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BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS IN DISTANCE LEARNING

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Unprecedented Times in Education

“In these unprecedented times...” is a phrase many people living in the United States (US) have heard repeated again and again since March of 2020. For some, hearing this phrase in advertisements, spoken by news anchors, and sprinkled into local government press statements has turned it into a joke, and diluted the meaning of the phrase.

However, the quick and intense spread of the COVID-19 virus has led to unprecedented times for all K-12 schools and universities in the US and worldwide. School closures affected every state and territory in the US during the spring of 2020, and 48 states discontinued in-person education for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Education Week Staff, 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that by mid-April of 2020, school closures affected around 90% of the world’s learners, or around 1.7 billion students (UNESCO, 2020). Education for nearly all of the world’s students has been disrupted or altered in some way, and the stress of learning during a global pandemic has led to a situation in education on a scale which has not been seen in recent memory.

In the US, there are an estimated 5 million public school students learning English, which averages to about 10% of all public school students (*English Language*

Learners in Public Schools, 2020). These English learners (ELs) have specific needs, and are entitled to receive targeted language instruction in order to access academic material. As schools shifted away from in-person instruction in spring 2020, ELs were affected by this instructional change. This has driven me to ask, ***how can educators improve ELs engagement and success in distance learning settings?***

While English as a second language (ESL) instructors continued to teach throughout this time, it is clear that simply being in a home environment leads to less exposure to English language for ELs as they are not interacting with teachers and peers in English as often, and are more likely to speak only their home language within the household. It should be noted that ELs should continue to use and develop skills in their home language, as the linguistic skills they hold in their home language can transfer into English. Furthermore, language is closely tied to identity, and loss of a language can have negative effects on a person (Cunningham, 2020). However, in schools where English is the language of instruction, ELs need ample opportunities to practice and develop English skills. These opportunities are limited during distance learning.

Additionally, added stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic likely affects ELs willingness to seek out opportunities to use English. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that in the US non-White individuals, of which ELs often identify as, are more likely to be hospitalized for COVID-19 due to a myriad of reasons (*COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups*, 2020). Thus, ELs education experience during the COVID-19 pandemic is different, and arguably more challenging than the experience of a

White student whose home language is English. As educators, we cannot ignore those who make up 10% of the student population.

From my perspective as an educator through the spring of 2020, I felt as though my peers and I were falling short of meeting the needs of our EL students. Even though teachers collaborated in ways I had not seen before, and created networks to share resources and online tools, the rush to move from in-person instruction to online and paper-packet based instruction meant that there is room for improvement in the quality of instruction. In keeping with the theme of distance and online learning, I will outline the need for the creation of a website geared towards improving instructional practices for ELs. This website will be a space for educators to connect and develop these instructional practices, and as a toolbox with resources for online education.

Unexpected Experience

While I have worked in public school settings since 2015, the completion of my ESL teaching license and student teaching placements occurred during the first half of 2020. In my Upper Midwest state, school closures began on March 18th. This was exactly halfway through my sixteen week student teaching stint, and was days before I was scheduled to switch from my first placement at an elementary school to my second placement at a middle school. As schools remained closed to in-person instruction for the remainder of the school year, I never got to properly say goodbye to the elementary students I taught, nor meet the middle school students I taught virtually. Delivery of instruction for the 2020-2021 school year in my state of residence depends on the number of COVID-19 virus cases per 10,000 people in the county. Schools have plans for

in-person, hybrid, and distance learning models, and must be prepared to shift based on state guidance if the number of COVID-19 cases changes. As of late November of the 2020-2021 school year, I have already taught in both hybrid and distance learning models. As a novice teacher, the COVID-19 pandemic and the distance learning setting has so far had a greater impact on my teaching practice than any other event.

As school closures came on quickly in the spring of 2020, teachers were only given a few weeks to transition from in-person to online, and administrators in all districts had just days to decide the format in which schools would deliver instruction. I would be remiss to exclude the dedication I observed of my cooperating teachers during this period. Suspecting that schools would close at some point in the near future, my first cooperating teacher printed packets and pulled together supplies such as pencils, scissors, and crayons in case students did not have Internet access or supplies at home. In the two days we were able to be in the school building after the announcement of school closures beginning Wednesday, March 18th, we compiled packets and supplies into learning kits for our students who would need them most. My cooperating teacher offered to deliver them to students herself if families could not make it to the school to pick them up. My second cooperating teacher used her own knowledge of the Spanish language to support her students, most of whom spoke Spanish at home. She translated assignments for new-to-country students, offered individual video conferences to help students understand lessons and assignments from any class, and called or emailed students and families daily. The longer distance learning went on, the less our students engaged with learning, but she continued to reach out to them and offer support however they needed.

These are but two teachers out of thousands in the United States who went above and beyond to provide the best education possible for their students in these circumstances.

It was also during this time I saw practices from other teachers which frustrated me and has driven me to want to find ways to improve EL student engagement and success in this distance learning. While video conferencing with students to help navigate and understand assignments for content classes, I could see how overwhelmed they would become when the instruction and assignments were entirely text-based.

As ESL teachers, we understand the importance of including the four modalities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and how to use visuals to support language understanding. These understandings, in addition to other specialized knowledge about language acquisition and the specific needs of ELs, should be drawn upon through the collaboration of ESL and content teachers in order to develop equitable instruction of ELs and all students. This may include further differentiation of assignments, implementation of visual elements, streamlined text, and other practices that support ELs access to the academic content.

The EL Experience in Distance Learning

In online-based learning, it is easy to include multiple modalities and use them to create an interactive learning experience due to the available technologies. But, districts delivering instruction via paper packets may have a greater challenge in creating quality content for ELs, especially since paper-based instruction for young people often directs caregivers to support its completion. For ELs, it may not be feasible for the adults in their lives to have the time or language skills needed to support the student in completing

worksheets or other non-Internet based instruction. As it is likely that schools will need to continue distance learning in some form in the near future, it is necessary to plan for providing an equitable education for EL students. It is also my goal to build on the knowledge gained from educator experiences in the spring and fall of 2020 so that future distance learning allows all students to learn successfully.

Distance learning, whether online or paper-based, is not a new concept. Correspondence courses have been an option for independent learners for decades, if not centuries. Online classes have been an option for students in recent years. As of the 2017-2018 school year 21% of public schools and 13% of private schools offered courses entirely online (Taie & Goldring, 2019). Independent language learning online is available through many websites or applications such as Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, or Babbel. It seems that as long as the Internet has been in existence, people have used it as a tool to learn. It has only been since March, 2020 that distance learning has shifted from optional to necessary. Despite the inclusion of more technology and online learning in K-12 schools, educators were not all mentally prepared to make the shift out of the physical classroom. For some districts, administrators also grappled with getting technology and Internet access into the homes of students (MPR News Staff, 2020). Coupling the suddenly necessary move out of physical schools with the emotional and economic stress of individuals involved due to the pandemic, it is easy to see why no one was prepared to create ideal learning environments within this distance learning format. Additionally, and arguably most importantly, the health effects of the virus should be considered. Educators and students who are infected with COVID-19 may become too

sick to participate in teaching and learning for a stretch of time. This is not only disruptive to education, but takes a physical toll on the bodies of those afflicted with this virus.

Preparing for the Future

Educators and school district administrators used the summer of 2020 to plan ahead to the 2020-2021 school year. It was necessary to hone in on developing best teaching practices during this time of reflection and planning, as it was clear the 2020-2021 school year would likely have repeating patterns of opening and closing school buildings depending on how many virus cases emerged in the community. The creation of a website detailing methods to engage ELs and improve their academic performance will be an indispensable resource for educators and administrators to refer to while creating norms and standards for teachers in delivering distance instruction. As previous research has been conducted on how to best deliver language instruction in international, university, and optional settings, knowledge gained from this research is critical in building a set of best practices for ELs in K-12 school settings. The biggest differences between the previous research and current COVID-19 driven distance learning are the applications of the findings to a broader population, who have a right to appropriate education, and the heightened stress levels due to life during a pandemic.

