Chapter 8

Creating an Accessible Learning Environment for P–12 English Language Learners in Traditional and Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors propose a framework designed to enhance access to learning for English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. P-12 schools. This framework is grounded in the foundation of second language acquisition, incorporating universal design for learning and multimedia principles. They discuss how to use this proposed framework to create an inclusive and accessible learning environment. Specifically, they focus on access to digital instructional materials, content instruction, and assessments, all of which significantly impact the performance and attainment of ELLs in schools.

Nationally, over five million students who are identified as English language learners (ELLs) are enrolled in P-12 public schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). The low academic performance of many of these learners and strategies to improve educational outcomes for this rapidly growing student population have been important topics in the field of education (Ariza & Goady, 2018; Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Park & Thomas, 2012). Given the increasingly multilingual and culturally diverse nature of P-12 schools, educators have a responsibility to examine learning environments for ELLs; they also face a unique challenge to teaching language skills and making proper instructional accommodations for the education of ELLs.

In March 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning for all students, particularly ELLs. School teachers quickly shifted their instruction from in-person to hybrid, blended online learning to support student learning. This emergency remote teaching had been used because of the crisis circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020). Such a temporary and urgent shift changed the learning opportunities and significantly limited ELLs' access to the support and services that would enable their language development and academic content learning. This situation may result in academic and achievement gaps for ELLs (Williams & Marcus, 2021). Although emergency remote teaching is a form of instruction, it is unfortunate that over half of the teachers were not prepared to facilitate remote and or online learning (Derek, 2020). Online teaching also made educators realize the challenges in engaging ELLs, immigrant students, and low-income students because of inequitable access to instructional and social resources (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). Additionally, classroom teachers lack proper training in ELL education, possess limited knowledge in second language acquisition, and hold misperceptions, such as the belief of mainstream teachers that teaching ELLs is not their responsibility, which contributes to ineffective teaching practice (Guler, 2018; O'Brien, 2011; Pettit, 2011).

Students' access to digital learning materials, lack of proper instructions and pedagogies, lack of deeper understanding of cultural and linguistic differences, and teachers' lack of proper training and misconceptions about ELLs when designing instructional or learning materials could become roadblocks to engaging the learning of ELLs. Thus, increasing attention to student access to learning and instructional materials and appropriate assessments in both traditional and online learning environments has been playing out in P-12 education in the post-pandemic and recent years. The impact of unexpected global crises and inclement weather could disrupt student education and create big achievement gaps (Tao & Gao, 2022). Educators need to be prepared for an uncertain future to ensure the continued delivery of effective teaching to ELLs.

According to Dhawa (2020), "Online teaching is no more an option [but it] is a necessity" (p. 7). Teachers require a significant degree of preparedness to adapt to

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