

Chapter # 40

EXAMINING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RURAL SETTINGS THROUGHOUT EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines English learning environments and methods in rural settings in Europe and the United States, assessing their contributions to language learning, both written and spoken. Educational systems are compared and contrasted, including two different styles of English education structured in a comparative analysis using five focal areas. These focal areas are expanded to include the definition and structure of rural education, English language learning modalities, linguistic environment, educational outcomes, and indicators of success. 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 provides valuable information that contributes to expert teaching and learning and bridges the gap between educating rural and urban populations of students. 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. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Often definitions of education and accompanying strategies for reforms do not capture the landscape or address the specific dimensions of the setting and environment. Rural education is defined in the United States as follows, “A rural school is in a census-defined rural territory that is anywhere from less than five miles to more than 25 miles from an urbanized area” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The challenges that accompany schools in rural areas are distinctly different from educational settings and schools in urban and suburban locations. The expectations vary considerably and so do the participants in each educational endeavor. The recent events of the Covid pandemic have shattered the normalcy associated with educational endeavors and required creative and innovative means globally to strengthen traditional educational programs, often moving English teaching programs online and to virtual platforms. Rural areas that may not have the technology or bandwidth for online coursework are particularly impacted by a lack of resources and qualified educators. 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 struggle compared to urban areas, and it is crucial that we invest in rural education across the globe. Schools in rural 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 United States 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 study focuses on investigation and implementation of quality instructional programs in English language acquisition (English as a Second Language or ESL in the United States 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 into 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? In a recent publication, the author and a colleague discussed at length the challenges of rural education in the State of Idaho (Peralta & Boothe, 2021). 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 United States. Authentic accounts and visits to assess English language learning in rural schools are gained through interviews of educational leaders, observations, and review of selected relevant literature. The level of education and target areas considered range from age five through university. Further collaboration with colleagues at Boise State University 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 the United States and individual European countries and the linguistic environment is unique in each location. 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 (Rural education at a glance, 2021).

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). For example, four in ten public schools in the state of 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). This is just one example of a state in the United States with a significant rural population and the educational challenges that impact and have a tremendous effect on student achievement including English language learning. 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 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, Hartman, Johnson, & Klein, 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 (Peralta & Boothe, 2021). In the states of New Mexico and Arizona, a very unique situation exists on the Navajo Reservation where there are over 150 schools according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Navajo Nation Department of Dine Education, 2022). The focus and educational mission of the Navajo Nation is to promote and foster lifelong learning for the Navajo People, and to protect the cultural integrity and sovereignty of the Navajo Nation. Many of these schools are located in rural areas and homes may lack electricity or running water. The Covid pandemic took a serious toll on the Navajo families because they tended to live in groups with many members and generations residing in the same household. Often attending school is difficult for children in rural areas who lack transportation and may not have access to technology and the internet.

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, Hargreaves, & Kučerová, 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 AND LINGUISTIC ENVIRONMENT

In the United States, numerous programs exist within school districts to provide quality programs for English language learning from ages 5 through 18. Throughout the country, 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. In the states of Arkansas and Georgia, limited funding is available to provide the additional resources needed by rural school districts. Often, this comes down to funding formulas and availability of resources to support English acquisition programs within each state or 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. At the university level, Colleges of Education must work together within a shared leadership team to address the challenges and opportunities that must be addressed to serve teachers and students grappling with English language learning in rural settings (Snow, Martin, Osguthorpe, Coll, & Boothe, 2011). Resource limitations will require creative and innovative steps to strengthen existing programs and introduce new ones. Federal grant programs such as the Rural Endorsement Development Opportunities project at Boise State University in Idaho provide funding for professional development for educators to add an English as a Second Language or Bilingual endorsement to their Idaho teaching certification. However, obtaining federal grant funding is extremely competitive and larger school districts or universities who can afford paid professional grant writers often land on top when the money is being allocated. Educators in rural areas are tasked with a multiplicity of diverse responsibilities and find it difficult to spend the time writing competitive grants that they may not receive while completing all the other responsibilities associated with their profession. Students and classrooms come first, and the tremendous amount of time and effort required for competitive grant writing is difficult to achieve.