Currently, this project is being undertaken during a time where we have not yet been able to see the exact long-term effects this disruption in schooling will have on students. However, there is recognition that learning and everyday life for nearly all students worldwide has been disrupted. Educators must adapt and be open to new ways

of teaching. We have not before had this impetus to change the ways in which we teach. We should use this opportunity to draw on our collective knowledge and creativity to radically rethink education in the US, with equity at the forefront.

The approach to developing best practices for ELs can occur with a universal design theory in mind. All students can benefit from accommodations made for ELs. As students are not participating in distance learning due to choice, there are factors which may affect all students' learning. The stress COVID-19 created and its effects on the economy and social communities are felt even by our youngest learners. We must take our students' and our own stress levels as educators into account, as stress negatively affects memory (Nelissen, Prickaerts, & Blokland, 2018). While it is unclear when this stressful period will end, we must prepare for the possibility of the pandemic continuing at least into 2021 and beyond the time of this writing.

Summary

While the COVID-19 pandemic emerged rapidly, and has greatly affected the American school system, we are lucky to be living in an age where information is easily shared and available. It is through this online platform that I aim to build a website accessible to educators in order to develop skills and practices to better serve the needs of ELs in a distance learning setting. ELs make up 10% of all students nationwide, it would be a disservice to not provide an equitable education to an immense number of our American students.

As my early teaching experiences have been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is to be expected that distance education will continue in some capacity in

upcoming academic years, it is imperative to build upon the knowledge gleaned from earlier research on online language learning. In chapter 2, I will explore this research further, as well as relevant research on student motivation, experiences of English learners in American schools, theories of second language acquisition, and the use of various technologies for educational purposes. Each of these fields of research will support developing solid practices for the instruction of ELs in the unique situation schools are in due to pandemic driven distance learning impositions.

Combining this research together will drive the development of a website geared for K-12 content and classroom teachers that will be explained further in Chapter 3. Providing a set of research-based practices for teachers to build instruction around will allow for swift implementation into classrooms. We cannot put off focusing on the needs of an important group of students, as ELs are more likely to have living circumstances that would compound the negative impact of interrupted education (Carnoy & Garcia, 2017). A website will serve as a hub where users can instantly gain access to pertinent information anywhere in the world, and will be a crucial tool as educators continue to adapt to new deliveries of instruction.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

Given the novelty of moving learning from in-person to online or other distance formats due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educators were unprepared for this change. The rapid pace at which schools worldwide needed to vacate the physical school buildings left many educators looking for guidance, and finding less than satisfactory results. Educating during a global pandemic is strange territory, and is a field of research that should be explored during this time. Not since the 1918 influenza pandemic have we seen a virus affect people on this scale, and there remain few today who were alive during this previous global virus pandemic. While we have the current advantage of technology, which can simulate many educational experiences that happen in-person, we still have to consider if all students have equal access to it. For English learner (EL) students in the United States (US), additional considerations need to be taken into account due to social, language, and cultural factors. EL students make up a significant portion of students nationwide, and they face challenges English speaking students do not, which leads me to ask *how can educators improve ELs engagement and success in distance learning settings?*

Since American educators have not before had to contend with teaching EL students in distance learning on this scale before, there is no previous research to answer this question. Therefore, I will consider each of the components that make up the research question so that we can understand distance learning and EL education. The synthesis of the themes outlined in the following paragraph will support the development and assemblage of best practices for the education of ELs during distance learning, particularly throughout the duration of a global pandemic or other possible mandatory school closures.

First, I explore research on both distance and online learning, with a focus on online learning, as this is the platform many schools have used during school closures. Following this, is an exploration of the research on technology and education, which is necessary to consider as technology supports the functions of online learning. In the third section, I consider the role motivation has in learning, because motivation can be closely linked to engagement and success. For the fourth and fifth sections, I consider theories of second language acquisition and the experiences of ELs in schools and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is necessary to further understand the reasons EL students should have special considerations and are a separate population from students who have English as a home language. Drawing on understanding from all these subtopics will contribute to creating a complete picture of the EL student's needs in distance learning.

Distance and online learning

Introduction

Distance and online learning are broad terms for several different models of learning. Distance learning has historically encompassed many different types of instruction, and has been viewed as an opt-in type of education, which allows the student to have choice and voice in how and when they learn (Wedemeyer, 1981). However, modern research often focuses on Internet mediated learning, which has expanded beyond universities to the K-12 setting (Rice, 2006). This section will first describe the historical role of distance learning, and the development of online learning. Following this will be a review of research on effective community building within online learning and research on student engagement and success within language learning online courses. Understanding prior knowledge on distance and online learning is pertinent to continuing effective instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, as online learning suddenly changed from optional to mandatory for many learners across the world.

Distance learning

While there is not an exact date marking the beginning of distance learning, it is clear as Wedemeyer describes that, “Writing was the first invention to break space-time barriers to learning” (1981, p. 33). As the general population has become increasingly literate with each new generation, distance learning has allowed people to access education in ways not limited by traditional in-person instruction. As for the role distance learning has played in the US, Wedemeyer notes how Americans have taken advantage of the technologies which provide a platform for learning; and by the mid-20th century, the

estimated number of Americans participating in distance or independent learning was in the tens of millions (1981, pp. 50–51). Additionally, Wedemeyer connects distance learning and autonomy in learning, suggesting that these students have greater control over the learning process (1981). If Wedemeyer were to consider the future impact the Internet would have on humankind's ability to access information, would he still consider the student to have the power in determining what and how they learn?

Online Learning

Online learning has played an important role in universities over the past few decades, but it is of interest here to understand the development of online learning in the K-12 setting. As many schools made the necessary shift from in-person learning to online during the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in spring of 2020, many questions arose from educators, caregivers, and others on how young people can continue to learn effectively online.

In her article, Rice notes that the medium of instruction plays less of a role in how a student learns compared to other factors. She contends that online learning is simply a way to deliver instruction, so other variables shape the online education experience (2006). No matter how advanced the technology, the technology itself “cannot substitute for well-designed instruction and opportunities to engage in purposeful, interactive learning activities” (2006, p. 442). So educators must approach teaching online by drawing on the same skills and practices that make their in-person instruction effective. Rice also notes that online education has become a growing option for students considered at-risk or who otherwise have not thrived in a traditional classroom setting

(2006). This could affect other research on online K-12 courses, as the participants may not be representative of the general student population.

Lowes and Lin (2014) describe the difficulties in drawing conclusions from research on K-12 online learning. Firstly, this term “online learning” can describe many different types of computer mediated learning, including as a supplement to face-to-face instruction. Similarly to Rice, Lowes and Lin consider the many factors present when comparing in-person to online learning, including the effectiveness of the teacher, and the element of student choice in participating in online learning, among other variables (pp. 92–94). The authors recommend that using surveys, case studies, and analyzing data from the online learning management systems can be ways to further research in this field despite the challenges faced in prior research. It may be through mandatory online instruction due to pandemic concerns that researchers can overcome the variable of student choice in online learning. When all students and teachers participate in online learning, it may become clearer how this mode of instruction compares to in-person instruction.

Since the development of online learning is so recent, and research has been limited in the K-12 setting, Lokey-Vega et al. note that there is no “body of theory exclusive to K-12 online learning” (2014, p. 72). The authors attribute this to two factors: Changes in environment that affect many aspects of life and society, and the difficulties associated with applying theories in education (pp.72–73). To move forward, Lokey-Vega et al. developed a visual model of the theoretical underpinnings of this field, which include epistemologies, instructional models and proposals, learning theories,

related fields, and historical perspectives (p. 81). As it is clear that online learning is not a trend, but rather a new mode of learning, it is important to build a solid theoretical foundation.

Within the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), in the section titled 21st Century Schools, the document outlines increased incorporation of digital learning, including aims to provide students with more opportunities to enroll in online courses. The US government has placed importance on the role of technology and the Internet in the education of K-12 students. The effectiveness of this act remains to be seen as the implementation of it is recent. It should also be noted that by 2016, not all households in the US had access to the Internet. According to Ryan (2017), 81% of American households had a broadband subscription in 2016, and 89% had a computer or smartphone (p.5). These percentages are a national average, and the rates of Internet access varies based on state, income level, and race (pp. 7–12). While this is the most recent data available, it can be expected that these percentages have increased from the period between 2016-2020. However, until Internet access is considered a human right and access is reliably available for 100% of the population, there will continue to be barriers between students and online education.

