



Advancing Implementation: Phase 2: Research on English Language Development Standards, Part 1: Focus Group and Interview Insights on Practice and Innovation

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This Phase 2 study examines how K-12 educators across the U.S. are implementing the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition. Drawing on focus groups and interviews with teachers, specialists, and leaders from 21 states, Part 1 of the study highlights practical strategies for standards implementation, emphasizing teacher agency, collaboration, and the everyday opportunities and barriers that educators encounter.



WIDA Research

WIDA research expands knowledge on effectively teaching multilingual learners and assessing what they know and can do in a fair and valid way. We work in partnership with districts, states, and national experts to conduct research focused on understanding and supporting the highest quality educational practices and outcomes for multilingual learners to inform educators, policymakers, families/caregivers, and the research community.

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Introduction, Background and Purpose

This report presents the first part of the Phase 2 study on the implementation of the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition (hereafter, WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, or 2020 Edition) with findings drawn from focus groups and individual interviews with educators and leaders. While the initial [Phase 1 Study](#) (Park, 2024) offered valuable perspectives from a large, self-selected sample, its limited representativeness prompted the need for a more targeted, in-depth approach. In response, Phase 2 adopts a multi-tiered design: Part 1 centers on qualitative data from conversations with educators, highlighting real-world experiences and needs at the classroom, district, and state levels.

A more in-depth exploration using a case study approach will appear in a separate (Phase 2, Part 2) report, providing a closer examination of implementation actions and contextual factors in selected K-12 settings. The initial activities offered a robust snapshot of current practices within a sizable, though non-representative, sample, but a multi-tiered case study approach was needed to examine specific actions and contextual needs at the teacher, district, and state levels in K-12 settings.

Additionally, K-12 classroom-based research conducted through research-practitioner partnerships can illuminate the needs of in-service teachers. Because several SEAs involved in the study are developing professional development (PD) for pre-service teacher education programs, WIDA would also benefit from examining pre-service teachers' understanding of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, and their readiness to implement it effectively.

Theoretical Framework

Teacher Agency and Change in Practice

Recent theories on teacher agency focus on the autonomy, decision-making power, and influence that teachers have in shaping their teaching practices, curriculum, and educational environments (Cochran-Smith et al., 2022; Rodriguez, 2013). These theories explore how teachers can take an active role in their professional lives, influence change in their schools, and impact students' learning. Teacher agency is closely linked to empowerment, professional identity, and growth. Recent theories on teacher agency also emphasize the empowerment, autonomy, and collaborative roles of teachers in shaping their practice and influencing systemic change. These theories stress the importance of teachers as leaders, advocates for opportunity, and key agents in curriculum development, digital transformation, and organizational change. By focusing on collaborative and collective action, these theories recognize that teacher agency is not only about individual decision-making but about working together to improve the educational landscape.

Some additional recent key theories on teacher agency are discussed in detail in the following subsections.

Teacher Agency as Professional Autonomy and Leadership

This theory focuses on teacher agency as a form of professional autonomy in which teachers are able to make decisions that impact their practice, student outcomes, and school culture. It emphasizes teacher leadership, both within and beyond the classroom (Biesta, 2013; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Lasky, 2005; Sachs, 2000; Tran & O'Connor, 2024).

Relevance to Teacher Agency:

- Teacher autonomy: Teachers are seen as experts who should have the power to make decisions about pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom management. Teachers also need to be taught how to be advocates at an impact level of instructional craftsmanship.
- Distributed leadership: Teacher agency extends beyond formal leadership positions. Teachers, regardless of rank, can lead initiatives, share ideas, and influence decision-making.
- Empowerment: Teachers are empowered when they have the freedom to innovate and tailor their teaching methods to meet the needs of their students, leading to greater job satisfaction and better outcomes for students.

In schools, teachers may be encouraged to take ownership of their professional learning by designing and leading workshops, collaborating with peers to implement new teaching strategies, or being part of decision-making committees.

Transformative Teacher Agency and Opportunity

Transformative Teacher Agency is based on the idea that teachers can be change agents who challenge and disrupt oppressive educational systems (Edwards, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). This theory is often tied to critical pedagogy and opportunity, encouraging educators to take action not only for professional growth but to promote opportunity and inclusivity within education (Giroux, 2020; Sachs, 2016).

Relevance to Teacher Agency:

- Opportunity access: Teachers are viewed as key agents in creating student opportunities by advocating for underrepresented and marginalized students, dismantling inequality, and promoting justice in educational settings.
- Critical reflection: Teachers who engage in transformative agency actively reflect on their practices, identify areas where inequities exist, and work toward improving the educational system to better serve diverse student populations.

A teacher may challenge the standardized curriculum and develop a more inclusive curriculum that reflects diverse cultures, or they may engage in advocacy efforts to address inequities in school funding or discipline practices.

Teacher Agency in the Context of Curriculum Development

This theory emphasizes the role of teachers in curriculum design and how educators can actively participate in or lead curriculum reform initiatives (Penuel et al., 2012; Priestley & Drew, 2017). It posits that teachers are not merely implementers of externally prescribed curricula, but active participants in shaping and adapting curriculum to better fit the needs of their students.

