

The Roles of an ESL Teacher in Rural Districts with Low Numbers of ELLs¹

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Abstract

Rural English as a Second Language (ESL) education in the United States warrants more attention and research in order to successfully support the language development of English Language Learners (ELLs). In addition, those teaching English in a Foreign Language (EFL) environment in rural areas can encounter comparable obstacles when supporting language learners. This article highlights important relationships teachers in rural districts with low numbers of ELLs and minimal access to other language-learning professionals must build to support their students. ESL teachers must collaborate with five groups especially when they are typically the only resources of ESL knowledge for a district: 1) content area teachers, 2) the ESL students, 3) parents, 4) administrators and other staff and, and 5) valuable professional colleagues. These five groups are presented to begin to understand the roles ESL teachers play in rural areas. In sum, the need for university/school district partnerships is significant in training pre- and in-service teachers with the skills they need to be effective practitioners for ELLs in rural districts.

Resumen

El inglés como segunda lengua en el contexto rural en los Estados Unidos es un ámbito que requiere de mayor atención e investigación para apoyar a los aprendices. De la misma manera, los docentes que imparten el inglés como lengua extranjera en los contextos rurales encuentran obstáculos para apoyar a los aprendices. Este artículo destaca las importantes relaciones que deben construir los docentes en distritos rurales, donde tienen pocos aprendices y mínimo acceso a otros profesionales de la enseñanza de lengua. Los docentes del inglés como segunda lengua deben colaborar con cinco grupos, especialmente cuando suelen ser los únicos recursos de conocimiento del inglés para un distrito. Estos cinco grupos son: 1) maestros del área de contenido, 2) los estudiantes de inglés, 3) padres, 4) administradores y otro personal, y 5) valiosos colegas profesionales, y sirven para comenzar a comprender los roles que desempeñan los maestros de inglés en áreas rurales. En resumen, las asociaciones entre la universidad y el distrito escolar son importantes para capacitar a los docentes en capacitación y en activo con las habilidades que necesitan para ser profesionales efectivos para los aprendices de inglés en los distritos rurales.

Introduction

What does it take to be an ESL teacher in a small rural school district with small numbers of ESL students? Rural education in general is a distinct teaching and learning context, and includes several factors. 1) Poverty (although not as extreme as in urban areas) exists. 2) Schools and healthcare along with publicly funded resources are far from homes. 3) There is little entertainment including literacy opportunities outside of the school day. 4) Ambition to be socially mobile in the community is low. 5) Highly effective teachers are not attracted to these areas because of low wages. These are unique factors that are absent in suburban and urban settings that combine to contribute to the rural education environment. In addition to the general rural education context, there are many obstacles for ESL teachers that can include being the only professional in the school who is familiar with state standards and regulations, collaborating with content teachers and other specialized teachers to support ELLs and their families, and supporting staff and administration that lack the knowledge to support non-native speakers all while in isolation

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from peers and professional development opportunities. On top of this, making clinical decisions about the grade level and testing for the language proficiency level of students are factors that teachers must consider when teaching ELLs. These components collide and set up situations that are hard for teachers in districts with few ELLs as they struggle to serve them in a way that is truly focused on language development. It is also essential to factor in the other decisions that need to be made regarding push-in (integrated) or pull-out (stand-alone) models of ESL instruction to do what is best for language learning. In addition, there can be tension between delivering language instruction and supporting social engagement and content area classes in English. It is also typical that an ESL teacher becomes an intermediary, especially with home matters, to ensure that ELLs and their families thrive.

The education of ELLs in both ESL as well as EFL context is an under-researched area in need of specific attention. The struggles teachers face may not be completely specific to rural education and may overlap into different situations such as districts in urban or suburban areas with low numbers and for those districts that employ itinerate ESL teachers that travel from district to district. Rural ESL education is a place to highlight, however, and offers a way to compare what is happening in schools that have different student populations and characteristics that include teachers in these schools being isolated. Additionally, the EFL rural teaching environment points to the internationality of this problem.

