Given the increase in the number of English language learners (ELLs) in U. S. schools, all teachers need to be prepared to address this emerging population. This chapter describes the perspectives of four elementary school teachers about what mainstream elementary teachers of ELLs should know and be able to do. Previous work focusing on preparing all teachers for ELLs has established this area as high need in the research literature due to the increasing number of ELLs in K–12 U.S. schools (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2008, 2011; Burke, 2014; de Oliveira & Athanases, 2007; Peercy, 2011; Peercy & Martin-Beltran, 2012). The impetus for this work comes from the idea that practitioner knowledge (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler,
2002) needs to be made public and is a response to calls for more research on teacher education for ELLs (Hollins & Torres Guzman, 2005; Zeichner, 2009). Drawing on interview and classroom observation data, this chapter conceptualizes a knowledge base for teaching ELLs at the elementary level.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teacher Preparation for English Language Learners

Mainstream, general education teachers are now seeing high numbers of ELLs among their students. Therefore all teachers, not just English as second language (ESL) specialists or bilingual professionals, need to be able to work with ELLs (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008). The need to prepare teachers to work with this population of students is pressing across the United States and is even more salient in contexts such as Indiana, where the ELL K–12 student population has increased by 408% since 1990 (Burke, 2013; Indiana Department of Education, 2014). These rapid changes put pressure on teacher education programs to prepare teachers to work with ELLs (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2011). Many teachers view mainstream U. S. culture and mono-lingualism as the norm. This view ignores linguistic diversity (Osborn, 2007) and perpetuates misconceptions about teaching ELLs (de Jong & Harper, 2005). These perspectives are important in the context of teacher preparation.

Mainstream and ELL teachers working with ELL populations need to create a supportive and academically challenging environment for ELLs (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Teachers need to be able to provide best practices for ELLs such as recognizing different linguistic and academic needs of students in various ELL subpopulations, instructing students in language learning strategies (specifically reading and writing strategies), and using a gradual release of responsibility model for organizing instruction for ELLs (Fisher, Rothenberg, & Frey, 2007). In addition, teachers need: materials and instructions in the students’ native language (Faltis, Arias, & Ramirez-Marin, 2010; Téllez & Waxman, 2006); extra-linguistic resources, text and oral language modifications, and explicit instructions (Lucas & Villegas, 2011); differentiation by language proficiency level (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008); and multimodal strategies (Gibbons, 2009). Collaborative groups can support academic English development (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2005) with flexible grouping structures and interactions with fluent English speakers (Rumberger & Gándara, 2004; Faltis et al., 2010). Explicit attention to language form and function (Schleppegrell, 2004), assessed through multiple means (de Oliveira & Athanases, 2007)
is of particular importance for ELLs at all grade levels and should start in kindergarten (de Oliveira, Klassen, & Gilmetidnova, 2014).

The ability to tap into different “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) that students’ families share has been found to be of particular importance in working with diverse learners, and ELLs in particular (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). In order to know a student as a whole person, the teacher must be able to use these funds of knowledge at school in order to make meaningful connections between home and school. Family members use their funds of knowledge to sustain their families both economically and socially, and these relationships connect them with other members of the community. Home visits and parental communication are very effective in helping teachers to connect the funds of knowledge available in the students’ home lives with what is important and valued in the school system.

A Knowledge Base for Teaching English as a Second Language

Significant agreement about the major components of a knowledge base for teaching has been achieved in general teacher education, although various models differ in some aspects. Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage (2005) provide a framework for understanding the general knowledge, skills, and dispositions for all teachers: knowledge of learners and their development in social contexts—knowledge about learning, human development and language; knowledge of subject matter and curriculum goals—knowledge about educational goals and purposes for skills, content, and subject matter; knowledge of teaching—knowledge about teaching subject matter, teaching diverse learners, issues of assessment, and classroom management. These three components indicate that there is a common foundation of knowledge for teachers. Two variables need to be included when we consider the specific case of teaching ESL: the special case of English language as content and process, and the case of students being speakers of other languages. Knowledge about language can be conceptualized as content knowledge, the knowledge teachers have of the subject matter. And the application of knowledge about language can be seen as pedagogical content knowledge. But this distinction is not enough to demonstrate the complexities involved in this “knowledge about language”. Four areas that add to the knowledge base for teaching are: (a) knowledge of teachers as learners of language teaching, (b) teacher practice and knowledge of self, (c) knowledge and understanding of language learning and assessment, and (d) procedural and declarative knowledge about language.
Knowledge of Teachers As Learners of Language Teaching

One dimension added to current knowledge base models is the first domain described by Freeman and Johnson (1998), the consideration of teachers as primary learners of language teaching. This work contributes to other knowledge base models the dimension of considering teachers as learners.

