

Supporting English Learners in Middle Schools:
COVID-19 and the Road Ahead

Conclusions from my Independent Study

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Abstract:

English Learners often face struggles in education, despite support provided in many schools. This year, online schooling brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic made it even more difficult for many students to stay engaged, receive support, and successfully attend classes. From January-June of 2021, guided by my AP Spanish Language teacher Profesora Liliana Simón, I conducted an independent study focused on supporting English Learner (EL) students during online schooling. Through this study, I spent 30+ hours tutoring eight EL students at a local charter school, collected data on student outcomes, and reviewed literature to identify solutions for teachers and schools moving forward. This report outlines why English Learners have faced a disproportionate amount of difficulty, how my independent study aimed to tackle this issue, and what solutions can be employed in the future.

Introduction

English Learners, or “EL” students, are students who are not yet fully proficient in English. Many ELs are recent immigrants, speak primarily another language at home, or have not been in school for a period of time due to their family situation. The process of learning a language through immersion can be very difficult for ELs. Below is an outline of the process (Teachings in Education):

1. Pre-production Stage:
 - a. Students will typically absorb and repeat info, but will not form new sentences
2. Early production stage:
 - a. About 6 months into learning
 - b. Students will speak in one or two word sentences
3. Speech Emergence
 - a. Lasts about a year
 - b. Students can understand parts of class
 - c. Students will likely begin to speak in short sentences
4. Intermediate fluency stage
 - a. About 2 years
 - b. Students can ask questions, have opinions, and build ideas
5. Advanced fluency stage
 - a. 4-10 years
 - b. Students may still need support with content, but appear in conversation similar to native English speakers

At the local charter school in which this study was conducted, students occupy a wide range of these groups, and as a result, they receive multiple levels of support. Most support is done in small groups with an EL teacher, and students are pulled out of class to receive help. “Newcomers” have often recently immigrated and speak very little English. As a result, they receive support nearly every day. Students at the “moderate” level receive support two to three times a week, but are still pulled out of class. Finally, students in the “transitional” group receive accommodations in the classroom, but are not pulled out of class for help. In order to determine which group they are in, students take a placement test during the beginning and middle of the school year (Rosen).

However, despite the support they receive, English Learners have struggled significantly in recent years, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many do not have strong access to the

internet at home. Additionally, students from Hispanic communities, which make up the majority of NC's EL students, are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, especially in pediatric cases. Access to testing served as a major impediment, as earlier in the pandemic, testing was often available only on the west side of Durham, while the majority of Hispanic and Latinx communities live on the east (Martinez-Bianchi and Panayotti). Because of these difficult family situations, an April 2021 University of Southern California study found that 75% of Spanish speaking parents are facing more challenges in helping students with homework. Burdens that teachers could previously help share, like answering students' questions, have begun to fall on parents even more. Furthermore, information that used to be conveyed through speaking or listening must now be conveyed through written messages, placing an even higher burden on Spanish speaking families (Rodriguez). One Durham mother told the News and Observer that she often found herself pasting large amounts of text into Google Translate in order to decipher her students' work (Innis and Murphy). With parents being forced to carry more of this burden, students are often taking care of family members while learning at home, making it incredibly difficult to focus (Breiseth). Thus, because of the change in their environment, lapses in communication with teachers online, and difficulties at home, EL students have struggled significantly more over the past year.

Introduction to this Independent Study

I learned about this problem last year, when translating for the charter school's Parent Teacher Conferences. There, I realized that EL students, who make up almost 25% of the school's population, were lagging behind more in History and English-language based courses—than in Math and Science. Many teachers had not made contact with parents in months, and it was incredibly difficult for all sides to connect. As a result, I began an independent study focused on supporting EL students during online schooling, combining hands-on work with students with research to propose stronger solutions. From January-June, I worked in small groups with 8 EL scholars, four from the 5th grade and four from 6th. I met with these students twice a week for thirty minutes in each session, similar to the amount of time that ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers spend with ELs in elementary school. Because so many ELs are struggling in English Language Arts (ELA) class, I worked on previewing the text with them before reading in class, breaking down words and phrases, and deciphering meaning from text. Strategies I used to accomplish these goals have included encouraging students to read out loud, performing live annotations of the text, searching for vocabulary, working in Spanish and English, and creating drawings to illustrate sections of the text.

