



## **Pandemic Perspectives: International English Learners' Issues with Online Instruction**

The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly shifted the delivery of teaching and learning, particularly for adult English learners (ELs) and international students enrolled in US institutions. This study investigates EL perspectives of their English instructors during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to remote learning in the spring of 2020 through a quantitative approach. Participants (N = 158) completed a perception questionnaire, and the results were analyzed through IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0.1. Results identify lower attendance and engagement tied to perceptions of limited instructor knowledge in online environments. In addition, they show perceptions of lower instructor effort, limited opportunities to connect with peers, and limited resources for students. These findings suggest the need for instructors with digital literacy skills and social and emotional skills in order to connect and strengthen class communities.

**Keywords:** English learners, COVID-19 pandemic, international students, remote instruction, social and emotional learning (SEL)

### **Introduction**

Educational institutions across the US were underprepared for emergency remote learning at the brink of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, literature centering on COVID-19 and online learning has widely focused on understanding students' online experience during this period. Much of the literature that addresses the issue focuses on instructional and emotional challenges imposed on instructors and institutions, primarily in Asia (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Assalahi, 2020; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Dhawan, 2020). The student experience within these contexts is less known, particularly for English language learners (ELLs) enrolled in US post-secondary institutions (colleges and universities). While attention to the socio-emotional aspects of teaching and learning always matters, the pandemic and the shift to online learning identified a greater need for social-emotional learning (SEL). This is necessary to counteract the trauma during the pandemic. It also prevents students from experiencing detrimental effects on their learning and success (Merrill, 2002; O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020). International students and English learners, in particular, face the dual trauma of the migration process—which preexisted the pandemic—and the pandemic (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020).

Although studies have focused on the challenges TESOL professionals faced in implementing a range of pedagogical approaches to support students during the pandemic, few studies have highlighted the experience of ELL post-secondary students during the pandemic. There is a need for research on student perceptions of the various online modalities and adaptations.

This study uses a quantitative approach to investigate ELL post-secondary students' perspectives of instructors' praxis during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to remote instruction in the spring of 2020.

Utilizing the SEL framework as a lens (SAMHSA, 2014), this study will analyze data on students' attitudes toward remote instruction during the pandemic. This quantitative study shows that the majority of the students were not satisfied with the techniques professors used during the pandemic. The study will also present practical instructional strategies and tips to allow educators to reflect upon their pedagogical approaches. Consequently, instructors will be able to build stronger relationships with students during remote instruction (SAMHSA, 2014). The research question in this study is, "In what ways do ELLs understand their teacher's online pedagogical practices?"

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework applied in this study is adapted from a trauma-informed approach initially developed by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to be applied across organizational fields (2014). The purpose of utilizing SEL in education is to foster emotional, social, and academic success for students. This study adapts six key principles of the *Online Trauma-Informed Framework* to include in online spaces:

1. **Safety:** beyond physical safety and includes emotional safety in communicating with peers and instructors. Also involves building a sense of feeling safe, including in an online environment.
2. **Trustworthiness and transparency:** information and directions are clear and transparent to all stakeholders involved. This can include institutions, teachers, students, and families staying abreast of how the school is operating, sharing clear guidelines, and communicating in ways that are accessible to all.
3. **Peer support:** develop support with peers through opportunities to collaborate, build trust, and share experiences. In online spaces, this may mean building in time for peers to interact and opportunities to work in pairs or groups.
4. **Collaboration and mutuality:** building relationships that extend beyond teacher and student. Includes staff and administration in developing change.
5. **Empowerment, voice, and choice:** individual students and faculty are recognized for their strengths and experiences endured. Empowerment builds resilience and they work alongside one another in the decision-making process.
6. **Cultural & historical inclusivity:** inclusivity of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, social class, and cultural responsiveness is necessary to heal historically marginalized people. (SAMHSA, 2014)

An emotionally safe learning environment can help students build positive relationships with their instructors and peers. When students are accepted and valued by their peers and instructors, they feel safe in the learning setting. Trauma-informed instruction in education spaces builds student self-regulation through developing strategies and resources that can help in developing trust and collaboration. Thus, a positive learning environment makes learners feel confident and comfortable (Brunzell et al., 2019). Creating positive relationships requires teachers to model behavioral interactions and practices through teacher-student and student-student interactions.