Community building in online learning

For students who are able to or have chosen to participate in online learning, many may bring preconceived notions of learning environments and expect certain interactions between students and the teacher. While designing an online course, instructors can recreate elements of in-person education. Just as the community of a

classroom affects in-person instruction, online course participants can exist within a virtual community, and the strength of the community may have an effect on how students in online classes learn and engage with each other and the content.

In her qualitative research study on how instructors can build community in online graduate classes, Berry (2017) found three key ways instructors could develop community in online classes. The first is “creating a warm and welcoming tone” (pp.6–7), which is achievable when an instructor shows an interest in students’ lives, offers assistance, and draws on their personality to make personal connections. The second way is “using technology to create a personalized learning experience for students”, which includes practices such as checking in with students, and recording individual feedback on assignments in video format (pp. 7–8). The third way is “using technology to engage all students”, which requires instructors to draw on tools available in the learning management system, video meeting applications, and social applications and media (pp. 8–9). Interviews with students in the online classes demonstrated the impact an instructor had on developing a strong sense of community virtually. For teachers to apply this to their own practice, it is clear that not only should they draw on their personal strengths in their personalities, but also be aware of how to use their available technology.

In a later qualitative study, Berry (2019) further developed four strategies on online class communities that build upon her previous work, but go deeper. Rather than just checking in with students, she recommends, “reaching out early and often” (p.169–170). Beyond incorporating video into an online classroom, Berry’s findings

suggest to limit lecturing and instead use more discussions, and to even use video to facilitate breakout room discussions synchronously (p. 170–172). Finally, she also found that building in opportunities for students to discuss on a social level contributes positively to the class community (pp.172–174). These strategies could be considered parallel to practices teachers use in-person to develop community. Both of Berry’s studies suggest that the instructor has a role in humanizing the online course, by taking advantage of the video and other technologies available.

Through research on a master’s level online course, Abdelmalak (2015) investigated how different online applications and tools contributed to the class community. Abdelmalak’s findings counter Berry’s in that students did not perceive the video calling application, Skype, to positively contribute to their sense of community. Out of the applications and tools used in this course, students reported that Google Docs and wikis had the greatest positive impact on the sense of learning community, while Twitter and blogs had a smaller positive impact (pp. 7–11). Although the students in this study did not identify video conferencing as a strong component of the class community, it should be noted that the sample size in this research was a 25 student graduate course, so K-12 or undergraduate students, and other classes where video conferencing is used may have different experiences and perceptions.

Student engagement and success in online language learning

Online community is closely related to student engagement and success. It is crucial to focus on this engagement in online learning, because the student is not physically connected to the institution (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). Drawing on Moore’s

three types of interaction present in effective online courses (learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content), Martin and Bollinger (2018) surveyed university students at multiple universities. They found that students placed most value on learner-instructor interactions, and least valued learner-learner interactions (p.213). This may suggest that the role of the instructor affects student engagement.

When we narrow in to focus on the experiences of a language learner, we must also consider the experiences of students of all backgrounds. In the US, many of the English learners are also non-White. An article by Athens (2018) looks into the engagement of students from underrepresented groups in community college online learning courses. She found that students who perceived the course to be engaging and have a strong sense of community, they had better outcomes. However, this did not affect all populations of students the same; Hispanic and Black students had lower grades for their engagement levels, while younger students and students with disabilities engaged less but had grades similar to other students (p. 40). The findings from this research suggest that the experience of students in online courses is situated within a larger discussion on race, ability, age, and gender.

Looking into the experience of a language learner in online learning, Blake (2013) describes that technology can be used to increase contact with and provide more input in the target language when in-person immersion is not possible (p. 2). The author also recognizes that language learning through a computer or other technology goes against the inherent social nature of language, but that humans as social creatures have found ways to socially engage with technology (p. 20–21). Blake notes that the limited research

on online language learning courses has shown that students can learn language through this platform (p.113), and developed several key features of what he considers to be effective incorporation of technology into language instruction. This includes using a variety of technologies, using the technologies in conjunction with our understandings of second language acquisition, student-centered learning, “interactivity, agency, and students as (co-)producers of technologically enhanced materials”, and allowing students to draw on their understandings from both languages (pp. 130–138). While Blake incorporates second language acquisition theories, his ideas align with other researchers on best practices for online learning.

Conclusion

Online learning is the natural successor to other types of distance learning, and historically has been a way for students to engage with learning beyond the physical classroom space and time. Since online learning is not new, educators experiencing mandatory shifts to distance and online learning can build upon best practices from previous research. Given the importance the US government has placed on expanding digital and online learning, accessibility should be a focus of lawmakers to ensure students can participate.

Best practices for online learning can mirror in-person learning in some ways. Strong sense of community is important for students, and technology has advanced enough that synchronous class meetings are possible. Strategies can be used by instructors to increase sense of community and student engagement, and it is clear that students need to feel a human connection in this setting. For language learning, similar

strategies can be used if theories of second language acquisition are taken into consideration. Despite the technology mediating interactions in online learning, students approach this as social humans who crave interaction and a say in their learning. As teachers, we need to remember that even though online teaching is supported by technology, there is another human on the other end who deserves quality instruction. In this next section, I will look further into the relationship between technology and education.

Technology

Introduction

Schools have integrated technology into programming, and many classrooms make daily or weekly use of digital technology which includes computers, tablets, and online applications or programs. The push for technology comes from its positive relationship to student engagement and potential for student-centered activities (Revere & Kovach, 2011), and has become a viable option when in-person learning is unavailable (Huang et al., 2020). This section looks first into how educators can put Internet based technology to use in their classrooms, potential barriers to implementation, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on online learning. Secondly, this section discusses how technology can be used in language learning classrooms, with English learners, and its effects.

Role of Technology in Education

The use of the Internet to support K-12 education has grown since the first recorded instances in the early 1990s. Gemin et al. describe computer assisted instruction

in 2015 as a broad landscape affecting millions of students that includes everything from schooling done completely online from the student's home to teachers implementing technology into the classroom. Gemin et al. additionally describe how Florida became the first US state to create legislation allowing for all public school students in the state to have access to part- and full-time online learning, and state level online courses have since expanded to 24 states (2015, pp. 14–16).

An article from Revere and Kovach outlines options available to supplement online course management systems. The tools and applications the authors outline promote both a student-centered learning environment and student engagement. These include classically thought of technologies, such as discussion boards, chat sessions, and peer assessment; and technologies brought in from outside the course management system, such as Google applications, audio-visual tools, Twitter, and collaborative platforms (2011). While the actual applications, programs, and websites may change over time, the authors have identified types of technologies that support student-centered online learning based on their functions. So, teachers may look at categorizing new technologies by types outlined in the article and assess advantages, disadvantages, and how to implement them.

In looking at how technology can be integrated into in-person classrooms, Bitner and Bitner (2002) identify eight areas of importance for teachers in order to have successful implementation. Recognizing that adults are more resistant to change than students, the authors address the hesitancy teachers may have, stress proper training and support, and recommend modeling successful models of learning using technology. The

authors also discuss the importance of teachers learning and experimenting with technology, and allowing themselves to make mistakes, including in front of students (p. 98). By the time schools began to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers have already incorporated technology into their classrooms, and for many teachers technology in classrooms has been the norm. However, the move into online learning during this time pushed some teachers into using technology beyond their comfort zone. Drawing on Bitner and Bitner's recommendations for teacher technology use may be worthwhile if schools consider any major changes in how they use technology.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Online Learning Technologies

Many schools in the United States and around the world shifted from in-person learning to online with little preparation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the country of Georgia, Basilaia and Kvavadze describe the implementation of online learning during school shut-downs due to COVID-19. The estimate of how many students have access to the Internet via tablet, or computer varies based on if the student lived in a rural or urban area; however, smartphone access is estimated at 88% for rural and 93% for urban students (p. 2). The authors note how Microsoft and Google applications were used to deliver synchronous instruction via Google Hangouts Meet or Microsoft Teams. Furthermore, supplemental instruction was broadcast over television. While lesson times were shortened, creating a shorter school day, attendance of students at one school studied was above 90% during the first week of mandated online learning (2020). While the authors do not make any recommendations, this study is an important snapshot of how teachers in one country implemented a variety of online learning tools.

