Teachers' Perception of Over-Identification of English learners in Special Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed teachers' perceptions of English learners (ELs) and their referrals to special education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Limited social interaction during the pandemic greatly affected ELs' language and social development. Using an online survey, the study identified how teachers perceived the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ELs, particularly changes in their areas of struggle before and after the pandemic, and the connection between their struggling due to the lockdown and special education referrals. This survey was distributed to Indiana public schools and targeted K–3 teachers. The results indicated that almost 25% of the teachers perceived an increase in ELs' referral to special education referrals after the school lockdown. Further, the teachers indicated an increase in reports of Els with behavior issues and emotional struggles compared to the pre-pandemic period.

Keywords: *English Learners, COVID-19 pandemic, Special Education Referrals, Teachers' Perspectives*

According to the US Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey, 5 million English Learners (EL) were enrolled in public K–12 schools, and this accounts for 10.3% of the total K–12 student population in public schools in 2020 (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). Given that a large proportion of school-aged ELs come from various home language environments, schools must provide more culturally responsive instructions to meet student needs, including overcoming language barriers, cultural differences, and academic challenges (Ortiz & Dynda, 2008). According to the 2019 Nation's Report Card: Reading, EL performance in reading was below the proficiency level (Council of Great City Schools, 2020), and reading difficulties were tightly connected to struggling in other academic areas (Sun et al., 2010).

A rich linguistic classroom experience can enhance student outcomes (Bauer & Arazi, 2011). Yet, ELs have still struggled in school and needed more supports, and the lack of environmental support eventually leads to ELs' overrepresentation in special education settings (Ortiz & Dynda, 2008). The overrepresentation of ELs has been an ongoing concern in special education (Sanatullova-Allison & Robinson-Young, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden lockdown of all schools for virtual instruction resulted in many children suffering from isolation. The situation could have been more severe for ELs, who risked losing all linguistic experiences other than interacting with their teachers and peers online (Matthews, 2021). However, how ELs have been affected by the lockdown, particularly in relation to special education referrals, has yet to be closely investigated. Thus, this study aimed to determine the relationship between the COVID-19 lockdown and special education referrals for ELs and the major changes in ELs' struggles before and after the pandemic.

Literature Review

ELs have unique needs in multiple aspects of their schooling due to being from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Ortiz & Dynda, 2008). However, they have fewer opportunities to experience high-quality educational environments, which eventually leads to overall learning difficulties in schools. For example, language and communication barriers are prevalent among ELs. ELs who typically use limited vocabularies are at a significant disadvantage in academic learning, and this lack of a rich vocabulary base too often is the main barrier to their comprehension of texts and lectures (Newton et al., 2008).

EL Areas of Struggle in Schools

Reading comprehension is the most difficult area for ELs (Hall et al., 2019). As the simple view of reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990) indicates, the level of reading comprehension depends on the product of children's decoding and listening comprehension. Scarborough's Reading Rope indicates that the level of skilled reading comprehension involves multiple factors, including word recognition (e.g., phonological awareness, decoding, and spelling) and language comprehension (e.g., background knowledge, vocabulary, and language structures) (Scarborough, 2001); however, ELs struggle with these factors, eventually leading to poor reading comprehension. Lin (2015) also reported ELs' writing difficulties, such as frequent pauses to think, selecting accurate words or idioms, and organizing their writings.

Due to these academic struggles, ELs also present behavior and/or emotional issues at schools. Castro-Olivo et al. (2011) assessed secondary Latino students' socio-emotional resiliency. The results indicated a positive correlation with academic progress, as the students' socio-emotional resiliency score was lower with lower academic performance. Communication is another area in which ELs struggle due to language barriers. Derwing and Rossiter (2002)

stated that ELs are developing their communication skills, while various pronunciation nuances, unique accents, or the occasional use of segmented sentences may present challenges. ELs often actively adopt and employ creative communication strategies to navigate these challenges toward better communication; however, not all strategies are equally effective, and some may lead to misunderstandings.

