English Language Learners in Computer Science Education: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

English-language universities are increasingly recruiting students who are English Language Learners (ELL), but in computer science little is known about whether or how their learning needs differ from native English speakers. Despite widespread efforts into broadening participation in computing, computer science education for ELL students who are learning computer science in English is relatively understudied. In this paper, we review the small but growing body of work in this area. We conducted a scoping review to identify 54 relevant publications and chart their commonalities. We then performed a qualitative analysis to identify meta- and sub-themes. The meta-themes include: studying what benefits or hinders ELL students, focusing on integrative language skills, and pedagogical and curricular approaches. Via this scoping review, we provide a summary and synthesis of the 54 publications and identify comprehensively-examined and emerging themes.

CCS Concepts

• **Social and professional topics → Computing education**.

Keywords

computer science education, English Language Learners, non-native English speakers, scoping review, qualitative analysis

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1 Introduction

The computer science education community – and the field of computing generally – has seen a prolonged focus on broadening participation for groups that have been and are still underrepresented in the field. The goal of this effort is to provide "students from all backgrounds with exposure, access, and opportunities to computer science education" [11, p. 46]. In most Western higher education institutions, and in numerous institutions around the world, English is the language of instruction while many students are English Language Learners (ELL). These ELL students may be domestic or international and may be learning English as a second or additional language. Despite widespread efforts into broadening participation in computing, computer science education for ELL students is relatively understudied. In computer science, little is known about whether or how ELL students' learning needs differ from native English speakers. As Armenti states, "[t]here is a significant lack of research and intervention in developing effective computer science materials for EL[L] students causing a crucial impediment to the CS4All goals." [7, p. 4]

Given the sparsity of the space and the desire to create computer sciences programs that are accessible to all learners, it is valuable to survey the literature to see where there are areas of untapped research potential. This paper performs this survey and contributes a scoping review of published literature about computer science education for students who are English Language Learners. Our goal is to identify, summarize, and synthesize relevant publications and identify topics that have been comprehensively examined and those that have been studied less often or are emerging and warrant future attention.

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2 Scoping Review and Analysis Methodology

Scoping reviews follow a systematic methodology and are "often used to map existing literature in a given field in terms of its nature, features, and volume" [41, p. 141]. The purpose of a scoping review can vary: the purpose of this review is to examine the "coverage of a body of literature on a given topic and give clear indication of the volume of literature and studies available as well as an overview ... of its focus" [36, p. 2]; we aim to identify well-studied topics as well as topics that are emerging and promising areas of future work.

2.1 Scoping Review Method

Scoping reviews use *a priori* protocols for inclusion and exclusion, have a clear objective, follow a three-step search protocol, present a narrative and flowchart description of the steps followed, present a graphical, tabular, or descriptive format of the findings, and use a clear, pre-defined chart for extracting findings from the selected literature [41]. The three-step search protocol includes [41]:

- Search step 1, an initial search of relevant databases to identify keywords;
- Search step 2, a second search using the identified keywords on all included databases; and
- Search step 3, a scan of the identified publications' reference lists for further relevant work

This scoping review answers the question "What has been published about computer science education for students who are English Language Learners?"

2.1.1 Databases and Search Methods We searched the Compendex Engineering Village, the Web of Science Core Collection, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, and ERIC publication indexes because we believe that they are the most relevant to computing education publications. Compendex includes IEEE and ACM publications and contains more than 20 million publications from more than 77 countries. The Web of Science is multidisciplinary and contains journal and conference publications. ERIC claims to be the most comprehensive education index, covering more than 200 journals. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global includes millions of citations and over a million full-text dissertations or theses.

In search Step 1, we generated the search terms iteratively. We started with relevant terms from previously identified articles. We read titles, abstracts, and keywords from initial search results and expanded our search terms. We continued this process until the results were both comprehensive and relevant. Our search terms are influenced by our understanding of the literature we wanted to review; another set of reviewers who are interested in the same general body of literature may generate different search terms.

In search Step 2, on January 26, 2021, we used the following terms to search Compendex, the Web of Science, and ERIC in 'All fields' or 'All text'. For ProQuest, we searched the first search term below in 'All Subjects and Indexing' and the second in 'Anywhere'[1].

