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## Overcoming Language Barriers with Parents of English Learners

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Overcoming Language Barriers with  
Parents of English Learners

A Plan B Project Presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of  
Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

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In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts in  
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## **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to my family, Jeremy, who has supported and encouraged me throughout this process and my newborn daughter, Kinsley. It is also dedicated to my parents, Brad Tallakson and Mary Tallakson and step-parent, Duane, for providing support along the way.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to determine the most effective ways to build relationships with parents of English Language Learner students. A literature review was done to answer the following research questions: In what ways can English Language teachers build relationships with parents of English Learners? How can the language barrier be overcome between educators and English Language Learner's families?

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

As an English Language Learner teacher for three years, I was faced with a few challenges when connecting with parents of my students. The main challenge was overcoming the language barrier as most of the parents did not speak English. During workshop week my first year of teaching, I learned that if I wanted a phone call to go home for a family where English was not the first language, I would have access to a bilingual liaison to help with the call. The liaison would make the call when they got the chance and I wouldn't even have to be present. Once the call was made, I would get an email stating what the parent had said and that was the end of the conversation. For the first year, I never talked directly to the parent over the phone. However, the following year, the administration instructed teachers on the procedure they advised to use to make phone calls to English Language Learner (ELL) families: fill out a form indicating what language was needed, what the phone call would be about, and when would work for the teacher to make the phone call along with the bilingual liaison or one of our bilingual paraprofessionals. The form often took a few days to be reviewed by the liaison, but a calendar invite would be sent shortly for the time and day when it worked for both parties to make the call to the parent. The teacher would guide the conversation and wait while the liaison translated what was said and for an answer from the parent and continue until the conversation was complete.

Disconnection was felt by the school staff as this mode of communication was impersonal. The only time ELL families were communicated with in person was during

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conference time when they were invited to come to the school and conference with the teachers of their child. About 30% of the families of ELL students would show up, sometimes only being able to stay a few minutes to discuss their child's performance before they needed to move on to the next teacher. Five minutes, two or three times a year is the amount of engagement that was had with the parents of ELL students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Prior to this study, I noticed the disengagement I had with my EL student's families. Other educators seemed to face the same challenge of disconnect with these families as well. Since student's success and achievement is built on parental involvement, this is a problem that should be addressed. Engaging families of EL students in the school community and communicating often with them is expected and strategies are needed in order for this to be successful.

The research goal was how to engage parents of EL students in the school community and how to overcome the language barrier between these families and educators when communicating and informing other educators during a professional development.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Educators are aware that an expectation is to communicate often with families of their students about both positive and negative aspects of the students' learning process. The purpose of this study was to find useful strategies to engage parents of EL students and to see how educators can overcome the language barrier when communicating with these families. I have taught EL students for three years and faced challenges of not knowing the best way to communicate when the families of my students who spoke a language other than English. Also, I wondered if there were ways in which I should have been engaging and inviting in the families

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of my students since there wasn't much communication going on. There was a low attendance level from these families at events put on by the school and for those who did show up, I had a small amount of time to interact with each family.

### **Research Questions**

- 1. In what ways can English Language teachers build a relationship with parents of English Learners?
- 2. How can the language barrier be overcome when communicating with parents of English Learners?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study helped me understand how to effectively communicate and engage the parents of her students. This will help the researcher better serve the families of my students, especially non-English speakers. The professional development presentation gave other educators an understanding of how to effectively communicate with these families and engage them in a better way also. Providing resources to educators who face the same challenges allows them to develop a better understanding of how to engage in a different way. This study is important to me as a teacher because it gave me an opportunity to acknowledge and educate others of my findings.

## **Chapter 2: Methods**

Communicating and building relationships between educators and parents of students is an important part in an educator's career. It has a positive effect on the students also. However, challenges arise when there is not a shared language or expectations. The focus of the conducted action research is how to build relationships with English Language Learner's parents when there is a language barrier and inclusion in the school community. The available literature has highlighted how important it is for both to happen. This chapter reviews the qualitative approach done including data collection and analysis.

### **Research**

While doing my research on how educators can build relationships and overcome the language barrier with parents of ELL students, the terms I used to redefine my search were: ELL parents, communication with ELL parents, language barrier with ELL parents, and involving ELL parents in schools. I did have success finding 21 sources that discussed these topics and answered my research questions. I did read through some articles that were nonrelevant, however. I copied and pasted the URL of each of my sources onto a document and wrote if the sources were good or bad next to it. If the source was bad, I moved it to the top of the page and kept them together.

### **Organization of the Readings**

After reading through each of the sources, I created a document where I wrote down the title, the type of source, and important notes from the source that I would want to look back on and remember. Each of the sources were numbered and I filled out every other section with the

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same color so the information did not run together, and I would know what information went with each article. When I filled the document out, I organized it by putting the sources that spoke about similar topics by each other. For example, on the first page, all three sources discuss how to communicate and involve parents of ELL students.