Meanwhile in China, as hundreds of millions of students have been affected by COVID-19 schools closures, Huang et al. (2020) developed a handbook to look deeply into how China's education system responded to the government's initiative, "disrupted classes, uninterrupted learning" (p.1). The authors discuss flexibility in instruction, reliance on user-friendly online platforms and tools, and creating and maintaining a dependable Internet network as several of seven areas of focus (p. 40). Additionally, collaboration between the government and schools contributed to creating a smoother transition from in-person to online learning (pp. 37–38). While the authors noted that an area of improvement is access to the Internet and technologies supporting Internet access, the authors do not detail the number of students who do not have access to online learning. Additionally, many of the online tools described in this handbook, apart from communication application Ding Talk, were developed for a Chinese audience and cannot be implemented on a worldwide scale in the same way that Google or Microsoft have been able to. It's also worth noting that the Chinese government has placed restrictions on the Internet within the country, and censorship is widespread (Xu et al., 2011). This limits the education system's access to globally available online technologies.

While the small sample from Georgia, and the larger scale implementation of online learning in China shows some signs of success in the use of learning technologies during COVID-19 school building closures, Hodges et al. (2020) outline the dangers of comparing online learning due to pandemic, described as emergency remote teaching (ERT) to established online learning:

Online learning carries a stigma of being lower quality than face-to-face learning, despite research showing otherwise. These hurried moves online by so many institutions at once could seal the perception of online learning as a weak option, when in truth nobody making the transition to online teaching under these circumstances will truly be designing to take full advantage of the affordances and possibilities of the online format (p. 2).

Rather than drawing conclusions on the functions and benefits of online learning happening during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors suggest that ERT is a temporary and different phenomenon than the research-based online learning which has been in existence for decades. Due to the fact that ERT is driven by crisis, and students may face disruptions in their lives, Hodges et al. also consider that asynchronicity and flexibility may be beneficial (2020). This point is key as schools consider any future ERT, since trauma and illness have a greater effect on students participating in ERT than students in traditional online courses.

Language Learning and Technology

While technology can be used to enhance learning in all subjects, students learning a language can be supported by a host of technologies and websites. Hossain et al. (2019) developed a qualitative study to collect information on electronic sources and websites that benefit English learners (ELs). Their collection includes mainly text-based and social media electronic sources for teachers to implement and with which students can interact. The websites the authors have compiled are geared at teachers, and contain materials which can be used in lessons. Since the authors did not outline any

recommendations on how to implement the sources and websites outlined in this article, it is left up to the individual teacher to decide on how to use these. Further, while the websites included may be appropriate and up-to-date at the time of publication, it remains to be seen if these sites will be useful and available in the future.

In research on one specific application, Instagram, Mansor and Rahim (2017) studied how Instagram could be used as a language learning tool for university business students by developing tasks for students to complete on the application using English. The researchers found that students participated at a high rate, and reported positive emotions in interviews about the experience. The authors consider that the participants had buy-in when learning language on a social media platform since it is interactive. The use of social media to promote language learning should be further explored, as there are multimedia aspects to each platform, and the content is situated in a real-world context.

Specifically looking into development of ELs' writing skills, Basri et al. (2019) consider the use of Google applications. The authors outline the benefits of using an application such as Google Docs due to the features that promote collaboration, such as adding comments, chat, the ability for multiple users to edit a document simultaneously, and the ability to see revision history. Basri et al. also argue that the affective filter, developed by Krashen, lowers when using an application like Google Docs, and thus promotes language skill development by decreasing anxiety levels (p. 2654). Given that this application suite is free for the public, and requires only the Internet to access, there is value in researching further how Google applications can support language learning.

While much research has been done on language learning technologies in the context of a classroom or online learning, it is important to consider the effects mobile apps have on language learning. Godwin-Jones (2011) reviews the development of smartphones and tablets, along with the available apps related to language learning, including ones which have remained popular such as Babbel, Google Translate, and Rosetta Stone. Godwin-Jones recognizes the uniqueness a smaller touchscreen device can have on a user's experience, "smartphones are ideal for individualized informal learning...As language educators, we should encourage and assist the learner autonomy this enables and provide means for learners to combine formal and informal learning" (p.8). While mobile language learning does not replace traditional English language instruction situated within the content, this option is worth considering as a supplement to formal instruction. As EL students remain at home due to COVID-19 school closures, their exposure to the English language is reduced. Thoughtful implementation of language learning applications on smartphones and tablets could be a way for students to increase their English proficiency during a time when immersion in an English-speaking community is limited.

Conclusion

Technology has demonstrated its useful place in education, and can be implemented from a small scale by the use of Youtube videos to supplement in-person instruction, up to a student experiencing all of their K-12 or university classes online. To incorporate technology into education, teachers should be supported and encouraged during the process, and learning should remain at the heart of why technology is used.

While the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools worldwide to close, educators relied on many online tools and applications to continue teaching. However, the problem of unequal access to the Internet remains, and may affect student equity in learning long-term.

In terms of online learning options for students learning English or other languages, there are many which are engaging and show promise, but there is not yet a set program of implementation or curriculum. As we are at a point in time where there are more options for learning via technology than ever before, it is worth exploring systematically how technology can be used to enhance English language learning, and learning during a global pandemic. In the next section, the human factor, motivation, how a student's motivation contributes to learning, and how teachers can affect this are considered.

Motivation

Introduction

Within the distance learning setting, motivation plays a role in how students engage in the course. It is thus important to investigate the components of English learners' motivation in online academic settings. In this section, the first part explores theories surrounding student motivation overall. The second part of this section focuses on motivation of the language learner, and the role the language teachers play in motivating students. This section will also look into how identity plays a role in the relationship between motivation and language learning. The third part of this section focuses on motivation in online language learning settings.

Student motivation

There are many components affecting how a student learns in an academic setting, and one heavily researched component is motivation. When we consider motivation in relation to students participating in online learning, we know that it is likely the student is trying to engage in coursework while in a home environment or face other distractions that may be a barrier to learning. Thus, a student's motivation and drive may affect how they engage in online learning in different ways than when a student is physically in a school building. However, the underlying theories on learner motivation should apply whether a student learns in a distance, in-person, or hybrid setting.

In a 2004 article, Seifert outlines established theories of student motivation, self-efficacy, attribution, self-worth, and achievement goal (pp. 137–143). These theories can be explained as a student's self perception of capability, how one views reasons for an outcome, how one assigns value to their person, and how and why one tries to achieve goals. Seifert further considers “motivation as an attempt to protect self-worth”, and that a student's emotions play a role in how they react to challenging situations (p. 144–145). Understanding this, we can expect that each person's individual experiences and personality will affect motivation. The author stresses that teacher student interactions have an overall effect on motivation, and this may be a main determiner on how a student motivates themselves (p. 148). So, it is necessary as an educator to understand the underlying drivers of motivation and how they can present differently in each student.

Looking further into how teachers have an influence on student motivation, Wentzel (1997) examined how middle school students perceived their teachers as caring,

and its effects on motivation. Wentzel found that beyond the established theories of motivation, students' understanding of their relationships with teachers and the extent to which they perceived teachers to care about their students had an effect on motivation (pp.416–417). This supports Seifert's claim that teacher interactions with students have an impact on motivation.

Language learner motivation

The ways a learner approaches acquiring a new language are more specific than general theories of motivation, as the language affects motivation in addition to other factors. Dörnyei approaches this idea by developing a model of language learner motivation composed of three levels: The language level, learner level, and learning situation level (1994, pp. 279–283). The author ties prior theories of motivation to each level and considers appropriate teaching strategies for improving motivation at each level. In a later work by Dörnyei and Csizér (1998), the authors developed a set of “ten commandments for motivating language learners” (Table 4). The commandments list “macrostrategies” instructors can follow that align with findings from Seifert and Wentzel, including how language teachers should create positive relationships with students. Additionally, Dörnyei and Csizér describe focusing on the learners needs and goals, which may perpetuate the reasons one has for learning the language (1998, pp. 215–218). These two articles once again, consider the amount of influence an instructor has in student motivation.

