

## Teaching Emergent Bilinguals: How In-service Teachers' Perception of First Language Acquisition Theories Inform Practice

Razak Kwame Dwomoh<sup>\*a</sup>, Araba A. Z. Osei-Tutu<sup>b</sup>, Stephanie Oudghiri<sup>a</sup>, Alankrita Chhikara<sup>a</sup>, Lili Zhou<sup>c</sup>, Troy Bell<sup>a</sup>

\* Corresponding author

E-mail: [rdwomoh@purdue.edu](mailto:rdwomoh@purdue.edu)

a. Department of Curriculum & Instruction, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

b. Department of Teacher Education, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra-Ghana


c. Department of Curriculum & Instruction, California State University, Los Angeles, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Different writers, linguists, and researchers present nuances in language acquisition theories. However, few studies explore in-service teachers' voices in such discourses. It is, therefore, imperative to explore the voices of in-service teachers in such narratives as they teach emergent bilinguals (EBs) and culturally and linguistically diverse students. This paper examined how in-service teachers perceive First Language Acquisition (FLA) theories and how those perceptions influence teaching EBs and informing classroom practice. Centering on Freeman and Freeman's discussion of FLA theories (imitation, reinforcement, behaviorist, social interaction, active construction, connectionist), we argue that in-service teachers' perceptions of first language acquisition theories impact how they teach and engage EBs in their classrooms. Findings show that in-service teachers consider the social interaction theory most beneficial to students' language development. However, the precariousness of FLA theories makes it challenging for them to determine the best approach to teaching EBs. Additionally, teacher education programs and critical professional development (PD) courses are instrumental in fostering understanding and robust pedagogical mindsets and preparing teachers to meet the needs of emergent bilinguals.

### KEYWORDS

Emergent bilinguals; in-service teachers; first language acquisition; professional development.

## INTRODUCTION

Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) or English language learners (ELLs) are terms used to describe English learners (ELs)—individuals who learn English as a second language. Ofelia García, a researcher of urban and Bilingual Education and the author of *Bilingual Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Global Perspective*, describes EBs as children who attend school but speak a language other than the language of instruction and contends that “bilingual education is *the only way* to educate children in the twenty-first century” (García, 2009, p. 5). García uses the term *Emergent Bilinguals* to affirm students’ ability to expand their language and communication potential (García, 2009; see also García & Kleifgen, 2010). Although the two terms (i.e., EBs and ELLs) refer to students who learn English as a second language, in this paper, we prefer to use *Emergent Bilinguals (EBs)* to refer to English learners, considering its potential for students to expand and develop their language proficiencies.

Emergent Bilinguals enrollment grows steadily in U.S. public schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022) report shows that EB enrollment in U.S. public schools grew exponentially from 4.5 million (9.2%) students in the fall of 2010 to 5.1 million (10.4%) in the fall of 2019. Additionally, the National Education Association (2020) predicts a potential for the EB student population to increase by 2025, where every American classroom may have at least one out of four children who are emergent bilingual or English. Considering the NCES report and the National Education Association’s prediction of significant growth in EB student population for U.S. future classrooms, it is becoming increasingly necessary for teachers, especially in-service teachers, to examine their perceptions about language acquisition theories (i.e., how individuals acquire first and second languages). Thus, rethinking or reassessment of those perceptions could inform their classroom practice.

The conceptualization of language equity requires a re-think of language as *actionable*—something we do instead of something we possess (Anya & Randolph, 2019; García, 2009). An investigation into the processes of how children acquire a language is described as language acquisition (Mehrpour & Forutan, 2015). First language acquisition (FLA) deals with how children acquire their *mother tongue* or first language after birth (Susanto, 2017). Studies over the years portray differing perspectives in theories of first language acquisition (e.g., Beckner et al., 2009; Bergmann et al., 2007; Freeman & Freeman, 2014; Halliday, 1994; Mehrpour & Forutan, 2015; Rice, 2002; Skinner, 1957; Susanto, 2017). For example, in explaining the need to study linguistics, Freeman and Freeman (2014) posit that “a well-educated person should know something about language” (p. 7). Thus, teachers need not only to know about language but also to “understand how students learn first and second languages” (p. 19). Freeman and Freeman point out that teachers can make language understandable when they know how it works. They also argue that “people acquire a second language...in the same way that they acquire a first language” (p. 18).

As a professor Emerita and professor emeritus, the Heinemann professional development providers, and leading scholars in the field of linguistics focused on language development for emergent bilinguals, Yvonne Freeman and David Freeman have been at the

forefront of preparing educators to teach English learners grounded in theory-based practices. For this module and to develop a conceptual understanding of the *Early Theories of First Language Acquisition* and language development to teach EBs effectively, we emphasized the readings in Freeman and Freeman's (2014) chapter on *Essential linguistics: What teachers need to know to teach ESL, Reading, Spelling, and Grammar*. We selected Freeman and Freeman's text as our primary reading resource for our participants because it delineated the various FLA theories and provided context for our participants to conceptualize what the theories were and a space for them to add their voices and reflections about the theories. From these reflections, we extracted the data that informed this study. As a result, Freeman and Freeman's text provided the lens through which we gauged the perspectives of in-service teachers perception about the FLA theories and how those perceptions inform their classroom practice. Therefore, centering on Freeman's discussion of the FLA theories (*imitation, reinforcement, behaviorist, social interaction, active construction, connectionist*), we argue that in-service teachers' perceptions of language acquisition theories impact how they teach and engage EBs in their classrooms. However, in-service teachers are often removed from such discussions that should be informing their practice.