Effective Instructional Strategies for ELs

In addition, to teach diverse ELs more effectively, Gay (2002) recommended that teachers use the cultural characteristics and experiences of the students themselves. Culturally responsive models require teachers and administrators to understand their students' communicative styles and literary experiences (Klingner & Edwards, 2006) and to have specific knowledge of cultural similarities and differences. Hamayan et al. (2007) suggested that teachers should assess ELs' abilities to function within the school culture to recommend appropriate culturally responsive interventions for those experiencing learning difficulties. Effective teaching practices for ELs are best implemented by teachers who acquire additional linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills and learn to apply these to curriculum planning, pedagogy, and six assessments for ELs (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Additionally, as Nieto (2000) noted, successful teaching for ELs is about changing teachers' attitudes about ELs and their families and communities. Besides working on cultural aspects of student and family cultures, teachers also use various pedagogical methods, including explicit teaching, individualizing, creating a positive climate, and collaboration and support (Cho et al., 2017).

EL Overpresentation in Special Education Prior the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite research suggestions to meet ELs' needs, multiple studies still report ELs' struggles at school, evidenced by EL misrepresentation issues in special education (Sanatullova-

Allison & Robinson-Young, 2016). ELs are one of the major groups reported as either underrepresented or overrepresented in special education classrooms (Counts et al., 2018). Whitford et al. (2019) also reported that ELs are significantly underrepresented in gifted education. According to 2020–2021 US Department of Education data, school-age ELs account for 13.74% of the special education population, whereas only 10% of ELs were enrolled in public schools in 2022 (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). Among ELs who received special education services in 2020–2021, almost three-fourths of ELs with special needs were served under specific learning disabilities (44.69%), speech or language impairment (18.93%), and autism (9.75%). These data indicate that ELs were referred to special education due to academic, communication, or behavior issues.

EL Struggles During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Without a doubt, for ELs, school is the place for receiving considerable input in social and English language areas. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the shift to online learning created inequitable learning opportunities for ELs and widened achievement gaps (e.g., Pier et al., 2021). Further, ELs need specialized instruction, active engagement, and instructional and linguistic accommodations to maximize their learning. However, school shutdowns during the pandemic cost social interactions that influence language and communication development for ELs (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). Notably, social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic may have limited more on ELs' English development because ELs typically use their native languages at home (Zhang et al., 2012). Many teachers missed direct in-person communication with ELs during the pandemic, making it challenging to keep students motivated (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). This change had a critical effect on ELs' English language development, as they lacked input in terms of speaking, writing, and reading in English, which is foundational to their

educational success.

Furthermore, beyond academic achievement, the transitions in instructional formats from in-person to online during the COVID-19 pandemic affected ELs' engagement in and access to learning. Teachers found it especially difficult to meet the needs of ELs when there was no shared classroom time (Marshall et al., 2020). Huck and Zhang (2021) showed that full access to content and hands-on activities during class time helped EL's learning; however, limited assistance in full participation and the lack of access to content resulted in learning and achievement lags. For example, in California, ELs demonstrated 3.8 months of learning lags in ELA and math from Fall 2019 through Winter 2020–2021 compared to the growth in their non-EL peers (Pier et al., 2021).

Lacking equitable access to resources and support has resulted in more challenges for ELs adjusting to schools. ELs may face more challenges upon returning to school, which could result in higher numbers of special education referrals (Ortogero & Ray, 2021). While their study was not directly related to ELs, Hammerstein, et al. (2021) reported that the Covid-19 had clearly negative impact on student achievement in both elementary and secondary schools in their meta-analysis literature review study.

Based on preceding discussion, we argue that social isolation during the pandemic would have resulted in referring more ELs to special education services. Thus, it is crucial to identify and discuss how ELs were affected by social isolation during the pandemic and how their struggles could have resulted in more over-referrals for special education services. Our research questions are as follows:

(1) Do teachers perceive any changes in major difficulty areas of schooling for ELs compared to the pre-pandemic period?

(2) Do teachers believe that the lack of an English language environment during the COVID-19 pandemic affected ELs' in-person school adjustments?

(3) How do teachers describe special education referrals of ELs compared to the pre-pandemic period?

Methods

This study used an online survey that targeted in-service teachers in K-3 classrooms in Indiana. The survey included questions for demographic information and teachers' perspectives on ELs during and after Covid-19. The authors sent emails to the principals of Indiana public schools and asked them to distribute the survey to their K-3 teachers. Once the survey responses were collected, the authors conducted a descriptive analysis to identify the results of the research questions. The next sections include more details of the process.

