

# Supporting English Learners During School Closures

## Considerations for Designing Distance Learning Experiences

Elsa Billings & Rachel Lagunoff • May 2020

*Like their colleagues across the globe, California's K–12 public school teachers are experiencing an extraordinary instructional challenge during the worldwide public health crisis caused by the new coronavirus. With schools closed and students sent home under shelter-in-place orders, teachers have had to make what for many is a precipitous shift from providing instruction in the classroom to providing it from a distance. Ensuring the general quality of this new teaching-and-learning mode is a challenge for teachers and education leaders alike. Equally challenging — and equally important — is implementing distance learning in a way that meets the specific learning needs of the almost 1.2 million California students identified as English Learners, a group that accounts for 19.3 percent of the state's public school enrollment.*

A first step for effectively engaging all students, including English Learners, in distance learning is, of course, ensuring that they have the required information and communication technology, along with high-speed internet, and any support they might need for using the technology effectively. This step is key because, while it might sometimes seem as if computers and other digital devices are ubiquitous in U.S. society, the digital divide is real — especially for English Learners (see *English Learners and the Digital Divide*, p. 2). Districts and schools are scrambling to close that divide by getting the necessary technology and internet access to students who need them so that virtual instruction can proceed for all students.

Once students — and their teachers — have the necessary technology and related supports needed for online instruction, educators still need to consider how to use these most effectively for their English Learners. For example, they should keep in

mind that many digital resources and tools currently available are not designed to meet the particular instructional needs of this student population. Moreover, as teachers design lessons and activities to serve their students through distance learning, they should consider the specific social-emotional, language, and academic needs of their English Learners, so as to avoid deepening education inequities and gaps in learning that already exist for this student population. While a fair amount is known about effective instructional practices for English Learners, less is known about how these practices might look different in a distance learning context compared to the classroom. The primary purpose of this brief is to help educators make this critical shift. It does so by identifying and explaining the value of four key practices that are known to be effective in meeting the instructional needs of English Learners. After describing each practice and providing some illustrative examples of what the

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practice can look like in a standard classroom, the brief offers some suggestions for how the practice might be applied in different types of distance learning contexts.

Whether coming together in the classroom or online, the teacher and students operate as a learning community that is most effective when all members feel valued, safe, and supported in stretching themselves to push beyond what they already know in order to develop new knowledge and skills (NASP, 2015). Being part of such a community may be especially important for English Learners, who strive to both learn and demonstrate their growth in a language they have not yet mastered. But, feeling safe and supported is important for all learners, and never more so than during these worrying times. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) has noted that the fear, stress, and anxiety prompted by infectious disease outbreaks can be particularly overwhelming for children and teens. “Creating Safe Learning Communities,” on page 3 of this brief, offers some tips on how teachers can continue to help their students feel safe and supported in a distance learning context.

### Applying Effective Classroom Practices for English Learners to a Distance Learning Context

Ideally, the four key practices for effective English Learner instruction described below are enacted in the classroom. There, English Learners can receive — and provide — just-in-time scaffolding and feedback through frequent and reciprocal exchanges, both oral and written, between and among the teacher and students.

### English Learners and the Digital Divide

There is a persistent digital divide between English Learners and non-English Learners (KewalRamani et al., 2018) and between lower- and higher-income individuals (Anderson & Kumar, 2019). Thus, among English Learners, whose families are disproportionately economically disadvantaged (Hill, 2018), many may not have computers or internet access at home.

In the sudden shift to teaching and learning at home, some districts are struggling to provide computers and Wi-Fi access to students (Johnson, 2020). Yet, even when districts succeed, English Learners and their families may have little familiarity with how to access and navigate online learning programs, or how to set up and use communication applications, such as video-conferencing. In a nationwide survey of how teachers use digital technologies with English Learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), the majority of respondents reported that, normally, they do not ask English Learners to use digital learning resources outside of class, due to concerns that the students do not have access to the required technology at home. In addition, many teachers noted their own lack of the expertise and experience needed to use digital learning resources with English Learners.