It is important to note here that EBs and many school children experienced less contact with teachers during the pandemic. That necessitated the power of this professional development experience for in-service teachers. Additionally, while the PD course did not focus on the methodology of teaching language, it focused on how these in-service teachers made meaning of language within their classroom spaces. This is especially relevant as teachers strive to enhance inclusivity by reimagining learning spaces. In light of the nuances in theories of first language acquisition and Freeman and Freeman's assertion that there is no difference in how people acquire a second language from the first language; we (a team of six scholars and researchers), through a four-week professional development module course, examined *how* in-service teachers—teachers certified to teach or who teach in K-12 classrooms—perceive first language acquisition theories, and how those perceptions influence the ways they teach EBs. Specifically, this paper is driven by two research questions 1) How do in-service teachers perceive First Language Acquisition (FLA) theories? 2) How do in-service teachers' perceptions of FLA theories inform action or classroom practice?

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A critical understanding of EBs and language acquisition theories, particularly First Language Acquisition (FLA) theory, provided the lens through which we gauged the perspectives of in-service teachers. Considering how in-service teachers' voices are not heard in language acquisition discourses, this paper explores and seeks to amplify the voices of in-service teachers' perceptions about FLA theories and how those perceptions inform their classroom practices. This research is also conceived at a time when emergent bilinguals, in the aftermath of COVID-19 due to public health and economic instability, have suffered academically because of less contact with teachers.

Participants' conceptual understanding of Critical Theory (e.g., Bohman, 2021; Giroux, 2003) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) (Alim & Paris, 2017) grounded the professional development (PD) course. Specifically, these frameworks were crucial in guiding how participants conceptualized and reflected on their understanding of FLA theories and their impact on cultivating inclusive classroom experiences with EBs. It also created a space for participants to reimagine their learning environments and instructional methods to foster inclusivity for EBs in mainstream classrooms. This is due to the increasing advocacy for educators to be well-equipped with a critical mindset in educating emergent bilinguals. To fully engage with these theories, participants were encouraged to confront biases and cultivate a shifting mindset in order to embrace a "perpetuat[ing] and foster[ing]–to sustain[ing]–linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation" (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Guided by self-reflection and in-depth discussions, spaces were created for participants to meaningfully engage in dialogue about race, culture, and ethnicity in order to create inclusive classroom cultures and effective teaching for a diversity of student populations (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017). Moreover, institutions and school districts are also responsible for providing support through curriculum planning, pedagogy, and policy interventions to ensure socially just and inclusive classrooms for all learners (Nieto, 1999; Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017; Sulkowski & Wolf, 2020). The findings of this study also reflect the notion that teacher education programs and *critical* professional development (PD) courses are instrumental in fostering understanding and robust pedagogical mindsets and preparing teachers to meet the needs of emergent bilinguals.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Language has become indispensable to human social life, and as Halliday (2004) puts it, we learn language, we learn through language, and we learn about language. Language is essential in daily interactions and teaching. Educators, especially in-service teachers, express varied perspectives about language development and how knowledge about language development helps teach EBs. That presupposes that a teacher's knowledge of FLA theories could be a precursor to effectively teaching EBs or English as a second language.

### First Language Acquisition (FLA) Theories

According to Chomsky (1975), humans are born with innate abilities for language acquisition. First language acquisition comprises early theories in the twentieth century, such as *imitation, reinforcement, and behaviorist theories*. Theories of first language acquisition from the twenty-first century include *social interaction, active construction, and connectionist theories*, which focus on the child, environment, and language. Freeman and Freeman (2014) point out that if "we acquire our native language without first learning the grammar. Why, then, do we need to teach a second language by teaching the grammar?" (p. 10). Therefore, teachers' understanding of how students develop language can "guide their curricular decisions" (Freeman & Freeman, 2014, p. 21). Rice (2002) adds that "any satisfactory model of language development must be compatible with how children learn; their ability to perceive, conceptualize, store, and access

information; and their motivations” (p. 21). As a foundation for preparing teachers to engage critically with EBs, our study reveals that when teachers understand how language works, they are better equipped to support and engage EBs in their classrooms effectively.

According to Freeman and Freeman (2014), the early theories of first language acquisition that are “now no longer accepted by linguists” are the *imitation theory* and *reinforcement theories* (p. 23). Imitation theorists propose that children “learn language through imitation” (Bergmann et al., 2007, cited in Freeman & Freeman, p. 23), and reinforcement theorists assert that “children develop language through positive reinforcement of standard language forms, and they are corrected when they produce nonstandard forms” (p. 23). As Freeman and Freeman (2014) posit, the widely accepted theory of language acquisition during the late 1950s and later received much criticism was the *behaviorist theory*, which was an amalgamation of the imitation and reinforcement theories. The contemporary theories of language acquisition, on the other hand, include the following: *social interaction theory* that proposes “language occurs in a social context” (p. 32), or the relationship that exists between language and the social context (Halliday, 1994); *active construction of a grammar theory* suggests “children invent the rules of grammar themselves” (Bergmann et al. 2007, p. 316); and *connectionist theory* addresses how children associate words and sound with objects, and the role of the brain in language development (Freeman & Freeman, 2014).