As I was writing my chapter on results, I made a separate document and put a short sentence from a source and put the corresponding number of the article next to it. I then looked for information similar to the previous sentence and wrote it underneath with the number of article next to it. This helped me see the similarities the articles discussed and overlapping ideas. It also helped me recognize themes. The themes I recognized were language barriers of ELL parents and educators, ELL parents value education but are unaware of how to show it, and also engagement of ELL parents in schools. There were quite a few studies done in my articles, so on a separate document, I wrote down the number of the article and a brief summary of the study that was done.

### **Chapter 3: Solutions for Educators**

“More foreign-born people live in the United States now than ever before. Schools are the main vehicle, sometimes the only one, to integrate immigrant families and their children into U.S. society” (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). There is a growing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the USA who English is not their first language, which makes building relationships with the parents of these students a challenge and engagement within the school society challenging as well.

Research shows that parental engagement is an important part of a student’s school career. It is one of the strongest predictors of school success and leads to improved student achievement and student attendance, and a reduced dropout rate (Ramirez, McCollough, & Diaz, 2016). It is shown in research that educators don’t always feel prepared when it comes to interacting with English Language Learner’s parents as they have no experience in doing so. Likewise, ELL parents have made it known that they want to show their value in education but don’t exactly know how to.

#### **Context**

Building relationships with parents of students is one of the most important steps educators take in the beginning of the year before the school year starts. Usually, the first connection is established at Open House. Teachers meet their students and whomever the students brought with them. Information about how to communicate is established and questions the student or their family has will be answered. Sometimes, there are translators available,



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other times there are not and a family member is the translator. When there are no translators, this creates a challenge: a language barrier.

Research has shown that often there is a lower level of participation in school events by ELL parents because of roadblocks: language barriers, immigration status, lack of formal education, and even fear (Protacio et al., 2020). This low level of participation raises a concern as there are not many opportunities for parents to attend school events during a school year unless requested by a parent or teacher. The involvement of EL parents in their children's education is crucial for success, student achievement, and confidence (Grant et al., 2017). Families play a vital role in their child's schooling. Often, educators do not share the same backgrounds or cultures as the ELL families they communicate with and may not know how to connect with parents who are linguistically or culturally different. ELL families want to be included in their child's schooling but have found that translators aren't always available which makes it impossible to communicate with their child's teacher. However, it is a federal mandate that educators are required to communicate with parents in the language that the parent(s) understand (Grant et al., 2017).

ELL parents often do not have an understanding of how to be involved with their child's schooling and what is required of them, and they are perceived by educators as not caring about their child's education. An example, "most Latino parents believe education and learning belongs to the educators and they don't want to interfere with their schooling" (Grant et al., 2017). Parents often feel because they don't have a strong educational background, they are not capable of helping their child succeed. Guidance and support on how to help their children outside of school is needed. There are six different ways that schools and parents can work together: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and

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collaborating with community (Baylor University, 2021). When it comes to parenting, assisting families in creating a home environment conducive to learning by providing support programs centered around health and nutrition, which helps to educate the parents, and checking in on families during educational transitions. Communicating: establish effective school-to-home communication by hosting parent-teacher conferences, providing language translators, and consistently updating parents through newsletters and phone calls. Volunteering: recruit parents to participate in volunteer programs within the school and make sure they stay up to date on upcoming opportunities. Learning at home: help parents provide support to students with homework and schoolwork by ensuring they have information about the skills required for assignments, as well as homework policies. Decision-making: encourage parents to participate in school decisions through PTA organizations, district-level advisory councils, and committees. Collaborating with community: connect families to broader community resources related to community health, social support services, and activities such as summer programs for students.

A study done by Grant et al. (2017) included three different examples of educators who modified the events that were already planned to engage EL parents and families in a better way with results that were successful. The first ESL teacher noticed that Open House didn't always have a great attendance rate. She decided to rename Open House to Diversity Night and recruited parents to participate by bringing a dish to share that was from their culture. Thirty-five families came to the event, which was a higher attendance rate than a typical Open House due to her involving them and communicating with them beforehand. Another ESL teacher modified parent-teacher conferences by sending out invites translated into the language of her EL student's parents and families. She followed up with a call to each of the families. She had 100% of the families attend the parent-teacher conferences. The families felt comfortable enough to ask

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questions and learn more about their child's behaviors. The final ESL teacher modified parent-teacher conferences as well but in a different way. She had her students make videos describing their country of origin, culture and family customs and place a sticker on a world map of where they immigrated from. During the parent-teacher conferences, students had families also place a sticker on the map and there seemed to be a high level of interest from the families on the students' videos they created and engaging conversations between parents, students, teachers and staff. These are simple modifications that were done to events held at school to engage EL families (Grant et al., 2017).

### **Language Barrier**

When it comes to engaging EL parents, the educator should be the first person to reach out to the family. However, a language barrier is often what stands between the educator and parents. EL parents often disengage from school events and communication because of the language barrier. They do not know if a translator will be readily available to help with communicating, which can be stressful. The effects of language barriers extend beyond classwork and can bleed into participation in other school-related activities (Baylor University, 2020). It is important for any educator to be mindful of students' cultural differences and familiarize themselves to create a welcoming space that is optimal for learning for all students. Figuring out how to facilitate parental involvement when English isn't a parent's first language is one challenge that is becoming more familiar to educators.

