Moving Elementary School English Learners Forward: Understanding How COVID-era School Disruptions Impacted English Learner Education

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Moving Elementary School English Learners Forward: Understanding How COVID-era School Disruptions Impacted English Learner Education

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Elementary Education

Bridgewater State University

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Introduction

COVID-19 has caused disruptions to the education of millions of school-age children around the world, leading to changes in how this system is run. One result of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States was a significant loss of learning. During the fall of 2020, a nonprofit NWEA looked at students’ performance in reading and math assessments. Compared to their scores in the fall of 2019, the 2020 students scored 5 to 10 percentile points lower than their 2019 counterparts (North 2021). COVID-19 changed a lot of lives, from losing parents, sisters, and brothers, to income, food, and housing. But one of the biggest changes was that the world’s students were locked out of their classrooms. In the United States, this was particularly difficult for students that were learning English. When the pandemic hit, these students lost time. They lost time speaking English in conversation, one on one time with specialists, visuals, and support from their school or their teachers. This causes English Language Learners (ELL) to fall behind their native English-speaking peers creating a gap between these two types of students. Currently, schools and educators are working to make up for these gaps in learning.

In the first semester of my honors thesis, I looked at how big events like COVID-19 affect non-heritage English speakers. Through my research, I was able to compile a literature review to see what challenges ELL students face, and how we could overcome those difficulties. This then led me this semester to look at what strategies could better assist ELL students in the classroom. To understand how teachers are working with students in classrooms now I interviewed teachers and observed
classrooms to find out what strategies, technology, and resources could help ELL students.

**Literature Review**

Throughout the pandemic, there has been a lot of research done on how well students have been affected by the pandemic. From there I started going through all these articles and compiled them into a literature review. These were a few of the articles that I found to be the best for my research. The first article centers around the 2020 and 2021 schools, where students lost a lot of time in school and lost learning. This article was able to show how the lack of internet access affected learning and some solutions to overcome this loss in learning (North, 2021). Then I looked at an article that focused on how online school is hard for non ELL students and how it affects ELL students. They talked about the struggles that English learners face with online learning, for example not having a computer or wifi and how towns overcame this (Richards, 2020). Next, I looked at an article that talked about how online learning worsened the divide between students. In the article, the author talks about the challenges that all students faced during the pandemic, for example, food insecurity, housing, and death (North, 2020). Therefore I looked at articles that discuss how time away from classrooms was handled in other big disasters like Hurricane Katrina. This article also gave some helpful strategies on how to better assist ELL students (Hill, 2021). Next was an article that centered on how the Covid-19 pandemic changed education. This article continued to discuss the gap in learning and how online learning will affect students. Lastly, I looked at an article that just focused on how the pandemic affected ELL students, which showed important ways to better help assist ELL students
in the classroom (Parker, 2020). There were a few more articles that I looked at; these just were the ones that ended up being most helpful in my research and were able to cover a great deal of important information. Together all of these articles helped me to gain insight into how ELL students were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Hurricane Katrina**

Through my research, I found articles discussing life-changing disasters like hurricane Katrina, how they handled the disruption to their school year, and the loss of learning the ELL students had to overcome. In early August of 2005, the New Orleans schools closed abruptly with a few schools that were on higher ground being able to start again in early 2006. But most of the children weren’t back in school until the following school year or even later. These students had suffered hurricane-related trauma or went to school for a few months in other states like Texas. Most were out of school until they returned to New Orleans (Hill 2021). Here students were missing out on a lot more learning than they did with the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, when students came back to school educators had to test the students to find their reading, writing, and math levels. Then they would organize the students by readiness rather than age (Hill 2021). Two different strategies were developed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina regarding learning loss. The first was to have students redo everything that they had missed. However, this approach did not work very well as students got bored doing work that wasn’t at their grade level. The second option became, “The best approach, they argue, is to keep kids at grade level but give them specific help when they face an obstacle due to something they missed, a process sometimes called targeted remediation or “just in time” learning.” (North 2021). This allowed students to still feel
challenged by the material, but get assistance where they needed it. Which is how we should go about combating learning loss due to COVID-19. For ELL students or English-speaking students, this would mean maybe some extra time spent outside of the classroom getting help with skills like decoding or phonological processing that they are struggling with. While in the classroom the teacher is still going ahead with grade-level content and assisting the whole class if they are struggling with a certain skill. This will not only help ELLs but all students become stronger after the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Brockton Public School System**

