

Professional Development and Self-Efficacy of Texas Educators and the Teaching of English Language Learners

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Abstract

With the continuing growth of the school aged population of English language learners, schools must provide instruction in the English language and in the various content areas in order for the English language learners to be academically successful. The growth rate of English language learners has greatly outpaced the professional development teachers have received to teach them. A lack of sufficient, quality professional development can impact the teachers' self-efficacy which can result in the teachers having lower confidence in their knowledge and ability to be effective. Teachers with lower self-efficacy are not as effective in their instruction. The purpose of this study was to explore the professional development and self-efficacy of Texas teachers as they relate to English language learners.

Keywords: English language learners, professional development, self-efficacy, content-based ESL

1. Introduction

In the United States, the school aged population is highly diverse, including students with a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In the 2004-2005 school year, the population of students who were identified as English Language Learners (ELLs) in the US was approximately 5.1 million or 10% of the US student population (Payán & Nettles, 2013). The states with the largest population of ELLs are Arizona, Texas, California, Florida, New York and Illinois (Payán & Nettles, 2013). To be identified as an ELL, a student speaks a language other than English as either their home or first language and has not met the standards set forth in the state they live in as proficient in English. While the criteria for English proficiency varies from state to state, the criteria generally includes oral language proficiency as well as passing scores on standardized or norm referenced tests. Prior to the passing of the No Child Left Behind act, students who were classified as ELLs were not required to meet the same rigorous standards of passing the state exams. Today, schools across the US are under increased pressure to ensure that their ELLs are learning both the academic content and the English required to be successful on the state exams in order to meet the federal requirements of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP).

1.1 ESL in Texas

In Texas, the state legislature approved standards for English as Second Language (ESL) and foreign languages in 1998 (Seidlitz, 2010, p. 5). These standards, while a good starting point, were only intended to be used by language arts teachers. However, in order for ELLs to be successful in school, they need to learn the academic and linguistic content of each of their content areas, including math, science, social studies, history, reading and language arts (Echevarria, Short, & Vogt, 2008). To better equip teachers in all content areas to teach ELLs, the Texas legislature approved the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) in December, 2007 (Seidlitz, 2010). All Texas teachers were to be trained on the ELPS so that they could effectively teach ELLs in all content areas, not just in language arts. The adoption of the ELPS required a change in educators' mindset towards the teaching of ELLs so that all teachers understand that they have an obligation to teach both their ELLs both the content and language they need to be success. School districts were encouraged to transition from a pull-out model to a content-based model of ESL, which required more teachers to become ESL certified. Any fully certified Texas teacher can become certified to teach ESL or bilingual education, without being required to take any courses or attend professional training, once they can take and pass the TExES certification exam (Dykes, Gillam, Neel, & Everling, 2012, p.2).

The combination of the move to more content-based ESL, the ease of certification, the need to implement the ELPS and the testing requirements of NCLB, have led to schools quickly making changes in their ESL and bilingual education programs.

1.2 Purpose

In order for schools to make the changes necessary to have successful content-based ESL classes, the teachers and administrators need focused, targeted professional development to gain the knowledge and confidence necessary to teach ELLs. There is limited research on the professional development training of teachers related to ESL (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008, p. 9). The purpose, therefore, of this study was to exam Texas teachers and administrators' professional development and their self-efficacy in regards to their knowledge about teaching ELLs.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Professional Development

Many teachers today do not have the training necessary to provide the high quality, linguistically accommodated instruction necessary to be successful in a content-based ESL class. "The recent increase in ELLs in U.S. classrooms has been rapid, and teacher education and professional development has not yet caught up with the demographic shift" (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008, p. 10). Traditional professional development often was presented as a decontextualized workshop presented by an expert. Effective professional development should be ongoing, integrated, driven by data and research and should "result in improved student outcomes and a narrowing of the achievement gap for English language learners" (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008).

