RESEARCH BRIEF

Empowering Teachers of English Language Learners

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Introduction

Empowering Teachers of English Language Learners (ETELL), a project sponsored by the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), U.S. Department of Education (Lara-Alecio, Irby, & Tong, 2016, PR/Award # T365Z160229), provides opportunities to in-service teachers working in bilingual education and English as a second language (ESL) programs. The main purpose is to implement professional development activities intended to improve instruction for English learners (ELs). ETELL assists educators working with ELs to meet high professional standards. The project continues building partnerships with local education agencies across Texas. Project ETELL prepares in-service teachers to be better equipped for working with culturally and linguistically diverse students, as well as to pass the Texas bilingual and ESL teacher certification examinations. Through Project ETELL, we continue the mission of the Center for Research & Development in Dual Language & Literacy Acquisition (CRDLLA) in implementing research that supports second language learners in schools to achieve academically through programs that promote the development of dual language and literacy skills.
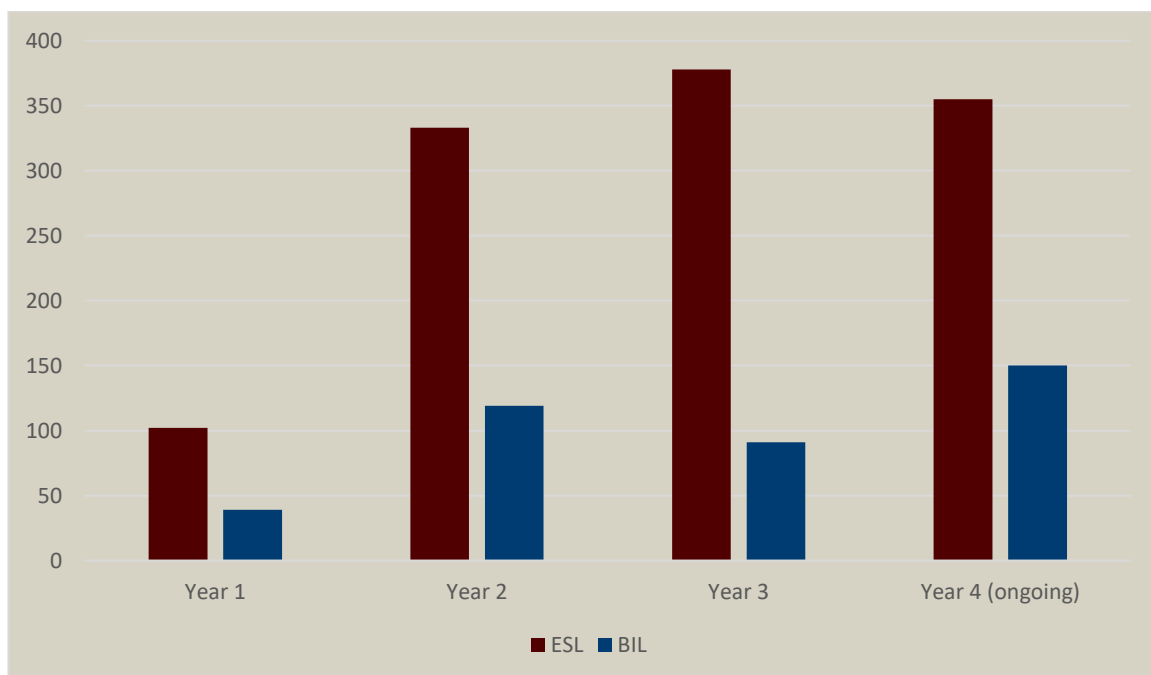