Next, I found articles covering The Brockton Public School system which is located on the South Shore of Massachusetts. This school system contains a very large population with 44.7% first language, not English, or the 28.2% that are ELL students (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022).

(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022) There were three strategies that Brockton implemented that I found to be important. The first strategy that they implemented was connections, ”The more that we can stay connected with them, the more they can stay connected with the school. It’s not only good for the
kids, but it’s invigorating for the people maintaining those relationships, too. Staying connected is also a way of reminding ourselves that kids are more than just the inequities that we talk about.” (Parker, 2021). School for most of these students is their safe space and where they can get strategies that allow them to accomplish any goals that they have. This became even more important when the COVID-19 pandemic hit as Brockton reached out to families to see what they needed to help enable their children to continue participating in school. This then led them to make sure students had enough food, and then get them the technology or wifi that they need to participate in school (Parker, 2020). Assisting district families with food security and technology infrastructure, it makes these students feel like they are still a part of their school world and valued by that same community. In 2020 Brockton also believed that “native language support is paramount, so the district is using its bilingual community relations facilitators to help families and students access counseling, nursing, technology, and academic support. They are also employing bilingual English learner advocates to help families access Wi-Fi programs, food assistance, and medical care.” (Parker 2020). This allows for better communication between the school and parents that may not speak English. Making parents feel a part of the school community and involved in the children's education is important to strengthen a student’s connection to their school. Finally, they highlight that “There is no way that you can leave English learners out of whatever kind of teaching you’re doing as a classroom teacher. So I think that’s the first piece of advice: be inclusive of all students, and individualize based on where each student is.” (Parker, 2020). All students need to be a part of what their teachers are doing in their classrooms. This becomes more and more important the less English they
know when they enter your classroom. If they enter, with little to no English knowledge and the teacher doesn't involve them in what the class is doing. This could end up discouraging these students from trying in your class, which could set them up for a challenging future education. These stages are so important because if they feel included and valued they will want to participate in the school community, which will lead them to have better success later in their lives.

Challenges from the Pandemic

As I went through my research I noticed that the pandemic changed our whole world with some of the biggest impacts being on education causing many challenges for students. The first of these challenges starts with their limited access to technological infrastructure for example a computer or the internet. As noted by the Associated Press “In addition to the widening achievement gap between lower-income students and their counterparts, schools also have to contend with the fact that 17 percent of U.S. students do not have access to computers at home and 18 percent do not have home access to broadband internet, which roughly equates to 3 million according to The Associated Press.” (Lakhani, 2021). A significant number of ELL students are among these children who have limited access to technology. Additionally, these students also have to contend with a crowded home where it's hard to concentrate, and there may be one computer or tablet that they have to share (North, 2021). Older students may even have to take care of their younger siblings instead of doing their work for school (Richards, 2021). So when school shifted to being online, and students were sent home to an environment that wasn't conducive to learning, they were missing the support they were used to having in the classroom. Not to mention that they had bigger needs during the
pandemic from food insecurity and housing insecurity. Furthermore, some children at home watched family members die there, “On top of these challenges has been the trauma of the pandemic itself, during which millions of people have lost jobs, countless families have fallen into poverty, and nearly 40,000 children have lost a parent to COVID-19.” (North, 2021). ELL students were already at a point before the pandemic where they had to learn English while their peers just had to focus on the content in front of them. Then the pandemic highlighted learning challenges that being in school helped to overcome. Making it harder for students to learn not only content, but also learn English online. Overcoming these challenges and giving more support to communities and students that need it, will help students to succeed.