2.2 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability and knowledge within a specific domain. Self-efficacy, therefore, can be defined as the confidence a person exhibits to themselves about a given area. According to Bandura (1993), self-efficacy is related to a person's belief about their ability to achieve a particular goal or to perform. The higher a person's self-efficacy, the higher their performance will be. Teacher self-efficacy impacts not only the teacher's performance, but it also impacts their students' performance. Teachers of ELLs need to be confident of their ability to communicate effectively and to effectively provide high quality instruction. The self-efficacy of the content-based ESL teachers can directly impact the academic and linguistic development of their ELLs.

2.3 Effective ESL

In order for teachers to effectively teach content-based ESL, they need to be familiar with at least 9 basic components: differentiating instruction, implementing the ELPS, providing linguistic accommodations, connecting the ELPS to the content standards, understanding the stages of language development, developing language proficiency in the content areas, providing academic interventions and understanding the fundamentals of bilingual and ESL education law.

2.3.1 ESL terminology and court cases

Teaching content-based ESL requires that teachers understand both the foundations of their content areas and ESL, as well as how to provide effective instruction for general education learners/students and ELLs. Teachers should understand the terminology used in ESL. For example, although most teachers and researchers use the positive term ELLs when referring to students, both the state of Texas and the US government use the term Limited English Proficient (LEP) as the official designation. Teachers should also understand that just having the ELLs in the same classroom with general education students is not sufficient; they must provide the ELLs with instruction that is effectively communicated (Lau v. Nichols). Teachers must also use practices that are instructionally sound, including assessing ELLs and monitoring their progress (Casteñeda v. Pickard).

2.3.2 Aligning instruction to standards

In order to successfully teach any content area, teachers must align their instruction with their content-area standards. In Texas, the standards are known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). When working with ELLs, teachers are required to integrate the ESL standards or ELPS with the TEKS in order to ensure that they are meeting the academic, linguistic and socio-cognitive needs of their ELLs (Collier, 1995).

2.3.3 Stages of language development

Teachers of ELLs should begin their planning with a thorough understanding of the stages of language development. Texas uses a four stage proficiency system: beginner, intermediate, advanced and advanced high (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

All four stages cross the four principle components of language: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Understanding the stages, their progression as well as the levels of each ELL in each component area, are vital for successfully planning a content based ESL lesson. The stages of language development should also be used to assess students' language throughout the school year (Texas Education Agency, 2013). When teachers do not provide on-going assessments of both students' language and academics, teachers cannot deliver effective instruction.

2.34 Meeting the needs of ELLs

Once teachers assess the ELLs academic and linguist abilities, the teacher can then plan effective lessons, differentiating the instruction to meet the content and English needs of the students and providing appropriate linguistic accommodations. The teachers can incorporate the ELPS to build the language of their content area and then provide the necessary academic interventions to ensure that the ELLs are acquiring the necessary academic competencies.

3. Methodology

This study was designed as a mixed methods study, combining descriptive statistics and qualitative, open ended responses. In a mixed methods study, two or more methods of collecting and analyzing data are combined to provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon being studied. While the quantitative, descriptive statistics provided discrete points concise measures of trends, the qualitative measures provided deeper insight into the beliefs, values and concerns of the participants.

3.1 Context

In order to facilitate communication between the state and school district and to provide quality professional development and program guidance, the state of Texas has 20 Educational Service Centers (ESCs) (*See Figure 1*) (Texas Education Agency, 2013). Participants were from all regions except 2, 9, 15, 17, and 19.

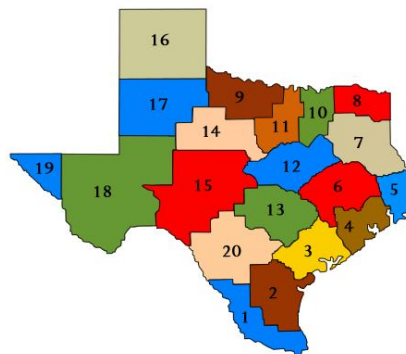


Figure 1: Map of the ESCs

In Texas, most public high schools are members of the University Interscholastic league which classifies schools for athletics and academics based on the enrollment of the high schools (University Interscholastic League, 2013-2014). All size public school districts were included in the study from small 1A districts having less high school enrolls of less than 199 students to school districts with multiple high schools with enrollments of greater than 2090. In addition, all levels of schools were included (*See Figure 2*).

