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# Teachers' Experiences in a Charter School With English Language Learners' Acquisition of Academic Literacy

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Teachers' Experiences in a Charter School With English Language Learners' Acquisition  
of Academic Literacy

by  
Estella Stephens

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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2018

## **Approval Page**

This applied dissertation was submitted by Estella Stephens under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

Where another author's ideas have been presented in this applied dissertation, I have acknowledged the author's ideas by citing them in the required style.

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Estella Stephens

Name

October 17, 2018

Date

## Abstract

Teachers' Experiences in a Charter School With English Language Learners' Acquisition of Academic Literacy. Estella Stephens, 2018: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. Keywords: charter schools, English language learners, literacy, phenomenon, qualitative research, teachers

This qualitative applied dissertation was designed to investigate and give voice to the lived experiences of mainstream teachers at charter schools where the English language learner (ELL) population increased significantly. It replicated McCoy's (2013) study. A phenomenological design was used to interview kindergarten-Grade 8 mainstream teachers in 3 charter schools. Interviews were conducted by a noninterested party due to the positionality status of the researcher. Interviews were transcribed, and the data analyzed and coded by the researcher. Teachers were asked about lived experiences with ELLs acquiring academic literacy, teachers' challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy, changes that occurred in classrooms in their work with helping ELLs to attain grade-level academic literacy, and how they could be best prepared to help ELLs attain academic literacy based on Cummins (1973) language acquisition theory.

Six themes emerged from the interviews relating teachers' experiences with ELLs' difficulty with mastering academic literacy in a charter school. The 6 themes that emerged included a large ELL percentage in the class, ELLs entering school behind grade level, cultural and language barriers, increased collaboration, greater emphasis on vocabulary, and increased professional development.

The study found that teachers perceived that the influx of ELLs into mainstream classrooms and culture and native languages posed challenges to students' academic literacy achievement. Increased collaboration and a greater emphasis on teaching vocabulary proved to be helpful. The majority of teachers' requests for professional development targeted teaching ELLs to prepare teachers better to help students attain academic literacy. The results of the 3 major findings in McCoy's (2013) research study were supported as principles of good teaching pedagogy. Implications, limitations, reflections, and recommendations for future research are reported.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

The demographics in the United States has changed over the past several decades with the integration of new immigrant and refugee populations. This landscape change can be seen in many areas throughout the country. During the late 19th through the present 21st century, the configuration of immigration and refugee patterns shifted from Europe to Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and African countries (Bean & Stevens, 2005; U.S. Committee for Refugee and Immigrants, 2006). In 2013, approximately 61.6 million individuals (approximately 20% of the U.S. population), foreign and U.S. born, spoke another language other than English at home (Ruggles, Genadek, Goeken, Grover, & Sobek, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported that, between 1980 and 2009, the percentage of children ages 5 to 17 in all schools who spoke a language other than English increased from 10% to 21%. To date, the National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Laman & Flint, 2018) reported that there are 9.4 million English language learners (ELLs) in public schools throughout the United States. This number has risen from 9.1 million in 2004 (Laman & Flint, 2018).

Many charter schools are experiencing similar changes in the linguistic makeup of their population. From 1999 to 2008, the number of charter schools almost tripled from 1,542 to 4,618 as did the number of English language learner (ELL) students they serve (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009; Rehora, 2011). The nature of charter schools is changing from serving expatriate children to providing academic choice for parents and children who are socio and economically disadvantaged (Zimmer et al., 2009). These factors combine to produce a significant growth in the number of ELLs in

charter schools. The numerical growth of these schools is fueled by dissatisfaction with educational services provided by traditional public schools. To support the instruction of the increased number of ELL students, the charter schools of Ohio (CSO) had a 15% increase in the number of ELL teachers its schools hired between 2011 and 2013 (administrator, personal communication, October 12, 2015).

In 2008, 83% of U.S. teachers were identified as non-Hispanic White of whom 43% worked with ELL students in American classrooms (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2008; Helfrich & Bosch, 2011). There are an estimated 6 million children of refugees or asylum seekers integrated into American urban public school classrooms (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; U.S. Committee for Refugee and Immigrants, 2006). Teachers in these 21st-century classrooms have ELL population of students consisting of “long-term ELLs, special education ELLs, students reclassified as general education students after passing the district’s language test, migrant ELLs, transitional ELLs, refugee children, and recent immigrants” (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011, p. 105). These teachers must transition to meet the needs of these demographics.

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 held schools accountable for student academic outcomes by “ensuring that states and schools boost the performance of certain groups of students, such as English-language learners, students in special education, and poor and minority children; whose academic achievement, on average, trails their peers” (Klein, 2015, p. 2). Nationally and on the local level, charter schools have become one avenue that afford opportunities for parental choice in the education of their children. Although states did not have to comply with the NCLB Act of 2001, sanctions were imposed and states risked “losing their Title I money” (Klein, 2015, p. 2).

According to Boswell and Seegmiller (2016), “The average literacy level of U.S. students is less than proficient when assessed via national standards” (p. 644). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Literacy (as quoted in Boswell & Seegmiller, 2016) reported that, despite the advancement of literacy improvements of children in primary grades, only “a third of middle school students possess requisite comprehension skills to critically evaluate what they read” (p. 644). The increase of text complexity and literacy tasks are critical factors stated as rationales why students begin to struggle with reading and writing tasks when they reach adolescence. Therefore, because the research data trend shows that a vast majority of adolescents’ literacy skills continues to diminish in academic reading and writing tasks, ELLs are at an even greater risk for low literacy achievement (Boswell & Seegmiller, 2016). The results from the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for eighth-grade students illustrated this point. Notably, only 5% of ELLs scored at or above the proficient level in reading. Similarly, results from the 2015 NAEP for eighth-grade students reported that only 4% of ELLs scored at or above the proficient level in reading (eighth-grade students did not take a writing assessment in 2015). In 2011, the NAEP data noted that only 1% scored at or above the proficient level in writing compared to nearly a third of eighth-grade students as a whole. The data trends on ELLs’ lack of significant literacy achievement are of grave concern when taking into account that they represent the fastest growing segment of the school-age population, having doubled from 10% to 21% of the total kindergarten-Grade 12 school population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

At the core of most educators’ philosophy is the belief that every child can learn and that every child deserves a fair and equitable education. The accomplishment of these broad tasks takes on another level of complexity, especially when the teachers’ and the

ELL students' predominant languages are authentically different. Nevertheless, all teachers of ELLs are expected to transfer proficient levels of knowledge and skills to all students. Educational accountability is further on the rise through the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in language arts and mathematics (CCSS Initiative, 2013). The new CCSS (2010) in language arts adopted by 42 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity stated that

all students must have the opportunity to learn and meet the same high standards if they are to access the knowledge and skills necessary in their post-high school lives. Each grade will include students who are still acquiring English. For those students, it is possible to meet the standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening without displaying native-like control of conventions and vocabulary. (p. 6)

The state of Ohio began the updating process of the CCSS in the 2015-2016 school year. The revised standards were adopted by the Ohio Board of Education in February 2017 and renamed The Ohio Learning Standards (for English language arts [ELA] and mathematics). All students, including ELLs, will be tested on the content of the Ohio Learning Standards (OLS) beginning in the 2018-2019 school year (Ohio Department of Education [ODE], 2017).

National and state education policies emphasize and require ELL students to participate in English-only instruction and assessment. Generally, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) can develop orally within a few days or weeks when usage of a second language is implemented regularly (Cummins, 1979). It is

estimated that children can master BICS in approximately 1 to 2 years of exposure to English at school. This very basic command of the English language excludes use of skills necessary to incorporate English in writing or additional assignments.

Comparatively, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), needed for reasoning, thinking, writing, and working in a second language, is likely to develop in 5 to 7 years (Brown-Chidsey, Bronaugh, & McGraw, 2009; Cummins, 1979, 1981a, 1981b). Students may converse well in English; however, they struggle with higher language levels required for academic processes.

Current and historical research indicates that it takes ELLs at least 4 years to become fluent in CALP (Cummins, 1979, 1981a; Mitchell, 2016). Teachers' recognition of the difficulty and the necessity to provide content-based instruction should result in inclusive language acquisition for ELLs, implementing instructional strategies and models at a high level of cognitive demand for all students, including ELLs. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate teachers' lived experiences with the difficulties related to ELLs' academic literacy achievement at Ohio school districts' kindergarten-Grade 8 charter schools. This qualitative research study explored teachers' lived experiences with teaching ELLs to acquire and master academic literacy in a charter school setting. By investigating with teachers of ELLs the overarching question pertaining to teachers' lived experiences with ELLs' difficulty mastering academic literacy in a charter school, experiences were analyzed to form data, and themes were developed to answer questions regarding the challenges faced by mainstream teachers with helping ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school.

**Phenomenon of interest.** As a result of a shift in demographics, learning and teaching within traditional public and charter schools are affected. Educational systems

are expected to implement various models of instruction for ELLs. Schools must incorporate structures that improve the skills of teachers. In addition, teachers are expected to accommodate and differentiate instructional strategies that allow students to master standards-based learning objectives and goals. ELLs require targeted-intentional instruction in using academic language that incorporates the “use of ongoing formative data on learning, teaching, attendance, behavior, and other important intermediate outcomes” (Calderón et al., 2011, p. 107). These continuous formative assessments integrated into instruction will require a paradigm shift. During the course of teaching and learning, mastery of CALP is essential and can be quantitated through formative assessments. Teachers can utilize formative assessments daily to improve learning during instruction (Heritage, 2010, 2014).

The topic of this applied dissertation was the exploration of CSO teachers’ lived experiences with their ELLs’ difficulty with attaining academic literacy. Whereas ELLs may be socially conversant in English, a key indicator of verbal ability is vocabulary. A child’s “vocabulary in kindergarten through first grade is a significant predictor of his/her reading comprehension in middle and secondary grades; it also predicts future reading difficulties” (Calderón et al., 2011, p. 110). Because ELLs’ academic literacy requires long-term and comprehensive vocabulary instruction, teachers must address the learning of vocabulary, content, and language. Moreover, teachers in many instances must also bring the ELLs up to grade level concurrently.

**Background and justification.** The creation of the charter school movement began in 1974 with Budde, an educator from Massachusetts (as cited in Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, 2016). Charter school legislation was passed in 1991 in the United States. Minnesota was the first state to pass legislation regarding charter

schools. (Finn, Manno, & Wright, 2016). The federal government did not make provisions for the creation and funding of charter schools until 1997 and revisited their policy in 2001 as a result of the NCLB Act of 2001. At its inception, the primary purpose of charter schools was to improve academic achievement for all students. Additional purposes for charter schools include but are not limited to the following:

Increased learning opportunities for all pupils; encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods; measure learning outcomes and create different and innovative forms of measuring outcomes; establish new forms for accountability schools; and/or create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site.

(Minnesota Statutes for Charter Schools, 2016, p. 1)

In Ohio, the charter school era began in 1997 when the state government passed legislation approving the establishment of “community schools, or charter schools as an alternative to the traditional K-12 public school program” (ODE, 2016, p. 1) and that answer to education reform. Community schools are defined as “government-funded and government-supervised institutions whose management is directed by private boards” (Walberg, 2007, p. 16). In Ohio, community schools, called charter schools in other states, are “public nonprofit, nonsectarian schools that operate independently of any school district, but under a contract with an authorized sponsoring entity that is established by statute or approved by the State Board of Education” (ODE, 2016, p. 2). Accountability for charter schools resides under the auspices of the state-appointed sponsor contract issuer for “student achievement and progress and are subject to closure for poor performance or insufficient enrollment” (Walberg, 2007, p. 16) and fiscal instability. In addition to being an alternative educational choice, charter schools “create

a new market [not only within the United States but at least] ten other countries are also experimenting with kindred models of independent public schools” (Finn et al., 2016, p. 1).

The national education reform movements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 2010) and the NCLB Act of 2001 focus on academic content standards. The large influx of the ELL population and their diverse English language development and proficiency present academic needs that are a challenge for the general education teacher and the traditional pullout teaching method (Bailey & Huang, 2011). Current studies suggested that, for ELLs, missing required content material due to loss of time in the mainstream classroom resulted in deficiencies of the more cognitively challenging language of the content area (Martinez, Bailey, Kerr, Huang, & Beauregard, 2010). The focus of the ESEA and the NCLB Act of 2001 was initially of process versus performance. The emphasis was on the quality of specific services, and, simply, the quantitating these services would be directly proportional to student achievement (Braden, 2007; Klein, 2015). Accountability standards changed in the 1990s with the advent of annual standardized testing performance as the documentation of student outcomes (Klein, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Its intent was to close the ever-widening achievement gap through the implementation of effective practices so that children throughout the United States have the necessary skills for success (Hertert & Teague, 2003; Klein, 2015).

The U.S. federal government has held schools accountable for achievement since the 1965 passage of the ESEA. The goal of the NCLB Act of 2001 was for all students to reach the proficiency as measured by the 2013-2014 school year. Most recently, the U.S. Department of Education (2011) invited each state education agency to request flexibility

regarding specific requirements of the ESEA of 1965 by the states proposing rigorous and comprehensive plans to improve academic outcomes for all students, thereby, closing achievement gaps and improving instructional quality.

The state of Ohio and 44 other states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Bureau of Indian Education submitted requests for ESEA flexibility (“ODE Flexibility Waiver,” 2015). ESEA flexibility was approved for the state of Ohio, 42 other states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Currently, the ESEA requires states to report test results for several subgroups of students, including ELL students. Schools that reach a threshold percentage of ELLs are required to disaggregate these scores as a group, rather than have them hidden within whole-school achievement data (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). By reporting the performance of target groups separately, the U.S. federal government proposed to facilitate schools to improve outcomes of traditionally underserved student groups. ELLs are included as one of the target subgroups for performance measurement.

Individual schools are required to meet state targets for student populations as a whole and for designated demographic subgroups that include students of racial and ethnic backgrounds, students with limited English proficiency, economically disadvantaged students, and special education students (NCLB Act of 2001). A student population threshold is required to be considered a subgroup. Failure to meet targets for 2 consecutive years for schools receiving Title I funding necessitates technical assistance (NCLB Act of 2001). If a school fails 3 years in a row based on Ohio’s flexibility waiver, the school must submit to the ODE an intervention plan (low-high support) related to the school grade report card (“ODE Flexibility Waiver,” 2015).

In the 2005-2006 school year, all states allowed ELL students to use a variety of

accommodations when taking state-content assessments, the most common accommodations being small group or individual test administration or reading directions aloud to students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Multiple measures and ratings compose components of Ohio's accountability system and include the use of (a) state indicators, (b) performance index score, and (c) value added and growth (ODE, 2008; "ODE Flexibility Waiver," 2015). In Ohio, school districts and schools can meet annual yearly progress (AYP) in one of the following four ways: (a) current year results, (b) 2-year combined results, (c) safe harbor, and (d) growth model (ODE, 2008; "ODE Flexibility Waiver," 2015).

In December of 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act, a bipartisan measure to reauthorize the ESEA and the NCLB Act of 2001. Legislatively, the overall purpose of the Every Student Succeeds Act is to address the declining trend of academic literacy for all students. The data trends for elementary and secondary adolescents' academic literacy showed a widening of the achievement gaps in reading and writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Results from the 2011 NAEP for eighth-grade students illustrated this point. Notably, only 3% of ELLs scored at or above the proficient level in reading, and only 1% scored at or above the proficient level in writing compared to nearly a third of eighth-grade students on the whole (NAEP, 2011). These findings place ELLs at heightened risk for low academic literacy acquisition. For ELLs and teachers, this is especially troubling because ELLs are expected to develop academic literacy skills in English concurrently with the development of oral English proficiency.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** Significant research has been conducted on the use of academic language at the elementary level. There remains a gap in studies at the

primary and intermediate levels related to teachers' lived experiences with the difficulties of bringing academic content lexicon to ELL students. Since the adoption of the CCSS or a similar, renamed version of CCSS that are utilized as the benchmark for determining English language arts and literacy and mathematics, many states are on the cusp of developing English language proficiency standards (ELPS) (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012). In the state of Ohio, the ELPS were published as guidelines in December of 2015 and were piloted in the 2015-2016 school year (Lau Resource Center at the ODE, 2015). According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (2012),

The development of native like proficiency in English takes many years and will not be achieved by all ELLs especially if they start schooling in the U.S. in the later grades. Teachers should recognize that it is possible to achieve the standards for reading and literature, writing and research, language development, and speaking and listening without manifesting native-like control of conversations and vocabulary. (p. 2)

General education teachers are expected to provide instructional strategies through differentiated methods accompanied by scaffolding and tiered learning (Tobin & McInnes, 2008). Therefore, teachers must assess ELLs' academic and language development needs and differentiate instruction appropriately. The expectation is that teachers and schools closely monitor student progress, measure academic achievement, and identify performance gaps (Choppin, 2002; Massell, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, and U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Few researchers addressed how teachers and administrators could measure acquisition of academic content lexicon by their students as evidenced by the assessments. Teachers and administrators are expected to monitor student progress and refine their efforts in

improving academic performance for the school district as a whole, the subgroups (e.g., ELLs) within the school district, and individual students who compose it (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). Also, few studies had been completed with an ELL focus on kindergarten-Grade 8 range of students and teachers that addressed Somali refugees, Latinos, and newly immigrated ELLs. Moreover, there is a paucity of literature and comparisons concerning the lived experiences of teachers with different seniority of providing instruction to ELLs in charter schools. The correlation between teacher (e.g., teachers of English to speakers of other languages training and certification) and professional development experiences with ELL student performance and growth would be illuminating.

**Audience.** Audiences who should profit from the results of this study are teachers and students, administrators and school governing authorities, parents and guardians, and government officials and policy makers. General education teachers (novice and experienced) as well as educators endorsed to teach English to speakers of other languages have been impacted by the increased demand and should appreciate research on how to improve ELLs' acquisition of academic literacy. Charter school developers; administrators; governing boards; charter school authorizers; charter school teachers; and students, parents, and guardians should greatly benefit from the findings of this research. The results of this study should offer new insights into tools and instructional and learning environments that optimize language and literacy development of all students and, specifically, ELLs. Other beneficiaries should include schools (e.g., charter, traditional, private, and parochial), school sponsors, teacher colleges and universities, fund-raisers who invest financially, and human resources for work-related and humanitarian reasons. These research findings should provide the stakeholders with

specific information needed to allocate and raise funds to meet the academic goals and implement interventions that are timely as they strive to meet national, state, and local achievement assessments and annual growth measures aimed at student proficiency on Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006; Popham, 2006).

### **Definition of Terms**

The definitions of the following terms are intended to ensure uniformity and an understanding of them throughout this study.

**Academic language.** According to Cummins (2000), “The sum of the vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and language functions that students will encounter and be required to demonstrate mastery of during their school years” (p. 541).

**Academic language proficiency.** According to Cumming (2008), “The extent to which an individual has access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling” (p. 72).

**Acquired language (L2).** This is the additional language that a student is learning. L2 is an additional language beyond the first language (L1) that a student is learning. Although it references a second language, many ELLs already know more than one language before they study English (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2010).

**Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).** This refers to the guidelines for the NCLB Act of 2001, which mandated that all public schools, upon the evaluation of students, report the results to find out whether states and school districts have made AYP. To reach AYP, a school must be proficient in 39 separate benchmarks (Giambo, 2010; “ODE Flexibility Waiver,” 2015).

**Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS).** This refers to the language

that is acquired within the first 2 years of language study that focuses on everyday language and vocabulary based on the theories of Cummins (as cited in Lau Resource Center at the ODE, 2012, 2015).

**Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).** This refers to the language that is acquired within 5 to 7 years of beginning language study that focuses on words, phrases, and language concepts that promote and permit understanding of higher level academic content based on the theories of Cummins (as cited in Lau Resource Center at the ODE, 2012, 2015).

**Charter schools.** These are defined as “government-funded and government-supervised institutions whose management is directed by private boards” (Walberg, 2007, p. 16).

**Cognate.** This is a word that is similar in sound or spelling in different languages. Cognates have similar origins and meanings (e.g., government in English, gouvernement in French, san in Japanese 3, and sam in Cantonese 3; Cárdenas-Hagan, 2015).

**English Language Learners (ELLs).** These reference programs and people. ELLs are studying English, usually in an English-speaking environment. ELL programs provide instruction and support to those learning English (Lau Resource Center at the ODE, 2012, 2015).

**English as an additional language.** This references programs that teach English to nonnative speakers. It is a newer term than English as a second language (ESL) and is meant to recognize that many language learners have already mastered multiple languages; English may not be the first foreign language that the learners have studied (“English as an Additional Language,” 2016).

**English as a Second Language (ESL).** This references programs and people.

ESL students are studying English, usually in an English-speaking environment. ESL programs provide instruction and support to those learning English. The term has lost its dominance because the recognition has arisen that many of those studying English may already speak multiple languages and, therefore, English is not their second language (Lau Resource Center at the ODE, 2012, 2015).

**Mainstream.** This refers to the regular classes with heterogeneous populations in contrast to classes segregated by special needs. It also refers to core classes of language arts, social studies, and mathematics in contrast to classes with specialists (e.g., art and music) (Ballentyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008).

**Native heritage language (L1).** This refers to an individual's L1 (AIR, 2010).

**No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.** This is a law that President Bush signed for all public schools in the United States in 2002. One of the goals of the NCLB Act of 2001 is to improve the education of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. This act is a federal measure used to calculate gains that are designed to hold schools accountable for students' progress (Giambo, 2010; Lau Resource Center at the ODE, 2012, 2015).

**Pullout ESL.** This refers to the times during a regular school day when a student is removed from regular classes to receive special services (e.g., English language instruction) usually in a small group or individual setting (AIR, 2010).

**Push-in ESL.** This refers to a coteaching model of delivering special service to students (e.g., ELLs) in their regular classroom setting in contrast to pullout service (AIR, 2010).

**Sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP).** This is a model of teaching strategies for mainstream teachers to promote the acquisition of language at the same

time as the acquisition of academic content. The model was created by Short, Eschevarria, and Vogt (as cited in Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2013).

**World-class Instructional Design and Assessment.** This is a criterion-referenced test focusing on the assessment of academic, rather than on social language (Molle, 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate teachers' lived experiences with the difficulties related to ELLs' academic literacy achievement at Ohio school districts' kindergarten-Grade 8 charter schools. This qualitative research study explored teachers' lived experiences with teaching ELLs to acquire and master academic literacy in a charter school setting. Teachers and administrators must take "affirmative steps [and] appropriate actions" (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, and U.S. Department of Justice, 2015, p. 10) that address the instructional needs of ELLs and their limited English proficiency. Throughout the United States, abroad, and at this CSO, ELLs are facing challenges mastering academic subject matter and how teachers can assist them in acquiring academic success through improved and enhanced ELPS. Overall, by investigating with teachers of ELLs the overarching question pertaining to teachers' lived experiences with ELLs' difficulty mastering academic literacy in a charter school, one can analyze their experiences to produce data that develop themes to answer questions regarding the challenges faced by mainstream teachers with helping ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school.