Relevance to Teacher Agency:

- Curriculum as a dynamic tool: Teacher agency involves adapting and changing the curriculum to meet the unique needs of their students. Teachers can challenge top-down, one-size-fits-all curricula by incorporating their knowledge of students' contexts and needs.
- Co-construction of knowledge: Teachers collaborate with students in developing curriculum, helping students take ownership of their learning while developing teacher leadership and agency in the process.

A teacher may collaborate with colleagues to design a new, interdisciplinary curriculum that incorporates diverse perspectives, focusing on project-based learning where students have input into the content they will study.

Teacher Agency in the Digital Era: Technological Agency

This theory focuses on the increasing importance of technology in education and how educators can use digital tools to influence their practice and the learning environment (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Kalyani, 2024; Park et al., 2015; Park et al, 2024). It examines the idea of technological agency, where teachers are not passive users of technology, but active creators and innovators in the digital space.

Relevance to Teacher Agency:

- Digital literacy: Teachers are empowered to use technology to enhance their instruction and to shape digital learning environments that meet the needs of students.
- Innovative pedagogy: Teachers who have technological agency actively incorporate new technologies, learning platforms, and digital tools into their pedagogical practices to enhance learning and provide new opportunities for student engagement.
- Global connectivity: Teachers can extend their agency beyond the classroom by connecting with global networks, collaborating with teachers from different regions or countries, and bringing global perspectives into their classrooms (Albion et al., 2015; Gleason & Jaramillo Cherrez, 2021).

A teacher may develop an online learning platform for students to access resources, submit assignments, and collaborate with peers. Additionally, they may use technology to create a flipped classroom where students engage with content at home, leaving more classroom time for active learning and problem-solving.

Distributed Teacher Agency in Collaborative Networks

This recent theory explores how teacher agency is distributed across networks of educators, both within and outside the school context (Cochran-Smith et al., 2022; Kolleck, 2017; Pantić et al., 2022; Vescio et al., 2008). The focus is on the shared responsibilities and collective actions of educators who work together across schools, districts, and professional networks.

Relevance to Teacher Agency:

- Collective agency: Teacher agency is not only individual but collective. Teachers can work together to create changes within their schools, districts, or even national educational policy.
- Networked learning: Teachers are part of professional learning networks (PLNs) where they exchange ideas, resources, and strategies. The concept of distributed agency highlights the role of these networks in fostering teacher innovation and change.

A teacher might belong to a regional network of teachers that collaborates on curriculum design, shares teaching strategies, and discusses challenges in implementing English language development standards, thereby influencing practices across multiple schools or districts.

Part 1 Study

Timeline

Data collection began with recruitment and baseline interviews in fall 2024, followed by focus groups. From January through spring 2025, these sources were integrated through iterative analysis, culminating in member checks and a comprehensive synthesis of educator perspectives, student artifacts, and districtwide outcomes.

Table 1

Timeline of Standards Implementation Study Part 1 Activities

Timeframe	Activities
October 2024	Recruitment via email/staff meetings Call for participation issued
Late October–Early November 2024	Individual baseline interviews with educators
November–December 2024	Focus group interviews by role/school level
January–March 2025	Ongoing participant clarification/follow-up
January–May 2025	Preliminary data analysis: integrating qualitative and quantitative insights
April–May 2025	Synthesized findings Member checking Consolidation of comprehensive report Receipt and integration of district five-year WIDA ACCESS frequency data
May 2025–September 2025	Evidence-based analysis and reporting
September 2025–December 2025	Final report revision, design, and preparation for publication and print dissemination

Research Aims

The aim of this study is to investigate how the implementation of the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, shapes teacher agency, instructional practice, and equitable language outcomes for multilingual learners (MLs). Specifically, the research seeks to:

- Examine how educators interpret, adapt, and operationalize the updated standards in their daily teaching and collaboration, focusing on shifts brought about by the 2020 Edition, such as Key Language Uses (KLUs) and Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs).
- Analyze the impact of professional learning communities, blended learning models, and resource-aligned instructional strategies on student proficiency growth and exit rates, particularly in the productive domains of writing and speaking.
- Identify systemic factors, resource constraints, and collaborative structures that mediate consistency, innovation, and equity in ELD standards enactment at both classroom and district levels.

Through this inquiry, the study aims to generate practical and policy-relevant insights that inform future professional development, curriculum design, and district-level strategies for advancing multilingual learner success.

Theoretical Framework

Recent theories on multilingual learner (ML) teacher agency emphasize autonomy, decision-making power, and leadership in shaping instruction, curriculum, and school environments (Cochran-Smith et al., 2022; Rodriguez, 2013). Agency is tied to empowerment, professional identity, and growth, positioning teachers as both practitioners and leaders who influence student learning and school culture (Biesta, 2013; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Lasky, 2005; Sachs, 2000; Tran & O'Connor, 2024). Transformative perspectives connect agency to critical pedagogy in which teachers disrupt inequities, advocate for multilingual learners, and promote more inclusive curricula. For example, teachers may design lessons that reflect diverse cultures, advocate for equitable placement policies, or collaborate on revising disciplinary practices. In this way, autonomy, distributed leadership, empowerment, and critical reflection allow teachers to act as change agents within and beyond the classroom.

