

Diversity and Speech  
Part 15: English Language Learners

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(October 19, 2020, Draft)

It has become a truism that COVID-19 has widened the gap between America's haves and have nots. As the wealthy add to their corpus, the poor struggle to survive. But beneath this master plot lie millions of shared disparity narratives, stories that repeat themselves over and over.

So it is with the narrative of English Language Learners (ELLs), educationese for kindergarten-twelfth grade students who happen to live in homes where English is not the primary language. Their parents may speak little or no English. Add the fact that many of these students -- maybe most of them -- come from working class families and are students of color. The absence of privilege triple whammy.

In the best of times, these young people face educational challenges. ELL specialists sometimes refer to this as lugging two backpacks. One backpack is the challenge of learning a second language, English. The other backpack is the challenge of learning subject matter content, from science to social studies, using English, a language they are still acquiring.

But these are not the best of times. The arrival of COVID-19 and the overnight switch to online learning have added a third backpack. Now ELLs must also contend with

learning to use unfamiliar computer technology while drawing on highly-technical English-language instructions.

As school districts shifted almost overnight to online instruction, inequities exploded. Children in homes without computers. Parents with little digital knowledge or experience. Undependable connectivity. Add to that, children no longer able to attend schools, the one place where they could regularly hear English and develop their English fluency.

Now my daughter, Alana, enters the story. She specializes in providing educational support services for English Language Learners. Facing this widening opportunity gap, Alana and her ELL specialist compatriots across the country have swung into action. To address the enormous challenge of creating access in situations encumbered by myriad barriers, they continuously come up with new strategies, born of necessity and shaped by creativity.

Every Sunday afternoon Alana and I talk via Zoom. About our lives. About her two children, one a college freshman, one a high school junior. And about her adaptation to the online teaching and coaching world.

Take the use of chat rooms for classes and teacher-training webinars. The chat room allows class members to post messages in response to the teacher's prompts and

questions. Everybody can “talk” at the same time. But built into the chat message structure is the fact that it favors some people over others.

Chat rooms favor the adventurous over the more reserved. They favor those with more keyboard agility. They favor interpersonal folks whose first response is to immediately interact, as contrasted with those with intrapersonal tendencies, who prefer “think time” to reflect and maybe write privately before sharing. And they favor those raised in English-speaking environments, who react immediately in their native language without the reflexive delays of those whose brains operate initially in their native languages.

Alana described one technique for equalizing chat room usage: ask students to write their responses but not post them. Then, after giving the entire class a determined amount of time, the teacher tells everyone to post at the same time. The result is to equalize access for the less adventurous, the slower keyboard user, and the intrapersonal thinker. And, of course, for English Language Learners. As Alana and her ELL specialist compatriots develop their workshops for teachers and ELL coaches, this delayed chat message technique has become a basic strategy for creating greater equality of learning opportunities.

One of the basic goals in the education of English Language Learners is to develop their ability to listen to, make meaning from, and articulate in English. For the sounds of English to become more natural and reflexive, it takes time and practice in speaking and listening. Over the years, ELL specialists have developed myriad classroom strategies

for strengthening this oral language. The forced move to online teaching has disrupted many of those strategies. The online challenge: how do you maximize English-speaking opportunities for students seated in front of a monitor in non-English-speaking homes?

One day Alana shared with me a new technique. Mute all of the students' microphones. Then ask a question and have the students answer all at once in English. In the classroom this would be cacophonous. On the digital screen there is total silence, as ELLs rehearse their responses before speaking individually to the entire class.

Another muted technique. Young kids are asked to bring a stuffed animal or something else they can talk to. Then, following teacher prompts, they turn to their silent companions and discuss the topic in English.

Obviously these techniques are not the total answer. Teachers still need to hear and interact individually with students. But these strategies do encourage ELLs to speak and develop their oral English.

As the months go by and I listen to Alana's stories of struggle and frustration, combined with achievements and breakthroughs, my admiration grows for the tens of thousands of ELL teachers and specialists who engage in the unceasing challenge of educating these young people. Working against linguistic and economic odds, hypertrophied by COVID-19, they battle day by day to open educational doors. Their stories may not

grace television news and talk shows, but their dedication to greater equity is deserving of medals.

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