Difficulties related to the lack of academic literacy can carry a battery of challenging outcomes that impact teachers and ELLs. In the 21st century, English is a core skill and no longer a privilege of the elite of our society (Pandya, 2012; United

Nations, 2015). Therefore, the lack of academic literacy transcends from the school and student achievement into a nation's achievement. As noted by Walberg (2007), "A country's achievement test scores in mathematics and science are strongly correlated with and predictive of a country's economic growth" (p. 3). Although other students are at risk due to gaps in academic literacy achievement, ELLs are at a greater risk of these real-world consequences that have potential generational significance (Boswell & Seegmiller, 2016; Calderón et al., 2011; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Cummins, 1981b; National Center for Education for Statistics, 2016; Pandya, 2012; United Nations, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Acquisition, 2015; Walberg, 2007; Zong & Batalova, 2015).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

This literature review contains nine sections and research questions. The first section reviews Cummins' (1973, 1976, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1981a, 1981b, 2000) original work in the field of second language acquisition. Sections 2 through 9 review literature related to the problem and the replicated research study, solution strategies, gaps, charter schools and teachers, and remaining challenges.

This review consists of a comprehensive search of the literature. After discussion of the theoretical constructs of Cummins' (1973, 1976, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1981a, 1981b, 2000) original work, which are based primarily on his research findings and books, the second through ninth sections primarily employed databases, including ProQuest, ERIC, EBSCOhost, Education Full Text, National Clearinghouse, Quest Central, Education from Sage, and Google Scholar, and focus on the most recently published articles related to the area of study.

The detailed summary of this literature review following Cummins' language acquisition theory is composed of eight topics. The second topic explores the content of instruction and student placement (push-in, mainstreamed, or pulled out). The third topical literature relates the necessity and importance of acquiring academic literacy. The fourth topic relates the impact and role that academic vocabulary has on acquisition of academic literacy and student growth. Topics 5 and 6 address literacy skills and cognitive demand as it relates to ELLs' achievement in multiple subject areas (e.g., mathematics, science, and social studies). Topic 7 explores the impact and importance of essential literacy skills. Topic 8 investigates the role of cognitively challenging academic rigor. Finally, the literature review concludes with addressing pertinent gaps in the research that

focus on the most recently published research articles and the research questions (Galvan & Galvan, 2017; McCoy, 2013; Stephens, 2016).

### **Cummins Language Acquisition Theory**

This section focuses exclusively on Cummins' (1973, 1976, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1981a, 1981b, 2000) original work that established the cognitive and academic language theory (e.g., BICS and CALP). This literature review incorporates a discussion of the challenges surrounding academic achievement of ELLs and the theory and research of Cummins (1973, 1976, 1979, 1981b) who established one of the foundational cognitive and academic language theories in the 1970s. In 1973, Cummins argued the inequities between theoretical research on bilingualism and cognition compared to the empirical research studies. In 1976, Cummins noted the presentation of linguistic levels of competence needed for bilingual children to enhance their cognitive levels and to avoid cognitive deficits. In 1979, Cummins (1980a, 1981a) coined the acronyms BIC and CALP to describe processes that assist teachers to qualify students' language ability. In 1980, Cummins further substantiated the theoretical base for bilingual education. In this research publication, Cummins (1980a, 1981b, 1984, 2000) made distinctions between BICS (everyday conversational language skills) and CALP (academic and classroom language).

Cummins (1979, 1981a) sought to provide a theoretical framework maintaining the distinction between BICS and CALP. His background in psychology influenced his theories about second language acquisition and his work distinguishing between BICS and CALP that was the underpinning framework for ELL service models for greater than 30 years (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012; Cummins, 1980a, 1980b, 1981a, 1981b; McCoy, 2013; Ranney, 2012). In 1979, Cummins introduced the threshold

hypothesis. Based on his research findings, the threshold hypothesis suggested that students with high native language (i.e., L1) and second language (i.e., L2) proficiency experienced cognitive advantages in terms of linguistic and cognitive flexibility, whereas low L1 and L2 proficiency resulted in cognitive deficits. Cummins (as quoted in Street & Hornberger, 2008) argued that, for students to catch up academically as quickly as possible, in cases where English is an additional language, it requires a “focus primarily on context-embedded or cognitively demanding tasks,” p. 74) within mainstream, push-in, and pullout classes. He noted that predominant theories at the time held that language proficiency be viewed as one global construct.

Cummins (1979) suggested that to incorporate all aspects of language use or performance into just one dimension of general or global language proficiency is problematic. Cummins’ (as quoted in Street & Hornberger, 2008) view, however, was that

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) or academic language proficiency develops through social interaction from but becomes differentiated from BICS after the early stages of schooling to reflect primarily the language that children acquire in school and which they need to use effectively if they are to progress successfully through school. (p. 73)

Cummins (as quoted in Ranney, 2012) defined academic language as the “ability to make complex meanings explicit in either oral or written modalities by means of language itself rather than by means of contextual or paralinguistic cues (e.g. gestures, intonation)” (p. 561). Cummins (1979, 1981a, 1981b, 2000) proposed a distinction between social language (BICS), which takes 1 to 3 years in development, and academic language (CALP), which requires 5 to 7 years to develop.

Furthermore, Cummins (1980a) suggested the concept of “cross-lingual dimensions” (p. 175). Cummins (1980a) argued the following four distinguishing features of cross-lingual dimensions:

(1) CALP is a reliable dimension of individual differences which is central to scholastic success and which can be empirically distinguished from interpersonal communicative skills in both L1 and L2 (second language); (2) The same dimension underlies cognitive academic proficiency in both L1 and L2; (3) Older learners acquire (L2) CALP more rapidly than younger learners because their L1 CALP is better developed; and (4) To the extent that instruction through L<sub>x</sub> is effective in developing L<sub>x</sub> CALP, students will develop L<sub>y</sub> CALP provided there is adequate exposure to L<sub>y</sub> and motivation to learn L<sub>y</sub> since the same dimension underlies performance in both languages. (p. 185)

In many school systems, ELLs are challenged to abort their native language in subordination to solely English speaking. However, Cummins’ research (as cited in Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012; Bialystok & Martin, 2004; Cummins, 1981b) substantiated that ELLs, with a developed vocabulary and knowledge of two language systems, proceeded to develop metalinguistic awareness and grasp high-level concepts that allow them to comprehend patterns and differences between and among languages. The importance of the native language, coupled with the English language, was a significant finding in both of these studies that linked their importance to propelling academic literacy achievement.

The two foundational constructs of L1 and L2 (Cummins, 1979, 1981a, 1981b) have significantly impacted policies and educational programs, national standards, and educational reform throughout the years (Bailey & Huang, 2011; Cummins, Mirza, &

Stille, 2012; Echevarria et al., 2013; Ntelioglou, Fannin, Montanera, & Cummins, 2014). These two concepts of academic language posit the importance of multilingualism and L2 use in classrooms as being different from L1 conversational literacy on the playground. According to Cummins' (1981b) threshold hypothesis, there are three types of bilinguals: proficient, partial, and limited. Bilingual children who are proficient maintain a high level in both languages and have positive cognitive effects. Children with partial bilingualism are native speakers in the one language without positive or negative cognitive effects. Finally, children with limited bilingualism experience negative cognitive effects due to low levels of understanding in both languages (Cummins, 1979). Furthermore, this supports Cummins' (1979, 1980a, 1980b) developmental interdependence theory that hypothesizes that the type of competence (BICS vs. CALP) the child has developed in L1 at the time when exposure to L2 begins partially determines the level of L2 competence a bilingual child attains.

Literacy engagement is critical for academic language proficiency (CALP; Cummins, 2000). Cummins (as quoted in Cummins et al., 2012) posited that the development of CALP develops from the following two sources:

The complexity of academic language, and the fact that English language learners are attempting to catch up to a moving target, namely, native-speakers of English whose academic language and literacy skills are increasing progressively from one grade level to the next. (p. 30)

Therefore, when schools and teachers are unable to distinguish between BICS and CALP, students may be subjected to unnecessary psychological assessment and early exits from federally approved programs designed to assist ELLs to make adequate academic growth alongside their peers and native speakers of English (Cummins, 1980a,

1980b, 1984; Kober & Rentner, 2012). However, challenges still persist with the quality of instruction as teachers struggle to advance ELLs' academic literacy achievement.

### **Content of Instruction**

This section reports on the literature related to the contents of instruction in education, the bulk of which has occurred over the past 4 years. The following overarching question still remains: How is the acquisition of academic literacy effectively assessed and achieved? ELLs enter schools throughout the United States with diverse backgrounds. The increased immigration of ELLs over recent years encompasses a “wide variety of educational and cultural experiences [as well as] considerable linguistic differences [that have] implications for instruction, assessment, and program design” (Echevarria et al., 2013, p. 4). Effective instruction that assists ELLs to understand subject content poses a tremendous challenge for many mainstream teachers. Because of this, various modes of instructional methods and delivery models have been researched throughout the years to assist ELLs' acquisition of academic English language (Echevarria et al., 2013; Short & Boyson, 2012).

The urgency to master academic language becomes more prevalent as ELL students advance through grade levels and due to the increasingly complex content and course work. The Council of the Great City Schools (2014) recommended criteria for supporting the academic needs of ELLs. The three nonnegotiable criteria recommended by the Council of the Great City Schools included “maintenance of grade level rigor; building knowledge while acquiring and building academic language (in English and/or other languages); and cultural relevance” (p. 13). Santos, Darling-Hammond, and Cheuk (2012) argued that “English language acquisition can no longer be considered a boutique proposition” (p. 3). According to Samson and Collins (2012),

Instruction can range from “classrooms where all students receive bilingual/dual-language instruction to structured/sheltered English immersion classrooms to general education classrooms, where content instruction from the mainstream teacher is supported by an ESL teacher working with individual students.” (p. 4)

As ELLs continue to arrive from other countries and increase the population in the United States, many school districts are implementing more “inclusive instructional programs that place ELLs in mainstream programs and as early and as fully possible” (Platt, Harper, & Mendoza, 2003, p. 105). School districts throughout the United States require ELLs to learn content-area skills and concepts at the same time as they master academic language and literacy skills (Kim et al., 2011; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Baecher, Artigliere, Patterson, and Spatzer (2012) suggested that mainstream teachers make “instructional choices that will support access to content learning and develop language skills” (p. 16) in addition to the collaborative efforts of the push-in or pullout models. Moreover, Hopkins, Lowenhaupt, and Sweet (2015) argued that more “robust understandings [are needed regarding the] relationship between language and content” (p. 431).

Differences in culture affect ELLs in many ways, including classroom participation and performance (Calderon & Minaya-Rowe, 2011; Kanevsky, 2011; Samson & Collins, 2012). It is challenging and culturally responsible for teachers to “learn who our students are, [to] know something about the learners’ ethnic backgrounds, [the] languages they speak, [and what] their parents do for work” (Freeman, Freeman, & Ramirez, 2008, p. 19). When teachers apply cultural background knowledge to content learning and adjust their instructional practices to support ELLs to be contributors in their own learning, they have a greater “effect size” (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016, p. 5) on

student achievement. Battiste (as cited in Cummins, Hu, Markus, & Montero, 2015) argued the necessity of cultural supports that meet cognitive needs without reducing content, regardless to the instructional classroom modality.

Finally, “common dimensions” (DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker, & Rivera, 2014, p. 473) of academic literacy interrelate across all content areas. According to DiCerbo et al. (2014), essential academic language consists of “the basic features of academic language that are used across all content areas including academic words, complex sentence structures, and discourse features that provide cohesion” (p. 450). Academic language and content are important in achievement of academic literacy. Furthermore, Elfers and Stritikus (2014) reported that academic literacy should be viewed as “acquisition of the language and content learning” (p. 311). Interestingly, the tenants of Cummins’ (as cited in Bailey & Huang, 2011; Bunch, Kibler, & Pimentel, 2012; Menken & Solorza, 2015) interdependent hypothesis that maintains that skills students acquire in their home language will transfer to English is supported when ELLs concurrently develop language and cognitive skills as they learn content.

### **Academic Literacy**

Cummins (2000) defined academic language as “the sum of the vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and language functions that students will encounter and be required to demonstrate mastery of during their school years” (p. 541). In 1996, the NAEP (as cited in Latham, Schneider, & Ark, 2016) began compiling assessment data to track the performance of ELLs in reading and mathematics. The NAEP (2015, 2017) reading assessment data revealed a 36-point achievement gap in 2015 and a 37-point achievement gap in 2017 between ELL students and the non-ELL students at the fourth grade. The eighth-grade findings revealed a 44-point gap in 2015 and a 43-point

achievement gap in 2017. In mathematics, the NAEP (2015, 2017) assessment data revealed a 25-point achievement gap in 2015 and a 26-point achievement gap in 2017 between ELLs and non-English language students at the fourth-grade level and a 38-point gap in 2015 and a 40-point gap in 2017 at the eighth-grade level. The Understanding Language District Engagement Subcommittee at Stanford University (as quoted in U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2015) compiled the following six key principles for instructing ELLs that meet the rigorous grade-level standards of the CCSS in English language arts and mathematics:

- (1) Instruction focuses on providing ELLs with opportunities to engage in discipline-specific practices, which are designed to build conceptual understanding and language competence in tandem;
- (2) Instruction leverages ELLs home language(s), cultural assets, and prior knowledge;
- (3) Standards-aligned instruction for ELLs is rigorous, grade-level appropriate, and provides deliberate and appropriate scaffolds;
- (4) Instruction moves ELLs forward by taking into account their English proficiency level(s) and prior schooling experiences;
- (5) Instruction fosters ELLs' autonomy by equipping them with the strategies necessary to comprehend and use language in a variety of academic settings; and
- (6) Diagnostic tools and formative assessment practices are employed to measure students' content knowledge, academic language competence, and participation in disciplinary practices. (pp. 8-9)

ELLs who have not developed academic language in their speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills are considered academically illiterate and are at risk for dropping out of school (Slama, 2012). According to Valdés, Kibler, and Walqui (2014), students must become proficient with the structural concepts that are scaffolded

throughout the content they are studying based on Principle 3 that states, “Standards-aligned instruction for ELLs is rigorous, grade-level appropriate, and provides deliberate and appropriate scaffolds” (p. 14). Short, Fidelman, and Louguit (2012) argued that, in order for ELLs to become successful in achievement of academic literacy, they must comprehend the integration of content concepts with academic language in addition to knowing the vocabulary and grammar. Academic literacy is the gateway to academic status, recognition, and a successful life within and outside of the United States.

Academic literacy requires “explicit teaching with a focus on the genres, functions, and conventions of the language itself in the context of extensive reading and writing of the language” (Cummins, 2000, p. 541).

Peercy (2011) wrote about how ELLs’ ability and inability to co-ordinate words, access context and linguistic clues in their reading, and come to understand their teacher expectations and themselves as learners are dependent on academic discourse. She conducted a qualitative study involving two junior high school ESL teachers of classrooms examining how teachers made content accessible to students in the development of academic literacy. ELL students in Grades 7 through 9 were placed in small groups according their proficiency levels (e.g., beginning, intermediate, or advanced). ELL students’ academic literacy skills were examined in a series of five target learning activities over a 4-month period. All students were taught the academic language that included “explicit reading strategies for comprehension using culturally responsive teaching methods” (Peercy, 2011, p. 330), and ELL students’ grouped in the L1 proficiency level were given additional culturally relevant supports to provide context knowledge in L1. All ELL students participated in discussions and prompts given by the ESL teachers to enhance “comprehension of text” (Peercy, 2011, p. 337), expand

vocabulary base, and help them make various connections between mainstream content classes and academic activities required. Verbal responses given by ELLs allowed teachers to “check students’ comprehension and students to practice language and connect ideas” (Peercy, 2011, p. 337). Peercy’s findings suggested that various aspects of strategic curricular practice were critical for ELLs’ achievement of academic literacy. In addition to different instructional strategies, teachers of ELLs needed to have a

deeper way of thinking about their teaching and knowledge of how to bring findings from various bodies of research together; engaging instruction that teaches students mainstream content while also attending to language, focusing on students’ academic language development, providing opportunities for L1 support, scaffolding students in effective ways to read both narrative and expository text, and teaching in culturally responsive ways. (Peercy, 2011, p. 353)

### **Academic Vocabulary**

Vocabulary knowledge has been shown to be a strong predictor of reading ability (fluency) and reading comprehension for ELLs (Baker, Simmons, & Kame’enui, 1998; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). According to Cummins (2000), academic vocabulary alignment is sequentially first regarding academic language development. Specific elements of vocabulary are essential to academic language development. Bailey and Huang (2011) defined “academic vocabulary [as] the vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse associated with language used to teach academic content, as well as the language used to navigate the school setting more generally” (p. 343). Echevarria and Vogt (2010) provided a working definition of academic vocabulary as functional language, content words, process, and word parts that teach English structure. Kieffer and Lesaux (2010) focused on the actual “words that

students often encounter in expository texts across the content areas of science and social studies, but they only rarely encounter in narrative texts and everyday conversations” (p. 48). Nagy and Townsend (2012) noted the following three principles of effective vocabulary instruction: “teaching both definitional and contextual information; promoting depth of processing; and providing multiple encounters of words” (p. 98).

Hattie (2009) synthesized over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. Hattie’s research and synthesis of over 15 years of compiled data (as cited in Fisher et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009) provided evidence-based support regarding the amount of impact (effect size) the teachers instructional practice has on a student’s academic achievement. According to Fisher et al. (2016), a strong vocabulary program has the effect size of 0.67. For an instructional practice to be significant statistically, the instructional action must fall inside the “zone of desired effects, which is 0.40 and above” (Fisher et al., 2016, p. 10). Marzano (2004a, 2006) credited 28 nationally recognized standards documents that he compiled to develop what he termed *synthesis document*. Marzano’s comprehensive synthesis of influences learning (as cited in Hattie, 2009, 2012; Hattie & Yates, 2012; Marzano, 2009) aligned with Hattie’s (2009, 2012) synthesis of educational research and the concepts presented within the visible. Moreover, a six-step process in the instruction of vocabulary was described by Marzano and Pickering (2005). The initial three steps were to aid the teacher in direct instruction. The last three steps involved provision of student opportunities to practice skills and reinforce their learning.

Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, and Green (2014) did a qualitative study with a focus on acquisition and application of work-specific vocabulary in three adult ELLs. Initially, the participants consisted of seven purposefully selected employees and their supervisor. However, during the course of the study, only four participants returned

to Part II for Module 1, and, during the 2nd week, only three participants returned to complete the training. Madrigal-Hopes et al. instructed the three adult ELLs in a 5-week, work-specific, vocabulary content training. Vocabulary that was “work-specific [was obtained from] interviews, observations and document artifacts” (Madrigal-Hopes et al., 2014, p. 49). Moreover, the six-step, work-specific, vocabulary training modules were developed by the researchers to investigate the framework for building academic vocabulary developed by Marzano (as cited in Larrotta, 2011; Madrigal-Hopes et al., 2014; Marzano & Pickering, 2005). The six-step process included

Step 1--The teacher provides a description, explanation, or example of the new term; Step 2--Students restate the explanation of the new term in their own words; Step 3--Students create nonlinguistic representation of the terms; Step 4--Students periodically do activities that help them add to their knowledge of vocabulary terms; Step 5--Periodically, students are asked to discuss the terms with one another; Step 6--Periodically, students are involved in games that allow them to play with the terms. (Madrigal-Hopes et al., 2014, p. 49)

The research findings in this case study supported Marzano’s (2004a, 2004b, 2006) six-step process of building academic vocabulary. In addition, as suggested by Cummins’ (2000) interdependency hypothesis, the applications to the acquisition of CALP were evidenced during the modules on work-specific vocabulary trainings.

The need for self-regulatory learning strategies significantly impacts academic vocabulary learning. Hattie (as quoted in Fisher et al., 2016) defined self-regulatory learning, also known as self-efficacy, as “the confidence or strength of belief that we have in ourselves that we can make our learning happen” (p. 24). College students in an English language proficiency program for international students course recognized the

implications for self-regulatory strategies to be direct or indirect to increase their effective acquisition of academic vocabulary (Ping, Baranovich, Manuelli, & Siraj, 2015). In the Ping et al.'s (2015) mixed-methods study, a pilot test was administered to 52 ELLs enrolled in the developmental English course prior to the questionnaire administration to the target group. All student participants were first asked to complete the questionnaire written in L1 followed by an interview for clarity. The researcher distributed a "paper version of the Vocabulary Levels Test paper and the questionnaires to the participants and administered them at the end of the class" (Ping et al., 2015, p. 141). During the follow-up interview, the majority of the students stated that "they did not plan their vocabulary learning and usually look up in the dictionary when encountering a new word or before memorizing a new word" (Ping et al., 2015, p. 142). Eight students believed that "it was hard to learn English words, and the biggest difficulty they encountered was vocabulary" (Ping et al., 2015, p. 144). Moreover, nine students stated that they believed they were not good in learning vocabularies (e.g., self-efficacy).

According to Fisher et al. (2016), the effect of a strong vocabulary is 0.67. Furthermore, "vocabulary knowledge is a strong predictor of reading comprehension" (Fisher et al., 2016, p. 49). Five students reported being able and motivated to learn vocabularies. This type of "self-verbalization and self-questioning" (Fischer et al., 2016, p. 169) has a 0.64 effect size on student acquisition of academic vocabulary. Hattie (2009) posited that "students' estimates of their own performance typically formed from past experiences in learning" (p. 43). Ping et al. (2015) found three significant findings as a result of this mixed-methods study. First, the study revealed the need to grow students' vocabulary knowledge to prepare them for university course work. Second, the students "recognized the importance of vocabulary in language acquisition and their perception

toward their capacity” (Ping et al., 2015, p. 144). Finally, Ping et al. noted the following pedagogical implications that showed as a result of this study: “self-regulatory strategies including cognitive, metacognitive, affective aspects should be taught directly or indirectly” (p. 144) as enhancements to improve acquisition of academic vocabulary.