### **Support for Emergent Bilinguals and Teacher Preparations**

Support for EBs in mainstream classes continues to be minimal or non-existent, as teachers have little to no preparation to teach linguistically diverse students (Polat & Mahalingappa, 2013; Stains-Davenport, 2021; Villegas et al., 2018) and has been exacerbated due to the crises associated with COVID-19. The above scholars find that training to get teachers ready to work with EBs is still not required in many teacher-education programs. In her attempt to understand how prepared mainstream teachers are to instruct EBs in the classrooms and engage teachers in questions about how to differentiate instruction for EBs, Stairs-Davenport (2021) found that besides not being prepared to teach EBs, the teachers she interviewed “expressed many wonderings and dilemmas of practice in their questions that focused on differentiating curriculum, assessment, and instruction, per the prompt, but many teachers also wrote questions related to building community, discerning language differences from language disabilities, and most striking, simply where to start in working with ELLs” [EBs] (p. 7).

The above-highlighted example and phenomenon reflect teacher education programs’ lack and teachers’ unpreparedness to meet student needs. What Polat and Mahalingappa (2013) suggest is even more vital to the process and efficacy of supporting EBs. They explain that even with preparation through teacher education programs and PD regarding teacher competence to support EBs, there is a need for teachers to hold pedagogical beliefs that promote equitable practice for them to accept their roles and responsibility of providing necessary instructional support for linguistically and culturally diverse students in their classrooms. For instance, in a yearlong study focused on EB and monolingual first graders, Moses and Kelly (2017) examined identity development’s role in literacy practices. The authors

highlighted the experiences of Ariana, a first grader in year one of a mainstream class. At the beginning of the school year, Ariana's teacher facilitated a strategy group of three students to position Ariana as a student who needed extra support in decoding strategies. By mid-year, Ariana's teacher-facilitated partner reading provided Ariana with the opportunity to position herself as a capable reader. While working with a fellow language learner, Ariana's coaching style led her to "confirm her identity as a capable reader and user of strategies in a second language with something to contribute to the community of practice" (p. 412). By the end of the school year, Ariana had made significant progress as a reader and positioned herself in the classroom community as a leader. Specifically, Ariana was able to apply coding, comprehension, and coaching strategies her teacher put in place. Through inclusive literacy practices, Ariana found support in her classroom community to develop a positive personal and academic identity. Thus, by preparing teachers who are knowledgeable of the acquisition process and strategies to support EBs and those who are linguistically and culturally responsive in their pedagogical beliefs, both in-service and pre-service teachers can better support EBs.

## METHOD

We designed a professional development course incorporating four modules on race, immigration, EBs, and women and gender in STEM (Osei-Tutu et al., 2022) in spring 2021. Each of the four modules was structured in a four-week format (weeks 1-4) that lasted 16 weeks. The module on EBs (module 3) incorporated first and second-language acquisition theories, as expounded by Freeman and Freeman (2014), and critiqued the various instructional models and theories regarding their implications for teaching EBs. This paper focuses on module three, a conceptual/critical understanding of EBs/ELLs (Dwomoh et al., 2022). Module three was purposefully designed for participants who were local teachers in a midwestern community. It aimed to introduce participants to theories of first language acquisition and the critical understanding of EBs (Osei-Tutu et al., 2022). We selected Freeman's text as the primary reading resource for the participants because this text expounded on the various FLA theories and provided assessment tools for practice, such as the *Exit Chart activity*, which allowed participants to identify specific language acquisition theories from the readings, highlight the key points from the readings, draw evidence for and against/critique the theory, and express their thoughts and reflections of the FLA theories. Additionally, these readings and theories were selected because they were seen to be essential foundations for the participants in building a critical understanding of EBs, and it is on these theories that we analyzed in-service teachers' perceptions in this paper.

### Participants and Data Collection Procedure

Sixty-two (62) in-service teachers from a midwestern community actively participated in the module mentioned above on EBs. However, a disaggregate of the participant characteristics were not collected. To explore participants' understanding of first language acquisition theories and how they advance teaching EBs, we scaffolded the content and instruction in the four-week modular course (Dwomoh et al., 2022; Osei-Tutu et al., 2022). In

week one, we assigned participants to read a textbook and two articles on EBs. For this module and to develop a conceptual understanding of the *early theories of first language acquisition* and language development to teach EBs effectively, we emphasized the readings in Freeman and Freeman's (2014) chapter on *Essential linguistics: What teachers need to know to teach ESL, Reading, Spelling, and Grammar*.

The second week characterized asynchronous virtual peer group discussions. In the third week, participants completed an *exit chart* activity. The *exit chart* activity focused on identifying language acquisition theories, key points from the readings, the evidence for, the evidence against/critiques, and personal thoughts. In week four, via a Zoom question and answer session, we invited a guest speaker, an expert on EBs, to further discuss the theories, readings, and activities from the first three weeks and answer questions the participants had. Finally, participants wrote reflections on their newfound knowledge and experiences in the professional development module (Osei-Tutu et al., 2022) on EBs. However, the data used for this study was the sixty-two *exit chart* activity reflections that participants completed in week three of the module.

### **Data Analysis**

This paper followed Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) conventional approach to qualitative content analysis. Researchers use this approach to analyze data that describes a phenomenon and to "gain a richer understanding of a phenomenon [the phenomenon under study is first language acquisition theories]" (p. 1286). It is more effective to use this approach when there is a gap in the literature about the phenomenon and themes/categories that emerge from the data during analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We employed this approach because it is flexible in analyzing text data (Cavanagh, 1997) and aided us in deriving themes directly from the text data. We analyzed the 62 activity reflections of participants because they reflect participants' perceptions and understanding of first language acquisition theories and provide answers to the two research questions.