Participants

As mentioned above, this study's target participants were in-service teachers who worked in K–3 classrooms throughout Indiana. K–3 teachers were mainly selected for the study because their students started schooling during the pandemic; thus, they had yet to have previous schooling experience or minimal school experience. Thus, the authors considered K–3 classrooms as having a much more substantial impact by the lockdown and having more difficulties adjusting to the school environment after the lockdown. The K-3 curriculum covers early literacy which develops essential and foundational skills for all academic achievement. During the Covid-19 pandemic, K-3 teachers expressed their difficulty implementing effective literacy instruction virtually (Wright, et al. 2023). More importantly, studies on K-3 grade reading achievement test outcomes in 2019 (before the pandemic) and 2021 (after the pandemic) show decrease of student achievement in all grades after the pandemic (Stoneberg, 2023). One notable finding of the study was that Hispanic students had greater decreases than Caucasian students. This supports the hypothesis of this study that ELs in K-3 classrooms could have been impacted harder during the pandemic. The first author retrieved the lists of the public schools

and the names of principals from the Indiana Department of Education website and contacted

principals to distribute our survey to their K–3 teachers. Table 1 shows the demographic

information of the participants. Most participants were European/White females with over five

years of teaching experience.

Table 1. Participating Teachers' Demographics

Category	N = 34	%
Gender		
Female	33	97%
Male	1	3%
Ethnicity		
European/White	31	91%
Hispanic/Latino	3	9%
Educational level		
Bachelor	19	56%
Master's	13	38%
Doctorate	2	6%
Areas of teaching license		
Elementary	26	76%
Early Childhood	2	6%
Special Ed	1	3%
Others (multi-grade, Elementary & ELL, Elementary & Special Ed)	5	15%
Teaching Grade Level		
Pre/K	8	23%
1st	6	18%
2nd	3	9%

3rd	5	15%
Others	12	35%
Years of elementary teaching		
1 year	5	15%
2 years	2	6%
3 years	1	3%
4 years	0	0
5 years	3	9%
Over 5 years	23	67%

Measures

The study collected data from an online survey using Qualtrics. The survey questions included demographic information and ELs' schooling before and after THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. The demographic information collected was gender, teaching grades, ethnicity, teaching experiences, teachers' education level, license area, teaching experience with ELs, and their home languages. For the home language survey questions, the researchers used the top 10 languages spoken by Els in the United States in the 2016–2017 school year data from the Office of English Language Acquisition. Although it was the most recent data available at the time of creating the survey, the researchers were aware that the data needed to be updated. Thus, at the time the survey results were analyzed, the data on the same site were reviewed again. The most current data are the 2019–2020 data, and the differences between the 2016–2017 data and the 2019–2020 data are presented in Table 2. Although the order of the languages is somewhat different in the two datasets, only two languages are different: Somali and Russian in 2016–2017 were replaced by Hmong and Cushitic languages in 2019–2020.

Table 2. Top 10 Languages Spoken by English Learners in the United States Between 2016–2017 Versus 2019–2020 (From the Office of English Language Acquisition)

2016–2017 Home Languages	2019–2020 Home Languages
Spanish	Spanish, Castilian
Arabic	Arabic
Chinese	Chinese
Haitian	Vietnamese
Tagalog	Portuguese
Vietnamese	Haitian; Haitian Creole
Somali	Hmong
Portuguese	Cushitic (Other)
Russian	Tagalog

The second part of the survey included six questions; (1) common struggling areas of ELs in pre-pandemic, (2) common struggling areas of ELs during the school year of 2021–2022, (3) the major factors that influenced struggling during the pandemic, (4) the change in ELs referral for special education services after the lockdown, (5) common reasons for ELs' referral for special education prior to the pandemic, (6) common reasons for ELs' referral for special education during 2021–2022. For the first three questions, the first author conducted a literature review to draft pre-selected items so that each participant could select the two most common items from the given options. The common struggling areas were pre-selected as academic (Calderon et al., 2011), behavior/emotional (Rogers-Adkinson et al., 2012), social (Winseler et al., 2014), and communication (Haneda, 2014) areas. Regarding factors that challenged ELs' experience (2nd and 3rd questions) during the pandemic, the four major factors identified from the literature review include lack of English language environment, lack of educational opportunities

such as daycares, schools, or other outside community activities, limited social interactions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and lack of family support (Council of Great City Schools, 2020). However, the literature review for this area was quite limited because the survey was developed immediately after the schools returned to in-person instruction from the COVID-19 lockdown. This question also included the 'Others' section so that the participants could give a written answer if they found different factors.