> "computer science education" OR "CS education" OR "computing education" OR "teaching computer science" OR "teaching computing" OR "learning programming" OR "teaching programming"
> AND
> "native language" OR bilingual OR multi-lingual OR multilingual OR ESL OR ELL OR EALL OR "English Language Learner" OR "English Language Learners" OR "non-native" OR "English as a Second Language" OR "English as an Additional Language"

The searches from Step 2 produced 50 results from Compendex, 44 from the Web of Science, 53 from ERIC, and 34 from ProQuest for a total of 181 results. Once duplicates were removed, there were 160 results, which we screened for inclusion. The criterion for inclusion was that the publication discussed English-language computer science education for students who are English Language Learners. We did not consider publications written in languages other than English. We did not apply further exclusionary criteria. After examination of these 160 results we identified 40 relevant publications [1–8, 12, 13, 15, 18, 19, 22, 24–28, 30, 35, 39, 43–52, 54–59, 61, 62] that we include in this scoping review.

In search Step 3 we read the 40 selected publications' reference lists to identify additional relevant work. We didn't follow references to online magazine-style articles, blogs, or articles written in a language other than English. This located 22 further publications to screen, of which 14 were selected for the scoping review [9, 10, 14, 20, 29, 31–33, 37, 38, 40, 42, 53, 60].

[1]searching in 'Anywhere' on ProQuest resulted in more than 1500 results, most of which were irrelevant so we narrowed our search.

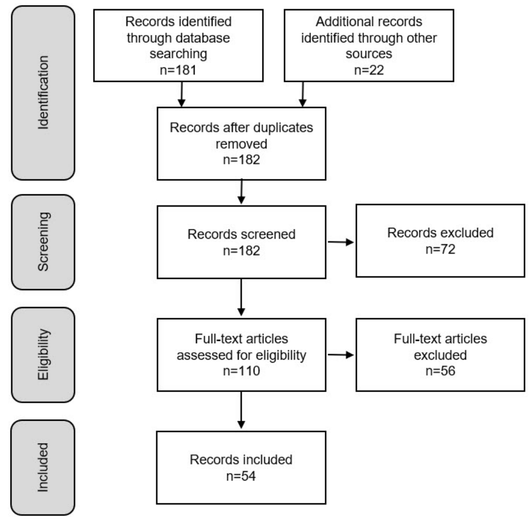

Figure 1: Flowchart of the scoping review selection process.

Scoping reviews should include a flowchart visualizing the entire set of publications considered in addition to the chronological, narrative description of the steps taken [41]. We include this visualization; see Figure 1. It begins with the 181 publications identified in search Step 2 plus the 22 identified in search Step 3. After removing duplicates, 182 unique publications were considered. Of the 182, 72 were excluded in a screening of titles and abstracts. Finally, 110 publications were examined in detail for eligibility and 56 were excluded leaving 54 publications included in the scoping review.

2.1.2 Scoping Review Data Extraction A scoping review follows a systematic, pre-defined set of steps to search the literature. It also requires completing a data chart and presenting a graphical, tabular, or descriptive format of the findings but authors choose how to analyse the charted data.

We developed a charting form by reading all 54 titles and abstracts again and noting the information that we wanted to record. We read each of the 54 publications and completed our data chart. For each publication, we recorded – if applicable – its:

- title
- authors and countries of authors' affiliations
- source and publication year
- type of publication venue (e.g., conference, journal) and type of paper (e.g., research article, experience report)
- level of students involved (e.g., K-12, undergraduate)
- keywords
- goal and/or research question(s)
- methodology and methods (data collection and analysis)
- data sources
- results or findings

2.2 Analysis Method

We performed deductive and inductive coding on the publications' full text to categorize their main characteristics and themes. This followed a traditional qualitative analysis methodology employing open coding to derive the themes from our data collected in the scoping review [16]. Both authors coded all publications; we did not calculate inter-rater reliability.

- Analysis step 1, derived initial codes based on the publications' abstracts;
- Analysis step 2, each author coded all publications and created new codes as they arose; each author re-coded previous publications with all new codes
- Analysis step 3, discussed coding and resolved any disagreements, usually adding rather than removing codes; and
- Analysis step 4, generated themes and meta-themes

3 Publications' Characteristics

To provide a high-level overview, we describe some characteristics of the publications. As shown in Figure 2, the 54 publications were published between 2006 and 2020, with the majority between 2018-2020. The publications are authored by people who work in 15 countries/regions – with the most publications from the USA (28), China (11), and India (7) – and nine of the 54 are co-authored by international collaborators. Thirty-four of the publications focus on undergraduate education while 14 pertain to K-12 education. The remainder focused on adults, all ages, or had unspecified students/participants. Thirty-six publications describe research projects, works-in-progress, or proposals. Fifteen papers are experience reports. Twenty-five of the research publications collected quantitative data and 22 collected qualitative data.