The qualitative content analysis emphasizes the contextual meaning of texts (Budd et al., 1967; Lindkvist, 1981; McTavish & Pirro, 1990; Tesch, 1990), which in this paper were the narrative responses (activity reflections). Narrative responses are part of several other qualitative data collection procedures, such as interviews, focus groups, observations, open-ended survey questions, and information in print (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). Each author was assigned ten to eleven activity responses during the initial coding. Afterward, each author did a repeated and close reading of each text and highlighted key ideas as initial codes. Next, each author made notes from the initial ideas generated, created codes representing several thoughts, and made categorizations. After reviewing all 62 activity reflections individually, we collectively reviewed each author's codes and labels and grouped similar codes/labels into themes. Finally, we derived themes that provide answers to the two research questions. To ensure credibility, we relied solely on themes that emerged from the data without preconceived categorizations (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). In addition, we utilized strategies such as peer debriefing, individual and group extensive engagements with the text data, and constant

observations of emerging themes and categorizations to ensure the credibility of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Manning, 1997).

## FINDINGS

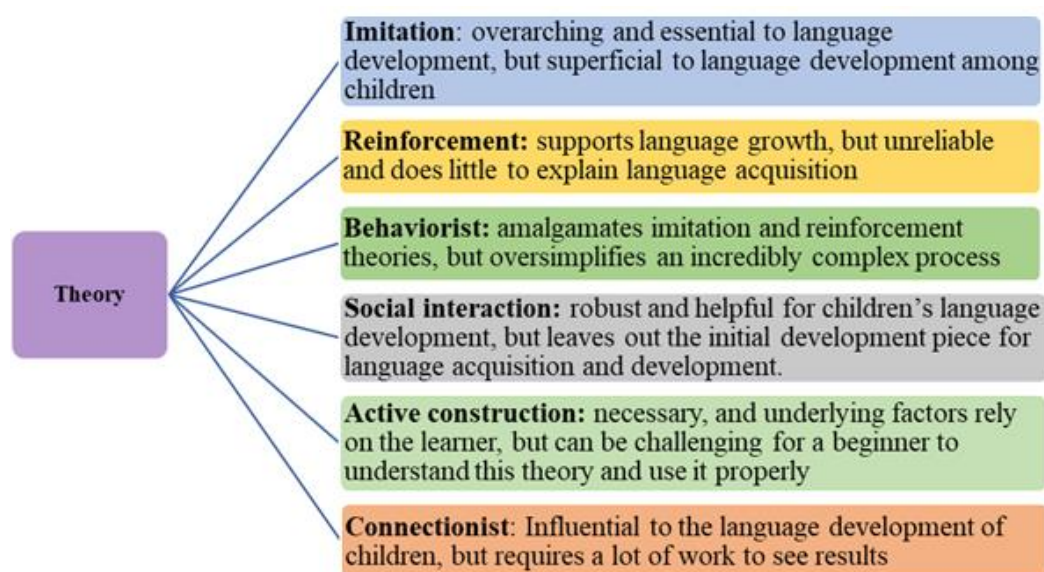
This section presents findings that address our two research questions (RQ): (1) How do in-service teachers perceive First Language Acquisition (FLA) theories? (2) How do in-service teachers' perceptions of FLA theories inform action or classroom practice? Within this section of the paper, participants' direct quotations are either in block quotations or inserted in the text. Findings for RQ1 include participants' views based on their understanding of the various theories and the resulting emergent themes that include the precariousness of the various theories about language development; Grammar is not a prerequisite to teaching Emergent Bilinguals; Embracing diverse teaching practices (Mindset/Philosophy); the impact of Previous Schooling Experiences/Flexibility in Schools, and Social Interactions on EBs. For RQ2, participants' responses led to the coding and the identification of three emergent themes that reflect how their understanding of the FLA theories can improve their practice and engagement with EBs. These include refraining from correcting students, re-thinking teacher education and the curricula, and newfound knowledge on how to effectively and equitably teach EBs.

### RQ1: How Do In-service Teachers Perceive First Language Acquisition Theories?

#### *The precariousness of the Various Theories about Language Development*

We address participants' perceptions about each of the theories and how those theories inform practice for EBs, respectively. The theories we delineate in this paper include *imitation, reinforcement, behaviorist, social interaction, active construction, and connectionist theories*.

Participants noted there is a high level of uncertainty surrounding first language acquisition theories, and they view the theories differently. They claimed that "first language acquisition cannot be defined by one theory alone," and the participants expressed different views as to how language develops in children, making it challenging for them as educators to determine the best approach to teaching EBs.



**Figure 1.** *In-service Teachers' Perception of First Language Acquisition Theories*



First, participants viewed *imitation theory* as overarching and essential but as a superficial theory to language development among children. Among such views included their assertion that “imitation may play a role in the overall language development of children, but it doesn’t tell the whole story,” and “many times in teaching foreign languages, we use imitation (repeat after me) to learn pronunciation and sounds of words, but that does not mean any acquisition of meaning is happening.” One participant also noted:

I am one who is guilty of continuing to believe that children learn through imitation. While I see the mounting evidence against this, I do find some merit in this as I saw my children learn the correct parts of speech through imitating my speech.