Teaching in Rural Areas

Given the cultural and linguistic diversity in the United States, teachers, even ones in rural areas, at some point in their career will be faced with educating ELLs in their classroom. In fact, 18.7 percent of all students in the United States attend a rural public school and 3.5% of those students were ELLs in the 2014-15 school year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Those teachers in large cities or areas where pockets of international families settle are familiar with the challenges and value what ELLs and their families add to the school and community. When talking about rural education, we are situating that education in a particular space that signals certain characteristics not limited to, fewer people, less diversity (although concentrated ethnic minorities), farming communities, low socioeconomics, and the like. The language development of ELLs in rural communities can be hindered when education is not a valued commodity or school staff misunderstand the attitudes and cultural foundations students and families maintain toward education. When families are not equipped to support academic tasks for English ELLs at home, they are only in a supported academic environment during the school day. Therefore, the language development and literacy of ELLs can only steadily progress with meaningful opportunities to produce language orchestrated by ESL teachers in collaboration with other members of the school community.

For schools of education there are also unique challenges to truly educate and expose teachers to the unique characteristics of rural ESL. Preservice teachers need to learn about rural schools as part of their teacher training because the unique characteristics of this environment should be familiar to them. Practical exposure, including observation hours and practicum coursework, to the realities of the environment can help bridge the gap between the theory and philosophy taught in teacher education and the realities of the

classroom. To gain experience with rural classrooms, these teachers should have the opportunity to student teach in more remote areas where feasible. Oftentimes these areas are a far commute from the location of colleges and universities and faculty supervisors. However, technological tools can be used to ensure that preservice teachers are supported during a rural practicum. In addition, in-service teachers in rural areas should have access to professional development and supports especially in the first years of teaching. To be certain that teachers get the professional development they need, those providing professional development need to make sure the context of the school, in this case geographic location, is an important consideration. There have been a number of conference presentations about teaching in rural areas of Australia and Great Britain. These presentations include ideas for preservice teacher training that should be included in coursework before teachers are placed in classrooms. Some of the topics are: how to leverage technology to expose students to ideas outside of their communities and the skills teachers need to interact in rural communities (Auh & Pegg 2009; Boylan, 2010). Also, considerations for teachers to have exposure to rural education in practicum placements including requirements to participate in community activities are recommended (Hudson & Millwater, 2009; King, 2006). In addition, it is important to make sure that rural topics are infused through the teacher education curriculum and that highlighted topics including teacher isolation and pedagogical considerations are components in course work (Baills, Bell & Wilcox, 2002 Page, 2006). In a study done by Green, Noone and Nolan (2013), the idea of "place" is the focus and this includes "...the social structures and relationships that shape every-day life experiences in rural and remote settings (p. 110)". This is a cornerstone to teaching ELLs in a rural context since academic development activities, which include language support and opportunities for language growth, are few outside of the classroom. Teachers should understand the complete context of their students. Giving teachers the opportunity to learn about rural education specifically in their course work including the issues faced in those communities and the impact that it has on the education of those students is essential. In addition, the opportunity to experience rural education in a practicum and/or student teaching situation is important to get teachers interested and prepared to teach in these locations. Students in rural areas also benefit from teachers with previous experience in rural settings and culture.

Along with considerations for preservice teacher education, in-service teachers in rural areas also face unique issues. In a study by Roberts (2013) that interviewed rural teachers and support staff, researchers got a sense of how the rural environment is represented in the curriculum. The author concluded that teachers should examine the positioning of their school. Teachers can be more satisfied in their jobs and engage students in curriculum activities that are relevant when the environment of the school is a consideration. However, the study was based in Australia, and there are many federal, state and local requirements that make it hard for teachers to really focus on the needs of the students in areas such as rural ones in NY (Roberts, 2013).

Professional development (PD) literature for teachers in general is prevalent, however research is scant for rural ESL practitioners specifically especially in the United States or with Birth-12 teachers (see Murphy & Santo, 2005). One study by Abbott and Rossiter

(2011), although focused on adult ESL instructors in rural Alberta Canada, highlighted instructors' and administrator's points of view and developed a list of eighteen recommendations for TESL PD. Five of those 18 suggestions are directly tied to establishing a community for support. It is essential to find an outside group to meet with to share ideas, successes and failures as well as to get ideas from, so that a support system is created for teachers in the same situation. The focus on the isolation of teachers in rural areas makes professional development and support of rural teachers important to sustaining their craft and support of student language learning.

