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# The Reality of Teaching English Virtually: ESL Teachers' Perspectives and Experiences during the COVID-19 National Pandemic

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**THE REALITY OF TEACHING ENGLISH VIRTUALLY:  
ESL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES  
DURING THE COVID-19 NATIONAL PANDEMIC**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The College of Human Sciences and Education

by

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For my family, friends, and the Louisiana education system.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the dilemma ESL teachers experienced as the educational system shifted from the usual modus operandi of in-person lessons to the uncharted virtual learning environment (VLE). ESL teachers, in one of the largest urban districts in Louisiana, accumulated additional roles and responsibilities that were unique to the teachers of the English learner (EL) population enrolled at their schools.

Data collected to answer the research questions were the product of single and focus group's interviews with five ESL elementary and middle school teachers in Freedom District. State and district emergency response to COVID-19 guidelines, along with instructional artifacts, were collected to establish internal validity. Data analysis indicated: (a) the 2020-2021 school year district and school leadership plans to reopen schools were chaotic and lacked the necessary tools and resources to support teachers in the VLE; (b) an overwhelming account of the additional roles and responsibilities ESL teachers adopted while teaching in the VLE; (c) an intimate view into their ELs' daily lives and a lack of resources available to them; and (d) a description of individual attempts to continue providing linguistic and academic support to their students.

This study displayed the responses ESL teachers, throughout pandemic teaching, displayed as they continued providing access to grade level content while supporting English proficiency acquisition, even when participants felt unprepared to effectively perform their job duties in the VLE. Additionally, it became clear that ESL teachers need increased support staff to close the developmental, academic, and linguistic gaps participants noticed even after a full year of in-person instruction.



## **CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted the routines and lives of all citizens worldwide surprised everyone with an unexpected distancing from what we all knew as “normality.” Stakeholders in every industry had to devise hurried alternative plans to keep their visions and productivity afloat, some succeeded while many failed. The education system was not immune to the repercussions from pausing all sectors of the community in the attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19. Disruption in education pushed educators to look for alternatives as they tried to ensure delivery of high academic content while maintaining equitable access for students. The status quo of the educational system was challenged, and the overwhelming majority of educators implemented online or virtual learning to address the needs of all students during the global pandemic. The education sector was forced to turn into the realm of virtual learning, a disruptive innovation according to Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2011), because the alternative was no instruction or learning at all. Technology could provide better means of getting the job done while schools were closed to the public (Flavin, 2021).

Many school districts were not completely unfamiliar with online learning since over 75% of districts in America had already been interested in the possibility of offering differentiation for students via the virtual learning environment (VLE; Horn & Staker, 2015). Prior to the pandemic, virtual and blended education were considered an alternative pedagogy that could support the students’ needs for personalized instruction, include larger course offerings or learning opportunities, and maintaining (or reducing) the cost of education for the schools. However, the separation of students and teachers during virtual (distance) or hybrid learning, created many barriers for teachers to deliver content and for students to demonstrate academic growth due to transactional distance between teacher and students.

Limited teacher-learner interactions, restricted to a computer screen during virtual education, paved the way to potential misunderstandings because distance education techniques are unique to this VLE that few students and teachers engaged with prior to COVID-19. A lack of experience and professional development for teachers needed to be successful in the virtual learning environment was felt across the world and it highlighted how unprepared the school system was in delivering content and supporting learning through online instruction. Successful language teachers had to adapt the delivery of content focusing on interactions and collaboration to promote language development based on the communicative language teaching approach (Gruber & Bauer, 2020).

In a survey study from Koehler and Farmer (2020), parents, teachers, and administrators described the challenges of the virtual learning environment as:

- having limited to no access to the internet, devices, and resources;
- experiencing technical issues such as problems with internet connectivity, virtual platforms malfunctioning, wrong usernames and passwords, and device compatibility with the virtual learning environment;
- difficulty navigating the different websites and platforms to locate assignments and content;
- unclear student expectations such as when or where to turn in assignments, limited or sporadic communication from the school, inability to address students' needs in real time, and limited assessment measures; and
- inexperience with the virtual learning environment that requires self-regulation and motivation, effective time management, non-completion of assignments, and a home environment not conducive to virtual instruction.

English as second language (ESL) teachers are federally mandated to support English language (L2) acquisition, fluency, and literacy of all ELs attending elementary, middle, and high schools located in this large school district in Louisiana. In addition to ESL teachers' responsibilities, it is also relevant to mention that ELs are required to take the Louisiana English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT; Louisiana Department of Education, 2022) on a yearly basis that monitors ELs' advances towards English language proficiency in the four different language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The ESL teacher's focus must not only include ELs mastering (or progressing in) the yearly state test, but they also need to have students to acquire English proficiency so the achievement gap between native speakers and ELs can be reduced. ESL teachers' loads increased as they had to balance their usual roles and responsibilities while navigating the new norm of student learning in the VLE, which demanded teaching and communicating through unfamiliar means.

### **ESL Instruction Goes Virtual**

When the learning environment shifted to the virtual delivery of content and instruction, ESL teachers' focus became the methods of how to effectively deliver their lessons without properly including assessments into their practice to monitor their students' English language development (ELD; Pu & Xu, 2021). However, Calderón, Slavin, and Sánchez (2011) explained that “what matters the most in educating English learners is the quality of instruction” (p. 107); but the shift from face-to-face instruction to the VLE greatly impacted attendance, engagement, and progress towards English language development (ELD). ESL teachers immediately recognized that they were lacking targeted professional development to support the English language development of their ELs in the VLE (Shin & Borup, 2020). Teachers' perspectives and self-reflection on their preparation to meet their ELs' needs in the classroom already

expressed a lack of appropriate specialized professional development prior to the pandemic; yet, during the school year 2020-2021 teachers' expectations, duties, and accountability only increased due to the state and local districts' attempts to adapt teaching and learning to the COVID-19 teaching reality that stretched within the online, in-person, and hybrid instructional settings.

### **Instructional Challenges**

Language learners need to talk to learn, and they learn through talking so if they are denied the exploratory talk then, students' learning is constrained by the language of instruction (Setati & Adler, 2000) which denies opportunities to properly acquire English language proficiency. The VLE allowed students to use online resources, such as translators and Wikipedia, rather than relying on their academic and linguistic knowledge to decode and complete their assignments or remain on task (Erbaggio et al., 2012). Social interactions among peers, an important part of learning, such as class transitions, recess, lunchtime, and ancillary classes, were not possible to emulate during distance learning (Maher, 2020) which became a concern in that many of the best practices in teaching ELs to develop English proficiency were be lost in the VLE. Most teachers had minimal experience in teaching through virtual platforms because it was a completely different learning environment than most teachers learned in or how they were taught to teach in their methods classes (Weinburgh et al., 2014). The research argues that teachers will face obstacles in delivering diversified, accessible, and equitable lessons to their students, especially to ELs because teachers had very little time to prepare to teach virtually. According to Rosenberg-Kima and Mike (2020), "in order to teach online, one should first experience online learning as a *learner*" (p. 119), which happened in real time for teachers

and students. All educators and students had to learn how to be a student or a teacher, respectively, in the VLE as they attempted to deliver or master content and language proficiency.

### **Culturally Responsive Challenges**

Culturally responsive practices were already embedded in the ESL teachers' pedagogy to support English language development, however, the overwhelming shift from face-to-face instruction to distance learning through VLEs needed much more targeted support from other experienced educators to ensure ELs had equitable access to the curriculum. According to Barko-Alva, Porter, and Herrera (2020), from the onset of the pandemic, school leaders and educators, discovered the limited technological resources and began preparing paper and pencil, one-size-fits-all, monolingual, packets to ensure student engagement at the most basic level.

Consideration towards ELs and their families' cultural and linguistic backgrounds was an afterthought as school leaders and teachers scrambled to prepare rote memorization and non-cognitively demanding activities that continued some semblance of learning. Teachers and administrators seemed more preoccupied with how to effectively navigate virtual learning platforms than finding ways to provide the same amount and quality of support to individual students with specific learning needs, such as linguistic needs.

It is only when teachers are able to integrate their students' strengths, funds of knowledge, and languages other than English into their practice with the understanding that language, culture, and identity are all interrelated and ever-present in their classroom setting, that ELs can move away from a self-perception of having learning deficits towards having a safe space for learning to demonstrate their understanding of the rigorous content (Martínez-Álvarez, Cuevas, & Torres-Guzmán, 2017). The VLE did not stimulate the inclusion of culturally relevant material in lessons to support culturally diverse students' academic achievement which limited

teachers' understanding and continuous learning about their culturally diverse students. Parental involvement or support varied depending on EL parents' computer literacy skills and command of the English language adding another layer to the difficulty ESL teachers experienced in supporting academic and linguistic growth in the VLE. Finally, meaningful, and purposeful teacher-student interactions with ELs decreased significantly in the VLE with very limited opportunities to practice the oral language that could promote sharing cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences as they navigated the challenges and successes of new pedagogical practices that were required from ESL teachers while they delivered instruction in an online learning setting, as well as to describe how the new practices positively and negatively impacted their supporting role in serving ELs virtually and the progression of students' ELD. Research concerning ELs usually emerges from states that have higher concentrations of ELs, such as California, New York, Florida, and Texas (see Bunch, 2011; Harper & de Jong, 2009; Hinton, 2015; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016; Schleppegrell & O'Hallaron, 2011; Shim, 2010; Sugarman, 2019; Weinburgh et al., 2014;) yet, there is an increased obligation to address the specific needs of ELs within the school districts in Louisiana because ELs seem to be an afterthought for stakeholders in Louisiana. The fact that teachers must wear many hats and be flexible in their practice is not a new concept; however, the demands teachers had to comply to during the 2020-2021 school year increased exponentially as virtual instruction become a requirement as they delivered lessons to students through virtual and hybrid learning models. With limited research that is exclusive to Louisiana's growing population of ELs and their families, this study provided insight into the

experiences of ESL teachers in Freedom District that can guide state policy, districts, and teachers' practices on how to better address the specific linguistic and academic needs of ELs in the VLE. Freedom District's growing population of ELs already demanded more in-depth training for ESL teachers throughout a regular school year; however, no professional development or training could have prepared educators for what was going to happen. The researcher hopes to start a discussion and provide recommendations on equitable teaching practices for ELs, particularly in Louisiana, within the VLE. Additionally, ESL teachers' perspectives on the positive and negative impacts of the VLE can also become relevant for all classroom teachers to help them be better prepared in differentiating their teaching and including the necessary support towards English language development and content access for ELs.

### **Context of the Study**

Freedom District is one of the largest urban school districts in Louisiana with a significant enrollment of ELs among minorities. Freedom School District was selected for this study due to being one of the largest urban school districts in the state that has a significant (and growing) enrollment of ELs. This district shares most characteristics of other urban school districts in the country that continue to see a growing number of ELs' enrollments (Louisiana Department of Education, 2021). I chose to work with ESL teachers in Freedom District who served language minority students at their schools in the VLE to provide updated relevant information that can guide every teacher with ELs in their classroom in supporting English language proficiency. The Louisiana English Learner Program Handbook (2020) defines English language proficiency as the ability for the EL to demonstrate "a level of English language skills necessary to independently provide, interpret, collaborate in, and succeed in grade-level, content-related academic tasks in English" (p. 16).

The context of this study will now be discussed and will include information on the state of Louisiana and COVID-19, Freedom District reopening schools, the implementation of virtual learning, and the progression into the hybrid model of instruction.

### **State of Louisiana and COVID-19**

In the summer of 2020 state and district leaders in Louisiana had to address a lot of uncertainties and unanswered questions prior to reopening schools due to the spread of COVID-19. In response, the State of Louisiana released minimum standards (or guidelines) all school districts had to meet to safely reopen schools. Throughout the summer of 2020, school districts in Louisiana were scrambling to present a plan for the reopening of schools that would take into consideration the safety of their students to protect them against the imminent danger that is COVID-19, a potentially deadly virus that targets the respiratory system. School districts and leaders attempted to provide safe environments as students returned to schools that complied with all state and district laws, mandates, and policies that were already in place for the reopening of the schools. The State of Louisiana imposed the usual educational requirements for schools in place with no exemptions granted for accountability measures. This included required instructional minutes, mandatory attendance for students, and state testing in the Spring of 2021. District- and school-wide initiatives referred to the mandate for all teachers to deliver content and instruction through virtual platforms until the state deemed it safe to the classrooms in the face-to-face or hybrid instructional settings. COVID-19 caused an abrupt interruption to learning, and even though districts scrambled to deliver content virtually, incomplete instruction increasingly widened learning gaps as the 2020-2021 school year progressed.



## **The Re-Opening of Schools**

Freedom District reopened schools for the 2020-2021 school year under pandemic regulations, which limited the number of people who could be in one room at a time who were all to remain static within their rooms to limit traffic flow in the hallways and close contact with others who were not part of the single room population. Teachers reported to their worksites daily and were instructed to remain in their classrooms throughout the day. They attended school meetings and taught the state-mandated content from their classrooms through the VLE, as the parish (and state) experienced subsequent spikes of COVID-19 positive cases. And despite there being serious health concerns for the staff and students throughout the state, the original decision of not providing waivers for the yearly state assessments remained in place and school districts were required to measure students' academic performance.

## **Implementation of Virtual Learning**

Freedom District's definition of virtual learning included a description of student instruction to be delivered "via a web-based educational delivery system that includes software to provide a structured learning environment" (Freedom District Blueprint, 2020, p. 8); However, the urban population that comprises Freedom District's student enrollments did not have the necessary connections and devices to receive online instruction during the months following school closures in 2020. In April, with few students able to access their teachers' instruction and complete assignments, educators began to provide enrichment instruction to their students through virtual learning platforms. Freedom District, as most of Louisiana's school districts, was unprepared to accommodate distance learning during the pandemic due to a lack of connectivity and internet access in the homes of their students. And as a result, the students experienced an

educational disservice based on their socio-economic background and the disparity of resources readily available within their homes.

### **The Hybrid Model**

As the 2020-2021 school year progressed and Freedom School District followed their own blueprint for reopening schools, they opted to implement a hybrid schooling plan so school buildings would not be at capacity until it was safe to host all personnel and students back on their campuses again. Parents had the option to send their child to school twice a week, following the hybrid teaching model, or allow their children to engage in 100% virtual learning. The hybrid model included a combination of the traditional teaching model of face-to-face instruction on some days and virtual learning on the other days of the week.

Later on, in the same academic year, Freedom District opted to resume instruction 100% face-to-face and did not allow for students who were enrolled in their neighborhood or specialized schools to select the virtual learning only option if enrolled in those schools. Instead, Freedom District opened a specialized virtual learning academy for students who could not, or chose to not, return to face-to-face instruction.

### **Theoretical Lenses**

The findings of this study were analyzed through the theoretical lenses of disruptive innovation and transactional distance because in the attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19, disruption in education pushed educators to look for alternatives to ensure delivery of the content and maintain equitable access for students. The physical separation of students and teachers during virtual learning created many barriers for teachers to deliver content and for students to demonstrate academic growth due to the transactional distance between teachers and students. Teacher and learner behaviors, restricted to a computer screen during virtual education, paved

the way to potential misunderstandings since distance education pedagogy includes techniques that are unique to this educational practice that few students and teachers were engaged in prior to COVID-19. The next section discusses the premises of the two theories that frame this study: disruptive innovation and transactional distance.

### **Theory of Disruptive Innovation**

Theory of disruptive innovations affirms that industries, in this case the education sector, are good at maintaining and improving what they do well with a disregard to other types of innovations that lie outside of the ‘normal’ trajectories (Christensen, Horn & Johnson, 2011). According to the theory of disruptive innovation, sustaining innovations are the new or improved version of what the consumers are already familiar with. A sustaining innovation in the education setting is the status quo of teaching and learning, face-to-face, where the teacher presents the state mandated content and prepares the students to show mastery on the yearly state assessments with minimal interactions on the virtual learning environment (VLE). However, Freedom District did not have enough computer devices to ensure all students and teachers utilized those devices for teaching and learning, in other words, it was not a 1:1 district prior to the pandemic. Additionally, assessment data and the instructional improvement plans to increase performance of their students on the state assessment had never been considered in the context of online learning or the virtual learning environment (VLE)—making it the disruptive innovation.

According to the theory, a disruption (online instruction) is not a major improvement or a replacement to the mainstream product or service (face-to-face instruction), instead, the disruptive innovation targets the population of non-consumers who cannot access the mainstream product or service providing a simpler and more convenient solution (Horn & Mackey, 2011). Disruptive innovations in the education sector are technological advances that can challenge the

way teachers deliver content and how students learn and interact with the content via distance learning (Velez, 2017). And most significantly, Flavin (2021) found, “if a potential user of technology cannot see what job technology will do for them, better than the technologies to which they already have access to, they are unlikely to use it” (p. 11).

For example, online learning, as a disruptive innovation, was initially considered a low-end, last alternative for credit recovery in high school, independent study courses, and homeschool settings second to the traditional face-to-face settings (Horn & Stalker, 2015). It is only over time and continuous improvement that the alternative, disruptive innovation, can sway students and parents' preference of how students learn to completely change the way we do school. Consequently, teachers would need to have a solid understanding and robust training of the technology that is available to them to replace their previous knowledge of teaching and learning and pedagogical practices for the disruptive innovation to be sustained.

### **Transactional Distance Theory**

Transactional distance theory considers the psychological and communications space, in addition to the cognitive space, that is a function of two variables: dialogue, which includes purposeful, neutral, or negative interactions, and the structure or course design (Moore, 1993). According to Moore, distance education is a concept that describes “teacher-learner relationships that exist when learners and instructors are separated by space and/or by time” (p. 22). Moore continues to explain that this separation between teachers and students undoubtedly affects the quality of teaching and learning because with physical separation there is also a psychological and communications space that must be breached to reach the students and understand their learning. Saba and Shearer (2018) add, that “transactional distance is a psychological variable that modulates in relation to three constructs: autonomy, structure, and dialogue” where the

constructs of structure and dialogue “are measured by the quality and quantity of communication between the instructor and learner” (p. 2). Additionally, Moore (2013) explained that autonomy in the virtual learning environment (VLE), requires learners to make a personal decision of what, how, and how much they will learn. Therefore, a high level of structure for content delivery with plenty of two-way dialogue and interactions decreases transactional distances among teachers and learners (Saba & Shearer, 2018).

Teachers who overload students with one-way dialogue during virtual or hybrid learning, such as videos, audio recordings, and lecture-style lessons, increase the transactional distance between their students and the content taught because the media cannot support exchanges of messages between teachers and students (Moore, 1993). According to Saba and Shearer (2018), one-way discourse teaching methods that are applied to a group of students become ineffective because they show no results of quality learning since teachers dominate the space and learning process during their lessons. In order to ensure students, receive equitable instruction through virtual platforms, teachers must have previous knowledge and some experience to determine the proper balance between one-way interactions and purposeful dialogue with their students. Teachers must be able to provide feedback to students through various methodical interactions including ample opportunities for students to engage with the content and discuss their learning, with a high consideration of the students’ learning styles, to become successful within online learning environments.

Wengrowicz (2014) explains that transactional distance is not an abstract construct of distance, instead “it is a specific, subjective, and personal distance, a byproduct of the explaining activity that takes place during the teaching-learning process” (p. 191). Swart and MacLeod (2021) describe the barriers that can arise from the restrictive virtual learning environment as

limiting the students' engagement and their learning experience caused by many factors that include the quality of interactions between teacher-student, student-student, the subject matter, and curriculum taught, and the instructional platforms used to teach. For example, the student-content interaction expects the learner to make use of the content of the course independently and achieve the academic goals without live instruction (Kandemir & Çakmak, 2021). Saba and Shearer (2018) also point out that transactional distance will exist in the face-to-face learning environment if there is an absence of dialogue, however, it can be eradicated from the virtual learning environment if dialogue is present and purposeful. It all hinges on the teachers' ability and sensitivity, when planning, to support individual learners' abilities and their academic performance within the given learning environment.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided this study:

1. What are the ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences during virtual instruction as they attempt to fulfill their responsibilities of
  - (a) providing access to the curriculum for English language learner students?
  - (b) ensuring the development of English language proficiency?
2. What are the ESL teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy as they continue to teach during a pandemic?

### **Significance of the Study**

, here is a growing number of students who are English learners (ELs) in need of comprehensive and targeted support to access the content being taught while simultaneously acquiring the English language. Macías (2014) discusses and focuses on the growth of the Latinx Spanish speaker population and explains that over the past 150 years the Latinx population has

increased in the US at a rate faster than the national population, showing how in 2011 one in six US residents were Latinx. If the US population will inevitably continue to grow as multicultural and multilingual, it is imperative for educators to explore and understand innovative L2 development and literacy pedagogy that supports ELs to ensure our emergent bilingual students properly develop their English proficiency rather than be pressured to test out of the ESL language program due to district and state accountability concerns. The state of Louisiana continues to experience consistent growth of the EL student population enrolled in local schools and Freedom District is no exception (Louisiana Department of Education, 2021).

All educators who interact closely with ELs must work together to plan lessons that address and anticipate linguistic demands that support ELD and access to content. Research shows all teachers must be involved in the language acquisition process and learning content aspect of ELs (deJong, Harper, & Coady, 2013; Heineke et al., 2012; Master et al., 2016), while also must participate in continuous and targeted training to support ELs in their academic and linguistic success (Coady, Harper & de Jong, 2016; Dove & Honigsfeld, 2010; Kibler & Roman, 2013; López & Santibañez, 2018; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Olson, Scarcella, & Matuchniak, 2015; Weinburgh et al., 2014). Mainstream teachers and their ESL teacher peers continue to express their need for more targeted and ongoing training to support their ELs academically and linguistically (Master et al., 2016). This study will not only expand the literature targeted for ESL teachers, but also, will include findings that can inform the practice of all teachers involved with the academic success and English language acquisition of ELs. Heineke et al. (2018), even goes a step further to advocate for holistic and inclusive ESL practices involving all stakeholders who influence the academic success of ELs by building

capacity and expertise on linguistically responsive practices within and across classrooms, schools, and districts.

The study aimed to present ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences on the unusual year that was the school year 2020-2021 in one of Louisiana's largest school districts. ESL teachers who were already struggling to meet the linguistic and academic demands of the ELs prior to the pandemic, recounting their experiences within their schools in teaching ELs and acquiring additional responsibilities and duties on campus during COVID-19 teaching and learning. Prior to the global COVID-19 spread, there was no contemporaneous world pandemic to explore so this study provides insight into teachers' practices and schools' responses to a pandemic that will add to the body of research on ESL teaching best practices. The study will also inform policymakers on what structures and guidelines should be in place if students and teachers should experience lockdowns and return to virtual instruction settings.

This study interviewed five ESL teachers in Freedom District after the 2020-2021 school year and throughout the 2021-2022 school year to discuss challenges and successes of providing services to ELs during the pandemic years as the district continued to attempt educating students in the restrictive VLE to reduce the spread COVID-19. My objective was to reiterate the limitations teachers faced when working with ELs during the VLE year and to provide a picture of how the pandemic interfered with students' ELD. In this study, I analyzed ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences emerging from a very unusual year of teaching and servicing ELs within select Freedom District's schools. I also reported on how ESL teachers ensured their ELs continued working on their English proficiency and accessing content. Finally, I provide recommendations on how districts and teachers can utilize this multiple case study findings to



further ESL teacher development and pedagogy in the VLE as they must ensure ELs receive the necessary supports to meet their language acquisition targets in and show academic progress.

### **Summary**

Culturally and linguistic responsive practices should celebrate diversity and value languages other than English within the classrooms and schoolwide (Heineke et al, 2012) so teachers can teach in an environment that is inclusive for ELs and other minorities. Not only do teachers need to be purposeful in teaching content with an emphasis on the linguistic objectives for their ELs, but they also must be knowledgeable and accepting of the language policies and mandates that drive best practices for teaching ELs' language development and academic achievement. Minority students, and teachers of those students, experienced barriers that denied culturally relevant instruction due to contextual factors and a lack of specialized training to promote ELD and academic success for ELs present in Louisiana classrooms. Educators seemingly showed a disregard to the research and equitable teaching practices available to support minorities while delivering instruction in the VLE because the inequities that were already present for minorities increased during the COVID-19 responses in education.

The goal of this completed study was to provide a comprehensive description of the ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences while adapting to the newly imposed teaching guidelines in the context of select Freedom District's elementary and middle schools. The rich participant descriptions include accounts of how the virtual learning settings were conducive (or not) to ELD for ELs while providing access to the curriculum. I presented the findings the lens of disruptive theory and transactional distance as I sought to describe ESL teachers' understanding of how the new teaching and learning demands influenced their pedagogical practice to foster

English language proficiency efficiently during COVID imposed state and district restrictive teaching guidelines.

## **CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

From the second half of the twenty-first century, there has been a renewed interest in language learning and bi/multilingualism as researchers, policymakers, and educators continue to search for the best educational practices that support the English language development (ELD) and proficiency of the rapidly growing multilingual and multicultural student population in the classrooms of the United States (Blaise, 2018; Bunch, 2013; ED Data Express, 2018; Estrada & Wang, 2018; Fitzsimmons-Doolan, Palmer, & Henderson, 2017; Migration Policy Institute, n.d.; Zhao & Lapuk, 2019). According to Cook (2008), language learners (LLs) with knowledge of two or more languages inevitably think differently than monolinguals because their knowledge of their native language (L1) is different from their monolingual counterparts and second language (L2) acquisition aids in creating flexible minds, language awareness, and better attitudes towards other cultures. Setati (2000) also explains how “bi-/multilinguals have a unique and specific language configuration and therefore they should not be considered as the sum of two or more complete or incomplete monolinguals” (p. 246).

In this chapter, a review of relevant literature and studies introduced theoretical foundations of language learning, in particular, the learning of an additional language other than the native language, in this case English as a second language (ESL), within the classroom setting for culturally and linguistically diverse students. First, there is an exploration of theoretical foundations of language learning that include sociocultural approaches to teaching and learning and culturally responsive teaching, followed by a discussion of ESL pedagogy and best practices prior to the onset of the global pandemic, COVID-19. This review also addressed teacher self-efficacy in the context of supporting ELD and proficiency through virtual instruction

due to health restrictions and staff shortages that were prevalent at the onset of the pandemic and throughout the 2020-2021 school year and were the effects of the COVID-19 experience.

### **Theoretical Foundations of ESL**

The theoretical foundations of ESL discussed in the following section are centered around the theories of second language acquisition and how language learning and the instructional setting are key factors to the success of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The sociocultural theory will also be discussed in the context of language learning along with references to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development as a factor to determine English language learners' (ELs) linguistic and academic scaffolds. Finally, this section presents how ELs, through the inclusion of culturally responsive pedagogy, must be allowed plenty of opportunities to interact with their peers, teachers, and content at their developmental and linguistic levels to be successful in the academic setting.

### **Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**

The focus of the research about SLA from the beginning of the twentieth century has been threefold because theorists and researchers have taken three different approaches to explain second language acquisition (Geeslin & Long, 2014; Hulstijn, 2013; Leow, 2019; Myles, 2013; Thomas, 2013). "SLA concerns human beings in a multitude of aspects: biological, cognitive, socio-psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions" (Hulstijn, 2013, p. 517). First, a focus on the formal properties of language such as morphosyntax, phonology, and semantics is referred to as the "linguistic approach." Next, the "cognitive approach" refers to the focus on how one acquires complex skills and how these skills can contribute to learning from a neurological point of view. Cognitive theorists and research also consider the psychological makeup of an individual, such as aptitude and intelligence levels when addressing how one acquires an additional language.

Finally, the “interactionist, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural approaches” focus on the social context in which language acquisition takes place and how the socio-cultural context plays a major role in co-construction of meaning or linguistic knowledge and the identity of individuals (Myles, 2013).

SLA theories that focus on the sociocultural approach, recognize second language learning is a process and must happen with exposure to input, where input refers to all interactions received by the learner, such as written and spoken (Geeslin & Long, 2014). According to Krashen (1981), all language acquisition requires meaningful interactions or natural communication where speakers are not concerned with the form (grammar) in which their messages are produced, but instead if the message was conveyed properly and understood by the listener. On the other hand, in the classroom or academic setting, the type of instruction for language learners, and the results seen, from explicit versus implicit instruction of simple and complex language forms yield in the process of second language acquisition is still a topic of debate in SLA research, however, a meta-analysis of studies discussing the success of each type of instruction for LLs revealed that explicit instruction is more effective than implicit instruction, which takes longer, in teaching and acquiring simple and complex language forms (Spada & Tomita, 2010). LLs need to be able to comprehend not just the spoken or written language but also, to produce language they must understand and respond to the contextual information of the interaction appropriately (Geeslin & Long, 2014).

