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**COMPETENCY-BASED BILINGUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER  
PREPARATION FRAMEWORK**

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**ABSTRACT**

American classrooms have become more diverse than before. With the increase in the number of English language learners (ELLs) in the classroom, so as the number of ELLs with disabilities or culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional (CLDE) students. There has been a shortage of bilingual education and special education teachers in the U.S. for more than 25 years. This paper discusses a review of literature to improve pre-service teacher preparation to include bilingual special education training. The purpose of the review of research was to identify a competency-based teacher training framework and practices to prepare pre-service educators who are trained to work with ELLs with disabilities.

**Key Words:** ELLs with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional (CLDE) students, special education, teacher preparation program.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

**1.1. English Language Learners (ELLs) and ELLs with Disabilities**

Demographic changes in the U.S. indicate that a large proportion of students entering schools come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The number of English Language Learners (ELLs) attending schools is increasing. Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) is defined or is an embodiment of the following terms: “student with limited English proficiency (LEP), native language speaker, dialect speaker, and student who is learning English as a second language (ESL)” (Scott, Hauerwas, & Brown, 2014, p. 172). ELLs are referred to students whose first language is other than English and are beginning to adapt the English language (Pennock-Roman & Rivera, 2011). They are being served in appropriate programs of language assistance (e.g., English as a Second Language, Dual Language, Transitional Bilingual Education) (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

U.S. classrooms have become more ethnically and linguistically diverse. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020), Fall 2017 consisted of over 10.1% of ELLs, which is around 5 million students. This figure was higher than that in Fall 2000, where 8.1% or 3.8 million students were categorized as ELLs. There were about 3.8 million Hispanic ELLs in public schools, constituting over three-quarters (76.5%) of ELLs enrollment. Asian students were the next largest racial/ethnic group with 530,900 students (10.7% of ELLs).

An ELL with a disability is a student who is being served in special education and in appropriate programs of language assistance (Watkins & Liu, 2013). With the dramatic increase of ELLs in U.S. classrooms, ELLs with disabilities also represent an increasingly larger sector in the K-12 student population (Kushner, 2008; Watkins & Liu, 2013). In Fall 2017, there were about 700,000 ELLs with disabilities, representing 14.3% of the total ELL population enrolled in the U.S. public schools (NCES, 2020). Among the 13 disability categories, in 2016-2017, there were 49% of the students identified with a specific learning disability, 19% with speech or language impairment, seven percent with autism and seven percent with intellectual disability (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2016).

## **1.2 Texas and ELLs with Disabilities**

NCES (2020) reported that in Fall 2017, there were ten states which had the highest percentages (10.1% or more) of ELL students in their public schools. Texas was the second highest with a percentage of 18% close to California with 19.2%. Texas Education Agency (TEA) (2020b) reported that in 2018-2019, the student enrollment was 5,493,940 where 2,854,590 students (52.6%) were Hispanic/Latino. There were 1.05 million of ELL students (19.4%) in the public schools. Among these students, 9.2% or 97,500 students were identified with disabilities.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

### **2.1 Federal Law and Educator Quality**

On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law replacing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The purpose of ESSA is to ensure that all students have access to equitable, high-quality education and to close educational achievement gaps (Alliance for Excellence Education, 2020). The Act has repealed the term “highly qualified”, which was the requirement of NCLB for all teachers of core academic subjects. In its place, it requires teachers to be certified according to each state’s standards (Texas Classroom Teacher Association, 2019).

### **2.2 Shortage of Bilingual and Special Education Teachers in Texas**

Texas educator shortage areas reflect national issues related to the educational needs of a growing CLD population. There has been a shortage of bilingual teachers even prior to the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 (Flores, Sheets, & Clark, 2011). Texas has indicated shortages in the areas of bilingual education and special education for over 25 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Texas Education Agency (2020a) mentioned that as of 2020-2021 there is a shortage noted in the following areas: bilingual/ESL and special education, both in elementary and secondary levels. Hence, this paper aimed to obtain research to support the development of a training model to fill the gap in preparing qualified educators who have the knowledge, skills and dispositions to

improve services to ELLs with disabilities or culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional (CLDE) students.