Teaching ESL/EFL in Rural Areas

There are very few studies that examine the teaching of non-native speaking English students in rural areas despite the growing numbers (Cho, Rios, Trent, & Mayfield, 2012; Hansen-Thomas, & Richins, 2015; Hoover, Sarris, & Hill, 2015). "The percentage of public school students in the United States who were ELLs was higher in school year 2014–15 (9.4 percent, or an estimated 4.6 million students) than in 2004–05 (9.1 percent, or an estimated 4.3 million students) and 2013–14 (9.3 percent, or an estimated 4.5 million students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In fact, the recent studies focus on mainstream teachers as they work to infuse ESL supports and work to better understand the needs of ELLs. In a study by Hoover, Sarris, & Hill (2015), rural elementary content area teachers had professional development to help them to use ESL instructional practices in their teaching. Through this professional development the teachers did a self-assessment then participated in workshops and observations of the classroom by the researchers. The teachers in the study became more aware of supports for ELLs especially the concept that they should consider language objectives in their lessons. This study highlights the importance of professional development for content teachers in rural districts that have ESL students so that they are supported in their language learning in their regular classrooms. When teaching in rural districts there are very few opportunities for professional development and sometimes being the only ESL teacher in the district with very few colleagues that understand the issues for collegial support and guidance can be isolating for ESOL professionals. In a study by Hansen-Thomas and Richins (2015) the authors report on their professional development model for rural ESL trained math and science teachers. Teachers collaborated to find solutions for problems ELLs faced in their specific districts which changed their own ideas of themselves as teachers as they advocated and taught others about ELLs with the idea that all teachers are ESL teachers. This was accomplished through extensive mentoring. Since little research is done about ELLs and/or their teachers in rural districts it is important not only to conduct more research in this area, but also to share practical ways to support ELLs and their teachers.

Another study by Cho et al., (2012) reports on a teacher preparation program at a rural university where there is a lack of diversity in both the university and school settings. Preservice teachers' knowledge of language diversity in their teacher education program is studied to understand changing ideas about ELLs. Faculty worked to incorporate language acquisition and methodologies into the curriculum in the described teacher education program. The results showed that preservice teachers in the upper level classes have a solid understanding that ELLs need differentiated instruction and language support. The authors further recognized through their study that these future rural teachers will

need experience and professional support in order to foster the positive attitudes they had during their teacher preparation program about teaching ELLs. This study emphasizes the need for teacher preparation programs to infuse concepts surrounding the rural education of ELLs from the start and the importance of supporting new teachers as they work with ELLs, especially those in rural areas that need to continue to develop their craft in teaching diverse populations in isolation. Connection to a community for teachers in rural areas is essential as a support structure (Abbott and Rossiter, 2011).

In the rural English language teaching context most research on EFL samples from rural environments; however, the rural perspective is not a consideration in findings and results. For example, in a study by Abidin, Ping and Raman (2012) observations and interviews with students from a rural primary school in Malaysia focus on their views on using web-based resources during reading. Students were divided based on their English language exam results and the students had to read appropriate texts as determined by an English expert from a different rural school. The goal of the study was to find if these students were motivated by the use of web-based resources during various types of reading tasks for reading comprehension. Another research study on rural women in Bangladesh reports on a link between the level of self-reported English language development and empowerment in women (Rahman, 2017). The results show that a higher level of English language attainment can lead to increased job opportunities for women. In a study by Ahmed(2017) a rural and an urban group of students in Pakistan learning English were compared after they were taught five short stories to see the differences in learning vocabulary. Analysis of statistical data highlights that the urban group of students had statistically significant improvement in their vocabulary tests compared to the rural sample. The study was controlled in that students were not allowed to take the short stories out of the classroom as it was hypothesized that urban students might have more help at home and this would skew the study. The study cited one possible difference in the achievement of the students as related to vocabulary in that urban schools expose students to short stories earlier in their careers than rural schools. The research context in these studies involves participants from rural areas learning ESL, however the rural environment was not a specific factor when conducting the studies or discussing the results of the studies.

Any teacher interacts with several people important to a student's education every day: other teachers, administration and staff as well as other students and parents. ESL/EFL teachers in rural districts with low numbers of ELLs can find themselves as the only professional equipped with the knowledge to interact with the various entities that comprise the team that educates our students. It seems that these ESL teachers in rural districts have at least five roles to play where they have to be proactive to support the English language development of ELLs in their schools. 1) ESL teachers must interact with other teachers in the building, 2) teach ELLs and support their individual needs with not just language learning, but other sociocultural factors, 3) make sure the parents of their ELLs are informed and part of the education of their children, 4) work with administration and other schools staff to ensure ELLs get the services and access they deserve and, 5) seek out professional development so they continue to develop their craft as teachers and find support in a role that can be isolating.

