

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID PANDEMIC ON ONLINE EDUCATION FOR DIVERSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

The global pandemic is significantly impacting students throughout the world. We are aware that education is vital for workforce development and economic prosperity (West, 2013). The Covid-19 numbers continue to skyrocket and it is estimated that over 300 million students worldwide are experiencing an education disrupted by this pandemic. Students and educators who are forced to rely on online teaching have even more challenges. Online teaching experts offer advice on designing support for students and point out resources to assist in the transition to remote teaching (McMurtrie, 2020). Parents and community members weigh in heavily on the impact and quality of transitioning coursework to an online platform. Children in earlier grades are often confused by the technology itself and have to rely on parents who may be working, or teachers on the other side of the computer monitor, to guide them. 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. According to Darby, the design and sequence of content and learning activities in both realms should be methodical, systematic and purposeful (Darby, 2020). This presentation and manuscript will discuss the ways that an innovative curriculum takes on numerous dimensions with the ability to revolutionize the learning experience, captivate and empower learners and challenge them to excel. Creative examples are provided focusing on: 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. 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). Particular concern has been expressed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who are faced with the challenges of learning English and simultaneously shifting to online instruction. Not only do these students, but also their parents, need clear and specific guidelines regarding the information and opportunities to strengthen their English skills and fully participate in the educational experience. Often translation of written communication in a variety of languages is needed to guide students in accessing technology and participate in remote learning.

Keywords: *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 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 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).

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.

3. Four key areas

3.1. Connecting with all students

In order to reach out to all students in the online classroom, particularly English Language Learners, 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). By making every effort to reach students and families with relevant activities and learning strategies, strong connections can be forged from the virtual classroom.

3.2. Addressing the challenges of remote learning

In the United States, and particularly in the State of Idaho, 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 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. Although there are online group activities and break out rooms for discussion, this is sometimes difficult for educators to accomplish 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.

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. All 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 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. 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.

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. 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. By asking them 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 have a voice and feel comfortable discussing the situations that they are facing at school and at home.

4. Discussion

In order to increase the achievement of English Language Learners during this global pandemic, crucial strategies must be implemented in order 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 tantamount to 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. An innovative curriculum and support with creative teaching tools is extremely helpful a teachers struggle to implement best practices and encourage their students to excel. 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. 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.

5. Conclusion

Recent events linked to the global pandemic have had a tremendous effect on all of us and disrupted traditional educational experiences. 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. In an attempt to afford quality 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. 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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