**Effect of COVID-19 on School**

In March of 2020 students entered this new world of online learning where the “Pressures online learning put on families: Remote lessons often require a parent or other adult to help the student with technology and staying on task, especially at younger ages, and that simply wasn’t possible in many households, whether because parents were working during school hours or because they had limited English fluency or other barriers. Again, low-income families were more likely to face obstacles in helping kids with online school, experts said.” (North, 2021). In an instant, the whole way educational institutions had functioned for years changed, it was no longer teacher teaching but parents who were left to facilitate the in-person aspect. North explained that some families were not able to devote that time to their children, because they had to work, or weren’t familiar with the online learning format. For ELL students where English was not the native language at home, they were now on their own to try and
learn in this new world. By June of 2020 analysis shows that most students could fall seven months behind because of the COVID-19 pandemic (North, 2021). This could only put ELL students more at risk for learning loss because they have more to learn already in a classroom. Online learning was a huge change with some not even having the technology to participate. To accommodate students who didn’t have the technology, the school made work optional for students, which led to a drop and engagement (Richards, 2021). Even then when students did come they would turn off their cameras making them all feel more isolated (Richards, 2021). They would also sit there on mute not interacting or speaking English whereas in a regular classroom there would be an expectation that they use English (Richards, 2021). All of this only contributes to a feeling of isolation which discourages students from actually being present with their teacher and learning. So with students coming back, we need to involve them again in learning and show them why education is so important. For ELLs, we need to help them to gain all the tools that they need and have missed due to online learning.

Strategies for Success

Lastly, in my literature review, I started looking at strategies to better support English Language Learners in the classroom. For these students, you have to start by teaching them keywords in English. Some examples included words such as a bathroom, nurse, cafeteria, principal, writing, lunch, playground, and recess (Shore, 2021). This helps them interact with the teacher and their classmates. It also helps to orientate them to this new world of school that they are in, making them feel comfortable and welcome by the school community. Next, involving reading aloud in the classroom
helps to expand students' vocabulary, build curriculum concepts, and learn the English language (Shore, 2021). This can be done by the teacher or in a peer-to-peer setting. Having students work with three peers on read-aloud shows the importance of peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor interactions. These interactions can help to increase a student’s sense of belonging which can be associated with student retention and performance in their studies (Means, Neisler, 2021). Creating a safe environment where students can feel comfortable trying new things helps all the students grow depending on what level they are at.

This leads to my third strategy which is providing opportunities for success. This gives students confidence that they can do things. If students don't envision themselves succeeding, they will be less apt to try and show less interest in learning. This can be done by “reading a story to the class in his native language, displaying an outstanding art project, or acting as the captain of the soccer team for a day” (Shore, 2021). Additionally, technology has become so important to education since 2020. But students need to be able to hear the language they are learning. “You need to speak it back,” she said. "That speaking and listening part is being left out of the equation for students with limited (technological) access." (Richards, 2021). Technology can be helpful but with students just coming off over a year plus of online learning, they need a change. In the future, there will significantly be more technology in a classroom with companies reducing the price of online software for schools and the inclusion of more and more devices that students and teachers use in a classroom each day.

The last two strategies work together to create a classroom community and involve families in the classroom. Creating a classroom community is important because
imagine being new and not knowing what anyone is saying, but being expected to learn the information without really being able to communicate with this new person in their lives. Building this community helps to make ELL students feel just as important as every other student and not singled out for their differences. Also, it is important to make sure as teachers are creating a community that values all students' culture, language, and backgrounds in their classroom. Together this helps to make a student feel comfortable and gives them something to contribute that they know, can see as role models, and just makes them feel valued in the classroom community.

Finally, it is important to involve parents in their student's education, because if they aren't involved, why would their children place a high value on education? This helps parents feel at ease about their child's education as their home country may have different ideas about education and a parent or family's role. So it is important to make sure they feel included so they can help to encourage their children and show how important education is. One way to do this is through, "Cultural days, parents as guest speakers, and volunteers from multiple backgrounds with different language skills will enable all children to connect through language and culture. Family and community strengths ought to be incorporated into the curriculum making obvious and intentional connections to the culture of the students in the class (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005)."