English Learners’ digital learning experience is further complicated by the fact that they have to make sense of new information presented digitally through two languages (i.e., English and their home language). Thus, to ensure equitable access to digital instruction for English Learners, it is critical that educators make particular efforts to ensure that these students and their families have the support and resources they need, in a language they understand, to engage in distance learning digitally.

As students participate in such interactions, they can simultaneously engage with a rich and readily accessible array of conceptual, academic, and language supports. For example, pertinent learning resources such as class-made charts and posters may be visible on the classroom walls or placed on students' desks, and useful formulaic expressions (e.g., "I found this text to be interesting because...") may be modeled by the teacher and used by

peers, as well as provided in an easy-to-reference handout. Some such classroom supports, though probably not all, can be provided to students online. For students with no technology, a teacher can of course mail graphic organizers, charts, or other handouts, but it should not be assumed that the student has someone at home to model the oral language or with whom to engage in content-based conversation. Even in a virtual context, where

## Creating Safe Learning Communities

During this period of school closures, it is important that students continue to feel connected to their teacher, their school, and, if possible, their classmates. Students must get the message that teachers are going to be a consistent presence in their lives during this period — that teachers are thinking of and concerned about their students, and that they are committed to ensuring that students continue to learn. Teachers and other school staff can communicate this message directly and indirectly, through assignments, distance learning lessons, and personal communication. Similarly, schools should maintain communication with students' families, to understand each one's home context and, also, to help family members support their children's learning at home.

Some practical tips for helping students feel valued, safe, and supported while learning from home follow.

- **Keep in touch with students and families**, via phone, email, and/or other social media used by students and their families (e.g., Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram). If families are offline, send a note.
- **Give students the opportunity to share how they are feeling and coping** with this new and potentially stressful situation.
- **Assure parents of their important role in at-home education efforts and offer guidance and tools for carrying out that role.** Let them know that supporting at-home learning does not require being able to read English or teach academic content. (See page 8 for ideas on how families can incorporate use of home languages and everyday activities into students' distance learning.)
- **Be flexible about students' attendance for online sessions and their ability to meet homework due dates**, because students may have more familial duties than normal, such as taking care of siblings who would otherwise be at school or in childcare.
- **Create a schedule that parents and students can plan around**, to ensure students' maximum participation in distance learning.
- **Be on the lookout for bullying** or violence against students of, or perceived to be of, Chinese heritage, who may be targeted based on a misconception that they either carry or have spread the new coronavirus. Follow your education system's policy for reporting such incidents.

discussion can occur, it can be difficult for students to spontaneously select and use the available supports or to share them with peers. During a classroom discussion, for example, one student who is struggling to think of needed vocabulary might turn to the classroom charts and graphs around the room (or a peer might point him to it), while another student turns to a table tent with the formulaic expressions useful for quickly planning how to express her thoughts. It's harder to make these kinds of supports easily available during an online discussion. Even when a teacher posts a graphic organizer in advance, students are unlikely to be able to print it out at home so as to have it on hand during a discussion; they may also have difficulty getting it to show on their computer screen while, at the same time, viewing their teacher and peers.

Interpersonal exchanges are also different online compared to in the classroom, especially when online conversations might be slowed or stopped by internet problems or interrupted by a family dog barking in the background. A student who speaks up in a classroom setting may feel less inclined to do so in an online context, where exchanges that are mediated through a screen and microphone can feel awkward and where it is difficult to read the body language of peers or of the teacher. Such factors may especially affect English Learners, who, in addition to attending to the academic content and learning tasks at hand, must expend extra cognitive effort to understand and express themselves in a language they are still learning.

In the classroom, teachers can actively monitor students' interactions and responses — gaining immediate visual and oral feedback on how well students understand a task and the content, and if and how students are using the available supports.

The immediacy of such feedback allows a teacher to adjust the activity and/or to provide prompts or questions tailored to what the students need. Ongoing monitoring and adjustment of instructional moves may be possible online and, to a lesser extent, through individual written exchanges with students who do not have digital access. But some important cues — chief among them, students' body language — are only available in an in-person setting. In an online setting, it's easier to inadvertently overlook silent, confused, or bored students.

