

LITERACY, LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS: STRUCTURING ENGLISH TEACHING PROGRAMS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This study will examine English learning environments and methods in rural settings in Europe and the United States, assessing their contributions to language learning, both written and spoken. This is a pilot project and will evolve into a rigorous comprehensive study suitable for publication as a chapter and part of an edited volume. This study will compare and contrast educational systems, including two different styles of English education structured in a comparative analysis using five focal areas. These focal areas include the definition and structure of rural education, English language learning modalities, linguistic environment, academic leadership, educational outcomes and indicators of success. For the purpose of this paper, the definition and structure of rural education and English language learning modalities will be addressed. The opportunity to investigate the experiences of teachers who are active in rural communities and focus on the multidimensional aspects of the education of multilingual learners will provide valuable information that will contribute to expert teaching and learning. Embracing English language learning, new technologies, and initiating change through proactive educational strategies including a paradigm shift to incorporate a translanguaging pedagogy for emergent English speakers will lead to relevant and purposeful accomplishments in rural school settings.

Keywords: *Rural education, multilingual English learners, comparative research.*

1. Introduction

Rural education is distinctly different from educational settings and schools in urban and suburban locations. Often definitions of education focus on urban expectations and do not capture the entire landscape that includes and values rural educational environments. It is often acknowledged that education and the opportunity to learn in an educational setting is tantamount to economic prosperity. While the educational attainment in rural areas has improved, it continues to lag behind that of urban areas and it is time to invest in rural education. Schools in these settings certainly do more than provide educational opportunities during the school day. They are often integral parts of the community and serve as gathering places for social, recreational, and cultural endeavors. Therefore, home-school partnerships are critical to success and educational outcomes can be strengthened by positive school, community and family relationships. Rural schools are also key to providing employment for members of smaller towns and villages.

English language learning throughout the State of Idaho and Europe is an ongoing factor linking leadership, teacher education and a wide range of intellectual disciplines. English language teaching in rural areas has a unique set of challenges and provides an overarching opportunity to impact success and serve as a catalyst for the expansion of learning. Strong programs in English language teaching in rural settings leading to quality educational experiences designed to meet the unique needs of learners are particularly valuable. Successfully delivering programs in English language acquisition in rural schools has become a challenging endeavor that is critical to the future of young people. Green and Corbett consider this topic by addressing the four areas of a) conceptualizing rural literacies, b) literacy/pedagogies, c) place and sustainability, and d) mobilities and futures (Green & Corbett, 2013). The goal of this pilot study focuses on investigation and implementation of quality instructional programs in English language acquisition (English as a Second Language or ESL in Idaho and English as a Foreign Language or EFL in Europe) that provide numerous opportunities and meet the needs of students in rural schools. This study will evolve to an in-depth investigation to provide detailed data regarding the educational outcomes and indicators of success in a comparative study with multilingual learners. How do these programs help students in rural settings speak, read, write, and understand English to communicate

more effectively? Meeting with education leaders from multiple locations, in person and online, particularly those from rural settings will establish working relationships for future research and information gathering.

2. Methodology

This manuscript represents the initial stages of a comprehensive and ongoing study that utilizes a multi-case design for the purpose of conducting comparative research in English language learning in rural schools in Europe and the State of Idaho. Authentic accounts and visits to assess English language learning in rural schools will be gained through interviews of educational leaders, observations, and review of selected relevant literature. Further collaboration with colleagues at Boise State and throughout Europe and the USA will lead to in depth exploration of the topic and systematic collection of data. Additionally, presentations at professional meetings will provide opportunities to gain further access to resources, methodological tools, and best practices. The pedagogical potential including meaningful research opportunities and analytics, as well as strategies for educators to frame best practices focused on the diverse learning needs of rural students strengthens success. The data will be used and analyzed to construct a matrix comparison between the two learning environments.

3. Definition and structure of rural education

Rural settings as well as English acquisition differ widely between Idaho in the United States and individual European countries. Rural education in the United States has been described in numerous ways. The focus is on students attending schools and living in a rural setting with fewer than 600 students in the school district or 2,500 people living in the town (U.S. Economic Research Service). Rural is considered by the U.S. Census Bureau as all population, housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban cluster (Ratcliffe, M. et. al., 2016). Four in ten public schools in Idaho are located in rural communities and almost one in four students attend a school located in a rural district. Statewide, 72.9 percent of the districts are considered rural (Idaho State Department of Education, 2020). Heller points out that rural students make up at least 20% of public school enrollments in the United States, yet continue to be marginalized, and rural areas often generate low tax revenues, and therefore cannot afford to pay teachers competitive salaries (Heller, 2022). Rural schools continue to experience a variety of educational challenges that directly affect student academic progress. Rural communities in Idaho tend to be poor, and a considerable number of their families are experiencing homelessness, but “relatively few students qualify for specialized educational instruction.” (Stockard, J., 2011). Teachers in rural communities often operate in isolation, salaries are low, and they tend to lack educational opportunities due to geographical isolation (Showalter et. al., 2019). Indeed, the need to improve their teaching skills has been clearly documented. According to the *Why Rural Matters 2018-2019* report, the school population in Idaho’s rural districts is “a mixed bag” in terms of diversity (Showalter et. al., 2019). The national average per rural pupil is \$6,367. Idaho rural expenditure per pupil is \$4,118 ” (Showalter et. al., 2019). This does not represent adequate funding to meet the needs of these students and provide quality educational services, particularly considering that many of these diverse students need additional assistance with English language acquisition and their teachers need further professional development and resources.

