

# What if There are Only a Few? Supporting English Learners in Rural Contexts

*GATESOL Journal*  
2025, Vol. 34(1), pp. 4–16  
doi:10.52242/gatesol.202  
ISSN: 2331-6845

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes the efforts of two teacher educators and four elementary school teachers to identify pragmatic approaches for educating newcomer English learners (ELs) in a rural context with a very small but rapidly growing EL population. We used a formative experiment methodological approach (Reinking & Bradley, 2004, 2008) consisting of iterative cycles of goal setting, observations and instructional supports, and adjustments to capitalize on teachers' experiences and expertise to identify four relevant, meaningful, and practicable approaches to instruction and assessment to benefit newcomer ELs. The four ways are: (1) finding ways to use students' home languages, (2) incorporating visual supports, (3) focusing on vocabulary development, and (4) fostering culturally sustaining positive learning environments. While these approaches have been used in other settings, this study is innovative in its focus on how teachers can leverage these supports in general educational settings to respond to demographic changes in the region. Our findings indicate that collaboration with experienced teachers led to the development of pragmatic approaches and policy clarifications that the school system has been able to apply in multiple contexts. These approaches, in turn, supported the ELs' English language development and overall academic progress.

## **Keywords**

English learners, elementary education, emergent English learners, rural schools, rural ESOL

## **Introduction**

Georgia is part of the *New Destination South*, where there have been increasing Hispanic and Asian communities in recent decades (Census Brief, 2001, 2002, 2011, 2012; comparable briefs for the 2020 census were not located; Marrow, 2011). Census QuickFacts (2024) estimated that the state population in 2024 included 11.1% Hispanic people and 4.3% Asian people. Such patterns mirror increasing numbers of public school students who are English learners (ELs). In the 2023-2024

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**Acknowledgement:** This project was supported by a seed grant from Georgia Southern University.

school year, according to data on the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (n.d.) Report Card, there were approximately 1,868,000 students in grades P-12 in Georgia; of these, 19.24% of students were Hispanic and 4.97% of students were Asian American Pacific Islander. Approximately 12% of students were ELs, with Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Arabic being the most common languages spoken.

While 12% of students in the state are ELs, some districts have as many as 28% of their student population learning English as an additional language while other systems do not have any ELs. As such, the resources and expertise supporting effective instruction for ELs tend to be focused in school systems with higher numbers of English learners. Federal Title III funds and FTE dollars are allocated based on the number of students served, which provides districts with higher numbers of ELs additional dollars to provide instructional services for students and professional development for teachers. For example, while urban districts in Georgia and across the nation may have newcomer schools and special classes to meet the needs of newcomers, most school systems do not have the resources to offer specialized programs or classes specifically for newcomer students. In rural schools, which often lack capacity for special programs and classes, many teachers may not have worked with ELs, much less newcomer students, throughout their entire careers; when they are confronted with meeting the academic and social needs of ELs, they often feel ill-equipped.

Even for experienced, effective teachers, it can be a challenge to modify instructional practices to make content concepts clear and to support ELs' developing English proficiency. Research indicates that there is still a struggle to prepare new teachers (e.g., Chesley & Jordan, 2012) and to provide professional development for practicing educators (Choi & Morrison, 2014) to effectively teach ELs. This is particularly true in rural contexts with low incidences of English learners (Coady et al., 2019).

In the district where this study took place, only 2% of the students were ELs (Governor's Office of Student Achievement Report Card, n. d.). About 88% of students and teachers in the district were white. According to an annual report on the district site, more than 30 languages were spoken by ELs, with Spanish being most common. Given the low number of ELs, most ESOL teachers were itinerant, meaning they travelled between schools to provide support, thereby limiting opportunities to provide ongoing, sustained support for individual teachers or schools. One school in the district, Loblolly Pine Elementary (a pseudonym), for the first time, had four students who were new immigrants to the country and had minimal English skills. The four teachers in this study were experienced educators at Loblolly Pine Elementary who wanted to support the newcomer ELs in their classrooms but felt ill-equipped to do so. The purpose of this study was to collaborate with general education teachers to enhance their instructional practices for teaching newcomer ELs.