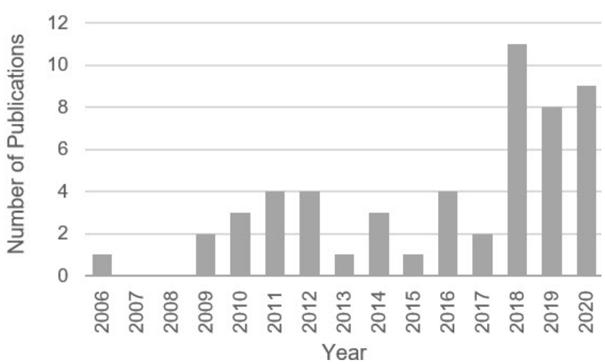

Figure 2: Number of publications by year

4 Publications' Themes

During analysis, we identified 11 themes that we grouped into three meta-themes: studying what benefits or hinders ELL students, focusing on integrative language skills, and pedagogical and curricular approaches. Ten of the themes fit into the meta-themes, while the theme of tools stands alone.

4.1 Studying What Benefits or Hinders ELL Students

4.1.1 Comparing Language of Instruction Nine publications examined the effect of the language of instruction on student learning or student experience [31, 37–40, 49–52]. All but one [31] were conducted in India.

In his PhD thesis, Pal describes a series of five projects investigating teaching programming to vernacular medium students [37], namely those students who studied in their local language at their K-12 school and in English at university. These projects were conducted in India with first-year undergraduate students whose native language is Hindi. We provide further detail about the three projects that are included in this scoping review. In these studies, Pal and Iyer compared post-test scores after a learning experience that was conducted in Hindi or English [38–40]. In each study, they used three groups: HH (Hindi in high school, Hindi in the experiment); HE (Hindi/English); and EE (English/English). In the first study, they investigated post-test scores after students learned from 1-hour video lectures [38]. They did not find any significant differences. In the second study, they investigated the impact of screencasts' medium of instruction (Hindi or English) on student performance and found a statistically significant difference in post-test scores with the HH group outperforming the HE group [40]. In the third study, they taught introductory programming workshops via English or Hindi in a classroom or via screencasts. In both the classroom and screencast contexts, post-test scores were worse for the HE group, and further, the self-paced screencast group did better than the classroom group [39].

Soosai Raj and collaborators [49–52] have conducted a series of experiments in India for native Tamil speakers investigating the effect of instructional design that combines students' native language and English when learning programming, topics in data structures, and topics in operating systems. They measured student learning via pre-test and post-tests scores and found no difference between the group taught with Tamil and English in comparison with the group taught in English. For the Tamil and English group, they used code-switching [21] – switching between English and Tamil– and translanguaging – "the process by which bilingual students and teachers engage in complex discursive practices in order to "make sense" of, and communicate in, multilingual classrooms" [23, p. 299]. They found that most students who are taught in Tamil and English will ask questions in Tamil. They conducted a sentiment analysis of student feedback and found that students had positive sentiments about the bilingual teaching methods [49]. They also found that students who studied in Tamil and English expressed positive emotions more strongly that the students who studied in English alone [49]. One important difference in comparison to Pal et al.'s work was that Soosai et al.'s student population had almost all studied at an English high school.

Lau and Yuen studied the effect of language of instruction in nine secondary schools in Hong Kong [31]. They found that students who learned in Chinese, their native language, tended to outperform students who learned in English, and that this difference was exacerbated for middle- and low-achieving students.

4.1.2 Correlates with Success in Computing Five publications focus on factors that correlate with success in computing [2, 3, 10, 42, 53].

Rauchas et al. investigated factors that correlate with success in computing courses and found that past English language performance was the best predictor of success in computer science [42]. Their work is situated in South Africa with first-year computer science students and their findings are relevant to the entire population of computer science students, not just ELL students. Ben Idris and Ammar surveyed IT and computing students and their lecturers at two Libyan universities and found that both groups believe students' English abilities affect their programming performance with English programming languages [10].