### **3. RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **3.1 Bilingual/ESL Special Education**

Since the late 1960s, educators have been aware of the unique learning needs of CLDE students (Figueroa, Klingner, & Baca, 2013). This recognition helped the establishment of bilingual/ESL special education. King, Klingner, and Añiles (2008) asserted that De Valenzuela, Baca, and Baca defined bilingual special education as the environment “in which student participation in an individually designed, special education program is conducted in both the student’s native language and English; in such a program, the student’s home culture is also considered, framed in an inclusive environment” (as cited in Gonzalez, 2008, p. 87-88). Moreover, special education provides interdisciplinary services that meet the educational needs of ELLs with disabilities.

Hoover, Klingner, Baca, and Patton (2008) asserted that not all the special education teachers have proficiency in both English and other language(s). Thus, when a teacher is fluent in the native language of the student and the student’s English proficiency is limited, a bilingual special education model should be utilized. On the other hand, if the student is more proficient in English, an ESL approach is more appropriate. Nevertheless, it is always the preferred strategy to teach the student using his/her native language if it is more proficient than English. This would mean that the teacher would need to present the lessons in two languages.

The theoretical framework of bilingual/ESL special education is based on three fundamental perspectives (Figueroa, Klingner, & Baca, 2013). The first perspective is sociocultural theory, which is the way learning is connected to students’ cultures. The second perspective is cultural capital and funds of knowledge of community, which are the resources that come from the students’ cultures. The third perspective is the principles of effective learning, which include teachers and students develop language and literacy across different disciplines and produce work together.

In view of the shortage of qualified special educators with bilingual education training, it is imperative to train personnel who demonstrate the competencies needed to provide high-quality instruction, evidence-based interventions, and services for children with disabilities, that result in improvement in learning and developmental outcomes. A broad array of experiences and competencies are needed to prepare personnel to more adequately address the challenges of serving children with disabilities in home, community, and school settings (Hoover et al., 2008).

#### **3.2 Competency-based Teacher Education**

Competency-based education (CBE) in U.S. higher education was started in 1968 when 10 colleges and universities were funded by the U.S. Office of Education to develop training programs for elementary school teachers (Ford, 2014; Nodine, 2015). These pilot CBE programs

were efforts to reform teacher education in the 1960s, specifically to improve teacher preparation and accountability of teacher education programs. It was these programs which initiated the first use of the term *competency* in teaching and learning (Ford, 2014).

Ross-Fisher (2016) asserted that educator preparation programs are particularly well-suited for a CBE model. This is because prior to receiving their state license, teacher candidates must first demonstrate their proficiency in content knowledge, pedagogy, classroom management, and other skills required for effective teaching.

In order to create a robust set of competencies within an educator preparation program, it is imperative to start with standards that are adopted by state, national, and professional organizations (Ross-Fisher, 2016). Once the standards are chosen, it is important to examine the competencies from both a macro and a micro perspective to formulate the key concepts and principles for the program. Once the competencies are established, it is time to construct learning objectives, from which assessments are developed to measure students' proficiency against a pre-determined level of mastery. These competencies, learning objectives, and assessments can be grouped within specific courses in the program and assigned credit hours or competency units. When a complete set of competencies, learning objectives, and assessments is drafted, the faculty and teacher trainers should be able to answer the question: *What do we want our teacher candidates to know and be able to do?* Ross-Fisher (2016) also stressed that the answer to this question should change over time depending on the professional standards and expectations.

### 3.3 Competencies Identified

To guide colleges and universities in their special education teacher preparation, Rodriguez (2005) conducted a study to identify the dual professional and teaching competencies of bilingual special education teachers. Stemmed from a review of literature which provided a theoretical rationale for the study, Rodriguez identified five areas where special education teacher preparation programs should focus on. These areas were: "language proficiency, appropriate assessment, planning and delivery of instruction, culture, and professionalism" (p. 1960).