## Literature Review

Publishing about the pandemic has proceeded at an expedited pace (Palayew et al., 2020). Numerous publications on COVID-19 and ELLs have been produced, many of which focus on ELLs and TESOL educators in Asia (Allo, 2020; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Halemán & Yamat, 2021; Shinjee & Battsengel, 2021; Wen & Tan, 2020). Many of these studies were conducted within a specific class/school setting, providing nuanced responses based on the school site. This literature review highlights themes in the literature on pandemic instruction and supporting ELLs in online spaces.

### Experience with Remote Instruction

Transitioning from a typical classroom to remote learning requires teachers to be well-prepared. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 97 percent of teachers had never experienced teaching via online platforms (Marshall et al., 2020). Prior to and during COVID-19, TESOL educators faced challenges with technology, access, and the learning curve in using new technology (Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020). At the same time, professors with prior online experience could enhance remote instruction through motivating and engaging online learning activities, which improved students' academic performance (Bailey & Lee, 2020). Many professors' approaches were more efficient and creative, given limited technological tools in online spaces (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020).

Students may prefer online instruction over face-to-face instruction if the instruction is approached and integrated well. Benefits include its convenience, the ability to access content, particularly for those already in remote areas, and more time to interact with content every day. Some students may prefer and believe in using technology for English language instruction over traditional methods even when they lack computer skills or inconsistent internet access (Shalevska, 2021; Shinjee & Battsengel, 2021).

### Instructional Practices During Remote Instruction

To meet student learning objectives in online spaces, particularly during a pandemic, teachers of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) should modify their instructional approaches (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). They should be able to assign remote activities to realize their learning objectives. Some activities, such as live chats, virtual meetings, and video tutorials, can motivate learners and engage them in remote learning platforms (Snelling & Fingal, 2020). Green (2016) indicated that teachers should deliver lessons through meaningful activities, for example, by providing question-and-answer sessions or ice-breaking activities to keep students involved in learning and mitigate the lack of communication between teachers and students when they are not able to meet in person. Gonzalez and St. Louis (2018) also stated that remote delivery strategies should be clear, suitable, and straightforward.

### Building Connections

Establishing positive teacher presence in synchronous activities is key to ESOL learning and educational experiences, influencing both social and cognitive presence. The pandemic identified a need for TESOL teachers and educators to provide clear communication of class expectations, opportunities to build connections between teachers and students, and peer interactions in both synchronous and asynchronous instruction (Allo, 2020; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Dhawan, 2020). Discussions in synchronous activities, between students and teachers in online spaces, e.g., via Zoom, establish norms for socialization and build upon cognition (Assalahi, 2020). Teachers modeling appropriate communication, e.g., the interactive communication model, allow students to develop trusting relationships with instructors and other learners that can help them manage struggles (Brunzell et al., 2019).

## **Communication and Opportunities for Collaboration and Feedback**

Studies suggested there are many factors that prompt students' satisfaction with online learning, such as online activities and content, student engagement, learner interaction, and instructor presence (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). In language teaching, there is a significant need to foster communication between teachers and students to maintain a relationship conducive to learning. Individual communication is both an interactive practice that builds skills and a way to build relationships with others (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). Time management in remote teaching allows teachers to give more attention and feedback to students. Providing regular feedback can also maximize the effectiveness of self-learning, particularly during remote instruction (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Allo, 2020; Yao et al., 2020).