The fourth question asked whether the teachers found EL's referrals to special education to be increased, decreased, or unchanged after the lockdown. The participants were asked to rank their responses to the fifth and sixth questions of the common reasons for EL's special education referrals before and during the pandemic using four options: learning difficulties, emotional/behavior issues, communication issues. The first three options are typical reasons for students to be referred for special education evaluations (Norlander, 2018). For 'others,' the participants were also asked to provide a short written answer.

Data Collection and Analysis

As described in the participants' section, the target participants were K–3 in-service teachers in Indiana. Initially, the researchers retrieved approximately 1000 public school lists and principals' email information from the Indiana Department of Education website so the random samples well represent the entire state. After receiving IRB approval, two emails were sent to all school principals on the list (approximately 1,000 schools). The first email included the purpose of this study and asked them to forward our study information to their K–3 teachers. In the second email, the principals were asked to forward the email directly to their K–3 teachers, including the study information and survey links for the teachers. Due to the low response rate during the first round of survey dissemination, the researchers had to send a second round of

emails to all the schools on the lists again. After the second round of emails, 34 participants completed the entire part of the survey. The Qualtrics report of each response received was analyzed.

Results

Here, some of the findings of the study are discussed. The first study result was the linguistic background of ELs in the survey participants' classrooms. Table 3 documents teachers' responses to the survey questions on ELs' home language use. This question item had 10 preselected home languages that they could select all that apply. The findings show diverse home languages of ELs. All 34 participants selected Spanish as their most used language at home. Ten participants selected Arabic, Chinese, and Haitian. The third frequency tier was Tagalog (n = 7) and Vietnamese (n = 5). Overall, 16 participants chose 'Others' and mentioned the home languages that were not from the given 10 choices. Among them, 10 teachers wrote India-related dialects (e.g., Pashto, Hindi, Urdu, Oriya, and Punjabi) as their students' home languages.

Table 3
Home Languages of ELs

Home Language	n
Spanish	34
Arabic	10
Chinese	10
Haitian	10
Tagalog	7
Vietnamese	5
Somali	3
Portuguese	2

Russian	1
Others	16

The next finding was about the struggling areas of ELs before the pandemic and post-pandemic in 2021–2022. Table 4 presents the results of the struggling areas. The areas were divided into academic, behavior/emotional, social, and communication areas, and the participants were asked to choose two areas in which their students struggled the most. For both questions (pre- and post-pandemic), the ELs struggled most in academics (97%, n = 33; 94%, n = 32), followed by communication (79%, n = 27; 73%, n = 25). Although the orders of the areas of struggle did not change pre- and post-pandemic, it is notable that more participants indicated that ELs struggled the most in the behavior/emotional and social areas during the 2021–2022 school year (combined n = 13 in pre-pandemic compared to combined n = 17 in 2021–2022). This means that 12% of the participants (n = 4) found more behavior/emotional and social struggles after the students returned from the pandemic lockdown.

Table 4. Comparison Between Pre- and Post-pandemic Areas of Struggles Among ELs

Struggling areas	Pre-pandemic	2021 – 2022
Academic	97% (n = 33) **1st**	94% (n = 32) **1st**
Communication	79% (n = 27) **2nd**	73% (n = 25) **2nd**
Behavior/Emotional	20% (n = 7)	29% (n = 10)
Social	18% (n = 6)	21% (n = 7)

The participants were asked to select two major factors impacting challenges ELs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the results are presented in Table 5. The lack of an English language environment was chosen by most participants (76.47%, n = 26). The lack of educational opportunities (44.12%, n = 15) and limited social interactions due to the Covid-19

pandemic (44.12%, n = 15) were the second tier of challenging factors. A lack of family support

was selected by 12 participants (35.30%). Further, the responses of six participants (17.65%)

who selected 'Others' described limited access to technology and the lack of parents'

communication.