### **Relevant Literature**

For this study, Alisa Leckie, one of the university researchers, worked with four elementary school teachers, each of whom had one or two emergent ELs in their classes. This was a new experience for each educator, despite their many years of teaching experience. One teacher, speaking with Alisa midway through the year, reflected on the new-to-her experience of teaching an emergent EL student, noting that, "I'm someone with 30 years of experience... I had no experience with it." This impression connects to two main areas in the literature: effective practices for ELs and our rural context.

### ***Effective Practices for ELs***

Effective practices for teaching English learners include using students' home languages (Krashen, 1985; Sayer, 2013), incorporating visual support (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Vardell et al., 2006), and focusing on vocabulary development (Carlo et al., 2004). According to Templeton et al. (2015), "[e]very teacher is a teacher of language" (p. 3), meaning that these practices are also appropriate across content areas. Integrating these practices results in target outcomes for ELs, including oral and written language proficiency and content mastery (Piñón et al., 2022).

However, research does not tend to specify differential practices for ELs with minimal, if any, English language proficiency compared to more English-proficient peers. Although guidance documents such as the WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors (WIDA, 2020) provide support to educators in explaining *what* ELs of varying proficiencies can do in instructional contexts, they provide little guidance for *how* to integrate these practices into their instruction. The majority of research on ELs focuses on schools and systems with high numbers of ELs. Only a small portion of this research focuses on newcomers, or emergent ELs, with minimal levels of English language proficiency.

### ***Rural Context***

Another key perspective that frames this work is the rural context of our college and partner school. Research has identified common themes across rural contexts while acknowledging that these contexts vary widely (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). This rural context, as noted, is historically and predominantly white while rapidly changing; the school, like many rural schools, is central to the community (Rural Schools Collaborative, n.d.). Recognizing this context allowed us to approach the study through an asset-based perspective, avoiding the commonly used deficit perspective in rural research (cf. White & Kline, 2012). Burton et al. (2013) noted that many studies draw on a "one-dimensional characterization" of rural teachers (p. 8). To counter this view, we highlight that this study focused on experienced, effective teachers facing a new situation: emergent ELs in their rural classrooms. Alisa was familiar with the school through previous partnership efforts, and the teachers approached her for assistance with emergent ELs. These teachers wanted to ensure success for all students, but in the words of one teacher, they "had no experience" with ELs. In this way, the teachers self-selected for the study.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

Two perspectives informed this work: linguistically responsive teaching (Lucas et al., 2008) and culturally relevant pedagogy/culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Lucas et al. (2008) explained six understandings about second language acquisition that teachers need to consider:

- *Academic language proficiency* differs from *conversational language proficiency* and takes longer to develop.
- Second-language learners need input just beyond their current levels of competence and numerous opportunities with academic and conversational language.
- Social interactions between ELs and English-speaking peers assist academic and social language development.
- ELs with solid literacy skills in their first language are more likely to achieve parity with English-speaking peers.
- A welcoming, positive learning environment with minimal anxiety about performing in a second language is essential for student learning.

- Explicit instruction in language function and form is essential to second-language learning. These principles informed our work with the teachers and our approach to analysis.

We also drew on culturally relevant/culturally sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Three components of culturally relevant pedagogy are a focus on student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally sustaining pedagogies seek to foster, or sustain, “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Together, these approaches aligned with our goals. One goal was to support teachers in sustaining cultural and linguistic pluralism and funds of knowledge (cf. Gonzalez et al., 2005) in their changing rural community; thus, we scaffolded teachers’ own cultural competence and recognition of the cultural and linguistic assets ELs brought to the classroom as a way to diminish a tendency to lean toward assimilation.

The following questions guided this study: (1) How does the integration of vocabulary development, students’ home language, and visual support facilitate the academic achievement of emergent ELs in a rural context? (2) How does *modeling* how to integrate vocabulary development, students’ home languages, and visual support followed by *instructional support* result in shifts in educational practice among elementary teachers working with emergent ELs?

## Method

We used a formative design approach (Reinking & Bradley, 2004, 2008) for this work with four upper elementary teachers as they implemented practices to improve academic achievement for emergent ELs. Formative experiments harness innovative instructional interventions to yield positive, pragmatic educational change (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Formative experiments allow for the creation of interventions responsive to particular contexts—here, emergent ELs in one rural school, Loblolly Pine Elementary. Since the goal of formative experiments is pragmatic pedagogical changes, we focused on changes in each teacher’s instructional practices.

