Reflection on and for Actions: Probing into English Language Art Teachers' Personal and Professional Experiences with English Language Learners

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Abstract

Effective ELL teaching and learning is profoundly influenced by the teachers' personal experiences and personalities (Farrell, 2016), their experience as language learners as well as language teachers (Farrell, 2007), and their beliefs about learning and teaching a second language (Farrell, 2015; Farrell & Ives, 2015). This study honored and examined in-depth the often-discounted stories/reflective narratives of our teachers. This paper reports a qualitative cases study that explores three veteran teacher's reflection on their personal and professional experiences with ELLs for self-discovery over years (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017) so that they can further reflect for their future actions with ELLs (Burns & Bulman, 2000; Farrell, 2007; Farrell & Vos, 2018). Data analysis revealed the teachers' different strengths and needs in working with ELLs. Four major dimensions (language, culture, culturally and linguistically sensitive pedagogy, and collaborative community) were identified as critical to effective teaching of ELLs and preparation of second language teachers.

Keywords: English language learners, Second language teaching and learning, second language teacher, reflective narrative

Introduction

The number of English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. public schools has increased from 3.8 million in fall 2000 to 4.8 million in fall 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The trend is true in many other English-speaking countries. The ELL students spend most of their school time with their teachers, who often feel professionally unprepared to

meet the linguistically diverse students' needs (Balderrama, 2001; Darling-Hammond, Chung & Frelow, 2002, Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005). It is also well documented that in-service teachers in U.S. public schools are in great need of appropriate Teaching English as Second Language credentials (Feistritzer, 2011; Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Rumberger, 2008) and relevant professional training (Menken & Antunez, 2001). As such, preparing teachers for increasing ELLs has become a critical factor in our joint endeavors of promoting equity and success for all students. However, limited perspective on second language teacher education and development has been gained from the in-service teachers, particularly their personal experience and professional practices with ELLs.

Teachers' Lore

There has been an ongoing oral tradition among teachers who exchange, construct, and reconstruct perspectives together, which is called teachers' lore (Schubert & Ayers, 1992, viii). The great potential of teachers' lore is to unfold the rich and complex realities in their various experiences (Blake & Blake, 2012). Effective ELL teaching and learning is often invisibly but profoundly influenced by the teachers' personal experiences and personalities (Farrell, 2016), their experience as language learners as well as teachers (Farrell, 2007), and their beliefs about learning and teaching a second language (Farrell, 2015; Farrell & Ives, 2015). For teachers, there is always space for improvement if they continuously and consciously reflect on what, how, and more importantly why they teach in certain ways (Dewey, 1933; Farrell, 2007; Farrell & Vos, 2018). This paper reports a research study that aimed to create a space for teachers to reflect on their actions and various experiences with ELLs for self-discovery (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017) so that they can better reflect for their future actions with ELLs (Burns & Bulman, 2000; Farrell, 2007; Farrell & Vos, 2018). Then, building on the findings about the in-service teachers' reflection on and for improvement of teaching and learning experiences and effectiveness, the author further discuss the implications for preparation of second language teachers.

Reflective Teachers and Teachers' Reflection

Teaching English learners is more than just good teaching practice. Teachers are thinking teachers who consistently make spontaneous and thoughtful decisions before, during, and after their teaching. Teachers' reflection is usually grounded in various experiences they went through in their personal lives and professional training, and daily teaching (Blake & Blake, 2012; Teng, 2018). Reflective teaching is "a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and while engaging in dialogue with others use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom" (Farrell, 2015, p. 123). As such, this research study values teachers' reflection with the researchers on both their classroom teaching experience and the matters outside the classroom (Farrell, 2007).

Teachers' reflection of their various experiences has been documented to be very beneficial for them (Farrell, 2013b; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Ives, 2015; Sibahi, 2015) as their reflections offer broader historical, social, cultural, political contexts of their teaching (Jay & Johnson, 2002). The reflective narratives provide a platform for teachers to examine how their different beliefs turned into various actions (Jasper, 2013). Their reflective narratives can guide their teaching with various theoretical, empirical, and practical knowledge and then

improve their teaching through continuously examining their and others' teaching from different lenses (Jasper, 2013).