This would help parents to be involved and also help to create that community in the class while all the students learn something about a different part of the world. Together these strategies will help English Language Learners to have success in the classroom.
Methods

In the next step in my research, I started looking at qualitative research methods. This step was important to me because there was only so much I was going to learn about ELL students and their experiences from articles. So I wanted to go into a classroom and talk to teachers and observe classrooms to witness in-depth what their teaching experience was like during the COVID-19 pandemic. The process of doing qualitative research started with trying to get Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This meant setting up an interview protocol and observation framework. Also, I had to talk to principals to get permission to go into their schools and talk to teachers. I will cover this whole process further on, but eventually, I was approved and was able to conduct my interviews.

Interviews and observations

Next after researching Covid-19 pandemic, as noted in my literature review, I went out into schools to interview teachers and observe their classrooms to learn some strategies to better assist. First, I started by looking at other examples of surveys or interview questions. One article I was able to find that was very helpful was my featured article “Teachers of English Learners Respond to. 2021”. This helped to guide how I would format my interview questions while I focused on my research question, how did COVID-era school disruptions impact the way elementary teachers taught English language learners? What kind of changes did they make to their instruction and what lessons have they learned? This then lead me to my questions,

1. Can you describe your experience of teaching EL students before, during, and after school closures due to COVID-19?

2. What do you wish you had done in February of 2020 that would help your EL students during closures and now?

3. In your estimate, what part of your English Language Learners students were engaged and participating during school closure? About 10%, 10-25%, 25-50%, 50-75%, 75-100%?

4. What activities do you do or see other teachers doing that harness the most engagement from EL students? Or on the other hand what activities didn’t encourage the EL students?

5. What kind of technology did you find yourself using the most during school closure to support ELs?
   a. Are you still using that technology now?
   b. Is there any technology that you wish you had?

6. How did teaching online impact your EL students?

7. Do you see a lasting impact on EL students due to the COVID disruptions to learning?

8. Do you feel you have adequate instructional and otherwise support now to help assist English Learners (technology, SEL, and more)?
   a. Yes/No
   b. Can you explain?
9. Are there any resources that you would want to keep in your classroom?

10. Do you have additional comments? Please share your thoughts!

After setting up my questions for interviews I made an observation protocol and framework.

**Observation Framework:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher’s Name:</th>
<th>Observer’s Name:</th>
<th>Date and time:</th>
<th>Subject:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

What is the teacher doing?

What are the EL students doing?

Questions:               | Next Steps:       |
This framework focused on what the teacher was doing to guide her students and what the students were working on. After all of these were finalized I worked on getting my IRB submitted to Bridgwater. This was a longer process than I thought it would be, but soon after it was submitted I got approved and was able to contact principals to set up times where I could come in and talk to some teachers. Below is a list of the teachers and grade levels that I was able to interview or observe.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Name</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Davis</td>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>Interview and Observe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Griffin</td>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>Interview and Observe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Smith</td>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>Interview and Observe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. McAndrew</td>
<td>Grade 3</td>
<td>Interview and Observe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Miller</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Interview and Observe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Carter</td>
<td>SEL specialist</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Olson</td>
<td>SEL specialist</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. O'Neill</td>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

From these interviews and observations, I created a word cloud to note phrases and terms that were used frequently by my participants.

These helped to guide my findings as they show the highlights from the interviews. The bigger the word the more often it came up during my interviews with the teachers. The four big themes came out of the interviews, COVID-19 disruptions, the support system, important resources, and lesson structure.