Additional theories extend teacher agency to curriculum development, digital innovation, and collaborative networks. Teachers adapt curricula to student contexts, co-construct knowledge with students, and lead curriculum reform efforts rather than simply implementing top-down mandates (Biesta, 2013; Priestley et al., 2012). In the digital era, technological agency empowers teachers to integrate blended learning, build digital platforms, and connect with global networks that enhance instructional practices (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sachs, 2000). Distributed agency further highlights the collective power of educators working through professional learning networks to share strategies, co-develop resources, and influence practice across schools and districts (Lasky, 2005). Taken together, these frameworks show that ML teacher agency is both individual and collective—anchored in autonomy, collaboration, and innovation—and is a central driver of systemic change in multilingual education.

Research Questions Guiding the Current Study

Standards implementation happens in the moment, with the teachers. If the standards do not infiltrate the student-teacher interaction, they are not implemented. Therefore, the focus of Phase 2 of the standards implementation study is in the following areas:

- What is the current level of teacher interest in implementing the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition?
- To what extent are educators able to act on their interest in implementing the standards, and what constraints do they face?
- What is the depth and nature of educator knowledge regarding the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, and do teachers feel adequately prepared for implementation?
- What are the primary challenges and key supports teachers encounter as they work to implement the standards?
- How do teachers' own experiences, mindsets, and backgrounds shape their agency and knowledge about standards-aligned practice?
- In what ways do professional learning, leadership, and collaboration enhance or limit teacher agency in the context of WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, implementation?

Note: the following questions frame the full Phase 2 study. Part 1 centers on teacher agency and educator knowledge; other research topics are addressed in Part 2 and future reports.

Methods

Participants, Setting, and Data Sources

Interview and Focus Group Meetings via Zoom (Fall 2024)

Nineteen meetings were conducted via Zoom in fall 2024, including individual interviews and seven focus groups. The individual interview session had participants that came from a range of backgrounds, and included LEAs (n=4) and classroom-based educators (n=6). For the group discussions, multiple SEAs (n=11) met over two subcommittee meetings, and seven focus group meetings were held. These groups included specialists, teachers, and faculty working with multilingual learners in various educational settings. In all, the process included individual perspectives from educators and state/local agency representatives and brought together voices from across states and international contexts, without including identifying information. Each focus group included ML teachers, ML specialists, or both, and occasionally higher education faculty in literacy or math. Across 19 meetings, participants represented 21 U.S. states and South Korea.

Individual Interviews: Classroom-Based Teachers

- CO (2)
- IN (2)
- NJ
- UT
- WI
- Int'l, South Korea

Individual Interviews: LEAs

- IN
- NC
- PA
- SD

Individual Interviews: SEAs (Research Subcommittee Meetings)

- Jan 22, 2025: MN (SEA Lead), CO, FL, IL, KY, NH, NJ, NM, NC
- May 6, 2025: MN (SEA Lead), CO, GA, IL, KY, MO, NH, FL, NM, NC

Focus Groups

- #1 MA (2); #2 FL (2)
- #3 MD (2), TX
- #4 FL, ND, TX
- #5 MD, ND, RI
- #6 CO, MA, UT
- #7 NC, MA, PA

Data Analysis

Focus group interview data were complemented by artifacts submitted as examples of successful standards implementation, adding contextualized, naturally occurring materials to supplement the analysis (Raptis, 2012). Additional artifacts and follow-up interviews after the nationwide survey provided further depth and representation. Participant names were pseudonymized to protect confidentiality.

Guided by a qualitative constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the analysis drew on participants' perspectives to understand how they constructed meaning around standards implementation (Creswell, 2014). Focus group questions elicited both individual and collective views, and data analysis followed an inductive, grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Using NVivo, themes were coded iteratively around areas such as teacher agency, collaboration, resource access, professional development, instructional practices, family engagement, and policy contexts. ELD student workbooks were examined through thematic

analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). A summary of the coding scheme, subcodes, and examples is provided in Table 2. To compare coding results, Epistemic Network Analysis (ENA) and quantitative ethnography were also applied (Shaffer & Ruis, 2017).

Table 2

Coding Schemes, Subcodes, and Examples

Main Code	Subcode	Definitions
1. Implementation Progress	1.1 Phased Rollout	References to gradual or uneven adoption of ELD standards
1. Implementation Progress	1.2 Policy Alignment	Comments on aligning ELD standards with district/state/national policies
2. Teacher Agency	2.1 Adaptation/Innovation	Teachers modify or create new materials, lessons, or strategies
2. Teacher Agency	2.2 Leadership/Advocacy	Teachers taking initiative, leading professional learning communities (PLCs), or advocating for MLs
2. Teacher Agency	2.3 Barriers to Agency	Constraints that limit teacher action (e.g., time, mandates, lack of support)
3. Collaboration	3.1 Co-Teaching/ Co-Planning	Joint lesson planning or classroom teaching between EL and content teachers
3. Collaboration	3.2 PLCs/Professional Learning	Participation in structured professional communities or ongoing PD
3. Collaboration	3.3 Cross-Disciplinary Work	Integration of ELD standards into STEM, CTE, or other non-ELA subjects
4. Resource Access and development	4.1 Resource Gaps	Lack of materials, technology, or support for ELD implementation
4. Resource Access and development	4.2 Resourcefulness/ Material Creation	Teachers creating/adapting resources to meet student needs
4. Resource Access and development	4.3 Technology/ Innovation	Use of digital tools, AI, or blended learning to support ELD
5. Professional Development	5.1 Demand for Practical PD	Requests for actionable, curriculum-aligned, or bite-sized PD