Logic of Inquiry

This research study utilizes teachers' reflective narrative as a way of knowing the meaning communicated among the teachers (Polkinghorne, 1988). It is a powerful tool of sharing, transferring, constructing, and reconstructing knowledge, experience, meaning, and memories (Bruner, 1990). As Schubert and Ayers (1992) pointed out, those who hope to understand teaching must turn to teachers themselves as the secret of teaching can be found in the local detail and their everyday life of teachers, which are told in and through the teachers' lore (Prologue V). In their own words and ways, the teachers reconstruct and represent their rich experiences and situated phenomena in and through their narratives (Le Goff, 1992; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Klein & Myers, 1999). As such, their narratives featured with specific teaching or personal events help the researchers gain an in-depth understanding of the narrated phenomena (Klein & Myers, 1999).

Meanwhile, teachers should also be encouraged to consciously reflect on their various experiences (including both their professional and personal experience because they are "the driving force behind many of their classroom actions" (Farrell, 2016, p.3). Therefore, it is assumed in this study that knowledge held in the teachers' reflective narratives can be retrieved, relayed, and evolving over time. The participating teachers' narratives about their personal and professional experiences with ELLs offer powerful venues of sharing, transferring, constructing, and reconstructing meaning from their memories and knowledge about teaching ELL and second language teacher education (Bruner, 1990; Farrell, 2013a, b.).

Methodology

In this research study, the purpose of exploring teachers' reflections is not limited to the needs and strengths in the participating teachers' experience with English learners. It also aims to explore how the teachers' reflective narratives may have shaped their teaching practice and what are the implications for these and many other (second) language teachers' future teaching practice. Specifically, the study has twofold focus in its investigation of the teachers' reflection. One part of the exploration focuses on the participating teachers' reflection on actions, "the retrospective contemplation of practice" (Burns & Bulman, 2000, p. 5), which included both their social practices in and out of classrooms at different ages. Its purpose is to unfold a repertoire of personal and professional experiences the teachers brought to their interactions with their ELL classmates/friends then and their ELL students now. This part of examination will also enable the teachers articulate their overall or unique impression of ELLs and what works for them in their interactions with ELLs and/or their teaching of ELL students. Informed by the findings of the teachers' successful or not-so-successful personal or teaching experiences with ELLs, the second part of the investigation focuses on the teachers' "reflection for actions". Its purpose is to let the teachers rethink and think ahead what personal and/or professional knowledge, skills, and support they would need and use in their future successful actions, especially teaching (Chien, 2013).

To explore the teachers' "reflection-on-actions" and "reflection-for-actions", a qualitative case study (Yin, 1984) has been conducted to pursue a more comprehensive understanding of

language teachers' both personal and professional experiences and the implications for teaching and learning of ELLs. A focus group of three veteran English language art teachers with over fifteen years of teaching experience was formed to examine their rich experiences within various real-life contexts (Yin, 1984).

Research Context and Participants

The state where this research study took place was one of the ten states (Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Nebraska, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia) in the United States that experienced over 300% growth in ELL enrollment between 1995 and 2005 (National Clearinghouse, English Language Acquisition, 2015). Our focus group included three female veteran teachers Beth, Sammy, and Linda from three different elementary and middle schools in the U.

Beth has been an elementary school English language art (ELA) teacher in three different elementary schools in the past 15 years. She usually taught primary grades (K-2). Beth holds a master's degree in elementary education. She was originally from and grew up in a small town near Buffalo in New York state. In her teaching, she occasionally uses some Spanish to communicate with Latino ELLs. Beth has been actively involving her students, especially ELL students' parents into her teaching.

Sammy has been teaching in a local elementary school with high ELL population. 95-97% of the students who received free or reduced meal plans. She holds a Bachelor degree in elementary education. Her native language is American English. She claimed that she might know "about 10 Spanish words". Her personal schooling experience was impressively rich as she moved with her family to eleven different schools in Texas and Tennessee. A lot of these schools were military schools, on-base schools. She started her career as a reading specialist. Then she has been teaching Kindergarten or first grade in the same school for almost 20 years.