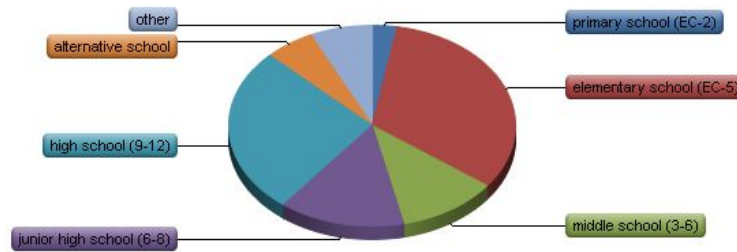


Figure 2: Distribution of Levels of Schools

3.2 Participants

There were 72 participants in the study, of which 20 were administrators and 52 were teachers. 54% had a minimum of a Master’s degree with an additional 12% have some graduate coursework. The administrators ranged from between 1-3 years to over 21 years of administration experience with 15 having more than 5 years administration experience. In addition, 85% of the administrators had a minimum of 5 years teaching prior to becoming an administrator.

3.2.1 Teacher participants

The teachers ranged from first year teachers to teachers with more than 15 years of experience (*see Figure 3*).

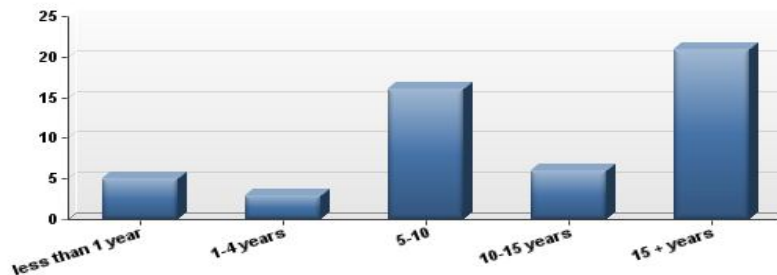


Figure 3: Years of Teaching Experience

61% of the teachers were certified through a traditional university program. 20% are currently certified to teach ESL with an additional 6% certified in Bilingual Education. Of those teachers certified to teach ESL, 71% became ESL certified by challenging the state exam. Likewise, 50% of the bilingual education certified teachers also challenged the state exam.

3.3 Instrument

The study was conducted using a mixed methods survey created using the Qualtrics program. The survey consisted of 11 demographic categorical questions, 16 quantitative questions about teaching, certification, professional development and self-efficacy related to teaching ELLs and two open ended qualitative questions related to ESL and bilingual education. In September, 2012, an e-mail was sent to a list-serve of Texas school district administrators. The e-mail consisted of a flyer explaining the study, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, an informed consent and a link to an electronic survey. The administrators were asked to take the survey and to forward the e-mail to their classroom teachers.

3.4 Data Analysis

As descriptive data analysis of the quantitative and demographic data was used to determine the minimum and maximum values, the mean, variance and standard deviation. A constant comparative analysis was used for the qualitative data. Triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data.

3.5 Limitations

The primary limitation of the study was the sample size. With only 72 participants, it is difficult to generalize the findings to the larger population. The sample, however, did provide a good representation of years of experience, grade levels and district size as well as representatives of 80% of the regions of the state of Texas. This study, therefore, should be viewed as providing preliminary data that can be built upon to develop a better understanding of the self-efficacy and the needs of teachers related to ELLs. Because of the small sample size, it was not possible to calculate accurate chi-squared values to determine if there was a significant relationship between the amount of professional development and the teachers' self-efficacy. The qualitative data, therefore, was essential in uncovering the relationship between the two areas as well as the broader concerns of the teachers and administrators.

4. Findings

4.1 Desire to teach ELLs

Although the state of Texas has required that all teachers receive training on the ELPS, it did not specify the quantity or quality of the required training. The one area that training by itself cannot change is a person's attitude. The teachers in this study overwhelmingly do not wish to teach in bilingual or ESL education. This is a major concern because if they are being required to work in areas outside their passion, it can directly impact their attitudes and beliefs in their own abilities which can impact the performance of their students.

