

***Bilingual Problems of Practice Protocol and Discoveries:
Supporting In-Service Teachers of English Learners During COVID-19***

Jordan González, St. John's University, United States

The European Conference on Language Learning 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The novel COVID-19 pandemic has caused a rupture in the trajectory of education worldwide. In the United States, it has been noted that the schism within education as a result of the pandemic is the biggest threat to national security (Choi, 2020). Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Multilingual Learners, specifically English Language Learners (ELLs), is one of the fastest growing student populations across the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017), and yet have some of the lowest graduation rates, such as in New York (NYSED, 2020). The pandemic further exacerbated the inequity for immigrant and ELL students with issues such as access to technology, digital literacy, and continuity of learning. This conference proceedings paper reviews a case study from one of the largest urban K-12 school district in New York, U.S.A. and the challenges, successes and promising practices that emerged during a professional development initiative for in-service teachers of ELLs within Bilingual Education programs. These teachers participated in a "Bilingual Problems of Practice Protocol" where they engaged in peer consultancy to systematically discuss their instructional dilemmas during the pandemic. The result of the peer consultancy was the generation of ideas towards resolution. The Bilingual Problems of Practice Protocol provided the forum for teachers to engage in professional learning with each other, where they analyzed instructional dilemmas and contexts, discussed successful practices and tools they discovered, and provided direction for the next steps teachers took in supporting their ELL students during a worldwide crisis.

Keywords: English Language Learners, Professional Development, Problems of Practice

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the continuous improvement efforts of one of the largest urban school districts in New York, U.S.A. in building equity and access for English Language Learners (ELLs) after the abrupt shift to remote learning and during the reopening of schools for hybrid instruction during the 2020-2021 academic year. Specifically, this study sought to identify the challenges, promising practices, and successes that teachers of ELLs have experienced within remote and hybrid. It also sought to provide an understanding of how the pandemic, which is often associated with negative impacts on the education systems, has also provided innovation and progress in areas of education that are beneficial for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

In addition, during the pandemic, New York State has experienced a significant increase in the ELL graduation rate. It has increased more than 20 percentage points since prior to the pandemic 2-years ago. The Regents Examinations, New York subject area exams that students must pass in order to graduate with their high school diploma in New York, and the exam exemptions prompted by the pandemic have contributed to the increase in ELL graduation rates by removing this requirement. However, although these exam exemptions were provided during both academic years (2019-2020 and 2020-2021), there is a stark difference in the ELL graduation rate during the height of the pandemic in 2020 and during the subsequent year in 2021. This suggests that the increase in the ELL graduation rate was not just due to Regents exam exemptions alone. Shifts in instructional practices because of the innovation, changes in policy, and technology integration should also be considered as contributing factors. These factors were implemented with ongoing systematic professional development that was informed by Improvement Science and the Cycle of Continuous Improvement. This qualitative study explores the and shifts in instructional practices that have emerged as a result of the pandemic and should be maintained during the post pandemic era.

English Language Learners in New York State during the pandemic

The New York State Education Department has indicated that during the 2020-2021 school year there was a total of 2,512,973 total students attending K-12 public schools in New York State (NYSED, 2022). Of that total student population, 240,035 are English Language Learners, or about 9.55% of students. Prior to the pandemic, the ELL graduate rate in June 2019 was 38.9% (NYSED, 2020), an alarming rate for any subgroup of students. In comparison, the statewide graduation rate was 83.4% (NYSED, 2020), noting the significant opportunities gap. During the pandemic, it was reported that ELLs knew their English was slipping away within New York City where 142,000 ELLs engaged in remote instruction (Kim, 2020). ELLs and their families experienced the compounded challenge of online schooling and navigating the systems in a language they don't understand (Rani, 2020), which resulted in bigger losses for children still learning to speak English (Kim, 2020). However, a year into the pandemic the ELL graduation rate rose to 60.5% in June 2021 (NYSED, 2022).