**COVID - Disruptions**

When I entered my first school this semester just by walking down the hallway I could see the changes that COVID-19 brought to school. The pandemic was hard for everyone but until I got to these classrooms I didn't understand what it was like for these students. In my first classroom the teacher responded to question six in the interview by saying “And because they were doing that double job of helping their parents as well as trying to understand me, I feel like it almost took a toll on them that it just put them in that hard spot where they had to kind of be an adult at the same time as being six.”
(Mrs. Davis). During the COVID-19 pandemic of ELL, students had to step up and do jobs that were expected of their parents, because their parents didn’t speak English or they had to work and couldn’t always be there while their children were in school. As I talked about in my literature review there were many challenges for students to overcome and if they weren’t getting their normal support from the teacher they were forced to step up at home. How are we supposed to expect that they are learning the content that was given to them during online learning? A second teacher reemphasized this by saying, “think like, it's going to be an uphill battle for a long time. Because a lot of these kids are in kindergarten level, then third grade. Moving on fourth, that gap is getting wider and wider and affects their self-confidence, which is leading them not to have put in as much effort to try because now they're scared of failure.” (Mrs. O'Neill).

These students had a lot of challenges to overcome during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then they are at home watching siblings or not receiving the support that they need in learning English. These students also didn’t have access to the support and resources that they were used to receiving. How, at the end of the day, can we justify them being engaged and focused on what is happening in an online classroom when their world is in chaos?

**Loss of Learning**

With their world being in chaos this led to all students losing skills that they previously had before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this time around it disproportionately affected the ELL student population. Teachers have been noticing a loss in vocabulary, phonics, and phonological awareness skills leading to less progression in basic writing skills and reading skills. Mrs. Olson, an SEL Specialist at
Brockton Public Schools shares a very similar concern. “I worry about their writing having simple things like sentence structures so I was focusing on writing as they’re writing. I must still need help even from my fifth graders. They still need help writing using the correct punctuation” (Mrs. Olson). If students aren’t able to grasp the small skills, how are they able to progress to grasp more complex concepts? For these students, it was a challenge to learn in this new environment as they didn’t have their normal resources available. Then, as noted in my literature review, before the teaching responsibility was put onto parents. For parents who don’t speak English or that isn’t their first language, it was incredibly hard, which causes problems with phonological processing like, “phonemic awareness you have to have phonological awareness first. I think the phonological awareness was not as good online because of internet issues, or not being able to hear the sounds through the computer. Whatever the case may be, we’re surrounding people talking in Spanish while your teacher is speaking in English, there’s no real reason that you’re going to catch the phonology.” (Mrs. Smith). Here students were not only hearing their native language but also English. How are we expecting students to tell the difference between the two sounds? But being in this new learning environment teachers weren’t able to look over their shoulders and easily fix miscues like they were due in a classroom. So when these students came back to the classroom they were behind and had to learn small skills, so that their reading and writing would get better.

**Support System**

Another part of the ELL student's support system is in the classroom and the teacher they are with. As we have seen these students had many challenges to face
over the COVID-19 pandemic, with very little support to help them in this new classroom. This not only leads to learning loss but a loss in engagement, as said by Mrs. Olson, one of two SEL Specialists I talked to, “Kids, sometimes I feel like they were, they were not engaged. They would turn off their screen, sometimes it's hard to get them to pay attention. It was, I feel like they didn't take it seriously. Sitting in front of the screen. It was probably I think some of them probably turned the zoom off and go play video games or something. ” (Mrs. Olson). This was something new and hard if you didn’t understand English, causing students to get lost in online learning. They also could have been in a loud environment where it was hard to focus (Mrs. Griffin). So they need the help from their teachers but their normal services, “And I feel like, during a pandemic, a lot of that kind of fell off because the PD stopped and the groups and like getting together and doing all those things because of what happened.” (Mrs. Davis). This led to ELL students to “just make them struggle more, it was just really difficult for them, they didn't have the support at home either. And I just feel like, especially the shy ones, lost the opportunity to ask for help. Because, like, you did try to go into small groups with them and stuff, but as they lost, it just they can't come up and whisper to you, they're shy, like, I need help, or just even like phonics and like forming the words and seeing the person's face and how to do it.” (Mrs. O'Neill). When the pandemic hits they need their teachers to help them, especially ELL students. It was clear at the conclusion of my interviews that ELL students were missing the support system they would normally receive during in-person schooling.