When contacting home, there are numerous ways encouraged to use: verbal communication, written communication, and technology. Verbal communication is the preferred method as it is more personable, and parents can hear the tone of voice. Identifying oneself and using a positive tone are ways to ensure that the parent must not worry. Informing the parent of

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what the call is about is also important. Written communication is another form of communication that can be used. It is important for any piece of paper sent home to be in the language the parent understands. This may mean a translator needs to translate it before it is sent and it might take extra time but this is the extra step that is necessary to make EL families feel at ease. Parents of ELs need to receive the same information as English-speaking families and at the same time. Google translate should not be used as the tone or message might get mixed up. The final method is technology, which is not encouraged as EL parents do not typically have a computer (Columna et al., 2009). In a study done by Zaidi, Rahat et al. (2021), a school in western Canada attempted to implement a web-based technology to support parents and it proved to be equally challenging due to families not having reliable access to technology. Teachers remarked that the parent's email was set up, but password forgotten, or they set up multiple email accounts and can't remember which one they used. Internet is another issue.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Funds of Knowledge theory, which originates from Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, encompasses the historically accumulated and culturally-developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being. The theory shifts from traditional educational approaches that positions adolescent learners as recipients of standardized curriculum and passive learners. It also positions families as knowledgeable partners with strengths that contribute significantly to their child's academic and overall development. This is crucial and seen in my research as I explain how EL parents can engage with their child's educators to ensure success in their education. This theory is linguistically sensitive to all learners which is important in this study as it focuses on English Language

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Learners and their parent(s) who aren't always English speakers like the educators they communicate with.

The research shows there are challenges educators face when engaging and communicating with families of ELLs. A language barrier is the main challenge that educators face and often disengages ELL parents from wanting to attend school events or communicate with educators. When researching the topic of language barriers with ELL families, there was a lot of information found and studies done to help engage these families in the school community. As schools become more diverse, more challenges like language barriers have become an issue.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

### **Communication**

Educators learn that communication with the families of their students is important for academic success. This is a challenge when the family does not speak English and might not have a good idea of how to support their child in their academics. There are always going to be families that have little to no communication or involvement with the school. The educator needs to be the person to initiate the start of communication. The common theme from my research was to have an open communication with the family and have a two-way communication in which the parent and teacher communicate equally. Creating positive rapport is key to successful engagement.

In the beginning of the year, sending out a survey to each ELL family to find out what the best way to contact them is a good start for engagement and involving the families. Finding out when the best time to contact them is also important to include on the survey. The survey should be in the language that the family speaks, so having it translated is necessary before sending home.

Having the child be the translator is one way to translate the information from English to the preferred language, but when there is sensitive information, it is not the preferred way. It is necessary to find a professional translator and for the communication to stay between the parent and teacher or educator. There are emerging technology applications on cellphones and computer that can be used to also translate, such as Talking Point, Class Dojo, and Remind.

### **Continuum of Family Engagement**

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Below in Figure 1, a visual of a continuum of family engagement is displayed. As schools and parents move from left to right on the continuum, there a move from information giving to a sharing of information between parents and schools. In order to engage families, focusing on the middle or right side of the continuum will have the best success.

The left end of the continuum, *family involvement with school*, involves traditional forms of having families volunteer, attend field trips, parent-teacher conferences and other school events. Families have very little input and the school is mostly in control of what role the families play.

The middle of the continuum covers *family involvement with schooling*, which includes a good exchange of information between educators and families. The activities can be at home or school, but the families are provided more agency. They will share information about the child's home life and other information that gives the educator a fuller picture of the child. This is where the two-way communication comes into play.

The right end of the continuum is *family engagement with learning*, which involves families having the most agency in determining how they can support their child's learning. This includes the families' beliefs and values. Family engagement might take place at school but most likely will take place at home (Protacio et al, 2020).

### Figure 1

*Continuum of Family Engagement*



### Limitations

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There are some limitations that will occur when communicating with ELL families, such as the language the translators speak. Smaller school districts will not have translators for every language. Another limitation would be timing of contacting families. Some families work during the day and others at night. Communication might take awhile to achieve.

### **Professional Development for Educators**

As the population of ELs continues to rise, it is imperative that educators working with ELLs are given opportunities for professional development to meet their needs. After doing research on communicating with parents of ELL students, my goal is to create a 1-2 hours long professional development to present to educators that work with ELL students strategies to communicate with their families.



### **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

The purpose of this literature review was to understand and interpret ways to engage and communicate with ELL families when there is a language barrier. Research shows that having access to a professional translator and emphasizing on two-way communication will create an open connection that is effective. Communication will lead to better success for the child and their academics. As technology advances, there are plenty of options to have applications translate messages going to these families, although not always accurate.

My project was created to inform other educators who struggle with the challenge of language barrier strategies they can use to effectively communicate with families who don't speak English fluently or at all. Connecting with families is an important part of teaching that can be difficult.

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