Although the goal of a vocabulary study is to test knowledge of “vocabulary meanings in context” (Wilhelm, 2013, p. 49), much progress has been made with working to get students’ definitions of lists of words (Larrotta, 2011; Wilhelm, 2013). Nagy and Herman (as cited in Marzano, 2009) noted that there was a 6,000 word gap between students at the 25th and 50th percentiles in fourth and 12th grades and an estimated 4,500 and 5,400 words for low- versus high-achieving students. Frontloading is one method for teaching vocabulary prior to the start of a lesson. Among the more popular ways to preview words needed within context are using cognates, word walls, or student-developed definitions with pictures (Echeverria & Vogt, 2010). Providing word banks in the form of Tiers 1 to 3 is also a proven tactic in strengthening vocabulary (Cummins, 2008; Marzano, 2010, 2012; Wilhelm, 2013). According to Cummins (2008), the research substantiates “strong relationships for both L1 and second language learners between opportunities to read and development of vocabulary and reading comprehension abilities” (p. 74). Additionally, the importance of explicit instruction in “comprehension strategies and explanation of word meanings supports the research findings” (Cummins, 2008, p. 74). For example, teachers preteach vocabulary by providing crossword puzzles and word lists (Yuriev, Capuano, & Short, 2016).

Different word families in the English language are estimated to be 250,000 (Wilhelm, 2013). Students need approximately 75,000 “individual words [to become] successful adult readers” (Wilhelm, 2013, p. 49). Marzano and Pickering (2005)

presented a list of 7,923 terms in various content areas (e.g., mathematics, science, English language arts, history, geography, civics, economics, health, technology, physical education, and the arts). In addition, Marzano (as cited in Larrotta, 2011; Madrigal-Hopes et al., 2014; Marzano, 2004a, 2004b, 2006) delineated a six-step process to assist teachers with ensuring that students receive effective vocabulary instruction. If a teacher presents the explanation of a new term to convey the meaning, he or she could utilize body language and visuals to assist ELLs in comprehending the meaning effectively (Sam & Rajan, 2013). ELLs can articulate their comprehension by restating it in their own words. Also, students can work in pairs to address their linguistic problem collaboratively and conclude with a team approach classroom activity (Sam & Rajan, 2013; Storch & Aldosari, 2013). Finally, Marzano (as quoted in Sibold, 2011) asserted that mastery of “academic vocabulary, specifically the language that may occur in multiple contexts or the precise words that are presented in a specific context, can help students acquire new learning strategies and skills” (p. 24).

A broader definition of the term *academic vocabulary* and a cross-disciplinary scope of academic language that encompass various academic language skills was investigated in this research study (Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Uccelli, Galloway, Barr, Meneses, & Dobbs, 2015). Uccelli et al.’s (2015) mixed-method study was conducted with a cross-sectional sample of 218 fourth- through sixth-grade students in an urban public school located in the northeastern United States. The sample size consisted of 49% males and 51% females; 65% of the students qualified for the free or reduced-price federal lunch program, 22% of the population was designated as ELLs, 28% of the students was designated as former English learners or former limited English proficient (LEP), and 109 of the sample size consisted of LEP students. Their methodology

construct involved administering four assessments to measure “core academic-language skills (CALs)” (Uccelli et al., 2015, pp. 337-338). Uccelli et al. (2015) designed an innovative instrument called the CALs Instrument (CALs-I) to measure CALs. CALs-I is an innovative design process that “integrated quantitative and qualitative analysis” (Uccelli et al., 2015, pp. 343-344) of the data collected.

Uccelli et al. (2015) expanded the definition of academic-language proficiency and academic-language skills as core academic skills as “a constellation of the high-utility language skills that correspond to linguistic features that are prevalent in academic discourse across school content areas and infrequent in colloquial conversations” (p. 338). The four assessments of Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Vocabulary Association Test (VAT), Test of Silent Word Reading Fluency (TOSWRF), and CALs-I were administered as a 45-min group interval. The goal of the study was hypothesized to assess academic vocabulary language as measured by reading comprehension. For example, Lesaus, Kieffer, Faller, and Kelly (as quoted in Uccelli et al., 2015) from the Vocabulary Association Test stated, “Students were asked to draw a line to the three words that always go with or are most related to the word in the middle” (p. 344). In order to examine students’ ability to recognize text appropriately, Uccelli et al. administered the TOSWRF and asked them to “draw a line between the boundaries of as many words as they can” (p. 344) within a 3-min time frame. Results of this mixed-methods research showed CALs (as measured by CALs-I) to be a “significant predictor of students’ reading comprehension as measured by the standardized Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test above and beyond the contribution of academic vocabulary knowledge, VAT, word fluency (e.g., TOSWRF), and sociodemographic characteristics” (Uccelli et al., 2015, p. 348).

According to Ramirez, Chen, and Pasquarella (2013), cognate knowledge aids in academic vocabulary acquisition with ELLs and nonlinguistic individuals. Ramirez et al.'s work with Spanish-speaking ELLs in fourth and seventh grades showed that they could transfer morphologically in their L1 to “enhance vocabulary and reading comprehension” (p. 74). The goal of Ramirez et al.'s research was to examine if there was a positive association between cross-linguistic Spanish “derivational awareness and English vocabulary and reading comprehension” (p. 76). For example, the Spanish-speaking ELLs were able to translate English-derived words from Spanish cognates (e.g., unusual to inusual in Spanish and facility to facile in Spanish). Echevarria et al. (2013) asserted the value of cognate study when they discussed the Sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP) and how cognates enhance understanding for students whose “native language has a Latin base” (p. 98). Furthermore, Echevarria and Vogt (2010) noted that “vocabulary growth may be accelerated when instruction is linked to the home language, such as offering an equivalent or synonym, or shared cognate” (p. 12).

Recent educational reform efforts assert the importance of academic vocabulary being a predictor of reading comprehension. In numerous studies with vocabulary, there is a growing body of research “showing the demands that academic language places on readers and writers, and on interventions to help students meet these demands” (Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 91). According to Gardner and Davies (2013), there is a need for a new academic vocabulary word list. Gardner and Davies posited that

control of academic vocabulary, or lack thereof, may be the single most important discriminator in the gate-keeping tests of education; and insufficient academic knowledge has also been strongly associated with the oft-cited gap in academic achievement that exists between certain groups of students—primarily the

economically disadvantaged and ELLs. (pp. 1-2)

Vocabulary acquisition occurs most robustly in active environments in which students move more words from receptive to productive use (Egbert & Ernst-Slavit, 2010; Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Zhou, 2010). In an effort to introduce a more robust academic vocabulary list, Xue and Nation (as quoted in Gardner & Davies, 2013) combined four nationally accepted word lists into a “University Word List” (p. 3). This list was utilized for greater than 15 years until Coxhead (as quoted in Gardner & Davies, 2013) expressed a need for a more “representative academic list” (pp. 2-3) that became the new standard. Gardner and Davies’s (2013) recommendations were that ELLs who were truly “beginners in English” (p. 24) start with resources like “Dolch List and Fry List as a precursor to working the AVL-AWL (Academic Vocabulary List-Academic Word List)” (p. 24). Moreover, Gardner and Davies argued that using high-frequency words combined with the top tier academic words (e.g., leading 500 or leading 1,000) would produce the best outcomes that “improve learning, teaching, and research of English academic vocabulary in its many contexts” (p. 25). Additional ways recommended for increasing receptive and productive vocabulary included problem solving, critical thinking, and reiterating stories (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Davies, 2013; Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Zhou, 2010).

Pacheco, David, and Jiménez (2015) found that making connections with students’ “heritage language” (p. 50) led to ELLs’ literacy achievement aligned to CCSS (Hakuta, Santos, & Fang, 2013). Heritage language, as defined by Pacheco et al., are “languages that students use in their communities or with their families that are tied closely to their cultural heritage” (p. 49). Students create mental and physical images to reinforce meaning about vocabulary, text, and reading comprehension strategies. In this

study, Pacheco et al. presented “TRANSLATE (Teaching Reading and New Strategic Language Approaches to English Language Learners)” (p. 51) as an instructional approach that allows students to access their heritage language for literacy achievement (Mori & Calder, 2013). For example, small group guided reading instruction, consisting of four to five students, are formed (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001, 2012). The following is an overview of a lesson implementation process:

Teacher begins by inviting students to make text-to-self, text-to-text or text-to-world connections to a poem, short story, or passage. The students then read the passage independently or as a whole group and collaboratively translate short sections of conceptually and linguistically rich texts from the passage into their heritage language. Students then compare translations with one another and discuss meanings at the word, sentence, and text level in their heritage language and in English. (Pacheco et al., 2015, p. 51)

When students engage in per-to-peer instructional strategies and self-efficacy, it helps with solidifying their own learning (Bandura, 1977; Fisher et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009). Furthermore, Cummins (as quoted in Pacheco et al., 2015) warned that “omission of students’ heritage languages in instruction can have profound and negative consequences on ELLs academic achievement” (p. 51).

How students figure out the meaning of unknown vocabulary words underpins Cárdenas-Hagan’s (2015) study. Introducing ELLs to morphemes (“the smallest units of meaning in language), cognates (words similar in meaning and spelling in a student’s native language and English), bilingual glossaries, multiple meaning words, and extended discussions with much repetition and rehearsal” (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2015, p. 35) could provide positive outcomes for ELLs’ acquisition of academic vocabulary. By integrating

evidence-based practices during vocabulary instruction, 60% of new words that ELLs encounter can be understood by utilization of “transparent morphological structures” (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2015, p. 35). For example, during middle elementary grades, students learn parts of words such as prefix, root, and suffix. Moreover, the teacher who understands the “word parts that transfer across languages” (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2015, p. 35) can explicitly teach them to ELLs.

In addition, Spanish-speaking ELLs who receive explicit instruction in cognates have advantages because “common everyday words of Spanish are often higher level academic words in English” (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2015, p. 36). For instance, the Spanish word for facility (English) is “facilidad” (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2015, p. 36), and the Spanish word for verify (English) is “verificar” (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2015, p. 36). Cárdenas-Hagan (2015) found that making connections with students’ prior learning and native language and by instructing ELLs explicitly and systematically in their native language is beneficial in providing morphological knowledge. Additionally, cognates can be used to teach similarities and differences in words as well as words that have multiple meanings using this same instructional technique. Multifaceted vocabulary instruction helps ELLs develop metalinguistic skills that are paramount to understanding oral and written language. Cai and Lee (2012) hypothesized that the most common strategy used by ELLs to determine meaning of words is inference from context, and the second is morphology. Nevertheless, Cárdenas-Hagan argued that educators who understand the use of morphemes and cognates can assist ELLs with expansion of their word knowledge and also “facilitate second language vocabulary development” (p. 38).

In their quantitative study, Mori and Calder (2013) postulated that the “age of exposure to the L2, which is usually indexed by age of arrival in an L2-dominant country

and be related to young learners' differential achievement in various aspects of L1 and L2 learning, including phonology" (p. 293). Age-related issues and time of arrival into the United States have been taken into account for ELLs in acquiring academic vocabulary knowledge. Cummins and Nakajima (as quoted in Mori & Calder, 2013) demonstrated the "significant impact" (p. 294) that the age of arrival and length of residence had on young learners as it relates to acquisition of academic vocabulary and English reading proficiency. Additional studies supported the need for LEP ELLs to receive push-in or inclusion school-based programs versus pullout to meet the need of the content-related components of their instruction (Jackson, Schatschneider, & Leacox, 2014; Nagy & Townsend, 2012). Being included in content-related instruction will ensure that ELLs are able to function in the academic setting and on achievement tests. Moreover, Mori and Calder suggested that accommodation and interventional strategies for LEP students be implemented across curriculum (e.g., mathematics, social studies, and science) and be "designed to bring students' attention to linguistic forms that are frequently utilized while learning a certain content" (p. 305). For example, the test performance of LEP students who arrived in the United States late suggests they had difficulty with implementation of the academic grade-level vocabulary needed in the content area in order to be successful in L2 English proficiency (Cummins & Nakajima, as cited in Mori & Cader, 2013).

Another study regarding vocabulary acquisition focused on ELLs and meaningful academic conversation with the use of words in context. Hill and Hoak (2016) found that academic language is seldom used in everyday conversation but, rather, is come upon during classroom content instruction. Gottlieb and Ernst-Slavit (as quoted in Hill & Hoak, 2016) argued that "if talk is encouraged as a way to develop academic language, then ELLs are on equal footing with proficient English speakers" (p. 46). In addition,

Purdy (2008) suggested that “guided reading” (p. 46) events allows ELLs’ conversational events to communicate context-related vocabulary successfully. Furthermore, Colombo and Fontaine (2009) found that, with involvement in “meaningful conversations, ELLs’ use of targeted vocabulary and text-connection and inferencing strategies increased” (p. 47). Researchers suggested that purposeful academic discussion is the “precursor to expecting high quality written work” (Hill & Hoak, 2016, p. 47). Moreover, Hill and Hoak stated that

purposeful attention to academic language, in conjunction with multiple opportunities for students to engage in productive, accountable talk is important for ELLs and others who need language development. Because everyone has to learn academic language, academic conversations benefit all students. (p. 44)

### **Subject-Area Vocabulary (Mathematics and Science)**

Content-specific vocabulary integration with a focus on literacy is critical for academic success for all students, especially ELLs. Explicit instruction of vocabulary is key within specific subject areas for acquisition of ELLs’ academic literacy. Mastering the language of chemistry, especially the “definition of terms and concepts, [is essential to success in] problem-solving” (Yuriev et al., 2016, p. 532). Although front-loading is a common strategy for introducing academic vocabulary in most subject areas (Echeverria & Vogt, 2010), science teachers must reload academic vocabulary to accomplish the in-depth knowledge needed for scientific inquiry and problem solving (Silva, Weinburgh, & Smith, 2013). In addition, Rupley and Slough (2010) said that students’ science understanding was “inextricably bound to their understanding of the vocabulary used to define and communicate the concepts and matching those concepts with the appropriate background knowledge” (p. 100).

There is a mistaken idea that ELLs can perform well because mathematics is built on problem solving, and numbers is a universal language (Pettit, 2014). Pettit (2013) found it necessary to explore teachers' and students' beliefs about ELLs in mainstream mathematics classrooms to dispel myths and to improve ELLs' academic vocabulary acquisition. In her work with middle school mathematics teachers and ELLs, Pettit (2013) found that "not only do teachers' beliefs affect the expectations they hold of students, but their actions in the classroom also reflect their beliefs [and their beliefs, if left] unexamined, negative beliefs toward ELLs, even well meaning teachers might discriminate without realizing it" (p. 130). For example, students reported having difficulties completing and understand word problems because of the contained "words they could not understand" (Pettit, 2013, p. 142). According to Pettit (2013), several teachers in this qualitative and quantitative study reported that,

despite the common assumption that mathematics is a relatively easy subject for ELLs, after talking with students, I found the opposite to be true. When asked about the difficulties the students face in math class, they all made some reference to the words. (p. 141)

Pettit (2014) stated,

It is crucial to form a new concept of classroom teachers' roles to include ELLs' diverse needs and to take full responsibility for their needs. Likewise, teachers should not blame the difficulties of ELLs on their home lives. Every student comes into a classroom with different needs and each deserves an equal access to the curriculum" in a language and instructional strategy they can comprehend. (p. 21)

In considering mathematics as a language, it is imperative that teachers gain an

understanding of the connectedness of effectively teaching mathematics and language concepts across all four modalities (i.e., speaking, reading, writing, and listening) in addition to teaching these concepts in isolation (e.g., nouns, verbs, and phrases; August, Fenner, & Snyder, 2014). Regarding mathematics instruction, the literature suggested that explicit, intentional, and student-friendly definitions support the learning of mathematical concepts (Baker et al., 2014). Baker et al. (2014) suggested that the following six criteria be utilized when selecting words to teach: “Words central to understanding the text, Words frequently used in the text, Words that might appear in other content areas, Words with multiple meanings, Words with affixes, and Words with cross-language potential” (pp. 16-17). Equipping students with multiple modalities to “experience the new academic vocabulary” (Baker et al., 2014, p. 18) goes above and beyond the shallowness of memorizing definitions. For example, the exhibit of a word map provides students with illustrations of the meaning of the word (student-friendly definition), understanding what the word does not mean (antonyms), and reinforcements of meanings of the word by providing examples and nonexamples (Baker et al., 2014). When teachers explicitly and intentionally infuse speaking, reading, writing, and listening, ELLs are enabled to use the language meaningfully while increasing proficiency (Pettit, 2013; Tan, 2011). Moreover, recent research strongly suggested the use of scaffolding techniques to integrate oral and written language into instructional content areas to promote student engagement in “classroom scientific and mathematical discourse” (Tan, 2011, p. 338).

### **Subject-Area Vocabulary (Social Studies)**

A major challenge for ELLs that is all encompassing as it relates to social studies content vocabulary is a lack of background knowledge (Cruz & Thornton, 2013). Lack of background knowledge also includes problem solving and reasoning of social studies

content. Short and Boyson (as quoted in Cruz & Thornton, 2013) reported that background content knowledge for problem solving and reasoning pulls from three knowledge bases: “knowledge of content; knowledge of English; and knowledge of how tasks are to be achieved” (p. 49). When vocabulary words are abstract and lack cultural relevant pedagogy, students are challenged to read, write, and become critical thinkers (Brodsky & Vahab, 2014; Choi, 2013). For example, teach students global history by first allowing them to discuss the origin of their births and ancestry after explicit discussion of the ground rules and respect. In addition, building on students’ cultural experiences and utilizing “material with familiar content can facilitate [ELLs] literacy development and reading comprehension” (Goldenberg, 2013, p. 8).

Furthermore, Cho and Reich (as quoted in Jaffee, 2016a) noted the implications of social studies teachers who utilized plays and role-playing as pedagogy for Latino and Latina youth to gain new knowledge by portraying significant historic events and “promoted academic literacy skills for newcomer students” (p. 149). These findings were the results of a multisite collective case study with ELLs in Texas. According to Jaffee (2016a), ELLs face significant challenges related to language barriers and lack of background knowledge. Jaffee (2016a) suggested that social studies teachers use guided conversations to increase the “comprehensibility of English” (p. 148).

Studies cited by Jaffee (2016a) and Colombo and Fontaine (2009) suggested allowing peer interactions between ELLs and native speakers to focus on social studies content, abstract concepts, and complex social studies topics to accomplish the needed cognitive academic language proficiency to learn social studies. In contrast, Fránquiz and Salinas’s study (as quoted in Jaffee, 2016a) showed that “newcomers bringing cultural and linguistic assets are accessed and used to bridge the content presented in social

studies” (p. 148). Consideration being given to ELLs voice and cultural background “highlights the intersection between citizenship and language, culture, and legal status” (Jaffee, 2016b, p. 2), thus, magnifying the added importance of vocabulary and social studies and academic literacy.

### **Literacy Skills**

Some research studies discussed “student exploratory talk” (Boyd, 2015, p. 376) as a method of communication utilized by students to comprehend academic material, regardless of the subject or content. Lindahl (2013) emphasized the significance of ELLs’ literacy development with simultaneous instruction of receptive and expressive language skills. Lindahl’s research depicted the “dual nature [of the role of the mainstream teacher as that of] teachers of content and teachers of language” (p. 4) target instruction. Mainstream classroom teachers benefit from implementation of best practices by “integrating language development with techniques to make content curricular topics more comprehensible” (Short, 2013, p. 119). For example, modeling the use of a graphic organizer assists students with organization of information as well as “reading comprehension and summarizing” (Watkins & Lindahl, 2010, p. 24). According to Lindahl, characteristics of good teachers that especially benefit ELLs include “the ability to analyze the grammatical problems that learners encounter; evaluate learners’ use of grammar against criteria of accuracy and appropriateness; anticipate learner’s learning problems and plan lessons at the right level; and present new language clearly and efficiently” (p. 34).

Cummins’ (1979, 1981a, 1981b, 2000) well-documented research regarding the number of years it takes for ELLs to acquire academic language (e.g., CALP) was substantiated by Lindahl’s (2013) and Watkins and Lindahl’s (2010) research findings.

Lindahl asserted that it is essential for mainstream teachers to “possess enough language awareness to focus students’ attention on specific target language forms” (p. 34) for the continuum into language proficiency. Front-loading is one method that can be used by content-area teachers as an instructional strategy for ELLs’ preview vocabulary and fluency prior to reading. In addition, when words are immersed within and connected to reading content versus taught in isolation, ELLs are more likely to retain new vocabulary words (Cruz & Thornton, 2013; Lindahl, 2013; Lindahl & Watkins, 2014; Watkins & Lindahl, 2010). Subsequent to reading, ELLs’ comprehension and background knowledge can be enhanced by teachers supporting language growth by semantic word webs, games, reading aloud, realia, and graphic organizers. Appropriate and target use of reading strategies, comprehension strategies, and vocabulary enrichment are critical components to ELLs’ success.

Thompson, Brown, and Ward (2016) did a mixed-method study within a large suburban school with six adolescent ELLs to inform teachers’ practice. Student performance data were systematically collected and analyzed to monitor data-driven instruction. The mixed-method study utilized an action research methodology to provide a “critical understanding of how ELLs and their ESL teacher reacted to the prescriptive close reading approach mandated by the states” (Thompson et al., 2016, p. 7). The six high school students’ L1 reading proficiency baseline was obtained by using “Reading A-Z” [and their L2] reading proficiency level was based on scores from IDEAS Proficiency Test [an English-language placement test]” (Thompson et al., 2016, p. 9). After the teacher read aloud, unfamiliar vocabulary words were discussed between the student and teacher, and, then, peer pairing occurred to read aloud to each other. Peer pair read alouds were preceded by teacher-generated questions. Finally, peer partners worked together to

answer teacher-generated “integration of knowledge and ideas questions aligned with the CCSS guidelines” (Thompson et al., 2016, p. 12). The study concluded with interviews of ELLs and teachers to gain insight into their perceptions of the close reading procedure. The findings of this mixed-methods study indicated the critical role of background knowledge for reading comprehension. Also noted were the performance challenges ELLs experienced that were reflected by a decline in motivation and engagement during the state-mandated tests.

Teaching reading strategies that assist ELLs before, during, and after reading is a common instructional technique utilized by teachers to help with reading comprehension. Klingner, Boardman, Eppolito, and Schonewise (2012) investigated effective components of reading comprehension that help struggling ELLs develop in reading and language in content-area classrooms. The authors collected data on several measures (e.g., language acquisition, reading comprehension, and content learning) for ELLs and compared them to their English-speaking cohorts. Klingner et al. evaluated a plethora of reading comprehension studies and strategies such as “Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)” (p. 37); “Self-questioning strategy; Comprehension strategies with culturally familiar text and native language; Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS); Modified Reciprocal Teaching; and Reading with comprehension strategy instruction with attribution retraining” (pp. 54-55) to ascertain the challenges and success ELLs experienced with reading comprehension.