Keeping in mind such challenges, as teachers shift to distance learning, they must think through the best of their classroom-based instructional practices and activities and consider the degree to which, if at all, each can be applied in a distance learning context, either as is or with some adaptation. The remainder of this brief identifies four key instructional practices known to be effective with English Learners,<sup>1</sup> provides illustrative examples of what the practice can look like in the classroom, and offers suggestions for how the practice might be used or adapted for each of three distance learning contexts.

The first two contexts are online: **synchronous online learning**, whereby teaching and learning take place as teacher and student(s) engage virtually at the same time; and **asynchronous online learning**, whereby teacher and student(s) use digital tools to communicate or do work online, but not at the same time. In recognition that some districts and schools will be unable to provide online learning for all students (e.g., those in remote areas that do not have internet access), the brief also suggests how

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1 For example, see: Baker, et al., 2014; Gibbons, 2015; Heritage, Walqui, & Linqunti, 2015; Walqui & Bunch, 2019; Walqui & Heritage, 2018; Walqui & van Lier, 2010.

effective instructional practices might be translated to a distance learning context with **no digital technology** (a “no-tech” setting). In this context, a teacher provides students with assignments they can complete when away from school without being online at all. For example, a teacher can prepare paper-based assignment packets to be picked up by students and turned in at the school weekly during set times.

Note that the examples given for each practice are provided for illustrative purposes only. They are not meant to be taken as a comprehensive list of how a particular practice might be implemented, either in the classroom or in any distance learning context. Teachers may well have been using other activities, tasks, and supports in their classrooms that embody the practices and that can also be used or adapted for a distance learning context. What’s most important in considering how to shift to distance learning instruction that incorporates the practices below is to stay focused on the overall goal: Ensure that English Learners can simultaneously engage with rigorous grade-level content and develop related academic uses of English.

### **Provide students with the linguistic and content supports they need in order to tackle academic activities they are not yet ready to complete independently**

English Learners, especially those with lower levels of English language proficiency, may need particular kinds of support to understand and respond to instructions or prompts (used in this document to mean any written or oral phrase or question that is used as an invitation to elicit deeper thinking, reflection, or more information), and to content that is presented in English, whether orally or in writing. Teachers must consider the kinds of specific language students might need in order to understand and respond to both. For example, students might profit from being given some formulaic expressions to use in their discussions of content (e.g., “I can represent this math problem by....”). Teachers must also provide scaffolding to students who are not yet able to independently engage with or respond to instructional prompts given in English, or to text written in English, whether students are asked to read the text on their own or it is read aloud to them. For example, teachers may chunk a long, complex text into shorter sections, or provide graphic organizers for recording ideas while reading or preparing to write.

Illustrative Examples of Classroom Implementation	Suggestions for Distance Learning Contexts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chunk longer texts into shorter sections. After each section, give students the opportunity to stop, analyze, and respond to the shorter section before moving on to the next one and eventually working their way through the full text.</li> <li>• Provide students with formulaic expressions that are open-ended, that do not have one right response, and that guide students toward the type of thinking and resulting language needed to express content-related opinions, ideas, and questions. One example of such an expression is, “I agree with ____ because ____,” which gives students a clear sense of how to use language to explain why they agree with someone.</li> <li>• Provide students with note-taking supports, such as graphic organizers, to support their comprehension as they read a text, listen to a lecture, or watch a video.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Synchronous Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structure visual and oral instruction in chunks, with deliberate pauses between chunks, giving students time to stop, process, reflect, and practice or respond to what they have heard or seen in each segment of instruction.</li> <li>• Provide formulaic expressions in a visual format, followed by orally modeling how to use them appropriately for a given task.</li> <li>• Provide additional support for English Learners by supplementing online group sessions with online or telephone office hours and/or individual or small-group sessions, depending on student needs.</li> </ul> <p><b>Asynchronous Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For teachers using video to deliver lectures or other forms of instruction, consider how to support students in meeting the recording’s oral language demands, perhaps adding captions or providing online posters or other visual supports that call out key words and phrases in the video.</li> <li>• In any recorded lesson — whether audio or visual — tell students to “hit pause” and to reread or listen again to words, phrases, or sentences they didn’t understand. Let them know it is not only okay, but also good for them to listen to a recording or to watch a video multiple times.</li> </ul> <p><b>No-tech Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide students with a variety of print texts on the topic at hand, either in English or in a student’s home language, along with reading guides and a note-taking device so the students can follow the ideas and organization of the text as they read on their own and summarize in their own words.</li> <li>• Provide a handout with prompts that invite students to reflect on, analyze, and make connections to a text, along with a few related formulaic expressions, to scaffold students’ language and content-area thinking, and provide assignments to be completed at home.</li> </ul>