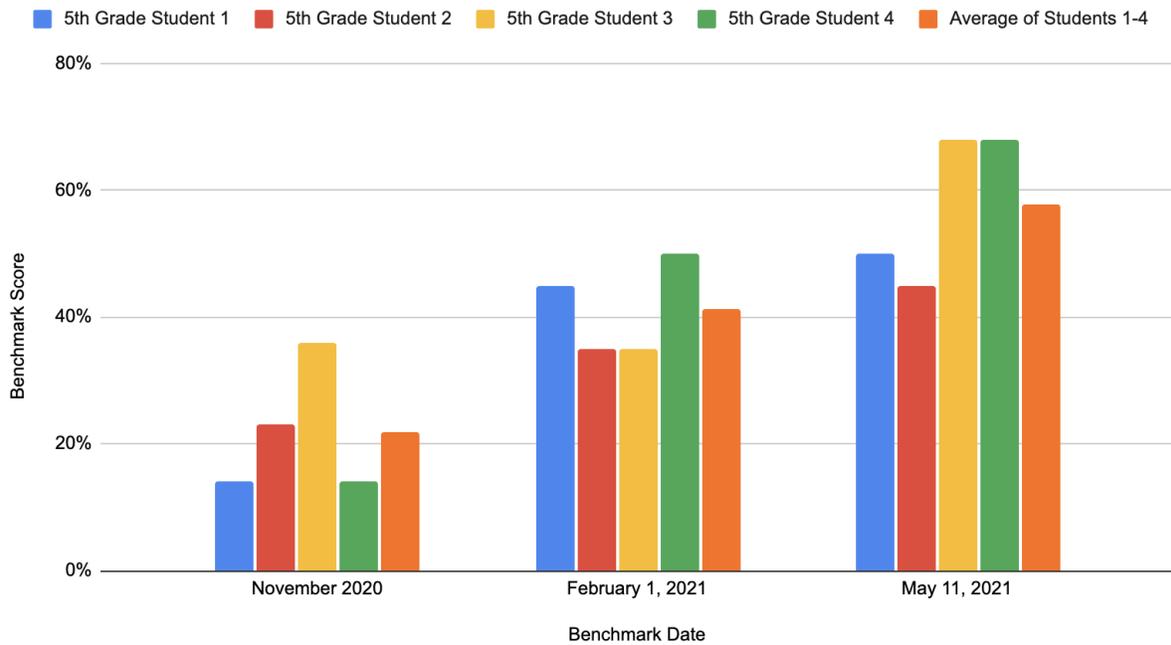
Data:

Throughout this study, students exercised skills in comprehension and literacy regularly. Below are students' benchmark test scores throughout this year. These benchmarks were administered by teachers in the ELA classes of each student:

	November 2020	February 1, 2021	May 11, 2021
5th grade Student 1	14%	45%	50%
5th grade Student 2	23%	35%	45%

5th grade Student 3	36%	35%	68%
5th grade Student 4	14%	50%	68%
Average of Students 1-4	21.75%	41.25%	57.75%
Class Average	56%	57%	65%