Second, contrary to the idea or belief that *imitation theory* is indispensable for children’s language learning, participants viewed *reinforcement theory* as beneficial but unreliable. They believed reinforcement can support language growth, but it does less to explain language acquisition than imitation theory. They indicated that “we, adults, are too inconsistent in supporting children [for children] to learn a language based on this theory.” Again, they asserted that “language comes with time and experience, which renders this theory a little somewhat pointless” and that “language is more that [which] we do, rather than something we know—the more “language” we do, the more proficient we become.” Some participants claimed that children learn language rapidly, regardless of reinforcement. Also, while some participants believed there are many corrections to use this theory for children’s language learning, others expressed that corrections are necessary for learning grammar rather than language and words. A Participant retorted:

I do agree with the invalidity of this theory as I often try to use reinforcement in my class when my 6th graders say “ain’t” and “goed”, and I do find that they use the correct form but will return to their nonstandard form soon after.

I think that in order for this theory to be somewhat effective, the corrections would have to be more consistent. This theory has many flaws because of the interactions of adults with children when they incorrectly use language.

Third, participants viewed the *behaviorist theory* as oversimplifying an incredibly complex process, and they believed language is too complex to be learned solely through this theory. They claimed that since this theory draws some of its background from reinforcement theory, it should be approached cautiously. Since this theory amalgamates the imitation and reinforcement theories, they believed “this theory ignores the complexities of the cognitive abilities innate to human beings. To claim we know the language because it was imitated and reinforced muddies the originations of speech.”

My son spoke early on and his first word sounded like this “Eh Ooh”. We had no idea what he was saying but he continued saying it. We didn’t reinforce anything because we had no clue what he was saying. We didn’t even know what he was imitating. Finally, one day while walking across the parking lot at Sam’s Club. He placed his hand up, said “Eh Ooh” and crossed with me. His first word was Thank you! We had no clue!

Fourth, participants viewed the *social interaction theory* as more robust and helpful for children's language development than all the other theories. According to them, the early language acquisition theories [imitation, reinforcement, behaviorist] were not wrong but were very basic. They believed social interaction theory is "helpful as it promotes working with children to help them succeed, rather than working on specific behaviors," and it works well "when the social interaction is between the child and caregiver." However, some participants considered this theory "leaves out the initial development piece for language acquisition and development. It seems to suggest that once the proper language is provided to the child, then they will imitate it." According to the participants, this theory could also be applied to writing—formal versus informal; texting language versus email language; writing to a friend versus writing to a professor; writing a research paper versus writing a quick reflection. A participant indicated:

The earlier theories were not wrong, but they were very basic. It is true that language is acquired through imitation, reinforcement, stimulus, and response, but the social interaction that happens between the teacher, the learner, and the environment also plays an important role in how we learn a language.

Fifth is the *active construction theory*. Participants viewed this theory as necessary yet having too many factors that rely on the learner, and it could be challenging for a beginner [novice educator] to understand this theory and use it properly. One participant indicated, "as a science teacher, I have learned that humans have questions and start testing what ifs. Children have this innate ability to be curious and will start to test with what if's in language as well." Another participant expressed that "it is interesting that children's language errors often come from overgeneralization of language rules, which means that they hear common patterns of language and then apply them to new situations." Another participant also stated that:

Kids can make connections. When we think about reading comprehension, making connections is usually one of the easier strategies for kids. But I can also see the complexity of language and how abstract it can be at times. I can see both sides on this one because of this reality.

Lastly, there were participants who viewed the *connectionist theory* as influential to children's language development, yet it required a lot of work to see results. This is possible considering the books they read to children, using new words in the classroom, and reinforcing the idea of using pictures and gestures to teach the meaning of words to children. Participants believed this theory illuminates background knowledge's importance in language development. A participant stated:

The more exposure a child has to a concept, whether through personal experience or literature, the stronger the neural pathways in their brain will become and the more associations they will be able to make. Similar to imitation theory, this reinforces the importance of naming objects, reading books, and having conversations with children about things in their world.

***Grammar is not a Prerequisite to Teaching Emergent Bilinguals.***

Comments from multiple participants reflect the opinion/perception that learning grammar is not a prerequisite for bilingual language learning:

I have seen teachers focus on sentence diagrams and memorizing verb tenses, which don't provide practical tools for students learning English. According to Freeman, "We acquire our first language without first learning grammar. Why, then, do we need to teach a second language by teaching grammar?"

Participants considered the dichotomy suggested by the precepts of the imitation theory and the belief that grammar must come first for EBs to learn English. A participant noted, "As a grandmother, mother, and teacher of 25+ years, in several locations across the US... I agree that children use what they hear to develop a set of rules... They listen and are awarded the conversation if they are successful in expressing themselves verbally." This participant suggests that children can learn language through imitation and develop their own set of rules from what they hear without having to learn grammar first. Another participant's remark represented the thoughts of several others in the PD Module who expressed support for the idea that imitation theory *and* grammar training are interactive in the process of emergent language learning. A participant indicated:

As a parent...we watch my children imitate us all the time and use memorization as their way to learn. I also see how people are against it in terms of phrases and sentences and the fact that children pick up grammar as they are taught and if it was just memorization, they would be closer to speaking full sentences sooner.

Like other participants, the remark affirms imitation as a learning mechanism, but also considers that something else must comprise the process if children are delayed in their ability to construct full sentences from phrases and sentence fragments. As other participants supported reinforcement theory as a key mechanism for learning, their statements acknowledge that grammar can come from following speech patterns and subsequent reinforcement, not from formal grammar training. This is best illustrated by the following remark, "It seems like our children do seem to follow grammatical patterns based on how we speak to them, but we do a lot of reinforcing."