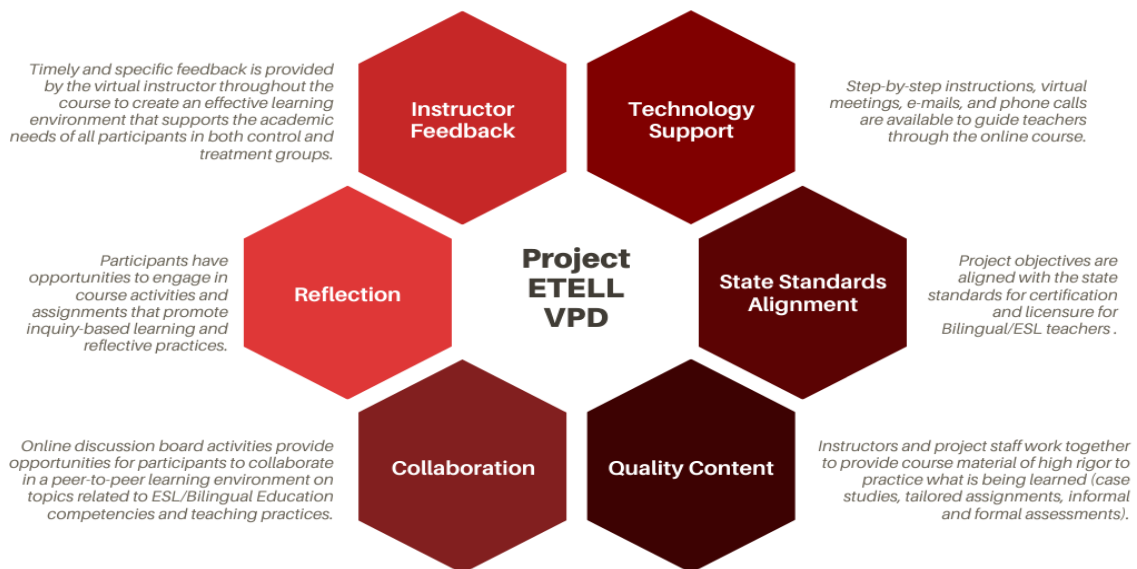*Figure 1.* Number of teachers serviced by Project ETELL.

What is ETELL?

The main purpose of this project is to increase the number of ESL- and bilingual-certified teachers in Texas through virtual professional development (VPD) and virtual mentoring/coaching (VMC). Efforts are focused on ensuring that in-service teachers receive high-quality training on the TExES ESL Supplemental Exam #154, TExES Bilingual Supplemental Exam #164, and Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test #190 (BTLPT-Spanish). Collectively, the VPD and VMC target the following areas: ESL and bilingual education state educator standards, best pedagogical strategies for teaching ELs, and improving current teaching practices.

Virtual Professional Development (VPD) via ETELL

Project ETELL serves in-service teachers seeking their ESL/bilingual certification in school districts across Texas. Obtaining an ESL certification requires passing the TExES ESL Supplemental Exam #154. Earning a bilingual education certification requires passing both the TExES Bilingual Education Supplemental Exam #164 and TExES Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test #190 (BTLPT-Spanish). Participants in the project receive VPD to help with their certification and become more knowledgeable about working with ELs. The three courses are offered:

- ESL Certification Prep Course — covers first and second language acquisition theories, approaches and methods for ESL, instructional activities that promote English language development, assessment of ELs, and methodologies (six-week course, 60 PD hours).
- Bilingual Certification Prep Course — covers first and second language acquisition theories, bilingual education program models and rationale, instructional strategies for bilingualism and biliteracy, content-area instruction, and assessment of ELs (six-week course, 60 PD hours).
- BTLPT Prep Course — covers test-taking skills for the listening, reading, oral, and written expression sections of the BTLPT (six-week course, 60 PD hours).

Timely and specific feedback is provided by the virtual instructor throughout the course to create an effective learning environment that supports the academic needs of all participants in both control and treatment groups.

Instructor Feedback

Technology Support

Step-by-step instructions, virtual meetings, e-mails, and phone calls are available to guide teachers through the online course.

Participants have opportunities to engage in course activities and assignments that promote inquiry-based learning and reflective practices.