The results of the study showed that adolescent ELL students faced three broad areas of challenges in content-area classrooms compared to their English-speaking cohorts. For instance, many ELLs faced cultural challenges that existed between the lack of understanding culturally relevant topics and practices versus the “culture of the

classroom they participate” (Klingner et al., 2012, p. 38). Second, the authors suggested that ELL students were more motivated, engaged, and able to comprehend when reading content was meaningful and familiar. Finally, the creation of supportive culturally responsive learning environments, the support of oral language development and vocabulary acquisition, and the teaching of reading comprehension strategies are recommendations of Klingner et al. on how to support ELLs’ language acquisition, reading skills, and content: “(1) Create supportive, culturally responsive learning environments; (2) Support oral language development and vocabulary acquisition; and (3) Teach reading comprehension strategies [CSR rose to the top of the list because it integrated ESL strategies and sheltered English principles]” (p. 59).

### **Cognitive Challenge**

There are numerous research studies that corroborated that instructional practices should be differentiated for ELLs to build comprehension and to provide depth of knowledge. In order to provide ELL students with deep knowledge and understanding, the mainstream teacher must address learning progressions. According to Ainsworth and Viegut (2015), learning progressions “represent prerequisite knowledge and skills that students must acquire incrementally before they are able to understand and apply more complex or advanced concepts and skills” (p. 272). Rigor in instruction is a critical component for ELLs and non-ELLs. When a teacher’s expectation of student performance is low, it has a significant effect on students’ cognitive challenge (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2015; Echevarria et al., 2013; Freeman et al., 2008).

The educational reform movement demands increased academic rigor from all students, targeting high academic standards (Short, 2013). Echevarria et al. (2013) explained that the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) instructional

approach to language and content addressed ELLs' variable abilities in their English-speaking and comprehension abilities. For ELL students, rigor in lesson planning as it relates to the cognitive process is extremely important. Echevarria et al. reported,

Whichever taxonomy, such as Bloom's or Anderson and Krathwohl's, or descriptive framework, such as Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK), teachers choose to use when designing lessons, it is important to carefully plan higher-order questions and tasks prior to lesson delivery. (p. 125)

The requirement for more academic rigor for all students' is also a critical professional development need for teachers. Jiménez et al. (2015) compared academic literacy development and instructional strategies used by emergent bilinguals to support their comprehension of English language texts. According to Jiménez et al., the bilingual students in their qualitative study utilized spontaneity (e.g., native language) in answering questions and writing reports versus the cognitive translation skills necessary for acquisition of academic literacy such as matters of syntax. The development of essential academic skills (e.g., effective listening and note-taking skills, critical thinking, classroom discussions, and oral defense) required ELLs "recognizing, affirming, and recruiting [all of their] language resources as they make sense of text" (Jiménez et al., 2015, p. 268). For example, by focusing on the essentials of CALP, ELLs were better able to compare and contrast their "translated text with the source text" (Jiménez et al., 2015, p. 268).

The four ELL students at the middle school where the study was conducted came to realize that "comprehension consisted of multiple cognitive operations; [they] enlarged their capacity to understand how different languages function" (Jiménez et al., 2015, p. 268). Finally, as a result of this study, the participants were better able to "comprehend

written texts” (Jiménez et al., 2015, p. 268) because their teachers allowed them to use all of their resources, including their bilingualism.

### **Gaps in the Research**

The vast majority of the research reviewed and analyzed in the literature review were quantitative. Instructional strategies and implementation of programs was the overarching focus of the research studies. A preponderance of the qualitative studies addressed measuring growth in student achievement based on implementation of those strategies or programs (Bailey & Huang, 2011; Martinez et al., 2010; Short & Boyson, 2012; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Yuriev et al., 2016). These studies were beneficial with analyzing, measuring, and evaluating specific programs and strategies for their effectiveness with ELLs’ achievement of academic literacy.

A gap in the literature emerged because the literature review did not show qualitative phenomenological studies of teachers’ lived experiences in their work with helping ELL students to attain academic literacy in charter schools. Different second language instructional strategies that affected academic literacy were discussed in articles and studies. They were usually written from the angle of student achievement as opposed to the culture of the ELLs and the culture of their classrooms or their impact on the teacher delivering them (Calderon & Minaya-Rowe, 2011; Jaffee, 2016b; Kanevsky, 2011; Klingner et al., 2012; Sampson & Collins, 2012). Qualitative studies can provide information related to perceptions and events by allowing the researcher to “explore conscious experiences of an individual and attempt to distill the experiences or get at their essence” (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017, p. 168) that quantitative studies cannot. According to Edmonds and Kennedy (2017), qualitative research not only involves data collecting and analyzing for specific theme development, but it also involves the “how

and why of systems and human behavior and what governs these behaviors” (pp. 141-142).

Another gap that existed in the research was seen in the lack of published work with ELL students at charter schools in Ohio. Ohio is one of seven states (i.e., California, Texas, Florida, Arizona, Ohio, Michigan, and New York) that contain more than 250 charter schools apiece (Finn et al., 2016). Although Ohio is noted for a significant number of charter schools educating ELLs, there was very little research specific to this state.

Finally, gaps existed regarding replication of qualitative phenomenological studies. According to Porte and Richards (2012), the challenges with replication of qualitative and quantitative studies lie in the “terms of events and processes [e.g., QUAL] and in terms of variables and correlations [e.g., QUAN]” (p. 288). Moreover, the misconception that replication must necessarily be exact replication is a misnomer and a leading cause of the gap based on the small amount of research articles located by the researchers (Basturkmen, 2014; Mackey, 2012; Porte & Richards, 2012).

McCoy (2013) proposed that a similar phenomenological study be completed at a school in the United States with teachers with longer tenures at their schools and had experienced an increase in their ELL student population. McCoy selected the hermeneutical phenomenological method to conduct her qualitative research study. The sampling technique was purposeful and involved intentional selection of the participants to comprehend the phenomenon.

Based on the limitations of McCoy’s (2013) study, her recommendations for further study, and on this researcher’s review of current literature, this study became a prime candidate of interest for replication (Mackey, 2012). Many of the challenges and

factors reported by McCoy within international schools and teachers' lived experiences with ELLs appeared to be questionable concerns with teachers and their lived experiences with ELLs within the charter school setting in the United States. Therefore, with slight modifications, this researcher replicated the study with a charter school emphasis entitled *Teachers' Experiences in a Charter School With English Language Learners' Acquisition of Academic Literacy* to derive answers to these questions within the charter school setting. This researcher implemented the hermeneutical phenomenological approach as the methodology involving her research within the charter school setting with teachers who had the responsibility for academic literacy proficiency instruction of ELL students.

The American Psychological Association (2016) defined experimental replication as “replication of the methods or results of a previous study, as indicated by the author”

(p. 1). According to Dennis and Valacich (2014), there are three categories of replication:

- (1) Exact Replications: These articles are exact copies of the original article in terms of method and context. All measures, treatments statistical analyses, etc. are identical to those of the original study;
- (2) Methodological Replications: These articles use exactly the same methods as the original study (e.g., measures, treatments, statistics, etc.) but are conducted in a different context.; and
- (3) Conceptual Replications: These articles test exactly the same research questions or hypotheses but use different measures, treatments, analyses and/or context. (pp. 1-2)

This replication study fell into the categories of methodological and conceptual replications (Dennis & Valacich, 2014; Mackey, 2012). Replications can be an effective pedagogical instrument (Grahe, Brandt, Jzerman, & Cohoon, 2014). Markee (2015) posited that “researchers who do research on second and foreign language (L2)

classrooms inspired by the conversation analysis-for-second-language acquisition movement should engage in comparative re-production” (p. 1) and how “teachers and students accomplish language learning behavior” (p. 15). Based on the literature reviewed in this study, it was illustrated that, by using knowledge previously gained, this researcher could discover new knowledge and search for answers to her questions regarding teachers’ lived experiences with ELLs’ acquisition of academic literacy in a charter school setting.

### **Research Questions**

The central research question was, What are teachers’ lived experiences with ELLs difficulty mastering academic literacy in a charter school? The following three supporting research subquestions guided this study (McCoy, 2013):

1. What are the greatest challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy to ELLs in a charter school?
2. What changes, if any, have occurred in teachers’ classrooms in their work with helping ELLs to attain grade-level academic literacy in a charter school?
3. How do teachers believe they can be best prepared to help ELLs attain academic literacy in a charter school?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Aim of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate teachers' lived experiences with the difficulties related to ELLs' academic literacy achievement at Ohio school districts' kindergarten-Grade 8 charter schools. This qualitative research study explored teachers' lived experiences with teaching ELLs to acquire and master academic literacy in a charter school setting. The study had a hermeneutic phenomenological design in order to discover the lived experiences of mainstream teachers and their practices in response to an increase in the language diversity in their classrooms. By investigating with teachers of ELLs the overarching question pertaining to teachers' lived experiences with ELLs' difficulty mastering academic literacy in a charter school, their experiences were analyzed to produce data, and themes were developed to answer questions regarding the challenges faced by mainstream teachers with helping ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school. In this chapter, the qualitative research approach, the participants, data-collection instruments, procedures, data analysis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and potential research bias are discussed.

### **Qualitative Research Approach**

After the review of literature, this researcher decided to use McCoy's (2013) study to replicate. In this replication, the two variables being changed were the setting (charter school vs. international school) and the tenure of the ELLs' teachers (Basturkmen, 2014). This was a qualitative research study of phenomenological approach and hermeneutic design. Qualitative research aims at "understanding and interpreting behaviors, contexts, and interrelations" (Boutellier, Gassmann, Raeder, & Zeschky, 2015, p. 3). Similarly, Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggested that qualitative research is "a

broad approach to the study of social phenomena” (p. 3). Therefore, qualitative methodologies seek to interpret a world in which reality is “socially constructed, complex, and ever changing” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 1294). Furthermore, Creswell (2015) stated that qualitative research (a) investigates what is going on, (b) explains why the phenomenon needs to be explored, (c) presents a detailed view, and (d) studies individuals in their natural setting. According to Padilla-Diaz (2015), “All qualitative research has a phenomenological aspect to it, but the phenomenological approach cannot be applied to all qualitative researchers” (p. 103).

Husserl (as cited in Kafle, 2011) is known as the father of phenomenology. Husserl (as quoted in Kafle, 2011) phenomenology is “built up around the idea of reduction that refers to suspending the personal prejudices and attempting to reach to the core or essence through a state of pure consciousness” (p. 186). Heidegger, a disciple of Husserl, (as quoted in Kafle, 2011) departed from transcendental phenomenology because of the “idea of suspending personal opinions and the turn from “interpretive narration to the description” (p. 186) known as hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenology asks, “What is this experience like? How does the meaning of this experience arise? [and] How do we live through an experience like this?” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 31). In essence, phenomenology asks for the “very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some-thing what it is--and without which it could not be what it is” (Van Manen, 1998, p. 10). According to Edmonds and Kennedy (2017), a hermeneutic design is closely tied to interpretation.

Constructivism is the philosophical worldview that is associated with this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological (HP) research design (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The rationale for employing this philosophical

orientation is to “describe and interpret the experience” (Willis, Rhodes, Dionne-Odom, Lee, & Terreri, 2015, p. 47) using descriptive and HP methods. Additionally, the focus of the HP interview method is to gain “meaning in HP [by reflecting upon the] expressions and perceptions people have of their life-world and how they interpret their lives” (Willis et al., 2015, pp. 47-48). The approach is often associated with researchers’ philosophical worldview employing qualitative interview methods in a situation whereby meanings of a phenomenon are viewed and interpreted from the participants’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Stephens, 2016).

The topic of teachers’ work with their students’ academic literacy was filtered through the lived experiences of the interviewees in this charter school district. Additionally, the study was built on in-depth interviews with teachers who had experienced increasing numbers of ELLs in their classrooms. Teachers who had experienced this phenomenon were asked to describe their lived experiences. The open-ended nature of qualitative study did not anticipate responses, rather, according to Edmonds and Kennedy (2017), the researcher explored “the meaning, composition, and core of the lived experiences of specific phenomena” (p. 168). Hycner (1985) stated that “at the core of phenomenology is the very deep respect for the uniqueness of human experience” (p. 300). Based on the answers to the open-ended interview questions about the lived experiences of the participants, the researcher interpreted the data, developed codes, and found common themes that focused on development of the phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016).

Van Manen (1998) explained that, in a phenomenological study, the point is not to solve a problem but, rather, to find out more about the meaning of the question. Furthermore, Van Manen (1998) posited the difference between understanding a

phenomenon “intellectually and understanding it from the inside” (p. 8) because one is unable to “reflect on lived experience while living through the experience” (p. 10). The research questions provided the framework for beginning the interview process with the teachers, and the emerging themes from the interviews provided the basis for the results of the study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). The findings of the results concluded with a reflection of the themes developed from the phenomenon. By giving voice to the teachers being interviewed, the researcher emerged with information about how educators, in general, experienced this phenomenon (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017; Hycner, 1985; Van Manen, 1998, 2016).

According to Creswell (2015), “Qualitative research relies more on the view of the participants of the study and less on the direction identified in the literature by the researcher” (p. 17). The qualitative data collected from this study were utilized to construct a rich description of teachers’ responses, actions, and views about their work with these students. The literature review informed, but did not direct, the interview (Stephens, 2016).

### **Participants**

The target population for this study was mainstream teachers at three CSO. Teachers who participated in this study were from kindergarten to Grade 8. Teachers with less than 1 year of experience teaching ELLs were automatically eliminated due to a brief time span and exposure to the phenomenon. The school district was composed of two elementary schools from kindergarten to Grade 5 and one middle school from Grades 6 to 8 and served approximately 600 students who were largely ELLs. The two kindergarten-Grade 5 elementary schools served as feeders for the middle school. Demographically, many of the students were from immigrant or refugee families, 90% qualified for federal

free and reduced-price lunch programs, and 76% were LEP. The major demographics were Latino, 45%; Somali, 50%; African American, 4%; and Caucasian, 1%. There were three principals, three assistant principals, a director of academics, a test co-ordinator, two deans of students, and 45 teachers and paraprofessionals serving the students. The teaching staff demographics were Caucasian, 84%; African American, 5%; Latino, 3%; Somali, 7%; and African, 1%. All certified teaching staff members were highly qualified and had at least bachelor's degrees. Additionally, 40% of the staff had master's degrees. One administrative staff had acquired a doctorate degree, and there were two doctoral candidates. In addition to students having a variety of learning styles, a broad spectrum of cultural-historical norms was evident in the learning environment. The school district was managed by a charter management organization that provided the positions of chief executive officer, executive director, and superintendent. Administratively, each school was run by the principal. Each school had a governing board and a sponsor. The sponsor was authorized by the ODE.

This researcher decided that a noninterested third party conduct all interviews because the participants were known to her and because of her administrative position at the charter school. This employment circumstance created a challenge known as “insider research [and] positionality” (Greene, 2014, p. 2). Naples (as quoted in Greene, 2014) defined insider research as “the study of one’s own social group or society” (p. 2). Similarly, positionality is “determined by where one stands in relation to the other; this can shift throughout the process of conducting research. Positions are relative to the cultural values and norms of both the researcher and participants” (Greene, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, a noninterested third party conducted the purposeful sampling interviews of the teachers at the schools.

According to Hycner (1999), “The phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants” (p. 156). Similarly, Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006) described phenomenology as an approach that describes and interprets the experience described by the participants and centers around the participants’ perceptions of the experience. In the same way, Creswell (2015) suggested that purposeful sampling involves deliberate selection of participants in order to learn about and comprehend a phenomenon. Maximal variation sampling was used, and a sampling of teachers over a wide range of grade levels with lived experiences teaching ELLs was asked to participate in order to gain a broad perspective on teachers’ lived experiences. Creswell (2015) defined maximal variation sampling as “a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher samples cases or individuals who differ on some characteristic” (p. 619).

Classroom teachers were the target participants because they had day-to-day and one-on-one contact with their students. To provide credibility and accuracy of representation for the interview process, the tenure of the teachers was limited to 1 year or more at the CSO and had teaching experiences associated with the demographic populations being educated (Krefting, 1991). In phenomenological studies, the recommended sample size needed to achieve data saturation ranged from six to 14 participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Data saturation is achieved “when no new information seems to emerge during coding” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 248). Six to 14 teachers from kindergarten through middle school were the target participants.

Prior to conducting the research, this researcher obtained verbal and formal written permission to conduct the research study. Because of the administrative responsibilities of the researcher, the primary authority to conduct the research was given

in writing from a school board member.

### **Data-Collection Tools**

The noninterested third party conducted the interviews by using the protocol and fielded interview questions in Appendices A and B. It was based on Creswell's (2015) qualitative "Sample Interview Protocol" (p. 225). This interview protocol provided structure and procedural guidelines for conducting the interviews (Creswell, 2015; McCoy, 2013). The interview protocol addressed the research questions.

### **Procedures**

Following Institutional Review Board approval and, thereafter, the approval of the charter school boards, participants were invited to become a part of the study. An invitation letter summarizing the study was given to the maximal variation sampling of teacher selection (Creswell, 2015). All interviewees were afforded the opportunity to participate in member checking to review their interview transcription for accuracy. Creswell (2015) defined member checking as "taking the findings back to participants and asking them about the accuracy of the report" (p. 259). There was an initial analysis of the interviews and audio recordings for themes conducted by the researcher. All interviews conducted provided this researcher with detailed information (conducted by third party only).

The audio recordings (conducted by the noninterested third party) were transcribed by the researcher. All documented interviews and audio recordings were analyzed and member checked for accuracy (Creswell, 2015). The outline of the steps of the research conducted were as follows:

1. The researcher invited participants by placing the Nova Southeastern University modified template participation letter in teacher mailbox.

2. The researcher scheduled and attended the initial meeting with the noninterested third party.
3. The researcher explained the study to potential participants (teacher with 1 year or more experience teaching ELLs in mainstream classroom) and answered any questions in the presence of the noninterested third party.
4. The researcher explained that participants will answer a series of interview questions related to the overarching theme.
5. The researcher explained to the potential participants that the interviews would be audio recorded.
6. The researcher explained that the interview should take less than an hour to complete.
7. The researcher explained that a follow-up meeting (approximately 20-30 min) would occur shortly after transcription of audio recording for member checking.
8. The researcher explained that the interview would be conducted by a noninterested third party and gave rationale regarding her status (principal investigator--positionality and noninterested third party).
9. The researcher distributed the informed consent form and explained that the forms should be returned in a sealed envelope and placed in a secure mailbox to be collected by the principal investigator.
10. The researcher explained to the potential participants that they are allowed 24 hours to decide whether or not they wanted to participate.
11. The researcher provided each teacher with a copy of the signed consent form.
12. The researcher arranged and secured a private interview place.
13. The researcher and noninterested third party scheduled the interview dates and

times.

14. The noninterested third party conducted and audio recorded the interviews.

Questions 1 through 7 were answered and transcribed without audio recording to provide anonymity.

15. The noninterested third party assigned pseudonyms to the teachers.

16. The researcher transcribed the audio recordings utilizing pseudonyms.

17. The noninterested third party conducted member checking after transcription was completed.

18. The researcher analyzed the data for significant words or nonverbal units of communication to develop themes, complete findings of research results and discussion.

19. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and member checked for accuracy (Creswell, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

The interviewer (i.e., the noninterested third party) asked each participant the open-ended questions on the “Interview Protocol” (p. 225) developed by Creswell (2015) and the interview questions located in Appendix B. The participants’ responses were recorded with dictation software and transcribed.

The researcher conducted the transcription of the audio recorded interviews in a locked room using headphones. After all interviews were completed, member checked, and the data were organized and coded, the researcher began the long process of hand analysis. Hand analysis was composed of “reading the data, marking (coding) it by hand, and dividing it into different parts (categorization) for investigation” (Creswell, 2015, pp. 238-239). The researcher read and reread the well-documented notes taken during each interview multiple times to ensure accuracy.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Due to the researcher's positionality, methodological and ethical issues were addressed as follows: The participants were interviewed by a noninterested third party. However, the researcher analyzed the interviews and transcribed the audio recordings for categorization and coding of the themes. The participants were identified by utilizing pseudonyms assigned by the noninterested third party. At no time were their identities divulged to prevent unethical issues from arising related to being an insider with positionality (Greene, 2014).

Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis and without financial compensation or reward for involvement. The identities of the interview participants were safeguarded with the use of pseudonyms (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). There was no identifying features or data included in the applied dissertation. Interview Questions 1 through 7 were asked without audio recording. The answers were written by the noninterested third party to protect the identity of the participants as an additional ethical consideration.

Additionally, measures were implemented to protect the data. The study data were kept confidential by the researcher in a locked fireproof file cabinet at the home of the researcher at all times (the sole possession of the researcher). The interview protocol did not ask for any information that could be linked personally to the teachers. The documentation of the participants' answers was associated with only the participants' teacher (pseudonyms were used as identifiers); the transcripts of the tapes, notes, and documentation did not have any information that could be linked to the participants. The transcriptions were stored on a password-protected personal laptop. All documentation and audio recordings will be destroyed 36 months after the study ends. The audio tapes

and paper (interview protocols and interview questions) will be shredded, and information documented on the personal computer of the researcher will be deleted. Information obtained in this study was strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of the data was implemented in a variety of methods. The interview questions were field tested. During all stages of data collection, multiple data sources, including interviews, and audio recordings were included to provide triangulation. All interviews were conducted by a noninterested third party. Member checking was implemented to ensure accuracy of participant interview statements and transcription. In addition, overall analysis was studied through qualitative peer review. Finally, three university professors (i.e., one from the Ohio State University, one from Nova Southeastern University, and another one from the University of Phoenix) examined the research product and process and reported back that there were no questions regarding the qualitative research practice (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017; Glesne, 2016).

### **Potential Research Bias**

Creswell's (2015) sample interview protocol was selected for this study because, in this researcher's opinion, the questions were not biased in any way. However, there was a potential for bias because the researcher worked as an administrator, professional development implementation person, and classroom observations and evaluations person in serving ELLs. Creswell (2015) made a distinction between the recording by the interviewer and the listening of the interviewer, advising that, during the interview, the researcher should "remain neutral and should not share opinions [and it is also important

to use a] positive tone of questioning and to have a neutral appearance” (p. 402). To reduce and eliminate the perception of bias, the researcher utilized a noninterested third party to conduct all interviews. Finally, trustworthiness was established by implementing the following criteria proposed by Guba (as quoted in Greene, 2014): “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (p. 7).

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate teachers' lived experiences with the difficulties related to ELLs' academic literacy achievement at Ohio school districts' kindergarten-Grade 8 charter schools. By investigating with teachers of ELLs the overarching question pertaining to teachers' lived experiences with ELLs' difficulty mastering academic literacy in a charter school, this researcher analyzed their experiences to produce data that developed themes to answer questions regarding the challenges faced by mainstream teachers with helping ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school setting. In this chapter, the participants, coding and theming data, analyzing and interpreting data, analysis of the themes of the research subquestions, and concluding remarks of participants are discussed. This chapter presents a detailed description of the rich-lived experiential accounts of the teachers that developed into themes and concludes with a chapter summary.