There were 100 participants in the study who were randomly selected, 25 in each professional group: bilingual special educators, administrators, clinicians, and professors (Rodriguez, 2005). The participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire, which consisted of a list of 55 competencies, and identify those competencies they thought teachers working with ELLs with disabilities should demonstrate.

The results showed that all of the professionals regarded the five areas (language proficiency, assessment, planning and delivery of instruction, culture, and professionalism) as vital and essential components in the bilingual special education teacher preparation programs (Rodriguez, 2005). Among the five areas, language proficiency was considered as the most essential area (85%). The findings supported the tenet that college or university bilingual special education

teacher preparation programs needed to include these 5 areas in the curriculum, courses, and field experiences.

#### **4. PROPOSED COMPETENCY-BASED BILINGUAL SPECIAL EDUCATOR PREPARATION FRAMEWORK**

The purpose of this paper is to propose a competency-based pre-service teacher training framework for ELLs with disabilities or CLDE students in the U.S. The proposed domains and competencies are aligned with the Texas Educator Preparation Standards (TEA, 2020c) as well as with research indicating what educators working with ELL/CLDE children need to know and be able to do (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Flores, Sheets, & Clark, 2011; Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018; Hoover, Klingner, Baca & Patton, 2008; Kushner, 2008; Rodriguez 2005). The domains and competencies of Texas Examination of Educator Standards (TExES) Program for special education teachers (TEA, 2018a) and bilingual education teachers (TEA, 2018b) serve as a framework for discussing competencies specific to working with ELLs with disabilities.

Moreover, the framework proposed in this paper also was referenced from the Administrative Code of Illinois State Board of Education (2020). The main reason is because Illinois is the only state in the U.S. that has the standards for bilingual special education teachers posted on their internet website. Based on the literature review, it is evident a bilingual special educator must develop the following competencies, which fall into 7 domains (Appendix A). The suggested domains and competencies were discussed in the following sections.

##### **4.1 Domain I: Language Proficiency**

In the field of bilingual special education, the competency of language proficiency has been a crucial issue. Rodriguez (2005) stressed that it is imperative for bilingual special educators to be proficient in two languages. They should enhance CLD students by acknowledging their language skills. Language is an intrinsic component of culture. It is a medium through which content of formal educational are expressed and transmitted. Guerrero and Valadez (2011) also noted that research has proven the use and development of one's first language is vital for conceptual, social, and academic growth.

When facilitating access to the general education curriculum, Kushner (2008) stressed that effective teachers of ELLs with disabilities should address students' individual language learning needs. They should be able to merge language development with content instruction and adapt language input to differentiate proficiency levels to help ELLs with disabilities to contextualize their learning. Rodriguez (2005) contended that in addition to help ELLs with disabilities to acquire the English language skills, language teaching should also be emphasized in developing students' sociolinguistic and conversational abilities. Thus, special education teachers in bilingual educational settings need to be proficient in two languages or bilingual in order to use both languages for instruction and assessment.

In the State of Illinois, the State Board of Education (2020) has established the standards for bilingual special education specialists. It is stated in the Administrative Code that competent bilingual special education specialists should understand and speak proficiently in the primary language (L1) spoken by the students and parents. They can read and write proficiently in the students' home language (L1) and in English (L2). In Texas, one of the competencies for beginning bilingual education teachers is to understand the process of L1 and L2 acquisition and development and apply this knowledge to promote language proficiency of students with disabilities in their first language (L1) and second language (L2) (TEA, 2018b).