Unlike two other teachers, Linda is a true local resident and teacher who grew up and has been teaching in the same area for her whole life. She also holds a Bachelor degree in elementary education. Her native language is English. She learned some Spanish in her high school but did not use it in her teaching. She has been teaching 9th grade in the same and only high school in town for over 20 years.

Data Collection and Sources

A semi-structure interview ([Appendix A](#)) (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Weiss, 1999) was constructed in advance to facilitate conversations with the participating teachers and the researchers. Their narratives based on the semi-structured interview provided a space for the teachers to reflect on their experiences, beliefs, and teaching practice and to arrive a new level of awareness of both their belief and practices (Farrell, 2015). The researchers and the participating teachers had been collaborated in or out of their classrooms for other projects for three years before they agreed to participate into the current research on teachers' lore and reflective teaching. The interview questions were shared with the teachers in advance. So, the interview data is also supplemented by the teachers' notes prepared for the interview and the

researchers' field notes before and after the interview. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers over one-semester span. Each interview lasted twenty to sixty minutes.

Data Analysis

The researchers conducted opening, axial, and selective coding (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and then met monthly for comparative data analysis. The reflective interview data collected in this study pinpoints the complexities of teachers' various personal and professional experiences as well as the rich implications for their and other language teachers' future teaching. Also with the focus on the teachers' lore/reflective narrative and their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), discourse analysis (Bloome et al., 2005; Green & Wallat, 1981; Gumperz, 1982) is employed to analyze the interviews that occurred in the nexus of relationships and interactions among the researchers and the teachers (Gumperz, 1982, p. vii). The teachers' interview preparation notes and the researchers' field notes will be used as supplementary source for data analysis and discussion. This data analytic approach provides a framework of analyzing "the social contexts and incorporating the teachers' own understanding of contexts into the inferencing of meaning" (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 316).

This study specifically explores the following research questions:

1. What are the teachers' personal experiences with ELLs?
2. What are the teachers' professional experiences with ELLs?
3. What are the strengths and needs in the teachers' personal and professional experiences with ELLs?

Based on the finding of the above questions, the researchers proceed to discuss the implications for both in-service and pre-service language teachers' teaching practices.

Findings and Discussion

There are three major findings emerged from our discourse analysis of the interview transcripts and our field and analytic notes. Each of the findings will be discussed below.

First, our in-service teachers need more personal experience or interactions with linguistically and culturally diverse students and communities. In our teachers' reflections on their personal experiences with ELLs at young ages (5-18 years old), our three focus teachers did not recall much *specific events or clear memories about their ELL friends or peers*.

Table 1. Teachers' Personal Experience with ELLs

Focus Teacher	Personal Experience with ELL Classmates/Friends
Beth	Some kids with tanner color No language barriers or issues More diverse and multicultural community
Sammy	I was the ELL in a "flip -flop" learning environment.
Linda	Grew and learned in all white community; Cultural shock with mixed student population in high school; Awareness of racial, social, and economic segregation.

In our interview, Beth remembered her ELL friends in elementary school as "some kids with tanner skin". She assumed that these kids were from "different cultural backgrounds and home languages" but "no language barrier issues" at school as they were not pulled out from their classrooms. She did share her "cute memory of a specific Philippine classmate" (in Beth's words) because the song "Getting to know you" in the Broadway show "King and I" was used in her class to get to know the classmates. It is of particular interest that her narratives indicated her sharper sensitivity to subtle cultural differences among different white communities. Her narratives also reflected her wider and deeper roots in the white communities. For instance, she suggested that "being full blooded is culturally important to Italian, Irish, and Polish and there were particular cultural symbols and routines associated with these white groups.

For Sammy, she identified herself as "the ELL in that environment". In this part of her narrative, "the ELL" refers to the isolated minority student. Among the eleven different schools she went, there were many with strong Spanish environment. At that time, she knew no Spanish word but knew that was the language the big kids spoke on the playground. She did not specify any positive or negative experience related to ELLs. But she recalled "I was miserable because I thought they were talking about me, because I did not understand a word, class with a Spanish basal book, expected to read in Spanish, do not know the words". Her narrative about her experience as "the ELL" was powerful as the researchers assumed such flip-flop experience might shape her future teaching experience of ELLs. However, the following data analysis on the teachers' professional experiences actually showed no significant influence of Sammy's personal experience on her work with ELL students.