However, during my classroom observations, I was able to see how these teachers have helped and are continuing to support their students during the pandemic.
They made new lessons and gave up time with their families. As one teacher put it, “But what drives I feel that they serve the kids with the heart something that I've noticed in your heart is the way you subsequently address situations when the kids are going through some things or their family the hardest thing is not just teaching them there is a problem you're right” (Mrs. Carter). They gave their hearts but there was only so much a teacher could do online for all of their students. The students needed their teachers to be there in the room to help but the reality was there was no way that would have happened in the early days of COVID-19.

These students did miss out a lot on their services which surprised me. I expected schools to have to provide services just like they do for students with learning disabilities. However, I learned during my conversation with Mrs. Davis that “I feel like their group where they, they don't, have a service that needs to be provided to them. But like with special ed with their IEP, there's a legal service for ELL that doesn't necessarily have that legal piece.” (Mrs. Davis). Schools aren't required to give them services. This is something very important as providing access to services that ELL students normally could have changed the way online learning was done for ELL students. It would give them a huge support system that could never be taken away. So if something in our world goes wrong these students are protected.

Lastly, to support students I noticed just how important communication between parents and teachers was. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit there was a drastic change for parents, teachers, and students in the normal routine of school. As school transitions online one major problem was some students didn't come to class,
“So, and I also think that before COVID, they were like, so this is, during COVID, but we had a lot of friends who didn't, because a lot of the technology and a lot of the announcements were not accessible to my students during, so the principal will call and say, Tonight, or tomorrow, we're all signing on at 830 in the morning, make sure that you check the link in your teachers email properly. Well, that message is translated into several different languages. So you need to ask for it on their machine. And they don't know any of that.” (Mrs. Smith).

If a parent doesn't speak English and picks up the phone, there is no way to change the message into their native language, yielding a large communicative barrier. How are they going to know that school will still be happening just online? This leads to students not being able to access the information that they need to be successful. This teacher talked about how because of this she now uses ClassDojo which has a translation service allowing parents to understand what is going on in her classroom. It is so important for parents to be involved in their children's classes. She goes on to note

"Language acquisition is dependent upon family communication, you know, and family involvement. And if parents don't feel like they can communicate with the school, neither do the students even more so. So I have a lot of, for instance, I have a lot of students who have maybe 20 days of kindergarten. no days of kindergarten because this district No. Requirement. It was optional, especially being virtual. So really, the students who started in my class for pre k were not kindergarteners moving first grade, they were pre-kindergarteners first. And so the gap that may have already been there, because of language ended up being more than a year ago. intimidating, both for them.” (Mrs. Smith).
This is a concept also discussed in my literature review, as the teacher said above it prompts communication. Not only between teacher and parent but between ELL student and teacher. If there is that kind of communication it opens up to the learning they could gain from being a part of their classroom community. Without this communication how is anyone supposed to know what is going on in a school?

**Resources**

The COVID-19 pandemic was not all doom and gloom. As a result, we gained a lot of important resources and technology to help our students in the classroom. First was the technology teachers were able to find and implement, "But a lot of that technology and the way of using them could be incredibly supportive for students. I think that the pandemic kind of lit the fire under people to create things and make things accessible for kids in a digital format." (Mrs. Griffin). As we have seen software like Zoom, Teams, Schoology, and learning A to Z, were not in as high demand before the COVID-19 pandemic. There was this whole influx of new teaching tools. In schools, we saw access to technology become far more available, in Brockton they were able to get every student a computer and helped to get these students wifi access. This was a school system that I looked at for my literature review that was already assisting their students; this only proved to help the students more. It opened their world, as we said, maybe they had never seen a computer or had to use technology but were not able to take it home with them.

