

COVID-CREATED COLLABORATION: VIRTUAL ESL FIELD EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The effects of the pandemic are expected to exasperate the academic barriers faced by English Learners. Meanwhile, pre-service teachers faced their own barriers such as a lack of authentic field experiences that would equip them to meet the needs of English Learners. This article describes a strategy that one university educator preparation program used to supplement traditional field experiences with virtual field experiences through a collaboration with a partnership school district. The justification of why this innovative pilot program emerged and details of how this pilot program benefited pre-service teachers, English Learners, and in-service educators are described.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), virtual, field experience, preservice teachers, school partnership

The aftershocks from the COVID-19 pandemic will continue long after the virus is no longer a threat to our community. Unfortunately, many English Learners (ELs) did not have access to appropriate accommodations in virtual settings. Moreover, basic access to virtual instruction was a serious barrier to ELs' learning due to insufficient resources such as devices and/or bandwidth (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). Some school districts responded to students' needs by distributing technology support and Wi-Fi hotspots (Cushing-Leubner et al., 2021). However, some districts reported that fewer than half of their ELs were participating in online instruction at a time when all instruction was virtual or remote (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). Cardullo et al. (2021) recognized that in addition to communication barriers with parents in a virtual world, teachers struggled with self-efficacy and student engagement as they learned to navigate new virtual platforms. These consequences of the pandemic should be alarming to teachers, educational leaders, and educator preparation professionals because ELs were already a population of concern. The achievement gap between English proficient students and ELs is expected to be even greater than it was pre-COVID.

Importance of English as a Second Language Training

Prior to the pandemic, many teachers felt unprepared to teach ELs and attributed their lack of preparation to insufficient coursework in English as a Second Language (ESL) methods, as well as a lack of pre-service field experience with ELs (Correll, 2016; Kolando et al., 2013). Teachers who have field experiences with ELs during their educator preparation program feel more prepared to teach them in their classrooms (Coady et al., 2011; Correll, 2016; Tran, 2015). Kolando et al. (2013) reported that the most powerful method to prepare mainstream teachers to meet the needs of ELs was a combination of personal experiences and academic experiences. Specifically, teachers expressed that time was needed to get to know the student and to develop strategies that would meet the needs of EL students. When pre-service teachers are afforded the opportunity to take an active role, rather than participate as passive observers in field experiences, they gain a deeper understanding of pedagogical methods.

Yet, Garcia (2014) examined the coursework and field experience requirements of five Texas university educator preparation programs and observed inconsistencies in how teacher candidates were prepared to support ELs. While all educator preparation programs in Texas are required to address English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) in their program, there is no policy that requires pre-service teachers to have field experiences specifically with ELs. With 18% of Texas K-12 students currently classified as ELs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), there is a clear need for teacher preparation programs to address their specific learning needs.

Unfortunately, the pandemic also brought field experiences to a screeching halt. Schools closed their doors, and school personnel worked diligently to launch virtual instruction. Pre-service teachers no longer had the option to apply and develop ESL methods in the field. Some educator preparation programs substituted traditional face-to-face field experiences with video observations and virtual internships (Ferdig & Pytash, 2021), but the abrupt changes left educator preparation faculty with limited options in how to meet field experience requirements. As a result, many pre-service teachers did not get authentic field experience.

Virtual Field Experience and Course Requirements

To overcome the lack of authentic field experiences, one Texas university educator preparation program launched a collaborative pilot program with a partnership school district in the spring of 2021. University faculty collaborated with the school district's educational leaders to orchestrate synchronous virtual field experiences with ELs via Zoom. The pre-service teachers registered as virtual volunteers in the school district to remain within district compliance. Then, teams of two pre-service teachers were matched with an EL who needed additional support and agreed upon a series of Zoom meetings where the pre-service teachers could consistently meet with the EL. To accommodate schedules, the pre-service teachers sometimes joined the Zoom meetings simultaneously, and at other times met with the EL independently. To the best ability, pre-service teachers were matched with students who were in the grade level they intended to teach. Specialists from the school district's multilingual department hosted routine Zoom meetings lasting between 30-45 minutes to connect the pre-service teachers with selected ELs at multiple campuses. Pre-service teachers were expected to complete a minimum of five hours of virtual field experience, so students who participated in half-hour meetings met their EL student on ten occasions while students who participated in 45-minute meetings met their EL student six to seven times throughout the semester.