Reflection

Project ETELL VPD

State Standards Alignment

Project objectives are aligned with the state standards for certification and licensure for Bilingual/ESL teachers.

Online discussion board activities provide opportunities for participants to collaborate in a peer-to-peer learning environment on topics related to ESL/Bilingual Education competencies and teaching practices.

Collaboration

Quality Content

Instructors and project staff work together to provide course material of high rigor to practice what is being learned (case studies, tailored assignments, informal and formal assessments).
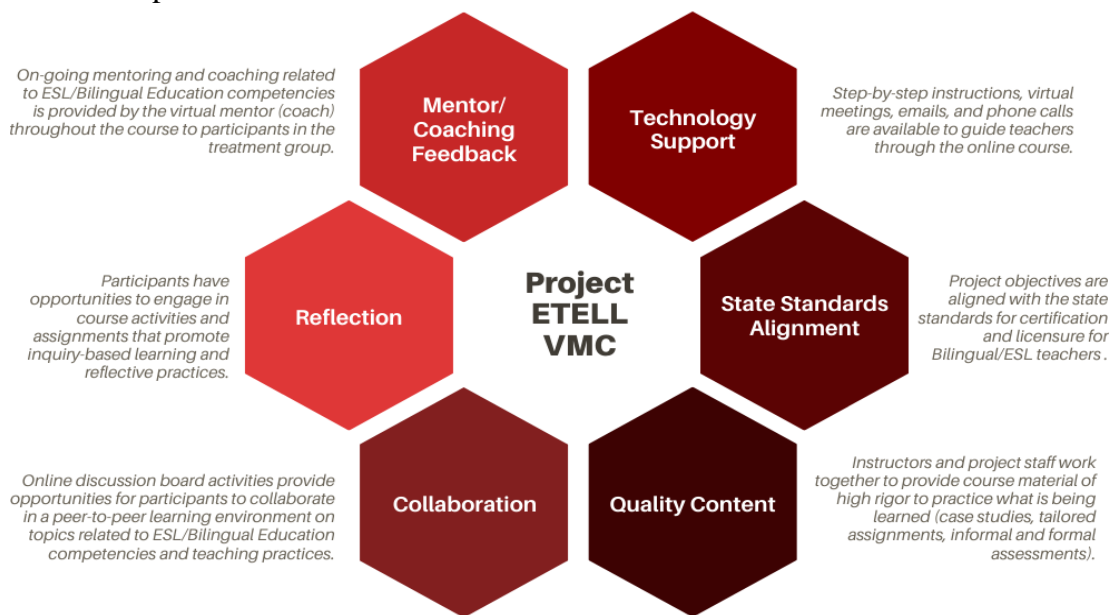
The courses are structured for participants to complete in six weeks and focus on the different teaching competencies connected with the corresponding TExES exam(s). Participants interested in obtaining their bilingual certification, who have not passed either of the required exams, begin with the Bilingual Certification Prep Course and then follow with the BTLPT Prep Course. Otherwise, they may take the course for the exam they have not yet passed to fulfill the bilingual certification requirement. The BTLPT course modules include Spanish language proficiency exercises in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Throughout the course,

instructors provide collaborative opportunities through discussion forums for participants to exchange experiences and grow together week by week. Teachers in the ESL and Bilingual Certification Prep Courses receive a tablet and textbooks in order to support them throughout the course. Teachers enrolled in the BTLPT Prep Course also receive a headset.

The courses are aligned with the standards and competencies set by the State Board of Education (SBEC) and the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Resources and information included in the course are constantly monitored in order to keep participants up to date on the latest research. To ensure excellent instruction and VPD, all instructors are highly qualified, possessing an ESL or bilingual educator certification and a minimum of five years classroom teaching experience. Also, online instructors are highly experienced in the areas of ESL/bilingual education, second language acquisition theory, and pedagogy associated with English language acquisition. Participants have access to the instructional materials for up to six months in order to prepare them for the exam. Teachers are encouraged to take their certification exam(s) as soon as they are able to upon finishing the course.