### **Sociocultural Theory and Language Learning**

Sociocultural theory (SCT) will assist the researcher in exploring how ESL teachers’ perspectives and language ideologies towards language acquisition in the virtual instructional environment (VLE) could potentially influence students’ language development because without

the daily social interaction with peers and more personal interactions with teachers in the traditional face-to-face instructional setting would be highly restricted through online teaching and learning. King and Ridley's (2018) study discussed findings that are connected to the premises of SCT in the classroom because the focus of language acquisition lies on the role of language as a mediation tool for developing English language proficiency. SCT affirms "developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organized sports activities, and workplaces" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007, p. 197). A solid understanding of language as a tool and target could motivate teachers to purposefully mediate interactions between students and teachers while ensuring access to the curriculum taught in English to ELs in the VLE.

Lantolf, Thorne, and Poehner (2015) explain SCT is embedded in Vygotsky's (1978) conviction that "human learning presupposes a specific social natural and process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p. 88) following the premise that "formal instruction in school precedes and shapes development" (p. 212). SCT supports the understanding of social interactions between children and more knowledgeable adults provide children with the necessary tools and resources to scaffold language acquisition and development (Davis, Ovando, & Minami, 2013) because language is the most prevalent and powerful cultural artifact humans utilize to mediate their connection to their world, themselves, and others (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Esquinca, Araujo, and De La Piedra (2014), affirm that "[h]uman interaction in institutional contexts, such as schools, take on a weighty role because it is within that context of those human interactions where learning occurs" (p. 165). When language, culture, and identity are deeply intertwined, educators must avoid the attempts to isolate teaching content in lecture

form for ELs' because it hinders the ability of students to display a holistic representation of their academic and linguistic capabilities. Interactions and ample opportunities to listen, speak, read, and write in English should be provided to all the learners in their virtual lessons.

SCT's relevance to this study derives from sociolinguistic theories that evolved from Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning and development. Vygotsky explained how language is a mediating tool that children use to learn through social interactions with more capable and experienced members of society while sociolinguistic theories address and study the structural characteristics of speech communities and the social context and practices that embed language use (MacSwan, 2017). Lantolf, Thorne, and Poehner (2015) also explain that SCT identifies language as the cultural tool students will use to successfully complete concrete goal-directed activities. ELs inevitably develop English language (L2) literacy, fluency, and proficiency by having opportunities to use English in social contexts outside of virtual instructions. According to Swart et al.'s (2018) study on the perspectives of teachers about the use of language across the content areas, it is necessary for teachers to understand language development for learning so teachers can begin refocusing their practice with a conceptualization of language as a tool and a target. If the goal is to provide a space for the multilingual, multicultural, diverse students to interact in the classroom with peers and teachers, then teachers must encourage students to use their entire linguistic repertoire to develop academic and interpersonal language skills through instruction in the various content areas, especially during virtual instruction.

### **Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding**

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) concept of utilizing a child's current knowledge towards his or her ability to navigate a more complex series of actions in problem-solving situations (Cook, 2008) could support English language development for ELs.

Scaffolding is a form of helping students, at their ZPD, succeed at mastering skills and concepts. According to Green (2015), “scaffolding is an education-specific aspect of best practices in pedagogy that ensures that learners are sufficiently supported in the learning process to bridge the gaps in their knowledge between what is known and what is unfamiliar in terms of course content” (p. 182). Kirkpatrick (2013) reveals how several studies from second language acquisition researchers show that cognitively complex subjects and tasks cannot be successfully understood or processed in the target language (L2) unless the student has a level of L2 proficiency that will allow him or her to access the content of the curriculum. Teachers' expectations of their ELs must include the key elements of language acquisition because it is unnatural and unrealistic to deliver content and language instruction in a virtual setting that allows very few opportunities to use language in all key components of language acquisition and development.

Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD theory supports this study because ESL teachers can support language acquisition by scaffolding instruction for ELs depending on their current English language proficiency levels during virtual instruction time. Teachers should identify a linguistic space in which the learner needs assistance from adults, or in cooperation with more capable peers, to complete the assigned tasks when the content is beyond the learner's current capabilities (Lucas & Villegas, 2011). Under the premises of SCT within the classroom, purposeful language use as a tool of meaning-making and mediation should be contingent on the needs of ELs and their ZPD as ELs acquire the necessary language skills that will allow them to function independently within the classroom and school setting (Lantolf, Thorne, & Poehner, 2015).



## **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

ESL teachers must be inclusive and differentiate their delivery of content and access to curriculum to all students because language and culture are intertwined with the student's academic experiences, and one does not exist without the other. de Jong, Harper, and Coady (2013) explain that an ESL teacher has an enhanced expertise that includes: (a) an understanding of ELs from a bilingual and bicultural perspective; (b) an understanding of how ELs' sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds shape their academic experiences and also inform pedagogy targeting bilingual students; and (c) the ability to mediate between all contextual factors that exist in the schools and the classrooms they teach in. The researchers affirm that in order to promote academic achievement for bilingual students, teachers must be culturally responsive and knowledgeable about their students' life experiences, language, and culture. To become effective educators of ELs, teachers must capitalize on this knowledge and implement it in their practice to improve language development and academic achievement for ELs. Heineke et. al (2012) support the inclusion of culturally and linguistic responsive practices that celebrate diversity and value languages other than English within the classrooms and school-wide daily in order to observe academic and linguistic gains from ELs.

Culturally and linguistic responsive practices should celebrate diversity and value languages other than English within the classrooms and school-wide (Heineke et al, 2012) so teachers can teach in an environment that is inclusive for ELs and other minorities. Not only do teachers need to be purposeful in teaching with an emphasis in the linguistic objectives for their ELs, but they also must be knowledgeable and accepting of the language policies and mandates that drive best ESL teaching practices for language development and academic achievement. Contextual barriers to obtaining an equitable education can be caused by many factors within the

school setting, such as their teacher's lack of specific skills to teach ELs, lack of understanding and using their language, culture, and background to enhance lesson plans and provide access to content. ELs also experience barriers towards their academic success that are tied to their culture, language, and socioeconomic background, for example, low-income urban areas tend to be underserved (Giraldo-García, Galletta & Bagaka, 2019) and the linguistic isolation within schools and neighborhoods exacerbates academic and English language development barriers for ELs.

Teacher preparation programs, unfamiliarity with culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) materials, lack of training to support culturally diverse students' academic achievement, teachers' different linguistic backgrounds from their students, lack of knowledge in how to address sociopolitical issues, and no knowledge about their students' cultures and languages are among the many factors that inhibit teachers' ability teach minority students present in their classrooms (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2010; Freire & Valdez, 2017; Kibler & Roman, 2013;). Kibler and Roman (2013) assert that previous teachers' experiences with ELs and the context where they teach will influence how they incorporate information acquired during targeted professional development into their daily practice. Diversity in the classrooms will continue to exist in Freedom District so it is that the district provides targeted professional development so all teachers can become better prepared to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students because "simply knowing what the literature says about preparing teachers for diverse student populations [alone] will not be of much use to teacher educators" and stakeholders (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Effective ESL methodology and pedagogical practices must be known by all teachers in contact with ELs to ensure they are supported to acquire English proficiency.

## **ESL Pedagogical Methods**

ESL teachers have targeted instructional models that support the ELD of their students but in Louisiana, teachers have additional guidelines to better support the ELs in the classroom. The following section will include best practices for ESL teachers along with some of the challenges present in the ESL classroom before and after the onset of COVID-19 disrupted teaching and learning.

### **ESL Best Practices**

Some of the best practices for ESL teachers in supporting English proficiency and academic achievement for ELs include teaching about language organically by taking advantage of teachable moments during lessons, including students' languages to support English acquisition, and learning the mainstream culture through exposure and purposeful grouping in the classroom (Coady, Harper & de Jong, 2016). Kibler and Roman (2013) explain that in order to support ELs in the classroom teachers must also move beyond honoring students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds to incorporate ELs' background knowledge (cultural and linguistic) into their daily instruction. The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model inevitably aids students who are English learners (ELs) in learning the curriculum by using targeted techniques that make the content more accessible in conjunction with supporting the development of second language skills (Kareva & Echevarría, 2013; Nikolov & Djigunović, 2011; Short, Echeverría, & Richards-Tutor, 2011; Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012).

The SIOP model supports language acquisition and access to the content by providing teachers with 30 ESL best practices grouped into the following eight teaching categories: (a) lesson preparation; (b) building background; (c) comprehensible input; (d) strategies; (e) interaction; (F) practice and application; (g) lesson delivery; and (h) review and assessment

(Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008). The SIOP model provides ESL teachers with the most comprehensive list of how to best support the academic achievement and language development of ELs before, during, and after instruction has happened. For example, in the lesson preparation, teachers need to create content and language objectives, plan meaningful activities adapted to their ELs' level of proficiency through scaffolding. ELs should have the opportunity to practice all domains of the English language within the duration of the lesson. Hands-on activities, wait time, application of knowledge, strategic grouping, assessment, and feedback are additional teaching strategies the ESL teacher must utilize with fidelity to ensure academic access and English proficiency.

Regardless of the purpose or need to learn English is, using the SIOP method of instruction will yield significant improvements in achieving the learning outcomes of acquiring academic language and proficiency in all language domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Kareva & Echeverría, 2013). Slowing down the pace of speaking, enunciating, enhancing the intonation of words, limiting the use of contractions, gestures, visuals, and utilizing manipulatives are all strategies that can support the academic achievement of ELs and all other students in the classroom (de Oliveira & Schoffner, 2009). Teachers must also be aware of their students' background knowledge and experiences in order to capitalize on learning and language acquisition by linking content to previous learning, their experiences, and purposely introducing, modeling, and providing opportunities to use the academic vocabulary.

### **ESL Guidelines and Louisiana Connectors**

The State of Louisiana follows federal laws (Title IV of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974) in mandating that every school in Louisiana must prepare a specialized language plan that will accommodate and meet the ELs' linguistic and

academic needs (English Learner Program Handbook, 2020). According to the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act, Title III-Part A (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965), states must: (1) ensure students who have limited English proficiency (LEP) become English proficient while meeting the same academic content standards that all students are required to meet; (2) assist all LEP students in achieving high levels in the core subjects that will in turn support students in meeting the content standards their native speaker peers are expected to meet; (3) develop a high-quality language programs that can assist stakeholders in teaching LEP students; (4) assist educational agencies to develop and enhance a high-quality language program that will prepare LEP students to enter an all-English instruction setting; (5) assist educational agencies and schools to successfully establish, implement, and sustain language programs for LEP student instruction; (6) promote parental engagement in language programs designed for LEP students; (7) streamline language programs funded by grants; (8) hold all educational agencies accountable for increasing core content academic knowledge and English proficiency of LEP students by demonstrating English proficiency improvement and adequately yearly progress; and (9) provide educational agencies with the option to implement research based language programs that the agencies deem to be the most effective in teaching LEP students.

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) also adopted the national policy from the Department of Education (DE) that demands Louisiana Educational Agencies (LEAs) to: (1) staff highly qualified content teachers that have also been training in supporting EL, qualified ESL teachers, and administrators who have been trained to evaluate these teachers; (2) provide meaningful professional development and follow-up for teachers and administrators to implement the EL language program effectively; (3) ensure administrators are properly trained to

evaluate ESL teachers' proper implementation of the EL language program so the language program is meeting the pre-established educational objectives (English Learner Program Handbook, 2020).

Additionally, LDOE created the LA Connectors for English Learners that describe the high expectations ELs are held to by integrating English language development within the appropriate academic content of each grade level (2016). The purpose of the 10 Connectors is to provide teachers with a guideline to support ELs' progress toward English proficiency by using the language to meet the academic demands, or student standards, in each grade level. The LA Connectors highlight the language functions (what the students have to do with the language to complete content-specific tasks) and the language forms (grammar, vocabulary, or academic language) that ELs need to access and master the content. The LA Connectors are designed to be used in conjunction with the content standards to emphasize and ensure the ELs' active and meaningful participation in the classroom with the content, teacher, and peers. The LA Connectors guide teachers on how to provide proficiency-level targeted opportunities to engage with the English language within the four language domains of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

### **Challenges in ESL Instruction**

ESL teachers have the specialized training to support language development, but it is the mainstream teachers who engage and teach ELs for most of the day, making it obvious that the overall academic achievement of ELs is not the sole responsibility of the ESL teacher, rather, the responsibility for linguistic and academic success relies on all teachers involved in the ELs' education. Heineke et al. (2012) suggested that the ideal collaboration between stakeholders involved in supporting and improving the ELs' language development and academic

achievement should include administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, and other community members. However, in the pandemic era, stakeholders were focused primarily on ensuring teachers have the necessary skills and training to navigate the virtual teaching world they were to master within weeks after the onset of the pandemic. Parents and students had amplified basic needs to tend to that included ensuring a paycheck and childcare for younger children and their students who may become virtual students at any moment there is a COVID case in their classrooms. Collaboration among all stakeholders became more difficult as all parties involved tended to their families' needs and COVID continued to pose limitations on how teachers could keep students and parents engaged in their education.

The number one misunderstanding ESL teachers experience is mainstream teachers having the preconceived knowledge that it is the sole responsibility of the ESL teacher to address all aspects of the EL's education and progress. Master et al. (2016) discuss specific pedagogical skills general education teachers must acquire to ensure content access for their ELs and reduce the academic gap between native and non-native speakers of English while deJong, Harper, and Coady (2013) ground their research on the fact that well-prepared teachers boost academic success and language development for ELs, and yet, ELs are more than likely to be placed in the classrooms of less experienced teachers, even though there is evidence in the research that highly qualified teachers will be more effective in teaching ELs (deJong, Harper & Coady, 2013; Giraldo-García, Galletta & Bagaka's, 2019; Master et al., 2016). In addition to students having to learn from less experienced teachers, Heineke et al. (2012) also discussed teachers' tendencies of closing their classroom doors and engaging with students without designing and implementing lessons that focus on language development and learning, further contributing to the current inequities minority students experience in the classroom.

Lara-Alecio et al. (2009) explained how teachers who prepare their lessons and teach purposely focusing on language development objectives embedded in rigorous content and vocabulary development, become more aware of their pedagogical practices which, in turn, enhances the quality of instruction ELs receive. Coady, Harper, and de Jong (2016) compiled a list of skills, from previous research, that identify a teacher as effective in teaching ELs when the teacher: (a) makes input comprehensible through language modifications; (b) uses appropriate materials and accommodations on lesson delivery that address ELs' specific linguistic needs; (c) purposefully groups during cooperative learning activities to support student learning; (d) provides plenty of opportunities to practice speaking and writing; (e) has an understanding and utilizes assessment and feedback to guide instruction; and (f) has knowledge of and incorporates ELs' accommodations into daily instruction and assessment. The effective teacher must also receive immediate feedback from recurrent observations from ESL teachers in order to adjust and guide their teaching and better serve the linguistic needs of their emerging bilingual students (Lara-Alecio et al., 2009). Freire and Valdez (2017) added that teachers who work within the dual language programs acknowledge culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is necessary to promote language teaching and learning even when there are four main barriers that prevent teachers of ELs to implement CRP practices in their classrooms: insufficient time during the school day, insufficient teacher training and knowledge of CRP, lack of materials to implement CRP in their practice, and teachers' beliefs that social justice is not a topic to teach their students.

### **COVID-19 and ESL Instruction**

Teachers experienced and lived in an unprecedented era of educational interruptions where all educators, administrators, and stakeholders had to reimagine and reinvent teaching and schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic school years. Although most of the academic



literature addressing teachers' use of digital technology tools to deliver content and engage students agrees with the benefits of virtual learning as having enhanced learning outcomes, increased participation and engagement from students, and more efficient content management and the organization of learning (Perrotta, 2013), there is limited research on the effectiveness of virtual learning as students and teachers expected the traditional model, face-to-face teaching, however the abrupt transition to virtual learning was imposed by the state and country leaders. Day (2015) discussed how academic continuity plans have been identified as important to prevent learning gaps in education, but emergency learning continuity plans are rarely developed and/or implemented within schools and educational institutions. It is exactly the process of transition and adaptation by Freedom District and elementary schools to the VLE that this study attempts to describe through ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences as they attempted to provide federally mandated services to develop English language proficiency and access to the content.

Pevneva and Edmunds (2020), address the challenges higher education students faced when universities and schools did not have organizational measures in place prior to the transition to virtual learning. The lack of preparation and organization therefore, inevitably yielded a precarious situation where learning was presented to the best of the abilities of each individual teacher. Ford, Kwon, and Tsotsoros (2021) found that the main challenges to distance learning included low levels of participation of students and parental involvement, limited social interactions among students, appropriate ways to engage students via learning platforms, teachers' lack of knowledge and experience in virtual teaching environments, and limited technological support, especially when the learning platforms or internet connections were faulty. According to Sailsman (2020), the teachers' ability or inability to integrate their students'

cultural and language differences can have a negative impact on students' engagement in online courses in addition to poor academic acculturation because "online education moves students from reliance on verbal communication to written and nonverbal engagement" (p. 45) and fewer opportunities to have meaningful interactions in all language domains with peers and teachers.

Course design plays a key role in the success of the ELs in the virtual learning environment if the teachers incorporate different types of feedback methods, such as textual and audio-video feedback, for their ELs and other students with diverse learning styles (Kandemir & Çakmak, 2021). In Barko-Alva, Porter, and Herrera's (2020) study, teachers used technology as a tool to breach the cultural and linguistic barriers that ELs and their families experienced during the pandemic to establish culturally and linguistically responsive sustainable learning practices. ESL teachers and tutors understood that parents of their ELs used their smartphones as their primary technological tool to access the internet and school information, therefore, ESL teachers capitalized on this and established parental support that provided scaffolding so parents could support their children in completing their academic activities (Barko-Ava, Porter, & Herrera, 2020). However, this example of teachers who were able to support their ELs and their families was the product of a school that had resources to assign bilingual tutors that could breach the linguistic barrier and promote ELD and access to the curriculum.

### **Virtual Distance Learning**

Virtual learning is not a new method for teaching and instruction, however, in this section the researcher presented the definition of online learning, best practices, and how it has been used within the ESL teaching and learning context. Pros and cons of teaching language in the virtual learning environment were also discussed in the context of the abrupt shift from the face-to-face environment to the VLE.

## **Definition and Implementation**

Virtual (or online) learning is a component of distance learning because teaching and learning happens via the internet, where teachers and students teach and learn in their own environments, physically separate from one another. Virtual learning includes “rich educational resources in multiple media and the capability to support both real-time [synchronous] and asynchronous communication between instructor and learners as well as among different learners” (Means et al., 2010, p. 1). Caprara and Caprara (2021) explain that a high-quality virtual learning environment has synchronous communication as a focus since it will include real-time opportunities for teacher-student and student-student interactions to address the students’ immediate learning needs. The virtual learning environment offers opportunities for flexible learning because learning can happen by allowing students to access the content at any time from any place (Driscoll et al., 2012). Virtual learning’s teaching tools for asynchronous learning include emails, discussion threads, podcasts, and collaborative documents that learners can access and respond to on their own and at their convenience, while tools for synchronous learning include videoconferencing, chat rooms, and the use of web-based applications to teach and share content with learners in real time (Means et al., 2010; Pearcy, 2014; Sener, 2010).

The internet allowed online courses in higher education to be introduced to universities as a solution to maintain and increase enrollment, alleviate the faculty shortage, as a less expensive option to provide education to a wider range of students, allow for flexibility of learning for all types of learners, and increase graduation rates (Compton, 2009; Sener, 2010). School districts followed higher education’s online course offerings with the same goals in mind, greater range of course offerings that can appeal to all types of learners, preference of students’ learning methods, maintain or increase student enrollment, lack of infrastructure, teacher shortage, and

increase graduation rates (Means et al., 2010; Reinking, 2021). From the 2000s, teachers began introducing online components into their classes such as PowerPoints, podcasts, videos and images, and announcements on webpages. However, teachers perceived the introduction and usage of teacher webpages as a “fail-safe” or fallback for students who were absent and for parents who wanted to track their child’s academic progress (Pearcy, 2014). Pearcy continues and describes how online learning transformed into student-centered courses with no face-to-face support and little interaction with peers in completing tasks and assignments of the course.

Currently, online courses include the integration of learning technologies, from adaptive educational technologies, learning platforms, digital eBooks, to learning management systems to track, monitor, and assess student progress along with purposeful collaborative practices between teachers and students. Online courses demand from students new ways of preparing for learning, organizing information, engaging with the content, and completing academic requirements through higher levels of independence and self-direction (Martin, Stampers, & Flowers, 2020). Other terms that are commonly used interchangeably to describe virtual learning include online learning, virtual learning, remote, e-learning, computer-assisted learning, web-based learning, and distance learning (Ally, 2008). I will use online, distance, and virtual learning interchangeably to describe students learning in separate environments by using technology to interact with teachers and peers.

### **Virtual Learning Environment Best Practices**

The success of a distance learning plan that includes online or virtual learning components will depend on the quality and quantity of teachers’ prior training and ongoing support to meet their students’ needs. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) present hybrid and virtual teachers’ best practices for learning in the virtual environment as having to: (a) establish

structures for self-regulation and interaction with the content, peers, and teachers; (b) provide choice and control in demonstrating learning by offering a variety of assignment or task formats; (c) make the content relevant to authentic purposes outside of school; (d) curate and publish student work for viewing by a target audience; (e) engage parents, set goals, and support parents in supporting their child in the virtual learning environment; (f) create synchronous activities that are age appropriate, productive, engaging, and fun; and (g) provide asynchronous supports such as visuals, schedules, routines, checklists, movement breaks, and effective tools and materials.

Expert online instructors have confidence in virtual teaching and are not limited by technology, they also have the skills to reformat content and materials to convert it into online friendly formats. Teachers who are comfortable with technology possess a wide range of online teaching strategies that allow them to choose content and activities carefully through constant monitoring, tweaking, and evaluation of the course (Cheng & Myles, 2003; Kumar et al., 2019). According to a meta-analysis of students' interactions with other students, the content of the course, and interactions with their teachers, there is a strong association between the type and strength of student interaction with achievement (Bernard et al., 2009).

### **ESL and Virtual Teaching**

Teacher confidence in technology will yield teachers who are positive about virtual teaching and more likely perceive the benefits of distance learning and technology use in contrast with teachers who are not “digital natives” and show reluctance and uneasiness with the use of technology (Perrotta, 2013). Prior to the pandemic, the approach to language learning and the use of technology focused on the hardware and software necessary for instruction rather than the actual pedagogy for the virtual learning environment (Compton, 2009). In order for ESL teachers to be successful in supporting English language acquisition through virtual instruction, the roles

of the teacher and students must be clearly defined and the use of technology and learning platforms should support all processes of language learning such as frequent interactions (teacher-student, student-student, student-content), access to the content, communication in all four domains of language, collaborative learning, and student performance assessments (Kandemir & Çakmak, 2021).

According to Dziubata (2021), teaching English as second language (ESL) via virtual instruction is most effective when teachers include synchronous and asynchronous modalities to develop English language proficiency, however adaptations of the traditional course materials and teaching styles is required support students' needs in the online learning environment. ESL and other language teachers need another set of skills to develop language proficiency because the lack of non-verbal clues, such as hand gestures and body language, during synchronous virtual instruction becomes a challenge for teachers and students alike (Compton, 2009; Maher, 2020). In order to develop the additional online teaching competencies needed for teaching a foreign language virtually, teachers must have been exposed to online teaching theories in addition to have experienced this type of pedagogy through hands-on foreign language teaching in the virtual learning environment (Guichon, 2009). Adequate training for online language (ESL) teachers is one of the main features of the effective ESL teacher and success in supporting English proficiency.

### **Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Teacher efficacy includes two different constructs that are intertwined, the first construct explains efficacy as teachers beliefs of having control or some influence in student achievement and motivation (Rotter, 1966 as cited by Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998), while the second construct adds that teacher efficacy is a type of self-efficacy, which includes how

teachers perceive their own ability to perform at a level of attainment. Depending on their self-efficacy beliefs, teachers will display their efforts to overcome obstacles and how they will cope with demanding, high-stress, situations in their work environment (Bandura, 1997 as cited by Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Self-efficacy relates to how the teacher perceives his or her own abilities to complete a task rather than his or her actual abilities and preparation to complete a task. In turn, this teacher's self-perception of their capabilities has the potential to influence how teachers will use the skills they possess, their approach towards a given task, and the amount of effort that they put forth for its completion (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). ESL teachers in Freedom District, who experienced teaching and learning in the VLE during COVID-19, shared their beliefs on how well they were prepared to meet their jobs' demands, the level of support school leadership provided to ESL teaching and instruction, and the types of relationships they may have had with their colleagues. These factors had some impact on their efficacy and self-efficacy beliefs and how they supported English language acquisition for their ELs.

Bandura (2006) explained that “efficacy beliefs influence whether people think erratically or strategically, optimistically or pessimistically” (p. 309) for teachers evaluating their performance in the three self-efficacy domains: instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Teachers who are confident in their abilities and performance will face obstacles with a positive attitude that can be translated to the degree of effort they are willing to put forth and the endurance to overcome aversive situations. “Not only can perceived self-efficacy have directive influence on choice of activities and settings, but, through expectations of eventual success, it can affect coping efforts once they are initiated” (Bandura, 1977, p. 194). Therefore, providing targeted professional development that addresses

the instructional challenges teachers face will allow teachers to gain opportunities to acquire the necessary skills that are unique to the VLE, which can sway self-efficacy beliefs to support coping with stressful situations (Dolighan & Owen, 2021).

A thematic review of ESL teachers' response to the pandemic portrayed how teachers struggled to continuously adapt their practice by trial and error because they lacked competence to teach in the online setting (Moorhouse & Khonke, 2021). In a study reporting on predictors of teacher efficacy and burnout, Pas, Bradshaw and Hershfeldt (2012) explain that teacher preparation, teacher camaraderie within their work environment, and leadership support can influence the level of teacher efficacy and the level of burnout. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) adds how "attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets also matter for school and life success (p. 34). Positivity and negativity about their job demands will sway respectively the teacher's response to their job requirements, "accordingly, teachers with high self-efficacy should have experienced less emotional exhaustion, while teachers with low self-efficacy should have experienced more emotional exhaustion during the COVID-19 outbreak" (Soncini, Politi, & Matteucci, 2021, p. 495). It is not surprising that teachers who are unhappy while working are also less prone to engage in it more than they are obliged to. However, it seems that the opposite is also true: low work engagement leads to more negative emotions at work. This result can be best explained by the fact that less engaged individuals also have lower levels of energy and mental resilience and are less ready to invest effort and persist when faced with difficulties, which makes them more prone to experience of negative emotions. (Burić & Macuka, 2018). Teacher perceptions of the level of performance at a given time vary based on the difficulty of the task, the amount of effort they put forth, the external aid they receive, the context under which they perform, and their mood and physical state at the time they must address a task and based on these influencing



factors, some performances will surpass, match, or fall below one's typical attainments (Bandura, 1986).

### **Summary**

Not only must ELs learn and master the content taught in their grade level, but they also must learn mainstream culture through exposure which, according to Coady, Harper, and de Jong (2016), is acquired in the classroom without targeted instruction. Many of the characteristics of a learning environment conducive to academic and linguistic gains for ELs were limited by the shift to the virtual learning environment (VLE). Some of the negative impacts to teaching and learning in online settings include reduced engagement from students, disruption to academic continuity, and the unplanned and uncertain duration of the virtual learning period (Day, 2015).

The five participants in this study are ESL elementary and middle school teachers serving the identified EL population enrolled in their Freedom Districts' schools. Valli and Buese (2007) explain that when too many policy demands trickle down too fast (as it happened during pandemic teaching and learning), attempting to incorporate all policies and mandates into their practice could lead to "teacher discouragement, role ambiguity, and superficial responses to administrative goals" (p. 520). The fact that teachers must wear many hats and show flexibility in their practice is not a new concept; however, the demands ESL teachers faced throughout COVID-19 and VLE school years, increased exponentially as the VLE became the norm to deliver instruction remotely or through hybrid learning models.

The literature on best teaching practices in the VLE continues to develop as researchers examine the various aspects of teaching and learning in the COVID-19 reality. Therefore, it is important to understand how the VLE can be beneficial or detrimental to ELs as they acquire English language proficiency while learning content in within an academic setting with limited

socio-cultural and personal interactions among peers and teachers. The study addressed the need for further exploration to better understand the necessary ESL teacher competencies in the VLE to teach ELs effectively by providing a thick description of the teachers' perspectives and experiences during unprecedented times (Moorhouse and Kohnke, 2021).