Table 5. Major Factors that Contributed to Els' Struggle During the Pandemic

Factors impacting ELs' challenging experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic	Responses: n (%)
Lack of English language environment	26 (76.47 %)
Lack of educational opportunities	15 (44.12 %)
Limited social interactions due to THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	15 (44.12 %)
Lack of family support	12 (35.30 %)
Others	6 (17.65 %)

In terms of the referral changes, 26 participants (75 %) responded that they did not see

any significant changes in the special education referrals for ELs between pre-pandemic and

post-pandemic. However, nine participants (25%) responded that they saw an increase in

referrals after the pandemic. Notably, this means that one of every four participants observed a

referral increase after ELs returned from the COVID-19 lockdown.

Lastly, we assessed the main reasons ELs were referred for special education services.

Table 4 shows the areas of struggle of ELs. These results focus more on the actual reasons for

special education referrals. The participants were asked to rank four reasons for ELs' referral:

learning difficulties, communication difficulties, emotional/behavior issues, and others. Figure 1

shows the rankings and the numbers of participants who chose each option and comparison in

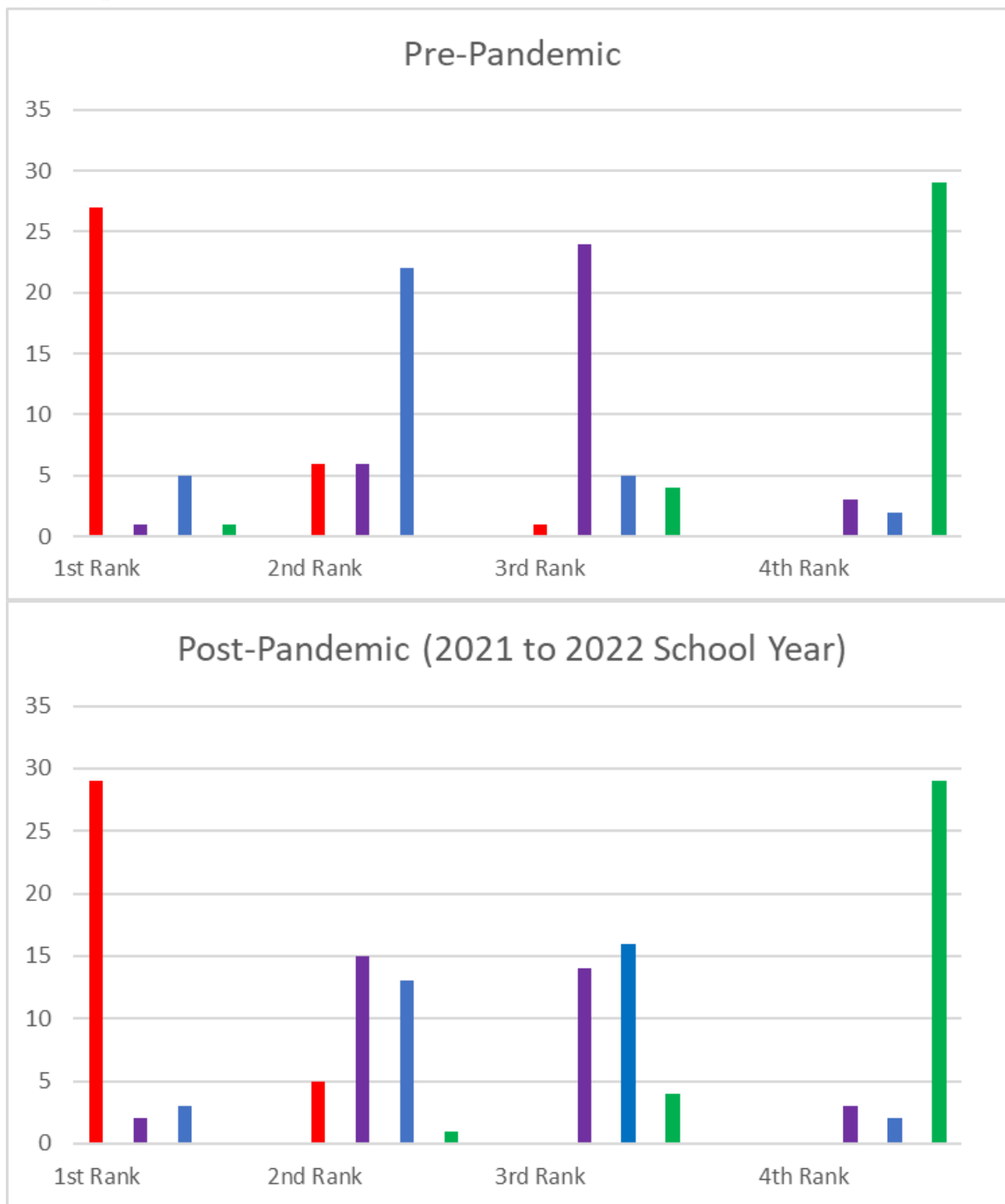both pre-pandemic rankings and post-pandemic (2021–2022 school year) rankings.