Teacher to Teachers

ELLs spend most of their day in mainstream classrooms. There may be times when an ESL teacher is with them or the mainstream teacher needs consult on how to support a non-native speaker. As an example, in New York State, students must spend part of their designated ESL instruction time in a classroom with a dually certified teacher (in ESL and the content) or in a co-taught classroom with a content and ESL instructor. The relationship between teachers that have to work together especially if there is only one ESL teacher in the building needs to be strong. In a close community, this relationship can range from having a seamless teaching relationship where they support one another to teachers having trouble when they do not have the same teaching ideals. These teachers need the skills to negotiate with one another so that academic content and language foundations are strong for the students. Classrooms must be a place where both the content teacher and the ESL teacher are equal partners in the teaching of all students especially in a co-taught classroom. Language supports should be infused with the content instruction and teachers have to have time to plan together and negotiate crucial components of lessons that will support language development. In the ESL classroom, it is important for ESL and content teachers to be aware of the full curriculum for the student. This helps to establish a seamless transition between the two classrooms and ensures both content and language are developed. It is the case in a small rural district that these teachers may have to work with one another year after year. However, when they do work well together, strong bonds can be forged. Students in the class do not see a difference in the teachers and the teachers can work seamlessly on curriculum to support all students in both language and content objectives.

ESL teachers also have to be advocates for their students so that their language learning is supported. The need for teachers as advocates for students and to support content area teachers in the education of ELLs is an important role for teachers to embrace (Linville, 2016). content teachers frequently look to ESL teachers to provide them with things the students can do at their level in the class so they are not just sitting there when others are engaged in an activity. They can also spend a lot of time keeping up with students that have behavior issues or are not doing work for the content area teacher. All of this can put a strain on the teacher-teacher relationship or make it stronger.

Teacher to Students

Some rural district have only one ESL teacher for all students. In this case, long term ELLs have the same teacher supporting their language learning through their whole career or have just two or three teachers in that role. The boundaries of a teacher become blurred when the possibility exists to teach a student for several years in close contact in small class settings. In this instance, the role of the teacher changes as there is a more intimate relationship that develops over time. Because of the advocacy for the student through the years, this relationship oftentimes extends to the whole family. Working with rural students this closely over a period of time can be positive as some students find comfort in having the same person to help and support them to thrive with English. However, it can also be detrimental if the teacher is always associated with the student needing help with language. In these situations, it can seem like the students never outgrow the need for this support and never graduate from this teacher no matter how much they learn and

grow. Each year mainstream students get a fresh start with a new teacher and when there is only one or ESLs teacher per district this is not a possibility. In order to mitigate this issue, teachers need to establish the boundaries from the beginning with their students and remember that other support staff is available for students. Teaching in a rural context, when there are a small number of language support providers, the role of teacher can easily blur in a teacher student relationship. ESL teachers have to constantly reassure students of their language growth and development.

Teacher to Parents

Sometimes non-native English speaking parents can be left out of important parts of a child's education because of the language barrier. The ESL teacher has to take on the role of informing the parents of issues and events related to school and finding supports such as translators when there is information that needs to be disseminated to parents in a language other than English. When these international families live in a rural district with small concentrations of non-native speakers, they can be living in a community that does not welcome such diversity. The parents of these students can be working from many deficits such as linguistic and economic and have to spend time acclimating to a new environment where those around them are not understanding or accepting. Parents have to find those in the community-sometimes teachers- who can help them stand up for rights and services especially for their children. In a study by Smith, Stern and Shatrova (2008), Hispanic parents were interviewed and took part in a focus group about their involvement and obstacles to involvement in their children's schools. The study highlights that the inability for parents to communicate with school personnel, the lack of Spanish translations for communications sent home with their children and the reluctance of the parents to question school officials in the position of authority and to advocate for their children were three factors that inhibited involvement. Just as Smith et al. (2008) indicate, a look at the communication practices with parents is essential to the parents feeling comfortable to participate and become part of their children's education in this way. There are both language and cultural barriers that need to be explored and supported by the school community and oftentimes the only person that has extensive knowledge is the ESL teacher. The bonds with the families can be extensive and supportive; however, boundaries can be blurred.

