

# Preparing Teachers to Succeed in Teaching English as a New Language



Photo provided by Ferreras

Penelope Ferreras '20, M.S. '21

*“Ser bilingüe es mi superpoder.”*

**Being bilingual  
is my superpower.”**

“It’s my favorite quote,” said Penelope Ferreras ’20, M.S. ’21, who earned her Spanish bilingual extension certificate in 2022 from Mercy College’s School of Education. “I had a poster of it hanging on my classroom wall last year to inspire my students.”

As people immigrate to the United States — whether by choice or necessity — local communities try to address the educational needs of these children and families. Teacher education programs play a role by preparing teachers to work in effective, affirming ways with students who are learning English as a new language. In the New York City area, there is a particular need for bilingual educators and other educators certified to teach English as a new language. And given that English continues to be the dominant global language of business, there is demand across the world for teachers who can teach English as a new language.

Mercy College’s School of Education offers several relevant programs: a bilingual extension certificate for certified teachers, an advanced certificate in Teaching

English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), a master’s degree in TESOL and a dual degree program in Spanish and TESOL. In addition, every education student at Mercy takes at least one course in teaching English as a new language. “New York State has taken a very proactive position that all teachers are teachers of English as a new language,” explained Victoria Núñez, Ph.D., assistant professor, Literacy and Multilingual Studies.

One factor that motivates many teachers to study bilingual education and TESOL at Mercy is their own experiences as first-generation immigrants or growing up in immigrant communities, explained Núñez. That is the case for Ferreras: “I was born here, but my family is from the Dominican Republic and Spanish was my first language. My mom sent me to pre-kindergarten only knowing how to say, ‘Can I go to the bathroom?’ in English. Thankfully, I picked up English pretty fast. But I’ve had classmates who came from different countries, and I saw how hard it was for them to learn enough English to get into the curriculum.”

One challenge that can arise for this group of teachers is related to a lack of formal language study. Even though they may have grown up speaking languages other than English, they may not have studied them in college — or ever. New York State requires 12 credits of college-level work in a language other than English to earn a certificate or degree in bilingual education or TESOL, which means that these teachers must sometimes backtrack to take four courses in the language — adding time and cost to their studies.

In other cases, teachers are motivated to study how to teach English as a new language because they want to work abroad or already did so. This was true for Ghnea Hockaday who earned an advanced certificate in TESOL at Mercy in 2022. After teaching in a charter school in Long Island, she decided to spend a few years teaching in China. “I was thinking about what I want to do with my life because I loved teaching, but I wasn’t really happy at my job,” she said. “And I had this wild idea to search on Google for opportunities to teach abroad.” Before she knew it, she was on her way to Shenzhen, China, to teach English to first graders.

Her experience in China opened her eyes to different teaching philosophies and methods: “The Chinese teachers who taught English had a much different style of teaching than we do in the United States. They did a lot of drills and memorization. When I would teach, I’d have students



Ghnea Hockaday teaches English to first graders in Shenzhen, China.

Photo provided by Hockaday

work in groups, play games, engage in experiential learning. I made learning fun and interesting, and students responded really well.” When Hockaday returned from China, she decided to earn an advanced certificate in TESOL from Mercy. Hockaday’s experience with different teaching styles illustrates a dramatic shift that has happened over the last 15 years in the best practice approach to teaching English as a new language. Previously, teachers used to emphasize memorizing of verb conjugations and vocabulary, Núñez explained. The critique of that approach is that these students end up with technical knowledge about language, but they are not always good at communicating. “Now, our primary goal is to help teachers think about how they can stimulate students to use the new language in school settings in fun, creative ways that are sometimes academic,” Núñez said.

Like all of Mercy’s education courses, bilingual education and TESOL courses at Mercy rely on practical, experiential learning, meaning that teachers can often apply their Mercy coursework directly in their classrooms.

**“When I would teach, I’d have students work in groups, play games, engage in experiential learning. I made learning fun and interesting, and students responded really well.”**

Students appreciate the practical nature of their coursework at Mercy. “I read about concepts in the textbook and then saw them play out in my

classroom,” said Ferreras. “And the cool thing is that I could use the assignments in my classroom. I even did the field work in my classroom. It never felt like something extra.” Most importantly, alumni report that the methods they learned at Mercy get results. Ferreras’ students last year were in sixth grade but did not speak any English and had interrupted educations in their home countries, so their math skills were years behind. “Their proficiency rate went from about 30% to 60% last year. That’s a really big jump, though they clearly have more to learn.” Big language breakthroughs like these start with small moments of trust and connection. “My students loved it when I said words in Mandarin Chinese, even though my tones were completely off,” said Hockaday. “I really think that made them feel more comfortable learning from me and taking risks in class. We were all learning languages together.”