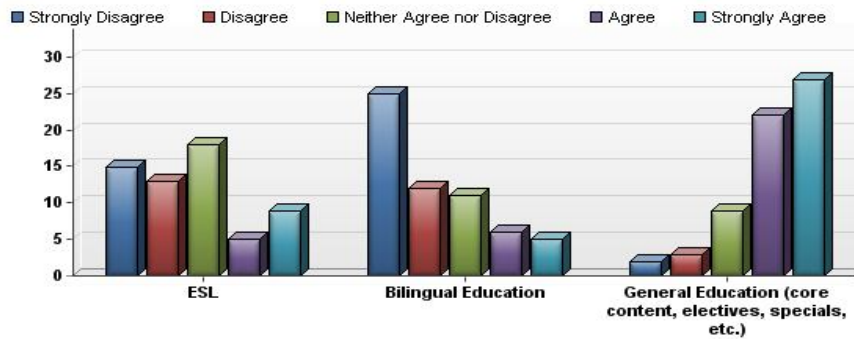


Figure 4: Response to statement: I want to teach in...

Given that the population of ELLs in the US is one of the fastest growing school aged populations (cite), this lack of interest in teaching this population is alarming. In addition, teachers were asked if they were under pressure to become ESL certified. 41% of the certified ESL teachers reported be required or pressured by their school district to become ESL certified. In addition, 15% of the non-ESL certified teachers reported that they are being pressured to become ESL certified.

4.2 Annual Professional Development

Teachers were then asked about the amount of professional development they received annually on each of the 9 areas of knowledge directly related to working with ELLs (see Table 1). Teachers indicated that on average they received at most 1 day of training annually on each topic. When asked how much annual training they believed they needed their responses paralleled the amount received. They indicated that in general, they needed about 1/2 to 1 day of training on each area.

Question: How much professional development do you receive annually on:	None (1)	A brief overview (less than 1/2 day) (2)	1/2 to 1 day (3)	2-3 days (4)	4 + days or On-going throughout the year (5)	Total Responses	Mean
Differentiation	17	18	17	4	2	58	2.24
Implementing the ELPS	17	18	16	4	3	58	2.28
Connecting the TEKS and ELPS	20	17	15	2	3	57	2.14
Providing linguistic accommodations for LEP students	24	16	13	2	3	58	2.03
Stages of Language Development	28	13	12	3	2	58	1.93
Developing English proficiency in the content areas	24	15	13	4	2	58	2.05
Assessing LEP students	25	17	11	2	3	58	1.98
Academic interventions	22	16	12	4	4	58	2.17
ESL/Bilingual law	23	18	8	4	3	56	2.04

Table 1: Amount of Annual Professional Development

For professional development to be effective, it should not be a one-time approach, but should include on-going trainings, especially in areas of low proficiency or confidence. Additional professional development related to all aspects of teaching ELLs is necessary to ensure that teachers can be successful. One participant remarked, “As an administrator, I get much more training than the classroom teachers. I think the teachers need more training in both special education and ELL to be effective in the classroom.” Another participant commented, “I feel that professional development in relationship to instructional strategies, differentiation, and accommodations for English Language Learners is severely lacking for all educators.” The participants recognize the need to improve the quality and quantity of professional development for ELLs.

4.3 Teachers’ self-efficacy related to knowledge of ELLs

In order to understand the teachers’ self-efficacy in relationship to working with ELLs, they were asked to rate their confidence in their knowledge of each of the 9 areas. Their responses indicated that overall, they did not feel confident in their knowledge of any of the areas (*see Table 2*). As one participant remarked, “I don’t know much about working with ELLs.”