I then asked the teachers to talk about what they would have done in February of 2020 their response was similar to this teacher that said, “And so I think had I known I would have tried to grab every single book that I had imagined to hand them to put their
backpacks, I would have made photocopies of packets, I would have given the paper, and notebooks and pencils and crayons.” (Mrs. Griffin). Which shows just how important these tools are for the ELL students as they may not have had access to things that were in the classroom. The teachers especially expressed how important books were for students. This would have helped to expand their vocabulary and it was something they could do if they couldn't get online. Brockton was also really good at getting these new programs called STMath, and Lexia for their whole district. STMath is a math program that reminds me of Khan academy where it allows students to progress at their own pace and allows the teacher to see what they are doing. Then there is Lexia which “I like now there's a reading program Lexia. And now everybody has it, which I wish they had then, because it's on the kid's level, and as kids move out the challenge, yeah, and they like it, it keeps them motivated. So I wish we had had that for everybody.” (Mrs. O'Neill). The teacher I talked to seemed to like that there was a structured program for their students to follow that helped to reinforce skills they went over in class. The pandemic not only shows learning loss, but also has brought to light all the tools that we had at our fingertips and which ones were important for our students to use.

**Strategies for Lessons structure**

As we talked about in my literature review there are many different ways to structure a lesson. From my interviews, there were a few different and similar strategies that were important to highlight. The first was a connection because “they have to be able to connect to be fully engaged. So if it's still hard for them, they will just ask you as long as it's something that they can connect with. They will be fully engaged. And you ask them questions to keep my first graders teaching me things.” (Mrs. Carter). It is
something I have noticed in my own education. If I am not interested in a topic I’m not going to pay attention. So why wouldn’t this be similar for not only ELL students but all students? One easy way to connect with these students is by involving their own culture in the classroom. They will be way more interested in this kind of topic because they have background knowledge on it and could even teach the class about its culture, (Mrs. Carter). Also as we said in the lit review it helps to make these students feel valued and connected to the topic.

Next, interactions and conversations between students are very important in their English development. With the COVID-19 pandemic “Like most of them, there was just a huge gap for you just reading levels went down. math levels, participation, language opportunities to speak like dialogue like honest, real dialogue that like the interactions with kids that the dialogue gives just happen naturally in the classroom. It didn't happen.” (Mrs. McAndrew). It is important for these more informal conversations to happen because it is where they can practice English in a safe environment. As a teacher, you want to make sure there is time in the day where students get to talk to each other so they can practice vocabulary or work on their sounds. This then leads to having role models in your classroom so that “if somebody has not yet shown you that they can express in English yet they please speak with somebody who speaks their native language and so develop a student talk but there's only so much of that that they get a day” (Mrs. Smith). This could be a classmate that is advanced in English and can help the teacher translate. Also a partner for another classmate.

Next, they can also work in groups, “So when I think it's important to see as a lot of the groups when you have them, they do try to vary them and put role models within
them. So I find that that's important to use, that often does. And having a diverse community I think helps because they see a lot of their own culture, and what you're doing in your daily work because you do what is familiar to them to help them create that cultural awareness and connection.” (Mrs. Davis). Here there is a group leader that can help guide their classmates and explain questions that may be harder for other students to understand. This role model could also be someone outside the classroom

“Like in a community, like where I'm from, they don't necessarily have those role models and those images of what their culture looks like in you know, the educated version because they don't necessarily have that to say they're not like everything kind of looks like here everybody looks like so to speak. So speaks the language like they do and has a family dynamic as they do. So I find that that doctor does a really good job with that. And I think having that connection to the school connection is important because it helps them see that everything is kind of one component of their life.” (Mrs. Davis).

Having any kind of role model helps to challenge the students to become better in school. If it is someone outside the classroom it shows that they can succeed and that no goal is unattainable for them even though right now they can speak English.

Another area that has become increasingly important is social-emotional learning. With COVID-19 students no matter what age got ripped away from a very structured environment to this lawless pandemic world where most of their social interactions were through a screen. It has taken a toll on students, “but from my experience working with another teacher, before COVID, the kids were more engaged. They look forward to seeing each other. The interaction, of course, was good. Which is
something we are working on right now. Social-emotional learning their social and emotional aspects.” (Mrs. Olson). All anyone wants to do right now is see their friends. So it's something as a teacher we need to be very conscious about and they may not have some of the skills that they need to make friends because they haven't had much practice in pandemic life.