## **Social-Emotional Learning**

Reports noted learning loss, poor attendance, decline in emotional and physical health, and issues with technology access negatively impacted ELLs during the pandemic (Katzman & Stanton, 2020; Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). One approach to ameliorate stress, anxiety, and loss of motivation when being online is through SEL. When transitioning back to in-person instruction, professors need to consider the overall well-being of their students, since good overall well-being positively impacts academic achievement (Katzman & Stanton, 2020). Professors can help students and themselves manage their feelings and increase their online learning effectiveness.

Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) describes SEL as “advanc[ing] educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation” (2020). Since EL students have various cultures, identities, and languages, teachers should adopt an inclusive and culturally sensitive attitude and teach through a multicultural lens with social and emotional awareness. A culturally, linguistically responsive social emotional framework that supports ELL is needed to achieve a meaningful learning environment (Hollie, 2018; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020).

## **Trauma-Informed Practices**

The 2020 shift to online learning was a traumatic experience. Students and professors were emotionally impacted when they left colleges and universities, not knowing when they would return. Additionally, ELLs already endured trauma from the experience of moving to a foreign, English-speaking country that received them with xenophobic messages.

A path towards recovery includes trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive practices that incorporate time to build trusting relationships, collaborative opportunities that extend beyond the immediate classroom, and an environment that offers structure and space for fostering their emotions and skills (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020; SAMHSA, 2014). If space is not provided and trauma-sensitive practices are not implemented, this could lead to re-triggering of trauma and negative manifestations in student behavior and school performance (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020).

## **Methods**

This study involved 158 participants enrolled in ESOL programs in California that were forced to work online due to the pandemic. The participants were of different levels and over the age of 18. The participants completed an online questionnaire voluntarily over the course of four weeks in the winter of 2021. The survey included demographic questions as well as questions centering on student perspectives of pedagogical practices and remote instruction during the transition using a Likert scale from 1 = strongly

agree to 5 = strongly disagree. Demographic information from participants included gender, age, and self-identified English proficiency (see Table 1).

The researchers used IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0.1 to analyze the survey data. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to present participants' profiles. The study used mean values to measure and interpret the ELLs' perceptions of the transition to online learning and ESOL teachers' procedures in remote classes.

The survey included seven statements about ESOL techniques utilized during the school closure due to COVID-19. The survey links were distributed privately to TESOL professors to email their students. The researcher also posted the survey link publicly on social media TESOL groups on Facebook and LinkedIn websites. The reliability of the coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.922, evidently confirming that the statistical reliability of the instrument prevailed. The coefficient is accepted if it is above 0.70 (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

	Characteristic	Count	%
Gender	Male	78	49.4%
	Female	80	50.6%
	Other	--	--
	Total	158	100%
Age	18–25 years	36	22.8%
	26–35 years	59	37.3%
	36–45 years	46	29.1%
	46–55 years	17	10.8%
	Total	158	100%
English Proficiency Level	Beginning level	24	15.2%
	Intermediate level	70	44.3%
	Advanced level	64	40.5%
	Total	158	100%

## Results

***“What are ELLs’ attitudes toward their teachers’ remote pedagogical approaches used during remote instruction due to COVID-19?”*** In order to address the study issue, the researchers developed a survey. The following results include a) the top six perspectives on the transition to remote learning, and b) perceptions of ESOL instructional techniques selected by English learners. Respondents were asked to identify the type of online teaching they were more comfortable with: synchronous or asynchronous learning. (N = 97, 61.4%) stated synchronous, (N = 51, 32.3%) stated asynchronous, and (N = 10, 6.3%) reported no significant difference.

**Table 2***English Learner Perspectives of the Transition to Remote Learning*

Descriptor	Count	%
Quality of the teaching/content delivery is reduced	36	22.8%
Disrupt the way of learning that I am used to	34	21.5%
Course content is not well-constructed	29	18.4%
Lack of essential learning apparatuses/learning resources	24	15.2%
Lack of the sense of group/learning community/peer support	22	13.9%
Quality of assignment and feedback is reduced	13	8.2%
Total	158	100

The responses of 158 participants were categorized into themes. Table 2 presents the findings from the six key themes that emerged from ELLs' perceptions of the transition to remote learning at the brink of the pandemic. Over one-fifth of ELLs' felt that the quality of remote teaching and the amount of content delivered was not comparable to traditional in-person learning, and approximately 14% indicated a need for class community. These two areas, in addition to the quality of assignments and feedback being reduced, suggest a need for instructor professional development on remote teaching practices and communication to build relationships with and between students.

