

ESL Teacher Significance in Support for ELs in Special Education

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Historically, ESL teachers' work has been predominantly associated with newcomers and long term ELs (English learners), therefore ESL support has been primarily delivered to this group of students. There are many articles that emphasize ESL teachers' significant role in the lives of EL students. ESL teachers deliver language support in grade-level content, set high expectations for all students, engage with the family and community, and provide professional development for the staff. We cannot allow any student to fall through the cracks. But, what about ELs in special education? Do all stakeholders do enough for these students? In general, when it comes to supporting ELs in special education, ESL teachers have been unwillingly marginalized. School districts must utilize their ESL teachers as a vital link in the chain of support and collaboration regarding ELs who are in special education as well. This article is written with the purpose of raising more awareness about the significant role that ESL teachers play in the academic success of ELs in special education. Old practices have to change, especially keeping in mind that the 2020 Edition of the WIDA ELD standards require language learning to happen in the context of grade level content. According to WIDA suggestions of potential use of the WIDA standards framework, ESL teachers have to monitor multilingual learners' language growth, and this includes ELs in special education. In my opinion, monitoring language growth should not be limited solely to annual assessments, but instead require full engagement on behalf of ESL teachers. Therefore, ESL teachers should be given tools and recognition to collaborate with special education colleagues regarding shared EL students in following ways: integration of content and language, coordination of learning and applications of best accommodations, providing classroom teachers with tools to work with these students directly, and providing experiences that are culturally and linguistically sustaining (WIDA ELD Standards Framework).

In his book *Atomic Habits*, James Clear says, "If you want better results then forget about setting goals, focus on your system instead." Clear's claim that a good system drives success made me reevaluate the system of collaboration with special education teachers regarding our shared ELs in my school district. The core of WIDA English Language Developmental Standards is that ELs (or multilingual learners) are best serviced when they learn content and language together in linguistically and culturally sustaining ways. ESL teachers have to serve as strong advocates for the application of ideas of the WIDA ELD standards framework such as equity of opportunity and access, integration of content and language, collaboration among stakeholders, and functional approach to language development. Therefore, I created [a flow chart](#) in order to have each team member specify their support when servicing a specific shared EL, in order to ensure academic success on a daily basis. Additionally, a flowchart with specific tasks can serve as a checks and balance framework, allowing us to all work toward the shared goal of seeing the student succeed. Therefore, a proposed flow chart becomes an ultimate team commitment for professional and undivided collaboration among all teachers involved in supporting a shared EL. For example,

when deciding how to distribute various tasks and roles, teachers bring their expertise to the table, in order to target as a team all layers of the content including type of accommodations and support with background knowledge. Often ESL teachers travel across the school district, and for this reason they can be disregarded in weekly planning. For this reason, a team-based approach will help ELs in special education have greater academic success. As shown above, having a flowchart sets clear expectations upfront for all teachers involved, and thus all voices are heard for the sake of shared students.

The most critical change when supporting ELs in special education is related to integration of content and language and the applications of accommodations on a daily basis. Currently, I support ELs with disabilities in 3rd grade, 5th grade, and 11th grade. First, ESL teachers have to take initiative in professional development and learn about their students' disabilities, become informed about their ELs' IEP (Individualized Education Plan), and accommodations. Next, ESL teachers must be involved in content learning of ELs with disabilities. For example, I service ELs with disabilities during either their science or social studies class. My direct engagement in their learning allowed me to collect formal and informal data about their struggles. I believe that my ESL perspective led to the reevaluation of the system of support and for more efficient practices relevant for ELs in special education. At first it can be challenging, or even uncomfortable to bring all involved on the same page, especially because for years ESL and special education have operated separately due to many circumstances. However, it is necessary to make changes in order to ensure academic success for ELs in special education.