This phenomenological study replicated a past study (McCoy, 2013) but examined different participants in a different country with different lengths of employment and at different research sites. A total of eight mainstream teachers of ELLs met the criterion for this research study and were invited to participate. Six of eight mainstream teachers with lived experiences educating an increasing ELL population in CSO voluntarily accepted to participate in this study and were interviewed. The overarching research question that guided the study was, What are teachers' lived experiences with ELLs' difficulty with mastering academic literacy in a charter school? The three research subquestions included in the interview protocol were as follows:

1. What are the greatest challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy to

ELLs in a charter school?

2. What changes, if any, have occurred in teachers' classrooms in their work with helping ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school?

3. How do teachers believe they can best be prepared to help ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school?

In order to answer the overarching central research question and Research Subquestions 1, 2, and 3, the field-tested interview questions were asked to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of six teachers.

### **Participants**

Eight mainstream teachers with 1 year or greater of lived experiences teaching ELLs were invited. Participation letters that served as invitations were placed in the school mailboxes in clasp envelopes and were distributed to eight teachers (elementary and middle school grade levels). Six of eight teachers voluntarily agreed to participate in this research study. The noninterested third party scheduled interview times to meet the teachers centered around their availability. Table 1 is a summary of participant demographic information.

For the purpose of anonymity, the participants were assigned pseudonyms by the noninterested third party. The interviews ranged in time from 15 min to 43 min with an average duration of 31 min. Table 2 shows the interview times and averages.

After conducting the interviews and transcribing the responses of the participants, the researcher started the coding process. Informative single significant words, short phrases, and nonlinguistic attributes (e.g., pauses) were utilized in coding to capture the essence of their phenomenon. Therefore, the essence of capturing significant words and phrases was discovered and analyzed and separated from irrelevant data.

Table 1

*Demographic Data About Participants*

Teacher pseudonym	Teaching level	No. of years teaching
Maria	Primary	8.0
Jacqueline	Primary	9.0
Su	Primary	2.5
Mussa	Primary	3.5
José	Intermediate	10.0
Charmaine	Intermediate	4.5

*Note.* All teachers worked with ELLs 1 or more years.

Table 2

*Interview Duration*

Teacher pseudonym	Teaching level	Interview duration in min:seconds
Maria	Primary	32:45
Jacqueline	Primary	31:23
Su	Primary	15:04
Mussa	Primary	32:08
José	Intermediate	43:35
Charmaine	Intermediate	33:12

*Note.* Average duration of the protocol interview was 31 min.

Interpretation involved asking if words and phrases were alike or could be

grouped together. This step in the process is known as “delineating units of general meaning” (Hycner, 1985, p. 282). According to Hycner (1985), “An essential constituent of the experience of wonder [teachers at CSO lived experience helping ELLs to gain academic literacy] as experienced by this participant” (p. 285) is needed for categorizing the data into units of meaning. Furthermore, Van Manen (1998) stated that “the structures of experience” (p. 79) that describe the phenomenon emerge as themes. The units of general meaning were transcribed and bracketed, and the analyzed data were placed in an Excel spreadsheet for further examination to uncover relevant patterns and repetitions that formed clusters.

### **Coding and Theming the Data**

After the interview data were thoroughly reviewed, analyzed, and interpreted, the researcher conducted the coding process. The first unit of meaning was identified during the initial transcribing of each audio recording and the review of notes. Coding is “developing concepts from the raw data” (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2018, p. 516). The first level of coding was at the theming level. A theme is an “extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 297). According to Saladaña (2016), theming the data identifies the units of meaning, uniting the data that form various themes in phenomenological studies.

Codes were applied to the “essence-capturing and essential elements” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 9) of each teacher’s interview to explain his or her lived experience. The coding and theming process identified a total of six primary themes. The themes were delineated into three areas. Research Subquestion 1 had three themes, Research Subquestion 2 had two themes, and Research Subquestion 3 had one theme. A description of each participant and the findings for each research question were categorized and summarized

with examples from the interviews. Quotations from the interviews were used to illustrate the themes answering each research subquestion. Specifically, the researcher was interested in finding out how teachers believed that ELLs in their classes were progressing and student difficulties with their acquisition of academic literacy. Appendix C provides a summary of the analysis of the units of meaning utilized in coding and emergent themes that adhered to the replication of data standards (King, 1995; Markee, 2015; Saldaña, 2016).

### **Analyzing and Interpreting the Data**

In qualitative research, the data analysis process begins with coding. The goal of the coding process is to “make sense out of text data, divide it into text or image segments, label the segments with codes, examine codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes” (Creswell, 2015, p. 242). Therefore, data analysis is a process that involves “making sense out of the text and data and preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). Analyzing and interpreting the data consisted of “drawing conclusions about it; representing it in tables, figures, and pictures to summarize it; and explaining the conclusions in words to provide answers to your research questions” (Creswell, 2015, p. 10).

During the interview process conducted by the noninterested third party, each teacher’s interview was considered and analyzed separately by the researcher. After the six interviews were completed by the noninterested third party and the recordings transcribed by the researcher, they were returned to each teacher for member checking to validate authenticity. The researcher conducted the long process of hand analysis. Hand

analysis was composed of “reading the data, marking (coding) it by hand, and dividing it into different parts (categorization) for investigation” (Creswell, 2015, pp. 238-239). The researcher read and reread the comprehensive notes taken during each interview and audio recordings multiple times to ensure accuracy and counted the frequency of words and phrases to identify emerging themes. The analysis of the frequency data that developed into themes is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

*Document Analysis With Interpretive Theme Frequency Count*

Emergent theme	Teacher					
	Maria	Jacqueline	Su	Mussa	José	Charmaine
Large ELL % in the class	8	5	3	7	7	5
ELLs entering school behind grade level	5	9	7	6	8	10
Cultural and language barriers	9	10	4	5	13	9
Increased collaboration	5	8	3	11	6	7
Greater emphasis on teaching vocabulary	8	10	5	10	5	7
Increased professional development and course work	7	9	3	8	7	6

*Note.* ELL = English language learner.

It was the goal of this researcher to describe the essence of each teacher’s subjective lived experiences and to capture their views (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013; Hycner, 1985). The overarching central research question and three research subquestions

guided this researcher's objective to describe and interpret six teachers' lived experiences that emerged from the interview data. The researcher constructed the "interpretation of meaning" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 18) from their member checked transcripts to answer the research subquestions.

### **Themes From the Protocol Interviews**

This section reports interview data collected from face-to-face audio recorded interviews. Six themes emerged from the data. Member checking was done with each teacher to provide trustworthiness of the data that emerged into themes. Various explanations were inserted by the teacher to reflect the perceptions of their lived experience as iterated during member check discussions for authenticity. Quotations and supportive evidence were taken from the teachers' interviews following the member checks of the themes. The findings for the overarching central research question, the Research Subquestions 1, 2, and 3, and the themes gave voice and a structure for learning about the teachers' lived experiences in CSO to help their large population of ELLs attain academic literacy. Examples from each teacher's interview provided illustrations that identified six themes validated by their member-checking review.

### **Analysis of Themes for Research Subquestion 1**

Research Subquestion 1 was, What are the greatest challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy to ELLs in a charter school? The most frequently occurring comments from six teachers related to this research subquestion was categorized as challenges. Maria discussed difficulty with mastery of academic literacy related to "mastering the receptive and expressive communication skills in order to communicate and relay communication skills between student to student and teacher to student." Collectively, the teachers listed the following reasons as their greatest challenges in

teaching academic literacy: comprehension of the academic English language; parents might not speak English as their home language; students are nonproficient in the command of the English language; lack of or inappropriate use of academic vocabulary; absence of the necessary tools at home to assist or reinforce the skills from the school setting; lack of ability to obtain other supplemental academic resources; and lack of transportation or funding to visit outside programs and activities such as library, museums, and theaters. The list concluded with Theme 1: Large ELL percentage in the class. Noted less frequently were the benefits in teaching academic literacy to ELLs. Three of six themes fit into this research subquestion.

### **Theme 1 (Large ELL Percentage in the Class)**

In terms of Research Subquestion 1 and the first theme, without exception, during the interview the teachers focused on the challenges that occurred within their classrooms due to having a large ELL population. An overview of the demographics at CSO is as follows: Latino, 45%; Somali, 50%; African American, 4%; and Caucasian, 1%. Demographically, many of the students were from immigrant or refugee families, 90% qualified for federal free and reduced-price lunch programs, and 76% were LEP. Again, without exception, every teacher stated that the CSO was their first experience with teaching ELLs. Su said, “I think it’s a challenge due to the large class size and also due to diversity in the classroom. It’s quite difficult.” José shared, “In our school, it is a pretty difficult task teaching large inclusive class size of ELLs because you have the full range of ELL severity of students.”

Without exception, every teacher credited the CSO with providing professional development specific to ELLs to enhance their professional knowledge and provide tools that helped them develop academic strategies and techniques to advance academic

literacy in their students. José noted, “A benefit to having them here is that students will get more attention and help in a school such as ours than in a general public school without a high ELL population as ours.” Charmaine added, “I actually think it has improved my teaching. Until you’re actually in a charter school with ELLs, it’s only theory. It’s also helped my pacing. I’ve learned how to slow down and adapt.” These were some of the benefits described by José and Charmaine in teaching academic literacy to ELLs at the CSO.

### **Theme 2 (ELLs Entering School Behind Grade Level)**

Theme 2 was ELLs entering school 1 plus years behind grade level. This theme was tied to refugee and immigrant ELL students. The refugee ELLs entered into the CSO with an unchallenged set birthdate of January 1 due to their flight from war torn countries. Based on their lived experiences at the CSO, many of the refugees entered the United States and their school without their birth certificates, shot records, and other important documents that accompany domestic students naturally. In addition, the immigrant ELL student population faced migration and homelessness challenges. Jacqueline stated, “Some family situations are just heart-wrenching. I really have a lot of belief in the fact that they’re going to succeed because they’ve already overcome so much more than what the typical, the average person goes through.”

Based on the CSO Student Information System data, ELLs and their families faced migration challenges due to a variety of reasons. The two most prevalent reasons documented in ELL students records and the Student Information System at the CSO were due to jobs (especially agricultural) and housing vouchers. These challenges caused interruptions with consistency throughout the ELLs’ educational process at the CSO. Mussa stated,

Our students are not at grade level when they come to us. It is playing that whole catch-up game of trying to get them to grade level as quickly as possible using what we have at the school. I feel that it is very challenging for them, but they can eventually do it. Charmaine talked about several ELL students being behind in her class “depending on how long they’ve been in the country or even their background experiences outside the country as far as education goes.” Her perception regarding these students was, “It’s extra hard for them trying to play catch-up with the basics and, then, trying to figure out what is all this stuff?” Mussa talked about the expectation of the state of Ohio regarding the statistical measurement of teacher performance on evaluations (related to ELL students, a subgroup test, scores, and performance), ‘the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System is based on students being at grade-level proficiency. Mussa said, “They are challenged at grade level because they are so far behind grade level.” Furthermore, Mussa discussed his personal belief and stated, “I’m never going to lower my expectations for ELL students, but I’m going to keep in the back of my mind that I feel this is very challenging for them and it’s challenging for me to teach them because they’re coming in at a disadvantage.” Several teachers discussed their challenge with getting ELL students to talk during class using academic language. Examples of these challenges and barriers are elaborated in Theme 3.

### **Theme 3 (Cultural and Language Barriers)**

A third theme that emerged from teacher interviews was, cultural and language barriers affect communication and teaching academic literature. With the exception of two teachers, the other participants believed that they were ill- prepared by their College of Education to teach ELLs. However, all of the teachers expressed the cultural and language barriers as being a major roadblock that affected communication and teaching

academic literacy to ELLs. Jacqueline noted, “When I started at this charter school, this was probably the first instance I had with language being a barrier.” When Su was asked the interview question, “Can you describe some of the challenges you experienced as you have taught ELLs in a charter school?,” she answered emphatically, “Cultural differences and language barriers are the two basic ones.” Maria stated, “One of the most challenging circumstances is probably the language, specifically, in the testing.” Maria described a scenario whereby she “tested a student that might be familiar with the word, but not really understand the usage of it.” For example, Maria illustrated a recent occurrence in her classroom. She portrayed it as,

This just happened the other day. I said shake your neighbor’s hand. They might not understand what the neighbor’s hand is. They might not understand what we know as shaking the neighbor’s hand. When I said shake the hand. They did not take the neighbor’s hand. And if the neighbor was not of the same sex, they would not shake the hand for cultural reasons. Then, there is the definition of shake. I wanted them to actually shake hands---take the neighbor’s hand and move it up and down. But, what they did was shake their hands in the air. They had no idea what the word usage really meant.

José gave another example. He said,

For example, in high school, in Spanish class, the teacher will make you speak Spanish for everything. If you want to get anything or go to the bathroom, you have to speak in Spanish. I think, because the aides are speaking to the ELL students in the Somali language and they’re not forcing them to respond back to them in English, this can become a crutch. The aides need to know the ultimate goal is English proficiency.

Jacqueline concluded with a positive, contrasting cultural attribute that could enhance communication and teaching. She gave this statement,

I think the culture is different in some ways, especially when the students come at a younger age they tend to have more respect for adults and teachers in particular than maybe the general population of the academic world. That's been my case, that's been my findings, most of the years that I have taught in the charter school.

### **Analysis of Themes for Research Subquestion 2**

Research Subquestion 2 was, What changes, if any, have occurred in teachers' classroom in their work with helping ELLs to attain grade-level academic literacy in a charter school? The majority of the teachers' answers were derived from job-imbedded professional development and collaborative teacher meetings. Every teacher described changes that have occurred in their classrooms to assist their ELL students with academic literacy development. Their combined changes focused around communication and collaboration, structures, and strategies to maximize student learning. The rich details of six teachers' lived evolutionary experiences during their interviews are described within the following two themes. Only two of six themes fit into this research subquestion.

#### **Theme 4 (Increased Collaboration)**

At the CSO, there is a large population of ELLs that is taught in the mainstream and content-area classrooms. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported that, between 1980 and 2009, the percentage of children ages 5 to 17 years in all schools who spoke a language other than English increased from 10% to 21%.

These numbers are expected to grow. The classroom teachers' need for support and resources at the CSO are at a severe high based on their responses to this question. Although there are many specialist teachers at the CSO with Teaching English to

Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) endorsements, all students are immersed into the regular classrooms. At the CSO, the TESOL teacher provides push-in and pullout services to ELLs based on their needs and the master schedule of the content coverage. However, the mainstream classroom teachers are responsible for their academic literacy achievement. Due to the rapid increase of the ELL population in their classrooms and the urgent responsibility of academic literacy achievement, collaboration became a necessity and became no longer optional.

Maria continued with the theme regarding the language barrier presenting unique challenges for teaching in her classroom and her urgent need for resources. She said,

One challenge is probably being aware of the language objective that you need to understand when thinking about teaching to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). You ask yourself a question: How does an ELL student understand the CCSS? For example, we have to post those standards, but those standards aren't written in a child ready format. For instance, the standard says: Students will be able to add and subtract numbers 0-5. Well, that's the standard but how do I word that standard so that students understand exactly what we're/they're going to do? You have to think back to what's culturally relevant to them. We use a lot of pictures; we use a lot of just general bodies. What I mean by that is...My instructional assistant (IA) and I actually get 1 student so that they're actively engaged in the process. I need 5 students, so how many more students do I need to add to that 1 to make 5? We go and get 4 more students so they can see 5. Then we ask: How many do we have all together? Basically, it's the concrete before the abstract. I know we go to the paper and pencil very quickly, but this is the type of collaborative activities between teachers, specialist, instructional assistants, and

even students that is needed due to cultural and language barriers. ELLs need pictures and illustrations.

José stated,

I don't think giving kids worksheets to do on their own and the teacher sits back is effective. The methods I have utilized are with seating arrangements, communication, and providing multiple ways for the student to access the information. Since I'm kind of limited in the language . . . these are the collaborative changes I have made.

Mussa delineated the essence of his lived experience in this manner,

It's not necessarily that I need a TESOL endorsement or to go out to college and learn more about TESOL. That's great, but what can I do now? I need to take the initiative to learn new strategies. I need to call, message or e-mail TESOL teachers at the other buildings, which I have done. I ask them what they think of a certain academic situation that is going on at my school so that networking back and forth, and different collaboration to make sure that I am doing everything I can do to help the ELL students.

Many of the teachers elaborated on many professional development activities whereby they divided into groups to collaborate in horizontal and vertical teams to discuss their student data, trends, progress, and struggles; to develop pacing guides; and to develop lesson plans that provided depth of knowledge. For instance, Mussa described a collaboration that occurred with him and a teacher-mentor-friend. He said, "I would share different strategies and ideas. One of the things that she shared with me is something I still use to this day called 'TTQA' (Turn the Question Around). It's just restating the question in your answer responses." Finally, Maria said, Basically, all

workshops and professional development given to us by the CSO deal with ELL students, SIOP, and ELL resources such as those offered by Educational Service Centers who come in and monitor our work as it pertains to the students.

Mussa summarized the answer to Research Subquestion 2 and Theme 4 with this statement,

We do not have a resource room, but we are a tight knit group of students and staff. We all rely on each other; We all collaborate. I have these students for 8 hours per day. They're always in the classroom except when they switch classes with me and my coteacher.

### **Theme 5 (Greater Emphasis on Teaching Vocabulary)**

The focus on teaching vocabulary increased exponentially with the large percentage of ELLs with multiple languages present in teachers' classrooms at the CSO. When asked the question, "How would you define academic literacy?," every teacher expressly understood the difference between social conversant English or BICS versus academic English language or CALP. Su's precise definition was, "Academic literacy is to be able to speak and read at a level that is according to standards and grade level." Every educator saw the need for preteaching or front-loading the vocabulary. Jacqueline said,

Each subject has its own unique list of vocabulary words. Math has its math words, science has scientific words, and even reading has clue words that need to be pretaught. That's true mastery with all subject matters. Social studies, math, science, every subject.

When probing Mussa to get a deeper understanding and clarity regarding this question, To get them to academic literacy, what would that look like?, Mussa said, "ELL

students are using academic vocabulary. They are using vocabulary that is at grade level. They are learning to talk to each other not just by answering my questions, but by engaging in the use of co-operative discussions.”

Many of the teachers could not elaborate on the greater emphasis on teaching vocabulary without reverting back to the cultural and language barrier they faced.

Charmaine described it as an overt point of change in instructional behavior. She said,

Most teachers would be better teachers if they had ELLs. It makes you rethink what you do. When you’re teaching something like vocabulary, you’ll change it up so that ELL students understand better. That applies to other students too.

Teaching students who don’t have the background or the language will help you teach the other students better. You’ll have that toolbox of teaching strategies that helps all students succeed. I think it made me a better teacher.

According to José, understanding the vocabulary is essential to understanding the problem and critical thinking. He discussed the following scenario:

I try to direct that student to reread the problem to understand what the question is asking. Being able to read the question for comprehension . . . to identify what is important and what is not, and to identify what you are being asked to do. So, ask yourself . . . what are you actually going to do to be successful on that question?

Then vocabulary comes into play to understand the context of the problem and all of those different aspects of the word problem. If you cannot understand the problem, you’re basically lost right off the bat.

Furthermore, Mussa talked about a strategy he used. He said,

One of the strategies that I used, because vocabulary is really big and important, is the “Frayer” model (meaning “foursquare” as my students call it). They have to

come up with a synonym and an antonym for a word . . . and then draw a picture and then write it in a sentence and I would end up having the students keep a binder of that so they a just pull it out. Basically, they have a sort of personal academic dictionary. When they learn a new word, it's like, "oh, I learned a new word." My students actually have a binder with probably 150-200 words they have learned this year. Most of the words were ones they did not understand because they had not experienced them/that. They are not necessarily grade level vocabulary, but more general vocabulary. I would say about 25% of those words are academic vocabulary.

In the discussions surrounding vocabulary, the strategy regarding the use of *word walls* surfaced. According to Jacqueline, word walls were one of the strategies that she learned from one of the job-embedded professional developments held at the CSO. This was Jacqueline's statements regarding the use of word walls, "I thought this year, I'm teaching math and science. I probable don't have to worry about designating space for that. Then I realized, no, math terminology needs to be recognized and taught." After she reflected on the importance of the word walls and how important it was and is to preteach vocabulary, she came to the realization that the importance of vocabulary was "not only for a general subject like each individual unit . . . whether it's English Language Arts (ELA), whether it's social studies, whether it's fractions, or decimals, the ELLs have a specific set of vocabulary that they need to know for these different things."

Uccelli et al. (2015) expanded the definition of academic-language proficiency and academic-language skills as core academic skills as "a constellation of the high-utility language skills that correspond to linguistic features that are prevalent in academic discourse across school content areas and infrequent in colloquial conversations" (p.

338). Strategic use of vocabulary is vital to the achievement of academic literacy.

### **Analysis of Theme for Research Subquestion 3**

Research Subquestion 3 was, How do teachers believe they can be best prepared to help ELLs attain academic literacy in a charter school? The answer to this subquestion was unanimously professional development. All six teachers met data saturation when they spoke to the need for teacher training that they did not receive in their college course work for teaching ELLs. One of six themes fit into this subquestion. A discussion of the teachers' responses to Theme 6 follows.

### **Theme 6 (Increased Professional Development and Course Work)**

SIOP training was in the 2nd year of implementation during the 2017-2018 school year. The topic of job-embedded professional development and the lack thereof related to course work wove a distinctive pattern during the interview process. The teachers began their approach to this subject in a very basic manner, making general statements. Charmaine said, "Maybe, if I had some more college classes." José stated, "Trainings would have to come with different ways of teaching the materials." Mussa said, "Getting my TESOL endorsement." Jacqueline's professional development statement was centered around the language barrier. She said, "It's just the language barrier that is kind of where I wish I had done something about sooner." Su's perception on professional development was, "Providing training that is specific on resources to teach ELLs, rather than me having to find resources (such as the webinars)." For Maria, professional development centered around background knowledge. Maria gave this illustration,

What I mean is . . . knowing the background in a professional manner. For instance, I'm getting this student and where were they before they came to CSO? My suggestion for the ELLs has been to have some kind of workshop or some

kind of focus groups. Maybe coach teachers using five or six children of families willing to have their children come into the educational setting early to see how they interact and engage with the teacher and each other. Maybe a week; Maybe two hours per day for one week in the summer to gauge where they are academically and to bring them to where they need to be before the start of school. Conduct a pilot study. Action research.