**Engage English Learners in routines that support socialization and focused learning of target concepts, skills, and the language needed to express them**

Routines can help reduce the linguistic and cognitive demand of complex tasks and, thus, help English

Learners to focus more deeply on the academic content being taught and learned. Routines include interactive activities and tasks with structured steps that help students predict what is coming next and/or tackle a complex text or task. Routine tasks that are used on a recurring basis serve as preparation for and/or reflection on academic activities.

Illustrative Examples of Classroom Implementation	Suggestions for Distance Learning Contexts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read aloud to students. Have students complete advanced organizers or a K-W-L chart (i.e., What do you know, what do you want to know, and what did you learn) as a way of brainstorming before a reading or listening activity, and/or for summarizing afterward.</li> <li>• Have students engage in a Think-Pair-Share in which they respond to an open-ended question or prompt that connects to the theme/s of a lesson and/or text to be read; share their own response with a partner and listen to their partner’s response; then share their partner’s response with the whole class.</li> <li>• Have students solve a mathematics or science problem and explain their reasoning to a peer.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Synchronous Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As you would do in the classroom, start online lessons with familiar routines, such as going over the calendar, weather, or announcements from the teacher or principal.</li> <li>• Read aloud to students during video or audio conferences.</li> <li>• Have students complete a quick-write or solve a problem and immediately share their work in an online space.</li> </ul> <p><b>Asynchronous Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have students tune into the many regularly scheduled online read-alouds offered by children’s and young adult book authors. In addition to reading their own books, some authors read those of their own favorite authors. They might read on Facebook, Instagram, and/or their own websites.</li> <li>• Assign students a daily quick-write or problem-solving task that they post to a shared space.</li> </ul> <p><b>No-tech Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For elementary-grade students, send parents or caregivers a list of ideas for language-related routines they can put in place at home, such as a storytelling time (oral or written stories in English or in their home language), song time, or a silent reading time, followed by a discussion of what the student found interesting or questions they have that emerged from the text.</li> </ul>

**Provide frequent opportunities for English Learners to engage in collaborative activities – with extended and meaningful exchanges of language – as a way of supporting their understanding of key content area concepts**

It is important for English Learners to engage in structured and extended interactions with peers, through oral discussions and/or collaborative writing, or by providing and discussing peer feedback on writing. Such interactions encourage and

support students’ participation in authentic dialogue around meaningful and interesting content-based concepts, which leads to learning and authentic use of content-related language. Actively using language related to grade-level academic content helps students do two important things at the same time: 1) improve their comprehension and production of English, and 2) gain a deeper understanding of the concepts of a given content area and how those concepts are analyzed and expressed.