***Embracing Diverse Teaching Practices (Mindset/Philosophy)***

Participants recognized that there are processes and ways of thinking that need to be unlearned regarding first language acquisition. One participant expressed that, "I believe that sometimes the most supportive plan is to just allow a student the freedom to be him or herself and to speak freely in the language that is most natural." Other participants also indicated that:

As teachers we teach and in one way or another, we mold minds. We must learn and unlearn some of the things that we have been taught in our classes. We need to continue to educate ourselves to make sure we are understanding all students including ESL [EBs] learners.

I've witnessed the frustration of teachers when an EB student is not comprehending questions or is struggling with another subject area although they seem to speak it just

fine. It's important for educators to provide EBs students with scaffolding and context clues during lessons so that they are fully grasping the information.

It's never right to assume that just because a student does not speak English, they are not capable of learning. Many of my students often mentioned their frustrations when they were given basic work because of their English level. I always encouraged them to try their best, and I assured them that the work would change as they learned more of the language; their teachers did such a great job of developing their skills and reinforcing the language they already knew. I believe that patience, a lot of it, is what is needed in classrooms with students who are learning academic content at the same time they are learning a completely new language.

### ***Previous Schooling Experiences/Flexibility in Schools, and Social Interactions***

Participants alluded to the process of socialization in shaping language identity. When learning a new language, people are encouraged to be in a context where that language is spoken, which facilitates learning the language quickly. Environmental factors and social institutions like schools and peers could influence and shape language development, as one participant noted:

Previous schooling experiences may influence students' performance in American classrooms because they provide the students with opportunities to socially interact with others, which is one way that language develops. Through that interaction in a classroom students develop the understanding of the need to interact with one another, which promotes language development no matter where they are attending school. The mode of instruction may be different because different languages are spoken and written in different shapes. However, with that schooling experience, students have an increased desire to communicate, which will help them develop the new language quicker through their social interaction with others.

Similar to the idea presented above regarding social interactions as a catalyst for language acquisition, the next quote highlights the successful master of language with the openness and willingness on the part of educators to encourage students to communicate in their first language.

### **RQ 2: How Do In-Service Teachers' Perceptions of FLA Theories Inform Action or Classroom Practice?**

In this section, we show how in-service teachers' perception of FLA theories informs their practice in the classroom. We identified three main themes based on participants' responses: 1) refraining from correcting students, 2) re-thinking teacher education and the curricula, and 3) participants' newfound knowledge.

#### ***Refraining from Correcting Students***

The teacher plays a role in the classroom to ensure correctness and accuracy. However, language learning is embedded in daily communication; thus, rather than correcting them, providing space that allows students to make mistakes would be more helpful for students to develop confidence in the language. Making mistakes is also a process of learning which should not be skipped. A participant recognized that by saying, "Students need to be given the

opportunity to experiment with language in an environment without shame and utilize it for practical purposes. This likely isn't always what happens because many teachers are not adequately trained in this area."

Correcting students might also discourage students. Students, in particular adolescents, would feel ashamed to have their mistakes corrected. Refraining from correcting and communicating with them will encourage students to participate positively in language learning. Students may think that the teacher is focusing on their opinions more than just correcting their language. The quotes two participants added, "I learned that the ability to learn language is innate and that children when they learn a language, learn it better if the person just communicates with the child instead of correcting the child," and "I think it can be very tedious and disheartening for the child if they are corrected every time they make a language mistake" attest to the notion that correcting may not be an effective approach to teaching EBs.

### ***Re-thinking Teacher-Education and the Curricula***

Based on participants' responses, in-service teachers seek new ways of supporting EBs in their classrooms. As participants reflected on their teacher education programs, several of them expressed feelings of being ill-prepared to work with culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students. According to one participant:

While it is clear that these ideas and strategies are best practices for teaching EBs, they are not always used in schools. Many teachers are behind the curve, still focusing on grammar instead of practical application. How can we change teacher education and curriculum to focus on better instructional practices?

Additionally, as they transitioned from a pre-service to an in-service teacher, participants expressed limited knowledge of theories that informed pedagogical practices grounded in social justice. A participant stated that "Teachers of ELL or ESL should focus more on creating equity and diversify education than equality." Participants were therefore responsive to enrolling in a PD course focused on critical theories to become more critically conscious, thus increasing their awareness of the social, educational, and political factors that impact EB's in K-12 schools. Participants were focused on building authentic relationships with students when reflecting on how the course readings and activities could potentially guide their teaching practices. As one participant described it, "I applied a self-check about how much of that is happening in my classroom, and my self-reflective self is telling me that I need to do more of that with more intentionality."

Throughout the PD course, as participants engaged with new knowledge, many found inspiration through self-awareness and sought new ways of cultivating inclusive classroom environments, supported by several participants who found that:

I have learned so many strategies that I never thought about with my ELL students. I think the biggest thing that I noticed is that we need to think about ELL students like any other student we have in our classroom. I think that sometimes, as teachers, we think that teaching ELL students is more work for us, but that is not true. There are so many ways to add new experiences in the classroom involving everyone.

Finally, for veteran in-service teachers who have been exposed to PD throughout their careers, participants expressed a desire to increase their funds of knowledge about EB students and families.