Virtual Mentoring and Coaching (VMC) via ETELL

Learning is a social practice that requires input from outside sources. Professional growth can occur through colleagues, book studies, workshops as well as teacher classroom observations. Participants are paired with seasoned teaching staff to provide an instructional model as well as mentoring and feedback to encourage professional growth. This type of model is provided to the participants in the treatment group by Project ETELL through the VMC component.

Project ETELL participants come from different content areas, grade levels, and instructional abilities. As they progress through the weekly activities, participants in the treatment are expected to submit five fifteen-minute classroom observation videos for their assigned mentor to review. Even though they do not receive mentoring and coaching, control participants are also expected to submit pre-and-post observation videos. All observation videos are recorded via an online video-conferencing software (LogMeIn GoToMeeting), and then uploaded to a secure cloud server at the university.

Assigned mentors are highly qualified bilingual and ESL classroom teachers who are working toward completing their doctoral degree in the areas of educational psychology, bilingual education, or curriculum and instruction. Virtual mentors are also highly experienced in the areas of ESL/bilingual education, research-based effective teaching strategies, second language acquisition theories, as well as pedagogy associated with English

language acquisition. Mentors provide a qualitative review for three of the observation videos using a rubric aligned with the state ESL or bilingual standards and research-based effective pedagogical practices.

The virtual mentor and participant set a time to meet to discuss the analysis as well as areas of pedagogical enhancement in the lesson. Following the submission of a preliminary pre-observation video, the Project ETELL mentor and participant schedule three VMC sessions to review the submitted observation videos. These mentoring and coaching sessions are also recorded via GoToMeeting.

The first mentoring session begins where the assigned Project ETELL mentor sets the stage for the discussion by assisting the participating teacher in developing background knowledge in the standards areas from the observation video. The mentor then shares ideas and recommendations that the participant can implement in future classroom lessons. In the third session, the participant will have received a solid overview of the ESL or bilingual standards with coaching feedback, as well as had sufficient time to incorporate them into the classroom learning experience. During this time, the participant and the mentor engage in reflective discussion about instructional situations while also brainstorming new ideas on how to potentially enhance overall classroom instruction. At the conclusion of the mentoring sessions, the participant submits a post-observation video to demonstrate how his/her instructional and pedagogical techniques have evolved.

Virtual Teacher Classroom Observations via ETELL

All videos for both treatment and control participants groups are analyzed utilizing a validated observational instrument, Transitional Bilingual Observation Protocol Instrument (TBOP). The theoretical model for TBOP originated with the Transitional Bilingual Pedagogical (TBP) theory, which identifies specific goals first published by Lara-Alecio and Parker (1994). Classroom instruction is analyzed by identifying the integration of theoretical concepts in bilingual education, how adjustments are made to enhance student learning, the use and analysis of data, the use of formative evaluation and how formative evaluations are used to identify and enhance student achievement (Lara-Alecio & Parker, 1994). Bruce, Lara-Alecio et al. (1997) developed this theory into TBOP. This protocol requires interrater reliability among evaluators to ensure each pre- and post-observation undergo review using TBOP with fidelity. The analysis quantifies the quality of classroom instruction and the use of language during instruction.

Videos submitted as part of the VMC component are also analyzed using qualitative measures. There are two types of data collected from the mentor/coaching videos. The instructor's submission(s) are transcribed using a qualitative analysis program, NVivo, to measure trends and patterns. The second data type comes from the mentor analysis of the observation video and the interaction added to the feedback form from the mentoring session. Data from both sources can be compared to identified teacher growth, processing of knowledge, as well as accurately identifying how the lessons demonstrate the principles of language learning and acquisition.