I will share a positive example of collaboration regarding a junior who came to my school district from another state. This student came with Spanish as her home language, an English proficiency level of 2, and an autism diagnosis. When a team of teachers collaborates successfully and assumes the best intent of each other, it will ensure success for their shared students. In the second semester, this particular student started to fail some of her classes due to missing homework. I immediately emailed all teachers in order to share my observations, and we created an action plan. Since this student did not have special education assigned support in her elective class Graphic Arts and Design, I decided to focus my support in this particular class. The student would get stuck on instructions, and she would not initiate a conversation with the teacher about clarification. Furthermore, I addressed these concerns to her speech and language therapist, and I suggested a [communication board](#). This suggestion was built on the speech pathologist's initial conversations prompts. It is a very simple document, and its main purpose is to bridge the communication gap between teachers and students and train students accountability for their learning. Initially, I created a communication board to use with some of my ELs who are not in special education, but they do not initiate advocacy for help. Next, I observed that both the student and her teachers could benefit from a tool that would allow them to communicate with clear expectations so that both the classroom teacher and student are able to connect in real time, which would give the student ownership over her planning and work completeness. Some sort of communication board is widely used by special education teachers, however there is not always follow through. It is needed to spend at least two weeks implementing this tool by training all parties to use it with consistency. Having a communication board taught me to improve my wait time, and it allowed my students time to process their answers. Once the speech therapist simplified the communication board text according to the

student's IEP, the board was laminated and distributed to each classroom teacher. Next, two of us discussed observing the implementation of the advocacy board for the first week, and then scored its use for the next four weeks in order to collect data and assess the tool and its effect on student success. The success criteria will be measured based on the student's ability to communicate with her classroom teachers for clarification in order to ensure that the student doesn't feel stuck or fall behind with homework. We will use data to either modify the tool or implement a different one based on the student's needs. This solution-based outcome is the result of both parties' willingness to act promptly, having in mind the best learning interest of the student and being open to share and hear ideas. I would like to add that the collaborating speech path teacher has a high work ethic, and she is willing to put all pieces of the puzzle together to support the student with best practices. This mindset is crucial in supporting ELs in special education. Although I am not a certified expert in autism, this does not imply that special education teachers are the only people who can work with ELs with autism. As a matter of fact, mainstream teachers cannot be "hands off", just because there is a special education teacher in the classroom. All parties must take part in these students' learning, collect classroom observations, assess language samples, and reevaluate accommodations or practices if they are not bringing success.

Another reason that ESL teachers need to be included in content learning of ELs in special education is that IEPs do not voice enough evidence of culturally sustaining experiences across the board. For example, one of my students with autism benefits from support in her home language. In this case, her special education teachers have to be aware of this and provide support in home language accordingly, as needed. However if this is not stated in the student's IEP, her special education teacher may fail to apply this accommodation in daily practice. Having a flow chart of delegated tasks may help with this situation because it allows ESL teachers to be involved in the application of ESL accommodations along with IEP listed accommodations for ELs in special education. Furthermore, the student's asset does not become a subject of an oversight. To summarize, WIDA's philosophy that ELs bring cultural and language assets should be reflected in IEP of ELs with a disability.

In conclusion, EL students in special education thrive academically with the united collaboration and application of best practices delivered by all involved. In fact, the WIDA English Language development standards framework 2020 edition came at the perfect time for ESL teachers to reevaluate the current system of support and practices for ELs in special education and to start a discussion with all stakeholders.

About the Author:

Jelena Kapetanovic has lived in Wisconsin since 2010. Previously, she taught both English and Italian as foreign languages from 2003 to 2010 in Montenegro and Serbia in both public schools and private schools. She is fluent in Montenegrin and English, and she has some level of proficiency in Italian. She can carry some conversations in Spanish. At first when Jelena moved to Wisconsin, she was a substitute teacher in Waukesha. She landed her first ESL job in Wisconsin in the Elmbrook School District in 2014. The following year, she was hired for a full time ESL job in Hamilton Sussex, and has been working there since. Her caseload includes students from kindergarten to 12th grade. Her experience has been so valuable as it gives her access to content areas across grade levels, and she often cross reference resources, strategies, and tools among her students based on their language proficiency, or background knowledge.