

# The Covid Pandemic Transforms Online Education for Diverse English Language Learners

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**Abstract:** The global pandemic is significantly transforming education throughout the world particularly for diverse English Language Learners and their families who face multiple challenges. Students and educators who have transitioned to online teaching face additional concerns. Online teaching experts offer advice on designing support for students and point out resources to assist in the transition to remote teaching (McMurtrie, 2020). Younger children, especially diverse English learners, may be confused by the technology itself and have to rely on parents who are employed, or teachers on the other side of the computer monitor, to guide them. According to Darby, the design and sequence of content and learning activities in both realms should be methodical, systematic and purposeful (Darby, 2020). Creative educational approaches are necessary to challenge students and positively impact their learning. This manuscript will follow up on identified concerns and issues and discuss the ways that passionate educators and an innovative curriculum take on numerous dimensions focusing on a positive learning experience to empower learners and challenge them to excel. Four key areas are the focus of this discussion: 1) Connecting with all students 2) Addressing the challenges of remote learning 3) Information Communication Technology (ICT) and web-based resources 4) Ways to keep students motivated and challenged to high ideals (Boothe, 2021). Covid-19 has created a digital divide that has left millions at a disadvantage and the internet is assuming a critical role in communicating with our students (Porumbescu G., 2020). English Language Learners (ELLs) are impacted in three directions as they struggle to adapt to online learning platforms, tackle learning English, and master transdisciplinary content instruction particularly in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields.

**Key words:** online education, pandemic, English Language Learners

## 1. Introduction

As one new variant of Covid after the other continues to lengthen the pandemic and extend the challenges to education, students, parents, and educators are being continually tested to deal with the challenges that are coming their way and the unprecedented changes. This is even more significant for diverse English Language Learners who are doing their best to grapple with the multifaceted dynamics of learning English and tackling STEM

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content area courses in the online environment. Students are often making up for lost time or spending considerably more time than necessary just trying to deal with the technology and access the material that is needed. For English Language Learners in the online environment, a multiplicity of challenges must be met and resolved in order for learning to take place. To sustain and increase the knowledge and skills required to succeed, multiple strategies must be addressed to engage and encourage students and their families to take advantage of the learning opportunities available. In her article, “Pandemic Learning was Tough on Everyone: Bilingual Students Faced Additional Challenges”, Tamez-Robledo points out that in a dual language school in Pharr, Texas, teachers are making up for months lost to the pandemic when students could have been making greater strides with their second language (Tamez-Robledo, 2022). Seventy-seven percent of the students in Graciela Garcia Elementary located close to the Mexican border are emergent bilinguals and many have missed valuable time from their educational experiences. She further points out that “It’s an intricate dance to balance instruction with 7-year-olds’ attention spans. And it’s a dance that requires teachers to have control over the learning environment: something that was sorely lacking during virtual learning” (Tamez-Robledo, 2022). Depending upon the age of the students, a unique set of dynamics presents itself and learning challenges are compounded by the technology and skills required to conquer English language learning and core curriculum subjects.

## **2. Objectives**

The objectives of this pilot study focus on addressing four key areas.

- 1) Connecting with all students
- 2) Addressing the challenges of remote learning
- 3) Information Communication Technology (ICT) and web-based resources
- 4) Ways to keep students motivated and challenged to high ideals

Each area will be considered individually along with its impact on online educational opportunities for English Language Learners. An innovative curriculum and strategic planning coupled with participation in remote learning will be presented and the outcomes revealed (Boothe, 2021).

## **3. Four Key Areas**

### **3.1 Connecting With All Students**

To reach out to all students in the online classroom, particularly English Language Learners in STEM fields, it is crucial to connect with them and relate positively. Often it becomes difficult to cultivate relationships and maintain connections in a virtual setting. Reach Out Schools from Australia (Anonymous, 2022) makes several valuable suggestions for educators including using video to keep virtual lessons engaging while adding a personal touch to demonstrate a sincere interest in the student. By building relationships and demonstrating your personal world and interests will help to engage students and pique their interest in learning. Some students may feel isolated and building a sense of community by involving all students and encouraging them to relate positively to their peers is extremely helpful (Anonymous, 2022). Parents are particularly challenged as they attempt to balance work responsibilities with family and educational needs. Often younger children are left in the care of older children. Teachers who work with students in the early grades are attempting to assist students with computer skills and educate them simultaneously. If parents are not available to assist younger children with computer skills, or do not have the English language skills required to participate in their child’s education, it becomes