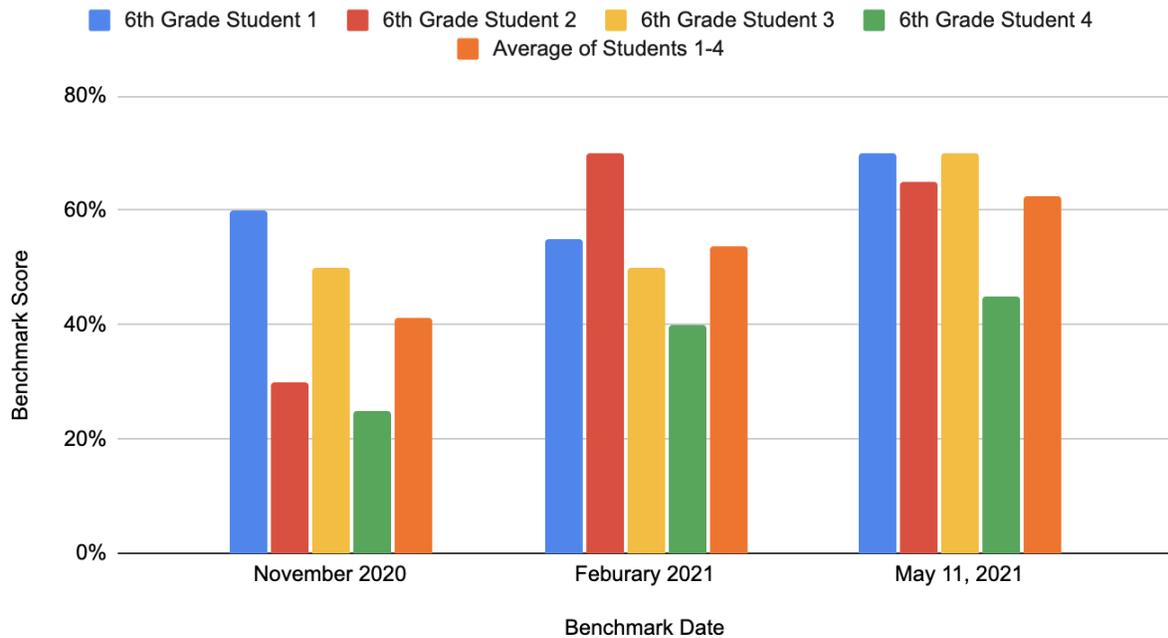
5th Grade Benchmark Performance



Student 4, who was the most active throughout small group sessions, showed a significant amount of improvement between benchmarks. Each student improved after each benchmark, and the average score went up from 21.75% on the first benchmark to 57.75% on the last, closing the gap significantly between the average of EL Students 1-4 and the Class Average.

	November 2020	February 2021	May 2021
6th grade Student 1	60%	55%	70%
6th grade Student 2	30%	70%	65%
6th grade Student 3	50%	50%	70%
6th grade Student 4	25%	40%	45%
Average of Students 1-4	41.25%	53.75%	62.5%
Class Average	53%	63%	63%

6th Grade Benchmark Performance



Students 1 and 3, who were the most active in small group sessions, reached scores of 70% on the May benchmark, well above the class average. In May 2021, three out of four students passed the benchmark, and the students averaged a 62.5%, a passing rate on the benchmark! This final score was only 0.5% below the class average of 63%.

Below are some areas in which students excelled:

Standards Overview i

EOY Benchmark_5R_2020-21

Standard ↓	Items	Mean
RI.5.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.	3	75%
RI.5.2 Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text.	3	42%
RI.5.3 Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text b...	2	13%
RI.5.4 Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 5 topic or subject area.	3	58%
RI.5.8 Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text, identifying which reasons and evidence support which ...	0	-
RL.5.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.	3	75%
RL.5.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or h...	2	50%
RL.5.3 Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.	4	75%
RL.5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, recognizing specific word choices that contribute to meaning and tone.	2	50%

5th graders excelled at referencing and drawing inferences from the text. Furthermore, they also developed a strong understanding of comparison, which is a skill I worked on a lot in small groups, especially in comparing how different characters felt about the same issue.

Standards Overview

EOY Benchmark_6R_2020-21

Standard ↓	Items	Mean
RI.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	3	78%
RI.6.2 Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinio...	2	50%
RI.6.3 Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text.	2	83%
RI.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning.	3	89%
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RL.6.3 Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot m...	3	56%
RL.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.	2	83%

6th graders showed strong skills in vocabulary, which was surprising in some ways, as they often did not recognize many words during our small group sessions. However, we also talked about vocabulary a lot and briefly worked on techniques to determine the meaning of words in context, which may have aided their performance. They also were able to summarize the text well, an exercise we often worked on together both verbally and in writing. In the future, practicing this skill in writing would likely help even more.

However, there are areas where students could significantly improve.

Standards Overview

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5th graders struggled with the informative texts, specifically in recognizing major ideas and relationships. In the future, more practice in reading and writing about these types of texts would likely be beneficial.

Standards Overview

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6th graders had difficulty identifying the central idea of informational texts. This is likely due to the fact that much of the classroom reading (and, consequently, the reading we did in small groups) was from fictional or story based texts. They also had trouble tying together the entire plot of a text, which may be a factor of difficulty remembering what they have read in the past. In contrast to the 5th grade, the weakest skill for 6th graders was citing textual evidence in literature, which can often require more abstract thinking and literary analysis than doing so in informative texts. To address this issue, tutoring and small group sessions could include more practice with this skill in the future.