In her interview, Jacqueline spoke of starting her tenure at the CSO teaching a younger group of students. Jacqueline talked about the lack of comprehension of basic words and phrases within the stories exhibited by these ELL students. She said, “It became very clear very fast that the words that I would assume the students knew, many of them had no concept.” She expounded on the fact that the school provided professional development targeted toward ELLs but believed they needed more due to the large population of ELLs attending the charter school.

On the contrary, Mussa enthusiastically described a field experience working with ELLs that he received at the middle school at the CSO. He described a successful field experience with middle school students meeting academic literacy benchmarks. He explained, “I found out that going back to get my reading endorsement and with correct application of that knowledge, ELLs can achieve academic success and I can achieve it also by learning different strategies from my professors that were amazing.” Finally, Mussa stated,

I feel that one of my biggest challenges is getting them that background knowledge. I still feel like I am growing with this, but I feel like the everyday language that I use and looking at what they know and understand . . . I took for granted! What I’m finding that is challenging for me is the lack of visuals in our

schools. I have to do a lot of background, so, it actually pauses the actual lesson.

The reason I'm feeling like I have to do this is because they are doing what one of my high school teachers taught me and it has stayed with me up to this day. It is called Swiss cheese reading. They are reading with little holes in their reading.

So, the students are not really understanding what the text is asking.

A number of teachers believed they needed more resources to teach the ELLs than the charter school could afford. They believed that teaching a lesson on a field trip site versus the Internet would be a more beneficial visual aid than what they currently provided the students with. Many of the teachers reported they had not been trained in their College of Education specifically to teach ELLs. All of the teachers spoke about what kind of training they received that helped them and their need for further professional development targeted toward ELLs to enhance their toolbox.

### **Concluding Remarks of Participants**

At various points throughout the interview Su stated, "I have a sore throat, and I am losing my voice, but I want to participate in this research study." Su's answers to the interview questions were short and to the point, in spite of her condition. However, she voluntarily continued to complete the interview process within 15 min and 4 seconds interview time duration. During the transcribing of the interviews, this researcher heard legible answers that were brief and concise. José described beliefs of cause and effect. He expressed his beliefs as a teacher in the following way: "The teacher, the person delivering the lesson to them must be able to deliver the subject matter in a manner that allows them to progress toward English proficiency." He stated,

Obliviously they are here in America and the primary language is English. We want them to be successful in their daily lives outside of their class, family, and

small neighborhoods. They must become fluent somehow. They need a class set aside each day that are not core classes. Classes that are busy working with life language acquisition.

Charmaine expounded on the fundamentals of teaching ELLs. She said, Sometimes, I sit there and think, This works really well for language arts, how can I get this strategy to work for science? Teaching ELL students is different from teaching non-ELLs. Probably, if I can say this right, most teachers would be better teachers if they had ELLs. It makes you rethink what you do.

Similarly, Maria described her beliefs surrounding good teaching as it related to ELLs and their culture. She stated,

I think having someone that's actually from that background to come and speak to us about their traditions, the relationships . . . not just a fancy video that provides information. Answering questions such as, this is what our culture does; don't be alarmed if you see this. . . . For instance, when I first came to teach at this charter school, one of the students said: You're galla. Galla means . . . it means something different to different people. To him it meant, you're bad because you're Christian. For other people it just meant that you're not Somali; you're not Muslim. They would voice this innocently because this was their culture. This information would be beneficial with lesson planning and cultural integration as a new teacher for new ELLs. Answering questions such as, what do I pay attention to? What do I ignore? What do I integrate into a lesson to benefit academic achievement?

Maria's final statement was,

I think in this environment and maybe in any other ELL settings, it rids you of

your own prejudices of what a population that you know nothing about that can hinder or help you. You work together. We are all here together. We're all here to benefit from one another.

Mussa's final comments revolved around the high teacher turnover he had observed at this charter school. He described his perception of the students' feelings and his own regarding this subject by stating,

I honestly feel like the one thing that my Hispanic students look for is the fact that they can see you next year and can say . . . Oh, you did not leave us! It's sad because I know that there are reasons to leave a school and I never want to blame teachers for that. They all have their different reasons. But, getting back to the students . . . Just knowing that they have the same person staying there it's like . . . You didn't give up on me! When I walk into my classroom I feel like they understand that I'm there and they understand that they need to get busy on the lesson that is being asked of them. They know that I will do anything in my power to help them achieve greatness!

Mussa's final sentence was, "They learned really quick that I actually cared and will go the extra mile for them." When Jacqueline was asked if she had a final remark or comment, she said,

In a matter of fact, I do. . . . The biggest thing I believe that I have learned throughout my tenure here is . . . If kids know that you really cared, they'll do anything to try to succeed and that just kind of sums it up!

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher gave voice to the lived experiences of six teachers instructing ELLs to gain academic literacy while working at the CSO. In all, there were

six teachers, two males and four females, teaching in kindergarten through Grade 8. The six teachers interviewed had a total of 37.5 years of teaching experience. The interviews were conducted by a noninterested third party, in person, on the site of the CSO, and audio recorded between March 21 through March 22, 2018. At the time of the interviews, these mainstream teachers' class demographics consisted of 95% to 98% ELL students. This researcher listened to and transcribed the audio recordings as well as analyzed the data to develop themes.

This researcher provided a narrative of the participants and demographic data. Coding and theming of the data were discussed and conducted. Also, a rich data analysis from the interview transcripts that revealed emergent themes was presented. Documentation of the themes' frequency counts provided insight into the analysis and interpretation of the data from the evolving themes concluded in the interview protocol table. The central research question that guided the interviews was, What are teachers' lived experiences with ELLs' difficulty with mastering academic literacy in a charter school? The following three research driven subquestions narrowed the focus of this research study:

1. What are the greatest challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy to ELLs in a charter school?
2. What changes, if any, have occurred in teachers' classrooms in their work with helping ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school?
3. How do teachers believe they can best be prepared to help ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school?

The following six general themes emerged from the interviews:

1. Large ELL percentage in the class.

2. ELLs entering school behind grade level.
3. Cultural and language barriers.
4. Increased collaboration.
5. Greater emphasis on teaching vocabulary.
6. Increased professional development and course work.

In chapter 5, this researcher reviews and discusses the implications of the findings of this research study. Chapter 5 also includes a discussion of the research as it relates to the replicated study (McCoy, 2013), current research, implications, limitations, reflections, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Overview of the Study

The purpose of this replicated phenomenological study was to investigate teachers' lived experiences with the difficulties related to ELLs' academic literacy achievement at Ohio school districts' kindergarten-Grade 8 charter schools (McCoy, 2013). This study had a hermeneutic phenomenological design in order to discover how the lived experiences of mainstream teachers and their practices responded to an increase in the language diversity in their classrooms. By investigating with teachers of ELLs the overarching question pertaining to teachers' lived experiences with ELLs' difficulty mastering academic literacy in a charter school, one could gain a greater understanding of their challenges and the difficulties teachers and ELLs had in mastering academic literacy. The challenge of this replicated study was built around moving students from Cummins (1979, 1981a) BICS to CALP in a charter school setting (McCoy, 2013). Grade-level academic literacy remained the goal in working with the ELLs at the CSO. The progression from BICS to CALP, as advocated by Cummins (1979, 1981a) was the goal of each teacher. CALP required mastering proficiency and presented difficulties for these teachers instructing ELLs to attain academic literacy. The audio recorded and transcribed interviews addressed the overarching central research question, What are teachers' experiences with ELLs' difficulty with mastering academic literacy in a charter school?

Eight mainstream teachers at the CSO's kindergarten-Grade 8 schools, consisting of a total of three charter schools where the researcher was an administrator, were invited to participate in this research study. This employment circumstance created a challenge known as "insider research [and] positionality" (Greene, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, the

researcher decided that a noninterested third party should conduct the interviews because the participants were known to her and because of her administrative position at the charter school. By utilizing a noninterested third party to conduct all interviews, this researcher attempted to mitigate the perception of bias and unethical issues.

The purpose for selecting these participants possessing at least 1 year or more experience teaching ELLs was to gain insight into their lived experiences related to ELLs' mastery of academic literacy. Only six of eight teachers who met the criterion consented to participate in the research study and were interviewed by the noninterested third party. The perspectives of these six teachers were captured by audio recordings and face-to-face interviews. Validity was established when teachers were granted the opportunity to member check their transcripts of their interview (Creswell, 2015). The interviews consisted of open-ended questions to preserve the trustworthiness and exploratory essence of this study (Greene, 2014). To confirm transferability, the researcher applied the standards of replication to conclude triangulation of this qualitative research study (Creswell, 2015; Greene, 2014).

The researcher discovered the essence of the lived experiences of these teachers by bracketing words and sentences to develop units of meaning and themes from their transcripts. The following six themes from the data analyzation of the transcripts emerged: (a) large ELL percentage in the class, (b) ELLs entering school behind grade level, (c) cultural and language barriers, (d) increased collaboration, (e) greater emphasis on teaching vocabulary, and (f) increased professional development and course work. The six themes provided understanding, insight, and answers to the three research subquestions:

1. What are the greatest challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy to

ELLs in a charter school?

2. What changes, if any, have occurred in teachers' classrooms in their work with helping ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school?

3. How do teachers believe they can best be prepared to help ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school?

The detailed summaries and tables provided in Chapter 4 gave evidence for utilization of these themes to answer the central research question and three research subquestions of this replicated research study (McCoy, 2013).

### **Interview Themes and Their Connection to the Research**

A comprehensive review of the literature was previously presented in Chapter 2 by this researcher. The literature review of existing publications provided a foundation and basis for conducting this replicated research study (King, 1995). Cummins' (1973, 1976, 1979, 1981b) cognitive and academic language theoretical framework, quantitative and qualitative studies synthesize and analyze trends, mixed methods, and case studies served as the collective lens for vetting this researcher's findings. Limited research was available on qualitative phenomenological studies of teachers' experiences in a charter school and ELLs difficulty mastering academic literacy. Also, gaps existed regarding replication of qualitative phenomenological studies.

Participants' lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions were expressed in six themes that emerged from the three research subquestions. Six themes emerged and connected the perceptions from six teachers who consented to participate in this research study. The teachers' lived experiences about ELLs and academic literacy merged with the thematic categories as evidenced by their quotes and comments transcribed by this researcher.

**Theme 1.** The first theme was one of three themes that connected with and merged under Research Subquestion 1. It spoke to the greatest challenges and benefits of teaching academic literacy to ELLs in a charter school due to a large percentage of ELLs in the mainstream classroom. The majority of the teacher interview statements described challenges regarding their lived experiences from having large class sizes of ELLs.

Teachers expressed their concerns as mainstream teachers with the inclusion of large percentages of ELLs that posed a tremendous challenge with providing effective instruction with the rigor needed to master academic literacy. Elfers and Stritikus (2014) urged teachers to view academic literacy through the lens of “acquisition of the language and content learning” (p. 311). The Council of the Great City Schools (2014) recommended three nonnegotiable criteria that supported the academic needs of ELLs. The three nonnegotiable criteria recommended by the Council of the Great City Schools included “maintenance of grade level rigor; building knowledge while acquiring and building academic language (in English and/or other languages); and cultural relevance” (p. 13).

José’s use of a different seating arrangement that resembled a U-shape versus desks in rows to pair ELL students with peers at different performance levels (i.e., high, medium, and low performers) to advance comprehension of board work while actively monitoring student engagement; Maria’s use of student engagement activities such as manipulatives and visuals to provide illustrations of academic content to *chunk* a part of the lesson to provide higher level questions eliciting depth of knowledge; or Jacqueline’s incorporation of word walls in mathematics to preload vocabulary were acknowledged as the additional components of the lesson plan needed continually to provide appropriate grade-level rigor, assist with academic comprehension, and build background knowledge

with the large population of ELLs versus non- ELL students. Santos et al. (2012) cautioned educators that “English language acquisition can no longer be considered a boutique proposition” (p. 3). Teachers’ must facilitate ELLs’ building knowledge and academic language concurrently to comply with state and federal rules and regulations (The Council of Great City Schools, 2014; Klein, 2015).

One mixed-methods research study in the literature review examined academic vocabulary language as measured by reading comprehension. This mixed-methods study was conducted with fourth- through sixth-grade students in an urban public school with a large population of ELLs. Uccelli et al. (2015) concluded that core academic skills and academic vocabulary are a significant predictor of students’ reading comprehension. This implies that robust and effective instructional strategies are indeed needed for academic vocabulary acquisition that leads to reading comprehension. Mussa stressed in his interview that the curriculum, Engage New York, is very rigorous and the students are not on grade level when they come to teachers, but they must get them to grade level as quickly as possible. Mussa’s statement tied directly into Theme 2 (ELLs entering school behind grade level).

The challenge regarding teachers providing effective rigorous instruction to ELLs entering school a grade level behind is twofold. Teachers must concurrently address the challenge with L1 as well as the student being behind grade level. Cummins’ interdependent hypothesis (as cited in Bailey & Huang, 2011; Bunch et al., 2012; Menken & Solorza, 2015) maintained that skills students acquire in their home language will transfer to English when ELLs concurrently develop language and cognitive skills as they learn content. Furthermore, Pacheco et al. (2015) asserted that making connections with students’ “heritage language” (p. 50) led to ELLs’ literacy achievement aligned to

the CCSS (Hakuta et al., 2013). Pacheco et al. affirmed that students create mental and physical images to reinforce meaning about vocabulary, text, and reading comprehension strategies. Cummins (as quoted in Pacheco et al., 2015) warned that “omission of students’ heritage languages in instruction can have profound and negative consequences on ELLs academic achievement” (p. 52).

José voiced an oxymoron during his interview. He shared his perception of the challenges and benefits of having a large class size of ELLs. He said, “In our school, it is a pretty difficult task teaching large inclusive class sizes of ELLs because you have the full range of ELL severity of students.” On the flip side of the coin, José explained, “A benefit to having them here is that students will get more attention and help in a school such as ours than in a general public school without a high ELL population as ours.” Calderón et al. (2011) discussed the transition teachers need to make to meet the needs of long-term ELLs, transitional ELLs, refugee children, and recent immigrants. This transition involves comprehensive vocabulary instruction while bringing the ELLs up to grade level concurrently. Results from the 2015 and 2017 NAEP for eighth-grade students illustrated the urgency of ELLs’ need to achieve grade-level academic literacy. Notably, only 4% of ELLs scored at or above the proficient level in reading in 2015 and 5% in 2017. The research data trend shows that a vast majority of adolescents’ literacy skills continues to diminish in academic reading and writing tasks. ELLs are at an even greater risk for low literacy achievement (Boswell & Seegmiller, 2016). Teachers of ELLs must transition to meet the needs of these increasing demographics of ELLs.

**Theme 2.** The second theme was also associated with Research Subquestion 1 regarding the greatest challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy to ELLs in a charter school. José alluded to Theme 2 when he commented, “ELLs enter school behind

grade level.”

Reading and mathematics assessment data compiled by NAEP (2015, 2017) tracking gaps between performance of ELLs and non-ELLs found a 36-point gap in 2015 and a 37-point achievement gap in 2017 between ELL students and the non-ELL students at the fourth grade in reading. In the eighth grade, there was a 44-point gap in 2015 and a 43-point achievement gap in 2017 in reading. In mathematics, the NAEP (2017) assessment data revealed a 25-point gap in 2015 and a 26-point achievement gap in 2017 between ELLs and non-English language students at the fourth-grade level. At the eighth-grade level, there was a 40-point gap in (2017) and a 38-point achievement gap. José and Mussa voiced their concerns regarding ELL students entering the CSO behind grade level. José gave a vivid description; he said,

With math, I think people get into the mindset that math is a universal language.

That does work if we are considering just numbers and symbols But, when you get into multistep story problems, that goes out of the window.

José’s lived phenomenon was substantiated by Pettit’s (2014) findings. According to Pettit (2014), there is a mistaken idea that ELLs can perform well because mathematics is built on problem solving and numbers is a universal language. Furthermore, recent research strongly suggested the use of scaffolding techniques to integrate oral and written language into instructional content areas to promote student engagement in chemistry and mathematics (Pettit, 2014; Tan, 2011; Yuriev et al., 2016). Baker et al., (2014) admonished teachers to equip students with multiple modalities of instructional techniques that go above and beyond the shallowness of memorizing. Making curricula and instruction explicit, intentional, and culturally relevant that concurrently addresses the urgent need to bring ELLs to grade level is not a simple task.

Mussa spoke at length regarding the state of Ohio's expectation of ELLs growth when entering the school as measured by the high-stakes test and being on grade level by the end of Grade 5 when leaving elementary school as unrealistic. Mussa noted, "Yes, ELL students can make a lot of progress and a lot of growth, but they are not actually going to be at grade level." Hill and Hoak (2016) concluded from their study regarding vocabulary acquisition and meaningful academic conversations using words in context that academic language is seldom used in everyday conversation but, rather, is come upon during classroom content instruction. Cummins (as quoted in Street & Hornberger, 2008) argued that for students to catch up academically as quickly as possible in cases where English is an additional language requires a "focus primarily on context-embedded or cognitively demanding tasks" (p. 74) within mainstream, push-in, and pullout classes. In his qualitative and quantitative study, Pettit (2014) reported,

It is crucial to form a new concept of classroom teachers' roles to include ELLs' diverse needs and to take full responsibility for their needs. Likewise, teachers should not blame the difficulties of ELLs on their home lives. Every student comes into a classroom with different needs and each deserves an equal access to the curriculum in a language and instructional strategy they can comprehend. (p. 21)

All of the teachers interviewed voiced the fact that they understood the challenges they faced bringing ELL students up to grade level but voiced great displeasure with the time limitations invoked by the state and federal government. The teachers had a negative opinion regarding the high-stakes tests, subgroup (ELLs) growth measurements, and teachers' performance evaluations and their lack of alignment to ELLs' factual development of CALP. One teacher stated that it was not supported by the SIOP research

information and job-embedded professional development they received. Nevertheless, the weight of the argument and the urgency to bring ELLs to grade level as quickly as possible remained (Klein, 2015). In the 21st century, English is a core skill and no longer a privilege of the elite of our society (Pandya, 2012; United Nations, 2015). Therefore, the lack of academic literacy transcends from the school and student achievement into a nation's achievement. As noted by Walberg (2007), "A country's achievement test scores in mathematics and science are strongly correlated with and predictive of a country's economic growth" (p. 3). Teachers must face the facts that, although other students are at risk due to gaps in academic literacy achievement, ELLs are at a greater risk of these real-world consequences that have potential generational significance (National Center for Education for Statistics, 2016; Pandya, 2012; United Nations, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2011, 2015; Walberg, 2007).

**Theme 3.** Theme 3 was also associated with Research Subquestion 1 regarding the greatest challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy to ELLs in a charter school. This theme addressed cultural and language barriers as being challenges that inhibited ELLs' acquisition of academic literacy. A reoccurring comment thread from the interviews was the teachers' perceptions that, because they did not speak the native tongue (Spanish or Somali) of the ELLs, this presented cultural and language challenges for ELLs and teachers.

Invariably, each teacher discussed their perceptions of the need to improve learning native words and significant aspects of ELLs' culture to improve communication and, thus, improve learning. Su voiced getting to know the community but still need to know background and culture of her ELL students. Jacqueline and Mussa expressed their interest in learning more about their ELL students' culture and language. Mussa said,

“My Spanish recognition has picked up just hearing them talk in Spanish.” Jacqueline emphatically stated, “Unfortunately, I don’t know Spanish. So, I’ve always relied on someone to interpret.” Finally, Maria stressed, “One of the most challenging circumstances is probably the language and culture aspects specifically in the testing.”

Two intermediate teachers, José and Charmaine, voiced their concerns that the negatives for them was being able to communicate with them and feeling successful in what they were trying to accomplish. José elaborated, “There is no negative in having the student, the language is an obstacle, and it’s very difficult to overcome.” Cummins’ (1979) threshold hypothesis suggested that students with high L1 and L2 proficiency experience cognitive advantages in terms of linguistic and cognitive flexibility, whereas low L1 and L2 proficiency results in cognitive deficits. Cummins’ (2008) research substantiated that there is a relationship between L1 and second language learners and their abilities to increase vocabulary development and reading comprehension by explicit reading opportunities. Ramirez et al. (2013) emphasized that cognate knowledge aids in academic vocabulary acquisition with ELLs and nonlinguistic individuals. In the areas of mathematics and science, content-specific vocabulary integration with a focus on literacy is needed for all students, especially ELLs.

Charmaine discussed having a cultural education class; however, and stated, “It didn’t necessarily focus on teaching ELLs.” Charmaine gave the following example:

When it comes to how to teach certain things to ELLs, I just sit there stuck, and, then, I go to the TESOL teacher. I ask her how to make this easier, and she can tell me how to adapt and adjust. She’s very good at how to make things flow better for ELL students.

Klingner et al.’s (2012) discussion that many ELLs faced cultural challenges that

existed between the lack of understanding culturally relevant topics and practices versus the “culture of the classroom they participate” (p. 38) resonated with Charmaine’s experience.

Differences in culture affect ELLs in many ways, including classroom participation and performance (Calderon & Minaya-Rowe, 2011; Kanevsky, 2011; Samson & Collins, 2012). Although it may be challenging and time-consuming, including culturally relevant examples into teachers’ lesson plans is needed. It is culturally responsible for teachers to “learn who our students are, [to] know something about the learners’ ethnic backgrounds, [the] languages they speak, [and what] their parents do for work” (Freeman et al., 2008, p. 19). When teachers apply cultural background knowledge to content learning and adjust their instructional practices to support ELLs to be contributors in their own learning, they have a greater “effect size” (Fisher et al., 2016, p. 5) on student achievement. Battiste (as cited in Cummins et al., 2015) argued the necessity of cultural supports that meet cognitive needs without reducing content regardless to the instructional classroom modality. José and Charmaine agreed that giving consideration to ELLs’ voice and cultural background are necessary components for academic literacy achievement.