increasingly difficult to make progress in English teaching and learning. Financial and economic issues are deeply impacting students' success. Does the family have adequate resources for food and clothing? Are the children hungry or do they have access to food banks and supplies? Does the family have the resources required to access the internet? Are there safe places that students can go to study, yet still social distance and meet Covid guidelines? Many schools provide computers for students to take home. Are those computers in good working order? Who can repair computers when they malfunction? For students who live in areas where the schools do not provide computers for home use, do families have the resources to purchase the necessary technology? Older and advanced students who are enrolled in coursework in STEM fields may need tutoring and instruction beyond the ability or knowledge level of their parents or friends. These are all relevant questions that have a powerful impact on the learning environment and must be addressed along with the educational interests of the students. Ongoing communication and follow up is necessary to relate to older students and ensure that they are engaged in the learning process. Independent learning is not always easy for all students and some need particular attention to make sure that they are organized, stay on task, and fulfill the requirements of their assignments and time frame for coursework and online lessons. Successfully learning another language requires ongoing practice and dedication. Educators are doing all that they can to meet the needs of students and their learning expectations. By making every effort to reach students and families with relevant activities and learning strategies, strong connections can be forged from the virtual classroom. Fortunately, many schools are returning to hybrid and face-to-face opportunities for students that will reinvigorate their educational experience.

### **3.2 Addressing the Challenges of Remote Learning**

In the United States, and particularly in the states of Idaho and Georgia, there is a shortage of teachers qualified to work with emergent bilingual students who can focus on English language development (Idaho State Department of Education, 2020). Educators need beneficial professional development to help them develop a quality online curriculum and make informed decisions regarding the transition of coursework to the virtual platform. Depending on the age of the student and access to technology, the challenges can be even greater. Young students need considerable assistance staying on track and accessing the online material necessary to increase their achievement. Many educators are ill-prepared to address technology concerns and online methodology simultaneously. In order to learn English, it is beneficial for students to engage in conversation and collaborate with one another. STEM coursework can be enhanced through group interaction and face-to-face lab work and field experiences. Although there are online group activities and break out rooms for discussion, it is sometimes difficult for educators to accomplish their objectives with English Language Learners who desperately need peer interaction. Dedicated and energetic educators who devote additional time and energy while persevering to meet the needs of their students and the demands of online education are successful in spite of the many challenges that they are facing. For many educators, this means devoting considerable amounts of time and energy to tailoring curriculum and instructional materials to meet specific needs of students who are all working at a variety of levels. Students enter the classroom with varying English language skills and abilities. Some students have a strong English language background and an excellent education from the country in which they previously lived. Other students have limited school experiences and not only need to learn English, but also address basic skills in a variety of other subject areas. This can become overwhelming for students who are trying to conquer language and the material required to learn a multiplicity of subjects that seem to be cascading upon them all at once.

### **3.3 Information Communication and Web-based Resources**

A plethora of curricular materials for the online classroom has been developed at every grade and age level to revolutionize the learning experience. Software and operating systems are designed to make technology available for all educators and students. A variety of telecommunications products including multimedia, web-based activities, and videotapes are available on the web for distribution to schools and classrooms. All of these materials require time and money to implement. Outstanding interactive resources exist to challenge students and motivate them to excel. Among these resources are videos, games, personal teacher websites, activities in the STEM fields, and printable resources. Free lists of teaching tools are available to assist teachers transitioning to virtual classrooms. There is a wide variety of products that educators can access to captivate students. Numerous web sites exist to support teachers in designing online classroom activities appropriate for the age and ability of their students. These digital resources are certainly accessible to help teachers stay efficient and reach out to their students with exceptional teaching tools, yet the advantages and disadvantages of the online classroom are still evident despite these learning materials. The barriers to incorporating web-based resources are being addressed, but some students and families still do not have access to the technology required to utilize online learning and engage in virtual classrooms. In order to reduce and eliminate these barriers, it is necessary to continue to reach out and make every attempt to meet the needs of students, parents and educators to ensure that they have the tools necessary to successfully engage in online education and virtual classrooms. As mentioned above, English Language Learners have a particularly unique set of requirements combined with the ongoing challenges of online education and transdisciplinary content or STEM subject specific language.