Educators throughout the United States 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 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. English language learners from non-English speaking nations are confronting an increasingly challenging environment as they try to develop language skills to meet the competing demands of contemporary social media on one hand and those of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) on the other. Social media's explosion onto the global scene has created the need for non-English speakers to in effect learn two diverging contextual and communication patterns within what is supposed to be a common language. English, at least a form of English, dominates social media communications on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and a whole host of abbreviated format international social media platforms. Moreover, these platforms have developed communications mechanisms that do not even conform to normally accepted, conversational patterns of spoken or written English. The English of some social media platforms is informal, littered with special and unique

abbreviations, grammarless, decidedly unstructured, and abruptly short. The vocabulary is explicitly simple in most cases, consisting mostly of one and two syllable words. The introduction of the “emoji” graphics (now totaling over 2600 according to Unicode Standard, the emoji lexicographer) has added image elements to the phonetic root language vocabulary and the near total lack of punctuation, complicates the process of learning to communicate effectively to other than a select audience or specific groups of people. (Boothe & Wickstrom, 2019). By teaching language skills across the curriculum, students can 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 and linguistic environment are certainly different because the purpose for learning English is not the same as in the United States. 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 must 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). Meanwhile, the ongoing events in Ukraine and neighboring countries continue to impact daily priorities. The affective domain is a strong determinant in language learning, and if students are surviving amid tension and strife, it is difficult to focus on studies. If there are psychological factors intervening with issues such as fear, safety, hunger, grieving for the death of a loved one, or the insecurities of war and displacement, then education takes a back seat to survival.

5. EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES AND INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

In order to ascertain the impact of any program, it is first necessary to establish objectives that are more than just aspirational indicators but can measure student learning and expectations for students and instructors. These critical measures of the ability of rural schools in Europe and the United States to guide English learners are essential to determine

the success of programs. Clearly, these objectives will vary based on the vision and goals for each program. Critical measures to analyze programs and activities are helpful indicators of outcomes for English speaking programs in educational settings in Europe and the United States. It is important to consider the quality and impact of each program including the transformative experiences gained. Collecting data on rural schools is a strategic process and comparing diverse settings is challenging. Comprehensive standards-based measurement tools exist in both the United States and Europe, although they differ significantly in their content and scope. As student gains are measured on standardized tests in the United States, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the successes and challenges experienced by rural schools. As programs are analyzed and data is gathered in rural schools throughout Europe, it will be possible to measure the impact of English teaching programs in rural European settings.

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 must address unique situations to make a significant impact by taking approaches that will meet the wide range of student needs—cognitive and affective. 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.

6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As this study expands and develops through visits to rural areas in Europe and the United States 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 is known at this point, is that the number of English language learners in the United States 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 in order to provide equal educational opportunities. Teachers must address the challenges presented by a diverse multicultural population. Not only academic, but physical, social, and emotional needs must be taken into consideration when developing curricula and instructional strategies and we must work to preserve the cultural identity of our diverse multilingual learners (Myers & Boothe, 2000). There are certainly methodological limitations and intervening variables that will need to be addressed as we pursue further research and focus on strengthening English teaching and learning in rural areas. The ideas expressed in this chapter and in earlier publications have potential for expansion and further development into a series of specifically crafted chapters tailored to further examination of the factors influencing English teaching and learning in rural settings throughout the United States and Europe. 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 United States will provide valuable knowledge as we pursue this topic in further detail.

7. CONCLUSIONS/DISCUSSION

There is limited information or longitudinal data examining the factors relating to teaching English in Europe and the United States and making comparisons regarding the two settings is challenging. It is certainly time to explore the ongoing strengths and challenges of each setting and determine how to learn from the strategies incorporated in order to serve students in both settings. It is understood that students in rural settings in Europe and the United States often do not receive the same rigorous educational experiences and opportunities as students in urban areas due to funding, resources, technology, and availability of educators who have received the support and professional development needed. By developing pedagogical methods specifically addressing rural education and the increasingly diverse needs of students in rural schools, it is possible to address the distinctly different points of view and needs of rural English education in Europe and the United States and challenge them to new levels of learning. In both the United States and Europe, there is an ongoing need to serve refugee and migrant students that are entering many countries in large numbers. Educators are seeking to serve and provide quality programs for all students that will meet their needs and challenge them to excel. By connecting research, education, and professional development, it is possible to bring best practices and optimal experiences to English language learners in rural settings so that they can realize their dynamic potential.

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