In Europe, studies have been conducted to address rural education and the impact on learning. Europe certainly cannot be categorized as one location since unique circumstances exist within each country and educational system. The book *Educational Research and Schooling in Rural Europe: An Engagement with Changing Patterns of Education, Space and Place* (Gristy et al. 2020) discusses and outlines the effects of the revolutionary political reform experienced in the past half century on rural education in Europe from a variety of perspectives and educational settings. The information provided and reforms addressed include the liberation of the Baltic and Eastern European states from Soviet communist domination, the ‘eurozone’ economic crises, and the current and future migration of people fleeing war and poverty from the Middle East and Africa. The authors point out that “trapped in this distal whirlwind of change are thousands of small and/or rural elementary schools and the life chances of thousands of young children” (Gristy et. al., 2020). Unfortunately, based on recent developments in Ukraine, another chapter of tumultuous challenges is facing Europe fraught with a multiplicity of tragic circumstances certain to reshape and redefine education.

4. English language learning modalities

In the State of Idaho, numerous programs exist within school districts to provide quality programs for English language learning. Throughout the state, it is the belief that every student should know how to read, write, speak, listen and use language effectively. The Idaho State Department of Education supports this philosophy by providing professional development, instructional strategies, and resources for Idaho educators to accomplish these goals. However, it is often up to school districts to support this learning by funding programs and opportunities for multilingual learners to excel and succeed. Often, this comes down to funding formulas and availability of resources to support English acquisition programs within each district. Rural districts function on considerably less resources than the larger urban districts. It is difficult to find educators in rural districts who hold endorsements in bilingual or English as a New Language (ENL) teaching.

Educators in Idaho realize that English language proficiency is based on the four modalities of listening, speaking, writing and reading, and they focus on determining individual student needs in each area in order to challenge students and encourage them to excel and become proficient in each of these areas. It isn't enough just to teach these individual strategies, but educators must become culturally responsive and relate positively to students encouraging them to excel by lowering the affective filters. The use of technology to strengthen language learning and incorporate interesting tasks and methods can be a tremendous asset. By teaching language skills across the curriculum, students are able to strengthen their knowledge and understanding of English in a variety of subject areas and topics. Using multiple modalities of teaching and learning will support a variety of learners all with unique learning styles that will help them relate and gain language proficiency. Some students are visual learners and will benefit from visual clues while others may be auditory or kinesthetic learners. Best practices for challenging English language learners in Idaho include focusing on students' educational needs. In addition to the strategies mentioned above, educators need to speak slowly and patiently wait for responses. Students need time to think through what they are speaking and writing. When they feel comfortable asking questions, English acquisition will come easier. By incorporating students' native languages and valuing their experiences at home, they will be encouraged to tackle the challenges of learning English. Rural schools may not have the technology or labs that are found in urban settings, but many of these strategies can be incorporated into lessons and will highly benefit English language learners.

In the rural areas of Europe, the dynamics are certainly different because the purpose for learning English is not the same as in the State of Idaho. Students continue to use their home language throughout the day and the use of English is an additional asset that they are endeavoring to acquire. The pressure associated with being thrust into a new setting and surrounded by English on a permanent basis is not present in Europe. The disadvantage is that they do not have the reinforcement of being surrounded by the English language and have to rely on English speaking counterparts along with teachers and texts or computer programs in English. In rural areas of Europe with limited budgets and supplies, the teachers often do not speak English as a native or dual language and are also limited in their English speaking abilities. Materials may not be accessible and professional development to strengthen educators' knowledge of instructional strategies is not always available in rural areas. In Norway and Finland, globalization has strongly impacted rural education. Legislative changes in both countries have transferred power to local municipalities and rural villages and communities are willing to fight hard to retain their local schools. (Solstad & Karlberg-Granlund, 2020). Post socialist decentralization in Poland significantly affected the operation of rural schools and transformed the supervision of schools to local governments (Bajerski, 2020).

Multilingual learners provide excellent opportunities for educators to strengthen their instructional skills, confidence and outreach to students, families and the community particularly in rural settings. The interrelatedness of the school, home and community is complex and key to student success. Students and teachers in rural communities are often challenged by a variety of unique and diverse factors, and classroom teachers have to address unique situations to make a significant impact by taking approaches that will meet the wide range of student needs—cognitive and affective. In order to engage students, rural educators are moving beyond the standard methodologies and best practices within the classroom to provide high levels of student achievement through outreach and making positive connections. TEFL/TESL teachers are expected to meet a multiplicity of student needs in rural areas, and getting to know the community and students' families provides insight that will help build relationships and strengthen educators' knowledge, skills and dispositions.

5. Conclusions and future implications

As this study expands and develops through visits to rural areas in Europe and Idaho including interviews with educators and students who are engaged in English language learning, the data will multiply, and the picture will come into clearer focus. What we do know at this point, is that the number of English language learners in Idaho and throughout Europe is on the rise, the need for increased funding and resources is clear, and the value of professional development for these educators is significant. Authentic accounts and ongoing study that utilizes a multi-case design for the purpose of conducting comparative research in English language learning in rural schools in Europe and the State of Idaho will provide valuable knowledge as we pursue this topic in further detail. Sadly, the political situation in Europe and the increase in refugees from Ukraine and beyond will continue to challenge the situation as we grapple with serving students of all ages and their families. As educators, we seek to serve and provide quality programs for students that will meet their needs and challenge them to excel.

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