#### **4.2 Domain II: Foundational Knowledge of Special and Bilingual/ESL Education**

It is stated explicitly in the Illinois Administrative Code of the State Board of Education (2020) that the competent bilingual special education specialist understands the philosophical, historical, and legal foundations of special education. It is imperative for the bilingual special educators to understand the current theories and practices of bilingual education, bilingual special education, and ESL. In addition, the competent bilingual special educators should understand the legislation, litigation, and current research relative to special education services for CLDE students.

#### **4.3 Domain III: Characteristics and Cultural and Linguistic Diversity**

Kushner (2008) asserted that the "key to the creation of culturally responsive learning environment is the understanding of the nature and dynamics of language and culture and their impact on student learning" (p. 46). Research findings have identified differences in cognitive and learning styles among students from diverse racial and ethnic groups. Such differences can also be found among students educated within and outside the United States. In addition, there are several psychological characteristics that influence the learning outcomes of ELLs with disabilities, such as self-concept, self-efficacy, and motivation. Also, differences can be found in communication styles, non-verbal behaviors (e.g., eye contact), and language patterns, which vary across cultures.

Rodriguez (2005) contended that bilingual special education teachers should be aware that language is a core value for a cultural group. Language also plays a significant role in the development of the students' cultural identity and self-concept. The competency of culture in the bilingual special education teacher preparation program must provide the tools, knowledge, meanings, and expectations necessary to prepare teachers to educate the CLDE students.

In addition, Hoover and deBettencourt (2018) contended that bilingual special educators in twenty-first century classrooms must understand the role of culture and language in how learners think, learn, and communicate. They must be taught that students' primary language and their cultural backgrounds are seen as assets. The curricula of educator preparation programs must have a clear focus on ELLs with disabilities and their needs.

#### **4.4 Domain IV: Assessment Tools & Techniques**



Rodriguez (2005) noted that assessment plays an important role in the diagnosis and evaluation of CLD students. Knowledge of assessment procedures is an essential competency in preparing bilingual special education teachers. Flores, Sheets, and Clark (2011) contended that effective instruction begins with “good assessment” (p. 151). It is through ongoing assessment that teachers are able to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses. If used properly, assessment is a powerful tool to examine student understanding and guide instruction. Teachers should utilize multiple forms of assessment, including multiple-choice questions and hands-on assignments, to collect artifacts of student knowledge. Multiple-choice items are for assessing factual knowledge and hands-on assignments are more appropriate for assessing students’ critical thinking, problem-solving, and inquiry skills.

Regarding assessment development, Flores et al. (2011) stressed that teachers have many experiences being the users of tests developed by others; nevertheless, they have few experiences as test developers. The authors contended that through developing engaging and challenging assessments for ELLs, teachers can improve their teaching.

Moreover, one of the reasons for the overrepresentation of bilingual students in special education is that the traditional assessment process cannot distinguish between language acquisition and learning disabilities (Figueroa, Klingner, & Baca, 2013). Evaluations for students with learning disabilities give insufficient consideration to the effects of language acquisition on learning or on the assessment process. Hence, it is imperative for the beginning bilingual special education teachers possess the knowledge on how to use a variety of assessment tools & techniques with CLDE students.

#### **4.5 Domain V: Planning & Delivery of Instruction**

Cloud (as cited in Artiles & Ortiz, 2002) stressed that to address the special needs of the ELLs with disabilities, instructional planning should be well-integrated with focuses on the students’ cultural characteristics, language needs, and disabilities. All of these three components are essential; if one is neglected, the instruction will suffer. As a result, teachers working with ELLs with disabilities should create a learning environment which is culturally responsive. Also, they should possess the knowledge on how to create a culturally responsive teaching and learning environment through (a) curriculum and materials, (b) classroom interactions, (c) instructional approaches, (d) resource management, and (e) counseling and parent outreach efforts (Cloud as cited in Artiles & Ortiz, 2002).

Rodriguez (2005) stressed that one of the most challenging issues in teaching CLDE students is related to the effective methods of instruction. There have been concerns about the quality of instruction. CLDE students are at greater risk of being placed in a classroom in which academic instruction is not emphasized. Hence, bilingual special education teachers must pay constant attention to their students’ academic needs and characteristics. They also need to challenge and motivate their students.