### **CHAPTER III. STUDY DESIGN**

As previously discussed, this study explored ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences while discussing the challenges and successes of their fluid supporting role, within each school, in providing ELs access to the curriculum and developing English language proficiency through the virtual learning environment (VLE). In this chapter, I discuss the qualitative approach and the case study methodology that produced a rich description of ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences. A multiple case study methodology guided the study since every participant worked in different schools with a different leadership and set of expectations, but all were bounded by Freedom District's guidelines.

Next, I discussed data collection and analysis by describing the setting and the participants in this study who shared their opinions individually and through a semi-structured focus group interview. Artifacts collected included state and district documents, emails, and teacher schedules, in addition to researcher notes, and transcripts from interviews encompass all the data that I collected and analyzed. Data collection, transcriptions, and analysis took place over ten months.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences during virtual instruction as they attempt to fulfill their responsibilities of
  - (a) providing access to the curriculum for English language learner students?
  - (b) ensuring the development of English language proficiency?
2. What are the ESL teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy as they continue to teach during a pandemic?

### **Rationale for Case Study Methodology**

A qualitative approach for this multiple case study is appropriate because qualitative research is primarily suited to answer descriptive questions that focus on an identifiable reality from multiple perspectives shared by the participants (Trainor & Graue, 2014). “Qualitative understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its contexts and in its particular situation” (Stake, 2006, p. 2). The case study methods were selected because the research questions’ focus demands descriptions and analysis of the experiences and perspectives ESL teachers discussed, rather than generalizing or explaining causal relationships that quantitative methods seek to address. “The case study’s unique strength is its ability to rely on a full variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, direct observations, and participant-observation” (Yin, 2018, p. 12).

The multiple case study methods supported the study’s objective to provide an in-depth description of how the teaching profession changed in the blink of an eye with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and throughout the 2020-2021 school year, but specifically, a description of the similarities and differences of ESL teachers' experiences and perceptions during virtual teaching and learning times that a positivist approach would discount (Bhattacharya, 2017). This study takes the constructivist epistemological orientation throughout all stages of the study in the attempt to “capture the perspectives of different participants and focusing on how their different meanings illuminate the topic of study” (Yin, 2018, p. 16).

### **Qualitative Approach**

The study provided an in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences and perspectives on how a global pandemic abruptly shifted the context of ESL teachers and how they provided services to their ELs. The study’s qualitative approach to describe the experiences

of people within their usual settings demanded that I took into consideration not only the participants' knowledge and experiences but also temporal, spatial, and situational influences that compose the context of the study (Marshall, 1996).

The qualitative approach in this multiple case study explored ESL teachers' perspectives and supported how I "value and seek to discover participants' perspectives on their worlds, and view inquiry" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 31-32) through the transactional distance theory lens that states participants in online classes struggle with isolation and making sense of their roles and each other (Dockter, 2016). In addition, qualitative methods aligned with the study's purpose to describe ESL teachers' perspectives in supporting English language development (ELD) within the virtual classroom because the I also understand that all "participants differ and must be understood on their own terms" (Mills & Gay, 2016, p. 102) through their own experiences, how they make sense of the world, and how they create meaning using the target language, English.

Qualitative methodology for this study included in-depth accounts of five ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences in the virtual learning environment (VLE) from the beginning of the school year 2020-2021 and beyond, within five elementary and two middle schools in Freedom District. I followed a descriptive, analytic, and interpretive interactive process between participants, data, and researcher that characterizes qualitative studies because the primary data collected and analyzed rely exclusively on people's words and various types of documents to understand and explain ESL teachers' perspectives on English language development within the VLE (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

## **Multiple Case Study Method**

The selection of a multiple case study as the research method included my desire to understand and describe relevant ESL teachers' actions and reactions towards virtual teaching within the context of a contemporary event—COVID-19 Pandemic. The multiple case study covered each individual teacher as a single-case study because every school leader in Freedom District's schools had their own ways of leading their schools with their own expectations for ESL teachers depending on the school's specific needs. In addition to each case being unique, the single cases are bounded by context, Freedom District, and ensuring English language proficiency in the elementary and middle schools where participants teach, and to the necessary pedagogical shifts when teaching in the VLE. However, in this multiple case study "the [individual] case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role and facilitates our understanding" (Stake, 2005, p. 445) about the similarities and differences of how or why ESL teachers shifted their practices and priorities in the process of adapting to teaching virtually amid a global pandemic. The single cases served as the evidentiary base for the cross-case analysis and were cited sporadically in chapter five, the sections dedicated only to the cross-case analysis (Yin, 2018).

This multiple case study took on a holistic approach since the research questions supported a collection of accounts discussing experiences and perceptions of ESL teachers teaching in the VLE within one district but at different schools and grade levels. The holistic approach to multiple case studies began with reporting on individual cases and cross-case comparisons before seeking convergent evidence in the findings and conclusions across the individual cases (Yin, 2018). I sought to describe the similarities and differences among the single cases to better understand teaching in the VLE because "the interactions between within

an entity and across entities help us recognize the [individual] case as an integrated system”  
(Stake, 2006, p. 3).

### **Proposed Study**

The interpretive nature of this study considered ESL teachers’ perspectives to describe and understand their subjective accounts of their experiences while teaching in the VLE following the response to COVID-19 teaching and learning guidelines. The multiple case study findings that culminated this research aimed to shed light on ESL teachers’ perspectives towards the challenges and successes of VLE teaching models and how COVID-19 restrictions posed limitations to their role in providing access to the curriculum for ELs and ensuring English language proficiency.

### **Setting**

The U.S. Census Bureau describes Freedom District’s parish as midsize with a population estimate of about 500,000. Foreign born people make up 6% of the population while between the years 2015-2019 8% of the population above 5 years-old reported speaking a language other than English at home. The median household income of the district’s population is close to \$55,000 while the percentage of people living in poverty is about 18%. Finally, about 90% of the households reported having at least one computer at home but only 84% of households had access to broadband Internet.

Freedom District, according to the Louisiana Department of Education, reported having schools with most enrolled students considered minorities. Close to 10% of the students attending Freedom District schools (K-12) are labeled as having Limited English Proficiency and therefore classified as English language learner students (ELLs). However, the ESL district leadership head did not have the ESL add-on certification or specialized training during the

school year 2020-2021. Freedom District also reported most of their students classified as economically disadvantaged.

### **Participant Criteria, Sampling, and Recruitment**

This section presents the requirements and criteria participants had to meet in order to take part in this study. I selected the purposeful sampling methods since I determined the participant criteria first, selected the participants, and requested access to their sites after participants agreed to take part in this study.

**Participant criteria.** The criteria for including the teachers in the study are as follows:

(1) Teacher participant must hold a valid Louisiana teaching certificate in elementary and/or middle school education with an add-on endorsement in English as second language;

(2) participants must be ESL teachers during the pandemic school years of 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022; and

(3) participants must have at least one year of previous experience as an ESL teacher in Freedom District.

Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) acknowledge that “guidelines for determining nonprobabilistic sample sizes are virtually nonexistent” (p. 59) therefore, participants that meet the criteria were selected through volunteer participation and willingness to share their experiences and perspectives on how they navigated teaching and learning at their respective schools during COVID-19 teaching years.

**Purposeful sampling.** The five ESL teachers who met the criteria were participants selected for this study, therefore I employed purposeful sampling methods to include the most productive and knowledgeable participants that fit the criteria of ESL teachers established by the researcher (Marshall, 1996). Purposeful sampling required the five participants to have previous



experience teaching ESL within Freedom District, being currently employed by the district, and have the ESL add-on certification. Whereas convenience sampling usually begins with locating accessible sites, that was not the case for this study because I identified participants first, then I secured permission from each site leader (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). No more than five participants were included in this study due to low interest from ESL teachers within the district, not possessing all qualifying criteria, and the limited time and scope of this dissertation.

**Recruitment.** I secured a district ESL teacher list that included their names and email addresses, then I contacted each participant by email providing a brief description of the study including the purpose, participant criteria, sample topics, and a guarantee of participant anonymity. Participants who were interested in participating answered a questionnaire electronically which included answers that supported the participant criteria. Finally, I informed the interested candidates that met all criteria that they were selected for this study and secured their participation with their signatures in agreement to take part of the study. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the identity and privacy of the participants as well as their teaching locations within Freedom District.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

This multiple case study relied on qualitative data collection methods instead of adopting quantitative methodology because the quantitative “snapshot’s-style analyses cannot result in the types of understanding” (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2015, p. xi) the study sought to describe from the participants’ perspectives and experiences. In this section I discussed data sources and the process of data collection that supported a better understanding of ESL teachers in the VLE during the pandemic teaching school year 2020-2021 and beyond.

Data sources included initial individual interviews with five participants, followed by a focus groups interview with all participants simultaneously, and final individual clarification questions that provided ample opportunities to the participants to express their thoughts about their experiences as ESL teachers when COVID-19 measures were in place for teaching and learning. I also collected and analyzed my field notes gathered during interviews to ensure I recorded questions and wonderings I had as the conversations developed. Artifacts were provided by the participants, they provided personal and school instructional artifacts along with state and district guidelines they received. I analyzed the artifacts to extract information about authors' views and priorities in the context of COVID-19 teaching and learning in the VLE.

## **Interviews**

I interviewed five elementary or middle school ESL teachers who teach grades K-8 ELs in Freedom District. Interviews were the main data source for this multiple case study and included initial individual interviews, a focus group interview, and follow-up questions. The information collected through the semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express their perspectives and experiences about teaching throughout the onset and development of the global pandemic's restrictive academic settings. All interviews and questions asked participants to describe their everyday experiences and their perspectives in serving ELs during the COVID-19 and teaching in the VLE. The development of specific protocols and descriptions for the interview types follow below.

**Developing the protocols.** According to Yin's (2018) protocol to collect data for case studies, the researcher conducting the interviews must be able to ask good questions by probing and prompting open-ended discussions to obtain in-depth and rich information about the participants' real-world context and experiences at their designated schools. The interview and

focus groups protocols used included outlines with questions and topics to discuss that facilitated and guided the conversations with the participants.

***Initial interview protocol.*** The initial protocol I created ensured that I remained focused on the line of inquiry and topics to cover. The protocol included a discussion that I began by providing background information about the study and why it was selected. I also prepared a personal introduction to establish rapport with the interviewee and gain their trust. I secured permission to record the session at this time prior to starting with the interview questions. The interviews began with factual opening questions about their teaching background that allowed participants to begin to open up by answering questions about something they were familiar with (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003).

The questions were all open-ended and expansive, some with additional bullet points that ensured the interviewee had adequate time to speak uninterrupted taking the question in several directions. The bullet points allowed me to remain on track with the flow of the interview while prompting the participant to provide pre-planned specifics they may not mention on their own (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012). I also included questions that came up during the interviews prompted by the participants' answers and included those additional questions into the protocol for the other participants to answer those additional questions (Appendix A).

***Focus group protocol.*** Questions for the focus group interview emerged from the descriptions obtained during the initial interviews (Appendix B). I presented, for the first few minutes of the focus group interview, a short overview of the study and ground rules for the duration of the interview. I requested permission to record the duration of the focus group interview and re-stated that all data collected is confidential and identities will not be revealed because I used pseudonyms only in the study as I reported on the data collected. The interview

began with an opening question to break the ice and share something familiar about their teaching. All participants responded individually to the opening question without prompting, which lowered the affective filter, modeled how they had to take turns to respond to questions without speaking over one another and ensured they were more likely to speak again for every question (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The researcher prepared questions guided by the eight key topics that emerged from the individual interviews: online teaching in the VLE, standout events or experiences, teacher duties and responsibilities, school or district operations, parental support and family status, professional development and self-efficacy, technological issues, and health concerns. I fostered an open discussion setting with all participants for them to be able to jump in and answer questions at their discretion. Some questions had sentence starters or prompts that facilitated discussions. Pauses and probing were part of the focus group interview to ensure I allowed for adequate time for participants to chime in and expand on their answers. Questions were arranged from general to specific issues in a sequence that prompted participants to ease into more sensitive topics. I covered all relevant topics, supported all participants to contribute to the discussion, and guaranteed that postponed questions or issues raised by participants were addressed by the end of the focus group session (Winlow et al., 2013). Finally, participants had the opportunity to ask questions and make suggestions to the district and state stakeholders in the event of future shifts to the VLE after all focus group interview questions were answered.

***Follow-up questions protocol.*** Follow-up questions were more rigid than the initial interview questions because these were clarification questions that occurred after the analysis of the initial interview transcripts. The purpose of these questions to interviewees was to clarify or expand on the information they shared during the initial interview or to allow me to ask

additional relevant questions that added to the data collected for the line of inquiry. Questions were open-ended and allowed the interviewees to speak freely and provide more information about their experiences and perspectives when teaching amidst the global pandemic.

**Initial interviews.** The initial interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 80 minutes per participant, which made sure the interviewee did not lose interest on the topics presented and supported rich descriptions of their experiences and perspectives about teaching ELs in the VLE during a global health crisis. Participants selected meeting times and locations, virtual or in-person, at the participant's convenience. The initial interviews took place in a span of two weeks in May of 2022.

I recorded and filmed the initial interviews to allow for closer review because “observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, interactions, and artifacts (objects) in the social setting” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 141) so I could further understand the participants as they presented their perspectives and experiences during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years teaching in the VLE. Participants' experiences, how they conveyed their views and how they understood the world, were described through the accounts of ESL teachers' perspectives as language teachers, as learners in the new VLE reality, and as educators who were forced to respond to the abrupt interruption of academic continuity starting the spring of 2020.

The initial interview ended with a conversation that informed the interviewee of the next steps in continuing the study. I included a statement about potential follow-up questions with participants in case that clarification questions or additional questions emerged after transcription. Data analysis of the initial interviews determined additional questions and topics

that I discussed with the participants during the focus group interviews explained in the next section.

**Focus group interview.** I allowed 75 minutes for participants to engage in the focus group discussion and explained that they should not speak over each other because it will be hard to understand one another (McLafferty, 2004). My role during the focus group interview was to moderate discussions and remain neutral as ESL teachers shared their perspectives on serving the EL population in their schools during the global pandemic through virtual learning. The focus group interview was scheduled weeks after all participants completed their initial interviews and the researcher conducted preliminary data analysis through the transcript of the interviews.

I recorded and filmed the focus group interview as participants further discussed their diverse perspectives and multiple viewpoints of the reality of teaching ELs in the VLE at their individual schools (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) amongst each other. I created a supportive environment where participants were free to express their points of view and differing opinions about the characteristics and life experiences ESL teachers shared that were relevant to answer the study's questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A focus group discussion was appropriate to this qualitative study because moderating a discussion about the ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences about teaching in a different setting than what was the face-to-face in brick-and-mortar classrooms provided another source of data that explored common themes between the participants' making sense of the new VLE academic reality.

The focus group interview prompted a corroboration of the participants' experiences by asking about their views and experiences on more than one occasion and in more than one way (Yin, 2018). Analysis of the focus group interviews' responses determined additional questions

and topics to inquire about with follow-up clarification questions which I discussed in the next section.

**Follow-up questions.** I emailed individual follow-up questions to participants that needed to clarify any statements or artifacts provided. The participants responded to the follow-up questions at their convenience, usually within a week. I emailed clarification questions after I transcribed the focus group interview to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives on teaching English as a second language during the pandemic. Clarifying questions to each participant were mostly about site-specific comments or artifacts that emerged after data analysis of the focus group transcription and artifact analysis that helped me determine whether the context of the comment or artifact can be generalized to other sites in Freedom District.

Another scenario that needed clarification was the intensity or emphasis a participant used to express their point of view to determine if other participants truly share the same emotions about topics discussed in the focus group interview (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The purpose of the follow-up questions was to obtain further information about the concepts, situations, perceptions, and experiences participants discussed during the focus group interview in addition to allowing participants a final opportunity to expand on the answers or comments expressed to get their point across.

### **Observations of Pre-Recorded Virtual Instruction**

Observations of the participants' pre-recorded virtual lessons took place after gaining access to the site and provided additional information about the ESL teachers' context and teaching environment. I was not involved with the participants or the groups of students and there was no interaction between researcher and participants, but only a documentation of what I observed from the sidelines adopting a peripheral membership role (Bhattacharya, 2017). I asked

participants, via email, to share a copy of any recording of virtual lessons so I could observe the entire recording of ESL teachers in the VLE. The observations were open-ended and lasted the length of a class period that the teachers recorded because “observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, interactions, and artifacts (objects) in the social setting” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 141) or the virtual classroom. Observational notes and the data gathered from observations provided additional insight to the teachers’ perspectives and experiences as participants taught in restrictive academic settings that ensured students and staff did not contract the virus.

### **Field Notes**

I recorded detailed impartial field notes in my data collection journal that included concrete descriptions of the context and became supporting evidence to the teachers' reality, daily interactions, and experiences during the COVID-19 years of teaching in the VLE. Field notes included information that answered the *how* participants delivered content and described *what* methods they used to support language development in addition to mapping the teachers’ space as they provide services to their ELs. Field notes were necessary because while conducting interviews and observations there was not enough time to write down everything I heard or saw. I captured the context, settings, and interactions during the interviews or observations by using words, phrases, or drawings that jogged my memory after all the interviews and observations have concluded (Fetters & Rubinstein, 2019).

### **Artifacts**

Artifacts will be obtained before and after the various interviews with participants. Participants shared instructional artifacts, district guidelines, and school emails. I reviewed state



and district policies to reopen schools in addition to an external audit of the Freedom District ESL department and EL performance during and after COVID-19 teaching and learning.

**Classroom artifacts.** Participants shared their daily schedules during the VLE teaching and learning, the number of students enrolled they provided language services to, and lesson plans the ESL teacher created to guide daily lessons.

**Instructional artifacts.** Additional data analyzed included district and state teaching guidelines and documents that were rolled out during the onset of COVID-19 to protect students, staff, and teachers against the disease. The study looked at the English Learner Connectors from the Louisiana department of education because these guidelines are to be used by ESL teachers to support ELD and access to the content. I also looked at an external audit that reviewed all EL programs within Freedom District pre- and post-pandemic. Finally, I asked participants to forward emails from their school administration that included directives, instructions, and information on how to teach virtually.

### **Data Analysis**

An inductive data analysis approach was at the core of how I interpreted themes and patterns that emerged from all the data collected. There was not a linear process that I followed to interpret findings, instead, I moved back and forth from all interviews, observations, and artifacts to ensure that chunks of related data were clustered in thematic categories that provided a clear understanding of the teachers' perspectives on serving their ELs during a global pandemic. According to Saldaña (2016), qualitative researchers yearn for patterns because patterns become descriptions of people's routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships that were necessary for me to provide an accurate description of the ESL teachers' perspectives on their roles in supporting ELs' language development within the VLE, during virtual lessons. Patterns

became trustworthy evidence that I utilized to demonstrate habits, salience, and importance in the participants' daily lives serving ELs as I presented the findings of the study (Saldaña, 2016).

### **Interviews - Initial, Focus Groups, and Follow-up**

The researcher transcribed interviews verbatim the same day they occurred, in order to quickly analyze the evidence and constantly ask why events, situations, or teachers' perceptions appeared as they did so I could determine if follow-up questions were needed and promptly request further information (Yin, 2018). Data analysis from in-depth interviews with the participants allowed for saturation of information through the collection and analysis of the teachers' experiences placed in different schools within Freedom District.

Data collected from the face-to-face interviews were then transcribed and coded to uncover and describe the participants' perspectives on serving ELs in the virtual classroom as they unfolded (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I followed descriptive coding or "topic coding" that helped me identify topics that emerged from data linking comparable content from interviews to each participant (Saldaña, 2016). I continued to code and recode data during analysis because "a code, in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4).

I analyzed the data for the first time to identify events and statements that were relevant to the participants' perceptions of online teaching and learning when supporting ELD (Pu & Xu, 2021). Then, I identified events and statements to code according to specific themes or contents so I could identify the distinct kinds of perceptions and experiences participants developed during virtual teaching and learning. For example, analyzing transcripts from the focus group interviews had me review each question, and if it answered the question, I gave it a title, or code,

that described the comment (Krueger & Casey, 2015). I applied the same technique to the second question and answers until the data from all questions were exhausted. If the answer could be coded with the same title or code extracted from the first question then, the answers were grouped under the same code as the first question's answers, if not, then a new title was created that described the content of the answer provided.

The three categories that emerged from analyzing participants' responses through a self-efficacy lens, followed Bandura's (1986) theory that "self-efficacy judgments influence human functioning through their choice behavior, on effort expenditure and perseverance, on self-hindering or self-aiding thought patterns, and on affective and neurophysiological reactions to environmental demands" (p. 362) because when I focused on the participants' responses I coded within the self-efficacy category and connected their behavior choices, efforts, and positive or negative thought patterns to how approached the shift to the VLE. Based on the participants' appraisal of their capabilities, I categorized their teaching performance in the VLE as surpassing, matching, or falling below one's typical attainments (Bandura, 1986).

Surpassing performances included the behaviors of ESL teachers who went above and beyond of what their schools, leadership, colleagues, and families expected of teachers in the VLE. For example: home visits during the pandemic, phone calls late at night, providing personal telephone numbers, researching outside of working hours for best practices in the VLE, looking for and attending professional development targeted for ESL teachers and language learning, and writing curriculum for ELD for the VLE.

Matching performances included reported accounts about meeting the school leadership and peers' expectations of the ESL teacher included without extra-ordinary or less-than efforts as they made a lateral move from in-person instruction to the VLE. Examples of matching

performance levels included: focusing on the same teaching strategies while in the VLE, attending VLE general professional development, utilizing the same in-person teaching materials to deliver instructions, providing students with learning tools from the in-person curriculum, and supporting school staff with interpreting services.

Below typical performances reflected limited coping efforts to the adverse situation participants found themselves in and examples of debilitating expectations throughout the time in the VLE. For example, low expectations for work completion, participation, and attendance in the VLE, minimal planning to teach in the VLE, and little collaboration reported with peers to better support ELs in the VLE.

### **Observations of Pre-Recorded Virtual Instruction**

The researcher looked for and analyzed recurrent behavior patterns, interactions with students, and relationships among ESL teachers and students (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Field notes' analysis supported the identification and description of patterns and themes that emerged from the pre-recorded virtual instruction observations. Finally, I reviewed several times the field notes collected during the observations because the expanded notes from the initial jottings provided a more extensive record of what I observed to determine if the themes and patterns that explained the behavior and relationships of the participants in the different settings where they work. Observation data analysis contributed to data saturation since observational field notes provided another data set with thematic content and patterns that I used to increase the rigor of the study.

### **Field Notes**

Field notes analysis was done initially, right after interviews and reviewing of the pre-recorded virtual instruction videos to ensure the initial notes were expanded to include a more

descriptive account of what was observed or heard from participants. Field notes were analyzed like the previous text data sets where I was “searching for key words and coding for thematic content” (Fetters & Rubinstein, 2019).

### **Artifacts and Instructional Materials**

Freedom District’s policies and guidelines documents were analyzed by following discourse analysis procedures because documents are “social products” that can provide information about the authors of the documents such as their views, priorities, and social context where the documents emerged from. According to Saldaña (2016), the products one creates embody who we are as much as the environments one establishes embody who we are. Following this concept, I analyzed classroom artifacts such as lesson plan documents, schedules, emails with virtual teaching directives, and the LA Connectors by utilizing rich descriptions and interpretations of the visual data recorded by the researcher in field notes. Field notes of artifacts and instructional materials guided a response to the following question: “What is the first and general impression I get about this artifact or materials, and what details within the documents led me to that impression?” (Saldaña, 2016). All additional artifacts mentioned, added validity of the specific claims and assertions in the findings because I utilized them in the data triangulation process with the goal to present more accurate, objective, and neutral representation of the phenomenon in this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

### **Rigor and Credibility**

In this section, I presented the inductive process of data analysis to support and justify the methodology used for data collection, coding, and analysis that produced the findings in the following chapters. I examined raw data sources, and chunk data in manageable units of analysis by grouping information that was similar in meaning, which prompted me to look for

commonalities across and within these groups to identify patterns that became themes (Battacharya, 2017). I also recorded patterns and themes by writing down, thoughts, ideas, and questions as those emerged from the chunks of data analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017). I shared with participants findings from individual and focus group interviews to verify I heard and understood the participant's voice and the meaning he or she meant to convey to further construct validity for the study. I developed my co-construction of meaning from the data analysis that aligned the findings to the research questions, theoretical framework, literature review, and qualitative methodology to enhance the rigor of the study and bolster my credibility. My goal was to show the process of reflection during the multiple rounds of coding and expound themes and patterns that emerged from the analysis to improve rigor and credibility of my research process because "codes are essence-capturing and essential elements of the research study that, when clustered together according to similarity and regularity (i.e., a pattern), actively facilitate the development of categories and thus analysis of their connections" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 9).

The study followed a formal protocol delineating the steps and systematic procedures I undertook to ensure the multiple case study maintained its rigor. It is also important to state that rigor did not equate to rigidity and that I remained open and unbiased to potential shifts in direction of the study if unpredictable situations arose. I planned to acknowledge and report if the study began to transform into a new study (Yin, 2018). I also certify that immediate data analysis began after all interviews, so all data collected during the interview were considered holistically guaranteeing themes and patterns that emerged, surfaced by following the case study protocol.

The data collection strategies selected for the study attested to data triangulation and were conducive to data analysis that identified culture as a collection of ephemeral ideas, feelings, and

behaviors unique to each of the participants that reflect their ways of thinking about their experiences (Handwerker, 2001). The multiple case study's clear methodology helped me reflect on my own practices and present findings that limited or eliminated biases deriving from personal beliefs and language ideologies throughout the data analysis process.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking added validity to the study because it is an additional approach to ensure I assessed and represented the findings with accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). I shared transcripts with all participants to allow an opportunity to review and ensure the transcriptions captured what they meant to said during their interviews. I asked participants, before I began to write findings, for their reactions, corrections, and further insights they might have had on what they meant to convey during their interviews to promote confirmation of findings presented in this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The member checks obtained throughout the data analysis phase also added to the validity of the findings presented in this study aiding in composing the thick descriptions of the phenomenon.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I recognize my personal bias on this topic of inquiry because of my previous ESL teacher role within the study's setting (Freedom District) understanding that as a researcher conducting a study in a familiar setting, it had the potential to become a conflict of interest throughout the research process and data collection. However, to ensure standards of trustworthiness were evident while engaging with participants, the researcher shared with the participants all preliminary interpretations and findings to avoid misrepresentations or misconceptions (member checks), that was followed by a triangulation procedure of comparing data collected to the

observations, interview transcripts, field notes, and artifacts because “when data are plentiful, data naturally overlap” (Morse, 2015, p. 1219).

According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), qualitative methods in a study identify the interactive process between participants and researcher as descriptive, analytic, and interpretive because the primary data collected for the study will rely exclusively on people’s words, observable behaviors, and various texts to understand and explain ESL teachers’ perspectives on virtual learning practices in supporting ELs’ academic achievement and English language development in the VLE. Therefore, I developed a rigorous research protocol and followed case study research methodology that created systematic research procedures and avoided equivocal evidence to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions (Yin, 2018).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The formal protocols showed evidence of my preparation and careful consideration of the participants’ safety, confidentiality, and privacy throughout the study’s different phases. First, I prepared, submitted, and waited for approval from LSU’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to securing participants, site access, or any data collection. To protect all participants, I provide an informed consent form explaining the nature of the multiple case study, my positionality, and a guarantee that I would be transparent throughout the entire process and duration of the study. The participants expressed their willingness to be a part of the multiple case study by returning a signed informed consent form to the researcher.

I continue to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my human subjects and the storage of archival records by reporting all findings and anecdotes using individual and site pseudonyms. The multiple case study did not share any information that could identify the participants, their work sites, or anecdotes about children. All physical data collected was stored in a secure



personal cabinet that will remain locked during and after the study concludes. All digital data, such as video or audio recordings, emails, and personal instructional artifacts was stored within the password-protected LSU data storage account. No vulnerable populations were part of the multiple case study and no participants were exposed to harm due to the data collection, through interviews, conducted in places exclusively selected by them.

### **Limitations**

I was transparent and explicit throughout the study by acknowledging and bracketing her personal beliefs and perspectives on ESL best practices in the VLE to suspend my biases during the interviews and the reporting of emerging themes and findings rich data yielded. As the main instrument for this multiple case study, I presented my positionality on virtual education for ELs along with my personal and professional experiences that led to the development of the research questions and inquiry of ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences in the VLE. The subjectivity of the study spurred from my professional experiences within the US educational system where policies and school norms derived from monoglossic language ideologies that do not appear to promote culturally and linguistically responsive practices all emergent bi-/multilinguals should have the opportunity to experience in the classroom in person, let alone in the virtual setting. The motivation to study ESL teachers' perspectives through the experiences within the new academic reality of COVID-19 was "to generate a detailed holistic description and analysis" (Barker, 2004, p. 64) of how the VLE influenced ESL teaching practices and self-efficacy perceptions as they supported ELD.