Alisa met with the teachers at multiple points during the year to discuss student progress, representative instructional practices, curricular materials, and modifications. There were three main cycles over the course of a school year; each cycle included goal setting, observations and instructional support, and reflection and adjustments. Alisa observed the teachers and met with them to discuss the topics above and how they were currently implementing best practices in their instruction. Teachers would identify ways to enhance their existing instructional practice to better benefit the emergent ELs in their classes. Then, teachers would implement ideas and monitor student progress. At the conclusion of each cycle, Alisa would meet with teachers for reflection: to discuss progress and to revisit and refine goals for the next cycle. At the conclusion of the year, Amanda Wall, another university researcher, conducted a focus group interview with the teachers.

## Participants and Researcher Roles

The teachers (all names are pseudonyms) were: Ms. Ash, Ms. Donner, Dr. Allie, and Ms. Hall:

- Ms. Ash taught fifth grade. She had 20 years of teaching experience. She had earned master's and specialist degrees.
- Ms. Donner taught fifth grade. Together, she and Ms. Ash divided the teaching of ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Ms. Donner had 21 years of teaching experience. She had earned a gifted endorsement.
- Dr. Allie taught fourth grade ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies. She had 12 years of teaching experience. She had earned a master’s and a doctorate degree.

- Ms. Hall taught third grade ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Ms. Hall had 29 years of teaching experience. Ms. Hall had a master's degree.

Ms. Ash and Ms. Donner were a fifth-grade team; they collaborated closely. Dr. Allie and Ms. Hall taught all four academic content areas in self-contained classrooms. As noted above, teachers self-selected for this initiative based on their new experience of teaching emergent EL students.

There were four emergent ELs in the upper elementary grades at the time of the study:

- Lila, fifth grade. Her home language is Thai. Her teachers were Ms. Ash and Ms. Donner.
- Leon, fourth grade. His home language is French, specifically Haitian French. His teacher was Dr. Allie.
- José, fourth grade. His home language is Spanish. His teacher was Dr. Allie.
- Marie, third grade. Her home language is French, specifically Haitian French. Her teacher was Ms. Hall. Marie and Leon are siblings.

The small sample size connects to the context of the study and the new experience of teaching emergent ELs for these accomplished teachers. Even among this small population of four emergent ELs, there were three home languages.

Both authors were familiar with the district through their roles as university supervisors for teacher candidates during clinical experiences. Alisa knows Spanish and has extensive experience teaching EL students. Amanda has a background in Romance languages. Both authors are committed to strong school-university partnerships. Alisa previously provided ESOL endorsement coursework for other teachers in the district and worked with the district ESOL coordinator to support teachers working with ELs. This study grew from that work.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Four approaches were identified to focus instructional supports for students. These became the framework for data collection and analysis. Consistent with a formative design approach, there were three cycles throughout the year during which the study occurred. Data sources included regular observation and meeting notes, sample instructional materials, and transcriptions from individual interviews and the focus group. Alisa worked with the teachers throughout the school year to provide support for emergent ELs. She visited the school bi-weekly, observing and conferencing with the teachers. In keeping with a formative approach and our focus on practical pedagogical change, there were three goal-setting cycles. These cycles focused on modifying instruction for students (e.g., creating vocabulary lists, selecting sentence frames) and discussing these materials and student work samples with teachers. Teachers shared and described student artifacts during conferences, although we did not include student work as separate data sources. Audio recordings of teachers' meetings included teachers' interpretations and their assessment of evidence of student learning.

We developed an *a priori* coding scheme from the promising practices identified through previous research, as noted earlier (Carlo et al., 2004; Gersten & Baker, 2000; Krashen, 1985; Piñón et al., 2022; Sayer, 2013; Vardell et al., 2006), and aligned with the tenets of linguistically responsive teaching (Lucas et al., 2008). The codes were: how teachers integrated students' home languages, visual supports, and vocabulary development for their emergent ELs. Information about student progress is based on teachers' notes and interviews; we did not have access to student assessment data. The data sources align with the purpose of the study to focus on instructional practices to support emergent ELs in this school.