Teacher Practice and Knowledge of Self

Language teacher education researchers focused on teachers’ instructional actions and their connections to teacher learning (Golombek, 1998; Pennington, 1995). Pennington (1995) and Golombek (1998) have studied teacher practice and change, in which teachers’ instructional actions were examined in the context of critical reflection and dialogue about those actions. They found teaching practices progress from technical matters to classroom roles and relationships and help teachers examine their actions and tensions derived from their practices. A teacher’s knowledge of self in learning to teach along with teachers’ practice can illuminate a knowledge base for teaching.

Knowledge and Understanding of Language Learning and Assessment

In preschool through 12th grade ESL teacher preparation, teacher education program standards have been developed for the purpose of accreditation of teacher education programs. Approved by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Board of Directors in October 2001 and published online in 2003, these standards were revised and approved in 2010 (TESOL International Association, 2010). Developed based on recent research in the areas of language learning, culture, and assessment, the TESOL/NCATE Standards document can be taken as a model for a knowledge base for teaching ESL and provides many examples of what ESL teacher candidates must know and understand about language.

ESL teachers must display knowledge in the domains of language learning, such as language for communication, connections between academic content and language, and selection and use of meaningful content in teaching. Knowing and understanding the backgrounds of ESL learners and their communities are also important components for planning and providing instruction to them (Tarone & Allwright, 2005).

Knowledge of assessment is a central category in the standards for ESL teachers. Teachers must be able to assess the academic achievement of ESL learners in the initial stages of learning as well as use different assessment techniques at different educational levels. In addition to assessment of ESL learners’ sociocultural competence (TESOL, 2010), teachers must recognize students’ needs in this area and assist their development of
appropriate norms and customs. Assessment of language proficiency and academic achievement and use of a variety of assessment techniques are key components of knowledge of assessment.

**Procedural and Declarative Knowledge about Language**

Another model to explore teachers’ attributes is Pasternak and Bailey’s (2004). The authors frame their discussion of issues of professionalism and proficiency around procedural and declarative knowledge. Declarative knowledge is knowledge about something; it refers to the things we know and are able to articulate (Pasternak & Bailey, 2004, p. 157). Procedural knowledge is knowledge of how to do something; it refers to the skills we possess or our ability to do things. An example of procedural knowledge would be a teacher’s ability to speak the language and declarative knowledge would refer to the teacher’s knowledge about the language, for example, the ability to articulate specific rules of the language. Part of the declarative knowledge of language teaching would include knowledge about the target language and culture and about teaching. This distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge provides a framework for assessment of areas that need improvement. It can be assumed that a language teacher’s confidence is dependent upon her procedural and declarative knowledge in any given area of English Language Teaching (ELT). The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of elementary teachers about what mainstream elementary teachers of ELLs should know and be able to do.

**METHOD**

**Context and Participants**

The context for this case study is a school district, given the pseudonym Greenbush School District (GSD), in a small town in Indiana. GSD was selected for this study because, although its population is predominately white, GSD has a growing Hispanic population and one of the largest ELL populations in the state. Most of the ELLs in the school district are from Latino backgrounds. GSD has three elementary schools that were given the pseudonyms Somerset, Kroger, and Rose. All three schools receive Title I funding.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of elementary teachers on what mainstream elementary teachers of ELLs should know and be able to do. Four teachers participated in the study. Three teachers taught at Kroger Elementary, a school with 90% ELLs. One teacher taught at Rose Elementary, a school with 60% ELLs, about a 5-minute drive from Kroger.

Diana was a kindergarten teacher with teaching certification in K–8. She has 35 years of teaching experience. Her highest educational degree is a
master’s with kindergarten and reading endorsements. Of the 26 students placed in her kindergarten classroom, 22 were identified as ELLs. She has lived in Greenbush for 29 years.

Anna taught first grade at Rose Elementary. She has a teaching certification and bachelor’s degree in elementary education with an endorsement in early childhood. She is certified to teach K–6 and has 13 years of teaching experience. Of the 21 students she had in her classroom, 15 were identified as ELLs. She has always lived and taught in Greenbush.

Sandra taught second grade at Kroger. Her teaching certification is in elementary education for grades 1–7. She has 16 years of teaching experience. Of the 24 students she taught, 21 were identified as ELLs. She has lived in Greenbush for 16 years.