Before the pandemic, the majority of participants ranked learning difficulties as the first

(n = 27), communication difficulties as the second (n = 22), emotional/behavior issues as the

third (n = 24), and 'Others' as the fourth (n = 29). Importantly, the majority of choices for the

second rank (communication) and the third rank (emotional/behavior) were very distinctive.

These results indicate that communication issues were more significant issues than

emotional/behavior issues for ELs during the pre-pandemic period. During the 2021–2022 school

years, when most students returned from the COVID-19 lockdown, the rankings changed

compared to the pre-pandemic period. Learning difficulties remained the top reason for ELs'

referrals (n = 29). However, unlike the pre-pandemic data, emotional/behavior issues (n = 15)

became more significant in 2021–2022 than communication issues (n = 13). These results

indicate that ELs presented more emotional/behavior issues after the pandemic lockdown, and

those behaviors were significant enough to yield more special education referrals for ELs.

Finally, 'others' remained in the fourth rank both pre- and post-pandemic, with a very

high proportion of participants choosing the option. However, this was only because the

participants were asked to place the 'Others' category in any ranks. This indicates that the

participants chose this category as the least important reason for special education referrals.

Further, the results of 'others' actually indicate that few issues were presented for special

education referrals other than learning, communication and emotional/behavior issues. In their

elaboration on 'others', no participants offered the reasons for 'others'.

Figure 1. Rankings of Common Reasons for ELs' Referral (Pre-pandemic vs. 2021–2022 School

Year)

Legend:
- ■ Learning difficulties (red)
- ■ Emotional/behavior issues (purple)
- ■ Communication issues (blue)
- ■ Others (green)

Pre-Pandemic

	1st Rank	2nd Rank	3rd Rank	4th Rank
Learning difficulties	27	6	1	
Emotional/behavior issues	1	6	24	3
Communication issues	5	22	5	2
Others	1		4	29

Post-Pandemic (2021 to 2022 School Year)

	1st Rank	2nd Rank	3rd Rank	4th Rank
Learning difficulties	29	5		
Emotional/behavior issues	2	15	14	3
Communication issues	3	13	16	2
Others		1	4	29

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers' perspectives on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on ELs' special education referral. According to the results above, the K-3 teachers perceived that the COVID-19 pandemic certainly affected how ELs learn in schools. The following sections address the study's findings in light of the research questions.

Increase in Referrals

As mentioned earlier, the overrepresentation of ELs in special education has been reported over the last decade (Zhang et al., 2014). One of the primary interests of this study was how the teachers perceive in terms of whether the special education referral was changed for ELs after the pandemic, and the results indicated that 25% of participants reported that the referral increased after the pandemic. The schools are where ELs receive considerable input for social and language areas. However, the school shutdown during the pandemic could have resulted in the loss of social interactions, which influenced ELs' English language and communication development (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). Lacking equitable access to resources and support would also have resulted in more challenges for ELs adjusting to schools. Thus, ELs may have more challenges when returning to school, which can result in higher numbers of special education referrals (Ortogero & Ray, 2021). After the pandemic, multiple studies indicated that school closure affected ELs, but the evidence was lacking. While the results of our study were from teachers' perspectives, this study would provide more indication that ELs had more significant struggling during the COVID-19 and eventually may be connected to special education referrals.

Factors for Struggles During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The lockdown during the pandemic heavily influenced the ELs' learning experiences.

Based on the participants' reports, this study showed that the teachers perceived that a limited English language environment was a major factor that contributed to ELs' struggles. However, the lack of social interactions and educational opportunities also could have resulted in EL's struggles in schools after they returned to school based on teachers' perspectives In addition, during the lockdown, teachers also identified that ELs had limited family support for learning experiences, as most ELs' family members were non-native English speakers. Sugarman and Larazin (2020) stated that many immigrant families struggle to help their children with schoolwork because of their limited English or education. According to the 2018 US census, 18 percent of ELs lived in families where all members had limited English. Thus, ELs may have received limited support from their families during the lockdown. Previous EL studies have identified that prior social interactions in English environments reduce EL's struggles at school (Facella et al., 2010). Our study also indicated similarly that the teachers saw the lack of social interactions during the lockdown as an important factor that could have contributed more to ELs' struggles.