We established the beginning coding structure. To reduce bias in interpretation, due to Alisa's close work with teachers, Amanda led data analysis. We initially coded the data separately. Data from each cycle informed discussions with teachers for the next cycle, following the pragmatic goal of change underlying formative experiments. Emergent themes (Merriam, 2009) augmented the original organizational coding scheme (Maxwell, 2005) as the study progressed. Categories, themes, and findings evolved iteratively across the cycles. We analyzed data to note instructional practices and to note shifts in teachers' instructional practices. Through discussion after the initial analysis, we streamlined themes and resolved discrepancies.

## Findings

Our research questions were: (1) How does the integration of vocabulary development, students' home language, and visual support facilitate the academic achievement of emergent ELs in a rural context? (2) How does *modeling* how to integrate vocabulary development, students' home languages, and visual support followed by *instructional support* result in shifts in educational practice among elementary teachers working with emergent ELs? We organized findings in four areas: 1) finding ways to use students' home languages, 2) incorporating visual supports, 3) focusing on vocabulary development, and 4) fostering positive learning environments.

### *Finding Ways to Use Students' Home Languages*

Students' home languages were used in conjunction with English for some assignments and assessments. At the beginning of the year, Alisa spoke with teachers about using Google Translate (or a comparable tool) to give assessments to newcomer EL students first in their home language to assess their understanding of content, particularly on text-heavy assessments in Language Arts and Social Studies. She encouraged teachers both to focus on vocabulary development in Math and Science and to provide those assessments in English to see how the newcomer ELs' language skills were developing. Translating all assessments was not feasible in terms of teachers' time constraints, nor would it have allowed them to assess English language development. Teachers made intentional decisions about when and why to use translation.

The use of students' home languages was also helpful during writing tasks. As an example, Ms. Hall provided a writing prompt in French for Marie mid-year. Marie generated ideas in French first, then worked to write her response in English. This opportunity to write first in French, her home language, allowed Marie to focus on content concepts and to list relevant examples and points for her assignment. Then, with the support of a word-to-word bilingual dictionary, her own developing knowledge of English, and some peer support, Marie wrote her response in English. This sequence allowed her to focus separately on content concepts and language concepts before uniting these in her written response.

The structures of students' home languages related to patterns teachers observed and the supports they provided in students' use of English. Leon, José, and Marie spoke Romance languages with many words and structures in common with English. This promoted their English language development when the home language and English language words were paired on vocabulary cards. This helped both teachers and students notice the large number of cognates among English, Spanish, and French.

Lila's home language, however, was Thai, which is structured differently from English. Lila's teachers referred to resources like *The Language Gulper* (Gutman & Avanzati, 2013) for information about the Thai language to better support Lila. For example, verb tenses in Thai are structured very differently from English. Instead of conjugating verbs to indicate time, Thai

linguistic structures use time-related adverbs or word order to express time. This awareness allowed Lila's teachers to notice patterns in her use of English and identify ways to develop her understanding of linguistic structures in English.

In one cycle in February, Lila's teachers set an ELA goal for her to focus on English verb tenses by highlighting examples of different verb tenses in selected passages. While other students were evaluated on their responses to comprehension questions, Lila was assessed on her increasing knowledge of morphemes indicating verb tense. Although some texts were modified so Lila could develop reading comprehension skills, it was not feasible to adapt every text used. By selecting a grammar skill or linguistic feature to focus on, when adapted texts were not available, her teachers were still able to engage Lila in learning.

### ***Incorporating Visual Supports***

At the focus group in May, teachers noted "visual learning" and "pictures" as strategies they had used throughout the year that had worked well for their emergent ELs. We entered the study with the idea that visual supports referred to images, videos, and visible text (word/phrase walls and text annotations) that would enhance learning for emergent EL students. The primary forms of visual support were paper or electronic flashcards and labels. Teachers worked with emergent EL students to use flashcards to develop their knowledge of general English terms (e.g., chair, table, flower) as well as content concepts (e.g., division, evaporation, character). In early cycles, these tended to be teacher-created flashcards. Over time, the students started to create their own flashcards. This shift was related to students' increased understanding and independence.