New York State provided exemptions to the Regents examinations required for the graduation requirement during the 2021 academic year (NYSED, 2021); however, these same exemptions were provided during the previous academic year in June 2020 (NYSED 2020), at the height of the pandemic and the ELL graduate rate was only 46.0% (NYSED 2021a). Although the ELL graduation rate increased by 7.1 percentage points in 2020, comparatively

the 2021 ELL graduation rate increased more than doubled in percentage points. It is important to note that the Regents examination exemptions were contingent on students who were scheduled to take the examinations and had to have passed the associated coursework. Therefore, the significant increase in the ELL graduate rate in 2021 also represents a higher ELL course pass rate in comparison to the previous year during the height of the pandemic in 2020. Increases in ELL students passing their courses in comparison with 2020 suggest there were more, and perhaps better, opportunities that were afforded to ELLs within classrooms across the state.

Improvement science

The framework that provided the systematic investigation of the shift in ELL instructional practices is Improvement Science. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching defines Improvement Science as the application of small, measurable, and individualized changes to address specific issues in an educational setting and help uncover the root causes of problems (Grunow, 2015). This is captured through the continuous cycles of improvement, represented in Figure 1. The cycle begins with “Plan” (analyze causes and assess current system), followed by “Do” (explicate improvement hypotheses and try out an improvement protocol), “Study” (measure outcomes and analyze results), and lastly “Act” (revise, refine or relate the intervention). This study will discuss the data collection and analysis within this framework.



Figure 1. Cycle of Continuous Improvement (Langley et al., 2009)

Plan

In order to assess the current system of providing ELLs with continuity of learning during hybrid and remote instruction, the following research questions were formulated.

Research Questions. The following research questions guided this study:

1. *Research Question Number One:* What challenges did ELLs have during remote and hybrid instruction during the pandemic?
2. *Research Question Number Two:* What were some of the promising practices that have emerged during the pandemic in support of our English Language Learners?
3. *Research Question Number Three:* What lessons learned need to continue beyond the pandemic in support of our English Language Learners?

The research included a qualitative approach through a case study approach. The case study included data collection from a narrative inquiry and professional development materials. The analysis attempted to understand and explore in detail the challenges, success and promising practices that have emerged as a result of the pandemic. The study included the collection narratives through surveys from one of New York State's largest urban school district with a large population of English Language Learners. The school district has English as New Language (ENL) program in every single school and Bilingual Education programs in multiple schools. The participants include both ENL teachers and Bilingual Education teachers. The surveys did not collect statistical information, such as Likert scales surveys; but rather, participants provided brief narratives as their responses to three questions. The questions included:

1. What are the biggest challenges you and your English Language Learners are facing during remote/hybrid instruction?
2. What are some of the best practices you have found during remote/hybrid instruction as it relates to English Language Learners?
3. What success(es) you have experienced since hybrid/ remote instruction began?

The survey was rendered during the early Fall 2020. The school district engaged in remote learning during the first month of the academic year and shifted to hybrid in October. The responses to the surveys were analyzed and coded until themes emerged for each question and across questions. Points of contact and departure within themes across the three questions were noted and are further discussed in the subsequent section.

Table 1 below contains the themes that emerged though the responses to the first survey question and are not placed in any particular order. Many participants responded with the challenge of access and equity for ELLs to technology and WIFI, which speaks to the lack of resources to complete homework even prior to the pandemic. Those that did have access did not have the digital literacy needed to effectively use the technology nor navigate the learning management systems being utilized by their schools. Many teachers also stated that they noticed their ELLs were not engaged, not participating within remote instruction, and were not completing or submitting assignments. The reference to scheduling issues and meeting the service mandates refers to the state mandates for ELL services, which requires weekly amounts of service minutes based on the proficiency level of the student.

Challenges MLL teachers and students face

Access and equity in technology and Internet
 Student engagement, participation & noncompletion of assignments
 Lack of digital literacy
 Scheduling issues in meeting the service mandate
 Class coverages
 Simultaneous teaching (in-person & remote)
 Co-Teaching online with content area teachers
 Social distancing and the need for student collaboration
 Need for ongoing professional learning for teachers and families.

Table 1 Themes of responses to survey question #1: Challenges

As part of fulfilling ELL service mandates, one option is to engage in Co-Teaching between the ENL teacher and content area teacher, which proved challenging for many during remote instruction. Lastly, many teachers also included the need for ongoing professional

developing to help learn the technology and how to integrate the technology within their instruction.