Based on the findings displayed in Table 2, which centered around concerns with the delivery approach of teaching contents, most of the surveyed learners reported that transferring in-person strategies to online spaces could be challenging, demonstrating that the data aligned with ELLs' generally expressed beliefs. Teaching practices demonstrated organizational issues regarding course content and limited resources, as evident in student responses. Personal disruption to instruction and the difficulty of adjusting to a new format suggest that these students might benefit from support such as SEL. Not only do the students have to adjust to the change in the delivery of their education, but also, they report a lowering in the actual quality of education being provided.

**Table 3***Student Perspectives Toward Teachers' Remote Pedagogical Techniques*

Statement Number	Statement	Overall	
		Mean	SD
1	Instant feedback	3.71	0.97
2	Student collaboration and activity	3.92	0.99
3	Self-discipline	3.84	1.06
4	Motivation for learning	3.56	1.16
5	Attendance	3.18	1.34
6	Perceived TESOL teachers' effort	3.42	1.14
7	Online resources	3.46	1.09

Table 3 outlines student perspectives toward the techniques ESOL educators used to deliver instruction online. ELLs expressed doubts about the effectiveness of online instruction utilized during school closures. Students felt their teachers did not provide them with timely and relevant online teaching feedback, which could help them deepen their knowledge by correcting mistakes, affirming competencies, and preventing any confusion. Students stated that online feedback by their instructors on assignments was limited, possibly contributing to students' perceptions (Appendix A).

## **Limitations and Further Research Areas**

Due to limited direct access to online ELL post-secondary students, student recruitment in this study involved instructors sharing the survey with volunteers willing to participate. Levels of technological competency were not explored. Students and instructors may have had limited exposure and experience with online teaching and learning before the study.

While recruitment in this study was centered in California, it was understood that some students returned home during the pandemic. Their rationale for returning home was not explored and may be a factor in attendance rates. Background information on students' location and enrollment in high schools, community colleges, universities, or graduate programs would be helpful in further disaggregating data. Nevertheless, this study provides a broader understanding of EL experiences in a number of online California ESOL programs during the pandemic.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

Students in this study felt the pedagogical practices their teachers used in person did not transfer with the same efficiency online. The study identified some instructional issues from feedback to quality of instruction. Professional development and institutional support could address these issues. A larger, structural issue is access to online resources and ensuring that students and teachers know how to navigate them. Without having structures in place to confront these concerns, student motivation and academic performance can be impacted. The following section provides more detailed suggestions developed by the authors and informed by research. These suggestions for practical implementation and reflective questions are applied through the *Online Trauma-Informed Framework* below.

### **Peer Support and Empowerment to Increase Student Engagement**

ELs expressed feeling easily lost in online courses, leading to a decrease in attention and motivation in class. This can be addressed through developing a space and system for peer support and empowering student voices (Johnson & Saito, 2022). To meet this end, instructors can do the following:

- Take time at the beginning of the course to build a better connection among students so that they can find support amongst themselves when they need it.
- Allow students time to interact with one another in online spaces for both social and academic purposes. This can be structured into asynchronous/synchronous classes through discussion boards, shared documents, video apps, voice chats, group chats, or breakout rooms (Khan et al., 2022).
- Provide opportunities for students to work in pairs or groups for assignments (Khan et al., 2022).
- Follow up with individual students to check-in on their progress. Use inclusive language to demonstrate care and concern, individually or in groups (Zilvinskis et al., 2017).
- Encourage students to lead in the process of learning. This can include assignments that are student-centered/student-led.
- Develop opportunities for students to provide feedback. Educators often provide feedback on student progress (Khan et al., 2022). However, student feedback to their teachers is also needed.