Lydia taught third grade at Kroger. Her teaching credential is in elementary education with a kindergarten endorsement. She has taught for eight years. Of the 16 students in her classroom, 5 were identified as ELL. She has lived in Greenbush all her life.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collected and analyzed for this chapter are part of a larger study that included teacher interviews, weekly classroom observations over a period of nine months, and field notes based on these observations. This chapter draws on that interview data. To analyze the data, we reviewed all transcripts and developed emerging categories and themes. We identified what the teachers, based on their experiences, perceived to be things that elementary school teachers need to know and be able to do with ELLs. We placed those areas under categories of knowledge that were established in our theoretical framework. Using the constant-comparative method (Merriam, 2009), we analyzed themes that emerged in our repeated readings of these passages and developed a matrix of knowledge categories which we then used to write our results.

RESULTS

Findings from an analysis of the interviews indicated that the participants placed greatest importance upon contextual knowledge.

Contextual Knowledge

Contextual knowledge may include knowledge of the community and the school structure. According to Shulman (1987), teachers must have
“knowledge of educational contexts, ranging from the workings of the group or classroom, the governance and financing of school districts, to the character of communities and cultures” (p. 54). In this study, the following three types of contextual knowledge emerged as being of primary importance to the participants: knowledge of school, knowledge of parents, and knowledge of learners.

The teachers described a number of challenges they faced when working with ELLs. From their stories and sentiments, we deduced that a demanding school environment causes teachers to feel overwhelmed and frustrated. As Diana explains in the following passage, both she and her ELLs struggle as a result of the pressures imposed by the schooling environment.

But I think they [ELLs] just feel overwhelmed. And sometimes as a teacher I feel overwhelmed, like, Oh my! There’s just so much for them to learn. They have to learn the English and they have to learn all these skills, and how are we gonna get this all done?

To illustrate the lack of support she felt, Lydia said, “I didn’t really feel like I got a lot of knowledge in how to help her [one ELL], like, no one really said, ‘Hey, you should try this.’ I never really got any leads on it. You know what I mean?” Without contextual knowledge—in this case, without understanding that not all schools offer adequate support to teachers serving ELLs—working with these students could be overwhelming.

When asked what she found most difficult about working with ELLs, Diana explained the difficulties she had communicating with parents.

Well, I think sometimes communicating with the parents because everything has to be translated…. So I have trouble with having to always get a translator or get everything translated. Like if I write a newsletter, okay, now I gotta have somebody translate this for me. So, that’s hard.

As this passage indicates, Diana believes that translators are needed to facilitate communication between teachers and parents. Translation and interpretation services are not readily available in the participating school district, therefore, Diana struggles to communicate with her students’ parents.

The participants discussed the importance of understanding ELLs’ home environments, particularly the role of ELL parents in aiding their children academically and in fostering their English language acquisition. Regarding students’ home environments, the teachers explained it was important to understand that ELLs may not have L2 language models at home, i.e., because of the parents’ own limited English proficiency, they cannot always help their ELL children with their homework.

As the following passage illustrates, Anna has observed how students’ home environment affects their language acquisition.
I think one of the other challenges specifically at first-grade level is our phonemic awareness skills aren’t real strong here. And the sounds that they hear at home are different. And I see spelling patterns that I know would be in a Spanish language, show up in their writing here. And that’s a hard thing to teach because the language that they hear is different at home than it is here [at school]. And so, I think they have a lot of confusion, especially with vowels.

Diana and Lydia also mentioned ELLs lack of L2 language models at home. As Sandra explains in the following passage, the parents of ELLs are often not able to help their children with homework assignments.

Their parents want to be so supportive and they are supportive, but they don’t know how to help them. They can’t help them if they don’t speak English. They can’t help them on a lot of the reading homework and that kind of stuff, or just even just basic tutoring-type things that you would sit down with your own kid and do. Their parents can’t do it in English. They might be able to do some of it in Spanish, which is good ‘cause that helps build that first language background. They’re very strong in their first language, but it’s (sigh) hard for them when they come to school and then everything is in English all the time.

While Sandra described the efforts of ELL parents to be supportive, Diana explained that not all parents are supportive. She said some parents “won’t do anything. Won’t put a coat on their kids for winter, won’t get their eyes tested […] So, those are the ones [students who] usually have trouble with reading, too, at home.” In addition, Diana mentioned that some parents of ELLs may be charged with educational neglect if they chose to remove their children from school for extended periods of time.

In addition to having knowledge of the challenges presented by the schooling environment and the importance of understanding how ELLs’ home environments affect their academic performance, the participants also discussed the importance of having knowledge of the specific needs in different content areas. Anna and Lydia explained that ELLs have limited knowledge of mainstream U.S. culture, and Lydia stated that ELLs require additional support in social studies and science because they often lack the background knowledge to be successful in these subjects. She added that ELLs typically do better in mathematics. The participants stressed the importance of understanding that there are difficulties associated with bridging first language (L1) and second language (L2) learning and acquiring an L2 can be overwhelming for students. Diana, Anna, and Sandra all mentioned that learning an L2 can be overwhelming.