Linda did point out her growing and learning experience in all white elementary school, student population, and neighborhood. Like Beth, she could not recall ELL students but one "beautiful and different" Asian girl with "long black beautiful hair but no accent". She said that was drawn to this Asian girl (Cynthia) because "she was different from anybody else I had been around". She did not really remember her family or anything else about her language experiences. Linda said that "we even did not have a black student" until her middle school. In her words, she was thrown into "a whole different world" with socioeconomically and culturally diverse student population." It is not surprising that Linda experienced a serious cultural shock with some students' (especially colored students') absence or late homework, which was an eye-opening experience. As an in-service teacher now, she realized "we were kind of segregated by which track (vocational paths) we were going". She also attributed the "other" kids' underperformance to their socioeconomic status and local cultural expectations.

The part of our findings addresses the need of a more comprehensive understanding of the in-service teachers' own personal experience with and perspective of ELL students. It is important to obtain their prior experience so that we may further explore how much their personal experience and perspective may influence their current and future professional practices with ELL students.

Second, the analysis of the teachers' narratives about their professional experience showed that the effectiveness of their teaching of ELLs is significantly influenced by four main factors: a) the teachers' knowledge of ELL students' ethnolinguistic background and their strengths and needs, b) the teachers' pedagogical approach in work with ELLs, c) their involvement of ELL family/community in ELLs' classroom learning, d) their collaboration with and support from student teacher, ESL teacher, and/or school/district interpreter.

Table 2. Teachers' Professional Experience with ELL students.

Focus Teacher	To know ELLs	To work with ELLs	To involve ELLs' family/community	Other support
Beth	Take active agency to know ELLs not as issues but as little souls; Let ELLs read at comfortable levels; Teacher as parent	Activate agency of ELLs and their family in Integrate language with content Self-reflection on second language learning	Facebook for her class and parents Co-planning and co-teaching with parents International moms' club Get to know and involve parents and their family	Student teacher Bilingual student/parent
Sammy	Nice little kids Let all kids play together	Teach literacy and vocabulary	Teacher-parent conference	School district interpreter Bilingual siblings
Linda	Observation in and out of class	Teach to curriculum and tests	No involvement due to stringent curriculum and teaching pace.	Student teacher ESL teacher Bilingual student

Among our focus teachers, Beth is the one who took significant amount of time and active agency to know the ELL children. Her comment about working with ELLs not as ELL issues but "little souls" is quite telling and reflected her embracing attitude towards ELL students

and their families. Besides this comment, she highlighted two other important things in her interview: a) a teacher cannot just learn the ELL's language(s) and then will be able to teach an ELL; b) a teacher "cannot misjudge ELL students' if they can orally or communicate in written forms in English due to the lack of English language skills".

Beth beliefs about ELL as little souls and about the importance of getting to know them were reflected in her detailed narrative of specific ELL students and her consistent active involvement of parents in her teaching, class Facebook, and school activities. One of the ELL students she talked a lot about was Wendy (pseudonym) from China. Wendy was born in the U.S. but sent back to China for school education and raised by grandparents. But her brother was able to stay with their parents in the U.S. Wendy finished her first grade in China and just returned to U.S. with her grandmother. Beth took active agency in getting more help from her bilingual students to better understand Wendy. Wendy cried quite often in Beth's class when she could not convey her ideas as fast as she was able to do in her native language (mandarin). In addition, together with one of our researchers, Beth has co-planned a study unit integrating English language art skills and social study topic, immigration. The collaborating researcher and international mothers in Beth or her colleagues' classrooms were invited to share their immigration journeys with the whole second grade in this local elementary school. Other peer teachers, administrators, local social media, and community members were also invited to their story telling event. As part of the co-planning and co-teaching, the researchers also invited Beth to their classes for pre-service teachers and to present our co-planning of this integrated unit plan.