Question: I feel confident in my knowledge of:	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Total Responses	Mean
Differentiation	8	12	11	10	9	50	3.00
Implementing the ELPS	11	7	14	12	6	50	2.90
Providing linguistic accommodations for ELLs	10	10	10	13	7	50	2.94
Connecting the TEKS and ELPS	10	12	14	7	7	50	2.78
Stages of Language Development	11	14	14	4	7	50	2.64
Developing English proficiency in the content areas	7	15	13	9	6	50	2.84
Assessing ELLs	11	16	11	6	6	50	2.60
Academic interventions	8	8	14	14	6	50	3.04
ESL/Bilingual law	16	14	10	6	4	50	2.36

Table 2: Teacher confidence related to knowledge of ELLs

In addition to their confidence in the general knowledge areas, the teachers rated their confidence in their ability to provide effective instruction to ELLs at the four states of language proficiency. Teachers were most confident in their ability to teach ELLs at the advanced and advanced high stages where the ELLs are most capable of communicating effectively in English (see Figure 5).

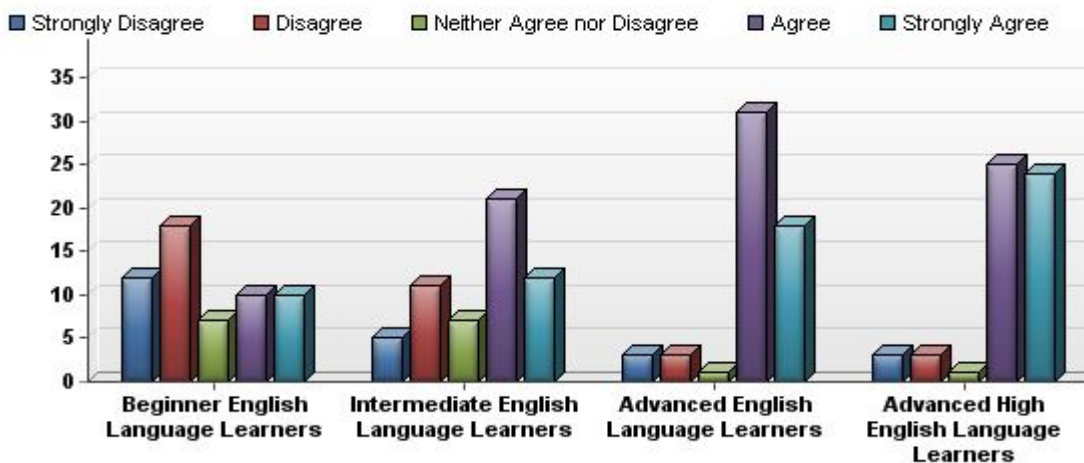


Figure 5: Response to statement: I feel confident in my ability to teach ...

“I don’t see how it would be possible to learn anything if there is a language barrier between student and teacher.” When teachers do not understand how to effectively teach content-based ESL, they cannot communicate effectively which impacts their belief in their ability to impact the learning of the ELLs. Teachers low self-efficacy, therefore, in both knowledge of and ability to teach ELLs as they develop language proficiency can hinder the teacher’s performance which will directly impact the ELLs acquisition of both content and language.

5. Implications

5.1 Professional development should be targeted

In order to ensure that professional development is effective, it should be targeted to the specific content areas of the teachers so that they are more willing to participate in it. If teachers can see the relevance of the professional development, they will be more prone to participate. Content-area teachers do need to know the foundations of effective ESL instruction, but they need to understand how they apply to their specific content area.

5.2 Teachers need to have good models

The teachers who worked directly with ELLs were positive about their interactions. “I have worked with ELLs in my classroom. It is amazing how much they can learn in a regular classroom.” Developing strong learning communities among the teachers, with teachers as models of how to effectively teach ELLs in different content areas and at different stages of language development, would facilitate active, collaborative learning that will be meaningful to the teachers.

5.3 Teachers need self-efficacy to be effective

In order for teachers to be successful in a content-based ESL class, they need to believe that they have the necessary knowledge and skills. If a teacher does not believe that they have the ability to instruct ELLs at the different proficiency levels, the lack of self-efficacy will hinder both their effectiveness as a teacher and the students’ ability to learn the material.

6. Conclusions

Given the continuing population growth of ELLs in the US, attention needs to be paid to the quality and quantity of professional development teachers are receiving. Because of the lack of research on the both the professional development and the self-efficacy of content-based ESL teachers, the needs of teachers and their ELL students are not being met. This area of research should be further explored with a larger population in Texas and across the US. These students are the future of the society; effective education is essential for their success.

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