Main Code	Subcode	Definitions
5. Professional Development	5.2 Impact of PD	Descriptions of how PD has changed practice or built confidence
6. Instructional Practice	6.1 Academic Language Focus	Emphasis on teaching academic vocabulary, sentence frames, or language objectives
6. Instructional Practice	6.2 Content-Language Integration	Lessons or strategies that blend ELD with content standards
6. Instructional Practice	6.3 Scaffolding/Differentiation	Providing supports for varying proficiency levels
7. Opportunity and Policy	7.1 Exit Criteria/Monitoring	Concerns or advocacy around EL reclassification and post-exit support
7. Opportunity and Policy	7.2 Rural vs. Urban Disparities	Comments on resource, staffing, or PD differences by geography
7. Opportunity and Policy	7.3 Culturally Responsive Practice	Efforts to make materials, assessments, or outreach relevant to MLs' backgrounds
8. Family Engagement	8.1 Family Outreach	Strategies to engage ML families (e.g., L1 screencasts, family nights)
8. Family Engagement	8.2 Community Partnerships	Collaboration with local organizations or leveraging community assets
9. Profile of Adopters	9.1 Dispositions	Traits of teachers who successfully implement ELD (e.g., open-minded, collaborative, culturally curious)

Findings from U.S. and International Individual and Focus Group Interviews

Across 19 interviews and focus groups with educators and leaders from diverse settings, representing 21 states and South Korea, the implementation of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, is progressing but remains uneven.

Teacher agency—the ability of educators to adapt, advocate, and lead—is central to effective practice. Major themes include phased and varied implementation, persistent barriers (time, resources, training), the critical role of collaboration, and a strong call for practical, curriculum-aligned resources. Teachers want actionable professional learning, culturally responsive materials, and leadership that supports their growth. Opportunity concerns, particularly for

newcomers and in content areas like math and science, are prominent. The most successful adopters are open-minded, collaborative, and culturally curious. Product and research priorities should focus on amplifying teacher agency, supporting cross-disciplinary collaboration, and ensuring equitable access to resources.

Major Themes in Standards Implementation: The Centrality of Teacher Agency

1. Phased, Gradual, and Varied Implementation: Agency Amid Systemic Constraints

Findings

Implementation of standards is occurring along a broad continuum, with some sites remaining in foundational phases while others have begun weaving the standards into daily instructional planning; this progress is gradual and context-dependent, often shaped by district priorities, leadership, and resources. Implementation of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition is ongoing, often slow, and varies by school, district, and state. Some sites are in foundational phases, while others are integrating standards into daily planning. This mirrors national research showing that implementation of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition is often “layered” and context-dependent (Lee et al., 2025; Park, 2024).

Approximately 74% of the educators (28 out of 38 interview and focus group participants) described a landscape where foundational understanding and buy-in for the 2020 Edition are still being established. In some contexts, agency is exercised through creative adaptation; in others, it is constrained by top-down mandates or lack of support. Many educators described their district’s standards implementation as slow, phased, or inconsistent, especially where populations of MLs are small or leadership turnover is high. These educators most often referenced phased or slow adoption, the need for more professional development, and the dynamics of district priorities or leadership. In some settings, agency is exercised through creative adaptation of the standards; in others, teacher efforts are constrained by top-down mandates, limited preparation time, or lack of dedicated support.

This is reflected in quotes from educators, such as:

- “For newcomers, it’s just a lack of resources... implementation varies wildly across schools.”—ML teacher, CO
- “We don’t always have the same teachers working with ELs each year, so implementation fluctuates... Teachers need foundational training.”—ML specialist, PA

As one multilingual learner teacher from Indiana explained, “Right now we’re just finishing up our building, like the foundation of it... Next semester is when they’re going to take a look at how they can start planning and supporting those standards in their classrooms.” This gradual, step-by-step progression underscores the need for both patience and targeted support as districts and schools move from initial adoption to deep integration.

Discussion

Teacher agency plays a pivotal role in navigating these variations—educators act as local change agents, adapting strategies to fit their unique school environments. A cohesive systemic approach will be particularly beneficial for districts and schools navigating phased or uneven rollout. By strategically implementing resources such as digital guides, exemplar lesson banks, or peer-led professional learning communities (PLCs), stakeholders can accelerate foundational training and support sustained application of the standards. When leveraged intentionally, these resources not only build essential local capacity but also foster shared vision, consistency, and more equitable opportunities for success among multilingual learners.

Agency Implication

Where teachers have agency, they can scaffold implementation even in the absence of system-wide support; where agency is stifled, progress stalls. Phased implementation requires differentiated supports, ongoing PD, and leadership continuity to ensure equitable access for all multilingual learners.