Overall Interpretations from Data and Observations:

Many of my observations were confirmed by the data above. Students improved significantly in annotating the text, reading out loud, and recognizing basic plots in the text. Annotations became more thorough, and students began to build the habit of annotating the text more regularly (see image below). Because students were taking turns reading out loud during every session, they also became significantly more comfortable sounding out words and their pace of reading improved. When prompted with questions about why characters were feeling a certain way or what was happening in the text, students were often able to respond accurately.

However, students also struggled with vocabulary—I would estimate that they were unable to recognize an average of one word per sentence. Because small group sessions were so short (30 minutes long), it was difficult to effectively reinforce vocabulary while also communicating the main idea of the text. Additionally, the benchmark test, which was mostly multiple choice, did not test as much for writing, which was one area in which I observed a weakness. Students often understood the main idea, but were not able to put it in their own words through writing. Students struggled with summarizing and paraphrasing, and grammar and spelling also often presented mistakes.

Potential for Improvement:

Thus, while small group sessions helped students comprehend the text and built strong habits, they could have been more effective in improving vocabulary and writing. In the future, small group sessions could include more writing, such as a fifteen minute period at the end dedicated completely to summarizing or doing short comprehension writing exercises. Vocabulary could be tested as homework or using more sustained methods, such as flashcards, rather than being brought up intermittently. Future sessions would benefit from continuing to annotate live as a

group, encouraging students to annotate on their own, and giving students practice reading out loud. However, these practices would deliver the optimal benefits if balanced with writing and vocabulary practice, as having students read too much of the text out loud and annotating takes up time that could be better used for writing practice. A healthy balance of annotating, reading out loud, vocabulary practice, and writing exercises would most likely provide the biggest benefit for students.

While reading: Highlight language (words) in which Dahl makes Mrs. Pratchett seem like a caricature.

legs trotting to keep up with him. They had already inspected one side of the playground where the Sixth Form and half the Fifth Form were standing. We watched them moving down the second side . . . then the third side.

'Still too big,' I heard Mrs Pratchett croaking. 'Much too big! Smaller than these! Much smaller! Where's them nasty little ones?'

They were coming closer to us now . . . closer and closer.

They were starting on the fourth side . . .

Every boy in our form was watching Mr Coombes and Mrs Pratchett as they came walking down the line towards us.

'Nasty cheeky lot, these little 'uns!' I heard Mrs Pratchett muttering. 'They comes into my shop and they thinks they can do what they damn well likes!'

Mr Coombes made no reply to this.

'They nick things when I ain't looking,' she went on. 'They put their grubby 'ands all over everything and they've got no manners. I don't mind girls. I never 'ave no trouble with girls, but boys is 'ideous and 'orrible! I don't 'ave to tell you that, 'Ead-master, do I?'

'These are the smaller ones,' Mr Coombes said.

I could see Mrs Pratchett's piggy little eyes staring hard at the face of each boy she passed.

Suddenly she let out a high-pitched yell and pointed a dirty finger straight at Thwaites. 'That's 'im!' she yelled. 'That's one of 'em! I'd know 'im a mile away, the scummy little bounder!'

The entire school turned to look at Thwaites. 'W-what have I done?' he stuttered, appealing to Mr Coombes.

'Shut up,' Mr Coombes said.

Mrs Pratchett's eyes flicked over and settled on my own face. I looked down and studied the black asphalt surface of the playground.

'Ere's another of 'em!' I heard her yelling. 'That one there!' She was pointing at me now.

'You're quite sure?' Mr Coombes said.

An example of a 6th grade EL Student's annotations in an April assignment

Recommendations:

Based on this experience and related research, I have drawn out some recommendations both for North Carolina public schools and for individual teachers.

Recommendations for schools:

1. Increased EL Professional Development (PD) Training for Teachers

- Along with the Migration Policy Institute, various EL teachers at the school recommended increasing professional development training for all faculty.

Techniques like using modified questions in class, altering assessments to include more multiple choice, and showing greater inclusivity in the classroom could be taught through these training sessions. Some EL students remarked that at times, it felt like teachers were placing a lot of pressure on them or moving too quickly, problems that likely could be improved significantly by making these PD sessions more widespread and happen more regularly.

2. In-home support services for parents

- Even before the pandemic, many families faced difficulty meeting with teachers in school and receiving personalized attention. By creating regular in-home services for parents, schools could better accommodate a wide range of working and family situations and gain a deeper understanding of the environment of the EL scholar.
- Schools could also provide a special separate orientation and end of year check in for EL families, allowing them to ask questions in a more comfortable setting and receive individualized support (Hall).