### **Creating Safety to Improve Online Class Climate**

A sense of safety for both instructors and students is needed to engage effectively in learning. The online class climate during emergency remote learning is often compromised. The focus can shift to content

completion rather than a holistic approach that is considerate of students' feelings during this time. However, creating a sense of safety in an online space is critical, particularly for ELs who may not be informed of cultural and linguistic differences while engaging in online classes (Saito & Li, 2022). In developing a positive and safe online class climate, consider the following:

- Develop online expectations that are clearly articulated, understood, and consistently reinforced. This may include protocols for speaking and listening that align with Constructivist Listening practices (National Equity Project, n.d.).
- Ensure that instructions and expectations are equitable. For example, clearly state directions for assignments and the course. Think about a student who doesn't attend the class that day; would the student be able to completely understand what they are being asked to do based on the instructions provided? (Garcia-Alberti et al., 2021).
- Create clear rubrics that can be used for homework, classwork, papers, and other assignments.
- Provide timely, supportive, and specific feedback to help guide students to improvement. Remember, if they only read your comments on their paper, will they understand what they can do to improve their work? Are students able to apply the feedback to resubmit their work? Consider why and when you are giving feedback. There should be a practical application to allow students to read and improve.
- Let students know when they are doing well. Reflect upon the teaching approach you are providing and whether or not you are also seeking students' assets in their learning (Swanson et al., 2021).
- Create 1:1 meeting times rather than open office hours. Sometimes creating a wide-open space is intimidating. Holding 1:1 conversations allows for greater connection and serves to clarify questions that instructors/students have (Zilvinskis et al., 2017).

### **Developing Trustworthiness in Online Instruction**

A range of communication methods is needed in order to provide equitable access to content, assignments, course announcements, institutional updates, networking, and relationship building among students. This may include emails, text, voice messaging, or videos to ensure all stakeholders are engaged in the learning and teaching process (Snelling & Fingal, 2020). With regards to the online, trauma-informed approach, both trustworthiness and transparency are needed to establish structural and operational understandings of the institution at a broader level and the class level. Online instruction can involve clear communication through the following trustworthy and transparent practices:

- Clearly state how students are able to navigate the online platform. Access to directions should be in multiple modes (written directions, video tutorial, live training, etc.) (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021).
- Create an accessible line of communication. Explicitly state and remind students of how and when they can contact you with any questions they have about the course. Do more than just add this information to your syllabus. Make sure it is visibly posted, restated in synchronous sessions, and encouraged (McMullen et al., 2020).
- Reflect upon the learning activities you are providing. Are there too many modes of instruction that are overwhelming for your students to navigate? Understand your student population to adjust how you are delivering your lessons. If a student cannot access the online platform or app you assigned, would this result in a lower grade? Instead, think about how you are making information easily accessible to everyone.



- Offer and design online material and content that meets students' needs (Sun & Chen, 2016).

### **Culturally Responsive, Historical, and Inclusive Teacher Training**

One of the issues expressed in the literature and commented on by students is the limited approach to culturally and historically responsive techniques that teachers have in an online environment. Expanding upon this notion—the little practice of culturally and historically responsive techniques in the online learning format—allows us to understand the approach in technology. We have to not only consider a professor's approach to technology but also their pedagogy and the importance of culturally responsive teaching. Instructors should clearly express that all students' languages and cultures are accepted in the classroom (Gay, 2018; Muhammad, 2020). Institutions should offer online professional development opportunities, identify possible mentors to support new or limited experienced instructors, and create a support system that allows partnering in online spaces to support instructors in implementing effective pedagogy; here are some suggestions for culturally responsive teaching:

- Provide opportunities to integrate assignments with identity development. This can be accomplished through journaling, self-reflecting, and making personal connections in assignments. This can also be achieved through explicit assignments that explore one's cultural background and identity. In what ways are student identities supported and developed in your classroom?
- Be present and listen. A lot can be learned from students. Remember to be open-minded and pay attention to what students are saying (Goodyear et al., 2001).
- Take an assets-based approach to student work. When engaging in identity development, is the focus on the creativity, content, and depth of the student's story, or are we only targeting pronunciation and grammar? Consider the context of the assignment and the types of messages the student receives when their personal stories and voice are invalidated by interruptions of pronunciation and grammar corrections. Consider reframing grading practices in these cases to be student-led. What would students like to improve on in their work? (El-Sabagh, 2021).