Table 2 below contains the themes that emerged from the responses to the second survey question on the best practices they encountered during remote/hybrid instruction. Three major themes surface that directly correlated with the challenges that were posed by the first survey question. Tables 3, 4 and 5 show examples of responses that participants included that were coded as “best practices.”

Best Practices MLL teachers and students face
Student Engagement and Participation
Best Instructional Practices for Language Development
Building Digital Literacy

Table 2 Themes of responses to survey question #2: Best Practices

Best practices for student engagement and participation
NearPod Lessons and other interactive programs for engagement
Chat feature where students ask questions who are reluctant to participate
Digital tools, such as collaboration boards, FlipGrid, and breakout rooms for peer interaction
Providing lessons live and asynchronously if students cannot make live session, they can watch it online, do the lesson and submit
Maintaining constant communication to parents and students with translation technology
Using students’ cultures to spark conversations and stimulate high order thinking skills

Table 3 Example responses to survey question #2: Student Engagement

Best practices for language development
The use of shared screen function to show visuals & videos related to the content.
Having a white board behind me to help demonstrate concepts and provide scaffolds
Putting less on slides with translations
Having close captions on in English for student to read and hear what is being said
Having intensive ENL Standalone session with Newcomers
Providing multiple opportunities to practice a skill to generalize the learning

Table 4 Example responses to survey question #2: Language development

Best practices for building digital literacy
Creating a Bitmoji classroom where students can find digital versions of various resources they can find in the classroom in-person
Creating explicit routines for hybrid and remote learning that has visuals
Reviewing routinely where online resources are with expectations
Using translation programs to mitigate language barriers for students and families
Using cloud based systems so that students have access to all information they may have missed

Table 5 Example responses to survey question #2: Digital literacy

In addition to best practices, the survey asked respondents to also discuss any success(es) they have experienced since remote/hybrid instruction. Table 5 contains the examples of responses participants included.

Successes experienced since remote/hybrid instruction

I have improved my technology skills in the process

I have expanded my knowledge on applications for education that can be utilized for ELLs

The students are becoming more comfortable using the technology and there are many programs they can access that promote listening, speaking, reading and writing

Increased parental involvement!!!

More students are engaged and helping them to complete classroom assignment

No cost virtual field trips

I am getting experience in true-co-teaching with regular common planning time.

Table 6 Example responses to survey question #3: Successes

One will notice that what some participants were experiencing as a challenge within one classroom or school, within the same school district other participants within another classroom or school were able to provide a best practice or success story that they experienced within their instructional context. In other words, there was a variation of challenges, best practices and successes teachers and their ELL students were experiencing within the same school district. Therefore, it became important to share the responses and themes with all the respondents.

The results of the data were shared during a meeting with respondents in October 2020. The participants stated that the information shared let them know that they were not alone in the challenges they were facing, but more importantly, it provided motivation and hope to experiment with or learn more about the best practices that was experienced by their colleagues. Therefore, the answers to their challenges were in the room. The teachers requested time and space to engage each other in discussion to share their challenges, successes, and promising practices. This led to the next phase of the continuous cycles of improvement.

Do

Within this stage, we explicate the improvement hypotheses and try out an improvement protocol. The hypothesis was informed by both the survey data and request from the teachers after sharing the results of the survey. The hypothesis is that we can improve instructional outcomes for ELLs during hybrid and remote learning by providing teachers with a forum to discuss their dilemmas and engage in sharing of insights and best practices. This led to the identification of the Problems of Practice Protocol to implement as an intervention that aligned with the hypothesis. The National School Reform Faculty of the Harmony Education Center provides a comprehensive collection of protocols for educators to utilize as part of their institutions continuous cycle of improvement. The problems of practice protocol's purpose is to help individual think more deeply about a concrete dilemma around teaching and learning and to build collaboration and collective efficacy among a group of colleagues.

Once a participant identifies their dilemma, he or she brings it to the consultancy group, frame a focus question that gets to the heart of the dilemma, and prepare background information and context to share with the group. The group engages in clarifying and probing questions to engage in reflective discussion. The group discusses and works to define the issues more thoroughly and objectively. The goal is not to definitively solve the dilemma; but rather to analyze it and bring in a new perspective to help the presenter reach a resolution. An informed professional development series based on the Problems of Practice

Protocol was implemented across the district, which allowed teachers of ELLs to engage in peer consultancy across schools in a systematic matter. This allowed teachers to tap into each other's expertise while building collaboration across the school district, breaking down the silos.