As a researcher who will study her "own kind" of teachers, the ESL teachers, and who was deeply situated in the context of the study during the onset of the pandemic; sharing workplace, traditions, and inside experiences, I am aware that as a former insider in the context

of the study, there cannot be assumptions that I had intimate knowledge of the experiences of every participant in the study, nor did I make generalizations about the knowledge and experiences I had had in the context of the study (Kanuha, 2000).

### **Timeline**

The length of this study, from IRB submission to finalizing findings and interpretations, was 11-12 months. Initial contact with the district, principals, and teachers requesting to conduct research and participation was in April 2022. The researcher sent, via email, a summary of the proposed study to all parties involved to secure participation. All contacted participants agreed to participate and returned the consent form within three days of receiving it. Consent forms were collected via email prior to scheduling and conducting initial interviews. All six initial interviews were completed over two weeks in May 2022, of the five individual interviews, four were conducted on a video conference call, while one participant chose an in-person interview. Then, I shared, via email, the transcript of the respective participant's interview in September 2022 after completing the initial interview data analysis and sent out a poll to secure the focus group interview in November 2022. I continued analyzing transcriptions and artifacts to answer the research questions and completed the final report in March 2023 (Appendix C).

## **CHAPTER IV. SINGLE CASE FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study is to understand ESL teachers' pedagogy during the pandemic school years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 by analyzing teachers' experiences and perspectives on how they delivered English Language development (ELD) instruction to their EL students (ELs) via the virtual learning environment (VLE) and/or via a hybrid learning environment. ESL teachers discussed their response to teaching and learning in the VLE along with their self-efficacy by sharing challenges and successes as they were providing ELD lessons to their ELs in addition to the many other responsibilities they assumed during pandemic times. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What are the ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences during virtual instruction as they attempt to fulfill their responsibilities of
  - a. providing access to the curriculum for English language learner (EL) students?
  - b. ensuring the development of English language proficiency?
2. What are the ESL teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy as they continue to teach during a pandemic?

These research questions required semi-structured single and focus group interviews that took place via Zoom in the participants' classrooms or residences. The artifacts utilized to support the participants' claims and data analysis include teachers' daily schedules, administrative emails about teaching and learning during the onset of COVID-19, and the Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) documents used to teach ELs along with LDOE's COVID-19 mandates for teaching and learning. This chapter summarizes the narrative data for each single case with the supporting artifacts to explain how I sought to answer the research questions, followed by a cross-case analysis of themes present within each case.

## **Individual Cases Findings**

This section will summarize data collected from each participant through the following themes that emerged from the study: (a) district and school operations; (b) pandemic teaching and learning; (c) EL students and families' needs; (d) student access to online learning; (e) ESL teacher response to the virtual learning environment; and (f) self-efficacy performance levels. Each case will discuss the themes individually even though there may be some overlap since ESL teachers discussed the many roles and responsibilities they assumed during this time as a key supporting staff member for students and faculty alike in their respective schools.

Each participant's report will read like a story because I sought to portray each case comprehensively by using ample but nontechnical description and narrative (Stake, 2006). The rationale for selecting this format of presenting individual cases first and separate from the cross-case analysis is to describe and interpret the experiences of each participant and show how the phenomena appeared in the different contexts (Stake, 2006) before reporting the cross-case analysis in the next chapter.

### **Roxy**

This participant taught at Elementary School (ESC) that had about 98 English learner students (ELs) enrolled in the 2020-2021 pandemic school year. Roxy was the only ESL teacher at ESC where she served grade levels Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade and focused mostly on the lower English language proficiency level students (emerging 1-2 and progressing 1-2). Per administration request, Roxy provided services to grade levels 3rd-5th three times per week for about 45 minutes and grade levels Kinder-2nd for 30 minutes twice a week. Students classified as emerging English proficiency and some progressing 1 students learned how to read by

spending their time with Roxy reviewing basic phonemic and phonological awareness using “The Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention System (LLI)” curriculum.

Roxy was at ESC during the onset of the pandemic and through the school year 2020-2021. Roxy has been serving ELs at Elementary School D (ESD) since the beginning of the school year 2021-2022 and there she has a partner ESL teacher where they see about 152 ELs.

**District and School Operations.** Roxy spent the first month of school (August) supporting clerical and administrative tasks as an interpreter for Spanish speaking families because there were families registering their children and school forms parents need to complete for their children upon the beginning of the school year. ESL teachers must also spend the first month of school filling out federal EL forms to support ELD, such as the accommodations form and informing the mainstream teacher about these supports that must be provided for the ELs. Roxy expressed frustration on how long these tasks took her to complete before she could start teaching her ELs, her willingness to begin working on ELD was there, but she could not move forward until the forms and spreadsheets required by the ESL department were completed.

The school had a weekly call that Roxy would have to interpret and record in Spanish because she was one of two Spanish speaking teachers on site and the Spanish teacher had a rigid schedule to follow that prohibited her to support with Spanish translations. Administration and teachers would request Roxy to translate for them messages for their students’ parents. She revealed that the expectations were for her to translate documents with a day’s notice for the end of the day. She revealed that she “hadn’t gone to that many, really, interpreters’ trainings” prior to the pandemic need to translate documents for her ELs’ families. Roxy also had to become familiar at her own discretion and utilize new platforms to teach and communicate with parents

and other adults because no VLE trainings were required by the district or school, although they were available for all to do.

Roxy remembered that when the time came for students to return to campus, but it was up to the families to decide what was best for them or if they felt comfortable sending their children back in-person, she felt like administration at ESC expected her to convince all EL families to send their children back to school. She said she had to “make a lot of phone calls with parents” to let them know that it is better if their children come to school, “especially if they did not participate a lot in class or had a lot of absences.” The school and Roxy’s main focus was “to get them at school so we can teach them something.”

Roxy’s main frustration with teaching and learning in the VLE is not with teaching, “but it was just being pulled all the time to call someone or go to the office when I was in the middle of a lesson” prompting her to end her class abruptly or just leave her students alone and waiting for her to finish her administrative support. She shared that she was “the one that always had to get pulled out of my schedule to go help and assist the front office” even though she was one of two staff members who spoke Spanish on campus. Roxy felt that the Spanish teacher at ESC did not provide bilingual services in the front office because she was an ancillary teacher who had a set schedule with the school that allowed classroom teacher to have a break during the day.

**Pandemic Teaching and Learning.** Roxy expressed concerns about the students not being able to see how to pronounce words and acquire the proper letter sounds for a newly arrived EL who has no experience with the English language. She claims it was a challenge because “being any language learner, I think, everything should be more hands on” rather than looking at you on a screen and not being able to differentiate nuances that make different sounds. Masks and computer screens the VLE, and online teaching settings, were very restrictive to the

English Language Development (ELD) because she felt like the students did not receive adequate help in the VLE.

Roxy did not feel trained to navigate the virtual environment at the onset of the pandemic, but also as the 2020-2021 school year progressed and she had to juggle some students being physically present and others at home, especially as the instruction was done exclusively via Google Classroom virtual meetings. Roxy took her EL group outside the school to an area with a bench for students to continue receiving virtual instruction, and even then, she had to wear a mask, making it extremely difficult to teach phonics properly. Another shocking aspect for Roxy was the inability to greet her students as they were used to prior to COVID-19. She explained that at her school, teachers and students were “very physical, people like to give hugs to the kids and high fives” but as students returned on campus everyone had to think twice before hugging or touching students or other adults when the hybrid learning days began at her school.

This participant’s first thought when thinking about the VLE is the “lack of participation from the students” making it very difficult to do her job and help improve her ELs’ English proficiency levels. Roxy concluded with expressing her opinion that she hopes ESL teachers never have to go back to the VLE because she observed that ELs did not gain a lot of knowledge from online teaching and learning, feeling that is the reason students are way behind and at below grade level attainment. She talked about how, despite teacher struggles in the VLE, the schoolwide response to low achievement levels included “new computer-based remediation programs” to try and make up for learning loss starting the school year 2021-2022.

**Student and Family’s Needs.** As a Spanish speaker, Roxy support ELs’ families by posting translated flyers and communications on her Google Classroom for the parents. Roxy’s attempt to remove the language barrier that families and students who are non-English speaking

natives included providing parents with her Google Voice phone number to parents so they could communicate directly with her during the 2020-2021 school year. Moving forward, Roxy explains that she uses another platform to communicate with parents, but it is limited to the families who chose to download, register, and sign-up for the communications.

Roxy also spoke about the inconsistency of student physical attendance to school during the hybrid day period because some families chose sporadically to have their child stay home and log in to their classes instead of bringing their child to school on assigned days. She feels that the parents took advantage of this learning schedule because if the children logged in to their classes, they were marked present leading to attendance issues since “some way, somehow the parent always has an excuse.” Students would log in and never turn their cameras on, they would not participate making it difficult for the teacher to really know if the student was actually present and attending to their lesson.

This participant explained that one of her main priorities during teaching and learning in the VLE was “constantly calling home” to inquire why their child was not logged in and she had to walk parents through the process of logging in since some had “never used the computer before.” Roxy also said that she saw “students just sitting together with the babysitter or more students in one area with one hot spot that is lagging” making it really hard to teach lessons for her ELs due to the parents’ not being able to be at home to support their children in the VLE.

In addition to parental supervision and support to get ELs in the VLE, Roxy noticed that the students, especially her 5<sup>th</sup> graders, who did not have learning tools and resources at home “are having a lot of trouble reading basic words” along with having “really bad” handwriting. She explained that she is advocating for those ELs to receive additional support via a 504 plan to support their reading abilities, or lack thereof, because “if they can’t read or write, they’re never



going to be able to exit the ELPT,” or ESL program. Roxy felt like “it’s just sad because I know for when they get to middle or high school it’s going to get even harder, and those kids are probably just give up and drop out.”

**Student Access to Online Learning.** Roxy explained that mainstream teachers struggled with providing accommodations and academic supports to their ELs noting that there really was not a positive for her students as their unexperienced in the VLE teachers attempted to deliver their lessons. Appropriate access to the content in the curriculum was just not there at her school, she noted that it was very hard for mainstream teachers to support content mastery for their ELs. She explains that content mastery depended on the ELs’ level of English proficiency, work ethic, and effort put forth to learn the content.

Students brought home devices, such as Chromebooks, during the 2020-2021 school year to access the VLE while learning inside and outside of school. However, the following school year that changed, and there was no virtual instruction even when schools were closed last minute due to weather increments. On emergency “remote learning days,” ELs who had access to devices and internet at home had some work to do, posted by their mainstream teachers, but was not mandatory and ESL teachers did not have a clear set of expectations for these days. ELs did not receive any ELD instruction or assignments from Roxy, it was simply not required which is eerily similar to what was done to provide some content to students at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020.

Roxy spoke about student engagement during her lessons in the VLE, she expressed that about 50 percent of her students engaged with thumbs up, nodding, and writing responses while they were all muted while the other half of students would be “the looking, not doing a thing.” As far as student assignment completion, she remembers the big issue was that all teachers had

to constantly remind students to complete and submit their assignments since it required a two-step process for students to turn in assignments. Student work completion and submission varied, according to Roxy there were some students who submitted all completed assignments alongside others who attempted to complete their yearlong assignments in one week.

Roxy ended saying that ELs, because of the school year 2020-2021's teaching and learning modality, ELs are lacking reading skills noting that 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> graders are still reading at kindergarten level, and she is working diligently at "meeting them where they are" in their reading levels to promote relevant growth and attempt to catch them up to their grade level. She shared that if the district or school would have had "in-person adult training for parents, to physically teach them how to work the computer" along with adequate technology and ELs know how to navigate the platforms they will use, "that would've helped a lot" and "the transition to virtual learning could have been smoother."

**Teacher Response to the VLE.** Roxy struggled with her presentations and trainings for her school faculty as they were all done virtually. She felt that other teachers were as overwhelmed as she was with the VLE and therefore participation from adults in her trainings was scarce. However, when speaking about her ELs that logged into her Google Classroom, Roxy asserted that her students did participate as much as they could, depending on where the students were at the time of the lessons. Roxy remembers using her Google Classroom platform to provide English proficiency assessment-like assignments for her students to work on during state test preparation. Other times, Roxy would use the LLI curriculum for her emerging students attempting to teach basic phonics to learn to read, write, and speak in English but not in her Google Classroom.

However, physical materials for students in the VLE that were at home were not available, students had to look at their screen to read while use whatever paper and pencil they had available at home to write responses. When ELs were at school, still learning in the VLE during hybrid days, Roxy would provide copies of texts in advance for ELs to have during their lessons. Opportunities to speak were limited when in the VLE in the mainstream classroom because ELs would disturb the mainstream teacher lesson if they spoke aloud. ELs who were at home in the VLE would have more freedom to practice their speaking skills during Roxy's ELD lesson.

She created a lot of assignments in the Google Classroom "just to have the kids that are at home and the kids that are there [at school] do the same things" with the LLI curriculum and "to help them with a class assignment that they didn't know what to do." Roxy had to work together with the mainstream teacher and collaborate so she would know how to support content and how to explain to them what they needed to do for those assignments. Roxy did not have a specific way to monitor student progress in their language acquisition journey, she explains that her expertise in teaching ELs guided her teaching practice by saying "if I was working with an emerging, all emerging group, I needed to find things that can help them, like build a sentence." Without a specific language acquisition curriculum, Roxy had to retrieve materials that she deemed helpful to support her students' ELD like anchor charts, pictures, and examples of how to properly produce the English language. However, she also said that she only did a few examples of what she was teaching being restricted by the VLE and how much the screen would fit to show students.

**Self-efficacy Performance Level.** This participant fell into the matched efforts to their usual pre-pandemic performance because she did not share experiences that swayed me to think

that her efforts were extra-ordinary or less-than in the VLE. According to Pas, Bradshaw and Herschfeldt (2012), “teacher efficacy relates to both the ability to create an adequate learning environment and to deliver academic instruction” (p. 130), which Roxy shared she accomplished but she did not describe innovative teaching methods or a lack of effort to continue teaching ELs in the VLE. Unquestionably, Roxy acknowledged that even though her school was well organized throughout the school year, she was still learning how to manipulate the platforms and tools in the VLE. This participant did not think that it was positive for her students to be in the VLE because the mainstream classroom teachers could not provide access to the content during pandemic teaching and learning.

Roxy described her VLE teaching activities that were congruent with non-pandemic ESL best practices that she included in her daily activities with her ELs. She also relied on the familiar curriculum and worksheets she would have ELs complete if they were in the classroom. Roxy also described how much harder it was for students who did not have any English proficiency to acquire those basic letter sounds and differentiate them. She described success with her ELs as “having them complete whatever work we had to do” and “taking advantage of all the minutes” they had with her. Roxy never mentioned exhaustion, she was focused on how she could continue ELD lessons with her ELs even though she mentioned it was undeniably hard.

### **Gladys**

This participant was the sole ESL teacher who split her time between two elementary schools every week at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 through October 2020 the next school year. Elementary School A (ESA) housed around 32 ELs during the 2020-2021 school year while Elementary School B (ESB) enrolled about 49 ELs the same year. For most of the

2020-2021 school year, after moving from ESA and ESB, Gladys taught at a local middle school (MSC) where she was one of two ESL teachers and a paraprofessional. This participant struggled to remember accurately which school did what during the 2020-2021 school year since she experienced the school closures and beginning of online teaching and learning the following school year at two elementary schools before moving to teach at a local middle school. Gladys then moved to Elementary School H (ESH) for the 2021-2022 school year when Freedom District had the occasional emergency remote learning days due to increment weather.

This participant worked with grade levels 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> at MSC providing push in academic support for her ELs. She was in charge of attending the mainstream core classes with her ELs to support access to the content. MSC placed ELs who were at the emerging levels 1-2 and some progressing 1 level students in the EL specific English class that focused on language acquisition and ELD. Students who were at the progressing 2-3 levels would attend only the mainstream English classes where Gladys ensured access to the content since they had more command of the English language and “required a lot less intervention.” The other ESL teacher at her school taught the English class for lower proficiency level ELs.

**District and School Operations.** Gladys remembers disorganization as she prepared to support students and families for the VLE. She spoke of the shock of the pandemic shutting schools down and having to prepare parents and students to access the VLE noting that there was a time limitation to ensure everyone was ready to begin school in the VLE. She discussed how she “never quite thought that the powers in charge really knew what they were doing or had the kids’ best interests in mind” and she also felt that the district and school leaders “were more concerned about [state assessment] scores and funding.”

At MSC, Gladys was the ESL teacher who supported students ELD within their EL specific class individually as her ESL teacher partner taught the class. She also pushed in the general education classrooms to provide academic and language support to her ELs. This participant's role at MSC was to ensure ELs had access to the content in real time as they were in their mainstream core classes. She provided bilingual support to her ELs by acting as an interpreter for Spanish speaking ELs who had limited English proficiency in addition to providing background knowledge information on what the curriculum required them to know. Gladys felt "that schools in the district unfairly placed a lot of the burden [Spanish administrative, teacher, and family support] on the ESL specialists" stating how "it took us away from our actual job." However, she also noted that ESL teachers spent "hours a day telling parents how to log in, in Spanish, and how to set up their hotspot." Conversely, she felt like schools serving ELs should not rely on the ESL teacher to provide interpreting services for Spanish-speaking families because Freedom District does have the personnel who can provide those services without taking away the ESL teacher and ELD time from ELs.

Gladys concluded her interview by stating that "the three things kids need is more time to adjust" to school and life post-pandemic VLE teaching and learning; "they need more direct instruction in foundational literacy skills at their level;" and "they need to be willing to actually work and push themselves" in response to what she felt students still need support in due to the effect of Covid-19 teaching and learning. She also suggested to have schools serving ELs properly staffed because the work she did at MSC, with an ESL team, was so much better when it was not split between two schools and her ELs did not have to see her "half the time they deserved with me."

**Pandemic Teaching and Learning.** Gladys remembers joining the mainstream teachers in the VLE to promote student participation but noticed there were a lot of absences from her ELs due to their limited computer literacy and the VLE. ELs were shy to participate in their mainstream classes when physically present in school in the VLE, Gladys checked their work and encouraged participation as she noticed students had correct answers or needed additional content support from their teachers. On the other hand, ELs who were at home in the VLE were “off-task A LOT” with the occasional participation over the chat feature only since their microphones were off during lessons.

Assessing ELs’ progress and language acquisition was really hard for Gladys because the VLE made it hard to assess them as they were not physically present in the classroom. She noted that she had to really “bug them to do work” and when ELs produced work, she would “observe it and give them feedback, it was a lot of informal observations at least outside of their EL specific class.” The other ESL teacher, leading the EL specific class would teach and formally assess the foundational skills she covered. Gladys observed that work completion was worse than in person since “they had to spend extra energy being motivated” and students did not feel like they were learning. She also discussed that “engagement went way down because kids would realize, oh, if I just turn my camera off, it looks like I’m there and you don’t have to do anything.”

During hybrid learning days, some students would be present in the classroom, and some were at home, but all students followed the lessons in the VLE. She explained that she became the moderator of the virtual meetings by having ELs participate, remain engaged, and complete assignments. She discussed that based on the state assessments, measuring content knowledge, it

was apparent that her ELs were so academically, socially, and emotionally behind due to the VLE teaching and learning and because “the kids were just not invested in it.”

Gladys’ main concern continues to be “how distance learning adversely affects ELs by virtue of their class and economic opportunity” because the response to teaching and learning in the VLE by Freedom District, Gladys felt, that “the district attempted to create an ‘equal’ opportunity for all without considering ‘equitable’ distribution of resources.” Gladys is convinced that if the district continues to “use this ‘equal’ approach, they will continue to overlook students (specifically ELs) for whom ‘equality’ is simply not enough.” She expressed that “in case that distance-learning has to happen again, ELs should be given extra time and direct instruction to close learning gaps.”

**Student and Family’s Needs.** One of the main responsibilities Gladys assumed very early during pandemic years was tech support for parents and families who did not have internet access or reliable devices for online learning. She helped students and their families connect the assigned Chromebooks to the hotspots provided by Freedom District at no cost. She also described that her workload during teaching and learning in the VLE comprised of family outreach, 60 percent of her time, to ask families what their needs were and where her ELs were when she did not see them logged in their virtual meetings with their teachers.

Gladys communicated with families via a text messaging application, limited to the families who signed up and requested to join the group. She also gave out her personal cellphone number to families so they could reach out at any time they encountered language barrier issues or if they needed tech support to have their children attend classes in the VLE. She expressed concern for her ELs emotional wellbeing because she could tell her students were “freaked out”



about the deadly illness that was spreading around them, she said “we only kind of barely scratched the surface of what it must be like to be a child right now.”

During the mainstream core content classes, Gladys assured me that she provided support and feedback to all ELs but noted how progressing level students did not require her attention as much as the lower-level English students. She provided all ELs linguistic accommodations within the mainstream core classes. She spent most of her time, during her push in times, “helping them complete assignment that they were given in their regular classrooms, just using ESL instructional strategies” to help her ELs access the content “in a way their teachers couldn’t.”

This participant compared her struggles in becoming a fluent Spanish speaker to her students’ English proficiency because she knows that her ELs have the colloquial English but lack the academic language to succeed. Gladys felt that not knowing how to “express themselves almost professionally” is a hurdle language learners must overcome by practicing their language skills and there were limited opportunities for her ELs while in the VLE. She added that the inequity of the system was exacerbated by the pandemic noting that students with limited resources and their families were not prepared to receive instruction at home through the VLE.

Gladys also spoke about what she felt the positives were during the VLE teaching and learning times stating that the Spanish translations provided some breakthroughs from her ELs and meaningful access to the curriculum. Another positive aspect of the VLE was that the number of students who were present in the class was smaller which allowed her to manage the classroom more easily. Finally, she expressed that the gratitude the parents of her ELs showed towards her all the support she offered and how caring she was towards the kids and families is going to stick with her, she is glad she got to be there for them.

**Student Access to Online Learning.** Gladys remembers that students were muted during the general education teachers' lessons and supported participation from her ELs during their class time but was unsuccessful in providing academic support through breakout rooms from the main lesson because most of her students "weren't online or it took them a while to log in, so we would just talk about the lesson" with the couple of kids who were present. This participant talked about ELs' success in the VLE by being responsive to their lessons, but she felt that "it was kind of a low bar" because she checked if the students were actually trying to do the work and if they did, she assess how responsive the students were to her academic support and feedback.

Gladys remembers the extensive Spanish translations of the mainstream lessons to ensure her ELs had some background knowledge to access the content being taught and mastery of the content. She explained that opportunities to practice the four domains of the English language were included in the mainstream lesson, for example ELs "were getting their listening and reading components from the lesson." Gladys looked over her ELs' writing when completing assignments and monitored the chat during the lessons to support the writing domain, while she encouraged her ELs to speak in class.

She also added that she felt the pandemic affect EL families more severely "by virtue of economic and class differences" because ELs were "less likely to have that adult present that will be able to support the child with their work" and were teaching themselves how to navigate the VLE "but they are also essentially raising themselves" being alone at home. Gladys felt like "students should not be left at home if they lack the appropriate resources and support to develop English Language skills on their own" because the VLE was "much more inequitable than in-person learning" for ELs.

During increment weather closures during the 2021-2022 school year, ELs were expected to login to their Google Classrooms and complete assignments posted by their teachers, including the ESL teacher. Some of the assignments Gladys would post included “Kahoot” and “Edulastic” quizzes, “Edpuzzles,” and English language proficiency test-like items to review foundational skills. However, if the students did not have access to the internet or a device at home, ELs were to “continue reading, practicing your vocabulary words, and do some writing practice on your own” to show evidence of work upon return to school.

**Teacher Response to the VLE.** Gladys explains the time spent working on ELD with her ELs was during virtual meetings without any posted assignments in her Google Classroom. She mostly provided ELs with academic support by pushing in and joining their general education virtual meetings encouraging participation from her students. In response to the change in teaching and learning setting that was the 2020-2021 school year, Gladys took it upon herself to attend the virtual professional development available to teachers over the 2020 summer break because she used some of those resources to communicate with parents and support EL language acquisition.

She talked about her concerns about evident socio-emotional development gaps expressed through their behavior that is “mentally two years younger” and how she does not feel “they’re ready to go to the next grade level, even skills wise, because their behavior, for some of the kids, is just atrocious.” Gladys noticed that upon return to a more normal school year in 2021-2022, her ELs behaved at the age level they were when the pandemic and online learning began, and she feels they lack general social and emotional skills of children their age today. She was unable to pinpoint exactly the cause of this unusual behavior she observed but did mention

that it could be due to missing out on peer interaction for a year, teacher discipline, or it could be due to a home situation.

Gladys felt that some ELs lacked motivation to learn extending their silent period when in the VLE and became frustrated because she could not understand why her students acted as if they did not care about learning or practicing their English skills. She shared how she felt that the struggle to get her ELs to attend class and keep them on topic was never-ending. Gladys shared that she had an EL who was “allegedly working with his dad, like some actual job he had” that caused this student to have a lot of absences, missed work, and a “dejected attitude towards schooling in general.” She felt that the labor from the beginning of the year as she tried to get all her students in class, logged in, “carried throughout the year.” Gladys described her experience with her ELs stating “it felt like a losing battle just to get them to show up and try to do the work” because even when she called home “most of the time nothing would happen” or “you couldn’t get a working number for a lot of them.”

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Another response to the VLE from Gladys was that she became apathetic towards her work as an ESL teacher because she felt that the restrictive and unfamiliar VLE was “not doing anything for kids, it is not for them, this is for us to feel like we’re doing something.” Even so, the following school year, 2021-2022, whenever there were school closures due to weather increments, Gladys sometimes had to monitor the VLE in the mainstream classes and support her ELs as she had previously done throughout the 2020-2021 school. Other times, she uploaded ELD assignments and language proficiency practice tests for her students on their Google Classroom which she said was better for everyone because “it’s not like were accomplishing much like in-person classes.”

**Self-efficacy Performance Level.** Gladys’s was vocal about the lack of district support and did not mention working with classroom teachers or her peer ESL teacher. Gladys also felt that “the powers in charge did not have the kids’ best interests in mind, they were more concerned about scores and funding” and how she was unsure as to how effective her ELD and academic support was for her ELs in the VLE. Gladys provided academic support for ELs at her school while her colleague was an ESL classroom teacher who focused only on ELD during her classes.

This participant fell into the below performance efficacy level as she immediately responded to the question about preparedness to teaching in the VLE with “not at all prepared.” She discussed the required professional development she attended during the school year 2020-2021, had nothing to do with the VLE but instead, topics included the superintendents’ district wide plan for all schools to implement, filled with acronyms that she could not recall the meanings to. Opposite from the first category, teachers who fall below, or short from, their usual performance are the less engaged teachers in their work who will also show lower levels of

energy and mental resilience which in turn leads to limited effort and becoming more prone to experience negative emotions (Burić & Macuka, 2018). Gladys' personal interview was filled with negative emotions as she described how her students had a hard time taking school seriously in the VLE, "they were off task a lot, I had to push them to do work" because she felt "they did not want to learn," and the academic support she provided to ELs felt like "it was kind of a low bar" set for ELs via the breakout rooms.

Although she loved seeing her students on the VLE, and she provided academic and ELD support to her students, she described her success as moderate and explained that she had the most success when helping ELs get into their classes rather than with the academic content or language skills' development because she "wasn't really sure how to bridge the gap" without being physically there, present, with them. Gladys' negative perceptions aligned with Tschannen, Hoy and Hoy (1998) who reported on the cyclical nature of self-efficacy perceptions (positive or negative) and how teachers with lower sense of efficacy put less effort put forth and tend to give up easily, which can translate into poor teaching outcomes.

### **Guillermo**

Guillermo is a bilingual, Spanish-speaking, participant who worked at Elementary School H (ESH) with about 82 EL students enrolled during the 2020-2021 school year. At ESH there were two ESL teachers, so Guillermo worked specifically with students in Kinder, first, and second grade to support ELD for his ELs by utilizing the LLI curriculum when teaching online in the VLE. However, he felt that "things got out of our control, out of our hands" because "resources that we needed and were so useful" were intended for in-person learning.

**District and School Operations.** Guillermo remembers the uncertainty he felt as staff and students ended the 2019-2020 school year and began the 2020-2021 school year. There were

many unanswered questions concerning teaching and learning in the VLE because of the health concerns they were experiencing since the onset of the pandemic. He remembered how at the very beginning of school closures there were three weeks when there was no communication or guidance from the district or schools. He recalled that the process to begin distributing Chromebooks to his students was very slow since he felt the district, and the government, had never had to respond to a pandemic. He did not recall having many professional development opportunities during the Covid-19 teaching and learning years.