**Theme 4.** The fourth theme, which connected with Research Subquestion 2 about the changes, if any, that occurred in teachers’ classrooms in their work with helping ELLs attain grade-level academic literacy in a charter school, was the need for increased collaboration with specialist teachers, networking, and teacher-based team (vertical and horizontal) meetings, elementary to elementary school meetings, and elementary to middle school meetings. This theme had the least support from the literature review. Whereas Sam and Rajan (2013) and Storch and Aldosari (2013) advocated that students

work in pairs to address their linguistic problem collaboratively and conclude with a team approach classroom activity, these researchers did not address teachers collaborating to compare and contrast best practices to bridge and narrow the existing gap between ELLs and non-ELL students and academic literacy. Pacheco et al.'s (2015) research translated pedagogies "TRANSLATE (Teaching Reading and New Strategic Language Approaches to English Language Learners)" (p. 51) as an instructional approach that allowed students to access their heritage language for literacy achievement. In their interviews, Jacqueline, Mussa, José, and Charmaine talked about how their ELL students worked independently or utilized peer-to-peer discussions or worked as a whole group and collaboratively to translate short sections of conceptually and linguistically rich texts from passages into their heritage language. These instructional strategies were supported by the research of Pacheco et al. When students engage in per-to-peer instructional strategies and self-efficacy, it helps with solidifying their own learning (Bandura, 1977; Fisher et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009). José sketched an example and elaborated,

At the beginning of the school year, I strategically place students desk in a U shape and, based on assessment scores, place students in a seating arrangement that looks like this . . . a medium scoring student will be placed next to a lower scoring student, and beside each medium scoring student a higher scoring student will be seated. This way, if I am not able to communicate with the ELL students individually, they can communicate with each other. So, if the lower level student doesn't know the answer to the question that I'm asking during class interactive discussion, he or she can ask the student next to him and get feedback. If the (medium level) student does not know the answer, he or she can ask the higher level student and collaborate. This practice allows for dissemination of

information in the class in their native language and in English and peer-to-peer interaction.

José sketched the following example where H is high, M is medium, and L is low:

H M L M H M L M H M L M

However, there remained a paucity of literature that correlated the importance and support of collaboration and best practices as it related to teacher collaborative practice and ELL instruction.

**Theme 5.** This theme, which also connected with Research Subquestion 2 about the changes, if any, that occurred in teachers' classroom in their work with helping ELLs attain grade-level academic literacy in a charter school, was the need for a greater emphasis on teaching vocabulary. Every teacher interviewed alluded to mastery of academic vocabulary as it related to academic literacy when responding to the multiple changes that occurred within their classrooms.

Multiple studies in the literature review referenced the effects of academic vocabulary. Mussa voiced his belief in regard to academic literacy: "For me, it would be studying the craft of literacy to gain knowledge of what the students need for literacy." The research of Baker et al. (1998) and Hickman et al. (2004) emphasized the importance of academic vocabulary. They noted that vocabulary knowledge has been shown to be a strong predictor of reading ability (i.e., fluency) and reading comprehension for ELLs. Jacqueline talked about how every subject had its own unique list of vocabulary words. Fisher et al. (2016) concluded that a strong vocabulary program has the effect size of 0.67. Therefore, for an instructional practice to be significant statistically, the instructional action must fall inside the "zone of desired effects, which is 0.40 and above" (Fisher et al., 2016, p. 10).

José talked about the significance of literacy and academic vocabulary and ELLs' need for mastery in his mathematics class. He remarked,

For example, vocabulary comes into play when understanding the context of the problem and all of those different aspects of it. So, literacy for me is the most important thing because most of what you do in my class is word problems, not basic computation. That's what you get . . . deeper knowledge, deeper learning, after you pull all of that out of the problems. If the ELL student cannot understand the problem, they are basically lost right out of the gate.

The work by August et al. (2014) significantly pointed to mathematics as a language. They stated that it is imperative that teachers gain an understanding of the connectedness of effectively teaching mathematics and language concepts across all four modalities (i.e., speaking, reading, writing, and listening) in addition to teaching these concepts in isolation (i.e., nouns, verbs, and phrases). Their findings aligned with the above remarks made by José. Congruently, Baker et al.'s (2014) work regarding mathematics instruction suggested that explicit, intentional, and student-friendly definitions support the learning of mathematical concepts.

A significant research study conducted by Cárdenas-Hagan (2015) dealt with ELLs and how they figure out the meaning of unknown vocabulary words. Charmaine summed up the various interview comments concerning ELLs challenge with vocabulary words and how to derive its meaning. She said, in reference to ELL students in her class, "Literacy means being able to read, write, and understand context that pertains to school or it could be a specific content area." Cárdenas-Hagan suggested introducing ELLs to morphemes ("the smallest units of meaning in language), cognates (words similar in meaning and spelling in a student's native language and English), bilingual glossaries,

multiple meaning words, and extended discussions with much repetition and rehearsal” (p. 35) to provide positive outcomes for ELLs’ acquisition of academic vocabulary. Furthermore, by integrating evidence-based practices during vocabulary instruction, 60% of new words that ELLs encounter could be understood by utilization of “transparent morphological structures” (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2015, p. 35). Current research, coupled with best practices, focused on teaching ELLs’ vocabulary using the variety of modalities can lead to greater academic literacy outcomes involving ELLs. Teachers believed that, with strategic professional development and a greater focus on teaching ELLs to master vocabulary, they could reasonably expect to narrow the academic literacy achievement gap of their ELL students.

**Theme 6.** The final theme, which was associated with Research Subquestion 3 about how teachers believe they can best be prepared to help ELLs to attain academic literacy in a charter school, was the need for increased professional development and course work. Having professional learning communities that avail themselves to networking and collaboration opportunities between educators within their schools and school districtwide was the consensus of all of the teachers interviewed. Teachers believed that they could be better prepared to instruct ELLs if they had job-specific professional development and opportunities to secure course work offered at the university-level schools of education that offered advanced credits. Although the CSO had implemented the SIOP training to guide teachers with interventions, instructional strategies, and scaffolding techniques that supported ELLs academic literacy, because of the language barriers the teachers felt stressed and ill-prepared and in need of additional SIOP and Measures of Academic Progress data training.

The literature review referenced multiple studies that addressed the SIOP model

(Echevarria & Vogt, 2010; Echevarria et al., 2013; Short, 2013, 2017). According to Short (2017), the goal of SIOP instruction was for “teachers to develop the learners’ academic English skills while using specialized techniques to teach and have students engage with the subject area topics in a comprehensible manner” (p. 4238). Maria discussed the training she received from the CSO and how she implemented the manipulatives according to the SIOP instructional strategies. Mussa stressed the need for additional resources such as visuals that would help with scaffolding academic language instruction. The comment that was made by Mussa was related to the lack of visuals while reading a story to ELL students; he said, “I took for granted a word that was in a book I was reading; one of the students didn’t understand what that word meant. . . . They didn’t have prior knowledge, and I had to go back and reteach.” Sam and Rajan (2013) reported that, if a teacher presents the explanation of a new term to convey the meaning, he or she could utilize body language and visuals to assist ELLs in comprehending the meaning effectively. Sam and Rajan’s findings addressed the challenge experienced by Mussa due to the lack of visuals. Beginning instruction at the students’ level is appropriate and encompasses one of the components of the SIOP model. Having explicit teaching tools and strategies that guide teachers where to begin and end with instructing ELLs was what teachers believed they needed in training and university course work. Short’s (2017) research design of workshops around SIOP language learning that provided job-embedded professional development for teachers to address CALP in the areas of “vocabulary, language skills and functions, and language structures” (p. 4245) is crucial and an answer for teachers and ELLs’ engagement with learning.

### **Discussion of the Research Subquestions and Their Connection to the Research**

**Research Subquestion 1.** The greater part of the teachers interviewed described

cases of particular difficulties they were encountering combined with the expansive numbers and levels of ELLs in their mainstream classrooms. All of the teachers interviewed portrayed the CSO as their first charter school experience or their first experience instructing ELLs. José said that, when he first started teaching at the CSO, ELL students were pulled out to go with their TESOL teacher or instructional assistant (IA). But, most recently, because there was a larger influx of Somali refugees and immigrants, all levels of ELLs were contained in classrooms, and the TESOL teacher and IAs provided inclusion support and specific, strategic, small group support during intervention periods. Su spoke the sentiments of all of the teachers when she expressed that there had been a big growth in the number of ELLs in her class. She said, “I think it’s a challenge due to the large class size and also due to diversity in my classroom.”

Notable challenges experienced by these teachers were related to communication, language, and cultural issues, coupled with ELL students being behind grade level. Mussa stated, “Students being that far behind grade level is very challenging for them, and it’s challenging for me to teach them. They are coming in at a disadvantage.” Although these challenges, in general, were not academic specific, they had a direct impact. They impeded the progress of the academic literacy process with the pacing of curriculum coverage in the academic year to prepare students for benchmark and high-stakes assessments. Challenges in or with communication, language barriers, and cultural issues were all tied to linguistic issues that affected acquisition of academic literacy. When discussing the issue of language acquisition, without exception, every teacher addressed issues surrounding vocabulary. Prior knowledge, background knowledge, figurative language, and idioms were a few of the examples discussed because of the demographic and their lack of comprehension. Teachers in the elementary and middle

school believed these challenges were intensified because a large majority of ELLs entered the school behind grade level. They voiced their concerns overall with there being insufficient time to teach all of the power standards, follow the pacing guide, and develop lesson plans with depth of knowledge that were differentiated. Heritage (2010, 2014) and Calderón et al. (2011) found that ELLs required targeted-intentional instruction. With the use of continuous formative assessments integrated during the course of instruction, CALP can be quantitated. The researchers' work showed that academic literacy with ELLs required long-term and comprehensive vocabulary instruction. In many instances, teachers had to bring their ELL student up to grade level while addressing the learning of vocabulary, content, and language concurrently. Teachers' daily use of formative assessments incorporated into the lesson plan during instruction could improve learning. Mussa and Charmaine believed that incorporating a lot of visuals assisted them (i.e., ELLs and teacher) with not having to go back and reteach and reword during the lesson.

The subject of language being a barrier that hindered ELLs' timely growth in academic language proficiency was a critical issue and very concerning for each teacher. José candidly expounded about an experience regarding two 8th-grade ELL students who entered his class behind grade level in addition to being non-English speakers. He stated,

The biggest thing in the classroom is that you are teaching a lesson to an entire class. I do things, differentiate to try and help them overcome the language barrier. But, even with differentiation, the specialist, TESOL teacher or IA assistance are needed.

Jacqueline also had an ELL student who knew no English. She surmised that there was not a school year that she did not have at least one ELL that came to her classroom who knew no English language whatsoever. Maria said, "The gamut of guessing goes on

and on and on. When what you want them to do is actually master academic literacy.”

Mussa shared the following story about a book he was reading to his class:

I took for granted a word that was in a book I was reading. Two ELL students didn't understand what that word meant. I was surprised. . . . I was like, wait a minute. I felt that was just a general thing, but they did not have the prior knowledge. They had no idea of what that setting was like. I had to go back and reteach: what did it look like on a farm; what is a farm; what animals live on a farm? I have to do a lot of background for words with general meaning. I actually have to pause the lesson, check for comprehension, and go back before I can go forward and cover additional chapters. Another one of my biggest challenges is background knowledge.

Cai and Lee (2012) hypothesized that the most common strategy used by ELLs to determine meaning of words was inference from context and the second was morphology. Cárdenas-Hagan (2015) wrote about introducing ELLs to morphemes, cognates, words with multiple meanings, and having extended discussions with much repetition and rehearsal. When teachers comprehend parts of words that exchange over dialects and explicitly teach them to ELLs, they could provide positive outcomes for ELLs' acquisition of academic vocabulary.

Another challenge that teachers believed slowed language acquisition was lack of student feedback or answering in a whisper or with one word versus academic conversation. This challenge struck at the core of ELLs' use of their native language. The majority of the teachers interviewed did not want ELL students to use their native tongue during the instructional period because the goal was mastery of English academic literacy. José expressed that the ultimate goal was and is being proficient in English

standards and acquiring academic literacy. Mussa said, I try not to allow them to speak in their Spanish mother language at school because they're trying to learn the English language. Mussa elaborated,

Trying to get them to talk to you. Trying to keep up the rigor while you're talking to the students and trying to get them to talk. Getting them to come out of their shell. I have a student right now that at the very beginning of the year could not speak a word of English at all. He would not speak to me. Now he's the one that gets into trouble for talking. So, he is a positive story. . . . he's breaking out of his shell.

Jiménez et al. (2015) did a study at the middle school level comparing academic literacy development and instructional strategies used by emergent bilinguals to support their comprehension of English language texts. A result of this study was that the teachers who allowed ELLs to use all of their resources, including their bilingualism, were better able to understand written texts. Cummins (1981b) and Ntelioglou et al. (2014) suggested that ELLs, with a developed vocabulary and knowledge of two language systems, proceed to develop metalinguistic awareness and grasp high-level concepts that allow them to comprehend patterns and differences between and among languages. Teachers struggled with finding a common middle ground with ELLs' appropriate use of their native language, student engagement, and placement level while acquiring academic literacy.

Cultural issues were additional challenges that teachers perceived were closely associated with language acquisition. Maria mentioned the language of testing being most challenging. She said, "One of the most challenging circumstances is probably the language specifically in testing. The ELL students might be familiar with the word but

not really understand the usage of it.” Maria followed her statement with this example,

So, when it comes to testing, you might see a question like . . . She threw the ball and she ducked. If they don’t know the word ducked meant to put the head down to avoid getting hit in the head, they might think of the animal. You have to really take all of these things into consideration as far as ELLs answering the test question correctly. So, asking ELLs . . . What does duck mean to you? Show me what that means to you? All of these things must be pretaught prior to the test.

And still, there are some times when you don’t know what is on the test.

Charmaine named colloquialism as a primary challenge for her middle school students. Her explanation was, “I have to figure out a way to reword things so that they can understand. Trying to tie things to what they’re learning is hardest because they don’t understand colloquialism.” José also brought up a communication challenge regarding language and culture. He said, “One of the negatives for us is being able to communicate with them and feeling successful with what we are trying to accomplish.” Su mentioned ELL students had a lack of motivation as a cultural challenge. Su’s statement was the outlier, rather than the norm. The Council of the Great City Schools (2014) recommended three nonnegotiable criteria when working through the complexity of ELLs academic and cultural needs. The three nonnegotiable criteria are cultural relevance, academic rigor that is at grade level, and building academic and background knowledge in English and their native language. Fisher et al. (2016) made it a point to emphasize that, when teachers apply cultural background knowledge to content learning and adjust their instructional practices to support ELLs, their students will begin to be contributors in their own learning. Regardless of the classroom instructional modality, cultural supports are also necessary for teachers to insert without reducing content to meet ELLs’ cognitive needs

(Cummins et al., 2015). The CSO was in its 2nd year of schoolwide and school districtwide SIOP implementation. Embedded in SIOP are culturally responsive and relevant supports for ELLs. Deeper implementation of SIOP as an additional method to help students attain academic literacy is still in its embryonic stage at the CSO (Short, 2017).

Although the challenges were numerous, each teacher voiced benefits they experienced teaching ELLs at the CSO. Jacqueline discussed the respect shown to her, especially with the primary-aged children. She stated, “I’ve gained sensitivity for what many ELLs actually go through.” One benefit Su talked about was getting to learn about their background, culture, and community. José shared the extra attention he believed the students received just by attending this school. He equated the extra attention akin to that which students with special needs received. While listening to the recorded interview and the noninterested third party probing for a deeper explanation, José elaborated,

It seems sometimes that the special education kids can be pushed off to the side because they are not the majority of the overall student body in the public schools. So, I think being in a charter school such as our benefits them. The extra kind of attention and services they will get.

José went on to state emphatically,

For me, seeing the different possibilities and spectrum of students that are out there and the need that is out there in different populations was different than you hear about from TV politicians, and noneducational groups to be fact and true and judgmental.

Charmaine and Mussa talked about the improvements they saw in their teaching because of working with ELLs at this charter school. For Maria, the one special benefit

she experienced was “being able to hear them read.” She explained,

In the last 3 years, my personal experience has given me a challenge with the lowest performing ELL students. Sometimes the families, refugee children that come to our country cannot speak, read, or write English. To see them reading or mastering the reading code, phonetics, vocabulary, knowledge and comprehension, to where they progress to grade level or above or close to it. . . . That’s the joy! My joy!

**Summary of Research Subquestion 1.** Research Subquestion 1 revealed the lived experiences of six teachers interviewed at the CSO and how circumstances that occurred in each teachers’ classroom contributed to their perceptions regarding their greatest challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy to ELLs in a charter school. The challenges shared by the teachers consisted of the large ELL percentage in their mainstream classes, ELLs entering school behind grade level, and cultural and language barriers.

The results of Research Subquestion 1 did not support the body of literature that suggested that proficiency in L1 and L2 is helpful in acquiring CALP. The majority of teachers found that the influx of ELLs into their mainstream classrooms and their culture and native languages posed challenges to their academic literacy achievement. Many believed that ELLs being pulled out and receiving specialized services with the TESOL teacher or paraprofessionals would be beneficial. Also, ELLs’ use of their home language during class and bilingual classes was discouraged and prohibited by the teachers; thus, the tenets of the literature were not tested. The perception of various teachers was that the ELLs were here to learn English. The theoretical underpinnings of Cummins (1973, 1976, 1979, 1981a, 1981b), the acquisition of BICS, CALP, and the interdependent

hypothesis allowed and encouraged bilingualism in class (Bailey & Huang, 2011; Bunch et al., 2012; Menken & Solorza, 2015). Also, there was a large body of scientific evidence cited in the literature review supporting ELLs' use of their native language that assisted with transference of English development and cognition skills (Jiménez et al., 2015; Pacheco et al., 2015; Samson & Collins, 2012). The former practice of exclusive pull out classes for ELLs is no longer encouraged. Regardless of the class size, inclusion or push-in classes are the recommended school-based program to meet the needs of the content-related components of instruction (Jackson et al., 2014; Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

All teachers stated and gave examples of cultural and language barriers. They made many adjustments to their instructional strategies to accommodate these challenges. Battiste (as cited in Cummins et al., 2015) argued the necessity of cultural supports that meet cognitive needs without reducing content, regardless of the instructional classroom modality. According to Fisher et al. (2016), when teachers apply cultural background knowledge to content learning and adjust their instructional practices to support ELLs to be contributors in their own learning, they have a greater "effect size" (p. 5) on student achievement.

The challenges faced by the teachers in this study expressed in the areas of class size and cultural and language barriers subconsciously contributed to lower expectations of ELLs; teachers could discriminate without knowing it (Pettit, 2013). However, the challenge teachers faced with ELL students entering behind grade level was supported in this study. The federal NCLB Act of 2001 held schools accountable for student academic outcomes. One of the subcategories where academic achievement typically trails their peers of other ethnic backgrounds are ELLs (Klein, 2015). The data trends on ELLs

illustrated in the NAEP (as cited in the National Center for Education Statistics, 2015) revealed a significant lack of literacy achievement compared to non-ELL cohorts.

It is estimated that students can master BICS in approximately 1 to 2 years of exposure to English at school. This very basic command of the English language excludes the use of skills necessary to incorporate English in writing or additional assignments. Comparatively, CALP, needed for reasoning, thinking, writing, and working in a second language, is likely to develop in 5 to 7 years (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009; Cummins, 1979, 1981a, 1981b). Teachers' recognition of the difficulty and the necessity to provide content-based instruction should result in inclusive language acquisition for ELLs, implementing instructional strategies and models at a high level of cognitive demand for all students, including ELLs (Cummins, 1979, 1981a, 1981b; Mitchell, 2016). When schools and teachers are unable to distinguish between BICS and CALP, students may be subjected to unnecessary psychological assessment and early exits from federally approved programs designed to assist ELLs to make adequate academic growth alongside their peers and native speakers of English (Cummins, 1980a, 1980b, 1984; Kober & Rentner, 2012).

**Research Subquestion 2.** Each teacher voiced some kind of adjustment that was made to their pedagogy, teaching abilities, and instructional strategies because of their work with ELLs to help them achieve academic literacy. Most teachers shared a combination of trials and errors they had tried throughout the years to meet the growing demand of ELLs and their acquisition of academic literacy and academic vocabulary. Besides the change in seating arrangements, José said, "I try to do everything on the board so that everything is usually a class discussion. This instructional strategy aligns with teaching mathematics as a language." August et al. (2014) suggested teaching

mathematics and language concepts across the four modalities of speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Charmaine stated that she had already touched on this subject when she mentioned the additional use of visuals and extra repetition of vocabulary words. Then, she pondered and explained, “I let the students help me decide who is going to help them find the answers through thinking and talking versus lecturing.” Silva et al. (2013) noted that science teachers must reload academic vocabulary in addition to frontloading to accomplish the in-depth knowledge needed for scientific inquiry and problem solving. In the course of her time teaching ELLs, Su made changes in her utilization of different types of resources such as Smartboards and chunking curricular materials.

Maria remarked, “One of the areas I made the biggest change is probably being aware of the language objective and the CCSS being in child friendly, understandable language to comprehend.” She gave several examples of how she accomplished this with the assistance of her coteacher. The importance of the use of word walls and preteaching vocabulary was a lightbulb moment for Jacqueline. She discussed that, whether teaching mathematics or science, terminology was important. Furthermore, she stated, “The kids need a specific set of vocabulary that they need to know for different things. I think this year I’m utilizing the concept of word walls more.” Mussa met with colleagues and shared strategies. According to Hattie (as cited in Fisher et al., 2016), in order for an instructional practice to be significant, the instructional effect size must be 0.40 and above, which is known as the zone of desired effects. A strong vocabulary program has the effect size of 0.67. This provides a strong indicator for ELLs’ movement toward achievement of academic literacy. Additionally, Yuriev et al. (2016) concurred that content-specific vocabulary integrated with a focus on literacy is critical for academic

success for all students, especially ELLs.

In addition, several teachers expressed that they had exhausted every theoretical method and strategy they had learned at university. For these teachers interviewed this meant more collaboration with peers, specialists, horizontal and vertical team meetings, and networking to share instructional strategies. They expressed a different need and had a different understanding of the time allotted to them for planning periods, professional learning communities, and building-level data team meetings. Su commented that she watched webinars on ELLs and spoke with ELL colleagues to get resources and other materials to educate ELLs better. However, she believed that was not enough and preferred additional professional development to fill the gaps. Maria spoke of her relationship with some ELL teachers who have a dual language background but had various questions surrounding cultural relevance and academic achievement. Mussa shared that the teachers in his building relied on each other and they all collaborated. He stated, however,

I need to take the initiative to learn new strategies and call, message or e-mail TESOL teachers at the other buildings. I have done this in the past. Scenarios like asking them what they think of a certain situation that is going on at “school B” so that networking back and forth occurs with different collaboration making sure that we are doing everything we can do to help the students.

**Summary of Research Subquestion 2.** Research Subquestion 2 provided understanding into the changes that occurred in teachers’ classrooms in their work with helping ELLs to attain academic literacy at the CSO. The changes shared by the teachers consisted of increased collaborative opportunities and a greater emphasis on teaching vocabulary. Each teacher discussed changes made to his or her pedagogy due to their

work with ELLs. Instructional changes made included changes in seating arrangements, board work with student engagement, preteaching vocabulary, peer-pair-sharing, visuals, increased repetition, word walls, and collaboration (i.e., teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, and student-to-student). The results from these findings aligned with various cited research literature and studies.