I would love to learn more in-depth about our ENL/ELL families. This class module was a good starting point, but there is still so much that I could learn. I know that my teaching would probably benefit from some more information about this. This is something that we can all gain a better understanding of the information that has been presented.

### ***Newfound Knowledge***

One of the major findings from teachers' exposure to EB learning theories in this module is a new understanding, perspective, and knowledge gained on effectively engaging and supporting students in their classrooms. Participants' responses approach this new knowledge from two different perspectives. The first category consists of participants who are teachers or educators but have no knowledge of these theories, understanding, or resources to work with EBs. One teacher remarked:

It was a surprise to learn that the way most secondary language is taught in the school does not seem to be in line with the way that humans naturally acquire language. I didn't walk away with a firm belief in any one of the theories as the definitive one: There are kernels of truth in all of them, and most likely are all pieces of the same very complex puzzle.

Another teacher discussed their new understanding by stating that, "at this point I have learned so much about language development from many areas of study, which I had never considered previously." The second category is participants, teachers/educators, who already teach and support EBs but have come to a new understanding of how to support them effectively. One of the educators in the module indicated that, they are "looking at all of this [EB teaching, learning, and support] through a different lens than a traditional educator," while another participant also reflected on how differently they would have engaged with their EB students had they had the opportunity to take this course earlier:

I currently have three students who are new to the U.S. and are ELLs and wish I had been able to experience this module at the beginning of this school year to help build my teacher toolbox of strategies.

It was also particularly useful to see the reflective and introspective approach that teachers were now bringing to their engagement with EBs. One of the participants reflected by indicating that:

A key element of the readings is to help ELL students by approaching them with a strengths-based mindset instead of a deficit-based mindset. I can change some of what I do in my own classroom to adjust to this strength-based approach.

The findings suggest that teachers have voices regarding FLA theories and that these perceptions inform their classroom practice.

## DISCUSSION

In contributing to teachers' training support, this PD modular course introduced in-service teachers to critical perspectives, understanding, and dialogue about teaching EBs. As Freeman and Freeman (2014) addressed that it is necessary for knowledgeable people to "[also] know something about language" (p. 7); teachers, especially in-service teachers, who are seen as experts and have the requisite training and expertise to teach K-12 classrooms, have a responsibility to know about language and to "understand how students learn first and second languages" (p. 19). In-service teachers' understanding of language acquisition and how language works can enable them to teach EBs for comprehension effectively. We discuss how this phenomenon is vital in K-12 settings, considering the minimal support for EBs in mainstream classes and a dearth of teacher preparation in teaching linguistically diverse students (Polat & Mahalingappa, 2013; Stains-Davenport, 2021; Villegas et al., 2018).

### **The Perspectives of In-service Teachers about FLA**

In-service teachers viewed first language acquisition theories differently and indicated that they face the challenge of determining the *best* theory(s) and approach to teaching EBs. They believed language development in children differs with every child and that one theory is inadequate to define first language acquisition theories. Among the theories (i.e., imitation, reinforcement, behaviorist, social interaction, active construction, and connectionist) of first language acquisition examined in this paper, in-service teachers consider the *social interaction theory* most beneficial to children's language development. They believed the focus and the collaborative efforts between the child and the caregiver or the student and the teacher, in lieu of ascertaining behavioral tendencies, foster language development. Also, in-service teachers indicated that language in a social context applies to students in formal and informal writing. It enables students to differentiate between texting and email, writing to a friend versus a professor, and writing a research paper versus journaling or reflection. Thus, teacher educators should highlight the social interaction theory in both pre-service teacher preparation and in-service PDs as they inform successful practice and engagement with EBs for academic growth and development.

However, in-service teachers viewed *imitation theory* as broad and essential yet superficial to language development among children; the *reinforcement theory* as beneficial but unreliable; the *behaviorist theory* as oversimplifying an incredibly complex process where language is too complex to be learned solely through this theory; the *active construction theory* as challenging for a beginning teacher to understand and use it effectively; and the *connectionist theory* requiring strenuous efforts to see results. There is, therefore, room for differentiated instruction in teaching EBs, but it requires a shift in pedagogical mindsets. Additionally, this perspective on connectionist theories has implications for how educators engage in-service and pre-service teachers on how some of the tenets of this theory can be used as a complement to social interactionist theory.

### **The Role of In-service Teachers in Teaching EBs**

Embracing diverse teaching practices requires a philosophical shift in mindset to enact equitable and inclusive classroom practices. Supporting Preservice teachers (PSTs) in teacher education programs often begins by challenging deficit thinking and promoting asset-based pedagogy. PSTs are not engaging with critical theories, so as they transition to future classrooms, they are unfamiliar with Critical Race, Sustaining, Relevant, and Responsive Pedagogies. While critical PD is needed for in-service teachers, teacher educators must rethink their curriculum and begin implementing these theories to fill in gaps of knowledge (Osei-Tutu et al., 2022). According to Braden and Gibson (2021), “teacher education programs have an ethical responsibility to support PSTs to build dispositions to create culturally responsive curricula for a diverse study body” (p. 242). Specifically, the authors argue that as PSTs prepare for future classrooms, critical self-reflection becomes an integral part of transformative practices [using the experiences of in-service teachers, as the findings from this study portray]. Thus, teacher education programs that promote critical theories that inform humanizing practices can better prepare PSTs to work with and support their students’ cultural, linguistic, and academic needs.