Guillermo explained that there were not ESL specific trainings provided by the school or district the first week of the 2020-2021 school year. Usually, the district provides professional development during the in-service week before the students arrive on the first day of school and he mentioned that school leaders, guest speakers, and more experienced teachers would present on different ways to better support the students. Guillermo also talked about a refresher interpreter course he had to attend per district request. However, he asserted that he acquired his knowledge on how to support ELs when he attended his ESL certification courses.

This participant explained that his focus at the beginning of the school year was always supporting Spanish-speaking families and interpreting for them as they attempted to register their children at ESD. The 2020-2021 school year was no different in how Guillermo spent the first month of school (August) providing bilingual support for Spanish-speaking families and school administration. He added that he offered bilingual support by interpreting or translating documents over 800 times throughout the school year. However, Guillermo also pointed out that the district must not assume that the Hispanic heritage of their students' families means they are all literate and able to read and write in Spanish because that is not the case for all ELs' families,

and they cannot always support their children even if they have homework or instructional materials in Spanish.

**Pandemic Teaching and Learning.** Guillermo discussed his role and responsibilities during online teaching and learning stating the focus of his lessons was ELD and not academic support for his ELs. He talked about continuing to teach ELs using the LLI curriculum in the VLE because it helped him, and the students, maintain consistency and familiarity with the flow of the lessons. This participant assessed his students' progress and reading levels weekly using the running record provided by the intervention materials. Guillermo also communicated with his ELs' mainstream teachers and discussed the students' ELD and performance in the core classes stating that teachers could observe improvement in their ELs participation and ELD. He explained that success for him was evident when ELs themselves began noticing that they were becoming confident fluent readers and speakers in the English language.

During his interventions in the VLE, Guillermo explained that his groups were smaller than when he was serving students in-person because all students alternated learning days following an A/B schedule model. He pointed out that opportunities to practice writing were less than in a normal school year but, he made sure ELs practiced the oral language to provide additional academic and content specific vocabulary usage. Student read daily using the LLI curriculum and listened as Guillermo lead the class.

Guillermo talked about not being able to measure progress during teaching and learning in the VLE, he explained that only when his students began attending school following the hybrid schedule, he noticed academic and English proficiency growth. He also shared how he struggled to keep control and focus of the lessons with his Kindergarteners because of their young age and the fact that when his students are in the mainstream classroom they often must



sit in silence during instruction. Guillermo asserted that “technology just goes so far, and you have to do the groundwork” to improve English language proficiency by “getting over the fear of speaking and being able to participate in the classroom.”

This participant made a comment about how “regular American students, whose first language is English, are still struggling” academically because, he noticed, these non-ELs “are coming out of the pandemic at such low achieving levels.” He then asked the question, “how much worse is it for the students that were just starting to learn English?” through pandemic teaching and learning. He then shared that the “district is overconfident about technology, thinking that technology is going to solve all the issues and somehow the kids are going to speaking and writing” because of the district’s continued reliance in technology even though he has not seen the fruits with his ELs. Guillermo also noted that he has observed a more “relaxed attitude” towards school and he feels that “the kids are just waiting for something to happen, and sometimes even the teachers are waiting” for something to click if the students stay long enough in their classrooms.

**Student and Family’s Needs.** This participant was very vocal about the lack of resources a lot of his ELs showed at home. He explained that there were many children attempting to join and follow their learning schedules sitting in one area at the same time, making it very distracting and difficult to access the content for them. Parents were not used to or prepared to have their children at home all day every day. Families had very limited experience with computers and technology. Guillermo had to learn how to connect devices to the hotspots provided by the district to have students join their classes with reliable internet connection. Parents would often go to their schools to request tech support, which was Guillermo for the Spanish-speaking families.

Guillermo revealed that the VLE was restrictive in serving younger ELs because it made it very difficult to deal with students' socioemotional needs from a screen in addition to relying on internet connections that would fail at times. ELs were missing parts of the lessons that were crucial to language acquisition such as proper pronunciation. However, he also described the VLE during Covid-19 teaching and learning as being positive for the students because it allowed them to have interactions with their peers and teachers. Guillermo pointed out that the younger ELs seemed to learn and adapt faster to utilizing technology and devices because he felt that younger ELs were basically born into a device and technology dominated world.

This participant also spoke about his reaction to having access to his students' lifestyles and needs while teaching and working in the VLE, Guillermo said the window into his students' limitations shifted his teaching pedagogy because it made him look for better ways to support their ELD and access to content. Guillermo shared his personal phone number with parents to make sure he was accessible to the families and provide support to students in any way he could, or they needed. He talked about trying to make his students see that even though it is "great to be in America with resources and smart boards, Chromebooks, and all that, there is still groundwork that needs to be done" so they need to keep trying, not giving up, and know that they cannot "expect instant results."

**Student Access to Online Learning.** Guillermo expressed frustration about his ELs' limited access to learning materials at home because he could not provide them with the necessary tools and worksheets to complete the activities tied to the books and skills they were covering during his lessons. He talked about limitations in the VLE for ELs because the students' socioeconomic status correlated to their ability to complete assignments. Many factors influenced how ELs accessed the learning materials, for example, if the student and his or her

family had previous experiences with technology (such as computer literacy) and they had learning resources like a printer, pencils, paper, coloring tools, etc. they could complete assigned activities. On the adverse, if the EL and his or her family was unfamiliar with the devices and how to connect to the internet, they would continuously go to their schools to request tech support and attempt to learn how to manipulate the VLE.

Another point regarding ELs' access to the VLE Guillermo made was how his students' attendance was irregular due to ELs being dependent on their parents' working schedules. Students and parents would forget the learning schedule and miss classes or if the internet were not working properly, ELs would not log in to receive instruction. Guillermo discussed how these limitations in the VLE for his students have left a gap in their learning that is still evident in the students' academic performance. This participant shared that "there was really no infrastructure in their homes to confront this kind of pandemic," stating that "it's very different when you are a person of resources." EL families that were more economically stable with available learning tools, internet, and "excellent computers" were able to perform better and had an easier transition to the VLE with parental support.

Guillermo was adamant that only when his ELs started to return to school, during hybrid teaching and learning, he "could really use the resources that we had" in the classroom in addition to helping students return to a more structured learning environment. He asserted that the "one of the side effects of the pandemic was the lack of access to spoken English within the instructional environment for our students" and how "missing so much school time during lockdowns got ELs behind in their English skills." His suggestion to better serve ELs in the VLE would be students having access to hard copy working packets that ESL teachers can then review

using “conversational skills because through conversation, a lot can be taught” while “reading and writing skills can be reinforced once students” return to school and “are taught in person.”

**Teacher Response to the VLE.** Guillermo continued teaching his ELs using the LLI curriculum materials and mentioned it was an easy transition into the VLE due to the structure of the lessons and interventions from the curriculum. He explained that his formal assessments were the same running records included in the curriculum because that was how he monitored his ELs’ progress. However, he expressed that “virtually, the most frustrating thing was the lack of resources of the students” in the VLE, he talked not being able to plan “anything in advance with certainty” because students often were not “at home, or [experienced] failing internet, and failing computers.”

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, Guillermo observed a significant gap in his ELs’ language development and academic progress which prompted him to adapt his lessons and begin teaching at a lower than usual ELD level to attempt to close the gaps. He explained that Hispanic children speak only Spanish at home because their families speak very little English, if any, and that is why the English level in his returning ELs was lower than usual since they had been at home for over five months immersed in Spanish only. This participant noted that the year 2020-2021 was very difficult for all teachers in attempting to close linguistic and academic gaps and that students are still struggling to catch up from the pandemic years’ learning loss. He stated that he feels we are still not back to ‘normal.’

Guillermo expressed that the actual illness did not affect his emotional status aside from the initial uncertainty and questions about what industries would close and next steps. He did not feel depressed by being restricted from going out and remembered that the fact the school and families needed his services so much encouraged him to keep working, even though it was a

heavy workload. Guillermo stated that being able to return to school and teach in the VLE was “una inyección de positivismo” (an injection of positivism)” for him.

Another thought from the pandemic teaching and learning years for this participant was his experience in planning ahead. Guillermo maintained that accepting the situation and “going with the flow” of things helped him keep calm and keep teaching dependent on what each day brought upon. He discussed the daily changes to how things had to be and be done asserting that being rigid or making predictions about everyday affairs could make you very frustrated.

Guillermo recommended that teachers become more understanding of their ELs’ home situation emphasizing that countries in Latin America do not have the same technological resources or advantages we have in the US. He shared that teachers should not assume that students come from places where they had the same resources or supports, we have available by living in the US. Guillermo explained that some students have walked miles to cross the border into the US, may have lost a parent or family member, and experienced trauma before arriving at the school, for this reason, Guillermo spoke on the need to support students’ socioemotional needs in addition to providing targeted instruction.

**Self-efficacy Performance Level.** Guillermo portrayed characteristics of the matching efforts, to pre-pandemic teaching, performance level because Guillermo’s focus was to continue using the same strategies he was accustomed pre-pandemic delivering the curriculum he had used prior to the school year 2020-2021. He believed that the ELs benefited from the structure and continuation of what they knew from prior classroom experiences with him. Guillermo also said that there were not many questions at the beginning of the year due to everyone living in uncertainty and only mentioned that he attended required, beginning of the year, professional development provided in-house by the school prior to begin connecting with his families. Pas,

Bradshaw and Hershfeldt (2012) pointed out that specific school-based organizational and social resources can be associated with decreased levels of burnout which Guillermo in this category did not mention as a factor hardship to teach in the VLE. This participant also expressed that the VLE was an experience that forced the district and all teachers to learn to integrate technology, which students have been born into and use it daily. His accounts implied school he had no concerns with leadership and that the school worked well to address students' needs during pandemic teaching and learning.

### **Heidi**

This participant worked at Elementary School F (ESF) with 122 EL students during the 2020-2021 school year. Heidi held the ESL teacher role for her Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in addition to being the ELD teacher for the dual immersion students. Heidi's school had a dual language immersion and mainstream program at that time, so she was responsible for supporting ELD for mainstream ELs and immersion ELs. She described her EL population as including newcomers to the US, students with interrupted learning, lack of learning in their home country, and some who experienced traumatic passage into the US. She was the only ESL teacher at ESF and has some Spanish language skills she used to provide bilingual support to her ELs and their families.

Heidi's ESL services included a class of all newcomers, mixed grade levels, that she served remotely covering basic and survival English skills. She also pulled out lower-level proficiency students (emerging and P1s) via VLE while for her ELs that were closer to transitioning to proficient, she did "my big inclusion support for grades 3-5" which she described as providing "beautiful visual supports for vocabulary" in the chat during their core classes. She

mentioned that her focus at ESF was to work with “primarily grades two through five,” all at the emerging English proficiency level, but also did some work with first grade emerging ELs.

**District and School Operations.** Heidi remembered the beginning of the pandemic shutdown as being very chaotic, without any communication from the district until April 2020. She did not feel she should have had to wait until the end of April to receive directives from the ESL department, Heidi was concerned and distressed from the lack of communication initially. On the other hand, Heidi explained that once the district began sending communications and responding to the closures, they did that very well.

When asked to describe the first thing that came to mind when I said VLE, ELLs, and COVID-19, Heidi immediately responded, “no direction” and agreed with Susie that no one really had clear directives or expectations for how to run the VLE and continue providing ELD services. She was adamant in saying that nobody at the district level thought about sending Spanish translations of important communications and updates, she emphasized “we had to think of that” and said “that was really hard to stomach” because of the high Spanish-speaking population at ESF.

Heidi compared her response to the roles and responsibilities to fill at ESF to the adrenaline surge a mother may have as she “miraculously can lift the car off her child” at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year being “really ramped and full of passion and energy” until December of 2020. Heidi disclosed that by the end of the year 2020 she felt burnt out from having to take on many roles and responsibilities to support her ELs and families, she was the sole person who these families relied on. She reassured me that she did not stop providing quality instruction, but she was checking out mentally feeling overwhelmed by keeping up with her students’ needs, such as attendance during quarantines, new hotspots if the families moved,

translating the script to inform parents about quarantine days and expectations, swapping out damaged devices, and easing parental concerns about the pandemic and school.

Heidi recalled the school district having professional development available for teachers on how to manipulate the digital learning tools teachers would need for the VLE, but the trainings were not required. Trainings that the ESL directed ESL teachers to attend were not EL specific but more on how to manipulate the Google applications to support ELD, “nothing life changing” because “everything that I did that worked had to do more with purposeful planning to teach language,” she insisted.

Heidi described how pleased she was with ESF’s administration because they kept constant communication with the staff and had multiple meetings with the teachers to determine how to support the students. ESF wanted the focus to be staff communication with families to find out if they had internet access and if so, was it a good connection to support learning in the VLE. The school also wanted to know from parents if there would be adult supervision at home during online teaching and learning. Before the 2020-2021 school year began, the principal at ESF requested that Heidi taught for three weeks a class of newcomers. She worked with a colleague on science and social studies content-based lessons, she explained that she had fun providing those ELs with some ELD prior to the beginning of the school year. Heidi wrote curriculum for her school over the summer as well, per school administration request.

Heidi ended her interview suggesting the district needs more ESL teachers that are really grounded in pedagogy “know what it means to be a language teacher and are passionate” about the job in addition to being ESL certified. Her advice to the ESL department and Freedom District was “not to drop the ball by ensuring that the most marginalized and vulnerable populations are prioritized with funding for hotspots and stipends” that can serve as incentives



for ESL teachers to ensure connectivity, early in the process of turning to VLE for teaching and learning with “all hands-on deck to meet the needs of this particular group of kids.” Additionally, she explained that she did not know how the district could have responded differently to the sudden transition into the VLE and all technological issues that came with that change in mode of instruction, “because although we do have a big tech department in Freedom District, they’re not bilingual, and I wouldn’t expect them to be” since we do not live in “New Mexico, California, or Miami.”

**Pandemic Teaching and Learning.** At the beginning of teaching and learning in the VLE, Heidi explained she continued providing ELD support to her ELs in their mainstream classes online noting that if her ELs were not online she had to make a lot of calls to find her students and get them logged in. She used the device and student digital monitoring platform to see if her ELs were online when they were supposed to be and if not, she would need to reach out to the family and find out what issues they were having that did not allow for their children to attend classes in the VLE.

Heidi disclosed that her priorities during the school year 2020-2021 were divided 10 percent dedicated to the ELD and teaching ELs in the VLE, while 90 percent of the day she spent calling parents where she “would try to walk these parents through and students through” manipulating their devices and tech issues so she could hold class. She also remembered “texting and calling while I’m on online classes supposedly supporting these kids linguistically trying to get them to stop” walking away and return to the computer “because there’s no one there.” She referred to her experience as a nightmare trying to juggle holding a class with her ELs, attempting to correct or solve her students’ tech issues by providing Spanish support even though she “had limited tech knowledge” and a lower intermediate level of Spanish.

Heidi struggled to maintain her remote inclusion services for her ELs during their core classes in the VLE because the initial platform that ESF used to connect to live teaching and learning switched to Google Classroom and she was no longer able to post images for her ELs to access the content and develop English proficiency. Heidi explained that she “whatever concept it was, I had prepared in advance a lot of high-quality clipart that I was able to copy and paste in the chat box” for her ELs while in their core classes’ lessons. She also acknowledged that providing “on the fly translations in the chat box of what the teacher was saying” was not a best practice strategy for the sheltered instruction educational model her ELs experienced at ESF and said “in this case, we do it as a bridge, as a means to an end, temporarily” highlighting that she did what she could, when she could as she attempted to continue providing ESL services to her ELs in the VLE.

Heidi also had to provide pull-out services, in the VLE, to her newcomer ELs because she felt it was important to teach those students survival English, as she would do in-person on a normal school year. Heidi also spent 20-30 minutes doing a bilingual Storytime for the dual immersion classes to support ELD for those students. She explained that, in the VLE, when she tried to make the cross-linguistic connections it “wasn’t as subtle and nuanced as it would have been” in the classroom, “the way they should be.” Heidi also discussed her ELs working memory and explained that “when you talk about working memory, the ability to hold on tight to information learned and utilize it” was limited because ELs no longer had the ability to look at anchor charts or rely on their interpersonal relationships with their teachers and peers to develop English proficiency. The “visual cues relating to other human beings in the classroom, that was all gone, completely gone,” Heidi explained.

This participant described what success looked like in the VLE for her students, as being present and engaged in the VLE, asking questions in the chat box, and having their camera on during their lessons. She took notes on her students' progress and monitored their ELD through her "own little mental quick formative assessments everyday" but also by creating mini rubrics to track progress for her ELs. She talked about how "there were a lot of days that were wins, when the kids were engaged, and their screen was on, and they were interacting with me in the chat room" in addition to interacting with their mainstream teachers.

Heidi stressed that the lack of interpersonal relationship with her ELs was the number one challenge in developing English language proficiency in the VLE because "a smile is universal in person and it's just not the same as if it's not in person." A second challenge she encountered was the inability to reflect on her daily practice because she was unable to give her ELs a true assessment each day to measure progress. Another challenge she discussed was her inability to critique the students' writing, "even on a very simple level, because I wasn't in person to see if their fine motor skills were impacting their ability to produce" output in writing.

**Student and Family's Needs.** Heidi assured me that she had strong relationships with her ESF families and "worked the phones like crazy" having conversations with parents about school expectations as she received information to share with them. Heidi felt her task to support her EL families was more daunting than the mainstream students' families because "sometimes they don't have enough food, let alone internet and such."

Heidi explained that she used content or high-quality books to teach her ELs that included characters who "came to this country under similar circumstances to leverage and ask questions" as her attempts to elicit oral language and "try to balance those linguistic exchanges in a way remotely that would set up the child to be able to write a simple sentence."

Heidi described her EL population as transients, moving often and requiring a lot of support to gain internet access again, replacing damaged or lost devices, and making sure the students were in attendance and logged in when they needed to be. She became overwhelmed with the number of calls she had to place to ensure her students and families had all the resources and information needed to be successful in the VLE. Heidi's birds eye view into the students' homelife was a challenge because she could see her students, being off a normal learning schedule, wore pajamas and often ate during their core classes making it hard for students to devote their full attention to their lessons. However, she maximized on those experiences by having ELs talk about their outfits and food they showed during their ELD time with Heidi.

This participant talked about the poorest of her kids being the ones who were the most vulnerable and had the most challenges at home because they moved a lot, were homeless, or lived in a two-bedroom apartment with nine other people. Heidi said she would call them and even do home visits to ask them not to give up and continue learning in the VLE because she noticed that these ELs were "not as successful over the year and half" that they had to spend in the VLE. She continued, "their engagement within the class was directly correlated to my level of hounding them" because their intrinsic motivation was lacking, and they needed Heidi to provide them with extrinsic motivators such as a literacy reinforcer. She also noted that it was hard for her to tell if her ELs' situation, of being left alone in the household to do school, "was only the case for the pandemic or whether it was always the case, like during Thanksgiving break."

**Student Access to Online Learning.** Heidi discussed her EL families' fears of the unknown and concerns about not having access to the internet in their homes, but she did help families identify the internet provider offering free wi-fi and secure a connection at no cost to

them. If a student was not logged in at the time of their classes, Heidi had to contact the family to figure out what they needed to remain online, such as a better internet connection. She noted that it was rough providing tech support to her families when her internet connection was not strong, and she had the same connectivity issues she was trying to solve for her EL families.

This participant was concerned about her ELs absenteeism due to the parents' working schedules because most had multiple jobs and could not stop working. Heidi described how her ELs' parents struggled with keeping up the VLE schedules of their children, so she had to remain fully remote to ensure her ELs had access to her lessons from home or wherever their parents had them logging in from. Heidi addressed attendance by continuing to contact parents via phone calls or messages, "that's how I got my kids to show up," she said. On the other hand, Heidi felt that the constant calling was exhausting and remembered how "I was in tears almost every night, it was horrible." Heidi added how frustrating it was that "the parents didn't understand, or chose not to understand, or whatever, how important the learning time was" because everyone could see "a father walking by in his underwear" and she felt that there was "just lack of parental support in terms of getting the kids to attend class" even after she had called parents the night before reminding them of their child's schedule to log in.

Heidi talked about the purposeful planning and thought she put into her lessons with her ELs, taking into consideration that her students may be stressed learning in the VLE so she incorporated the readers' theater curriculum so her lessons "wouldn't be so dry." Heidi knew that if the newcomers did not have the basic linguistic skills in English, they would not be able to access the content so she "provided linguistic frames to make sure they could demonstrate their knowledge." She presented her newcomers class many stories with predictable text to read with

her students and had them answer questions. As far as monitoring progress, she ticked off her rubrics during readers theater as part of her performance evaluation process.

“As a language teacher, I’m always trying to incorporate the four domains,” she explained, for listening activities she did a lot of read alouds, “writing was always part of the lesson,” some independent reading at the ELs level followed by question and answering, and for speaking she talked about doing readers theater, even with a nonfictional text, to make it fun and how she “would stay up at night and write a little story and put characters so that they could jump in there with some oral output.” She described the workload that she had to do in the remote environment as a lot more than what she did before the VLE because she had to do so much preparation to make sure she was counteracting the deficits that were inherent in the VLE that would affect her ELs’ working memory. She felt that “the masking, the virtual learning, all of that truncated that very thing we need so much for English learners” referring to oral language comprehension because of “how important it is that we really dig deep in those areas before we try to tackle the reading [skills], and certainly the writing [domain].”

When she mentioned student work completion, Heidi remembered that the mainstream teachers knew the ELs’ accommodations and accepted pictures, sketches with labels, correct responses in Spanish noting that “with those accommodations in place, my kids were able to be very successful” in the VLE. However, when asked if her students mastered the content, she explained that she did not know and said her ELs’ test scores showed 50-60 percent mastery. She also confirmed that there was a huge learning loss that she observed throughout the following school year to teaching and learning in the VLE.

**Teacher Response to the VLE.** Heidi began her interview with the assertion that the principal at ESF had always relied on her to do what is necessary for her EL students and their

families. Heidi explained she did not have roles or responsibilities assigned to her but said “I just jumped in and did what I felt I needed to do to help my kids.” She talked to them on the phone a lot to alleviate their fears and even went as far as doing some home visits because she felt it was important for her ELs to see her. “Anybody worth their salt was on the phone trying to communicate with these parents and explain to them how important it is that the kids have a quiet space,” to learn in conjunction to parental support, she added. She felt frustrated and referred to it as “tragic to see how many kids were left alone and how young they were” taking care of other siblings or relatives in their household while attempting to learn in the VLE themselves.

Heidi explained that she felt working from home should have been easier, but it was very stressful for her because she felt she had the burden to make sure her ELs, who had more socioeconomic challenges than their peers, were present in the VLE. Heidi spent the initial weeks of remote teaching and learning contacting families and ensuring her ELs were online until everyone settled into the routine of teaching and learning in the VLE. Afterward, she was able to provide ELD support by using the chat box during the mainstream lessons by posting images for vocabulary words however, she asserted “I was providing a remote inclusion service on the fly.”

Heidi did not feel like she knew enough about technology to provide ELD services in the VLE, she said it was a tricky situation because she felt like she was expected to be the “everything teacher” for her ELs as opposed to only providing ELD services. She remembered how challenging it was to become familiar with all the learning tools needed in the VLE, however, she felt she had no choice but to learn how to work in the VLE and assured me that she

was “very well supported by colleagues both in the ESL department and ESF, especially my immersion colleagues.”

This participant ensured she acquired the necessary skills to teach in the VLE, “like every night I was researching, talking to colleagues, going online, researching what can I do to help ELs in a remote environment,” she described. She increased her ELs’ engagement by having engaging and fun lessons and made sure there was some retention by providing exit tickets that the students had to complete and hold up to demonstrate learning. She also discussed that because the students were dropping off the internet connection often, she could not be sure that “they were really getting anything based on them demonstrating their understanding” so she worked hard to support retention and recalling “even though there was no way to prove it.”

Heidi read language acquisition literature to ensure she planned for ELD and modified her lessons to support English proficiency so ELs would have the necessary linguistic tools to access content in their mainstream classes. She made her directions “brief and concise,” used simple language and repetition starting with the verb because “it helps the child anchor better,” made sure her routines were predictable “to reduce stress,” and used songs or music to make it fun for her students to develop English language skills. Heidi described her planning as being intentional, consistent, focused on routines, and “planned for language as purposefully as possible.”

Heidi discussed a major limitation for her continues to be, to this day, her home internet connection explaining that her “internet is never strong and stable as I want it to be.” Heidi described her connectivity as tricky and challenging because “I was trying to get families the help they needed revolving around their internet connectivity issues, trying to address those needs and having issues myself,” she said. Heidi also felt that she did not have “enough cute



stuff to put on the wall behind me in the dining room” or the necessary space to provide instruction in the VLE. She described her 1962 house as not being conducive to having a corner with white walls to decorate to teach, “it’s just not how my house is set up, not a function of when it was built.”

Heidi did not want to leave her house because she was “freaked out” about the pandemic in addition to not wanting to spend money on materials to decorate her teaching space at home, even though she felt self-conscious about not having “a cute and engaging space as other folks.” She also worried about finances saying there was a lot of uncertainty about “how long it was going to go on that we would be paid” and did not want to spend money on teaching supplies even if she did go out to the store.

**Self-efficacy Performance Level.** Heidi’s response to the VLE portrayed her as going above and beyond normal duties and responsibilities, surpassing prior years’ expectations and attainments, because Heidi described visiting their students’ homes to ensure access and attendance to the VLE, wrote EL targeted curriculum to support the acquisition of academic background or survival English skills for newcomers with no English proficiency, and worked closely with the classroom teacher all while providing academic and linguistic support in the VLE. According to Bandura (1986), a person’s self-efficacy perception on how well they approach new situations or attainments, depends on the “nature and strength of pre-existing self-efficacy” (p. 363) and this participant, with over a decade of experience supporting ELs in Freedom District, described herself as language teachers first who ensured their lessons were meaningful and purposeful while in the VLE.

Heidi also added, “I had no choice, I had to jump in” referring her experience as she was forced to shift her practice to the VLE and singlehandedly figure out how to help students and

families. Burić and Macuka (2018), also assert that higher levels of self-efficacy led to more effective problem solving because “people who believe in their capabilities to master their environmental demands interpret them as less threatening” (p. 1921) while results of a study on teacher self-efficacy as teachers. Heidi sought out meaningful and targeted professional development for EL teaching and learning in the VLE, that prompted her to find research-based and innovative teaching strategies to ensure she provided the best support they could for their students. She researched VLE best practices outside of student hours and she planned her lessons accordingly, even creating skits for ELs to have access to the content taught in their mainstream lessons. transitioned into the VLE due to COVID-19 confirmed that teachers with more online teaching and learning tools experience reported the highest level of self-efficacy if they had previous experiences and familiarity with the learning platforms and online learning tools (Dolighan & Owen, 2021).

### **Susie**

Susie has been working in Freedom District as an ESL teacher at Elementary School G (ESG) for over a decade, although she is also trained as a librarian. This participant served, and continues to serve, ESG within Freedom District where 76 English learners were enrolled during the school year 2020-2021. She worked alongside an ESL paraprofessional where Susie focused on ELs in grade levels Kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and her paraprofessional worked with the upper grades. Susie asserted that this arrangement with the paraprofessional works because she “usually exits out students by third grade” but, if there were non-English speaker newcomers in the upper elementary grades, she would pull them too. Susie utilized the LLI curriculum to support ELD with all her ELs in addition with some bilingual support translating vocabulary to

help them access the content. She met with her students for about 45 minutes to an hour Monday through Thursday while Fridays were for planning.

**District and School Operations.** Susie remembered that she did not receive any communication from the ESL department until the end of April when the pandemic forced schools to shut down. Susie said she waited for communication from the ESL department feeling relieved when she finally got contacted by her supervisor because she asserted, she “was not going to make the first move.” When asked about the first thought when she hears COVID-19, ELs, and VLE, Susie responded “scrambling” because “it was like we were all chickens with our heads cut off.” She also expressed that she “never felt like [she] was an instructional leader on [her] campus, it was always kind of [she was a human Band-Aid” trying to figure out how to run and navigate the VLE for her ELs.

She recalled not hearing from the school for about ten days, but once she got communication from the school, she began contacting parents to find out what they needed noting how it was the school that took the lead and not the district. Susie said that when the ESL department did contact her, they gave her the same directives about checking in about connectivity with her EL families that she had already been doing for weeks.