2. Collaboration and Cross-Disciplinary Work: Agency as Collective Capacity, Collaboration, and Leadership

Findings

Agency is enhanced by supportive leadership and shared expertise but constrained by rigid hierarchies or lack of time. Overall, 82% of educators in the study (31 of 38) identified structured collaboration or co-teaching as essential to both building confidence in ELD use, and to bridging content and language learning for students. Many described positive experiences

when shared expertise and collaborative time were prioritized, while others expressed frustration at rigid hierarchies, time barriers, or siloed roles that undermined these efforts.

Educators had this to say:

- "As a teacher, I'm required to collaborate with other teachers in different subjects... so that we can comply with the framework."—ML teacher, CO
- "Our idea was... perhaps doing like a co-teaching model teaching with their core teacher... so that a teacher can see that in action."—ML teacher, CO
- "Co-teaching during literacy blocks requires aligning ELD standards with module overviews, but classroom teachers still lack deep understanding."—ML teacher, MA
- "ESL teachers must coach gen ed staff on language objectives, but buy-in is inconsistent."—ML specialist, MA

Discussion

Collaboration across grade levels, content areas, and roles amplifies individual agency into collective efficacy. Effective implementation hinges on collaboration between ML teachers, content teachers, and curriculum writers. Teacher agency is influenced by district structures and leadership. Teachers leverage their expertise and that of their colleagues to integrate standards meaningfully. Collaboration, including co-teaching, PLCs, and cross-disciplinary planning, along with teacher agency, are central to effective use of ELD standards (Burr & Burho, 2022; Ning et al., 2015; WIDA, 2023; Wilson, 2016). Agency is the capacity of teachers to act intentionally, adapt, and lead within their context, and is strongly shaped by district leadership, scheduling, and trust among colleagues (Park, 2024). As one ML specialist from Wisconsin noted, "I worked with the STEM curriculum team to overlay the ELD standards and integrate the ELD standards in with their entire curriculum."

A cohesive and systemic approach that embeds structured collaboration, such as PLCs, co-teaching models, and cross-content planning, will be highly beneficial for districts seeking to strengthen ELD standards implementation. By intentionally providing dedicated time, shared professional learning, and leadership support for cross-disciplinary teaming, districts can build collective expertise and sustain high-quality instructional integration. Such efforts not only foster ongoing innovation and shared responsibility, but also expand equitable access and meaningful outcomes for multilingual learners across varied instructional contexts.

Agency Implication

Agency is maximized in collaborative cultures where teachers are empowered to lead, share, and innovate together. Districts should invest in teacher leadership, cross-content PLCs, and structures that allow agency and innovation to flourish.

3. Barriers: Time, Resources, Competing Priorities, and Systemic Constraints—Agency Under Pressure

Findings

Consistent implementation of ELD standards continues to face universal barriers, including lack of time, insufficient resources (especially for newcomers and non-ELA content areas), and the pressures of competing initiatives such as “science of reading” mandates. Even the most motivated teachers find their agency constrained by systemic factors that limit their capacity to innovate or sustain instructional change, testing the limits of teacher agency. In this study, approximately 76% of educators (29 out of 38) reported that their professional agency was “used up” navigating basic logistical hurdles, noting they were “stretched thin,” covering multiple schools or serving in hybrid roles. Resource gaps were especially acute for newcomers and in rural or underfunded districts—echoed in the words of a Georgia educator: “Rural districts lack funds for scaffolds... urban schools prioritize mandates over ELD.” Others described the pressure of competing initiatives: “We have a huge push, especially in our elementary schools with science of reading... so it’s just been really hard with all these other initiatives coming in to find time to help support educators and work with them on the [ELD] standards” (ML teacher, IN).

Discussion

Even the most motivated teachers face constraints that can limit their ability to act. These challenges are echoed by multiple educators, and have been identified as core obstacles to effective ELD implementation (Harklau & Yang, 2020).

Removing barriers through a coordinated, systemic strategy—such as targeted resource allocation, purposeful scheduling, and clear leadership commitment—is essential to relieve the daily pressures faced by educators. By securing sufficient time, dedicated supports, and focused funding streams, districts can enable teachers to move beyond mere logistical management and invest in meaningful, innovative implementation of ELD standards. Ultimately, these efforts will support more consistent instruction, greater equity, and stronger learning outcomes for multilingual learners in every context.

Agency Implication

Agency flourishes when systems remove barriers; it wanes when teachers are left to “do more with less.” Addressing time and resource gaps is critical for equitable standards implementation. Districts should streamline initiatives and prioritize ELD in resource allocation.

4. Professional Learning and Resource Needs: Agency Through Practical Support, Demand for Practical Curriculum-Aligned PD

Findings

Teachers consistently express a need for professional development and resources that are actionable, curriculum-aligned, and empower them to enact meaningful change, rather than simply comply with mandates. Roughly 80% of teachers (30 out of 38) in this study prioritized access to shared lesson banks, classroom-ready scaffolds, and real-world examples over abstract theory. Their preferences were echoed in comments such as, "I would love for WIDA to be working with as many curriculum writers [from our district] as possible... the more shared resources out there that we have, the better" (ML specialist, WI) and "Micro-PD on proficiency descriptors helps teachers avoid overwhelm" (ML teacher, IN). Others emphasized the need for flexible, self-directed, and immediately relevant learning: "3-minute MLPD screencasts let teachers self-direct PD... short, focused training works" (ML specialist, WI) and "The more we can get curriculum based, the better because people like things that they can be like, oh, that's actually my area and I can see how they're using it" (ML teacher, IN).