The main goals of the VMC component are to support the teachers' preparation for the TExES ESL or bilingual exam, as well as enhance their pedagogical knowledge of ELs. As a result of the VMC experience, many participants become more reflective in their teaching practices.

How Well Did VPD and VMC Work for In-Service Teachers?

The VPD and VMC were developed by the PIs to address the needs of teachers working with ELs. Both virtual modalities provided practitioners with the flexibility to enhance their professional growth regarding ELs and expand their knowledge through the varied perspectives of their peers. By providing teachers with case studies, discussion forums, and presentations, the project offered teachers a space to become more proactive in their learning by sharing and building their pedagogical content knowledge. Subsequently, we present preliminary findings on participants' perceptions regarding the quality of VPD and VMC.

In-service Teachers' Perceptions on the Quality of the VPD

A five-point Likert scale from "1=strongly disagree" to "5=strongly agree" was implemented to evaluate the quality of VPD. The teacher participants evaluated the quality of the VPD as displayed in Table 1:

a. The participants' ratings regarding VPD ranged from 4.39 to 4.61.
b. The majority of participants strongly agreed that the VPD was structured and efficient.
c. The majority of participants strongly agreed (65%) and agreed (27%) that they felt comfortable teaching ELs post VPD.
d. The majority of participants strongly agreed (66%) and agreed (27%) that they learned many new strategies and methods to teach ELs.
e. The majority of participants strongly agreed (63%) and agreed (24%) that they felt prepared to work with ELs.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Perceptions of the Overall Quality of the VPD

Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)
The course materials were presented online in an organized manner.	4.61	0.59	65%	31%
I understood what to do in each lesson module.	4.58	0.54	55%	38%
The visual interface (the look of the course--colors, buttons, etc.) was appealing.	4.39	0.66	47%	46%
It was easy to find course content, resources, and materials inside the eCampus course system.	4.40	0.71	41%	41%
The instructions were clearly written.	4.55	0.55	57%	40%
The eCampus course system was easy to use.	4.42	0.68	46%	42%
I feel comfortable teaching ELs.	4.55	0.70	65%	27%
I know many strategies and methods to teach ELs.	4.58	0.67	66%	27%
I feel well prepared to work with ELs.	4.49	0.78	63%	24%

In-service Teachers' Perceptions on the Quality of the VMC

A five-point Likert scale ranging from "1=strongly disagree" to "5=strongly agree" was implemented to evaluate the quality of VMC. The teacher participants evaluated five elements of the VMC. The majority of the participants strongly agreed that the VMC was beneficial (see Table 2):

A. The majority of participants strongly agreed (69%) the VMC met their overall expectations.
B. The majority of participants strongly agreed (84%) the mentor provided helpful and constructive feedback related to their instruction.
C. The majority of participants strongly agreed (85%) the mentor was well versed and knowledgeable in the area of ESL and bilingual education strategies.
D. The majority of participants strongly agreed (73%) that they felt their instruction improved as a result of the VMC.

E. The majority of participants strongly agreed (62%) the observation tablet and GoToMeeting were easy to use virtual mentoring.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Perceptions of the Overall Quality of the VMC

Questionnaire Items	Mean	*SD*	Strongly Agree (%)
The virtual mentoring met my expectations overall.	4.09	1.39	69%
The mentor provided helpful and constructive feedback on my instruction.	4.55	1.07	84%
The mentor was well versed and knowledgeable about the ESL/bilingual strategies.	4.58	1.04	85%
I was able to improve my instruction as a result of virtual mentoring.	4.22	1.30	73%
The observation tablet and GoToMeeting were easy to use for virtual mentoring.	3.94	1.39	62%