Susie told me how even directives she received from her school administration were not clear on what to do to help her ELs. She had to login to her computer at 8am but did not know what she was supposed to be doing. Susie explained how she along with her ESL paraprofessional “grabbed the bull by the horns and figured out what and how we could help our parents and students.” However, when the district “woke up from their stupor” and started sharing their concerns about how to do some online learning, that’s when Susie planned the

summer program for her ELs to prevent a six-month gap in learning before the 2020-2021 year began.

Susie was adamant that it was at the school level that meaningful professional development happened and not via district trainings targeted to manipulate all educational tools and platforms needed to succeed in the VLE. She said, “anything I’ve ever gotten that was useful has been delivered at my school, not by our district.” She felt that the district trainers or presenters were not “uniquely qualified to do professional development for teachers during the pandemic.” Susie noticed how district trainers were learning the content and how to teach in the VLE themselves just hours before they delivered it to district teachers.

Susie expressed that her “principal did a really good job at keeping us safe” during the pandemic noting that they “knew our colleagues were masking up and if they were ill, they were going home and not getting the rest of us sick.” The school did not have any people in the building who did not work there, the “principal was not having it” but not having big meetings with parents meant that “we had to do more one-on-one talking, sending out reminds, and writing something in Spanish so that they understand what’s going on.”

Susie talked about how late the district provided clear dividers for her to teach and use during the state’s English proficiency exam, she said “it was just ridiculous” because she did not use them because they were flimsy and terrible quality. Susie remembered the dividers were very expensive and was upset because she felt that money could have been better allocated for materials she could use in the classroom. “For a system that has so much money coming in from the federal government, for us to have so few resources, it’s criminal.” Susie also shared that the district leaders do not have ESL certifications, so she feels that for years the district has had ESL leaders who have not been qualified to teach ELs and do not understand language learning.

Finally, when Susie spoke about emergency virtual days during the school year 2021-2022, she said that classroom teachers, not ESL teachers, at her school put up asynchronous work for the students and not teaching and learning in the VLE. Susie said there was not a push for ESL teachers to serve ELs during emergency virtual days. She noted that it was “very last minute” that they district decided to have remote learning due to a major storm or hurricane, prompting the school to instruct classroom teachers to have asynchronous work in the Google Classrooms.

**Pandemic Teaching and Learning.** Classroom teachers would contact Susie when ELs did not attend classes to have Susie call and find out what was the issue and why the child was not online. Susie remembered how she would go into her ELs’ homes to find six children trying to work in the VLE without adults present to help them or take care of them. She monitored her students’ attendance and engagement in the VLE to make sure all her ELs were able to login to their classes, had a schedule, and participated. In the classes where she had a lot of ELs, Susie would break out with ELs and worked with them “on the same kinds of things that they were doing in class.” She said that a fourth-grade teacher “would split off kids and I would take them in a separate meet and go over specific texts that they were using in the classroom,” and added that her ELs would have had the text at home because teachers made a lot of packets for students to physically have as they taught in the VLE.

Susie remembered that her main role “was to make sure that students were attending” their core classes in the VLE but she also held virtual office hours with her students “where they would come in and we would have a check-in, emotional check-in to see how everybody was doing.” She watched her higher English level of proficiency over the monitoring platform to make sure they were where they were supposed to be in along with guiding other students by

taking over their computer because they struggled following their schedules. Susie pushed the non-English speakers into their core classrooms using the monitoring platform and ensured teachers understood that EL accommodations had to happen in the VLE as well. She would go over the text with them and “highlight words that they didn’t know” and help them use their dictionaries to “figure out what the meaning was, focusing on what they knew rather than what they didn’t know and figuring out things from context clues.”

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year Susie held office hours and “part of that time was policing, making sure ELs were going where they were supposed to go.” After the first month she spent “policing” ELs, she would have grade level groups, one group for kindergarteners, one of first graders, and another for second graders, where she spent an hour in the VLE working with each grade level. Susie remembered working with the teachers “very closely to align what they were learning in their classrooms and how I could help those students.” Susie worked with the 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> graders who were newcomers and did not know any English, she remembered that “it was really hard because they didn’t understand anything that was going on.” Susie discussed that on Fridays she did not have class time with her ELs because that was her planning and prep time.

Susie explained how she monitored her ELs’ progress, “basically it’s anecdotal from teachers and from me, just working with me and watching them” but also looking at their test scores and working together with the mainstream classroom teacher. Susie was also very confident about her ELs’ ELD because “the good thing about our school is that they’ve got great teachers in every classroom.” She claimed that “the kids who had the roughest [time in the VLE] were the emerging” ELs since they had very limited English language knowledge and she had a hard time trying to provide ELD support to them.

Susie claimed “it’s still catch up right now” because ELs need additional support in ELD and academically. She claimed that “eliciting speech from them was very difficult” in the VLE and that she thinks “they’re still recovering from that.” She said that the students’ ELPT scores for the school year 2020-2021 “were rough, but the whole state scores were rough” due to teaching and learning in the VLE. Susie feels that the district “is just not very helpful” because the current curriculum for ELs is online only, the district has not and will not provide any physical, ready to use materials, for ELs putting an onus on her to prepare or print all necessary materials to meet curriculum expectations.

**Students and Families’ Needs.** The first thing Susie remembered was having to call parents to survey all families to ask how they were doing and what they were struggling with. Susie and her paraprofessional pulled together the necessary resources for the families based on their needs. Food, Chromebooks, and hotspots were the priorities for the students to have available and attend classes in the VLE since their parents kept working through the pandemic. Susie ensured all her ELs were connected to the hotspots by physically going to their houses because “once we got devices in all the children’s hands, then we had to worry about connectivity and it was hard, the parents were not very tech savvy” so she had to teach ELs and their families how to work the devices, synchronize them to the hotspot, and make sure the children were in the appropriate teachers’ classrooms.

Susie asserted that in the VLE, if the students’ parents were involved in their children’s education, “they made sure that they were there” in the VLE, in the classroom ready for instruction. She talked about how she called parents letting them know that their children were not online and asked them if they were having issues connecting or tried to find out what the problem was. Susie said, “children really suffered because of their parents, they were not as

available to help them” because parents were not equipped to provide support in the VLE. Susie remembered “basically teaching the parent to use the Wi-Fi to get hooked up, and then showing them how to get into their Google Classroom.”

Susie attributed the first challenge of teaching in the VLE was the ability to get them logged in and to their Google Meets for instruction “all there at the same day at the same time” because there “were a lot of kids following their parents to some kind of job somewhere.” She said that she struggled in the VLE with “the ability to have some of these kids take it seriously because that didn’t feel serious to them, so they didn’t take it seriously.” She now sees that some of them are still struggling, today, academically because “no one was retained, but there was a lot of gaps and there’s still a lot of gaps” for those ELs who were kindergarteners, first and second graders when she had to teach in the VLE during the pandemic. She claimed that ELs “maybe they’re a bit worn down by the pandemic” because they showed lack of attendance to precision and grit to complete their work accurately.

Susie explained that she and her paraprofessional used a communication application to reach the parents along with Google Voice because “if the parents get our personal numbers, they will at 11 o’clock at night.” Susie said that she did not communicate via email with the parents of her ELs because the families tend not to have email addresses or accounts. Susie made sure “that things that were written in English were translated into Spanish properly” especially if it had anything to do with the pandemic.

One thing that she has noticed with her ELs and their families is that they seem “less serious about school” because she feels that, since the pandemic, parents do not have the urgency “to make sure kids are in school as much as possible.” ELs that have been impacted by the pandemic seem to have been missing a lot of days, “it seems like it’s even more than it ever was,



their absenteeism.” Some of her students are still struggling academically and with writing and reading skills and Susie felt that the student trajectory of growth is inappropriate because her ELs continue to “make-up a lot of ground in the last year and a half” from the learning gaps they experienced during pandemic teaching and learning times in the VLE. Susie wished that the district would have focused only on ELA and math right after the pandemic and “forget science and social studies” so ELs would have had time to catch up on reading and writing skills before focusing on science and social studies content.

**Student Access to Online Learning.** Susie discussed how she had to make sure EL accommodations in the classroom and during assessments were provided to ELs even though she feels like the teaching and learning in the VLE was “real bare bones.” She expressed that teaching students how to read and write on the computer was hard and she asserted that “we’re still seeing the ramifications” because “those children are behind” academically and in their ELD. Susie talked about her students’ decline in performance on the state’s English language proficiency test (ELPT), she noted “how the speaking skills have not come back even though we’ve been face to face for a year and a half.”

Susie connected ELs’ lower performance in reading scores to the mask wearing because she felt it “hindered their ability to see your mouth and mimic sounds to create connections with phonemes and graphemes.” She also attributed lower English proficiency to absences due to teacher and students becoming ill with the virus. Susie also explained that the ELA block was in the morning for most ELs, all classes had ELA at the same time so, she expressed frustration stating, “I can only be in one place” and how “that’s been a struggle that I’ve had since I’ve been teaching ELs.” She was adamant about lacking the proper resources “to help teach language skills to the children” and “teach them how to read, how to fill in those gaps they missed”

because even after two years later, she felt that the district “should have figured out how to make ELs attend a summer school” that supported reading and writing for 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grades providing a prescriptive program with the appropriate curriculum and all resources needed along with it to support ELD with “the millions and millions of ESSER dollars” they have rather than allocating it to additional Math and ELA coaches.

Susie shared that at her school, per principal’s request, if an EL was not attending or if ELs were having problems logging in to their core classes, mainstream teachers were to alert Susie and her paraprofessional to make phone calls and find out what the issue was. Susie remembered how “a lot of times we found out it was children home alone” where siblings were in different parts of the home also attempting to learn in the VLE. Susie went “quite a few times to [the] major trailer park to” to try to get her students set up to login and attend their classes in the VLE. Even after ELs were set up to login to their classes, Susie said she became “the Internet police making sure they were going to the classes” or “closing down 75 tabs” so she could push them into where they were supposed to be.

**Teacher Response to the VLE.** Susie discussed how the district and school expected teachers to have their own computer or devices to teach in the VLE, or they could have the same Chromebooks students were using that she felt were not the appropriate or “robust” devices to deliver instruction. She said, “I stand strong in that if you expect me to do something, you need to give me the proper tools” regarding buying her own device to provide instruction. She mentioned that when she tried to do guided reading groups, using the LLI curriculum, she “literally would hold up a book to the screen, which is just ludicrous” since “we didn’t have the bandwidth to do things and we didn’t have the resources we needed to do things,” or the knowledge of which tools to use in the VLE. However, to ensure Susie continued to provide

support for her ELs, even at the height of the pandemic, she wrote curriculum for the summer school program for her ESL paraprofessional to deliver in the VLE, since her payrate was significantly lower than the ESL's teacher pay.

Susie suggested that the district could have better spent funds available during the pandemic by getting teachers “a decent laptop, some kind of Elmo that would project items, and online reading resources that [she] could have projected,” rather than providing her clear dividers for the English proficiency state assessment that she did not use. The most frustrating thing for Susie, as she was teaching in the VLE, was that the Chromebooks the district provided for her “wasn't very responsive, it could only do certain things” and said that “if you really wanted to have some decent interaction with the kid” you had to spend a lot of money and Susie refused to do it. Susie felt frustrated because the district's expectations were that she spent a lot of time trying to meet students' needs but she said the district did not provide the necessary resources for her to do the actual teaching portion in the VLE.

When discussing EL accommodations, she explained she tried to have the accommodations fit the VLE and stood up for her students who were not doing well academically so these students would not have to repeat the year. Susie was successful in ensuring her ELs moved forward academically, she “did not allow any students to suffer academically because of their situation” like a chaotic household, poor internet connection, or because parents did not have experience with technology or devices. Susie explained that when she was able to work with her ELs synchronously, there were still barriers because the internet connections were not stable and there was lag time.

When Susie spoke of her preparedness to teach in the VLE, she said she taught herself how to navigate the virtual teaching platforms and discussed how much new vocabulary she had

to learn and the expectations of each VLE teaching and learning modalities. She described the teachers' attempts to adapt to the VLE saying "we were flying by the seat of our pants" and the district's professional developments about teaching and learning in the VLE as not very helpful because the presenters were not experts in the subject matter. Susie "stumbled upon" relevant professional development sessions for the VLE that she shared with the faculty at ESG so they could secure useful and purposeful ways to support students academically during the pandemic teaching and learning times. She claimed her experience was horrible teaching in the VLE that she's been "trying to block all that" now that teaching and learning have returned to some normalcy.

Susie acknowledged that she planned to work summer school because she knows there are still gaps in reading and ELD, so she planned to help their English proficiency over the summer with a more targeted learning environment. Susie did not find that there were any positive aspects in ELD that emerged from the VLE aside from being able to "check in on them during that time" while allowing them to see a familiar face. Susie also felt uplifted by seeing her students in the VLE stating that "it really was kind of a support for our emotional health." She concluded with the assertion that ESL teachers need a language development program that can be used in the VLE because "teachers should not have to invent the virtual wheel, it should be provided" along with the necessary professional development to succeed in the VLE.

**Self-efficacy Performance Level.** Susie's response to the VLE portrayed her as going above and beyond normal duties and responsibilities, surpassing prior years' performance levels because as she focused on lower grade levels in the VLE, she posted pre-recorded phonemic awareness videos for her students and attached link to those videos on her agendas so her ELs "weren't so behind when we got back face to face." She felt that although "the students almost

felt like it was play school, that it wasn't real" in the VLE, she was very intentional in what she planned for her students. Susie had a schedule that she followed, and her students knew they needed to go to her Google Meet via her Google Classroom, however, "it was really hard trying to get them to come and stay" because she had to go to the student device monitoring platform and "pluck them and pull them into my area." Susie remembered "it felt like a lot like I was wrestling the whole day, trying to get kids to stay where I was in my Google Classroom."

Susie also visited her students' homes to ensure access and attendance to the VLE, wrote EL targeted curriculum to support the acquisition of academic background or English language skills, and worked closely with the classroom teacher all while providing academic and linguistic support in the VLE. Susie described her experience entering the VLE realm of teaching and learning as having to "grab the bull by the horns" and singlehandedly figure out how to help students and families. Soncini, Politi and Matteucci (2021) findings reported higher self-efficacy reports showed teachers who perceived the VLE as a strength and capitalized on the shift to VLE as an opportunity to implement innovative teaching methods that could provide individualized support to students which prompted Susie to seek out meaningful and targeted professional development for EL teaching and learning in the VLE so she could implement research-based and innovative teaching strategies in the VLE to ensure she provided the best academic and linguistic support to ELs.

### **Summary**

The participants' rich descriptions of perspectives and experiences in the VLE showed how the pandemic exacerbated the need for a better ESL teacher support system within the district such as targeted professional development to provide equitable access to education and the curriculum to diminish the academic gap minorities experience in contrast with non-minority

students. Targeted professional development for ESL teachers was not a priority as Freedom District began to review school plans to support distance education even when it was obvious the components of ESL best practices were difficult to incorporate and implement in lesson plans when the VLE was still a novelty for teachers and students. Glitches in the platforms used to teach students, in addition to connectivity and internet capacity available inhibited or delayed much of the instruction teachers presented to the students.

The purpose of this section was to showcase and analyze the individual cases organized in the themes that inevitably emerged during the participants' single interviews and focus group discussions. The participants' experiences, influenced by the different school settings within Freedom District, described the social, situational, and contextual realities participants perceived during the pandemic teaching and learning year that was the school year 2020-2021 (Stake, 2006). This section also presented participants' self-perceptions of efficacy categorized by three levels of performances, based on their descriptions as they adjusted to the VLE.

## **CHAPTER V. MULTIPLE CASE ANALYSIS**

The purpose of the multiple case study is to highlight the many contexts the phenomenon, or quintain, of interest manifests within different situations (Stake, 2006). Under one district, all schools received the same (or no) directives on how to continue operating and teaching in the restrictive teaching and learning environment that sought to limit exposure and transmission of the disease and all participants taught ELs at one or more elementary and/or middle schools within Freedom District at the onset of the national pandemic and through COVID-19 teaching and learning in the VLE. Therefore, this chapter presents a cross-case analysis between all participants' experiences teaching and learning in the VLE and their perceptions on their self-efficacy. I present a summary of the commonalities and differences within each single case regarding how ESL teachers provided access to the curriculum and English language development (ELD) in the virtual language environment (VLE) in addition to their self-efficacy perceptions of providing ESL services during the pandemic.

### **Cross-case Analysis**

The rationale for presenting a separate cross-case analysis section, following the individual cases' narratives, is to follow Yin's (2018) multiple-case compositional format where the single cases are the narratives that provided the evidence to support the assertions or findings presented in this section. The following section discusses the six major themes that emerged from each case and how those themes manifest within all cases. Triangulation across the cases occurred throughout the cross-case analysis "to assure [I] have the picture [of the quintain or phenomenon] as clear and suitably meaningful as [I] can get it, relatively free of [my] own biases, and not likely to mislead the reader greatly" (Stake, 2006, p. 77). The six major themes in this study are (a) district and school operations' support; (b) pandemic teaching and learning; (c)

student and families' needs; (d) limited student access to online learning; (e) teacher responses to the VLE; and (f) self-efficacy performance level.

I listed assertions, under each theme, which were rooted in the findings about the quintain and supported by evidence from the individual cases “to show how uniformity or disparity characterizes the [q]uintain” (Stake, 2006, p. 40). As I compared findings, I present this cross-case analysis organized by the same major themes emerged in the individual case findings with a set of sub-themes under each thematic review, in order to maintain consistency and flow for the reader. However, I modified the names of each major theme to convey the overall assertion extracted from the combined findings and organized assertions, or sub-themes, as paragraph titles as an emphasis of the main cross-case findings.

### **District and School Operations: Chaotic District and School Leadership**

The most significant theme from the cross-case analysis was dealing with chaotic district- and school-level leadership. Chaos, confusion, uncertainty, and fear reigned as the school year 2020-2021 opened back its doors to teachers to be physically present at their respective sites and prepare to receive their students virtually for remote instruction through the VLE. The one size fits all approach to the VLE that the district took to ensure students received daily instruction from the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year did not consider the diverse learning population that is in every classroom. Participants' descriptions of how it felt to return to their place of work and begin teaching in the VLE, included scrambling, and running around with no clear direction from the school district while waiting to receive some guidance from the ESL district leadership. Heidi and Susie described their experiences as chaotic during pandemic teaching and learning because they felt district leadership did not provide clear directives or expectations for teaching ELs in the VLE. The uncertainty participants felt, more so Guillermo, of how they could



continue serving ELs amid a global pandemic made them realize very quickly how the VLE increased the barrier to access content and develop English proficiency.

**Inequity-fits-all approach.** Every participant spoke on how ELs were significantly disadvantaged in the VLE due to the one-size-fits-all response from district and ESL leadership as they attempt to address ELs' specific needs. Directives that trickled down to schools from the head of Freedom District failed to target ELs, or any other minorities with special needs, because transition plans and policies were created for the typical children in the school system overlooking academic, linguistic, or socioeconomic barriers that were present before the VLE became the norm. Even at the beginning of the school year 2021-2022, with one pandemic year completed, the Freedom District's "Parental Remote Learning Plan for Continuation of Academic Engagement," did not address any modifications or adaptations for EL to access content instead, only one slide in the plan mentioned that "teachers and other support personnel such as counselors, para-professionals, and therapists will be able to provide instruction and services to meet the needs of all learners to the extent possible but not guaranteed" (2021) in the VLE. Gladys pointed out how the district's response, which provided equal academic opportunities for all students, did not yield equitable access to education for ELs widening achievement gaps that were already present due to limited English proficiency.

Although participants shared what they had to accomplish at the beginning of the school 2020-2021, such as determine their ELs' needs like needing reliable internet and devices to log into their classes from the first day of school, to inquiring whether the children would remain in the VLE 100% of the time for the remainder of the year, to providing information on how to obtain meals for the children, to finally providing parental and student training on how to properly navigate their devices, three participants were very vocal on the lack of home resources

and learning tools available to support students' participation and access to content. Schools were not equipped with enough materials or supplies to distribute to the families to support teaching and learning in the VLE, this was the case for students and teachers alike because ESL teachers also shared that they lacked teaching materials and curriculum to shift their face-to-face lessons to the VLE adding to the overall inequity they felt ELs were experiencing.

One participant felt that Freedom District's attempts to create "equal" opportunities with disregard to what is equitable for ELs, she added this equality approach to pandemic teaching and learning in the VLE was not enough to support ELs because it was not 'equitable' resource distribution for the EL population. Another participant became upset during the individual and focus group interviews when speaking about the lack of resources provided to teachers to be properly equipped to support ELs in the VLE while pointing out the late response by the ESL department on providing some resources to ESL teachers to support ELD in the VLE, e.g.: clear, flimsy dividers to use during the English language proficiency state assessment. This participant expressed time and time again how it was the district's responsibility to spend money to ensure teachers have the necessary and appropriate resources to provide services to their students. Susie refused to spend any of her personal money to buy materials or digital devices during pandemic teaching and learning in the VLE, which limited her ability to teach ELs with the same level of rigor and quality content in the VLE.

**Human Band-Aid: ESL teacher role.** Participants at their respective schools assumed roles and responsibilities strictly focused on the EL population needs within and beyond school in addition to providing academic support and ELD lessons in the VLE. Four of the five participants described how the school leadership relied on the ESL teacher to do what was best for the ELs and their families, without further consideration of their needs past the standard

questions all teachers were tasked with reporting about their homeroom students. Depending on the school they served, one ESL teacher was responsible for contacting an average of 70 to 100 EL families—a huge jump from the regular classroom teacher’s homeroom of 25 students. Susie added how the increased number of communications were the consequence of not allowing any outsider in the school building, she had to send out more messages in Spanish so her EL families could have some sense of what was happening at the school. ESL teachers made themselves available to ELs and their families by participants providing parents with their personal, or Google number, to ensure that parents were informed about class, school, and district affairs. Participants texted and called parents directly from their personal phones to maintain open communication with their families, this included calls and text messages late into the evening. Four participants explained this decision to share numbers as a way to ensure that English did not become a barrier to accessing the new normal during pandemic teaching and learning. Participants remembered jumping in and starting to call parents to relay information about the disease and appease EL families from their fears, to ensure students had reliable internet and devices, to join classes in the VLE. However, Susie, on the other hand, did not provide her personal cell phone number because she did not want parents or families calling past 10 PM, she only used a phone application to message parents and the school phone instead to communicate with her EL families.

Three of the five participants were adamant about the burden they felt by constantly providing bilingual support to parents and students so ELs could be present in the VLE, did not diminish throughout the school year 2020-2021. Gladys, Susie, and Heidi described how this never-ending affair continued throughout the entire school year, calling parents to ask why the children were not logged into their classes, monitor that students remained and were actively

engaged in their lessons, providing tech support to teach ELs and their families how to troubleshoot internet and device failure, and providing bilingual support to school administration. Consequently, all five participants expressed concerns on the amount of time they had to spend doing the aforementioned tasks for the dozens and dozens of ELs and their families because it took them away from their main ESL teacher responsibilities: teach ELD lessons to improve English proficiency for ELs.

Three out of five participants described the ESL teachers' administrative bilingual support expectations over the actual teaching of ELs. Heidi expressed frustration and was overwhelmed being the single point of contact for ELs and their families to rely on for communication in Spanish. These participants emphasized how they craved continuing to serve their students rather than being pulled out of classes to support administration due to their Spanish proficiency. They believed it was unfair to their ELs having to prioritize administrative bilingual support over teaching and supporting ELD and access to the curriculum for their ELs. In addition to Spanish translation services, all participants agreed that another type of time-consuming bilingual support was the amount of time spent providing technological assistance to parents to ensure their ELs were able to access the VLE for their core classes and ELD support lessons.

ESL teachers also had to spend a significant amount of time during the day “policing” their ELs via a computer monitoring system to ensure ELs were present in all their core classes and ready to work. Lower elementary students had to be pushed into core classes by the ESL teacher and remotely close all the opened tabs so ELs could focus on their lesson. Four participants all remembered having to locate their ELs physically and virtually to ensure they were all attending their core classes at their designated times. Heidi recalled it was a 90% time

allotted to contacting parents versus 10% teaching ELs in the VLE, while Gladys felt it was more of a 60-40% time allotted to family outreach and teaching ELs.

ESL teachers put their lives at risk of contracting the mortal disease to ensure their students did not lack resources to continue accessing content and their ELD lessons. Not only did ESL teachers resort to creative ways to communicate with parents, but three participants described how home visits were also necessary at times, to ensure ELs were connected and properly wired for the VLE. These participants recalled making home visits to deliver devices, set up some devices, provide technological assistance, simply because they felt that seeing their teacher would provide some socioemotional support for the students. However, one participant confessed that the few home visits she paid to her EL families motivated her to continue investing in her students, but it also provoked uneasiness to some families who were terrified by what they knew about COVID-19. Another participant who went to ELs' houses to resolve connectivity issues for the families described how she wore surgical and disposable full-body protection to ensure she would not contract the disease.

**Non-existent ESL professional development.** Participants shared how adequate and targeted training to support ELs in the VLE was nonexistent for ESL teachers, who attempted to fulfill their job duties by improvising and trying many self-taught online pedagogical strategies. All participants shared that the district did not require specific training, although there were some online training sessions available for all teachers, that supported teaching and learning in the VLE. Three of the five participants discussed how the only professional development sessions required were at the beginning of the school year 2020-2021 and pertinent only to the individual schools, not EL teaching in the VLE specific. This was also evidenced by the lack of EL-specific

meetings, trainings, or presentations for ESL teachers and all staff on the beginning-of-the-school-year agendas for the first week of professional development.

Four participants also spoke about the non-mandatory professional development available to all teachers addressing only how to manipulate learning tools that would be relevant to the VLE. Specifically, one participant described a Google Suite professional development as “nothing life changing” because ESL teachers used those tools to support some learning at the onset of the pandemic. Another participant asserted that it was clear the district trainers who provided professional development on how to utilize learning tools for the VLE, learned about those tools hours before presenting them. On the other hand, ESL teachers who provided professional development targeted to support ELs also had very limited experience on the VLE, and yet one participant who described her experience in presenting to teachers noted how the teachers’ response to her virtual training, included low engagement and participation.

Two of the five participants developed curriculum over the 2020 summer, during the height of the pandemic, to provide some ELD and background knowledge to incoming ELs at their schools. The ESL teacher-created-content was delivered over the VLE without the ESL teacher having previous experience or knowledge about best practices for ELs in the VLE. These two participants planned for three weeks of ELD and content support for designated ELs at their schools with the limited knowledge about the VLE that they made sure to research on their own and by attending some of the available trainings to all teachers in Freedom District. One of the schools had the paraprofessional teach the ELD lessons due to budgetary limitations, who had even less training and qualifications to teach over the VLE.

## **Pandemonium in the VLE Classroom Setting**

The second major theme that emerged was that of the experience of pandemonium in the VLE classrooms. All participants gave many reasons as to why they did not feel like their teaching was effective in the VLE, such as, lack of parental support, language barrier, low-income families with limited resources, limited technology literacy skills, and students left alone at home assuming all responsibility to learn in the VLE; however, it was the lack of teacher readiness, ineffectiveness of the VLE for language acquisition, and technology that attributed most to the disorder and confusion.

**VLE teacher (non)readiness.** The participants' degree of comfort in using virtual learning tools varied; however, three of the five participants asserted they did not feel prepared to move into the VLE teaching and learning at the beginning of the school year 2020-2021. Gladys, Roxy, and Heidi explained how they took it upon themselves to learn how to use different learning tools and platforms to support their ELs remotely. Gladys attributed her inclination to attend non-mandated district trainings on VLE learning tools due to her passion towards technological advances in the education sector. However, for Heidi, it was difficult to shift to the VLE, even with curricula familiarity and experience with ELs, because of her limited technological skills in addition to her intermediate Spanish proficiency needed to provide synchronous tech support to ELs during their classes. Additionally, when the district moved from strictly remote learning in the VLE to hybrid learning, still through the VLE, towards the second semester in the school year 2020-2021, one of the participants explained how this move added stress because now they had to teach while simultaneously monitor ELs' learning with half of the students present in the physical classroom and the other half at home. ESL teachers were even

less prepared to support learning in the hybrid modality of teaching because it added another layer to their lessons that they had to cater to.

Another aspect of teaching in the VLE that one participant recalled struggling with, was classroom management for the lower elementary children who were introduced to school and classes via the VLE. Although the district provided guidelines of the maximum time for lessons in the VLE, based on the child's grade level, small children, with limited to no schooling experience required ESL teachers to further adapt their pedagogy to support early childhood needs. No participant mentioned any training available addressing classroom management strategies in the VLE, instead they all mentioned that every child had to keep their device muted which was detrimental to the children's social and linguistic development. One participant mentioned how he attempted to address classroom management by continuing to follow the structured lessons from the curriculum to provide ELD support.