As an example, Ms. Hall, Marie's teacher, further focused on providing visual support for Math through labeling; this goal of providing visual support lasted through the first two cycles. Ms. Hall would intentionally label the aspects of graphs, shapes, and parts of mathematical sentences for Marie. This labeling allowed Marie to connect spoken words to their written counterparts in order to make math concepts more comprehensible. Pictures were important supports for content concepts. While teachers had included visuals to support their instruction on a regular basis prior to working with emergent ELs, they became more intentional and consistent about their use over the span of the year. Again, many students gained proficiency in selecting visuals themselves to support vocabulary and content knowledge. They also developed skills in selecting images to demonstrate their understanding of concepts to successfully complete class assignments. Ms. Hall described a presentation Marie gave in class in May. Marie gathered pictures to support her presentation about "real kids, real heroes." Ms. Hall commented that, "You could hear a pin drop in this room... everyone wanted to hear what [Marie] had to say."

Text modifications and annotations were another aspect of visual support for students. In December, Lila successfully read a text adapted with key ideas and key terms were in bold print. Throughout the first two cycles, Ms. Ash and Ms. Donner, her teachers, had increased implementation of text adaptations. These adaptations allowed Lila to focus her attention and effort on the parts of the text that were most critical for her comprehension. In a mid-year cycle meeting in February, Dr. Allie, José's teacher, mentioned how he marked his copy of the class novel by circling different words. Earlier in the year, she had annotated texts for José and Leon, but, over time, each student began to annotate his own texts. Dr. Allie mentioned again how José would mark texts during the focus group in May, suggesting the continued importance of this practice. Both José and Leon had individual copies of the class novel that they could mark and write notes in. By providing copies of texts that the two boys could write in and annotate, Dr. Allie supported their content learning and English language acquisition.

### ***Focusing on Vocabulary Development***

There were several ways teachers focused on vocabulary development to support emergent ELs. This was a focus across content areas, following the idea that “vocabulary knowledge *is* content knowledge” (Templeton et al., 2015, p. 3, emphasis in original).

Alisa worked with Ms. Hall to develop a list of keywords and phrases for Marie to focus on in different units of study across content areas. Here are sample keywords and phrases from one cycle:

- ELA: *claim, main reason, best meaning of a word, identify the main idea, organize your key points*
- Math: *how many, number sentence, factor, expression, frequency, line plot*
- Science: *temperature, change in temperature, warmer, cooler, thermometer.*

Similar processes took place for other students. For Lila’s fifth-grade study of World War II through the Cold War, Ms. Ash and Ms. Donner identified key terms and dates to focus Lila’s learning along with her classmates.

Text adaptations were another way that vocabulary development was supported. Texts were adapted through annotations (as noted under visual supports) and modified content. At the end of the first cycle, Dr. Allie explained how she presented José with a simplified version of a book the class was reading, *Who Was Neil Armstrong?* (Edwards, 2008). José had gained “some basic English vocabulary,” so he was asked to circle words he did know so that flashcards could be developed for important words he hadn’t circled. In February, during the second cycle, Dr. Allie reported on Leon’s reading books commonly assigned to first and second graders, although he was in fourth grade. These less complex texts had been given to Leon to support his basic English vocabulary as well as accuracy, fluency, and rate of reading.

### ***Fostering Positive Learning Environments***

A positive, culturally sustaining, and responsive classroom environment provided a supportive atmosphere for each of the emergent ELs. These culturally responsive and sustaining environments provided encouragement and a degree of protection for the ELs, helping them to feel part of the class and school communities.

Dr. Allie taught both José and Leon. She noted at one point how she structured a group for them to sit next to her and to one another, commenting that, “They have a nice little friendship.” Farther along in the conversation, she reflected on the overall classroom environment: “But they just feel like part of us, you know?”

Ms. Hall noted the positive classroom learning environment at multiple points throughout the year. In February, she relayed how “the children just are constantly building her [Marie] up.” In May, toward the end of the third cycle, Ms. Hall summarized that Marie “has been embraced by boys and girls, and certainly me.” She also specified small groups as a beneficial classroom structure.