Discussion

Research confirms that job-embedded, curriculum-based professional learning has a greater impact on teacher practice and multilingual learner outcomes than theory-heavy or generic workshops (Cavazos et al., 2018; Pacchiano et al., 2016). For example, a district director from North Carolina shared, "We created 3-minute ML PD screencasts for staff—bite-sized PD that's actionable," underscoring the value of brief, targeted training.

Embedding these approaches into a cohesive state or district strategy, aligned to real curriculum and modeled for diverse content areas, will maximize benefits. By expanding job-embedded, actionable PD, providing banks of exemplar lessons or scaffolds, and facilitating peer-to-peer resource sharing, states and districts can support meaningful and sustained standards implementation. These supports will ultimately empower teachers, reduce overload, and result in greater consistency, confidence, and equity for multilingual learners.

Agency Implication

Practical, accessible PD and resources are catalysts for agency, enabling teachers to implement, adapt, and lead. Districts should build and curate repositories of practical, standards-aligned resources and offer ongoing, embedded PD.

5. Culturally Responsive and Content-Specific Practice: Agency as Adaptation

Findings

Approximately 82% of participating teachers (31 out of 38) reported that they regularly exercise agency by adapting materials and assessments to be culturally and linguistically relevant, particularly when district or commercial resources are inadequate. Educators described a broad range of practices, from leveraging new tools to supplementing with posters and speaking/writing scaffolds. As an LEA from Massachusetts explained, “Posters with speaking/writing scaffolds are in every classroom—consistency aids transient students.” Persistent resource gaps, especially for newcomers, drive this creative adaptation: “We lack culturally relevant materials... ACCESS tests assume cultural knowledge students don’t have (e.g., unfamiliar animals)” (ML teacher, CO).

This adaptive work is most visible in content areas such as math and science. One ML teacher from Colorado shared their approach this way, “Using lots of visuals. Lots, tons, tons, tons of visuals. Sentence structures, center stems, center starters, vocabulary. Gestures. Repetition. Everything.” These adaptations allow teachers to scaffold complex content while connecting learning to students’ backgrounds and experiences.

Discussion

Agency is visible in the ways teachers modify, supplement, or create resources to meet the needs of their students, particularly in content areas like math and science. Research shows that culturally and linguistically responsive teaching not only improves literacy and content outcomes for multilingual learners, but also fosters independence, engagement, and a sense of belonging (Gay, 2018; Park, 2024; Williamson, 2022; Zhang-Wu, 2017). As teachers adapt and personalize materials to meet student needs, they enact agency and promote equity—outcomes that can be further supported through access to shared, culturally sustaining lesson banks and ongoing collaboration among teachers (Pacchiano et al., 2016; Robertson, 2014). Systemic efforts to curate, create, and share these resources will maximize their benefits and yield lasting improvement for multilingual learners in diverse classrooms.

Expanding access to shared banks of culturally relevant and content-specific instructional resources will make it easier for teachers to adapt lessons meaningfully and equitably. Providing practical supports such as vetted lesson examples, AI-powered materials generators, and scaffolding tools empowers educators to respond flexibly to student backgrounds and curricular gaps. Systemic investment in collaborative resource development and sharing will

help sustain effective adaptation and ultimately foster richer engagement, learning, and belonging for multilingual learners across every classroom.

Agency Implication

Agency is most powerful when teachers are trusted to adapt and innovate for their students' unique needs.

6. Instructional Shifts, Practice, and Impact: Academic Language, Scaffolding, and Content Integration

Findings

The WIDA ELD Standards, 2020 Edition, emphasizes five disciplinary areas: Language for Social and Instructional Purposes, Language for Language Arts, Language for Mathematics, Language for Science, and Language for Social Studies, yet most ELD programs remain concentrated in language arts. National data and local qualitative accounts show that content integration and discipline-specific scaffolding are emerging but uneven across sites (Park, 2024; WIDA, 2023).

Roughly 70% of the teachers interviewed (27 out of 38) reported growing shifts toward intentionally planning lessons that intertwine content and language goals. Teachers use visuals, sentence stems, vocabulary walls, and peer supports to scaffold language. There is a shift toward intentional planning that aligns content and language goals, often using collaborative lesson planning or CLIL (Content-Language Integrated Learning) frameworks. Interviewees explain:

- “It [intentional planning that aligns content and language goals] supports the language of math, the language of science, the language of social studies... it makes it visible for our classroom teachers to see what’s expected.”—ML specialist, WI
- “We use visuals, sentence stems, and peer collaboration daily to build confidence in newcomers.”—ML teacher, NC

Educators report that these approaches help clarify linguistic expectations for both students and teachers across disciplines, enhancing access and engagement even for newcomers and students at lower proficiency levels (Coyle et al., 2010; WIDA, 2023).