Veerasamy and Shillabeer proposed to investigate the relationship between English Language test scores and programming ability [53]. Aldmour and Nylén proposed to study whether Saudi students' English language skills transfer to an understanding of computing concepts [3]. Alaofi proposed to investigate the impact of non-native English speakers' English abilities on their programming performance [2].

4.1.3 Barriers and Difficulties Six publications explored the theme of barriers or difficulties that English Language Learners faced when learning computer science [1, 4, 18, 25, 26, 44].

Two studies were conducted with online data that was not related to a particular course at a particular institution [25, 44]. Guo surveyed users of the Python Tutor (pythontutor.com) to learn what barriers English Language Learners face when using English-language instructional materials and how they hope the materials will be improved [25]. He found that the survey respondents reported barriers with all modes of communication (reading code and documentation, writing code, listening, and speaking) and would prefer that English-language based resources used simpler language and avoided examples from any particular culture.

Reestman and Dorn investigated the Java compilation data logs from the BlueJ Blackbox database to determine whether the compiler errors generated by non-native English speakers differed from those generated by English speakers [44]. While they did find a statistically significant difference in the distribution of errors, the effect size was weak.

Hartshorn et al. surveyed instructors from five disciplines to investigate their perceptions of ELL students' language skills, reading requirements in their majors and the importance of reading, and how prepared ELL students are for their studies and future work [26]. They found that instructors perceive language skills to be more important in business and psychology than in computer science. The top three reading challenges for ELL were the same for all five majors – 'English is their second language', 'vocabulary', and 'understanding disciplinary content'. Across all majors, instructors believed that their ELL students were equally or slightly less prepared for graduate school and the workforce.

Al Zumor describes results from a survey of computing, medical, and engineering students at a Saudi Arabian university about English-medium instruction (EMI). He found that students perceive EMI to have negative academic and emotional impacts [1].

Alharbi conducted a qualitative study of international ELL students to learn what difficulties they face when studying computer science and found a number of barriers, such as understanding lectures, participating verbally, reading, and writing [4].

Feijóo-García et al. describe a study that compares native English speakers to native Spanish speakers who are learning English when using an English or Spanish Scratch interface [18]. Hispanic participants said they would prefer to use a Spanish interface.

4.2 Focusing on Integrative Language Skills

4.2.1 Bilingual Teaching in China Nine experience reports are written by authors who work in China and focus on bilingual teaching [15, 20, 30, 32, 33, 59–62]. Since 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education has required that universities and colleges offer 5-10% of their courses bilingually [20]. The experience reports generally describe the course context, the textbook, the division of time spent teaching in English and Chinese, and what the authors learned from the experience.

The students in all courses described are native Chinese speakers. The courses generally choose English textbooks written by professors who work at world-renowned institutions. They state that far fewer textbooks are available in China than outside China, which leaves professors with limited choices that are difficult to match with the intended curriculum [62]. The textbooks are described by many authors as a challenge as they are difficult for the students to read and understand [15, 20, 30, 32, 59, 62]. Multiple authors suggest creating custom course materials to supplement the textbook [15, 20, 59], and Wang reported that the students comment positively about custom course materials [59].

Authors commonly report that teaching in English is challenging, as faculty need strong English language skills and a solid foundation in the course's technical content [20, 30, 32, 60–62]. It is not explicitly reported, but our assumption is that the professors' native language is Chinese. Feng, Xiong et al., and Jiang et al. suggest that continued training is important for bilingual teachers [20, 30, 62] and Xiong et al. suggest that institutions should incent professors to take advanced training in teaching methods [62]. Although not the focus of this review, these experience reports highlight the challenges that ELL instructors face when teaching bilingual classes.

With regards to students, authors report that it is important to give students a chance to speak English in class [61] and that understanding English lectures is challenging [59]. They also report that English language skills vary amongst learners [30, 32] and some are less enthusiastic about bilingual teaching [15], however, English is seen as valuable to students' future careers as computer scientists [15, 62]. Liu et al. propose a student-centered approach to bilingual teaching that uses active learning techniques [33].

4.2.2 Translanguaging Eight publications have investigated translanguaging – "the process by which bilingual students and teachers engage in complex discursive practices in order to "make sense" of, and communicate in, multilingual classrooms" [23, p. 299] - in relation to computer science education [37, 49–52, 56–58].