The university instructor required preservice teachers to complete five assignments with ELs in which they applied course content. The first assignment required the pre-service teachers to get to know their EL. University students were guided in how to ascertain the academic, linguistic, cultural, and personal backgrounds of their ELs so they could get to know their student. The second assignment required the pre-service teachers to estimate speaking proficiency using the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) English proficiency language descriptors. As part of the first and second assignments, the pre-service teachers were asked to observe and reflect on specific Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and ELPS they could emphasize for the remainder of their meetings. Although most pre-service teachers planned to address English Language Arts and Reading content, secondary pre-service teachers were encouraged to apply ESL methods while addressing TEKS of their specialized content-area subjects. The third and fourth assignments required the pre-service teachers to use a sheltered instruction strategy while addressing appropriate TEKS and ELPS then reflect on whether their goals were met. For the fifth assignment, pre-service teachers were asked to design a linguistically accommodated assessment that could be used to assess whether the EL demonstrated academic and linguistic growth on the emphasized TEKS and ELPS, again reflecting afterward on the success.

Finally, to consolidate knowledge the pre-service teachers gained through the virtual field experiences, pre-service teachers presented a case study of their experience with the EL to their peers in class. The requirements of the case study aligned with three of the four questions on the Texas New Teacher Survey which is distributed to all first-year teachers to evaluate how well their educator preparation program prepared them for the classroom (Texas Education

Agency, 2021). In the survey, first-year teachers assigned to teach ELs are asked about their level of preparation to design lessons that support ELs with TEKS, to design lessons that support ELs with ELPS, and to develop appropriate assessments for ELs. Thus, the case study reinforced this portion of educator preparation program accountability.

Because pre-service teachers met with the same EL throughout the semester, they were coached on how to personalize instruction with appropriate accommodations for their EL. However, pre-service teachers were also encouraged to be creative, innovative, and to synthesize course content with what they knew about their student to design mini-lessons and activities that were relevant to the student. Because university students were partnered with another student in the class, some class time was devoted to discussion about their observations and shared goals for the student and cooperative planning to meet such goals. Coursework aligned with the field experience expectations in that the topics and strategies discussed in class were expected to be applied in the virtual field. After applying methods and strategies via Zoom, pre-service teachers were expected to demonstrate reflective practices through written responses so the instructor could provide further guidance, resources, and teaching suggestions. Emphasis was placed on employing sheltered instruction methods and linguistic accommodations to support the EL's grade-level academic standards in accordance with the language proficiency levels.

While opportunities for improvement were identified throughout the pilot program, the overall results were largely positive. Pre-service teachers gained authentic experiences, and despite the short-term nature of the program, some pre-service teachers expressed developing a relationship. Overall, pre-service teachers reported they had gained confidence in how to support ELs and demonstrate culturally responsive pedagogy. The intentionally planned virtual field experiences with ELs afforded pre-service teachers the opportunity to apply ESL methods, while also supplementing the work of in-service teachers. Thus, in-service teachers and educational leaders were grateful for the instructional support. Most importantly, ELs benefited from personalized attention, instruction, and positive relationship. Finally, faculty members from both the partnership schools and educator preparation programs were available to support pre-service teachers through coaching, guidance, and feedback on a flexible schedule.

Challenges and Misconceptions Overcome Through Virtual Field Experiences

As the consequences of missed learning during school closures becomes more apparent in the next few years, it can be expected that ELs will have further exacerbated gaps when compared to their non-EL peers (Cushing-Leubner, 2021). ELs will need exceptional teachers who can compensate for missed learning opportunities, implement sheltered instruction strategies effectively, and apply linguistic accommodations appropriately. Yet, teacher attrition and turn-over has been a long-standing problem in the United States, and pandemic-induced stressors accelerated teacher attrition and early retirement options. An unplanned benefit of the virtual field experience was the professional networking pre-service teachers developed within the partnership school district.

It is a common misconception that high-quality pedagogy can compensate for ESL methods, but as deJong and Harper (2005, p. 102) expressed, "just good teaching" is not good enough for ELs. Teachers need specific training to understand how language and culture affect ELs (deJong & Harper, 2005). An understanding of ESL methods is critical for teachers to go from "just good teaching" to good teaching for ELs. For example, high quality reading instruction begins with words that are already in a child's oral vocabulary. However, ELs often do not have these words in their vocabulary. Thus, ELs may internalize the notion that reading is just saying the words aloud; understanding their meaning is not required. Like all field experiences, the virtual field experience provided an opportunity to apply skills and strategies obtained from coursework and to reflect on practice for deeper, personal learning. Teague (2010) noted that teachers develop abstract competencies such as how to develop culturally responsive lessons and how to work with diverse learners through experiences with diverse learners. Pre-service teachers need adequate training and field experiences with ELs to practice supporting culturally diverse learners prior to entering the field, and virtual field experiences are a viable solution to this need.

All educator preparation programs seek to prepare candidates to instruct diverse learners, but too often, educator preparation programs generalize ELs as diverse learners, grouped into a category along with students with special education needs (Kolando et al., 2013). This overgeneralized assumption that the needs of ELs can be met with the same methods used for students with special needs leaves teacher candidates without any experience in how to teach language proficiency standards, how to effectively select linguistic accommodations, and how to capitalize on the assets ELs bring into the classroom. Thus, virtual field experience with ELs began with identifying the strengths of the student, intentionally addressing ELPS, and strategically selecting accommodations.