### **Fostering Social Interaction in Teaching EBs**

One of our significant findings is that participants subscribed to the interactionist approach premised on learning a language from a desire to communicate. One of the significant implications of this understanding is that language development is incumbent on whom one communicates. The socio-cultural environment that someone grows up in is an essential indicator of language acquisition. We argue that the more diverse a teacher’s schooling or educational experiences, the better they can advocate for EBs. Essentially, language learning and all aspects of teaching require establishing an environment of mutual respect for diversity and diverse school experiences. A mindset change to recognize an EBs cultural environment as holistic can help create a classroom environment conducive to language mastery.

Additionally, the nature of teaching is to provide instructions for correcting and eliminating mistakes. For teaching EBs, allowing mistakes is a way to promote students’ language development. Research shows that “children develop language much better when adults help them communicate their intended meanings, not when they try to correct what they say or how they say it” (Freeman & Freeman, 2014, p. 41). Thus, teachers who refrain from correcting students would leave a space for students to feel safe to make mistakes and learn from mistakes. Teachers could support EBs in class practices instead of correcting students by extending waiting time and through effective communication with students. This strategy proves to be effective for students’ language development and makes students feel cared for and safe. It also promotes students’ interests and desire to use the language further.

### **The Call for “Critical” Professional Training for In-service Teachers**

The inability of teacher education programs to develop and train teachers prepared to meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students (Polat & Mahalingappa, 2013; Stains-Davenport, 2021; Villegas et al., 2018) is further substantiated by the results of this study. As participants went through the course and reflected on their training, they realized how ill-



prepared they were to support EBs in their classrooms. In-service teachers called for the need for professional development courses that could help them effectively educate EBs that they continue to encounter in their classrooms. As Durgunoğlu and Trudie Hughes (2010) pointed out, pre-service teachers were not prepared to teach EBs, and the in-service teachers who were mentoring the pre-service teachers were not providing any guidance because they also did not have the know-how. “Teacher educators who enhance their attention to culturally responsive teaching by articulating a corresponding vision of linguistically responsive teaching may decide how to structure preservice learning to realistically incorporate appropriate learning during the relatively short preparation time frame” (Stairs-Davenport, 2021, p, 5). A more pragmatic way forward is that the teachers are willing to engage in more *critical* PD courses centered on EBs to support their newfound knowledge adequately.

Knowing how to support EBs is not enough if the teachers do not have the philosophical mindset and will to make changes in their classrooms. Thus, the need for teachers to hold pedagogical beliefs that promote equitable practices in their roles and provide necessary instructional support for linguistically and culturally diverse students in their classrooms cannot be overemphasized (Gay, 2018; Mahalingappa, 2013). Therefore, for teachers who did not know these EB theories, understanding, or resources to work with EBs, their explicit desire and strategic planning to implement some of their new knowledge with their students is commendable. On the other hand, are teachers who are already engaged with EBs at various levels, building their *teacher toolbox of strategies* through the PD course, though timely for the new EBs they will encounter, was too late for their previous students. Teachers who are well-prepared, culturally and linguistically sensitive in mindset, with strength-based lenses on EBs, can change the exclusionary school culture that is a disservice to EB students and their families.

## CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, when it comes to teaching and engaging EBs, in-service teachers play a critical role in their academic success; however, their voices are not heard in language acquisition discourse. Thus, what this paper sought to do, was to show that in-service teachers do have perceptions about FLA theories and how those theories inform their classroom practice. The findings show that when teachers understand how FLA theories inform or affect their practice, coupled with their classroom experience, opportunities are created for dialogue that can better serve EBs. Additionally, developing a better understanding of FLA theories has implications for how teachers teach EBs. Changes in perspectives, as discussed by participants, reflect reimagined teaching methods. Thus, teachers discuss various ways in which their teaching practices, such as refraining from correcting students, can change to support EB learning and academic success.

That implies a dearth of PD sessions on FLA theories and a critical understanding of EB learning are essential for in-service teachers. As the findings and discussion show, participants reflected on their training and realized how ill-prepared they were to support EBs in their classrooms. Critical self-reflection becomes integral to transformative practices as pre-service

teachers prepare for future classrooms. The more diverse a teacher's schooling or educational experiences, the better they can advocate for EBs. In-service teachers called for the need for PD courses that could help them effectively educate EBs. While critical PD is needed for in-service teachers, educators must rethink their curricula and begin implementing these theories to fill in the knowledge gaps. Teachers can support EBs in class practices instead of correcting students by extending waiting time and effective communication with students. This strategy is effective for students' language development and makes students feel safe and cared for. It fosters students' interests and desire to use the language further, which has implications for enhancing inclusivity in the classroom. That is because teachers' understanding of how EBs learn would mean showing teacher empathy and respect for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Finally, this paper has implications for policymakers, FLA theorists, and researchers. For educational policymakers, it is important to provide opportunities within the teacher education curriculum for pre-service teachers to be adequately prepared to teach EBs. FLA theorists and researchers should begin engaging teachers to integrate theory and practice.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

As common with all qualitative studies, this paper also had limitations. The main limitation of this study is that we cannot generalize the experiences and perceptions of the 62 participants to all in-service teachers teaching in American classrooms. However, the findings can be extrapolated, and the implications for informing or improving classroom practice can be adapted to novel classroom situations. This study focused on only in-service teachers' perceptions of first language acquisition theories. Future research can examine pre-service teachers' perspectives about the same phenomenon and its implication for classroom practice.

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