The participants explained that ELLs are not homogenous; ELLs have different levels of language proficiency, different academic abilities, and different backgrounds. Therefore, different types of ELLs have different needs. Diana spoke at length about a young male ELL in her class who she
described as a “selective mute.” He would speak Spanish, but not English. Diana was patient with him and the school provided him with a Spanish-speaking aide to “make him feel more comfortable.” Diana explained that “by the end of the year, he really blossomed” and was making efforts to speak with her and other students in English.

**Knowledge of Self and Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

While the participants gave primary importance to contextual knowledge, they also placed importance on knowledge of self and pedagogical content knowledge, especially as these pertain to second language acquisition and instruction. Knowledge of self refers to the skills and qualities teachers bring to the classroom. These are based on their understanding of and reflection on personal experiences, including their experiences with language and their experiences as learners and educators. Knowledge of self also includes a teacher’s understanding of his or her own culture, background, emotions, and attitudes. Pedagogical content knowledge refers to knowledge of instructional strategies, including classroom management and organization.

In particular, the participants placed value on having knowledge about language. They felt they needed to know more about how language works, the process of second language acquisition, and how students use language within various contexts. The teachers explained their own experiences with acquiring an L2 and their attitudes towards ELLs using their L1 while in school.

In the following passage, Diana reflects upon her own acquisition of Spanish as an L2.

> When I started getting so many Spanish children, I was trying to learn the words. And it just helped to know okay, this is orange. It’s *anaranjado*. And at first I could not get that *anaranjado*, and it was so hard. I kept telling Maria, ‘Can you say that one more time?’ (laughter) . . . So, I know how they [ELLs] feel because I’ve had to . . . I feel like they’ve taught me, too. And they’re so sweet. And they’ll tell you, ‘Now this is this in Spanish.’ And I’ve learned a lot of Spanish just by being with my kids.

As this passage illustrates, Diana is open to the use of students’ L1 in the classroom and she herself has tried to acquire Spanish as a means of communicating with and relating to her students.

Sandra explained the importance of allowing students to speak in their L1, as doing so increases the amount of comprehensible input they receive. She said, “A lot of teachers want to ban whatever the native language is.
No. Let them talk amongst themselves, so they can get that comprehensible input in their own language, too. So, speaking in Spanish is fine.”

Anna explained the type of individualized attention she provides her ELLs and how she uses her knowledge of Spanish to aid her students. Anna holds individual writing conferences with ELLs during which some ELLs tell her their outline in Spanish. In the following passage, she explains this process.

...still I have to do a lot of individual conferencing with my ELL students and sometimes you find yourself kind of providing words for them because they can’t get them out of their heads as easily. I’ve even had some tell me their prewrite in Spanish so that I can get the idea of what they want to write. And that helps me a little bit to know, okay, they understand the concept, they’ve got a good idea, we just don’t know the vocabulary for it in English.

Anna also conducts guided writing with her ELLs during which she writes down their ideas and asks them questions to draw more information. Anna also conducts extended pre-writing exercises during which she has conversations with her ELLs to help them brainstorm ideas.

These findings indicate that by learning and using their ELLs’ native language in the classroom, teachers were able to increase their understandings of the experience of being L2 learners and motivate their ELLs to produce more output. Also, the comments made by Sandra indicate that teachers’ possess both positive and negative attitudes toward the ELLs use of their L1.

Our findings demonstrate the importance of contextual knowledge—knowledge of school, parents, and learners—for teaching ELLs at the elementary school level. Participants discussed the challenges they and their students faced in the school environment, the importance of communicating with the parents of ELLs, and the importance of recognizing that ELLs are not homogenous.

**CONCLUSION**

The rapid increase in the number of ELLs in the United States requires that all teachers be prepared to address ELL needs in mainstream classrooms. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of elementary teachers about what mainstream elementary teachers of ELLs should know and be able to do. This chapter described the perspectives of four elementary teachers and conceptualized a knowledge base for teaching ELLs at the elementary level. This study has demonstrated that practitioner knowledge is important, especially for K–12 ELLs. A primary finding was the importance participants placed on contextual knowledge. Knowledge of school, knowledge of parents, and knowledge of learners were the most prominent
categories. This study provides several lessons for teacher educators. First, we must listen to the voices and experiences of teachers. Second, we must go beyond strategies for teachers of ELLs. Third, we must remember that we are preparing non-specialist mainstream teachers for ELLs.

Having knowledge of schools and knowledge of learners would help alleviate certain sentiments such as feeling frustrated and overwhelmed.

REFERENCES