Teacher to Administration and Staff

In order to get ELLs all of the services they need, it is important to make sure that administration and staff such as guidance counselors, principals, reading teachers and other professionals involved in specialized services, are aware of the state standards and the services that a student should receive. In a rural context, the regulations surrounding the support of ELLs are not always understood because ELLs are a small special population and off the radar of the school administration and staff. It is the ESL teacher that has the information from a teacher preparation program and PD to help language acquisition along with the laws that dictate the accommodations required for ELLs. It is oftentimes the case that scheduling a student's day with extra services or different accommodations proves to be a challenge. The ESL teacher is an advocate for ELLs and this can sometimes cause conflict between administration and staff that have different agendas for the course of a student's academic career and the school's accountability, staffing, and standing. When

an ESL teacher is the only resource in a rural setting and there are not enough other resources available to cover what is needed for an ELL, the teacher is forced to operate under these conditions. There are times when teachers have to make lessons for students to do independent work in their content classes which also adds to the workload of an ESL teacher. It seems that those involved in teaching ELLs must have more than one role to give and advocate for children and their mandated services.

Teacher to Professional Development

Research on professional development of in-service teachers highlights the usefulness and impact on the classroom when teachers have sustained collaboration and mentoring inside the classroom (Batt, 2010). It is important for teachers, especially those isolated in rural districts, to have a community that can support and provide feedback to teachers as they continue to find ways to support the second language acquisition of non-native speakers in their classrooms. Specifically, ESL teachers in rural areas (or any location) that may be itinerate, having to travel to multiple buildings or even districts, or have low numbers of ELLs in their schools need to find creative ways to stay connected to other professionals in their fields. These teachers are oftentimes required to find their own PD hours or sit through PD time that is not beneficial to their learning because there is no alternative. It is often that case that teachers find this support from establishing their own "collective" with a monthly meeting time outside of class for a social coffee hour at a local location or wine hour hosted at someone's house. Teachers can ask for a superintendent's day release from the mainstream classroom teachers' professional development as it does not pertain to them and they can all meet for their own agenda and invite an outside consultant.

Conclusion

Rural ESL public education is an under-researched topic (Abbott and Rossiter, 2011; Murphy & Santo, 2005). It seems that since the population in rural areas is limited to begin with and the ESL/EFL population even smaller that the urgency for research in this area is low since the results do not impact many people. However, the increasing numbers of ELLs and their families along with the number of people associated with the education of ESL/EFL students warrant the need for more research in this area. Researchers need to provide everyone associated with rural education sufficient information so these students have the best learning experience possible. This is possibly an international problem that transcends the field English Language Teaching (ELT) both in the United States and abroad. Teachers, ELLs, families, administration, and staff all face unique challenges in small schools in general that seem to be amplified when there is a language barrier. It is essential for ELLs to get the services they need as well as quality teachers, informed families and administration and other support staff that understand their needs. Rural education and understanding the context and place are not necessarily a part of pre-and in service TESOL Programs. Having teachers teach in rural settings and having this as part of the curriculum at the university level is an important consideration as Green et al. (2013) start to work out in their literature review and two studies. Burton and Johnson (2010) also highlight the need for teacher educators to establish a place for preservice teachers to explore rural settings as a teacher both in curriculum and field placement. Starting with preservice education and making sure that teachers are informed of rural issues as well as ESL in these areas is an important consideration in a curriculum. Further,

preservice teachers in rural areas need access to professional development and colleagues that understand their position and help with support. Part of the solution requires university faculty members in teacher education to be connected to the B-12 classroom. Placements can then be set up so that 1) teacher candidates get a rural experience, 2) faculty can collaborate with the ESL teachers to be sure that all members of the school system understand issues faced by this population and 3) ESL teachers can have some contact with those that understand the context. This also informs faculty teaching education courses of the real-life situations and issues of ELLs in our schools so they can better educate teachers. Teachers and administrators constantly look for the quickest fix or ideas on how to support ELLs. An overlooked solution is an ongoing trusting relationship between a university and the public schools so that students and teachers can get more support. Federal regulations for accreditation of schools of education in the United States require dialog and collaboration between higher education and school systems for the benefit of both institutions. It gives the faculty ideas about what teachers need to possess to function in the classroom after graduation and faculty good placements for teachers that need student teaching and observation hours. In short, having a faculty member to support an in-service teacher for feedback and professional development also bridges the gap where the faculty also benefits from the relationships build in the school building and the up-to-date knowledge of what actually impacts the teachers and B-12 students. There are so many reasons why teaching in rural areas, specifically ESL, is great job and so many reasons why it can be discouraging. More research into rural education along with forging strong bonds between university schools of education TESOL Programs and the public schools can be a key factor in the successful support of all teachers of ELLs, ELLs, and their families as well as school administration.

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