In a 2007 work by Gardner, he establishes four stages of language learning, two types of motivation, and how the types of motivation present in each stage of learning

and within two contexts of education and culture. The two types of motivation are described as “language learning motivation and classroom learning motivation” (p. 10–11). As for the four stages of learning, Gardner identifies these as elemental, consolidation, conscious expression, and automaticity and thought (pp. 11–12); which can be described as four stages from basic vocabulary acquisition (elemental) to full fluency with little effort put into expressing and understanding language (automaticity and thought). Through research with a group of Spanish students learning English, Gardner found that both educational and cultural contexts have an effect on motivation, which is then tied to achievement in the language classroom (p. 18). This research solidifies the idea that motivation and achievement are linked together.

Finally, Dörnyei (2009) describes his “L2 motivational self system” made up of three components, which considers that a language learners consider ideal and future versions of themselves within the real classroom environment (p. 29). This system considers the unique learning situation of a foreign language classroom, because language, culture, and identity are closely related and differ from other academic subjects. A student learning a new language may consider their identity situated within the culture of the target language; and as Dörnyei points out, the classroom environment can have an effect on this.

Motivation in online language learning

Beyond the specific factors involved in language learning motivation, we must also consider how motivation plays a role in online language learning. In research on university level students enrolled in foreign language courses, Ushida (2005) found that

students were generally motivated, which is likely due to the nature of these courses as self-selected. The students who reported higher motivation also had higher achievement in the class. Additionally attitudes towards the target culture grew more positive throughout the semester, which demonstrates that teaching culture is possible through online learning (pp. 65–66). Ushida’s findings also showed that students entered this course with self-reported high levels of anxiety regarding the course, but this decreased during the semester (pp. 66–67). Further findings from surveys completed as part of this research suggest that the instructor has a part in student attitudes towards the course (p. 68). This aligns with other research findings that teachers have a hand in student motivation.

Looking into connections between student motivation characteristics and success, a study from Al Fadda (2019) involving a student questionnaire from a blended university English as a second language (ESL) course considered five “self-regulatory attributes” and how they correlated with achievement. The author found that self-efficacy and verbal ability had a significant positive effect on grades, but due to the nature of the blended class and sample of students there may be different results for other students (pp. 91–92). However, it is clear from this study that motivation and success in language learning courses are linked.

Al Fadda and Ushida both focused on university students in these studies, so further research should be conducted on K-12 students. A main consideration in both of these studies here, is the choice university students have in their courses and paths of study. We know that K-12 students have less choice, and EL students do not usually have

the option to enroll in courses in their home language. The lack of control in courses and language of instruction may have an effect on EL student motivation in the K-12 setting.

Conclusion

Student motivation consists of a number of pieces, and each person has different levels of motivation based on their unique individual qualities, motivation in an educational setting can be affected by the teacher. Knowing this, educators can reflect on their own behaviors and practices to identify ways their teaching affects the motivation of their students.

In terms of language learning, the close relationship between language, culture, and identity adds another dimension to a student's motivation in a foreign language classroom. While research on general student motivation can be applied to language learners, including how teachers also partly determine student motivation, a student's self-perception of their own relationship to aspects of the language and its cultures may affect their motivation too. This appears to remain true regardless of if the language instruction happens in-person, in a blended context, or online. Online language learners may also report anxiety, which is possibly due to how students consider the platform of the course unfamiliar. As online learning becomes more prevalent, these attitudes may change in the future.

In the next section, I will look beyond motivation to consider other theories involved with second language acquisition. While motivation contributes to how one learns a new language, there are other processes and factors that are also important.

Second language acquisition theories

Introduction

People learn additional languages differently than the ways in which they acquire their first, often termed *native*, language. Second language acquisition (SLA) is as VanPatten and Benati (2010) describe, a “complex set of processes” which are approached from multiple disciplines (p. ix). This section will look into research conducted on SLA, and focus on information relevant for the field of education, especially SLA theories tied to motivation (Dörnyei, 2005).

Second language acquisition theories

Much of the research on SLA is situated in the field of education. Krashen noted the distinction between language acquisition and language learning, with the learning being explicit instruction (as cited in VanPatten & Benati, 2010, p. 60). Krashen’s further contributions to SLA research involve his input theory, which describes how language becomes internalized due to exposure; and his monitor theory, which details an affective filter present in a learner’s mind that allows for more or less linguistic information to enter (as cited in VanPatten & Benati, 2010, p. 60–62). While Krashen’s research has been influential on the field of SLA, VanPatten and Benati further detail other theories that contribute to this field. These include many tied to psychology, and some specific linguistic processes such as acquisition order (p. 61). The ties to psychology are important in SLA theories because the age and experiences of the learner can vary which differs when compared to the near-universal experience of a person’s first language acquisition. Cummins expands on this idea in his common underlying proficiency theory,

which explains how language learners draw on skills and knowledge derived from their first language (1980, 2016).

Essentializing language acquisition may not be possible, however Ortega (2016) divides ten observations on SLA developed by VanPatten and Williams into five key subfields. The subfields are knowledge and cognition, first language, interlanguage, linguistic environment, and instruction (Table 13.1). As one of the identified subfields is instruction, this reinforces the concept that SLA involves learning rather than simply a natural acquisition.

Tying into his other research on motivation in language learning, Dörnyei (2014) considers the effects of individual differences on SLA, which he considers to be a large umbrella for a wide variety of factors (p. 7). He focuses on how personality, ability or aptitude, and motivation can affect SLA, and concludes that all of these components can affect how one learns to some degree, but that the relationships between individual differences and learning is complex (pp. 218–220).

There are factors which affect language acquisition, and in a book on sheltered instruction for EL students Echevarria and Graves (2015) divide some of the main factors in two categories: Language learner and socio-academic. Within the language learner category are factors that differ for each individual and include motivation, social identity, age, personality, first-language development, and cognitive ability. In the socio-academic category are family, access to the target language, and quality of instruction as factors (pp. 38–42).

Conclusion

There are multiple theories to explain the processes involved in SLA, but one underlying assumption is that SLA differs from how one acquires their first language. Individual differences, characteristics, and social factors may explain how SLA happens differently for everyone, but it remains a complex process spanning the fields of linguistics, education, and psychology. Teachers should consider SLA theories when instructing in foreign language or students whose first language differs from the language of instruction so that their teaching practice can adjust to meet the needs of the students.

In the next section, I will shift focus from the theory of language learning to examine how EL students show up in education, and how their experiences are affected by language and culture. Additionally, I will explore how the COVID-19 virus has affected EL students differently than other populations, and the effects school closures due to the pandemic have had on students.

Experiences of ELs in schools

Introduction

This section will discuss specific issues that contribute to the current experiences of ELs in the American education system. The first part of this section will explore research on the EL student, the student's family, and interactions between teacher and student. This part will also include relevant discussion on the role of power and race in the classroom (Delpit, 1988), as race often plays a role in the educational experiences of EL students. The second part of this section will focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic

has affected the global education community, and how schools have responded to the pandemic by closing and changing the delivery of instruction.

EL students and education

Given that EL students in the US are a diverse population of learners, bound only by the similarity that all are in the process of learning academic English, it is obvious that research on the education of this population cannot describe common experiences shared by all. For research purposes, it may be better to consider students living in the same geographical area, or who speak the same home language. However, in research on how teachers and ELs hold expectations of each other, McCargar (1993) found that people from different cultural backgrounds have different ideas of the roles that teachers and students play. McCargar suggests teachers work to understand the expectations of their students, and adjustments in practices or delivery may minimize dissonance (p. 201). In related research by Youngs and Youngs Jr. (2001) on Great Plains teacher expectations of EL students was generally neutral, but found that teachers who had personal experiences with foreign cultures held more positive attitudes towards ELs. The authors suggest that more teacher training in diverse topics and more opportunities to work with ELs may contribute to more positive attitudes towards EL students.

Beyond teacher student relationships, Guo (2006) considers the relationships between teachers and parents of EL students, and how they differ from White Canadian parents. She identifies the barriers as “language differences, parent unfamiliarity with the school system, teacher attitudes and institutional racism, different views of education, and cultural differences concerning home-school communication” (p. 80). The author

proposes that educators need to examine their own attitudes and beliefs, and work to understand these barriers. Similarly to Youngs and Youngs Jr., Guo also suggests more teacher training with a focus on EL students. This perspective considers that schools should adjust to understand the needs and expectations of EL students and families, rather than pushing for the EL families to change to fit the culture of the school.