Principal's Perceptions of the Impact of ETELL

A five-point Likert scale from "1=strongly disagree" to "5=strongly agree" was implemented to evaluate the quality of VMC as perceived by teacher participants' principals. The principals evaluated five elements of the project. The majority of the principals strongly agreed and agreed that the program was efficacious and impactful (see Table 3):

   a. The majority of principals strongly agreed (42%) and agreed (43%) that their teachers spoke highly of the program.
   b. The majority of principals strongly agreed (14%) and agreed (63%) that they noticed a positive difference in teacher instruction when working with ELs.
   c. The majority of principals strongly agreed (24%) and agreed (56%) that they noticed positive differences in teachers' confidence and ability to work with ELs.
   d. The majority of principals strongly agreed (48%) and agreed (40%) that they would recommend this program to their other teachers or to other principals for their teachers.
   e. The majority of principals strongly agreed (37%) and agreed (52%) that overall they rate the program as effective.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Principals' Perceptions of Project ETELL

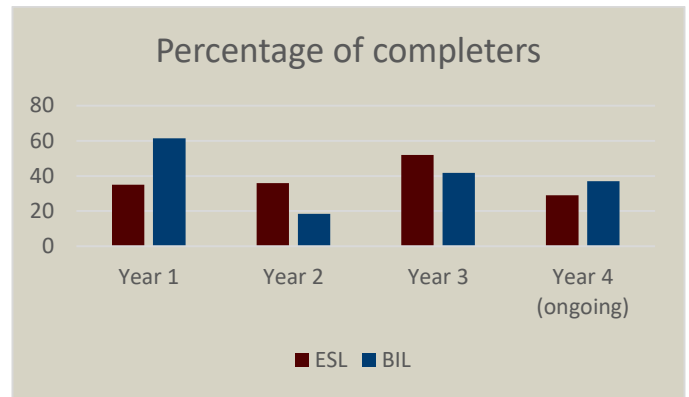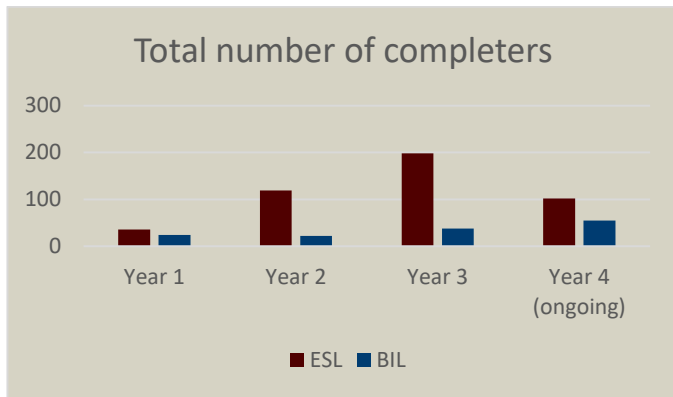| Questionnaire Items	Mean	*SD*	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)
My teacher(s) spoke highly of the program.	4.35	.68	42%	43%
I noticed a positive difference in my teacher's or teachers' instruction in working with English learners.	3.95	.61	14%	63%
I noticed a positive difference in my teacher's or teachers' confidence and ability to work with English learners.	3.99	.93	24%	56%
I would recommend this program to my other teachers or to other principals for their teachers.	4.36	.81	48%	40%
Overall, I would rate the program as effective.	4.32	.63	37%	52%

VPD and VMC Enrollment Steps

Through recruitment efforts, Project ETELL has shared with many Texas districts the project's purposes and goals, and led to the development of a relationship with the district. Once a relationship has been established with the district, teachers receive registration information to begin the enrollment process. The data collected from the registration forms is compiled, sorted, and sent for random assignment to condition by Johns Hopkins University (JHU), external evaluator, to determine the treatment (VPD and VMC) and control (VPD) groups.

JHU randomly assigns participants to control or treatment groups to ensure there is intervention fidelity in this randomized controlled trial (RCT) study. Once participant rosters are set, Project ETELL staff begin the process of populating eCampus courses for both treatment and control groups. Treatment group participants are also assigned mentors. Once the participants are grouped and assigned to their courses, they take part in an orientation to the course as well as introductions between participants and instructors.