Sammy has been teaching Kindergarten or first grade class in the same elementary school with rapidly increasing Hispanic students and African American students. In her words, "little kids are nice and willing to take ELLs under their wings". Because she was not be able to play or speak with the big kids when she was in military based school. Therefore, from her perspective, letting all the children playing all together and the children being able to play together work out effectively in ELLs' socialization among peers. She did point out that the ELL children with basic communication skills still need English as second language service as they were "academically behind". And "structurally the vocabulary may not be there".

With her reading specialist background, Sammy expressed her confidence in teaching literacy and structure or content vocabulary. All the ELL students she has had so far joined her class with basic communication skills. She indicated that she would feel desperate if an ELL came to her class with zero English. Meanwhile, Sammy mentioned the divided family structure of her ELL students. Some of the ELL families still had some basic needs of food, housing, clothing, etc. Regarding parent involvement, she held teacher-parent conference for parents of ELL and all other students. The role of the interpreter was emphasized as Sammy said "the interpreter makes the (ELL) teacher-parent communication circle complete". She was aware there were translation websites and system wide materials, which had not been used yet.

Linda's both personal and professional experiences are grounded in dominantly white culture and community. As a teacher now, she only has few colleagues from other cultures. Most of the ELL students she could recall in the past ten years had been in ELL for several years and would come like "a merging learners". When she had a Russian ELL with no English, she assigned a student teacher to work with her individually, which effectively helped the students' language development. By what she shared, the Russian girl could speak English

beautifully after a couple of years. Linda obtained some help from the ESL teacher but was still dependent on Spanish-English bilingual students or the English proficiency level of her ELL students.

Linda further shared her general impression of ELLs from different backgrounds. She gave specific examples of Asian students who were usually quiet, easy going, hardworking, all As, with some broken English. Her Hispanic ELLs, especially girls, who were often absent and ended up moving to other places. She assumed that they were asked to babysit young siblings at home and there was a cultural gap in what would lead to success in school.

All three teachers shared their concerns about ELL family members' limited involvement in their children's schooling, especially regarding their absence, late homework, and unstable living locations. Student teachers, ESL teachers, and interpreters were also seen as important resources. Meanwhile, they admitted the limited and much needed collaboration between the classroom teachers and the ESL teachers.

Third, our findings showed the richness as well as complexities of strengths and needs in the teachers' personal and professional experiences with ELLs. All three teachers expressed their need and willingness in collaboration with ESL teachers and interpreter, which was confirmed in their teaching practice as an effective way to learn more about ELLs, their language proficiency levels, and corresponding expectations. All three teachers emphasized the effectiveness of letting ELL learn, play, and socialize with their peers in and out of classroom, which were authentic language use contexts and could promote ELLs' English language development.

Table 3. Teachers' strengths and needs in personal and professional experiences with ELLs

Strengths	Needs
1. Facilitate play and socialization process between ELLs and peers. 2. Create authentic language use environment. 3. Engage ELLs' multiple intelligence. 4. Take active agency in discovering ELL students and parents' funds of knowledge. 5. Use social and local media and get community members and administrators to be part of the teaching and learning of ELLs.	1. Better understand ELLs, their talents, their absence, their quietness, their crying in classes, and their parents and friends out of classrooms. 2. Systematic professional training related to ELLs. 3. teaching and learning things out of the teachers' comfortable/expertise zone. 4. Need support from interpreter, student teachers, parents, etc. 5. Accessibility of materials and tools. 6. Using available sources.

Beth's successful experience with ELLs is built on her active engagement of children's multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2008). Visual aids (especially in vocabulary instruction) such as, graphic organizers, sentence starters (for both speaking and writing), acting out, pictures, music, laughter, etc. were widely used in helping ELL students. Beth highlighted the importance of being flexible and differentiated instruction to help ELL achieve learning goals and their best.

For Beth, she pointed out that for both in-service and pre-service teachers there was systematic learning or professional training related to ELL or second language education. She also felt ESL teachers only shared some law changes or different strategies for things quickly at their faculty meetings. Further, she did not think a short-term ESL certificate program with focus on teaching language or literacy would be enough as she did not want to be a "pull-out" but "inclusive" teacher. Her want reaffirmed her belief of teachers as parents. Beth invested enormous time to get parents involved through social media, guest speech, special performance, parent math or engagement night and established geography club, where half of the students were ELLs. Beth felts comfortable reaching out parents and obtaining "first-hand experience" of her ELL students. She invited parents together to teach and tackle possible stereotypes the native English speaking kids may have had about other countries or cultures.