Given that EL students are often non-White, and are not fully fluent in the language of the classroom, Lisa Delpit's piece on power in the classroom should be considered to understand the experiences many EL students have. She explains that it is easier to acquire success in institutions such as schools, if you acquire the culture of those in power of the institutions. Beyond this, being explicitly taught the nuances of culture in power makes it easier to gain power, but those who hold the power are often least aware of, or least willing to acknowledge the power structure (1988). For an EL student, the teacher's understanding of this may have a strong impact on how they experience education and gain power. Yet, it is also important as Delpit describes, for adults from the students' cultures to influence their education (p. 296). This is a complex topic, made even more nuanced as a global pandemic caused rapid changes in US schools in the spring of 2020.

COVID-19 pandemic and education

Research on a new, contagious virus happens more slowly than many people prefer. When making decisions to close schools, lawmakers had to rely on limited information about how the COVID-19 virus affected and spread among young people. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has since reported that this virus has

disproportionately affected “racial and ethnic minority groups” (*COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups*, 2020), and we know many EL students can identify as members of these groups. The CDC considers systemic reasons these groups are at higher risk for contracting this virus, including access to healthcare, occupation, household makeup, discrimination, gaps in education, and financial reasons (2020). These are important to consider as the expectation that students continue to learn in some form has continued during this pandemic, but EL students may be more likely than White students to know someone affected by COVID-19.

In Reich et al.’s report on guidance from states during the pandemic, the first recommendation is to “continue to place issues of equity at the center of remote learning plans, with increased guidance for special populations” (2020). EL students are considered a special population, but it is up to each state to decide what this recommendation entails. The other two recommendations involve acknowledging the difficulties associated with education outside school buildings, and emphasizing the need for clear communication. Given that this report was created within weeks after schools closed, it could be possible that understandings of best practices have since shifted.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has outlined a list of negative effects of school closures (2020), which range from interrupted learning and struggles to adjust to learning in a home environment to poor nutrition, rise in dropout rates, and increased likelihood of exposure to violence or exploitation. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has highlighted these issues because they affect children worldwide, and we

can assume that ELs in the US are also affected by none, some, or many of the issues described in this article.

Conclusion

EL students are a unique subset of learners in the US education system, and their diversity contributes to their experiences in education. Teachers should examine their own biases when considering working with ELs, and more effort should be placed on developing teacher training and programs to prepare teachers to work with ELs. The role of power a teacher holds can also affect the experiences of not only EL students, but also all non-White students.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the ways many groups of people are at a health disadvantage due to systemic issues that go beyond the healthcare system. Due to these factors, EL students and their families are more likely to experience the virus. And while states have recognized that by closing schools, ELs are affected more than the average student, the possible negative outcomes for all students reveal the importance of schools in contributing to the well-being of young people.

Summary

We can conclude that EL students are a distinct population who teachers have not always understood well, and many of whom face challenges similar or identical to non-White students. While in the classroom learning content with peers, ELs are also undergoing a unique learning experience as they work to master a second language. Factors in SLA affect each individual in a unique way, which teachers should be aware of, as it will mean that each EL student learns differently. One determiner in how a

student learns is their motivation, and it is clear that teachers can have a role in affecting motivation. The role of the teacher in this is present in both online and in-person education. As for online learning, this is just a method of delivering instruction, so many practices an effective teacher uses can be transferred to this platform. Similarly, technology is used to enhance learning, but is not a substitute for strong instruction. Overall, it is apparent that teachers play a large and important role in student learning and motivation no matter the platform. Since motivation is linked to student achievement, teachers should consider how they can improve creating positive class communities and relationships with their students.

In the next chapter, I will detail the development of a website to be used as a resource for educators on the topic of best practices for teaching EL students in distance learning. By drawing on SLA theories and EL experiences, I will outline how to approach lesson design through the perspective of an ESL teacher. Based on the knowledge gleaned from the section of motivation, I will describe how teachers can self-reflect to maximize their role in influencing student motivation. Finally, by reflecting on the previous research in distance and online learning and technology, I will develop a set of resources educators can use during the development of online classes. These components will all contribute to a cohesive website that may provide some direction for educators who are looking for how to best support ELs while teaching in an unfamiliar format.

CHAPTER 3

Project Overview

Introduction

As a student teacher in the spring semester of 2020 and a new English as a second language (ESL) teacher in the fall of the same year, I have had firsthand experiences in how schools transitioned from in-person instruction to distance and online learning, and prepared for the 2020-2021 school year by developing plans for in-person, hybrid, and distance learning. English learner (EL) students have specific language needs, and based on feedback through video conferencing and written communication from some of the EL middle school students I taught, online learning was not a positive experience for them. This feedback, along with the low number of students who completed assignments successfully, and the multiple times EL students requested help understanding lessons and assignments from content classes has led me to ask *how can educators improve ELs engagement and success in distance learning settings?*

As of November 2020, distance learning has reoccurred for many school districts across the United States, and will continue for the foreseeable future due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As distance learning becomes commonplace, it may also become a more viable option for students during snow days, students homebound due to illness,

and a growing alternative choice in schooling, among other reasons. As EL students currently make up around 10% of public school students (*English Language Learners in Public Schools*, 2020), this population must be considered when educators develop instruction in distance learning.

As the focus of this project is on distance education, mainly through online formats, I felt it was in alignment with this topic to create a website. During the COVID-19 school closures, many teachers worked from home and connected with students via laptops and other electronic devices over the Internet. A website would be not only easily accessible for educators already connected to the Internet, but is also free to users, easily shared amongst people, and available anytime. As the COVID-19 closures have affected people nationwide, teachers can access a website from any locale.

In this chapter I will first describe the intended website project, which will include best practices, news, and resources for educators planning online instruction for EL students. This website will be intended for classroom teachers, but can also be useful for school administrators and ESL teachers. I will then detail the supporting research for this project, followed by the setting, audience, and timeline in which the project will be completed.

Project Description

My project is a website designed for educators working with EL students. This website was developed using the free website builder Wix, as this website builder has accessibility and readability features built in. This website serves as a resource for educators by providing clear ESL theory based practices to implement into online

instruction, and links to other resources. This website connects information to educators, which can then be used immediately in instructional practices. The resources this website houses for online instruction includes other websites, multimedia, articles, and applications. Additionally, as distance learning due to COVID-19 has been an evolving situation during the year 2020, this website will include a news section to share new information as new challenges arise.

The design plan of the website has a home page offering clear navigation to choose between the pages of *best practices*, *news*, *about the author*, *resources*, or *FAQ*. The website has a navigation bar at the top of the site, visible on each subsection and page. Within the *best practices* page, I overview the basics of who EL students are, the role of an ESL teacher, how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected EL students and their families, and how to best support ELs in online learning. The *best practices* section has a list of research-based references to support the claims. In the *resources* page, I divided the information into sections based on the type of resource, age groups, and audience to best connect teachers with the information needed for their specific classroom. Not only does this direct teachers to the most usable and relevant information, it is less overwhelming and promotes readability. The *news* page contains links to recent news articles pertaining to the topic of education and COVID-19. The *FAQ* section anticipates questions from teachers on the topic of ELs in distance learning. Finally, the *about the author* details the purpose of the project.

Research Support

The discussion on how language learning in an online setting is not new, as opt-in courses at all levels of education, especially university level, have existed and been researched since the early days of the Internet. For some, the social interaction inherent in language may lead to hesitancy regarding online language learning. However, Blake (2013) discusses that language learning is possible through online platforms, and there are factors that affect the quality of an online course apart from the technology used. He describes this as “not what technology but how it’s used” (p.132). Given the current state of technology, educators have the ability to draw on their talents and mirror many of their instructional practices through synchronous and video based technologies. Thus, the instructor has a great effect on the quality of instruction happening on an online platform, and the limitations of technology are not as strong as they were even five to ten years ago. The follow-up questions then lie with how to ensure that all students have high speed Internet access, and equity with technological access. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this discussion to the forefront, and I think the next step for many countries is to decide if Internet access is now a basic human right.

