and generating a connected community goes beyond the families' trust; it is vital to the students as well. One study reported that when English second language students were pushed into casual and structured English conversations with their native English-speaking counterparts, both groups of students received the experience positively (Lee, 2016). EL students primarily reported increased competency in their English-



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speaking skills, while the traditional students responded positively to the opportunity to learn more about the EL students' cultures and heritage (Lee, 2016).

### **Confidence**

ESL teachers are often thrown into a bad spot upon entering the field. All the aforementioned issues with ESL teaching are disheartening for many, oftentimes causing those who choose to stay in the field to stagnate. Learning about these issues can be helpful if future teachers take them as problems to be solved, rather than accepted. ESL teachers who walk into the classroom with confidence, knowing that they can make a difference despite their situation, are more likely to be effective at their job. ESL teachers who self-reported better confidence in their classroom management and creativity skills were found to be more effective in gaining the interest of their students as well as being overall more effective in raising their students' proficiency levels (Dewaele et al., 2018). It is important that ESL teachers focus on self-improvement along with tackling structural issues in order to ensure their students are getting possible education. It's 'easy' to be a revolutionary in spirit, trying to motivate your school for the betterment of everyone, but it is not as easy to be a revolutionary and an effective teacher who does the best with what they currently have.

### **Improvements**

Aside from the individual level, ESL teachers have significant work to do in improving their field. Unlike other groups of teachers, ESL teachers have no major nationwide union to push their interests. The two foremost professional organizations that cater specifically to ESL teachers are the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) and the TESOL International Association. TESOL stands for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. These organizations, however, are not unions; they are relatively small—with roughly

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5,000 and 13,000 members respectively—and are often directly opposed from one another in terms of what policies they advocate for (TESOL International Association, 2023; NABE, 2023). If any significant progress is to be made on the professional side of ESL teaching, it would be wise for ESL teachers to come together and create statewide and national professional organizations and unions so that they can have a voice for themselves. Instead of depending almost solely on other, larger teaching organizations to cater to their interests.

ESL teachers cannot do it alone. It was not without public support that the original ESEA legislation was passed, and ESL teachers would be foolish to believe that they can change the course of their discipline without aid from administrations, parents, and other members of the community. The plights of our nation's EL students must become known to the broader public. If we wish to see a better future for our country, then we, as voters, taxpayers, and constituents, should throw our support behind our ESL teachers. We cannot afford to lose a fifth of our country's future students' valuable education.

### **Conclusion**

Given that one in five Americans don't speak English at home, it seems irrational that so little attention has been given to the ESL teaching sector. We are doing an immeasurable disservice to millions of EL children. By failing to provide ESL programs with the proper funding, staff, and resources, we have prevented many of these students from being able to achieve their true potential. The untold damages of this neglect are surely disastrous. Although it is impossible to be certain, one can only speculate what sociocultural and economic damage this broken system has created. Thankfully, the system is not beyond repair. If ESL programs were to be made a legislative priority, we could decrease funding and material shortages. And if ESL programs were to be made a sociocultural priority, we could eliminate teacher and administrative

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shortages. Hypothetically, if both of these problems improved, then it may be possible to break down the stigma that partially created these shortages in the first place. The path to solving these issues starts with you, the teacher in training. For the sake of our increasingly diverse youth, you must make it a personal priority to fix these injustices through public advocacy, community outreach, and curriculum changes. We must also call on the support of the wider community to incentivize those in power to make concrete policy and legislative changes if we ever want to see some real progress.

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