While the control group begins engaging with the course, the treatment group attends an additional orientation via live webinar, where they receive information regarding the mentor observation videos they must submit. During the orientation, the participants are introduced to program mentors, requirements of the mentoring and coaching sessions, and guidelines for the observation videos. Frequently asked questions are discussed. The purpose of this webinar is not only to share additional information, but also to promote buy-in from teacher participants by answering questions and providing perspective on the additional activities they are being asked to complete in through the VMC component.

Years 1-4 Statewide Impact of Project ETELL

Project ETELL has impacted over 1,500 in-service teachers across 94 school districts for Years 1-4. The participants have come from over 800 campuses across Texas that include rural, urban, and suburban communities. Below is a breakdown of the enrollment and completion numbers for Years 1-4.

Figures 2 and 3. Number and percentage of teachers completing the program.

Year 1 (September 1, 2016 - August 31, 2017) served as the pilot year for program implementation. As a result, there were 102 in-service teacher participants enrolled in the program and were active in both the VPD and VMC components. Of these 102 participants, 36 completed the program and 14 passed the ESL/bilingual certification exam(s).

In Year 2 (September 1, 2017 - August 31, 2018), 452 in-service teacher participants were enrolled in the program and actively participated in the VPD and VMC components. Of these 452 participants, 141 completed the program and 84 passed the ESL/bilingual certification exam(s). Due to the impact of Hurricane Harvey, many of the participants received extensions to complete or re-enroll in the program at a later date.

During Year 3 (September 1, 2018 - August 31, 2019), 469 in-service teacher participants were enrolled in the program and actively participated in the VPD and VMC components. Of these 469 participants, 236 completed the program and 99 passed the ESL/bilingual certification exam(s). We are still awaiting the submission of several exam score reports from teacher participants.

Currently, in Year 4 (September 1, 2019 - August 31, 2020), Project ETELL enrolled 505 in-service teachers who have been actively participating in the VPD and VMC. Of these 505 participants, 204 completed the program, while we are awaiting the submission of their ESL/bilingual exam scores. Due to COVID-19, many of the participants received extensions to complete the program at a later time and will register to take the certification exams in the coming months.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in the Table 1 results, based on the VPD component, teacher participants were able to increase their knowledge in the following areas: second language acquisition theories, best teaching practices for English learners, pedagogical strategies that promote language and literacy development, content-area instruction, assessment of ELs, ESL and bilingual education state educator standards. Virtual instructors continuously provided participants with timely feedback on course activities that included assignments, discussion forums, lectures, presentations, and assessments. These course activities promoted inquiry-based learning and reflective practices for all participants. The majority of teacher participants in the treatment group developed a more thorough understanding of the ESL and bilingual education standards along with effective pedagogical practices for ELs. Through mentoring and coaching sessions, participants engaged with mentors in reflective discussion on current teaching practices and standards. Experienced mentors also provided critical feedback on how to improve overall teaching practices and classroom instruction. To date, we have serviced over 1,500 in-service teachers in Texas through this grant. Also, we have obtained over 1,000 pre- and post-observation and mentoring videos from teacher participants.

In-service teachers who completed the program developed a strong foundation in ESL/bilingual education competencies, quality instruction, classroom pedagogy and research-based teaching practices, and reflective teaching via the VPD and/or VMC. Through the VPD and VMC, we continue building teacher capacity to support ELs in campuses and geographic regions statewide. In-service teachers who complete the program can apply new skills and knowledge in their classrooms and thus impact academic achievement levels of all students, including English learners. By way of this federally funded project, we continue to impact education for students in the state of Texas as we provide online preparation, professional development, and learning opportunities to teachers of ELs. Through the Project ETELL initiative, we are able to provide solutions to remedy the state and national shortages of ESL- and bilingual-certified teachers across Texas and the United States.

For more information about Project ETELL, please visit: https://crdlla.tamu.edu/etell/

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