### **3.4 Ways to Keep Students Motivated and Challenged to High Ideals**

The online learning environment presents a unique situation for many students, particularly English Language Learners and their teachers. Teachers need to do all that they can to keep the classroom interactive and engage students in listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. Previously, face-to-face instruction allowed educators to forge strong relationships with their students that were reinforced by daily discussions that were formal and informal. Just the act of greeting students as they enter the classroom and asking them how their day is going promotes positive interaction and the opportunity to understand their feelings and interests. Now educators are challenged as they attempt to engage their students through video conferencing and various types of online synchronous and asynchronous instruction. By encouraging collaboration, students are apt to feel more involved and part of the virtual classroom setting. When students are accountable through quizzes and challenging activities, they will tend to feel more ownership for their own education. Worksheets, simulations, games and activities specifically designed for use in English language classrooms will provide an opportunity to actively engage students in learning and challenge them to high ideals. Additionally, content area and STEM materials will enhance students' vocabularies and understanding of English speaking, reading and writing. By asking students for feedback and giving them a voice, they will have a vested interest in their educational outcomes. They should always receive feedback following a formative or summative assessment activity. Then students should be rewarded for their accomplishments and receive positive reinforcement as they demonstrate progress. Because parents and families are a crucial component of every child's learning experience, ongoing engagement and involvement with families is crucial. The situation with the global pandemic has had a tremendous impact on all of us. If students feel comfortable discussing these challenges, they can certainly be a part of the lesson plan and language learning. Students need to be heard and feel comfortable discussing the situations that they are facing at

school and at home.

#### **4. Discussion**

To increase the achievement of English Language Learners during this global pandemic, strategies must be implemented to provide a quality education for online learners in a virtual classroom setting. Preparing educators to provide the best education possible for these students is necessary for their success and the wellbeing of their families and the community. Simultaneously, educators need to be supported in numerous ways as they struggle to move their coursework to an online setting. Often, they do not have the technology skills to grapple with such a huge undertaking nor do their students have these skills. Therefore, the responsibilities are duplicated to become more than teaching and learning, but to expect that all of those involved will increase their technology skills to rise to the demands of the occasion is quite an endeavor. When educators are frustrated because they are having difficulty getting the technology to work properly or locating missing students who are distracted and not paying attention, the stress and strain of the situation spills over to the students and negatively impacts everyone. An innovative curriculum and support with creative teaching tools is extremely helpful as teachers struggle to implement best practices and encourage their students to excel. Not only are English language skills important but assisting students with the expectations of STEM and transdisciplinary coursework is essential, particularly for older students in secondary schools and at the university level. Prior to the pandemic, teachers had the opportunity to participate in professional development programs where collaboration, reflection, models and modeling provided the support that they needed to strengthen their instructional practices. As the situation with the global pandemic bombarded all of us, they did not receive the professional development required to address all of their concerns regarding online teaching and learning but were forced to adapt as best they could to the ongoing changes and move to online coursework. Their accomplishments are admirable and numerous educators saw this situation as an opportunity to support their students and make a difference in the life of each student and his or her family. Teachers certainly need positive reinforcement and expressions of appreciation for all that they are tackling and accomplishing. Another critical aspect to the education of students relates to the affective filters that are challenging their learning. Certainly, there were myriad intervening variables impacting teaching and learning at all levels in each unique subject area and classroom. Teachers are becoming counselors and attempting to address the social and emotional needs that their students are encountering. Often, they are ill-prepared to deal with student issues focusing on critically ill family members or even death. Meanwhile, teachers themselves are in need of support and understanding as they attempt to balance their careers and their own family responsibilities. During the pandemic, teachers have also lost the opportunity to visit and discuss strengths and opportunities with fellow educators in an informal setting such as the faculty lounge or school campus. Although video conferencing platforms such as Zoom provide the opportunity for online meetings and discussions, the face-to-face experiences and social interaction that has previously been a valuable component of our lifestyle is missing.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Recent events linked to the global pandemic have had a tremendous impact on all of us and disrupted traditional educational experiences. We are aware that education is at a critical juncture and vital for workforce development and economic prosperity (West, 2013). We must embrace new insights and take advantage of educational approaches offered in the online setting so that students can explore and expand their acquisition of

knowledge as we move courses online. English Language Learners who are grappling with myriad educational responsibilities, STEM content fields, and the challenges associated with the virtual classroom setting are particularly at risk. They will need to face multiple obstacles and adjust to the changes that they are confronting. Positive outcomes have surfaced through all of the tragedy and isolation and provide an overarching opportunity to impact success and serve as a catalyst for the expansion of learning. Parents and community members have weighed in heavily on the impact and quality of transitioning coursework to an online platform. In an attempt to afford innovative and equitable education for English Language Learners, educators have gone beyond the call of duty to meet the challenges of a quality curriculum coupled with the efforts required to transition classes to online learning. This experience has been life-changing for students, educators, and their families. Schools are slowly transitioning back to face-to-face or hybrid instruction to alleviate some of the challenges, yet the impact of the Covid pandemic is far reaching. Although there have been numerous concerns regarding lost learning time, students and their teachers can be encouraged by the student performance that was strengthened by the efforts of many to rise to the occasion and provide the best education possible for all students.

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