Neither Sammy or Linda expressed their need of further professional development. Sammy did not think she would need what she has had. Her response to the question related to professional development need indicated her hesitation of teaching and learning out of her comfortable zone, reading. Sammy also mentioned her difficulty understanding a ELL parent from Africa, who used different syntax structures. She indicated that she would love to know Spanish as well as dialect and syntax differences between African English and American English.

Linda, with her busy high school teaching, wanted to learn on how to interact with her ELL students. She said she did her best but felt unsure whether she helped enough. Her challenge is the average of ninety students she had each semester and the amount of time she had with them. The stringent curriculum, schedule, and busy tests were also mentioned by Linda as the barriers of more interactions with ELL students and involvement of their parents.

Conclusion

Our findings can be summarized and presented as four dimensions. The first language dimension pinpoints the importance of valuing and capitalizing on ELLs' language diversity and including diverse literatures as the teachers in this research study had limited second language learning experience, which became a barrier for them to understand the ELLs' potential and learning process. The second culture dimension highlights the importance of knowing the teachers' as well as the students' cultural backgrounds, boundaries, and therefore becoming aware of their cultural similarities and differences. The teachers' awareness of the cultural common ground and uniqueness can make teacher-student intercultural communication in English language socially and academically appropriate for the ELL as well as other students. The third pedagogy dimension reflects our findings of the three teachers' need of systematic professional training, especially related to culturally and linguistically sensitive and responsive pedagogy. As Beth indicated, she wanted the professional training and pedagogical knowledge that enabled her to better work with the

little souls rather than become a "pull-out" teacher. Language is cultural. Language uses are always guided by cultural norms; culture is practiced in and through our language uses. The marriage of language and culture affirms the importance of being sensitive to the existing and equally important languages and cultures in a classroom. In addition, Beth has been committed to expanding the supportive learning environment for her ELLs beyond her classroom and through her active involvement with parents in the school. Both Sammy and Linda indicated their need of knowledge of English variations and local community cultures in their communication with ELL and African American parents. All the four dimensions are closely connected. The last community dimension represents the need of joint efforts of teacher, teacher educators, and the relevant communities of ELLs and administrative professionals.

To conclude, this study honored and examined in-depth the often-discounted stories/reflective narratives of our teachers. With years of established collaborative relationship with the researchers, the teachers were willing to share their powerful reflective narratives about their personal and professional experiences with the researchers. Through their reflections, the teachers became more aware of their teaching beliefs and the underlying influence of daily teaching practices in the class. More importantly, the reflection helped both teachers and the researchers realize what needs to be improved in their teaching practices (Farrell, 2015) in order to better teach ELLs and prepare teachers of ELLs.

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Appendix A Prompt Questions for Interview

1. Please introduce your name, language(s), and cultural background. What other languages have you learned?
2. What are your personal educational experiences with English language learners? That is, did you grow up and go to school with ELLs? If there were some, what did you know about them? Did you get a chance to work with, play with them?
3. Are there any kind of stories or experiences you remember as you learned with ELL in schools, played with on playground, or worked with ELLs in workplace? Did you observe and/or know any challenges they may have encountered in and outside of school?
4. Did or do you have difficulty understanding or communicate with ELL peers/students? What are those difficulties you observed in your interaction with them?
5. What are your professional experiences with ELL and/or ESL teachers?
6. Do you feel professionally prepared to work with our growing diverse student population? for instance, content knowledge, experience, pedagogy, certification etc. Do you feel confident while working with ELLs?
7. How much do you know our local ELL community, their families and family backgrounds? What have you done or will you do to engage ELL parents and their community in your classroom?
8. What would you do to improve ELLs' learning experience and achievement in your class? What tools or sources do you need to support your teaching of diverse learners?
9. Do you think you have enough time to teach ELLs content knowledge beside the language and literacy skills?
10. What kind of professional development support or training would you like to receive in order to prepare you for ELLs or further improve your instruction of ELLs?