In a theoretical paper, Vogel et al. discuss translanguaging and describe two example pedagogical approaches they used in K-12 settings [58]. They describe computational literacies as the ways that one makes meaning from "computational representations" [58, p. 6], including but not limited to code. Further, they describe translanguaging pedagogies to teach these literacies in a way that "emphasizes what students have and can do, rather than what they lack, or what schools perceive to be the object of their learning (Standard English, for instance)" [58, p. 8]. They argue that translanguaging pedagogy has potential to help us consider "how [computer science] as a community of practice, a discourse, and a literacy evolves" [58, p. 18-19] as participation in computing broadens.

Vogel et al. also used a qualitative analysis technique to investigate students' translanguaging as they learn computational thinking [57] in two middle school English and Spanish dual-language arts classes that integrated computational thinking into other subjects. They collected data from a variety of sources including 50 hours of class observations, audio recordings, and focus groups, and found "computational literacies are intertwined with students' other literacies" [57, p. 3] and "students translanguage to engage in specific [computational thinking] practices." [57, p. 3]

Soosai Raj and colleagues studied translanguaging in the context of instructional designs that combine students' native language and English, as described in Section 4.1.1 [49–52]. Pal discusses translanguaging and code-switching as methods of scaffolding [37].

4.2.3 Content and Language Integrated Learning Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an approach that combines language instruction and learning with subject-specific (e.g., computer science) instruction and learning [17]. It has been explored in relation to computing education in five publications [6, 24, 37, 45, 48]. With a CLIL approach to computer science, students' English language skills are further developed through interacting with computing concepts and activities, and, simultaneously, they learn computing concepts via the language that is used in the activities.

4.3 Pedagogical and Curricular Approaches

4.3.1 Culturally Relevant Curriculum Eight publications discuss culturally relevant or culturally responsive curriculum [7, 27–29, 47, 56–58]; all of this work has been published since 2018. As Ryoo et al. state, "curricula and pedagogy need to acknowledge how the CS classroom is not divorced from the larger sociocultural and political contexts within which they sit, and that students should not have to fight to have their voices and perspectives heard within the CS classroom itself." [47, p. 356] Three of these projects were in the context of Research Practice Partnerships (RPP) [27–29, 47, 56–58].

Ryoo et al. describe a RPP that used qualitative data to answer the research question "[f]rom the perspective of minoritized students historically underrepresented in computing, what makes a critical difference in their sense of agency in introductory CS high school classes?" [47, p. 337] They found that it was important to prioritize relevance to students' lives in computer science curricula and pedagogy. As described in Section 4.2.2, in the context of their RPP, Vogel and colleagues have done extensive studies on students' translanguaging while using culturally relevant curriculum [56–58]. Jacob and colleagues describe a RPP aimed at teaching computational thinking to middle school students [27–29]. They integrated culturally relevant computational thinking curriculum with English Language Arts curriculum.

4.3.2 Computational Thinking Computational thinking was a theme in five publications published in 2016 and later [7, 22, 27–29]. The RPP that Jacob and colleagues describe focuses on teaching computational thinking [27–29].

Armenti developed computational thinking and data science curriculum intended to be accessible for English Language Learners and then had a group of expert instructors who design curriculum and assessments for ELL students review it [7]. Her study resulted in curriculum design suggestions of providing multiple opportunities for students to discover meanings of words, using clear, concise language, and allowing students to practice all language modalities (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

Friss de Kereki and Manataki provide an experience report of their bilingual Spanish-English computing MOOC for high school students that aims to develop computational thinking skills [22].

4.3.3 Universal Design for Learning Four publications [5, 6, 12, 25] mention Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which was created by Meyer and Rose as a set of principles and guidelines for developing curriculum, pedagogies, and assessment strategies that are effective for diverse learners [34]. Burgstahler provides a history and explanation of UDL, general recommendations for using UDL, and examples of how UDL could be applied in a computing course [12]. She describes how using UDL is a *proactive* approach to accessibility while ensuring that students receive university-determined accommodations is a *reactive* approach [12]. UDL does not mandate implementations; instead through its principles and guidelines, one can make decisions about one's own teaching. Burgstahler states that the "potential of [universal design] to improve computing instruction should not be ignored" [12, p. 1]. UDL is not commonly referenced in the computing education literature, but could provide a useful framework for educators who are looking to broaden participation in computing across a variety of populations [25].