Study

Within this penultimate stage within the cycle, the protocol and hypothesis must be measure in to determine if the intervention is having an effect. A survey was administered after a series of Problems of Practice Protocol sessions to collect feedback on teacher experiences with the protocol. Table 6 provides some of the responses that represented themes in the responses submitted in the survey.

Post Problems of Practice Protocol Survey

Continue to meet with all Bilingual Teachers to continue to have collegial conversations on what is working and what is not working and assist our students in moving forward.

I enjoyed my experience with the protocol, and I received great resources and ideas from colleagues.

Next meeting, I would like to meet with monolingual and bilingual teachers in my grade level.

This was a first attempt at using this protocol. We need more practice using this protocol and along with that, more clarity as to the roles of each person.

Table 7 Example responses to post survey

The post survey analysis provided both successes of protocol as well as suggestions to refine the process, including the expansion of the consultancy group to include non-ELL teachers and the increase in the frequency of the consultancy protocol for practice as this was a relatively new professional development practice for participants. The results from the study informed the next and last stage.

Act

This final stage within the continuous cycle of improvement is where the intervention is either revised, refined, or related. Another way to think about this stage is to either adopt the intervention, adapted it based on the “study” stage, or to abandoned it due to the negative impact it had. The intervention, the Problem of Practice Protocol, was refined to include more teachers, specifically content area or teachers not trained within language learning development, in order to provide insights with content area practices. Further guidance was given on the roles of the protocol as well as the frequency of meetings for this job-embedded professional development.

Conclusions

The pandemic has been catastrophic within the educational system; however, the pressure and circumstance has also allowed for innovation within technology integration and instructional practice for our ELL students. It also brought together teachers to drive their own professional development through a peer consultancy protocol rather than relying on outside consultancy they may not be familiar with the resources, student populations, and school district cultures and dynamic that teachers are intimately familiar with. These

emerging lessons learned would and should continue to be incorporated even within a post-pandemic society. Based on the findings, ongoing professional development on using the resources, as well as opportunities for teachers to exchange and share their challenges and best practices will allow for the development of a professional nexus that will build capacity in meeting the needs of our culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. Further study is needed to determine to what extent has the shifts within instructional practices have impacted the 2021 ELL graduation rate. In addition to the Regents examination exemptions and shifts in instruction, additional variables need to be identified and explored to fully understand the significant increase of the ELL graduation rate in New York during the pandemic.

References

- Choi, D. (2020, July 8). Navy SEAL who oversaw bin laden raid says America's biggest national security issue is the k-12 education system. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/navy-seal-william-mcraven-education-biggest-security-issue-2020-7>
- Grunow, A. (2015, July 21). Improvement discipline in practice. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teacher. Retrieved from: <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/improvement-discipline-in-practice/>
- Kim, J. (2020, Dec. 29). With remote learning, a 12-year old knows her English is slipping away. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/29/nyregion/coronavirus-english-language-students.html>
- Langley, G.J., Moen R., Nolan K.M., Nolan T. W., Norman C.L., and Provost L.P. (2009) *The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). Fast facts English language learners. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>
- NYSED (2020). State education department releases 2015 cohort high school graduation rates. Albany, NY: NYS Board of Regents, Retrieved from: <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2020/state-education-department-releases-2015-cohort-high-school-graduation-rates>
- NYSED (2021). *Exemptions from diploma requirements and cancellation of the august 2021 administration of the New York State (NYS) high school regents examination program in response to the ongoing impact of the covid-19 pandemic*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/state-assessment/memo-june-august-2021-assessments.pdf>
- NYSED (2021a). *State education department releases 2016 cohort high school graduation rates*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2021/state-education-department-releases-2016-cohort-high-school-graduation-rates>
- NYSED (2022). State education department releases 2017 cohort high school graduation rates. Retrieved from: <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2022/state-education-department-releases-2017-cohort-high-school-graduation-rates>
- Rani, R.S. (2020, Apr. 22). Imagine online school in a language you don't understand. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/coronavirus-immigrants-school.html>