Discussion

District and state curriculum, as well as professional development, should explicitly model integrated content-language lessons and provide discipline-specific, practical scaffolds. Expanding access to vetted exemplar units, collaborative CLIL planning sessions, and ongoing cross-content PD will empower teachers and ensure the WIDA ELD Standards Framework,

2020 Edition, serves as a unifying framework throughout the curriculum. Such efforts will promote instructional coherence, deeper student learning, and equitable participation for multilingual learners in every academic domain.

Agency Implication

Curriculum and PD should model integrated content-language lessons and provide discipline-specific scaffolds.

7. Buy-In and Profile of Adopters: Agency as Disposition

Findings

Teachers most likely to adopt ELD standards are those with an open, adaptive, and collaborative mindset, often with personal or professional experience in language learning. Findings from this study indicate that 68% of participating teachers (26 out of 38) most likely to adopt and sustain meaningful ELD standards implementation exhibit an open, adaptive, and collaborative mindset, often developed from personal or professional language learning experience. Research consistently finds that educators with a “growth” or learning-oriented mindset are both more flexible in adopting instructional innovations and more effective at fostering student progress (Dweck, 2006; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Park, 2024; Tirri, 2021). As one ML specialist in Wisconsin noted, “It’s the teachers that are willing to adapt to the circumstances around us and do what’s best for the students... are the ones that are at least most likely to adopt the standards.” Likewise, a Colorado ML teacher emphasized the importance of mindset: “I’m thinking about someone who can grasp these concepts. First, someone who has an open mind, open-minded so they can understand the standards, and they can be able to integrate them in their teaching.”

Discussion

Agency is both a trait and a product of environment; schools that cultivate curiosity, collaboration, and risk-taking see higher rates of standard adoption. Discussion across settings revealed that agency is both a trait and a function of supportive environments; schools that intentionally cultivate curiosity, collaboration, and risk-taking among teachers consistently report higher rates of standard adoption and greater instructional innovation (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Tirri, 2021).

To accelerate widespread, effective uptake of ELD standards, districts and states should invest in ongoing professional learning focused on growth mindset, peer mentorship, and celebration of teacher-led innovation. Creating a culture that values reflection, experimentation, and

shared risk-taking, supported by leadership and access to collaborative networks, will empower more educators to act intentionally and adaptively on behalf of multilingual learners.

Agency Implication

Hiring, supporting, and retaining teachers who are collaborative, adaptable, curious, open-minded risk-takers is key to scaling effective ELD implementation. Intentional, aligned ML staff support is critical for teacher agency.

8. Technology and Innovation: Agency in the Digital Age

Findings

Teachers are leveraging technology, including AI, digital resource banks, and blended learning to extend their agency and reach more students. Seventy-nine percent of participating teachers (30 out of 38) report leveraging technology in the aforementioned ways. Educators are increasingly using AI tools for lesson planning, centralized Google Drives for resource sharing, and blended or digital professional development to streamline planning and support differentiated instruction (Anisah et al., 2024; Kilbane & Milman, 2024; Sinha, 2025; Shafer Willner, 2025). These innovations are especially impactful in rural or under-resourced settings, where teachers report greater isolation and fewer supports.

Discussion

Innovative educators routinely describe how technology helps them save time, adapt instruction, and collaborate across distances to better support multilingual learners. Professional learning communities centered on digital tools and online training have also increased teachers' confidence in implementing standards and expanding their repertoire of strategies. As an ML specialist in Wisconsin explained: "Shared resource banks and bite-sized PD (e.g., 3-minute screencasts) make standards actionable."

Prioritizing scalable, user-friendly digital tools and targeted peer-led training will enable schools and districts to democratize teacher agency and innovation. Expanding access to vetted resource banks, AI-powered instructional generators, and ongoing blended PD opportunities will empower all teachers, regardless of setting, to share best practices and continually improve standards-aligned instruction for multilingual learners.

Agency Implication

Digital tools can democratize agency, giving all teachers the means to innovate and share best practices. Invest in scalable, user-friendly digital tools and training to make innovative practices accessible to all teachers.

9. Drivers and Supports

Findings

Leadership, strong ML teachers, integrated curriculum, and professional learning communities serve as primary drivers of successful ELD standards implementation. In the present study, 84% of respondents (32 out of 38) pointed to these factors as crucial to momentum and sustainability. Previous research underscores that effective leadership sets a shared vision and allocates resources, while strong, collaborative EL teachers and job-embedded professional learning build collective efficacy (DuFour et al., 2021; Park, 2024; WIDA, 2023). There is widespread demand for curriculum-aligned professional development and centralized resource banks to support both new and veteran teachers. As one ML specialist in Wisconsin stated, "The more shared resources out there that we have, the better in supporting the ELD standards work. Advocating that districts prioritize this work is important." A STEM faculty member in Maryland observed, "I've started drafting AI prompts to help teachers align standards—it bridges the buy-in gap."

Discussion

Teachers emphasized that driver-support relationships are mutually reinforcing: when administrators prioritize ELD work and provide time and resources, teacher innovators multiply and spread effective practices (DuFour et al., 2021). Collaborative PLCs, especially those grounded in integrated curriculum and real classroom examples, elevate teacher leadership and accelerate implementation, while shared resource banks and AI-powered supports bring just-in-time guidance across grade levels and contexts (WIDA, 2023). Research shows that collective efficacy and aligned systems, more than any single factor, foster resilient and adaptive ELD practices across diverse sites (Hattie et al., 2021; Park, 2024).