**(In)Effective setting and teaching.** Participants did not feel like the VLE addressed ELs academic and linguistic needs, consequently, their experiences during the time spent with ELs in the VLE were unpleasant because they spent the majority of their time communicating with families and students about the expected behavior and convey to them that it was as if they were still in the classroom. Three of five participants described ELs' carefree attitude towards school in the VLE because it did not feel like real school and students were not required to have their cameras on, all that was required of ELs was to log in to their classes. One participant spoke on how students were off task a lot and did not do the work because they were muted during their core classes and they could turn off their camera, this participant noticed how the students were just not invested. Another participant described her experience when explaining to parents and students the expectations for ELs in the VLE as a nightmare because she had to rely on the



online translator, rather than a human interpreter that could have been requested during a normal year, to teach parents how to set up their students for learning. ESL teachers who do not speak the native language of their VLE seldom use an online translator to convey meaning for their students, instead they rely on ESL best practices, such as modeling, having visuals, repetition, and acting out, to ensure ELs understand them. Therefore, conveying directions and expectations to students with limited English proficiency via a screen became a challenge for ESL teachers because the same best practices for the in-person classroom, were ineffective when attempting to have ELs remain seated and focused in front of the computer, or have them understand they needed to wear uniforms and not pajamas, and that eating was allowed only during designated/scheduled times.

The lower elementary ELs were deprived of a lot of the social norms and developmentally appropriate tasks they were supposed to learn in the physical classroom. Two participants mentioned that they could not determine if lack of fine motor skills was interfering with their language acquisition, for example, Heidi added that a lack of handwriting practice in the VLE, in addition to not being able to assess fine motor skills development, was another challenge in the VLE for ELs in producing output that can showcase their language acquisition progress. Four of the five participants described the repercussions of having to spend a year receiving instruction in the VLE, still evident by the end of the school year 2021-2022, how handwriting skills were still a concern, even at the middle school level, when students' handwritten assignments were difficult to decode due to their illegible handwriting. Guillermo added that even the coloring-to-learn activities that support acquisition of language and fine motor skills were not completed by ELs who lacked the necessary school supplies at home.

The VLE took away from teachers and ELs the most important experiences they ought to be exposed to acquire language and improve English proficiency because ELs (like every other student) did not have moments where they could discuss as a group, talk to a neighbor, work in groups, or individually with the teacher to enhance English skills. Teachers were unable to provide additional accommodations for ELs due to the inexperience with the VLE and the many other factors that they had to consider while attempting to teach. For example, three of the five participants were concerned about ELs not being able to differentiate letter sounds and acquire proper pronunciation behind a screen in the VLE because they experienced how teaching language restricted to a computer screen did not facilitate the hands-on approach participants were accustomed to which made it very difficult for ELs to catch linguistic nuances that were not obvious in the VLE. Heidi spent 20-30 minutes supporting the dual language immersion class in the VLE, she did bilingual story time with those students, but she acknowledged that it was very difficult to make cross-linguistics connections since the VLE did not allow ELs to catch nuances of language acquisition.

The ever-changing nature of teaching during the school year 2020-2021 prompted the district to change videoconferencing platforms that did not support the same features utilized by ESL teachers to provide inclusion services. One participant spoke on the inability to provide visual cues, such as clip-arts and high-quality pictures, to promote curriculum access to her students during their core classes. She felt she was unable to provide appropriate inclusion support via the chat during her ELs' core classes and began writing translations on the fly in the chat as an attempt to continue services to the best of her abilities even when it was very challenging to do so. Oral proficiency was drastically delayed for ELs, according to participants citing the English language proficiency state assessment scores. Another participant expressed

that the ELs who had the roughest time in the VLE were those who had low English proficiency when the pandemic began because it was still catch up as the 2021-2022 school year ended since eliciting speech from her ELs was very difficult in the VLE.

**Technology: Helpful or harmful.** The shift to the VLE in response to a global lockdown for all humanity was a necessary step to continue providing some sort of semblance of teaching and learning; however, all participants ensured their ELs did not stay 100% in the VLE when the district allowed for children to return for some face-to-face time on campus through a hybrid schedule. According to every participant, the VLE felt the complete opposite to the setting ESL teachers needed to advance English language proficiency. Susie, Gladys, Heidi, and Guillermo described their time in the VLE as a counterproductive experience for ELs who did not have the right learning tools or learning space and were not immersed in the English language within the traditional school day away from home. All participants mentioned how they struggled to teach in the VLE because they observed limited progress or gains with their ELs and described that only when students were at school, with teachers did they see linguistic and academic gains. Over relying on technology is not the answer to ensure ELs are receiving the support they need from teachers, ESL teachers needed to have predictable routines and hands on relevant lessons to support ELD. For newcomers, or newly arrived at the United States students, language became a bigger barrier because ELs did not have the necessary English proficiency to access content and understand what was being taught.

If teachers and school leaders around the state continue to notice academic gaps and developmental delays with most native English speaker students then it is certain that ELs, who must acquire the English language additionally, will be even further behind academically, widening the learning gaps that may have already been present between ELs and native speakers.

Despite the obvious need for (ESL) teacher interventions due to the low attainment and language acquisition progress, the district adopted new computer-based remediation programs to address learning loss for the 2021-2022 school year while ESL teachers were allotted a new learning tool or curriculum that was completely virtual. It seemed that despite ESL teacher outcry to their district and school leaders to better staff schools serving ELs and provide high quality curriculum for targeted interventions, the plan to solve all learning and linguistic gap excluded the human element and prioritized computer-based interventions. One participant described this district response to learning gaps as ludicrous because ESL teachers did not receive any print or hands on materials along with the virtual access to their curriculum to support ELD.

### **Student and Families' Needs: An Open Window to ELs' Reality**

Unfortunately for a lot of ELs living within the borders of Freedom District, ordinary life already looked very different from the normal pre-pandemic. A direct glance into ELs' lives through the VLE really put into perspective the additional obstacles ESL teachers had to address before they could even think about teaching. Repeatedly, participants described the quality of life they saw as they interacted with ELs and their families in the VLE. Although participants were aware of their ELs' demographics and socioeconomic status, they were shocked to have a more intimate view into their daily lives. Four of the five participants described how ELs' pre-pandemic quality of life was exacerbated throughout the lockdowns and VLE instruction. These four participants spoke about the inequity of the VLE teaching and learning time for this population, from the language barrier to the very limited technology literacy skills by students and parents alike.

**Home alone.** One of the first issues ESL teachers observed as they shifted into the VLE was how ELs were left alone at home due to the parents or guardians having to continue to work

throughout the pandemic. ELs had to navigate online teaching and learning on their own, or with some support from older siblings in their households. Students home alone was a concern, especially for two participants, because ESL teachers were unsure if the lack of adult supervision was due to the pandemic disrupting parents' routines or if students were left at home alone every school break. Some families even took their children to their jobsites with them and had them log in to their classes from wherever they were at that particular time while the parents fulfilled their job duties. All participants, however, observed how most of their ELs were left alone at home due to parents needing to work to support their families, or for the middle school students, some ELs were working with their parents rather than attending classes in the VLE. Only one participant mentioned that a lot of her ELs were at home with either babysitters or sibling supervision. Guillermo pointed out that there was no infrastructure in his ELs' homes to confront pandemic teaching and learning in the VLE.

**Inexperience with technological skills.** The VLE adversely affected ELs and their families due to the inexperience with computers and other digital devices needed to access schooling during the pandemic. The parents and ELs were not prepared to receive instruction through the VLE, so ESL teachers spent considerable amount of time providing computer literacy skills to parents and students alike. Two participants described how EL parents had not had any previous experience with the necessary digital devices for the VLE and noted how the additional language barrier for non-English speaking parents was a colossal task to overcome even before ELs could access the curriculum. Roxy added that some parents never used the computer before which made it increasingly too difficult to provide the necessary support for their child(ren) in the VLE.

**Connected and castaway.** ESL teachers continued to struggle providing ELD lessons to students even after they ensured ELs were properly connected and set up for the VLE because students were expected to have school supplies readily available to complete required activities at home. One of the biggest limitations and disadvantages for ELs in the VLE was the lack of resources to learn from home due to their socioeconomic background. Gladys felt the inequity of the education system was exacerbated by the pandemic because ELs had limited resources at home to receive instruction through the VLE. Increasingly EL families moved often even at the height of the pandemic and consequently ESL teachers had to ensure time and time again that ELs had a working device and internet connection to access the VLE.

The bird's eye view of the ESL teacher into the lives of ELs presented an obvious lack of structure at home to follow the school schedule because students were consistently surrounded by many distractions such as, siblings in the same space trying to attend their own lessons, lack of parental supervision, and not considering the VLE as a serious affair like face-to-face instruction. Students would forget to change into their uniform shirt and log in wearing their pajamas or still eating. Therefore, making it challenging for ELs to complete assignments so much so that two participants mentioned that the level of work completion by their ELs, and attendance, depended on how much they follow-up and pursued their ELs, without the constant addressing work completion, attendance, and participation were not priorities for ELs.

All participants mentioned they felt students lacked intrinsic motivation to be successful in the VLE and described how much they struggled having ELs take school in the VLE seriously because it did not feel serious to them, due to some ELs following their parents to their jobs, not requiring them to be physically at school. Parents demonstrated to have less urgency to make sure their children were logged in regularly. One participant said that she still observed this

behavior from parents and EL absenteeism during the 2021-2022 school year. One participant attributed the lack of grit ELs suffered from to do the work required to succeed in the VLE to parents being unable and unavailable to help them through teaching and learning in the VLE.

**Socio-emotional needs.** After ESL teachers ensured ELs secured food, devices, connectivity, and access to content, they also began to worry about the socio-emotional needs they noticed ELs were experiencing. The attempt to meet ELs' socioemotional needs added another layer to teaching and learning in the VLE because participants had difficulty addressing emotional needs during their lesson times. One participant recalled thinking about what it must have felt being a young child, with limited knowledge of the disease and attempting to understand the new pandemic norms. Two participants felt that paying home visits to their ELs was a way to make sure ELs knew they cared about them and improve morale. Another way one of the two participants mentioned she supported her ELs' interests and socioemotional wellbeing by incorporating familiar topics about children with similar experiences of moving to the US into her lessons.

Socioemotional support to ELs via the VLE by interacting with participants was pointed out as a benefit of the VLE according to three participants, however they also described that the socioemotional support was not just for the students, it motivated them to continue investing in them while teaching in the VLE. Heidi felt the need to "work the phones" and try to explain parents what was happening at the school, district, and even state level regarding the pandemic. She also went to some ELs' houses because she felt it helped her students seeing her during uncertain and difficult lockdown times.

### **(Questionable) Student Access to Online Learning**

All participants addressed the learning loss they observed during the school year 2020-2021 when the VLE was the setting for teaching and learning. ESL teachers were still seeing those learning gaps even at the end of the 2021-2022 school year, even after an entire school year with less than 10 remote learning days. For a language learner to access content, they must have opportunities to engage with the content by being exposed to the four domains of the English language: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Although EL may have some colloquial English proficiency, they need the academic language to succeed in the classroom, which ELs cannot access unless they have plenty of opportunities to practice their language skills within the core subject lessons.

**(Un)Attainable accommodations.** One of the main responsibilities of the ESL teacher in Freedom District is to complete an “English Learner (EL) Accommodations Checklist” (2022) at the beginning of the school year, as one of the documents they have to fill out for every EL enrolled at their respective schools. The accommodation checklist was not modified for the VLE but participants were still expected to check off accommodations for ELs that teachers were legally mandated to provide to their students. Out of the 18 classroom accommodations available for ELs, listed on the EL accommodations checklist, four were incompatible with the VLE while eight accommodations VLE compatible could be perceived as questionable for VLE compatibility. ESL Teachers provided copies to the mainstream teachers, however, participants observed teachers struggling to differentiate their lessons to ensure access to the content and cater to ELs’ linguistic needs simultaneously while teaching in the VLE. One participant explained that teachers at her school were familiar with their students’ accommodations and



accepted modified work and responses, however, when addressing mastering of the content, this participant observed her ELs had a 50-60 percent content mastery in their core classes.

All participants mentioned EL accommodations' paperwork being filled out, only one of them was adamant, during the individual interview, about ensuring those accommodations were met by the teacher and ELs were not penalized due to their internet and/or device quality, or lack thereof. One participant believed that the mainstream teacher was not prepared to provide EL accommodations in the VLE, this participant observed how the core teacher could not or would not provide those accommodations and the appropriate access to the content. Two different participants attempted to provide those accommodations and access to the curriculum in the VLE using sentence frames or visuals but did not mention anything about core teachers also modifying their lessons to support specific EL needs.

**Widening learning gaps for ELs.** ESL teacher found no positive aspects for ELs when teaching and learning in the VLE, because there was limited access to content for ELs with very limited English proficiency or the because the virtual learning platforms were not designed to support EL strategies to ensure access to the curriculum. Without the necessary learning tools or parental support, ELs were left to their own devices to access the content and improve their English proficiency. Based on the ELs' household experiences and means, families that were more economically advantaged, had proper devices and parental support allowed ELs to perform better in the VLE. External or household factors also influenced how much ELs were able to focus and access content because even for participants it was a struggle to keep their focus if there were other things happening around the student.

It is also concerning that mainstream classroom schedules set most core class subject at the same time, which made it difficult for one ESL teacher to provide linguistic support and

target access to content. ESL teachers then, were forced to choose what class she would log in to provide EL with the support they need to master the content. One participant expressed frustration about her ELs' core classes schedules, stating that she was only was person and could be at one place at a time. Three participants discussed how ELs missed crucial parts of lesson, such as pronunciation and other cross-linguistic connections, due to connectivity or device issues. The low engagement was a consequence of students' option to turn off their cameras where ESL teachers were only able to observe 50% of students participating via nodding, hand gesturing, or writing on the chat because ELs, and the rest of the class, were required to keep microphones muted.

**Limited language output opportunities.** ESL teachers know that it is through the oral language ELs acquire English skills and it was clear that there was no freedom to speak during core class lessons. ESL teachers also attributed mask requirements as the main contributor to the speaking deficiency observed in their students' ELD progress because wearing masks hindered the students' ability to see and mimic sounds to make the necessary phoneme and grapheme connections. One participant felt that not knowing how to properly express themselves is a hurdle language learners must overcome by practicing their language skills consistently. However, participants experienced ELs having very limited opportunities to produce language and practice language skills, in their core classes, they learned during their ELD class. Another participant spoke about the VLE truncating what ELs needed in reference to the lack of oral comprehension and language ELs needed to master before addressing the reading and writing domains.

All participants described their attempts to provide ELD opportunities in the four domains, however, ESL teachers were limited to ELs' attendance, participation, reliable devices,

focus during the lessons, and parental support. One participant recounted how she supported her ELs' interests and socioemotional wellbeing by incorporating the readers' theater, linguistic frames, and predictable stories to read and answer questions on. However, planning required a lot more time in the evening on a daily basis to create fun readers' theater lessons for fictional and non-fictional stories ELs needed to be able to produce output this way. Even with the tremendous efforts ESL teachers put into supporting ELD, one participant cited the 2022 English language proficiency state assessment scores show how the speaking proficiency for the students has not come back even after over a year of face-to-face instruction.

**(Un)Learned VLE lessons.** School leadership and Freedom District, during the following school year 2021-2022, for the most part had asynchronous work posted in the Google Classrooms for their students during “emergency remote days.” ESL teachers, or mainstream teachers, were not required to provide synchronous lessons for students nor did all students had access to a district provided Chromebook at home because of last minute communication to cancel classes. Even after experiencing pandemic teaching and learning in the VLE the year prior, some schools did not allow for students to bring their devices home on a daily basis in case of emergency closures. Therefore, when the district delayed school closures until the evenings before canceling school, ELs were in the same predicament than at the onset of the pandemic without a device to access content and/or work posted on Google Classroom by their mainstream teacher. Participants recalled how they were not required to provide ELD lessons or post work online for ELs during emergency remote learning days, although only one participant posted English proficiency assessment test-like review assignments. However, if ELs did not have access to the internet or a device at home, they were not penalized for not completing the work and were instructed, via Google Classroom, to read and practice writing on their own.

It seems that the district and school leadership continued to disregard the basic needs and lack of devices or internet available at home a lot of ELs had the prior year, because teachers and students did not have to attend synchronous lessons and assignments posted were completed by students who could access them. These experiences ESL teachers and ELs lived through during the days of emergency remote days were not much different than what happened at the onset of the pandemic.

### **Teacher Response to the VLE: A Teacher's Take**

As the entire education system drastically changed over the spring of 2020, teachers' experiences and responses varied depending on district and school leadership approach taken to support the student population as a whole. However, to provide the necessary support to ELs, the ESL teachers' workload increased as they had to make sure all EL families were accounted for and all needs were met to secure attendance. These ESL teachers had 100 students on average to support in every aspect they needed support with during the school year 2020-2021. Participants had to improvise and adapt as the pandemic teaching and learning continued to evolved throughout the school year and make do with whatever materials, curriculum, and supplies they had available at that time. When the sole responsibility for the entire EL population fell into the ESL teacher, it was inevitable to feel some kind of burnout or exhaustion due to the higher than a regular homeroom classroom enrollment of ELs at any given school in Freedom District.

**Mode and modality of teaching.** There were plenty of difficulties when teaching ELs in the VLE because students did not have the necessary materials in front of them and teachers could only rely on the screen projecting what they had available to teach. It was only when hybrid days were available, and some students were present on campus, that ESL teachers were able to provide text and printed materials for their ELs to follow along and complete classwork

in the VLE. One participant recalled that making packets for ELs and mailing them would have made the school spend a high amount of resources and therefore, it was not possible.

ESL teachers had to resort to Google Classroom even though they had never been required to create their own EL Google Classroom because this is mostly a mainstream teacher tendency prior to teaching and learning in the VLE. Participants created assignments on the learning platform as a way to ensure all ELs had access to the same materials, some assignments pertained to the ELD lessons while others were English proficiency tests. Two of the five participants spoke about being very intentional when providing ELD lessons to their ELs because they curated purposeful content and assignments on their Google Classroom to prevent their students from delaying even further their English proficiency.

All participants felt that in the VLE they were just not meeting the same goals they did in person with their students, participants spoke of the VLE being restrictive and detrimental to the work they needed to do with ELs. ESL teachers had to accept that even though they spent a lot of time planning future lessons for ELs, there were just too many external factors that would derail the plans and lessons. Participants resigned to the uncertainty of pandemic teaching and learning to be able to face each day as it came.

**Increased effort, less progress.** Inclusion services for ELs were often on the fly due to the myriad of lessons and topics content teachers covered that ESL teachers experienced by joining mainstream classes to support ELs' access to the curriculum and ELD. Some participants worked closely with their ELs' mainstream teachers so they could provide access to content that ELs were having difficulty grasping and help with their core class assignments, which added more time and effort to plan accordingly. Additionally, ESL teachers did not have an EL targeted language acquisition curriculum, which prompted them to rely on their expertise of teaching ELs

to find content to support ELD in the VLE. Therefore, ESL teachers spent hours outside of their working schedules researching best practices for ELs in the VLE to ensure students continued to acquire English proficiency. ESL teachers provided additional targeted support for ELs by uploading assignments for ELs based on their grade level and English proficiency, which included kindergarten to fifth grade content or sixth to eighth grade carefully curated content for their students.

ESL teachers also attended available professional development, at their discretion, on VLE learning tools they deemed necessary or useful to their practice but none of the trainings were required. One participant described how her lessons were purposefully planned and targeted towards language acquisition by including ESL teachers' best practices, however, she felt she could not accurately monitor progress of her ELs due to the teaching and learning limitations in the VLE.

Participants were in contact with the families of an average between 50-100 ELs at their schools with or without additional ESL support staff, an unfair burden placed on ESL teachers since most mainstream classes had one homeroom that they were responsible for but if they had ELs, the responsibility of that child fell solely on the ESL teachers. Three participants explicitly talked about the increased workload due to additional expectations and responsibilities towards their ELs. Participants described their position as the ESL teacher as being the everything teacher for her ELs and families or being the human Band-Aid teacher due to the heavier workload and burden placed on the ESL teacher.

**Playing the hand that was dealt.** Students were not the only ones who lacked resources to be successful in the VLE, if teachers did not have a personal device to teach, the school would provide a device, however, when the pandemic required all personnel and students to work out of

a computer, devices became scarce, and teachers received the same Chromebook devices than their students to utilize for their lessons. Chromebooks had very limited functions, since they were acquired for student use, and attempting to teach, plan, video chat, join other teachers' lessons, and monitor students in the VLE was a lot more than what the devices were expected to be used for. However, one participant refused to buy a personal device that would have facilitated her instruction in the VLE better because she expected the district to provide her with teaching tools and would not use her own resources to finance such purchase.

All teachers had to adapt their homes to support teaching and learning in the VLE so, while some teachers ventured outside their homes to the teacher supply store to acquire materials that would enhance their teaching and learning, others did not and attempted to support their students without a makeshift classroom space in their homes. For example, one participant felt very self-conscious about not having cute materials to use during instruction in the VLE giving citing her reasons as being scared to leave the house, being worried about her finances, or being scared about the disease. Another participant described her frustration about not having the proper teaching tool throughout her interviews, noting that to have better teaching interactions with students she would have had to spend money, however she reiterated she refused to spend her own money because it was the district's responsibility to provide those tools.

As human beings, morale can affect how we respond to the environment we are in, for ESL teachers working in the VLE, it became difficult to shake off student attitude and effort put towards their academic progress. When teachers felt that their ELs just were not serious enough about learning in the VLE while noting all the difficulties experienced attempting to ensuring all ELs had daily access to content and ELD lessons, their intrinsic motivation and drive could only extend so far. Two participants expressed a sense of apathy towards the VLE, one mentioned

ELs' attitude towards school and absenteeism as the cause of her response to pandemic teaching and learning, while the other attributed losing drive to being burned out and exhausted from the never-ending efforts they had to put in to ensure ELs were present, participating, and acquiring English skills. Some participants were so frustrated with the VLE and the school 2020-2021 year to the point that they said several times they have tried to block it out of their memories due to the trauma they experienced.

### **Self-efficacy Performance Levels**

The following themes of “operations: chaotic district and school leadership” and “teacher response to the VLE: a teacher’s take” were used to determine the self-efficacy levels of the participants since participants described their self-perceptions of efficacy in the VLE within the context of their own response and the district and schools’ responses to the virtual learning shift. The sub-themes emerged include the human Band-Aid roles or the everything (ESL) teacher, the non-existent target ESL professional development for the VLE, and the mode and modality of teaching.

**Surpassing performance self-efficacy level.** The first category showed two ESL teachers going above and beyond their normal duties and responsibilities, surpassing prior years’ expectations and attainments, because Susie and Heidi described visiting their students’ homes to ensure access and attendance to the VLE, wrote EL targeted curriculum to support the acquisition of academic background or survival English skills for newcomers with no English proficiency, and worked closely with the classroom teacher all while providing academic and linguistic support in the VLE. According to Bandura (1986), a person’s self-efficacy perception on how well they approach new situations or attainments, depends on the “nature and strength of pre-existing self-efficacy” (p. 363) and these two participants—Heidi and Susie—with over a



decade of experience supporting ELs in Freedom District, described themselves as language teachers first who ensured their lessons were meaningful and purposeful while in the VLE.

***Human Band-Aid.*** Heidi stated, “I had no choice, I had to jump in” referring her experience as she was forced to shift her practice to the VLE while Susie described her experience entering the VLE realm of teaching and learning as having to “grab the bull by the horns” and singlehandedly figure out how to help students and families. Burić and Macuka (2018), also assert that higher levels of self-efficacy lead to more effective problem solving because “people who believe in their capabilities to master their environmental demands interpret them as less threatening” (p. 1921) while results of a study on teacher self-efficacy as teachers transitioned into the VLE due to COVID-19 confirmed that teachers with more online teaching and learning tools experience reported the highest level of self-efficacy if they had previous experiences and familiarity with the learning platforms and online learning tools (Dolighan & Owen, 2021).

***Lack of targeted professional development.*** Although it was a prevalent belief among all participants that they were inexperienced and lacked adequate training on how to effectively navigate the VLE, self-perceptions on unrefined technological skills and limited knowledge of learning tools motivated four participants to attend a variety of optional, district provided, professional development sessions targeting VLE learning tools and platforms. Soncini, Politi and Matteucci (2021) findings reported higher self-efficacy reports showed teachers who perceived the VLE as a strength and capitalized on the shift to VLE as an opportunity to implement innovative teaching methods that could provide individualized support to students and these two teachers even went to their students’ houses multiple times over the 2020-2021 school year to ensure they had proper devices and connectivity to attend lessons. Susie and Heidi

sought out meaningful and targeted professional development for EL teaching and learning in the VLE, that prompted them to find research-based and innovative teaching strategies to ensure they provided the best support they could for their students.

**Below performance self-efficacy level.** Gladys, the participant in the second category, was vocal about the lack of district support and did not mention working with classroom teachers or her peer ESL teacher. Roxy also described how much harder she felt it was for her students who did not have any English proficiency to acquire those basic letter sounds and differentiate them. She described success with her ELs as “having them complete whatever work we had to do” and “taking advantage of all the minutes” they had with her. Gladys was the academic support for ELs at her school while her colleague was an ESL classroom teacher who focused only on ELD during her classes. This participant immediately responded to the question about preparedness to teaching in the VLE with “not at all prepared,” however she chose to attend some district available (optional) professional development to get more acquainted with learning tools and platforms to support her ELs because the required professional development she attended during the school year 2020-2021, had nothing to do with the VLE but instead, topics included the superintendents’ district wide plan for all schools to implement, filled with acronyms that she could not recall the meanings to.

***Inequity-fits-all.*** Opposite from the first category, teachers who fall below or short from their usual performance are the less engaged teachers in their work who will also show lower levels of energy and mental resilience which in turn leads to limited effort and becoming more prone to experience negative emotions (Burić & Macuka, 2018). Gladys’ personal interview was filled with negative emotions as she described how her students had a hard time taking school seriously in the VLE, “they were off task a lot, I had to push them to do work” because she felt

“they did not want to learn,” and the academic support she provided to ELs felt like “it was kind of a low bar” set for ELs via the breakout rooms. Although she loved seeing her students online and she provided as much academic and ELD support to her students, she described her success as moderate and explained that she had the most success helping ELs get into their classes more than with the academic content or language skills’ development because she “wasn’t really sure how to bridge the gap” without being physically there, present, with them. Gladys’ negative perceptions aligns with Tschannen, Hoy and Hoy (1998) who reported on the cyclical nature of self-efficacy perceptions (positive or negative) and how teachers with lower sense of efficacy put less effort put forth and tend to give up easily, which translated into poor teaching outcomes.

**Matching performance self-efficacy level.** The final category, which includes the last two participants, describes the teachers who matched their efforts to their usual, pre-pandemic, performance. Although Roxy and Guillermo did not describe their efforts as being the norm for their practice prior to the shift to the VLE, their interviews did not portray connotations that swayed me to think they put forth extra-ordinary or less-than efforts into their practice during pandemic teaching and learning.

**Mode and modality of teaching.** According to Pas, Bradshaw and Herschfeldt (2012), “teacher efficacy relates to both the ability to create an adequate learning environment and to deliver academic instruction” (p. 130), which both participants shared that they accomplished but they did not describe innovative teaching methods or a lack of effort to continue teaching ELs in the VLE. In fact, Guillermo’s focus was to continue using the same strategies he was accustomed to pre-pandemic delivering the curriculum he had used prior to the school year 2020-2021. He believed that the ELs benefited from the structure and continuation of what they knew from prior classroom experiences with him.

Unquestionably, Roxy acknowledged that even though her school was well organized throughout the school year, she was still learning how to manipulate the platforms and tools in the VLE. Roxy described activities that were congruent with non-pandemic ESL best practices that she included in her daily activities with her ELs. She also relied on the familiar curriculum and worksheets she would have ELs complete if they were in the classroom. Roxy also described how much harder she felt it was for her students who did not have any English proficiency to acquire those basic letter sounds and differentiate them. She described success with her ELs as “having them complete whatever work we had to do” and “taking advantage of all the minutes” they had with her. Finally, this participant did not think that it was positive for her students to be in the VLE because the mainstream classroom teachers could not provide access to the content during pandemic teaching and learning.