In addition, both ESSA and IDEA require students with disabilities to have access to general education curriculum (Tomasello & Brand, 2018). Appropriately accessing the general curriculum might require the use of assistive technology (AT) to enhance learning and participation in the inclusive classroom. IDEA requires that AT be considered in the development of a student's individual education plan (IEP) (Poel, Wood, & Schmidt, 2013). AT includes any device or service that helps students with disabilities meet their IEP goals and participate in the general education setting to the greatest extent possible. Because AT is mandated by law, educator preparation programs should include AT in their programs of study in order to align with the law, professional standards, and classroom practice (Poel et al., 2013).

#### **4.6 Domain VI: Educational Performance, Behavioral and Social Skills, and Transition**

##### **4.6.1 Educational performance**

Both ESSA and IDEA require educators to use evidence-based practices (EBPs) and interventions to improve student learning outcomes (American Institute of Research, 2019; California Department of Education, 2019). In general, an EBP is one whose effectiveness is supported by rigorous research; that is, research findings show that the practice works (IRIS Center, 2019). These practices are instructional techniques that have been shown through reliable, trustworthy research to improve students' learning and behavior (Sawyer et al., 2017). Special education teachers' accurate implementation of EBPs can significantly improve academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities.

IRIS Center (2019) also pointed out that EBP is not the same as best practice or recommended practice, which have been used inconsistently. Some of these practices or programs are not supported by research. Therefore, educator preparation programs need to train their students with EBPs, which are backed by research and not just anecdotal evidence or professional judgement.

##### **4.6.2 Behavioral and social skills**

Hoover, Klingner, Baca, and Patton (2008) asserted that teachers whose culture differs from that of their students tend to misinterpret the students' behaviors. If they are to create classroom environments that are culturally affirming for CLDE students, they must develop culturally responsive instructional and management strategies.

Bowman (2000) contended that culturally different behaviors are not equivalent to deficits in social skills or behavior disorders. As a result, it is imperative for bilingual special education teachers to make an effort to understand all facets of their CLDE students (Hoover, Klingner, Baca, & Patton, 2008).

##### **4.6.3 Transition**

Hoover et al. (2008) noted that working with youth with disabilities from CLD backgrounds requires an understanding of the critical issues facing these youth and their families. Therefore,



bilingual special education teachers also need special skills in developing and implementing transition plans across the life span as well as school settings.

#### **4.7 Domain VII: Professional Roles and Responsibilities Professionalism**

Research and reform efforts have identified continuing development and learning of teachers as a key to improving the quality of schools and student achievement (Desimone, 2009). Therefore, it is imperative to address teacher professionalism in preparing bilingual special educators (Rodriguez, 2005). Teacher professionalism should be considered as an ongoing learning process to improve the learning and academic performance of ELLs with disabilities.

Effective teachers of ELLs with disabilities serve as resources for their students, students' families, and their colleagues (Kushner & Ortiz, 2000). They share with the stakeholders materials and resources strategically designed to support CLDE students. They actively participate in curriculum decisions and advocate for interventions that provide opportunities to develop and maintain both the native language and English. Also, they are active members in professional organizations. They present/write papers on instructional practices related to CLDE students. They attend conference sessions that allow them to reflect and modify their instructional practices according to the current, research-based practices for ELLs with disabilities.

##### **4.7.1 Collaborative Consultation**

Hoover et al. (2008) noted that the teaching profession was used to be independent rather than collaborative. Teachers have been working with their students in their own classroom. Nevertheless, as schools have been reformed and restructured, teacher independence has shifted to teacher collaboration and interdependence. The trend of teacher collaboration has been more prominent as schools have tried to better meet the educational needs of challenging students including the ELLs with disabilities. To provide the most effective programs for students with disabilities, it is essential to have collaborative consultation among special education, bilingual/ESL education, and regular education teachers.