Increased Emotional/Behavior Issues of ELs

This study also examined how the teachers perceive the comparison of the major factors for struggling before and after the pandemic and found one common result. More emotional/behavior issues were reported by the teachers after the pandemic. Teachers perceived that more students exhibited emotional/behavioral issues, and more special education referrals were made regarding these issues. Hukkelberg et al. (2019) reported a correlation between behavior issues and social competence. When children have lower social competence, they exhibit more behavioral issues. However, when children increase their social competence, they can reduce their behavioral issues. The participants of this study reported that ELs lacked social

interaction during the pandemic lockdown. This would have caused a lack of social competence, resulting in more behavioral issues upon sudden exposure to social interactions with a large group after being isolated with only their family members. More importantly, teachers perceived that these behavioral issues were significant enough to become a reason for special education referrals.

Implications

This study presents some implications for EL studies. Our study shows that the teachers perceived that the pandemic lockdown had a significant impact on ELs. Remarkably, the teachers identified the limited social interaction and lack of English environments as severe impact factors that eventually yielded more special education referrals. Thus, the results of this study indicate the need for future studies to identify more statistical data on actual referral cases for ELs for pre- and post-pandemic comparisons. This study also shows that ELs emotional/ behavioral issues need to be reviewed from multiple perspectives, particularly how limited social interaction influences ELs' school behaviors. Furthermore, teachers need to be informed and trained in understanding the effects of the pandemic lockdown on ELs and finding proper resources and support for ELs' adjustment to school settings. School administrators and teachers should intensify support for social and behavioral/emotional issues along with academic support, given the minimal social interactions ELs had during the COVID-19 lockdown. Finally, teacher educators in higher education settings need to address how the pandemic has affected ELs and correspondingly train pre-service teachers on remediating the impact.

Limitations and Future Studies

Although this study provides several important results that can be used in the EL study field, it also has some limitations. The sample size was too small; thus, the results are not

generalizable. The authors found that the survey distribution method limited the sample size. Instead of relying on principals to distribute the surveys to their teachers, more participants could have been recruited if the survey had been sent directly to the teachers through several teacher organizations. Also, due to the anonymous nature of the survey, the authors were unable to identify if the participants are widely spread out through the state or localized. Further, the data were collected in one state; thus, the results may not be applicable to other states. Future studies need to include a larger population with multiple states to identify the connection between ELs and special education referrals after the pandemic. Further, the survey measured the teachers' perspectives only, which may provide limited perspectives on how ELs struggled during the pandemic. Future studies should study parents' perspectives on this issue or use direct observation methods. Also, due to the small sample size, the comparison of the impact by the grade levels or the years of teachers' experience with ELs was not able. This comparison could have yielded richer data to analyze.

The survey could be developed with a more robust theoretical framework, as limited research on the impact of the pandemic was available at the time of initiating this study. However, more EL studies during the COVID-19 pandemic are now available. Therefore, future studies should design their surveys based on the literature reports of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ELs. Also, this study only identified the factors for ELs' struggling areas. Yet, future studies need to focus on more specific reasons that caused those struggles like communication difficulties. Finally, this study only found that special education referrals increased immediately after the pandemic. However, it has been over two years since the students fully returned to in-person instruction settings. Thus, future studies need to follow up on ELs who were referred for special education after the pandemic and how much, if any, they have

recovered from the struggle or whether they are still receiving special education services.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of education, and ELs were not free from its impact. The overrepresentation of ELs in special education is an ongoing issue that was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, EL studies need to make more effort to clearly measure the exact impact and provide appropriate services to remediate ELs' struggling from the pandemic lockdown. While this study focused on special education referrals, it also provides a good rationale for why providing a linguistically rich environment and active social interaction opportunities are crucial for ELs' success in schools. When those experiences were forfeited, the consequence was severe, leading ELs to special education services. However, providing remediation for ELs to catch up with what they have missed cannot be done only by teachers. All stakeholders, including school administrators and parents, need to work together to prevent inappropriate referrals of ELs to special education.

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