Most of these examples relate to a positive classroom environment on a general level. Teachers also worked to include students’ home cultures and knowledge into instruction. One specific example of a connection to a student’s home culture was when Ms. Donner noted how Lila’s classmates enjoyed seeing examples of Thai money she shared during their unit on decimals in Math. When teachers recognized that Lila was struggling with the money-related decimal problems because decimals are not used in money exchanges in Thailand, they positioned her as an expert and asked her to share her money and commerce experiences from Thailand. Similarly, during a unit on trickster tales, Ms. Hall helped Marie identify and retell a trickster tale she knew



already. This allowed Marie to expand her peers' literary experiences, as recounting and retelling stories were part of their ELA standards. Mrs. Hall was able to intentionally support Marie's development of skills related to that standard and the content of the trickster tale unit.

### ***Using These Approaches Together***

While we highlight each of these four approaches separately, we also note that teachers drew on these approaches together to support their newcomer ELs. One example of this integrated approach comes from Dr. Allie and how she supported José and Leon during a study of *George Washington's Socks* (Woodruff, 1993). The two boys had their own copies of the text to mark and annotate. They could note unfamiliar words and make flashcards. They also used these annotated texts to read aloud to Dr. Allie in small group settings. Through visual support, focus on vocabulary, and a positive learning environment, José and Leon showed Dr. Allie growth with content concepts and with the English language.

In May, Ms. Ash reflected on Lila's year. She shared an example of when Lila scored 100 on an assessment and recalled how Lila was both humble and "very aware of what her abilities are." Ms. Ash continued: "She knows she's very smart; it's just the language barrier. It's not any kind of intelligence indicator. It's just the language barrier." Ms. Ash's recognition of her student's language challenges highlights how she paid attention to Lila: how Lila was using English, how she responded to strategies and adaptations, and how she grew in knowledge and skills with content and with English during the year. This reflection connects to the use of Lila's home language, focusing on vocabulary, and providing a culturally sustaining learning environment.

### **Discussion**

Our research questions explored how expanded instructional practices supported the academic achievement of newcomer ELs, and how modeling and instructional support for teachers supported these expanded practices. The limitations of the study relate to its context and participants. The school where the study took place is a rural elementary school in a partner district with historically few EL students. The new situation of four emergent EL students in the classrooms of veteran teachers with little to no experience teaching ELs led to Alisa's collaboration with the teachers and the framing of the study.

While the specific context of this study is a limitation in terms of generalizability, it is also a strength in terms of yielding tangible practices and examples for teachers of emergent ELs, particularly in rural contexts with very small populations of EL students. We identified four key practices teachers implemented over the year in various ways to support emergent ELs and their academic achievement through informal assessment, teacher-created formative and summative assessments, and district assessments.

First, teachers came to *recognize and support students' home language* and to use intentional translation to engage students socially and to foster their academic success. Teachers observed some initial school and system administration barriers due to perceptions that allowing students to use their home language would be a "crutch" and hinder their acquisition of English. In fact, emergent ELs self-selected to limit and eventually discontinue home language support as their English proficiency developed. Second, teachers incorporated a range of *visual supports*, some of which the students created. Third, teachers *focused on students' vocabulary development* through these visual supports and other scaffolds like sentence frames. From providing images for key vocabulary terms to using bold text and other means to emphasize words and phrases, teachers designed ways to foster access to content concepts and augment their own and students' overall

metalinguistic knowledge of English. Fourth, and underlying all of the above, teachers *fostered positive learning environments* by creating inclusive, culturally responsive classrooms. At times, their culturally based instructional decisions were intentionally planned through work with Alisa and one another, and at times incidental, such as when Lila shared Thai currency. Through their individualized attention to these emergent ELs, teachers recognized some culturally incongruent aspects of content and instruction; from there, they were able to address and resolve inconsistencies.

The structure of iterative cycles of goal setting, observation and instructional support, and reflection allowed teachers to identify the instructional practices they were already using and to see how those practices supported newcomer ELs. With increased and intentional use of those practices along with a few additional modifications, the teachers were able to notice gains in focus areas and to see how their own shifts in practice supported students.