Illustrative Examples of Classroom Implementation	Suggestions for Distance Learning Contexts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have students “partner read,” in which two students are paired and take turns reading aloud a section of a text and pausing after each section to summarize, clarify, or articulate any areas of confusion. The student’s partner may then agree or disagree — or, in the case of confusion, may try to explain — using evidence from the text.</li> <li>• Have students work with a partner or as part of a team to take turns describing, sorting, and categorizing picture cards related to a particular content area (e.g., pictures that depict different animals, different types of waste), providing a justification for each category created. After all the cards have been described and sorted, student pairs/teams must come to a consensus on final categories, justifying their choices, then labeling each category. Student pairs/teams then share what they have done and why with the rest of the class.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Synchronous Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use videoconferencing applications to engage students in group discussions online. This California Department of Education web page<sup>2</sup> includes links to online engagement systems and platforms (many of which are free) that can support group engagement.</li> <li>• Create breakout rooms during synchronous online large-group sessions (using videoconference programs such as Zoom) to allow for small-group discussions or problem-solving, and then have students share out to the larger group.</li> <li>• Share online rubrics that students can use to measure their own and their peers’ success in applying particular aspects of content and language during collaborative oral and written interactions.</li> </ul> <p><b>Asynchronous Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide students access to shared online documents (such as via Google Docs or Word Online) to complete assignments where they contribute to group writing and problem-solving activities by adding to or commenting on the text.</li> </ul> <p><b>No-tech Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give students at-home assignments that encourage them to continue using oral and written language on a daily basis, whether in English or in their home language. Sample assignments include:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» interviewing family members,</li> <li>» surveying family members about a topic and recording and writing the results,</li> <li>» reading to siblings,</li> <li>» learning a song or poem from a family member,</li> <li>» writing about the literal or inferential meaning of a song, poem, or story, and</li> <li>» recording in writing the steps of preparing a dish, either a traditional family dish or a new one.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

2 This web page can be found at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/appendix1.asp>

**Invite English Learners to engage in multimodal tasks that support and reinforce listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English throughout content areas**

English Learners benefit from daily opportunities to use content area language in multiple ways by participating in meaningful tasks with peers. Initially, the primary focus is for students to

understand the purposes of oral, written, or multimodal texts across content areas. Explicit examples of language use or formulaic expressions are displayed or provided for students to complete content area activities. Over time, students gain increasingly greater proficiency in understanding and expressing content-area concepts, using the styles and formats of oral, written, and multimodal language particular to each content area.

Illustrative Examples of Classroom Implementation	Suggestions for Distance Learning Contexts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have students work in a group of four to synthesize and represent their understanding of a historical or literary character in a collaborative poster representing the character’s psyche. Ask students to incorporate both writing and illustrations and to come to a consensus as they:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» identify two quotes from the text that express the character’s state of mind,</li> <li>» craft two original phrases to illustrate the character’s key feelings,</li> <li>» decide on two symbols that relate to the character’s condition, and</li> <li>» create two drawings related to the character’s state of mind.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Have students work with a partner to sequence key events from a story depicted on picture cards. After agreeing on the correct sequence, students label each picture with key language, appropriate for their grade level, that can be used to describe a sequence. For example, younger students may use <i>first, second, third,</i> and so on, ending with <i>and last,</i> while older students may use <i>in the beginning, and then, suddenly, after that,</i> and <i>in the end.</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Synchronous Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use whole-group online instruction to provide necessary background knowledge, to model language and processes, and to answer questions.</li> <li>• Design tasks and activities that have students in small groups discuss responses to content-related questions or prompts, using the breakout room function of your communications platform (e.g., Zoom, Google Hangout).</li> </ul> <p><b>Asynchronous Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design collaborative tasks in which students work together online to write stories, story/book reviews, or dialogues for characters from stories they have read.</li> <li>• Create tasks in which students use virtual tools (e.g., Zoom, Flipgrid, WhatsApp) to record themselves for group presentations, to individually summarize a lesson, or to demonstrate a process.</li> </ul> <p><b>No-tech Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give students at-home assignments that encourage them to reinforce their learning. For example, students could explain to family members the ideas or information from a text they read. Younger children could recount the sequence of events in a story or the steps in a procedure (such as doing laundry or fixing a broken toy) by creating and labeling drawings.</li> </ul>

As teachers attempt to integrate these four key practices into instruction for distance learning — by appropriately using or adapting successful classroom activities and tasks or creating new ones — they should remain flexible, creative, and patient with themselves, their students, and the

circumstances. And, throughout their efforts, they should continue to return to the overall goal of ensuring that their English Learners can, at the same time, engage with rigorous grade-level content and develop related academic uses of English.

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