

Chapter 14

Emergent Bilinguals in Rural Schools: Reframing Teacher Perceptions Through Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores rural teacher attitudes towards emergent bilinguals at the secondary level before, during, and after translanguaging professional development. Within the current political climate, accountability measures and assessment training affect teacher perceptions of second language acquisition and add to the deficit perspective. Juxtaposed with the accountability climate are the benefits of rurality and teachers who value the funds of knowledge these linguistically and culturally diverse students possess. Through a mixed methods study using qualitative and quantitative survey data, the authors examined the effects of translanguaging pedagogy on an English-only school district. The translanguaging strategies used in English language arts and reading classrooms showed potential to improve standardized English assessment scores by shifting the monolingual ideology of the teacher participants to a multilingual stance. The results of this study could revise current perceptions and pedagogy for emergent bilinguals.

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INTRODUCTION

Across the U.S., English Learner (EL) populations are lower in rural than in urban areas, and average 3.6% nationwide (McFarland, Hussar, Wang, Zhang, Wang, Rathbun, Barmer, Cataldi, & Bullock Mann, 2018). While the English Learner, also called EB (Emergent Bilingual¹) population in many rural areas is small, it is growing exponentially. Long term English Learners, or L-TELEs, whose families have become rooted in local communities, represent a large and steadily growing group of EBs in public schools in the U.S. Long term English Learners are EBs who continue to be labeled English learners after seven or more years in U. S. schools (Kim & García, 2014). This chapter presents data from a small rural district in the southwest in which one half of the community consists of rapidly-growing suburban neighborhoods, while the other consists of horse ranches where many students and their families are employed. Anya Independent School District (pseudonym) (AISD) is a fringe rural district near a large conurbation in Texas (see Appendix 1 for rural designations).

As a Texas public school district, AISD must follow federal and state accountability guidelines including administering annual assessments in Reading and Math for all students. In AISD, 3.7 percent of all students are coded as English Learners (predominantly Spanish speakers), which is comparable to EL populations in rural districts nationwide. These students must take additional standardized assessments for language proficiency that also affect the district's accountability score. The combination of small EL populations and additional accountability assessments creates a difficult scenario for rural districts. These districts often struggle to divert resources for such a small percentage of students, yet a small population means individual students' scores have a greater effect on accountability ratings, resulting in less support despite higher stakes for these students. Within this context are new ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015) regulations mandating that schools either create a separate English Language Arts course for only EBs (effectively isolating all EBs from the general student population), or require all content teachers to become certified to teach English as a Second Language (ESL). The district chose the second option, despite the small EL population and the lack of buy in from their teachers.

This chapter spotlights rural teachers' attitudes regarding L-TELEs in light of the current political and educational context, and reveals how they may play a role in student success. As a corollary to the English as a Second Language (ESL) certification, a professional development (PD) program was implemented to support the teachers' work with the EBs. The PD program was designed to cultivate and value EBs' home language and culture in the classroom through the use of translanguaging pedagogy (García, Ibarra Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017) and was developed and presented by a campus colleague (Author 1) who is also an ESL and English Language Arts

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