Roxy, or Guillermo, never mentioned exhaustion, they were focused on how they could continue their ELD lessons with their ELs although they mentioned it was undeniably hard. Pas, Bradshaw and Hersfeldt (2012) pointed out that specific school-based organizational and social resources can be associated with decreased levels of burnout which both participants in this category did not mention as a factor hardship to teach in the VLE. Guillermo said that there were not many questions at the beginning of the year due to everyone living in uncertainty and only mentioned that he attended required, beginning of the year, professional development provided in-house by the school prior to begin connecting with his families. This participant also expressed that the VLE was an experience that forced the district and all teachers to learn to integrate technology, which students have born into and use it daily. His accounts implied that in the school he had no concerns with leadership and that the school worked well to address students’ needs during pandemic teaching and learning.

One of the main reason participants cited that they did not feel as if students were progressing was due to the language restrictive remote setting that was the VLE. Pressley's (2021) study on teaching and learning during COVID-19 found that teachers reported the lowest levels of instructional and engagement efficacy during all virtual instruction, which increased for the hybrid teaching modalities, and showed the highest instructional and engagement efficacy scores in the face-to-face environment. Notably, every participant in this study felt that their most effective way to teaching the English language to students with limited proficiency was face-to-face, that it was only when the students began to physically return to the classroom, via a hybrid and then a face-to-face schedule, that they experienced significant growth.

### **Summary**

Although no individual case is completely alike, all cases were bounded by Freedom District's directives and each school's adoption of guidelines and policies. This cross-case analysis aimed to provide the readers with a close-up view and a description of what ESL teacher experiences during pandemic teaching and learning in the VLE. This analysis, organized in thematic sections, portrayed a deeper understanding about the quintain within the context of one urban school district in Louisiana. In this section, I presented assertions that combined the findings from the in-depth analysis of each single case providing multiple perspectives and views on the issues and experiences ESL teachers described. I included each assertion, or sub-theme, within the appropriate theme to show commonalities between the cases and answer my descriptive research questions with a focus on an identifiable reality from multiple perspectives shared by the participants (Trainor & Graue, 2014).

## **CHAPTER VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this research was to provide a bird's eye view of a large school district in south Louisiana with a detailed description of the five participants' experiences and perspectives on pandemic teaching and learning. Specifically, the research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the ESL teachers' perspectives and experiences during virtual instruction as they attempt to fulfill their responsibilities of
  - (a) providing access to the curriculum for English language learner students?
  - (b) ensuring the development of English language proficiency?
2. What are the ESL teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy as they continue to teach during a pandemic?

The discussion of the findings, guided by the research questions and analyzed through the theoretical lenses of disruptive innovation and transactional distance, includes accounts of how the virtual learning environment (VLE) truncated the key components of ESL best practices. The next section provides conclusions that are supported by existing literature and addresses some of the gaps in literature on ESL teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in the VLE.

### **ESL Teachers Experiences and Perspectives During Virtual Instruction**

The first research question sought to provide a glimpse into what it felt to be an ESL teacher in Freedom District's elementary or middle schools during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. This research question was two-fold in that the areas of (a) providing access to the curriculum for ELs; and (b) ensuring development of English language proficiency for ELs were the primary foci. All participants experienced a sense of uncertainty, inexperience, and chaos as

they determined the necessary supports ELs at their schools needed to access curriculum and develop English proficiency.

### **Perspectives and Experiences**

This study explored ESL teachers' perspectives of teaching in the VLE in order to understand their teaching practices as they provided access to the curriculum and ELD to their ELs. Participants' responses articulated a myriad of experiences, with families, students, colleagues, and school leadership, as they navigated the VLE and attempted to support ELs and their families as they gained the necessary technology skills to attend school. Findings showed that participants were concerned about their students' delayed academic, linguistic, social, and human development while they were in the VLE because "developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organized sports activities, and workplaces" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007, p. 197), which ELs missed out on as they were learning remotely, in isolation.

### **Access to the Curriculum**

The effective ESL teacher must be culturally responsive and knowledgeable about their students' life experiences, language, and culture in order to promote academic achievement for multilingual ELs (de Jong, Harper, and Coady, 2013) because ELs experience barriers to their academic success that are tied to their culture, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Giraldo-García, Galletta & Bagaka, 2019). Participants had to ensure ELs had some English proficiency before they could provide access to the curriculum since second language acquisition research showed how ELs cannot understand or process cognitively complex subjects and tasks in the target language (L2 or English) unless they have a level of proficiency in the L2 that will

allow them to access the grade level content they must master (Kirkpatrick, 2013). Additionally, providing access to the curriculum must include scaffolding, which “is an education-specific aspect of best practices in pedagogy that ensures that learners are sufficiently supported in the learning process to bridge the gaps in their knowledge between what is known and what is unfamiliar in terms of course content” (Green, 2015, p. 182); however, for participants, it was very difficult to include in the lesson through the restrictive VLE setting.

In the next section I address findings about access to the curriculum in conjunction with the participants’ ELD findings because effective ESL best practices include strategies that target language acquisition embedded in the core content lessons. For example, slowing down the pace of speaking, enunciating, enhancing the intonation of words, limiting the use of contractions, gestures, visuals, and utilizing manipulatives are all strategies that can support the academic achievement of ELs and all other students in the classroom (de Oliveira & Schoffner, 2009).

### **English Language Proficiency**

Findings showed that participants were concerned with the VLE not allowing ELs to notice linguistic nuances or make cross-linguistic connections for many reasons that included technological failures, bad internet connections, distractions around ELs’ environment at home, lack of grit, and inability to focus or engage with their lessons in the VLE. The major themes that emerged in regard to the slow-paced English language development (ELD) within the VLE include: (a) teaching and learning in the VLE; (b) student and families’ needs; (c) ELs’ questionable access to online; and (d) teacher’s response to the VLE. Sub-themes within the major themes also provided evidence to answer the research question section on developing EL’s English language proficiency.



**Pandemonium in the VLE classroom setting.** ELs needed to be able to comprehend not just the spoken or written language, in order to produce language, they needed to understand and respond to the contextual information of the interaction appropriately (Geeslin & Long, 2014). Participants' perceptions of the VLE as the context to learning English skills did not reflect any positives that specifically supported language acquisition as the face-to-face context would. Findings from this study concur with research stating that "language is primarily social and cannot therefore be removed for analysis from the context in which it situated" (Myles, 2013) because participants acknowledged how the VLE was detrimental for ELs' progress in acquiring English language proficiency due to ELs' not being immersed in the school setting where they could interact with native speakers and implicitly learn simple language forms, or survival English skills.

Participants were adamant when they said that the VLE was an ineffective setting to allow ELs to acquire English language skills that they needed to access the content. Findings suggested that ESL teachers were aware of how the VLE deprived ELs of normal schooling experienced that supported an all-encompassing child development which include socioemotional, cognitive, behavioral, and academic developmental aspects, and although they attempted to provide meaningful, purposeful, and well thought out lessons, they could not address all aspects of child development. Socio-cultural theory supports these findings because it postulates social interactions between children and more knowledgeable adults provide children the necessary tools and resources to scaffold language acquisition and development (Davis, Ovando, & Minami, 2013) since language is the most prevalent and powerful cultural artifact humans utilize to mediate their connection to their world, themselves, and others (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007).

Esquinca, Araujo, and De La Piedra (2014), affirm that “[h]uman interaction in institutional contexts, such as schools, take on a weighty role because it is within that context of those human interactions where learning occurs” (p. 165) which supports the findings that the deprivation of social interactions with teachers and peers all ELs experienced in the VLE, delayed their language acquisition, content mastery, and developmentally appropriate child behavior. Research on ESL best practices states that exposure to the mainstream cultures, purposeful or strategic grouping, the use of manipulatives, assessment, and student feedback, if implemented with fidelity, will ensure curriculum access and ELD (Coady, Harper & de Jong, 2016; de Oliveira & Schoffner, 2009; Kareva & Echeverría, 2013), however, findings revealed that all these best practices were selectively implemented at best due to the virtual distance limitation and lack of proper training.

**Student and families’ needs: An open window to ELs’ reality.** The findings included recurrent descriptions of how the students’ lack of learning resources at home limited ELs’ ability to fully engage with the content and advance English language skills. In a survey of Indiana teachers, administrators, and parents during the shift to the VLE (Koehler & Farmer, 2020), respondents expressed a variety of challenges with working exclusively in the VLE that included the lack of guardian supervision, support, and the frustrations that arose for students and families. For example, right on cue with the research, participants expressed predicaments ELs and their families experienced due to their unfamiliarity with technology, limited English language proficiency, and the inability to help their children with content mastery. Participants added how their ELs’ parental work schedules also interfered with their children’s responsibilities and attendance in the VLE in addition to not having a home environment

conducive for the VLE, all answers that respondents shared in Koehler and Farmer's (2020) survey.

**(Questionable) Student access to online learning.** Participants cited results from the state's English proficiency assessment ELs took in the spring of the school year 2020-2021 and noted ELs' lower oral proficiency and slow language skills acquisition. Second language acquisition (SLA) is a process that requires the language learners (LLs) to acquire simple and complex language forms to produce output, where "explicit instruction is necessary in order to help learners discover complex rules" and simple features are prone to be easily noted and learned via input received, implicitly (Spada & Tomita, 2010, p. 264). Participants' experiences and perceptions fall in line with the research because they claimed that the input ELs' received via the VLE was ineffective due to a delayed acquisition of English language forms, whether simple or complex, a slow progress, and continued struggle with speaking, reading, and writing in the English language.

Findings also showed how participants relentlessly attempted to close the linguistic and academic gaps their ELs experienced due to their isolation within their non-English speaking households, limited parental support, and available learning resources at home. The findings mirrored research that asserts ELs experience barriers towards their academic success that are tied to their culture, language, and socioeconomic background, for example, low-income urban areas tend to be underserved (Giraldo-García, Galletta & Bagaka, 2019) and linguistic isolation within their neighborhoods that inhibit academic and English language development. The findings included recurrent descriptions of how the students' lack of learning resources at home limited ELs' ability to fully engage with the content and advance English language skills. In a survey of Indiana teachers, administrators, and parents during the shift to the VLE (Koehler &

Farmer, 2020), respondents expressed a variety of challenges with working exclusively in the VLE that included the lack of guardian supervision, support, and the frustrations that arose for students and families. For example, right on cue with the research, participants expressed predicaments ELs and their families experienced due to their unfamiliarity with technology, limited English language proficiency, and the inability to help their children with content mastery. Participants added how their ELs' parental work schedules also interfered with their children's responsibilities and attendance in the VLE in addition to not having a home environment conducive for the VLE, all answers that respondents shared in Koehler and Farmer's (2020) survey.

**Teachers' response to the VLE: A teacher's take.** Another finding suggested by participants' descriptions of the lack of grit and intrinsic motivation from ELs in the VLE, despite the participants' tremendous efforts to provide content access and meaningful ELD lessons, were congruent with how every aspect of SLA concerns ELs and their environment and is embedded within the biological, cognitive, socio-psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions of a person (Hulstijn, 2013). Even if participants were implementing ESL best practices that should have yielded significant improvements in achieving the learning outcomes with acquiring academic language and proficiency in all language domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Kareva & Echeverría, 2013), findings showed ESL teachers did not see that significant academic and linguistic improvements while the teaching and learning in the VLE. A potential explanation to low achievement could be that ESL teachers could not control the cognitive or socio-affective factors that may have influenced ELs' motivation, learner beliefs, or aptitude while teaching and learning in the VLE (Myles, 2013) or how online courses demand from students new ways of preparing for learning, organizing information, engaging with the content,

and completing academic requirements through higher levels of independence and self-direction (Martin, Stampers, & Flowers, 2020).

### **ESL Teacher Levels of Self-efficacy**

In a world that was halted for months due to a pandemic, all teachers in Freedom District had to relearn their craft as they abruptly switched their teaching methods to virtual instruction and eventually hybrid instruction. As previously discussed in the literature, teacher efficacy is closely connected to the level of support the teacher received during their preparation and then later from administration prior to the pandemic (Burić & Macuka, 2018; Dolighan & Owen, 2021; Pas, Bradshaw & Hershfeldt, 2012; Soncini, Politi, & Matteucci, 2021). Even without any specialized training to deal with a deadly pandemic, ESL teachers took on the massive responsibility that required daily contact with EL families inquiring about their current situation, needs, and preparedness to receive virtual instruction from March 2020 until the official end of the 2019-2020 school year into the entire duration of the 2020-2021 school year.

The second research question provided participants an avenue to share their perceptions on how they perceived their teaching practice as they shifted from a face-to-face setting to teaching in the VLE. According to Bandura (1986), under usual circumstances a person will have biases that can distort how they represent and remember their attainments. Success in challenging situations can be categorized by self-perceptions that surpass, match, or fall below one's usual performance regarding any given task completion (Bandura, 1986). After data analysis, the five participants' self-efficacy perceptions were divided into three categories, surpass, match, or below performance ratings based on the effort, emotions, and leadership support each participant described in their individual and focus group interviews. ESL teachers experienced a range of socioemotional concerns as they attempted to serve ELs where they

questioned their efficacy throughout the time spent in the VLE and beyond since they noticed developmental, linguistic, and academic delays in their students.

Although all participants spoke on how they were able to provide some academic support and ELD lessons to their ELs, two participants shared experiences that went above and beyond of the ESL teacher expectations and that can be attributed to statements about school leadership and staff support and collaboration, which follows Pas, Bradshaw and Hershfeldt's (2012) claims on how teacher camaraderie and school leadership support will positively influence self-efficacy levels. Additionally, individuals judge their self-efficacy perceptions and capacity for challenging activities through their perceptions of knowledge, skills, and strategies they have at their command, and effort require to complete a task (Bandura, 1986); appropriately, participants who surpassed their usual performances had decades of experience teaching ELs, positive attitudes, and increased efforts to prepare meaningful and targeted ELD lessons for the VLE.

The two participants who appeared to match their typical performances as they taught in the VLE had less years of experience in teaching ELs and responded to the shift of teaching environment by relying on what they knew well to provide academic and ELD support. Both participants mentioned how they did not feel prepared to teach in the VLE because they were not used to including all the necessary virtual teaching tools as they shifted their practice to the VLE, which relates to the conclusions that higher self-efficacy perceptions correlated with having previous experiences in using district provided learning management systems and having used recurrently virtual technology supports for their face-to-face lessons (Dohligan & Owen, 2021). These participants described their approach to the challenges of teaching in the VLE without negativity or mention of emotional exhaustion, following what Soncini, Politi and Matteucci (2021) theorized as they explained higher self-efficacy perceptions should have helped teachers

approach and succeed during challenging times preventing negative effects such as emotional exhaustion.

The last participant was the only one who was unsure about the success of her response to teaching in the VLE because she could not properly measure students' mastery of the content or their progress in acquiring English proficiency skills. This participant's self-perceptions of efficacy related to the below usual performance level because she did not feel she had any control or influence in her students' achievement and motivation, which Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy (1998) explained as factors that influence teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy. Additionally, this participant discussed how the students' lack of engagement and motivation influenced her own attitudes and efforts towards her teaching, which falls in line with the Mojavezi and Tamiz' (2012) study concluding that there is positive correlation between teacher self-efficacy and students' motivation and achievement. This participant, in her first years of teaching ELs, logged into the VLE and tried to support her ELs without true directions from the leadership or meaningful collaboration with her ESL teacher peer. She repeatedly expressed that the VLE was not conducive to learning for ELs and described her most successful experiences as ensuring her students were able to log in and be present for their mainstream lessons. Her experience, response, effort, and attitude towards the VLE reflects the conclusion of teachers who taught 100% in the VLE reporting the lowest levels of instructional and engagement efficacy, increasing for hybrid models of instruction, and the highest efficacy performance levels for instruction and engagement the exclusively in-person teachers (Pressley, 2021).

### **Limitations and Implications**

This study addresses the gap in literature that Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021) suggested because it provides further exploration, adding more information, to address the need of

understanding the teacher competencies that are necessary to teach ELs effectively in the VLE within the K-12 setting. Not only did this study shed light on the ESL teachers' need in the VLE, but it also adds to the limited research that explores the ELs' needs seeking to acquire English proficiency and content mastery in the VLE (Maher, 2020). Additionally, this study will provide more descriptions of situations that teachers, students, or families experienced throughout the shift and time in the VLE that can enhance the understanding of how to better anticipate and address emergency shifts into the VLE (Holzweiss et al., 2020).

This research was limited to the individual schools where the participants were assigned for the 2020-2021 school year, which included six elementary schools and one middle school in Freedom District. Therefore, the study's findings are not generalizations intended to represent the practices of every ESL teacher in the district, nor for every grade level.

Implications about the findings, although relevant, indicate that further research within Freedom District's schools and all its ESL teachers are needed to provide a more comprehensive description of how teachers supported students, families, access to the curriculum and ELD. Additionally, further research should be conducted in other urban districts in the state of Louisiana where ESL teachers work with similar EL populations to compare results that can support state leadership in creating a list of ESL teachers' needs and how to support them to ensure ELs receive more targeted support at their schools. The findings also suggest that additional research must be conducted to provide a wider perspective and understanding of how different teacher or student's personal, socioeconomic, or social settings affected by crisis, influence performance and confidence in the VLE.



## **Recommendations**

Participants yearned for targeted ESL professional development since continuous training and knowledge about the practice is imperative to support the diverse needs of the EL population in Freedom District, as well as for similar districts in Louisiana. I recommend for the district to ensure continuous and meaningful ESL professional development that includes best practices for the traditional face-to-face school setting in addition to training to support teaching and learning in the VLE. Not only do ESL teachers need targeted professional development for best practices in the classroom for in-person student support and for remote support in the VLE. ESL teachers must be ready to shift to the VLE in the event of another unexpected pandemic or natural disaster with the necessary tools and knowledge needed to successfully navigate virtual tools and promote language acquisition for ELs. Participants showed passion and grit as they figured out how to best support their ELs even within the stressful situation of avoiding a potentially deadly disease and being confined to their homes that were sometimes not suitable to prepare and deliver their lessons. Districts can capitalize on their teachers' engagement and attitudes within the setting of pandemic teaching and learning by providing meaningful and differentiated professional development on virtual ESL teaching and learning best practices since this was what participants wished they would have had to feel successful in the VLE.

A second recommendation, related to professional development and trainings, would be to target parents' computer literacy skills by preparing and delivering informational and continuous sessions that teach parents how to manipulate technology and devices their children utilize in the classroom. From the participants' experiences, it is clear that parents had very limited knowledge of technology and/or how to utilize devices their children brought home to continue their academic career throughout remote learning that started March 2020 and

continued beyond the 2020-2021 school year. If parental engagement is one of the main priorities ESL teachers should focus on, then the district should provide the necessary support and trainings ESL teachers need to ensure parents remain present in their children's academic careers. It was very evident parents lacked experience handling technology and devices, for this reason there must be a focus on educating parents on the learning tools their children utilize and other virtual resources parents may need to support their children. We must learn from the COVID-19 pandemic experiences to ensure districts, schools, teachers, parents, and students remain prepared to confront another shift into the VLE and minimize the learning loss participants spoke about numerous times. Leaders and stakeholders should address head-on the major disconnect between home and school educators saw first-hand throughout pandemic teaching and learning.

### **Conclusion**

The scope of ESL literature I reviewed does not included the perspectives and accounts of ESL teachers in an urban district in the state of Louisiana, in fact, I found limited literature that described teachers' experiences within the unique teaching setting that is the state of Louisiana. It has not been until recently that Freedom District has expressed concern and intent to address the growth in the EL population living inside district boundaries, having doubled within the last ten years. The district was unprepared to support all stakeholders involved in providing equitable and quality education to all populations of students, in particularly ELs. This study emphasized the need of preparation for another natural disaster or global pandemic that may happen in the future. Although this study was ESL focused, the findings were not exclusive to the EL population or ESL teachers, in fact, similarities exist between EL student characteristic and home life with other minorities present in the district. This study can support all teachers

who teach minorities with similar socioeconomic status and other contextual factors that ESL teachers struggled to address during pandemic teaching and learning.

In the context of the VLE, Day (2015) discussed how academic continuity plans have been identified as important to prevent learning gaps in education, but emergency learning continuity plans are rarely developed and/or implemented within schools and educational institutions, which findings revealed was true also true for Freedom District. Although the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year allowed five months, after the initial shutdown of schools, for the district to organize and prepare to serve its teachers and students in the VLE, findings described chaos, uncertainty, and limited resources available for ESL teachers and EL students to continue their work effectively. District leaders and educators must develop emergency plans that address a shift into the VLE to prevent learning loss due to lack of resources and training to succeed in the virtual classroom.

Ford, Kwon, and Tsotsoros (2021) found that the main challenges to distance learning included low levels of participation of students and parental involvement, limited social interactions among students, appropriate ways to engage students via learning platforms, teachers' lack of knowledge and experience in virtual teaching environments, and limited technological support, especially when the learning platforms or internet connections were faulty. ESL teachers in Louisiana were not exempt from the same challenges as they supported their ELs' academic and linguistic achievement. Participants struggled to adapt their pedagogy to the VLE due to their perceived inexperience and limited technological skills that were not adequately supported by the available professional development Freedom District offered. Trainings and differentiated professional development must address ESL best practices within the traditional classroom setting and the VLE, emergency remote days will continue to happen

whether it is caused by a global pandemic, weather increments, or additional unexpected events that cause a school to close and everyone must be ready and prepared to shift into the VLE.

Learning gaps are still present, educators must ensure those gaps do not continue to widen.

Adequate training for online language teachers is one of the key features of the effective virtual ESL teacher and success in developing English proficiency--and this is exactly what the participants in this study were aware that they needed. Specifically, the participants knew they required another set of skills to develop English language proficiency due to the lack of non-verbal clues, such as hand gestures and body language, that were a challenge to provide for ELs during synchronous virtual instruction (Compton, 2009; Maher, 2020). However, in order to develop the additional online teaching competencies needed for teaching a foreign language virtually, teachers must have been previously exposed to, and somewhat familiar with, online teaching theories in addition to having experienced this type of alternative language teaching pedagogy through hands-on foreign language teaching in the VLE (Guichon, 2009). This study showed that, even if participants had some previous experience using technology in their lessons, it was not enough to feel prepared or capable to begin working in the VLE exclusively. ESL teachers needed ample training and opportunities with the VLE in order to perceive their instruction being as effective as they deemed it to be in the face-to-face setting and to ultimately increase ELs' achievement.

## APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



**TO:** Estanislado Salazar Barrera  
LSUAM | Col of HSE | Education |  
CC00165

**FROM:** Alex Cohen  
Chairman, Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** 30-Mar-2022

**RE:** IRBAM-22-0198

**TITLE:** ESL teachers' Perspectives  
and Experiences Related to  
Virtual Instruction During  
COVID-19

**SUBMISSION TYPE:** Initial Application

**Review Type:** Expedited Review

**Risk Factor:** Minimal

**Review Date:** 29-Mar-2022

**Status:** Approved

**Approval Date:** 29-Mar-2022

**Approval Expiration Date:** 28-Mar-2023

**Expedited Categories:** 07

**Requesting Waiver of Informed Consent:** No

**Re-review frequency:** Annually

**Number of subjects approved:** 6

**LSU Proposal Number:** IRBAM-22-0198

**By:** Alex Cohen, Chairman

**Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:**

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.

3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

*\* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/research>*

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## **APPENDIX B. INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **1. Administration**

- a. Describe what it was like during the onset of the pandemic at your school.
  - i. What were the roles and responsibilities assigned to you by administration?
  - ii. How did you attempt to fulfill these roles and responsibilities? Did you succeed? Why do you think or why not?
  - iii. How often did your role and responsibilities change?
  - iv. How did you react?

### **2. Self-efficacy**

- a. How prepared did you feel when distance learning began?
- b. What did your class time look like? Did you provide services when schools closed? How did that look like?
- c. What kind of limitations did you experience during the end of 19-20, 20-21, and 20-22? How did you address those limitations?
- d. What did success with your students look like?

### **3. Professional Development**

- a. What kind of required professional development did you received during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school year?
- b. Did you receive any EL specific training? What kind of training? ELD? Parent engagement? Other?
- c. Did you implement strategies learned during the PDs in your classes? Were you successful? Why or why not?

### **4. ELD**

- a. How did you begin serving ELs and supporting ELD? When did you start with your ELs? 19-20 or 20-21?
- b. What kind of instruction did you provide to your ELs during the pandemic (2019-2020, 2020-2021, 2021-2022)?
- c. How did you provide opportunities to use the language in the four domains: speaking, listening, writing, and reading?

- d. How did you measure and monitor your students' progress in acquiring the English language?
  - e. What would you say were the challenges in developing English proficiency during virtual instruction? Why?
  - f. Described positive aspects of working with your students in the VLE?
5. Socio-emotional
- a. How did you feel when the schools closed? How did it affect you?
  - b. What kind of feelings and emotions did you experience as the 2020-2021 school year was beginning?
  - c. How did your feelings change from 19-20 closures to 20-21 and now during 21-22?
  - d. How did your feelings affect your teaching practices and pedagogy?
6. ELs and their families
- a. How did you communicate with the families of your students when the schools first closed, during 20-21 and 21-22?
  - b. What did you observe your students' go through during the pandemic years as it relates to: Attendance? Engagement? Work completion? Mastering content?
7. Other
- a. Is there anything else you think might be relevant to this study that you would like to add?



## **APPENDIX C. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Opening Question:

Tell us how long you have been in your ESL Teacher role and the schools you were serving during the Pandemic school year 2020-2021. Is this the same school(s) you are now? If not, where are you now? What grade levels do you focus on?

2. Introduction:

What is the first thing that comes in mind when you hear Virtual Learning during COVID-19 years with respect to ELLs? How far away do you feel we are from pandemic years?

3. Transition:

Think about the school year 2020-2021 when teachers returned to campus without students. What were your priorities with respect to English language development and content access in the virtual learning environment for ELLs? (Engagement with the school and content)

4. Key:

- a. What was a day like for you during the school year 2020-2021 when you were teaching via VLE? (Inclusivity) Once we moved past ensuring basic needs, how did you ensure your ELLs continued learning and developing English?
- b. What was particularly frustrating to you as an ESL teacher trying to continue providing services to your ELs in the VLEs? (resources)
- c. What were your most important roles and responsibilities during the pandemic year of teaching and learning online SY 20-21? How did you address lack of engagement or absences from your ELLs in the VLE?
- d. What do you feel are the effects of COVID-19 teaching and learning in the VLE for your ELLs? Think about your 3, 4, 5 who were in K, 1, 2 and your 6<sup>th</sup> graders in 20-21 who are in 8<sup>th</sup> grade now.
- e. What do you think your EL students still need extra support in? Has changed in your teaching practice since teaching ELLs in the VLE? Alexandra (emailed after focus group 11/3)

5. Ending:

- a. If you had the chance to tell the ESL department how they could've done better at supporting ESL teachers and servicing EL students, what advice would you give them? Alejandro and Alexandra (emailed after focus group 11/3)
- b. I'd like you to help support other ESL teachers in Louisiana that may have to experience the VLE again at any other time. What do they need know to ensure language development for ELs in the VLE? What did we miss? Is there anything else we should have covered?All (emailed after focus group 11/3)

## **APPENDIX D. TIMELINE**

March 2022 – IRB submission and approval for this study

April 2022 – Requested preliminary approval to conduct research in Freedom District

April 2022 – Contacted principals and participants and collected consent forms

May 2022 – Received official approval to conduct research in Freedom District

May 2022 – Conducted all initial interviews

August 2022 – Transcribed initial interviews

September 2022 – Conducted the first round of data analysis and shared initial findings with participants

October 2022 – Recoded initial interview data, classified findings, and recorded emergent themes and patterns

October 2022 – Requested and secured focus group interview day and time

November 2022 – Conducted the focus group interview, transcribed, and analyzed data from this interview

December 2022 – Organized the final round of data analysis for initial interviews and conducted another round of data analysis of the focus group interview

January 2023 – Reviewed all data and wrote the formal report of the findings

February 2023 – Continued writing the formal report to answer the research questions

March 2023 – Submitted for review the final report that answered research questions and conclusions.

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## **VITA**

Natalia M Guerrero was born in Ecuador but lived and studied in Italy prior to moving to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She has one daughter and a longtime partner who has been in her life for a decade now. She has traveled for work, study, and leisure since childhood.

Natalia graduated from the University of California, San Diego with a B.A. in Art History and Criticism and an M.Ed. with a concentration in bilingual education before beginning her career as a teacher. After several years of providing regular education in English, at a local elementary school, and teaching in Spanish within an immersion school, she decided to pursue additional certification in educational leadership. She began her journey towards securing an Educational Specialist degree before completing a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership at Louisiana State University. Natalia worked full-time as a teacher and was a mother to her daughter throughout her career and enrollment at LSU. She now seeks to influence the educational system in Louisiana at a much grander scale, she dreams in becoming the state superintendent of education.