An article by Goldschmidt (2020) details how technology is essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for young people. This supports the creation of a website for this capstone, because technology has been at the center of how people have approached handling the pandemic. This includes academic instruction of children, social interaction for emotional well-being, telehealth and the approach to data from the medical

fields. Thus, teachers who instruct online during this time should be able to find resources from online sources as well.

In terms of how to go about the creation of a website, accessibility for the user needs to be the guiding focus. Dinc (2017) outlines practices and reasoning for accessible education websites through a lens inclusive of those with diverse abilities, so care must be taken to ensure that people of all abilities are able to successfully navigate and access a website. The organization of information and clear navigation systems on a platform supporting text-to-speech and other assistive technology is important to be able to connect with all educators and users of the site. Dinc also notes that educators should consider the accessibility of a website before implementing it into instruction. This can be extended to considering how EL students with limited English proficiency can navigate through a website, and how the text of a website aids or hinders this. Universal design can have unintended positive effects for the general population, so to guide my website development, I will follow Leavitt and Schneiderman's guidelines on design and usability (2006). Wix, the website platform I used has many of the features the authors recommend built in, and I adjusted the presentation of the website to adhere to their recommendations.

Setting

This project will take place in the context of a suburban K-12 district of 8,000 students. The district has 478 classroom teachers, which gives a student:teacher ratio of 17:1. The student demographics of this district are 56% White, 14% Hispanic or Latino, equally 11% each for both Asian and Black or African-American students, 7% two or

more races, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native. 13% of the district's students are identified as English learners, which is a few percentage points higher than the national average. 16.3% of the students in this district receive special education. Additionally, 34% of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch, and 0.6% of all students are homeless. At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, 22% of students have enrolled in the district's newly created online learning program for the entire school year. The remaining students will be experiencing the 2020-2021 school year in one of three models: in-person, hybrid, or online. The state government outlined these learning models in July of 2020, and school districts prepared to adjust periodically throughout the school year based on the county's COVID-19 case numbers per 10,000 people. Every two weeks each district reviews COVID-19 case numbers and adjusts the learning model if the case numbers are above or below a threshold per 10,000 people as outlined by the state. Through this plan, students and teachers in this district could experience up to three different types of learning models during the school year (Minnesota Department of Health, 2020).

Target Audience

The intended audience of this project is educators, and I mainly address K-12 content and classroom teachers. The reasoning is that content and classroom teachers are directly working with EL students daily, and are less likely to have professional development or education backgrounds focusing on the needs of EL students. However, the information presented in my project may also be useful for school administrators and ESL teachers in planning for instruction and collaborating with classroom teachers.

Timeline

The first step in the development of this website involved feedback from experts and revisions during August, 2020. The website pages and components were planned in September and October of 2020 through Google Docs, a text-based online platform for written planning. In October and November of 2020, I continued to monitor recent research and news on COVID-19 and school-aged students, specifically non-White students, because EL students are often non-White. The outsized impact of the COVID-19 virus on non-White individuals in the United States was discussed in chapter 2 of this capstone, and continues to be an area of research and concern. I monitored research on this topic so I have the most up-to-date research in this quickly changing pandemic situation. During this month, I also began drafting chapter 4 of this capstone project. In late October, 2020 I decided on the website design and claimed a site address on Wix. I closely reviewed the user readability and accessibility guidelines to ensure the design of the website promotes ease of use, and is navigable by anyone through any Internet capable device. In November 2020, I developed each of the website's pages, then reviewed and revised in late November and early December. Submission happens in December, 2020.

Summary

Due to distance learning continuing during the 2020-2021 school year in many places across the United States, this capstone project takes the form of a website. With teachers instructing through technology and relying on the Internet to connect with students, staff, and teaching resources, it was logical to develop a website so that this

research can reach educators quickly and through a platform they are already familiar with and have access to. The website was developed to be approachable and immediately usable for teachers instructing through the online platform. The website's information is geared towards classroom and content K-12 teachers who work with EL students.

Accessibility and readability was considered in the development of this website so that its information is clear, organized, and usable by all. The website was developed during the fall of 2020, and is ready for teachers to use in December, 2020. If online learning is mandated further during the 2020-2021 school year due to COVID-19, this website can be used during this school year and beyond to support the instruction of EL students.

In the next chapter, I will reflect on my learnings through the capstone project process and the development of the website. I will also consider the future of research on this new and growing topic.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion and Reflection

Introduction

The process in investigating and answering the research question *how can educators improve ELs engagement and success in distance learning settings?* has informed and driven much self-reflection in my own teaching practice. During my research into this question, and developing my project, I found myself applying my learnings immediately into practices within my own classroom. In this chapter I will first review the context and impetus for this project. Then, I will reflect on my learnings on both the research and the creation of a website as the culminating project. Next, I will discuss the implications, limitations, and recommendations surrounding my research. Lastly, I will describe the process and benefits of sharing this project with peers in my profession.

Context

The necessary shift to distance learning in the year 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted students all across the United States and worldwide. This change in education went beyond students and teachers, a ripple effect occurred among parents of school-aged children, many of whom needed to leave the workforce or adjust

how they worked in order to supervise their children while the physical school buildings remained closed. English learner (EL) students felt the effects of school closures in arguably stronger and different ways than English speaking White students, as ELs often belong to populations that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic (*COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups*, 2020). In my role as an English as a second language (ESL) teacher, I saw firsthand the challenges ELs faced during distance learning, and wanted to advocate for equitable and quality education for these students during a historical and challenging period.

While there are arguably some benefits to online learning, including flexibility in when and where students learn, students need reliable technology and Internet access, and a support system to keep them engaged and motivated. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it can also be argued that there was a lack of preparedness for instruction in the spring of 2020, which negatively affected student engagement and outcomes. The stress of teaching and learning during a global pandemic can cause cognitive overload, which should not be underplayed. Combining this with health, financial, and emotional stressors may lead to negative educational outcomes for many students, not just ELs. As a country, the United States will feel the educational impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for years beyond its duration due to the prolonged disruption it caused in the lives of both students and teachers.

Keeping all this in mind, I approached my research question with the understanding that this was a newer topic, as there has not been any recent global event that has affected education, and specifically ELs in the United States, on a similar scale

as the COVID-19 pandemic. While researchers are still working to understand the long-term effects of this event, I felt a sense of urgency and duty to conduct this research to work to make a positive contribution to the ESL field and the educational experience of EL students.

Learnings

I entered this research feeling a little overwhelmed to tackle such a new and developing topic. The development of my question and the beginning of my research began at the end of the spring in 2020. The last few months of the spring semester brought abrupt changes to all learners from preschool to university level, as school buildings closed and teachers scrambled to figure out instruction from a distance. At that point, no other person had yet addressed a topic close to my research question. I found that by identifying key components of the research question, I could synthesize and pull together research in each of the major themes of my question to understand my question as a whole. This was my first experience investigating a topic that did not have a foundation of research to build upon, and I learned how to dissect my question in order to divide my research into sections and bring these together to develop understandings in a developing topic.

One of the research findings that I found surprising was the positive effect teachers can have on their students' motivation in online learning, and how motivation is tied to academic achievement. I expected factors other than teachers to affect student motivation, but it is heartening to know that even when teachers and students are

mandated to conduct school in an online setting that teachers still can have a positive impact on their students.

As a writer and learner throughout this process, I have found myself drawing on the findings from the research to apply to my own learning (and teaching practice). Like many people working and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt stress and cognitive overload. Knowing that others have similar experiences, and understanding portions of what my students experience has motivated me to answer my research question so that EL students can be better supported during what is a stressful time for many.

Like so many others during the COVID-19 pandemic, I also found myself needing to learn unfamiliar technology, and shift my work to happening completely online. As a writer and learner, this ended up adding to my organization and productivity as I found new technologies, websites, and applications intended for my capstone project were also useful for my own teaching and learning. This has led me to have more of an open mind in regards to evaluating my own habits and practices as a learner, and also give me the opportunity to share my experiences as a beginner and newcomer to different technologies with both my students and peers.