### **Building Trustworthiness Through Inclusive Instructional Design**

This study suggests students report the overall quality of online instruction being compromised (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Shalevska, 2021). In developing a strategic plan for future emergency remote learning, the following should be taken into account:

- Include a recovery plan at the beginning of each term to bridge the learning gap. This can be refined and revised specifically for the school site.
- Incorporate targeted professional development offerings throughout the year using an online teaching format.
- Use agency and autonomy learning strategies as tools improve learning outcomes and mitigate the impact of a lack of opportunity to practice the language.
- Consider long lens views of sustainability in developing new teachers, selecting professional development opportunities, and building home-school support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights the challenges ELLs faced when shifting to emergency remote instruction. The results offer insight into the ways teachers can support ELLs in online classes through improving instructional

practices, including the quality of instruction, providing timely feedback, and offering space for students to build connections. As this study was conducted in 2021, future studies can examine teacher reflective practices, ELL educational outcomes during the pandemic, and ELL perspectives on transitioning back into in-person classes.

The recommendations in the Discussion and Recommendations section could offer a space for educators to improve their instructional and organizational practices as well as direct changes that can be implemented through the *Online Trauma-Informed Framework*. The overarching focus of these recommendations centers on student performance in an online climate, engagement, and considerations for inclusive instructional design.

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## Appendix A

### *Pandemic Perspectives: International English Learners' Issues with Online Instruction*

#### General Information

1. What is your current ESL level of study?
  - a. Beginning Level
  - b. Intermediate Level
  - c. Advanced Level

2. Gender
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other; please specify: \_\_\_\_\_.
  
3. Age
  - a. 15 years old to 25 years old
  - b. 26 years old to 35 years old
  - c. 36 years old to 45 years old
  - d. 56 years old to 65 years old
  
4. Compared with typical lecture instruction, which type of online teaching are you more comfortable with?
  - a. Synchronous (scheduled, live virtual engagements with students, such as zoom meetings with professors.)
  - b. Asynchronous (pre-recorded lectures, such as watching YouTube videos.)
  - c. No significant difference
  
5. What are the negative impressions on online teaching (choose all that apply)?
  - a. Disrupts the way of learning that I am used to.
  - b. Course content is not well-constructed.
  - c. Lack of essential learning apparatuses/learning resources.
  - d. Lack of the sense of group/learning community/peer support.
  - e. Quality of assignment and feedback is reduced.

**Questionnaire**

<p>This questionnaire finds out what students think and feel about professors' online teaching approaches used during COVID-19. This is not a test, so there is no correct answer. As you read the given text with a comfortable mind, check the box that corresponds to your thoughts and feelings.</p>					
	1 = strongly agree	2	3	4	5 = strongly disagree
6. In my opinion, the most significant disadvantage of online learning is a lack of instant feedback.					
7. In my opinion, the most significant disadvantage of online learning is a lack of student collaboration and activity.					

	1 = strongly agree	2	3	4	5 = strongly disagree
8. In my opinion, the most significant disadvantage of online learning is an intense requirement for self-discipline.					
9. In my opinion, the most significant disadvantage of online learning is a lack of motivation for learning.					
10. In general, I didn't attend all the class sessions during COVID-19.					
11. In my opinion, ESL teachers' effort to transition from a typical format to an online learning format was unsatisfactory.					
12. In my opinion, the online resources the ESL teachers used to deliver the classes in online learning platforms were unsatisfactory.					