##### **4.7.2 Home-School Collaboration**

Last but not least, one of the important responsibilities of teachers of ELLs with disabilities is to work closely with the parents of these students (Hoover et al., 2008). Educators must be taught how to actively collaborate with students' families and communities (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). If parental involvement is necessary to improve the academic performance of regular education students, it becomes all the more important for students with special needs (Hoover et al, 2008).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Schools in the United States are being held to the highest levels of accountability for the academic achievement of students with disabilities (Hoover & Bettencourt, 2018; Kushner, 2008). With the demographic changes, today's classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, which leads to the national concerns about shortages of bilingual and special education teachers. Personnel preparation programs need to ensure that educators are ready to serve CLD students and students with disabilities.

This paper delineates the critical competencies bilingual special education teachers require in addressing the academic needs of ELLs with disabilities. The proposed competency-based bilingual special education teacher preparation framework can help produce bilingual special education teachers who are ready to meet the educational needs of CLDE students and ensure their academic success.

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Appendix A

**Table 1 .Domains and Competence-based Framework for Bilingual/ESL Special Education Teacher Preparation**

Domain	Competency
	<u>Descriptions</u> The elementary bilingual/ESL Special Educator:
I Language Proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ is proficient in two languages;</li> <li>▪ understands the processes of first-and second-language acquisition and development and applies this knowledge to promote language proficiency of students with disabilities in their first language (L1) and second language (L2).</li> </ul>
II Foundation Knowledge of Special and Bilingual/ESL Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ understands the philosophical, historical, and legal foundations of special education;</li> <li>▪ understands the foundations of bilingual education and the concepts of bilingualism and biculturalism and applies this knowledge to create an effective learning environment for students with disabilities.</li> </ul>
III Characteristics and Cultural and Linguistic Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ understands and applies knowledge of the characteristics and needs of students with disabilities;</li> <li>▪ demonstrates awareness of the way in which a student’s culture can permeate all areas of the curriculum;</li> <li>▪ plans strategies to respond positively to the diversity of behaviors involved in cross cultural environments and classrooms.</li> </ul>
IV Assessment Tools & Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ understands formal and informal assessment and evaluation procedures and knows how to evaluate student competencies to make instructional decisions;</li> <li>▪ has comprehensive knowledge of the development and assessment of literacy in L1.</li> </ul>
V Planning & Delivery of Instruction, including the use of Assistive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ understands and applies knowledge of procedures for planning instruction for individuals with disabilities and managing the teaching and learning environment, including procedures related to the use of assistive technology;</li> <li>▪ demonstrates knowledge of basic classroom management theories, methods, and techniques to use with students with culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional learning needs;</li> </ul>



Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ demonstrates the ability to teach students to use thinking, problem solving, and other cognitive strategies to their individual needs;</li><li>▪ demonstrates the ability to interpret and use assessment data for instructional planning;</li><li>▪ demonstrate the capacity to develop comprehensive individualized student programs with the involvement of family and/or community resources;</li><li>▪ demonstrates the knowledge of effective innovative teaching techniques for use in various content areas.</li></ul>
VI Educational Performance, Behavioral and Social Skills, and Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ has comprehensive knowledge of content areas instruction in L1 and L2;</li><li>▪ knows how to promote students' educational performance across the curriculum by facilitating their achievement in a variety of settings and situations;</li><li>▪ understands and applies knowledge of issues and procedures for teaching appropriate student behavior and social skills;</li><li>▪ understands and applies knowledge of transition issues and procedures across the life span;</li><li>▪ knows how to plan, facilitate, and implement transition activities as documented in Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSPs), Individual Education Program (IEPs), and Individual Transition Plans (ITPs).</li></ul>
VII Professional Roles and Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ applies knowledge of professional roles and responsibilities and adheres to legal and ethical requirements of the profession;</li><li>▪ knows how to communicate and collaborate effectively in a variety of professional settings.</li></ul>