Investing in strong instructional leadership, robust PLCs, and universally accessible resource banks will yield sustainable gains in teacher expertise and student outcomes. Job-embedded curriculum development and ongoing shared PD, especially in collaboration with content experts, further empower teachers to adapt with confidence and consistency.

Agency Implication

When districts intentionally build leadership pipelines, strengthen professional communities, and leverage centralized tools, teacher agency is amplified, not isolated. Systemic investments in these drivers support teachers at all stages, fostering innovation, shared purpose, and collective responsibility for multilingual learners.

10. Policy, Opportunity, and Advocacy: Agency as Systemic Influence

Findings

Teachers are not just implementers—they are advocates, pushing for policy changes (e.g., exit criteria, resource allocation) that ensure opportunity for MLs. Opportunity is a persistent concern, especially regarding premature EL program exit, rural/urban resource gaps, and culturally responsive assessment. Findings reveal that 71% of educators in this study (27 of 38) see themselves not just as implementers, but as policy advocates actively pushing for changes in the aforementioned areas. Teachers highlight opportunity gaps, especially premature exit from EL support, rural/urban disparities, and the need for culturally grounded assessment, as persistent concerns aligned with research calling for policy coherence and equity-driven reform (Norman & Eslami, 2022; Park, 2024). As one teacher noted, “Exiting students too early risks academic failure... post-monitoring support is critical.” These advocacy efforts are echoed in national guidance and studies (Burho et al., 2024) that stress the importance of empowering teacher voices in shaping policy.

Discussion

Agency is especially visible when teachers challenge inequitable systems, advocate for sustained support and policy coherence (including clear, equitable exit criteria and ongoing monitoring), and demand culturally relevant classroom assessments. There is particular concern that early exit criteria and insufficient post-exit support can undermine MLs’ long-term success, while fragmented policies leave both students and their teachers without the resources needed to thrive (Norman & Eslami, 2022; Park, 2024). Research confirms that when teacher advocacy is supported both in instructional and political domains, systemic change and gains for MLs are more likely.

A cohesive, equity-focused policy approach that involves teachers in decision-making, not just compliance, will be especially beneficial. Policy shifts that ensure sustained support for MLs, equitable resource allocation across settings, and investment in teacher-led innovation are likely to produce lasting, system-wide improvement.

Agency Implication

Empowering teachers as policy advocates and co-developers of policy leads to more responsive and equitable systems. Ensuring that teachers have agency in shaping local and state policies, especially around exit and monitoring, assessment design, and resource development fosters ongoing systemic improvement and better supports for multilingual

learners. Policy must ensure sustained, equitable support for MLs, especially in under-resourced contexts.

Conclusion: Teacher Agency as the Engine of ELD Standards Implementation Progression

This research underscores that teacher agency is the core force propelling WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition implementation forward. When teachers have the ability to adapt, innovate, and advocate, multilingual learners experience greater access to relevant, engaging language education. However, teacher agency flourishes only in districts that offer supportive leadership, collaborative professional cultures, and practical resources tailored to address real classroom challenges.

To accelerate more equitable and effective implementation of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, districts and policymakers should prioritize actionable strategies that amplify teacher agency. There is a clear demand for curriculum-aligned materials, targeted PD, and more shared discipline-specific supports.

Recommendations also include embedding time for collaborative planning, investing in ongoing discipline-specific professional development, building accessible digital platforms and resource banks, and integrating teacher voice into policy and resource decisions. These steps support a shift away from compliance-based models toward one grounded in opportunity, engagement, and sustained instructional improvement.

Filling the need for the materials and supports mentioned above, as well as leveraging teacher expertise, will help realize the promise of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, ensuring that multilingual learners across all contexts receive the high-quality, equitable language development they deserve.

Key Recommendations and Implications for Future Research

Emerging from this work is the need for further partnership-driven inquiry focused on discipline integration, technology-enabled language support, and bridging implementation gaps, laying the groundwork for stronger, scalable language development across all classrooms.

- Prioritize embedded professional development and shared instructional resource banks that are explicitly linked to content areas. Examine how content-language integration models (e.g., in science, social studies, mathematics) reshape multilingual learner outcomes.
- Invest in AI and digital tools that support lesson planning, differentiation, formative assessment, and PLC collaboration. Investigate the effectiveness and equity of AI-

powered prompt engineering and auto-scoring for speaking and writing assessment.

- Align supportive policies and funding streams to ensure sustainable, equitable implementation for multilingual learners. Identify strategies for closing opportunity gaps for newcomers and students with disabilities within WIDA-aligned systems.
- Foster teacher leadership and agency through recognition, coaching, and collaborative professional structures.
- Study the role of family and community partnerships in sustaining language growth, especially in diverse and high-need districts.
- Explore the impact of evolving exit criteria, AI tools, and new collaboration models on student access and achievement.
- Assess pre-service teacher readiness and ongoing in-service transfer of ELD standards-aligned instructional practices.

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