Do's & Dont's

of EL Instruction

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ENGLISH LEARNERS SUCCESS FORUM

GRADES K–12

Distance Learning and English Learners:
Making Lemonade from Lemons

What We Know

Successful English Learners (ELs) develop both language and content knowledge simultaneously, and they learn best in face-to-face interactions that both challenge and support them. However, during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of schools are shuttered and more than five million ELs are learning from home. So, while there is limited research on the efficacy of distance learning and even less evidence-based guidance on how to best serve ELs in a completely digital PreK-12 environment, what we can offer teachers here is our best advice on making lemonade from lemons. We believe that in every crisis there is an opportunity, and by utilizing the recommendations below, teachers can refocus on what we know works when teaching ELs, reformat lessons to adapt research-based practices to online environments, and reimagine a system where all ELs demonstrate success.

In March, ELSF surveyed educators. We wanted to listen to teachers' authentic reactions and learn how our nation's quick shift to distance learning impacted their practice. The results from that survey indicated that while teachers were adapting at lightning speed and utilizing a myriad of online learning systems, apps and paper packets to promote continued learning, they still had unanswered questions about how to best serve their ELs in the new learning format. The Do's and Dont's below are our best thinking to address some common threads specific to ELA instruction.

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Based on the research and ELSF guidelines, we suggest the following:	
DO Ask questions to understand how the pandemic is impacting your students and offer encouragement. Maintain your authentic connection to your students by calling them on the phone, texting, or sharing written feedback in a letter sent over snail mail in addition to utilizing online on-demand feedback methods.	**DON'T** Don't assume that what you knew before about your students will suffice. Don't let your students forget how much you care about them.
DO Reflect on the big picture. What do you want your students to know and be able to do? Design an arc of learning and lesson plans that maintain high expectations, access to high quality text and worthwhile learning tasks as the focus.	**DON'T** Don't use one definition for student success. Individualize what success will look like for each student during these challenging times.
DO Adapt previous pacing guides to distance learning by making strategic decisions about breadth and depth of content. Design lessons and learning experiences around compelling ideas and rigorous academic tasks. Use the boost, offer, provide and incorporate frame.[4] Try this fillable Distance Learning Lesson Plan for ELLs Template.	**DON'T** Don't try to cover the exact same material at the exact same pace online as you would have in person. Ask yourself what is the compelling content and what are the priority standards and then focus on those ideas rather than the full pre-pandemic scope and sequence.

Based on the research and ELSF guidelines, we suggest the following:

DO Carefully craft explicit directions (and provide them in students' home language if possible) so that each student can get started on his or her own right away. Provide general, specific and individualized help resources that make this possible.

DON'T Don't draft complicated or unclear directions that leave students uncertain about how to begin, or try to do too many things all at once. Don't over-scaffold assignments and diminish student autonomy.

DO Teach students how to effectively use digital tools like Google Translate or TalkingPoints as a strategy for learning and increasing metalinguistic awareness. Reach out to peer, community or family interpreters for support as needed. Use this resource to access multilingual guides to Zoom, Google Classroom and more.

DON'T Don't overuse Google Translate (it's limited) or over-rely on translators or interpreters. One way that you can meet students where they are is by providing them the opportunity to demonstrate their content learning in their home language when possible.

DO Consider jump starting your live learning lessons by pre-recording videos that provide necessary background building and content lectures in the flipped classroom design.[1] In class, focus on a product that is bite-sized, specific and manageable.

DON'T Don't monopolize precious synchronous whole-class learning minutes with teacher talk.[4] Maximize authentic student-to-student interactions by using active learning routines that provide pairs or small groups with clear directions for practicing speaking, listening, reading and writing.[2] Don't try to tackle too much at one time.

DO Continue to formatively assess and provide students with the necessary just-in-time scaffolds (such as amplifications that use visuals, multimedia, or the strategic chunking of material) in order to access complex grade-level text. Do you need additional ideas on how to accomplish this? For more support with scaffolding in a remote environment see this resource.

DON'T Don't put the technology before the task. Continue to design tasks that help students simultaneously learn the language and content, then, consider the various tech options to help your ELs learn the objectives you designed. Avoid overdesign by adding too many tech features or too many scaffolds that confuse students.

DO Plan for and explicitly teach language. In every lesson, pre-identify the language that is necessary for students' core understanding of the content. Use formative assessments to determine individual student needs and record mini- lessons on these target language elements. Provide multiple practice opportunities and feedback on language development.

DON'T Don't focus on bits and pieces of language such as grammar and vocabulary in isolation or disconnected from ideas or content learning. Don't forget to continue to utilize sentence frames and graphic organizers, even in an online teaching environment.

DO Increase student engagement in online learning by asking students about texts and topics of interest, and providing enriching, standards-aligned, culturally-relevant and challenging options for content learning. Use simple games, songs, scenarios and apps that provide students multiple opportunities to practice their English. Check out both Colorín Colorado and SupportEd for more practical strategies and resources.

DON'T Don't decrease student engagement by over-relying on worksheets, copying information or other below grade-level, low-interest assignments. Don't assign busy work that has little value for the time invested.

It is recommended that these practices be part of a comprehensive approach to EL instruction and not in isolation as laid out in our Guidelines for Improving English Language Arts Materials for English Learners.

Endnotes

1 Bergmann, J., & Sams, A. (2012). Flip your classroom : Reach every student in every class every day (First ed.). Eugene, Oregon: International Society for Technology in Education.

2 Bondie, R., & Zusho, A. (2018). Differentiated instruction made practical : Engaging the extremes through classroom routines (Eye on education). New York, NY: Routledge.

3 Colorín Colorado.

4 Quality Teaching for English Learners (2020). How to Support English Learners in Distance Learning. WestEd.

5 Immigrant Connections. (2020). Google Classroom and More in Multiple Languages.

6 Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. SEDL.

7 Using Multilingual Resources to Support English Learners' Remote Learning. (2020). English Learner Success Forum.

• elsuccessforum.org

Based on the research and ELSF guidelines, we suggest the following:

DO Engage students with as much contextualized language as possible. They need the words to describe their technology challenges, current circumstances and public safety guidelines. Teach them to critically read and analyze media (TV, radio, internet) and to create their own media by recording thoughts that demonstrate new understandings using new language skills.

DON'T Don't go on with business as usual and ignore that students, ELs and non-ELs, are living in a new reality with dynamic circumstances. Consider how the students' academic and non-academic needs are being met and how you can help. Connect students with counselors and community organizations that can provide additional support beyond academics.

DO Craft your schedule so that you have time for one-on-one meetings with your ELs. Use this time to clarify misunderstandings, offer specific next steps, provide personalized encouragement and keep their learning moving forward.

DON'T Don't neglect the importance of individual and specific feedback, even online. Feedback is critical to motivation and growth so offer reactions that assists students in developing greater awareness of their own linguistic and conceptual growth and foster their autonomy over time.

DO Provide multilingual resources for parents to partner and extend the learning opportunities to the entire family. Encourage your students' continued development of their home language by conducting family interviews, journaling and engaging in family discussions around compelling topics or concerns. More ideas from ELSF can be found here.

DON'T Don't forget to engage parents, caregivers and families in quality interactions that foster intergenerational lifelong learning.[6]

DO Extend grace and compassion to yourself and your ELs as you navigate this new teaching and learning format.

DON'T Don't give up. Continue to connect with your students individually and motivate them to achieve more than they imagine is possible.

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