We highlight the power of a formative experiment methodological approach (Reinking & Bradley, 2004, 2008) in creating interventions responsive to a particular group of students in a particular context – in this case, emergent English learners in rural contexts. The goal of formative experiments is to bring about positive and pragmatic educational change, and this study documents pragmatic changes that resulted from the iterative and collaborative cycles that are the foundation of this method, as well as the utility of this approach in addressing professional development needs in changing contexts of all kinds – demographic and curricular. Additionally, this work informed the development of district guidelines for evaluating newcomer ELs' learning.

The modeling and coaching supported teachers in noticing, discussing, planning, and enacting practices to support emergent ELs within the larger regular class setting. The cycles of goal setting, observation and instructional support, and reflection provided teachers with opportunities to focus on specific aspects of instruction and learning environment. In February, during the second cycle, Dr. Allie recalled how she had been “super overwhelmed” when she first started to teach José and Leon. At the focus group in May, Dr. Allie commented, “So these students come in straight from another country. It’s very overwhelming and challenging. And just... feeling like I’m failing them because I don’t know where to start.” Alisa spent time with teachers in three iterative cycles discussing each student’s progress in English proficiency generally and each teacher’s curriculum specifically. Each teacher was able to identify focus areas for each emergent EL. Subsequently, teachers made instructional modifications like developing vocabulary lists, selecting phrases to emphasize, and pairing images with content concepts. Alisa suggested additional strategies to support each student. This clear focus on what to emphasize in instruction helped teachers’ intentionality.

Through modeling, Alisa progressed from initiating ideas to discussing teacher-initiated strategies and approaches. Over the course of the year, Alisa modeled and discussed practices with teachers. She also listened and acted as a sounding board for teachers as they progressed with knowledge of their emergent ELs and types of practices; in this way, teachers’ knowledge and skills were expanded, and teachers took ownership of their own understanding (Belans, 2020).

Ms. Hall commented in February that Alisa “showed me how to target words that I didn’t have to worry as much about her getting the whole sentence if we could just pull out *polygon*. Pick out the *polygon*.” In this example, Ms. Hall discussed how she focused on key vocabulary (and related content concepts) through modeling and support. In the same meeting, Ms. Hall told Alisa, “You made it very tangible.... It just took me back. I had no experience with it.” Ms. Hall repeated the idea of her novel experience teaching an EL for the first time after decades in the classroom. Ms. Hall came back to the importance of modeling in the focus group, when she said she started

the partnership was “a cry for help” and came to appreciate how she was able “to understand what we are allowed to do with instruction, what we aren’t allowed to do with instruction.” This modeling supported teachers in modifying aspects of instruction to support –and challenge– emergent EL students while following their standards-based curriculum and district guidelines for instruction and assessment.

This year-long collaboration between university researchers and experienced educators through a formative experiment approach was particularly beneficial when addressing novel educational circumstances. Teachers’ knowledge of curriculum, communities, resources, the school system, and the local community informed the pragmatic implementation of best practices and related to the need for policy updates and guidance to capitalize on the expertise of experienced educators to develop school-wide capacity in teaching a new student population.

### Conclusion

This research is meaningful in its practical outcomes. This year-long initiative allowed teachers at the focal elementary school to develop capacity, and also inspired the teachers, administrators, and school system leaders to develop guidelines for assessing and grading the work of emergent ELs in ways that provide accurate and meaningful information to students, parents, and administrators, largely as a result of this project. Collaboration with the district continued, resulting in the development of a newcomer kit with specific supports, like those used with the students in this study (cf. Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lucas et al., 2008; Paris, 2012). As the school and district continue to welcome emergent ELs, there are more and more teachers educating these students who can provide support to one another. The iterative cycles of goal setting, instructional supports, and reflection and implementation provide a model for teachers to continue.

The guidance document was developed through collaboration with these teachers. The district can now share this guidance document with other teachers in other schools; the document includes ideas for teaching ELs and evaluating their learning. Additionally, the teachers have gained the capacity to be teacher leaders to their colleagues who have ELs in their classes in future years. This research is also important in the way we frame continuing work with general education teachers of ELs in rural schools. While this study focused on elementary teachers, similar approaches could be adopted by teachers at the middle and secondary levels with appropriate modifications. The rural context is key to this research as we continue to expand practices for teaching ELs in schools where there have historically been few ELs and where numbers now call on general education teachers to modify their practices. The entire project united school and university partners to support students.

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