Allen et al. [6] describe the application of UDL in curriculum reform of a CS1 course that was taught to students who were English Language Learners. They argue that using UDL will be beneficial to both ELLs and native English speakers.

4.3.4 Teachers' Perceptions and Strategies Three publications have explored instructors' perceptions of teaching computing to English Language Learners independent of a particular pedagogical or curricular focus [24, 43, 54]. Reestman interviewed 10 high-school and university instructors who had taught computing to classes of exclusively (or mostly) ELL students [43]. He found that instructors generally believed that their ELL students were equally able to succeed, but they also described barriers perceived as challenging for ELL students, such as English-language course materials and documentation, and that additional time was necessary for ELL students to complete activities. Reestman's participants described strategies that they used when teaching ELL students, such as speaking the students' native language (if possible), encouraging small group discussions if students have a common, native language, and providing course materials in the native language. Further strategies include providing the information in multiple ways, using analogies, using images, teaching a systematic approach to solving problems, and posing questions to students. Instructors in Reestman's study also mention a variety of institutional, peer, and community supports that are perceived to be helpful to students. Finally, instructors mentioned that they believe many students see English bilingualism as important for their future careers as computer scientists.

Griffith describes an action research project in which eight computer science teachers taught in English using a CLIL approach for the first time [24]. She found that "[w]hat is essential is for professors to see how to use language support strategies with their own contents, with their own students and with their own teaching style." [24, p. 135]. Further, she found that strategies the teachers developed could be transferred to their usual teaching contexts.

Villavicencio et al. report on the first year of a CS4All project in New York City public schools [54]. It is included in this review because one of its goals is increasing access for groups that are underrepresented in computing, including English Language Learners.

It reports teachers' responses to the CS4All professional development workshops but, interestingly, none of the teachers reported any challenges or supports that are specific to ELL students.

5 Tools

Four publications discuss tools and techniques authors have created or used [9, 45, 48, 55]. Banerjee et al. developed BlockStudio, a tool that allows ELL families to learn to program together [9]. They conducted three case studies at community centres that serve ELL families and found that the families were able to engage with the tool in multiple ways. Rimbaud et al. describe preliminary work that used a CLIL approach to create algorithms to supply adaptive, online learning for ELL students [45]. Sisti describes an online computer science English course (CSEC) for undergraduate students who were taking applied computer science [48]. Vishwanathan et al. describe a semi-automated technique to translate deterministic finite automata problems into multiple languages [55].

6 Limitations

This scoping review is limited by a number of factors. We only searched four English-language indexes and databases which returned publications that were written in English. Of the publications that had relevant titles and abstracts, we were unable to locate the full text of three so we had to exclude them at the screening stage.

We conducted this scoping review in a group of two, so all decisions about the indexes and databases to use, the search terms, the inclusion criteria, the screening of publications, the subsequent charting, and the qualitative analysis was influenced by our understandings of the topic, our biases, and our personal subjectivities. All research projects and all forms of literature reviews are influenced by the subjectivities, histories, and biases of the people who undertake them. To mitigate these limitations, we have carefully documented and reported our process in this paper and we have shared the full list of the 182 publications that we considered at https://bit.ly/3yIsfII.

As this is an initial mapping of the literature, we chose to include search terms related to "non-native" English speakers as well as "English Language Learners". Non-native English speakers may be fluent in English, so these two terms are not synonymous. Further research could investigate the nuances of the publications related to these two groups of learners. In most cases, the non-native English speakers who participated in the work reported in this scoping review were also English Language Learners.

7 Conclusions

This scoping review provides a synthesis and summary of the currently available literature about English Language Learners and computer science education. Due to space limitations we chose to focus this paper on presenting the scoping review results; we leave discussion of the implications of these findings for future work.

Despite the relatively small body of work that we found, there has been increasing attention paid to students who are English Language Learners and are learning computer science in English, especially in the past three years. Key themes have been studying what benefits or hinders ELL students, focusing on integrative language skills, and pedagogical and curricular approaches. While the entire body of work is small, the most examined theme has been studying what benefits or hinders ELL students. Work on pedagogical and curricular approaches, particularly on designing culturally relevant curriculum, has emerged in recent years as a key area of focus. We believe that designing culturally relevant curriculum and using translanguaging as a communication strategy are promising avenues of future work. Both avenues are student-focused and take an asset-based approach to students' knowledge, cultural backgrounds, and experiences.

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