Literature review

All the components of the research question needed to be considered to gain a whole understanding of the topic of best practices for ELs in distance learning. I identified several core themes: Distance and online learning, technology, motivation, second language acquisition theories, and the experience of ELs in schools. I researched a

variety of peer-reviewed journals, some books, and several news articles and reports to develop my understanding of each component, or theme, of my research question.

Throughout my research, the COVID-19 pandemic was developing, and as of writing this, research is still being conducted to understand the effects of the virus in medical, education, and public health fields. This capstone reviewed research up until the end of October, 2020.

While I consider each component of the literature review to be important in understanding my research question as a whole, I found that motivation, how motivation is tied to student achievement, and how teachers can influence student motivation to be key in my understanding of the research question. During the spring of 2020, when many students disengaged from learning, it is important for teachers to know that they can play a role in motivating students. With EL students, it is worth considering that the stress and disruption of life brought on by COVID-19 for many of these students may have a larger impact on their ability to participate in distance learning than just motivation.

One researcher, Sharla Berry (2017, 2019) has affected how I now approach teaching in online learning. She emphasizes the importance of building community in online classrooms, and how instructors can affect the way students experience online learning. She also discusses how instructors can draw on their strengths and personalities to be successful in online learning. It is reassuring to know as a teacher that the strengths you bring to your classroom apply no matter the platform.

Another article from Hodges et al. (2020) has influenced my thinking on the topic. The authors discuss the differences between planned online instruction and

emergency remote instruction, and if it is fair to compare the two types of instruction or expect the same student outcomes. This article is contemporary with the development of this capstone project, and has helped shape my understanding of what one can reasonably expect from students during a time of crisis.

As we look into the next decade of education, we can only expect that online learning will continue to develop as a viable platform for education. And as ELs make up 10% of the United States population, this group should not be left out while planning for online instruction. Based on the findings in my literature review, ELs are a special group that deserve consideration, but best practices understood from teaching ELs in-person, and strong practices for teaching all in online learning can have a positive effect on ELs' experience in this setting.

Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations

Implications

The implications of my project could be positive and wide-reaching. Distance learning has continued into the 2020-2021 school year, and may remain that way for many until COVID-19 case levels drop significantly or vaccination campaigns are underway. Teachers will need resources and support in how they instruct ELs. My project will connect teachers to these resources, and since a website is easily shareable and can be linked to, teachers anywhere in the world could have access. The project also has the ability to continue to develop and expand if needed, as website content can be changed or added to easily should additional relevant resources, news, or research become available.

While there may not be any changes to the policies surrounding ELs based off the findings in this research, it should be noted that at least one state has considered ELs, in addition to students receiving special education services, deserving of special consideration to return to in-person instruction while others remain in distance learning due to the unique needs of these learners (Minnesota Department of Health, 2020). This is recognition that ELs are often members of populations and communities that have been affected differently by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also that ELs may need additional support in school.

Limitations

Some of the limitations relate to the newness of the research and the changing understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic affects different aspects of life in the United States and the larger world. The outlook for how the virus would continue to affect the United States in August of 2020 is different than the outlook in November, 2020. Schools have had to be more reactive than proactive in regards to this pandemic, and this affects how teachers can plan for instruction.

Another limitation of this project is the assumption that teachers can implement tools and resources as they see fit into their instruction. Some teachers must follow strict guidelines and curriculum, so the resources I have made available may not be usable. Additionally, my focus has been on online learning, but some school districts are unable to instruct students online. Distance learning for some may take the form of weekly or monthly worksheet packets, or other similar forms. The best practices and resources I put forth are not as applicable or appropriate for this type of distance learning. This again

brings up the question, is the Internet now a human right? If significant populations of students do not have access to the Internet, is education in the United States equitable? This topic deserves further attention, but cannot be fully addressed here.

Further, while the intended audience of this project is educators who work in K-12 settings with ELs. There are teachers who rarely or never work with ELs, so my project would not be applicable to this segment of teachers. I did not address teachers of higher education in this project either, however the information could still be applicable, and resources geared towards secondary education could be useful and appropriate for higher education.

Recommendations and future research

Mentioned above, the findings that demonstrate the impact teachers have on motivation and online classroom community should be taken into consideration by educators. This is something in a teacher's locus of control during a time when many aspects of life feel out of our control. Teachers should focus on how to transfer their strengths from in-person teaching practices, and take the time to build classroom community. And to allow their personality and own best practices to create a personable experience for students. While online teaching adds a layer of distance between teachers and students, education in this format is still human to human.

Further, it is important for teachers to recognize the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected ELs and their families, and that their experiences may be different and more intense than their peers and teachers. Building relationships with these students

and families, and working to understand the experiences and cultures of ELs can remove some of the barriers between ELs and the education system.

While my aim with this project is to focus on the specific needs of ELs in K-12 education, there is space within the research to develop better distance learning practices in many areas. This includes students receiving special education services, students living in rural areas or without access to the Internet, early childhood education and primary grades, university students, and adult basic education students. It should be noted that in all of the aforementioned areas of research, ELs make up a portion of each population.

There is also potential for research regarding distance education and the differences between public, charter, and private schools, as well as the rise in homeschooled students during the COVID-19 pandemic. My research and project did not make a distinction between these, but school funding and the presence of ELs in each type of school may lead to different student experiences.

As my research and project focuses on the needs and experiences of the English learner, specifically in the United States, future research could be conducted and considered for students in other countries, and immigrant student population learning a different language. Given that English is a widely used global language, there is a body of research on students learning English as a foreign language while residing in a country where English is not an official language.

Given that the shift to mandatory distance learning is so recent, there are ample opportunities for others to develop research on this topic. It also remains to be seen how long the COVID-19 pandemic will disrupt and affect education within the United States,

so this event could be a brief event, or it could be the beginning of a large shift in how the United States educates its millions of students.

Communicating Results and Benefits to the Profession

Communicating Results

The project was created with the intention that it would be easy to share with the intended audience. The project is a free website hosted through Wix.com, so a link could be included in a professional development, newsletter from a district or administrator, or shared amongst colleagues. I intend to initially reach out to principals and other ESL teachers in the school district I am employed in, before considering how to extend the reach of this project. Ease of use and accessibility were considered with the classroom teacher as the intended audience, so the design of my website aims to help rather than overwhelm during a time when many teachers feel overloaded.

Benefits to the profession

My intentions with this project are to include ELs in the conversation when designing instruction for distance learning, and help classroom teachers consider all students when planning for instruction. ELs deserve the support from both ESL and classroom teachers, and my project provides an opportunity for classroom teachers to learn more about how to best serve these students.

I predict that online learning will continue to expand after the effects from the COVID-19 pandemic subside, and ELs will be part of the population participating in online learning. I hope my project and research are part of a push for inclusivity and universal design so students of every language and cultural background, special education

service level, and income level are considered and advocated for as teachers and other educators rethink how to deliver education.

Summary

Completing this research and project greatly influenced and guided how I approach teaching. The 2020-2021 school year is my first year as a licensed teacher, but like so many of my colleagues, we are all beginners this year. We have had to plan for instruction both in-person and online, and for some both simultaneously. To enter into my first year of teaching while concurrently researching how to best teach ELs, and developing a project intended to support my colleagues has led me to have a growth mindset in every aspect of my teaching, but also to be self-reflective as things constantly change around me.

The learnings and findings from this research can be the beginnings of larger, more comprehensive research on ELs and other unique learners since as of this writing, the United States is still in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains to be seen the long-term effects of this historical event. It should bring light to educators navigating teaching during this stressful time, that the strengths they draw on in the classroom can be applied to online learning; and with a few adjustments based in second language acquisition theory and understanding of the needs of ELs, they can also successfully support their own EL students.

I plan to continue to advocate for the needs of EL students, and use this project to support classroom teachers in their instruction. The collaboration of classroom and ESL teachers is essential in meeting the needs of ELs, so by sharing this project with

classroom teachers, the line of communication can open further. While completing this research and project during a pandemic was stressful in many ways, my drive for helping students kept pushing me to continue and create a project to the best of my ability, and keep a growth mindset during times I felt like wanting to give up or felt overwhelmed. I'm thankful for the opportunity to contribute to a timely issue, and hope that my learning inspires and drives others to do the same.

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