Benefits for Educator Preparation Programs

All educator preparation programs aim to develop exceptional teachers, and recent legislation has increased the accountability measures for educator preparation programs in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2021). Surveys distributed to first-year teachers by the Texas Education Agency each spring include questions relating to how well teachers were prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners. For first-year teachers who are assigned to teach ELs, an additional four questions are posed. The additional questions address how well novice teachers were prepared to support ELs in mastering content area standards and English proficiency standards, develop assessments for ELs, and understand laws pertaining to ELs. The virtual field experiences provided opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop these skills before clinical teaching, so it is expected that in their first year of teaching the candidates who participated in the pilot program will report being well prepared in this domain.

Pre-service teachers who have field experiences with ELs have been reported to develop greater cultural competence (Teague, 2010; VanDeuses, 2019). Teague (2010) ascertained that experiences with diverse learners helped future teachers challenge their own beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes while addressing their own emotional response to diversity. However, Teague (2010) noted that the process of self-examination must be done with scaffolding. Bennett (2013) affirmed that with prompting, the pre-service teachers engage in deep reflective practices and examine their personal biases and assumptions. Equitable educational access begins when educators hold an asset-based mindset about diverse students, maintain high expectations for all learners, and have developed the skills and strategies to support students in achieving high levels of learning. For educator preparation programs that do not require coursework specific to ELs, field experience with ELs could be arranged within their respective content area methods courses (VanDeuses, 2019). Because pre-service teachers reflected upon their culturally responsive practices in their virtual field experience case studies, it can be inferred that these teachers will enter the field with a greater understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has become less of a threat as vaccinations become more commonplace, many school districts are planning for virtual campuses to open in the fall of 2021. Preparing teachers to serve students in both virtual and traditional face-to-face contexts will increase their career opportunities. Virtual field experiences for pre-service teachers are not new (Hixon & So, 2009; Simpson, 2006), but they have recently become a necessity and may become a standard in educator preparation programs with the expansion of online schools, scheduling benefits, and access to specific student populations. Pre-service teachers who benefited from the virtual field experience with ELs learned how to teach via synchronous virtual learning and were able to reach students who were home or at a school over 50 miles from their university, saving a great deal of travel time and expenses. Most importantly, pre-service teachers were able to work with a specific type of learner for reciprocal benefits.

Benefits for Education Leaders

The shortage of ESL and bilingual teachers has been a problem for many years in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2020). Because nearly one of every five Texas students are identified as an EL, Local Education Agencies are often tasked with training in-service teachers to implement sheltered instruction methods for teachers who were underprepared to teach ELs. Partnerships between Local Education Agencies and educator preparation programs would

allow ELs to gain personalized attention and open the opportunity to recruit teachers who have engaged in coursework and field experiences with ELs.

Given the need for ESL and bilingual teachers and the need for personalized EL instruction, educational leaders should support partnerships with educator preparation programs to arrange virtual ESL field experiences. These will benefit ELs by providing personalized instruction and assisting pre-service teachers in developing the skills needed to meet the needs of ELs. In the pilot program described above, some administrators arranged for the virtual field experiences to occur during intervention time, while others arranged for the meetings to support virtual learners who were needing additional support at home. However, educational leaders must help cast the vision and explain how all participants can benefit. Educational leaders are also needed to establish the norms and expectations for all participants, including in-service teachers, pre-service teachers, ELs, and educator preparation program faculty. More importantly, educational leaders must periodically monitor the progress of the sessions to determine whether ELs are benefiting from the experience, just as the educator preparation program faculty must monitor the progress of pre-service teachers.

Conclusion

Although this virtual field experience pilot program was designed to overcome pandemic barriers, virtual field experiences may be a useful strategy in future contexts to prepare teachers in ESL methods. All who participated in the pilot program, including pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, university faculty, and EL students received some benefit from the program. In addition to providing the much-needed individualized instruction to ELs, the virtual setting afforded preservice teachers the opportunity to experience virtual platforms as Cardullo et al. (2021) recommended. Because many Texas school districts will offer a virtual campus in the coming 2021-2022 school year, it would be ideal to prepare teachers to experience the field in both face-to-face and online settings. For teachers who expect to teach in the traditional brick and mortar settings, virtual instruction may still be required during times of school closures such as those caused by natural disasters.

A formal study of the pilot program has yet to be completed, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the virtual field experience with ELs conducted in the spring of 2021 was a success. Pre-service teachers demonstrated the application of ESL methods and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to virtually teach ELs. ELs benefited from academic support and expressed gratitude for the experience. Administrators who supported the pilot program were appreciative of the personalized learning provided to ELs and have requested that the program continues in the upcoming school year. The faculty of the educator preparation program is looking forward to improving and continuing the collaborative program.

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