According to current and historical research, it takes ELLs at least 4 years or more to become fluent in CALP (Cummins, 1979, 1981a; Mitchell, 2016). The Council of the Great City Schools (2014) recommended the following three nonnegotiable criteria for supporting the academic needs of ELLs: “maintenance of grade level rigor; building knowledge while acquiring and building academic language (in English and/or other languages); and cultural relevance” (p. 13). The Understanding Language District Engagement Subcommittee at Stanford University (as quoted in U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2015) compiled the following six key principles for instructing ELLs that met the rigorous grade-level standards and encompassed the instructional changes made by the teachers interviewed at the CSO:

- (1) Instruction focuses on providing ELLs with opportunities to engage in discipline-specific practices, which are designed to build conceptual understanding and language competence in tandem;
- (2) Instruction leverages ELLs home language(s), cultural assets, and prior knowledge;
- (3) Standards-aligned instruction for ELLs is rigorous, grade-level appropriate, and provides deliberate and appropriate scaffolds;
- (4) Instruction moves ELLs forward by taking into account their English proficiency level(s) and prior schooling experiences;
- (5) Instruction fosters ELLs’ autonomy by equipping them with the strategies necessary to comprehend and use language in a variety of academic

settings; and (6) Diagnostic tools and formative assessment practices are employed to measure students' content knowledge, academic language competence, and participation in disciplinary practices. (pp. 8-9)

The results of teachers' recognition of the difficulty and the necessity to provide content-based instruction, resulting in teacher collaboration; student collaboration opportunities; inclusive language acquisition for ELLs; and implementing instructional strategies and models at a high level of cognitive demand for all students, including ELLs, was supported in this study (Bandura, 1977; Cummins, 2000; Fisher et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009; Sam & Rajan, 2013; Short et al., 2012; Storch & Aldosari, 2013).

**Research Subquestion 3.** During the interviews, many teachers expressed their concerns and lack of preparedness regarding the state of Ohio and federal requirements for subgroups meeting grade-level standards. ELLs is one of the subgroups that is expected to meet the CCSS. In February 2017, the new learning standards were adopted and renamed the Ohio Learning Standards (OLS) for the subjects of ELA and mathematics. ELLs are a subcategory, and all students will be tested on the content of the OLS in the 2018-2019 school year (ODE, 2017). All teachers throughout Ohio are expected to implement the OLS in the 2018-2019 school year. Mussa remarked that he felt challenged by the state expectations of ELLs versus the actual time it takes for ELLs to achieve grade level academic literacy. Professional development that addresses the requirement for more academic rigor for all students' is a critical need for teachers.

There was one outlier who stated, "I believe that every year that I've been here there has been some extension to my development. Developmentally, I think I keep up on professional development. It's just the language barrier." Two of six teachers stated they would like to attend the annual TESOL Conference held in Ohio for professional

development. Charmaine felt the need for more professional development targeted toward middle schools with strategies that applied toward the developmental needs of intermediate students. Su focused on her specific needs. She said, “[I need] training that is specific on resources to teach ELLs rather than me having to find resources such as webinars.” When José was probed further regarding additional training opportunities he believed would help him prepare ELLs attain academic literacy, he elaborated by sharing the following feelings:

Difficult question! Without knowledge of the language, you are not aware of the whole issue is language or is it partly concepts not developed. I just have no clue what they are lacking. If it’s just strictly language or if it’s also skills sets? . . . because it is very hard with the ones who are limited and severely limited in their language. I do not know if training can help. Perhaps evaluation of the teacher could be helpful. Evaluating the ways that a lesson is conducted, classroom management and other things like how teacher assistance is given to students needing help. Additional trainings would have to come in with different ways of teaching the materials, writing, pictures, kinesthetics. Doesn’t seem to be a quick fix (training) of the problem. Maybe recognizing how ELL students react. The ELL level would dictate the type of training that is needed.

Jiménez et al. (2015) conducted a study at the middle school level comparing academic literacy development and instructional strategies used by emergent bilinguals to support their comprehension of English language texts. These researchers found that, when teachers instructed ELL students to utilize essential academic skills such as effective listening and note-taking skills, critical thinking, classroom discussions, and oral defense, students were able to comprehend different genres within written texts

through cognitive processes. The type of training as conducted in this study by Jiménez et al. appeared to make a significant connection to the needs expressed by José.

Finally, José recalled a time when he began teaching at the CSO; he said,

When I first started at the school, in the beginning I never had the limited ELL in the classroom. Aides that speak the Somali language were not in the classroom.

They were in a separate room with the extremely limited students giving the students the basics, in Math, English, etc. Then the policy changed and the limited ELL students would be in my classroom. If we had some kind of technology that would provide the information in their language that would be helpful, but this is not practical or available and you can't always have an aide there to translate for you. So, there is a roadblock. There is never full delivery of the information because of the language barrier. Some things just won't happen.

All staff received professional development during the annual preservice training in August of 2018. Uccelli et al. (2015) expanded the definition of academic-language proficiency and academic-language skills as core academic skills as “a constellation of the high-utility language skills that correspond to linguistic features that are prevalent in academic discourse across school content areas and infrequent in colloquial conversations” (p. 338). Planned professional development learning opportunities that encompass this definition of academic vocabulary with a cross-disciplinary scope of academic language support and target the training needs of teachers of ELLs and all students as well as address José's concerns. All teachers believed that additional, specific course work and training targeted toward teachers of ELLs were needed. SIOP rose to the top of the list of an ongoing and in-depth training need.

**Summary of Research Subquestion 3.** Research Subquestion 3 provided insight

into how teachers believed they could be best prepared to help ELLs to attain academic literacy at a charter school. The majority of teachers openly shared their perceptions regarding their educational experience at university. These teachers stated that their university did not include course work that prepared them for teaching ELLs. Several teachers commented that they had a course in diversity or special needs that was insufficient to prepare them for the teaching strategies specifically needed for ELLs. As a result of their lived experiences, the majority of teachers requested increased professional development targeted toward ELLs to be prepared better to help them attain academic literacy.

Educational systems, including charter schools, are expected to implement various models of instruction for ELLs. Teachers and administrators are expected to monitor student progress and refine their efforts in improving academic performance for the school district as a whole, the subgroups (e.g., ELLs) within the school district, and individual students who compose it (Stiggins et al., 2006). Therefore, teachers of ELLs need innovative teaching methods that measure learning outcomes and create different and innovative forms of measuring outcomes (Minnesota Statutes for Charter Schools, 2016). The efficacy of existing teacher training programs or available CALP assessments were not supported by the findings in this study. Few researchers addressed how teachers and administrators could measure acquisition of CALP by their students as evidenced by assessments.

The most requested training was for SIOP and to attend the annual training. Echevarria et al. (2013) explained that the SIOP instructional approach to language and content addressed ELLs' variable abilities in their English-speaking and comprehension abilities. Song (2016) posited that a systematic professional development approach with

SIOP could compensate for theories and pedagogies not acquired during teacher education programs but needed for teachers for ELLs.

### **Implications for Practice**

The focus of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of academic literacy in teaching ELLs in a charter school. The lived experiences of six teachers interviewed provided a rich description of what mainstream teachers working with ELLs experience complying with mandates to close the academic literacy achievement gap in this subgroup. One implication for practice to help with the difficulty with ELLs academic literacy achievement is the incorporation into lesson planning of culturally relevant topics and practices versus the "culture of the classroom they participate" (Klingner et al., 2012, p. 38). Another significant implication could be allowing students to utilize their native language within the classroom to improve comprehension among peers (e.g., peer-pair-share) and improved academic literacy outcomes. Last, another significant implication could be to provide targeted job-embedded professional development for all teachers of ELLs with a SIOP framework. By providing job-embedded professional development specific to ELLs, it will enhance the needed instructional strategy supports for mainstream teachers without the specialist licensure and endorsements (e.g., TESOL, reading specialist) needed for deeper learning of ELLs and all students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Any authentic research study experiences some limitations. Without exception, this research study experienced limitations. The overarching limitations were potential researcher bias due to the positionality status of the researcher and the qualitative methodology approach used. Qualitative studies versus quantitative studies do not offer a

hypothesis. Qualitative research aims at “understanding and interpreting behaviors, contexts, and interrelations” (Boutellier et al., 2015, p. 3). The methodology utilized was a qualitative research study of phenomenological approach and hermeneutic design. According to Van Manen (2016), phenomenology asks, “What is this experience like? How does the meaning of this experience arise? [and] How do we live through an experience like this?” (p. 31) versus quantitative studies that measure statistical outcomes. To address the potential bias related to the positionality of the researcher, a noninterested third party conducted the interviews; interview questions were field tested, and peer reviewers were engaged. The following limitations to the study were related to the site and participants:

1. The study looked at only three charter schools within one state. The teachers’ lived experiences may have differed in other states and charter schools based on legislation and cultural differences.

2. Only teachers were invited to participate in the study based on preestablished criteria. Other administrative staff, coaching staff, lead teacher staff, and specialty staff who provided various services to the ELLs could have presented different themes and findings.

3. Two of six teachers interviewed were planning to leave the school at the end of the school year. The other four teachers were remaining. Their staying or leaving status may have impacted what was or what was not shared in their interviews.

4. Newer teachers to the charter schools or to the field of teaching (outside of the preestablished criteria) could have provided a different perspective.

5. Teachers at each grade level were not selected due to the eligibility criteria.

6. A major limitation of the study was the relatively small sample size.

7. Another challenging limitation was the positionality status of the researcher.

### **Reflections From the Study**

Throughout this entire doctoral process, I have grown as an educator, researcher, and leader. In the past, I would have denied being a researcher. My skewed view of being a researcher involved being a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) only. As I began to comprehend and apply the knowledge gained from class discussions, assignments, flipped classes, team projects, leadership seminar and leadership simulation, summer institute, and peer interactions, I paused for various moments of reflection. For 10 plus years, my work centered around making a world of difference in the lives of immigrant and refugee ELLs. Among the administrators, a common saying was we cannot be data rich and information poor when it comes to utilizing the data to advance our student demographic population. Based on my background, I began the search for a research topic related to ELLs. I read volumes of research articles and dissertations before stumbling upon a dissertation related to ELLs that intrigued me. As an educator and business professional, I was drawn to its topic of Teachers' Experiences With ELLs Acquisition of Academic Literacy (McCoy, 2013). Due to my background knowledge of the federal, state, and local legislation, I sought guidance regarding replication of the research study. This process caused me to question thoroughly the problem of ELLs and ascertain if there was a valid need for this research being replicated in a charter school setting.

As a school developer and practitioner, I have learned that change is constant and many times out of one's control. In a perfect world, if I could do anything different, I would have chosen the field of education as my first career. I would have attended college from bachelor's to doctorate degrees without taking a break. However, the major

lesson that I learned from undertaking this research study was, it is never too late to change. Like the students I serve, they come from various countries, situations, and circumstances. They change their names, they change their country, they change their citizenship, and they migrate as immigrants or refugees in search of a better future. A better future in many instances is tied to a better education. I learned that later in life is a good time to make a change. Because of where I am in life; because of my life experiences; because of my excursions to several continents; because of my interactions with global citizens, global educators, and global businesses, I was ready for this journey.

I began this journey with experiences that I wanted to use as a topic to be an advocate for ELLs. That approach did not work. No matter how I packaged undocumented immigrants, each professor said that it would not pass the Institutional Review Board.” When I understood this concept, I had a light bulb moment. It was, then, that I moved from novice to scholar. As a scholar, I learned how to utilize the library database to maximize finding research articles efficiently. Finally, I came to understand that completion of this body of research could add to the field for all stakeholders and possibly change a life, change a law, change a practice, change a school, or even change the face of this world. As a scholar, no matter how great or how small, my research will impact academic literacy for ELLs, other student demographics, educators, and stakeholders because I completed the work.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this replicated study was to investigate teachers’ lived experiences regarding the academic literacy achievement of ELLs as teachers in a charter school. The findings of this research study gave voice to the lived experiences of mainstream charter school teachers of ELLs as perceived by them. Researchers in future studies could use

these findings to connect theory and practice for teachers of ELLs at Colleges of Education. Over the past several decades, there has been migration of new immigrant and refugee populations into the United States. Learning and teaching within charter schools was affected as a result of this shift in demographics. During the course of teaching and learning, mastery of CALP was expected of all ELLs according to federal, state, and local legislation. Thus, mainstream teachers of ELLs are tasked with addressing the learning of vocabulary, content, and language as well as bringing ELLs up to grade level concurrently.

Although this qualitative research study filled a gap by investigating teachers' experiences working with ELLs in a charter school, gaps still remain at the primary and intermediate levels related to teachers' lived experiences with the difficulties of bringing academic content lexicon to ELL students. The vast majority of research was quantitative, measuring instructional strategies and implementation of programs. In addition, few studies were done with kindergarten-Grade 12 populations in charter schools with a lens focused on ELLs. The following suggestions for future research focus on the phenomenon of ELLs' mastery of academic literacy:

1. A mixed-methods study that utilizes quantitative research methods for large data sets to address how teachers and administrators could measure acquisition of academic content lexicon by their students as evidenced by the assessments and use a qualitative method (phenomenological) to address information that statistics cannot explain.

2. A qualitative study with an ELL focus on a kindergarten-Grade 12 range of students and teachers in a charter school that address Somali refugees, Latinos, and newly immigrated ELLs.

3. A qualitative study of the lived experiences of teachers in a kindergarten-Grade 12 range of students and teachers with different seniority levels focused on ELL mastery of academic literacy in a charter school.

4. A quantitative or mixed-methods study that addresses the correlation between teacher (e.g., teachers of English to speakers of other languages training and certification) and professional development experiences with ELL student performance and growth would be illuminating.

5. A qualitative or phenomenological study with an ELL mastery of academic literacy focus concerning the lived experiences of teachers in a kindergarten-Grade 12 range of students and specialist teachers (e.g., TESOL, bilingual reading specialist, and intervention specialist) in a charter school.

6. A mixed-methods study utilizing phenomenology to explain the human phenomenon that statistics cannot do a comparative study with ELLs and their peers related to high-stakes tests and assessments (e.g., Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career or Smarter Balanced) and teacher evaluation system based on student performance (e.g., Ohio Teacher Evaluation System).

7. A mixed-methods study evaluating Teacher College of Education programs, teacher preparedness, and schools' (e.g., charter schools, traditional schools, and private schools) professional development to meet the needs of ELLs in mainstream teachers' classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the limitations of McCoy's (2013) study, on her recommendations for further study, and on this researcher's review of current literature, McCoy's study became a prime candidate of interest for replication. In this replication, the two variables

changed were the setting (charter school versus international school) and the tenure of the ELLs' teachers (Basturkmen, 2014). Limited research had been done with an ELL focus on a kindergarten-Grade 8 range of students and teachers that addressed Somali refugees; Latinos; and newly immigrated ELLs and academic literacy achievement, particularly in a charter school. Within this charter school setting, mainstream teachers have the responsibility for academic literacy proficiency instruction of ELL students. Therefore, I decided to conduct this research study to investigate the lived experiences of teachers in a charter school with ELLs' difficulty with mastering academic literacy.

Six themes were identified that provided a deeper understanding of the phenomenon experienced by six teachers interviewed. The findings of this study revealed that the majority of teachers found that the influx of ELLs into their mainstream classrooms and their culture and native languages posed challenges to their academic literacy achievement (i.e., CALP). Another finding of this study showed that increased collaboration and a greater emphasis on teaching vocabulary proved to be helpful. The third finding in this study was that the majority of teachers' request for increased professional development targeted toward ELLs to be better prepared to help them attain academic literacy.

These findings of this research study provided an in-depth view into how these ELL teachers perceived their effectiveness as educators, the difficulty advancing ELL students to mastery of academic literacy, and the school's role in providing the training and resources needed to support them. Hence, this research study filled a gap by investigating teachers' experiences working with ELLs in a charter school. The three major findings in McCoy's (2013) research study were that (a) the importance of good teaching, (b) the importance of good communication, and (c) implementation of best

practices could assist teachers in their work with ELLs. These foundational principles were supported as principles of good teaching pedagogy. It is desired that the findings of this study will provide guidance that will be beneficial to teachers of ELLs and advancing ELL students to mastery of academic literacy throughout the United States and abroad.

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Appendix A  
Interview Protocol

## Interview Protocol

Teachers' Perceptions of English Language Learners' Difficulty With Mastering  
Academic Literacy in a Charter School

Time of Interview:	Date of Interview:	Place of Interview:
Interviewer:	Interviewee:	Position of Interviewee:
Noninterested third party		

Thank you for consenting to be part of my (Estella Stephens) research study about the experiences of classroom teachers who have experienced an increase in the numbers and responsibilities for English language learners (ELLs) in their classrooms. Specifically, I am interested in finding out how you feel that ELLs in your classes are progressing with their acquisition of academic language. This research is being done as part of my program as a doctoral student at Nova Southeastern University. Due to my position and being an insider, a noninterested third party will be conducting all of the interviews. Your anonymity will be kept in the strictest confidence, and you will only be identified by a pseudonym.

The reason I have asked you to be a part of my research is that I believe that learning about what you have seen and heard and felt as an experienced classroom teacher will help others who are also experiencing an increase in the number of ELLs in their classrooms. Your participation will help me and other people at your school, other charter schools, and schools at large to understand better teachers' perspectives on this challenging issue. It will also give teachers a voice that they do not have otherwise in legislative changes and challenges regarding their profession.

Your participation in my study will be a private affair and will have no impact on your immediate work at school. In my research write-up, you will be identified with a pseudonym. The noninterested third party will interview you less than an hour and a follow-up for 20-30 min shortly after transcription of audio recording for member checking. My plan is to transcribe the interviews. The interviews will be kept in a locked fire proof file cabinet at the home of the researcher. The noninterested third party will ask if you would like to read the transcripts of the interview protocol and questions and verify their accuracy.

My main focus in the interview process (noninterested third party) will be on finding out how you feel you have been doing with helping ELL students to attain academic literacy. For my study, the term *academic literacy* means the subject-specific vocabulary words and the language constructs that combine to make up the language students need in order to be successful in school. You can tell me (noninterested third party) stories about

particular students, or you can tell me (noninterested third party) about the general situation in your diverse classroom. I will appreciate hearing about your personal experiences.

After interviewee reads and signs consent form, the place and time of interview will be scheduled by the noninterested third party with the teacher. The central research question was, What are teachers' lived experiences with ELLs difficulty mastering academic literacy in a charter school? The following three supporting research questions guided this study (McCoy, 2013):

1. What are the greatest challenges and benefits in teaching academic literacy to ELLs in a charter school?
2. What changes, if any, have occurred in teachers' classrooms in their work with helping ELLs to attain grade-level academic literacy in a charter school?
3. How do teachers believe they can be best prepared to help ELLs attain academic literacy in a charter school?

Thank you for your co-operation and assistance with this research study. Please be assured that your responses will be kept confidential. You will have the opportunity, if you wish, to read the documentation of the interview to verify its accuracy (noninterested third party).

*Note.* Adapted from Asmussen and Creswell (as cited in Creswell, 2015, p. 225).

Appendix B  
Interview Questions

## Interview Questions

1. What is your name?
2. What is the name of the Charter school where you work?
3. What is your role in a Charter school?
4. What are your responsibilities in that role?
5. How long have you been teaching?
6. How long have you been teaching ELLs?
7. How long have you been teaching in a charter school?
8. How would define mastering academic literacy?
9. How difficult is it for students to master academic literacy in a charter school?
10. What sort of course work or professional development have you had in teaching ELL?
11. Can you describe some of the challenges you experienced as you have taught ELLs in a charter school?
12. Can you describe some of the benefits you experienced as you have taught ELLs in a charter school?
13. What preparation have you received to help ELLs attain academic literacy?
14. In your university course work do you recall any training in teaching ELL specifically (what sort of preparation did you receive to teach ELL)? Can you describe it? In your professional development, do you recall any training in teaching ELL (what sort of preparation did you receive to teach ELL)? Can you describe it?

15. What changes have you made over the course of time that you have been teaching ELLs?
16. A. What changes have you seen in the level of student engagement?  
B. To what do you attribute these changes?
17. What additional training opportunities do you believe would have helped prepare you to help ELLs attain academic literacy?
18. How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your preparation?
19. What additional training would help prepare you to grow as a teacher of ELLs?

## Appendix C

### Emergent Themes From Data Analysis Participants' Interview Transcripts

## Emergent Themes From Data Analysis Participants' Interview Transcripts

Participant	Emergent Theme 1	Emergent Theme 2	Emergent Theme 3	Emergent Theme 4
Maria	Large percentage	Challenge with lowest ELL students; at their own level; behind	Refugees; just entering this country; customs; alternate methods of communication; Somali/Muslim	Relationship with TESOL teachers with dual language background
Jacqueline		Develop-mentally delayed; lack understanding	Immigrants; TESOL presentation related to academic literacy; language barrier	Opportunities are there to collaborate/ share and learn; peer-share type deal
Su	Large class sizes of ELLs	Behind grade level; lack of motivation	Cultural diversity;	Collaborate with other teachers
Mussa	High ELL population as ours; different spectrum of students	Challenged at grade level; far behind grade level; struggling readers	Language is obstacle; very difficult to overcome	Share different strategies/ideas with TBTs, vertical and horizontal; close staff network; coteacher; peers
José	School population; Severity of ELLs	Active monitoring until they write and/or talk; lack background experiences; depends on time in country /war	Language class for staff/ Spanish/Somali; English proficient; Unable to communicate in their language	Do all work on board collaboratively;
Charmaine	Need smaller class sizes, small groups; big groups don't work	They come in lost, far behind; don't make that connection	Build rapport	Meeting with TESOL teachers to brainstorm in my subject area

## Emergent Themes From Data Analysis Participants' Interview Transcripts (continued)

Emergent Theme 5	Emergent Theme 6
Behind in phonetics/ knowledge/ comprehension/ vocabulary/ reading; manipulatives	SIOP;
Preteaching vocabulary; word walls;	Large percentage of our PD focus on literacy/reading/ Comprehension/written text
Specific resources to help teach ELLs and motivate them	Need additional PD besides self-taught webinars;
Grade level vocabulary; 150-200 words; 25% academic vocabulary; Increase visuals	Increased rigor for Common Core, Blooms and DOK; Attend TESOL conference; TESOL endorsement; MAP data/post quarterly data
Manipulatives; vocabulary to understand context	Evaluating the way a lesson is conducted; classroom management; no quick fix
Heavy emphasis on visual supports for vocabulary; extra repetition	More college classes; PD with more middle school strategies