Lastly, something that stuck out to me as I visited these classrooms was using Spanish or their native language in the classroom. There was one teacher who wished I was able to ask why this is a strategy that they use. This teacher allows her students to “They can respond in either I encourage English but not all of them are comfortable responding in English. And so you have a lot of students who go through a much longer silent period and will not participate. And so I don't know what they're observing. B, they're not engaged in the conversation. And we do a lot of student talk. I do encourage student talk and I haven't assigned talk partners.” (Mrs. Smith). This was a concept that surprised me when I first got to the class. How could it be helpful for students to talk in Spanish when they are trying to learn English? But it was when the teacher talked about a silent period and they explained that they said,

“So I find what I want them to do is learn English, but I also want them to learn content, I feel like they're just too far behind for me to be as content with some of the contents got to come. So if I see glazed eyes, or they give me an answer, and I think, nope, that's not what I want from them, I will make clarifications.” (Mrs. Smith). It also helps the students to “share in a group discussion, I'm not going to discourage their sharing in their native language because then they
won’t even engage in what the conversation is about. After all, they won’t even think about the future next time that makes sense” (Mrs. Smith).

By using their native language the teacher can understand what their student knows outside of English. While helping them to feel comfortable in the classroom enough to eventually participate in English. Other teachers also talked about using cognates which were similar to what this teacher was doing. The cognates help them connect between the two languages that they are experiencing. A language is a vital tool that we need to utilize to help engage and support our students.

**What I Learned from my Research.**

This research project was something that I started as a future teacher to learn more about a population of students that previously I knew nothing about. English language learners to me are students that get a very similar stereotype to special education students. That they aren’t capable of learning and can keep up with that work. This is untrue, ELL students are multicultural language scholars. They have this knowledge of the language at a young age that many native speakers don’t have. Because even though they don’t know English, they are already fluent in the language. This is something that we as educators should be celebrating, not making them feel inferior for not knowing English.

My research also led me to three very important themes: support, communication, and involving what students know in a class. These three themes were something that kept getting repeated in every aspect of my research. So it was something I feel that as a future educator I should pay attention to. The first support strategy for this could be anything from having extra pencils to having extra online work
for students who need it. Especially for ELLs as we learned through the pandemic that school is this stable force for them. So we need to use that to the best of our ability to provide students with the best education experience. Next is communication, it is not only English-speaking parents that have a hard time knowing what's going on in a classroom. But it is significantly more difficult when you are an ELL parent and are not able to understand the messages given out by the school. We need to make sure that the classroom community involves the parents no matter how their student is doing. This means they can help and support at home what a teacher is doing. Lastly was involving students' knowledge in the classroom, this is vital. If a student cannot understand, connect, or have background knowledge on a topic they will be less likely to understand what the teacher is talking about. Think back to your education: what were the things that you remember, were the fun things that you liked, or the time when the teacher talked about the information you didn’t understand? For all future teachers, I recommend this as the most important tool that you use in your classrooms. It will not only help you but greatly improve the experience and learning for students.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic changed all of our lives and put our world's students online. This introduced new challenges for students like access to computers or the internet, food security, housing, and the deaths of family members. While this was a difficult transition it only became harder for the ELL students as they are trying to learn English as the modern education system turned upside down and went virtual. Through this transition, there was a loss of learning which hit ELL students' particularly hard. But as we have started to get through this pandemic it has shown
educators strategies and techniques to better assist language learners. Some of these strategies are communication, the interaction between students, involving culture, supporting students, and involving their native language in classroom instruction. Together all of these different strategies can be used to better assist ELL students. The COVID-19 pandemic also gave us these resources that have changed the way we teach and give students more sports systems to rely on. While the pandemic has changed the lives of students, having them take on more adult responsibilities. There is one thing that can never change how we as teachers support our students. It is our responsibility to be there for them so they don’t have to be an adult when they are only six.
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