3. Student and family support groups

- In schools throughout North Carolina, some parents have resorted to joining large online group chats or pasting messages into Google Translate (Innis and Murphy). However, many are likely unable to spend such large amounts of time deciphering messages, causing them to miss critical information. While schools often have existing translation services, to further address this issue, they could create EL family support groups consisting of both EL and non-EL families. These groups could help send reminders about school policy and schedule changes, answer questions about student events, and help EL families who have recently immigrated become more accustomed to the United States' school system and learning environment.
- Schools could also ensure that the contact information for students in this group is disseminated among students. As a result, students within a group would be able to easily support one another and develop relationships both inside and outside of school.

4. Providing classroom buddies for EL scholars

- Many of the students I worked with mentioned having difficulty when teachers move too fast, being unsure about where to annotate, and missing assignments. Schools could create a formal system to provide a non-EL "classroom buddy" in the homeroom of each EL student (Rodriguez). These buddies would help students stay on track during class, answer questions individually to avoid disrupting the full class, and help EL students connect with other students.

5. Providing opportunities to learn in Spanish

- According to the psychological Theory of Common Underlying Proficiency, students become more proficient if they are taught in both languages. Because literacy is so critical to the learning process, it is important for students to be able to read and understand the text in their native language as well (Brooks and Karathanos). Accordingly, schools could include reading in Spanish in EL small group sessions, teach vocabulary in both languages, and provide supplemental materials in Spanish for EL students.

- Teachers could also include Spanish language books in independent reading libraries (Hall). This would allow scholars to exercise comprehension without having to exercise language skills, decreasing the attention split that occurs when they read in English.

6. Partnering with nonprofit organizations and state agencies

- Many Community based Organizations (CBOs) throughout North Carolina provide services for immigrants and English Learners. By setting up direct programs with these nonprofit organizations, such as bolstering translating services, using nonprofit services to create supplemental teaching materials, providing information tailored to families, and more, schools could utilize these resources most effectively (Sugarman and Lazarín). Additionally, many organizations, such as El Centro Hispano, are already used widely by English Learner communities, so EL students would likely be more familiar and comfortable with their services.

Recommendations for Teachers:

1. Using more images and videos in lessons

- EL students often encounter many difficult words throughout their readings. In my experience working with 5th and 6th grade scholars, students likely do not know at least one word per sentence. However, it is very easy to forget words when they are translated quickly only through dialogue. Instead, teachers could show images and videos to translate and attempt to use more images throughout lessons (Sorrell).

2. Providing “jobs” to keep students engaged

- EL students often do not feel as included in the classroom. To better integrate the environment, teachers could assign “jobs” to students to set up a lesson, such as helping get technology set up, passing out papers, and reading out loud. This idea was actually suggested by one of the scholars I worked with, who noted that having jobs can often be a fun way for students to feel more engaged.

3. Regular workshops on learning strategies:

- Teachers could hold short (10-20 minute) weekly workshops focused on:
 - Teaching students how to annotate
 - Teaching students how to paraphrase
- I have noticed that students tend to have difficulty with these skills because while they are sometimes tested in assessments, they are often not consistently reinforced in the classroom. By spending some time each week to provide a refresher on what details to highlight and include in summaries, providing students opportunities to practice, and checking in with each student individually, teachers could ensure that these skills are reinforced more strongly.

4. Avoid teaching new activities and new content at the same time

- Teachers and students often enjoy using new activities, such as creative games, new types of slideshows, or different worksheets, to learn material. However, when these new activities are introduced at the same time as new content, EL students tend to get confused (National Education Association and Colorín Colorado). Teachers could ensure that when new vocabulary and content is being taught, activities that

students are familiar with are used to help keep them on track. Consequently, when introducing new activities, teachers can reuse and reinforce existing content. By reinforcing one while learning the other, teachers could keep EL students engaged and at the same pace as other students.

5. Allowing students to take notes in their native language

- By allowing students to take notes in native language, teachers could help students work on their comprehension and writing skills without having to adapt to a new language (Brooks and Karathanos). Through this exercise, students could focus on developing skills one at a time, allowing them to strengthen comprehension more effectively.

Conclusion:

COVID-19 exposed critical gaps in the education of English Learners, but these gaps have existed since before the pandemic. Students were busy taking care of family members during school, dealing with high infection rates, and attempting to communicate solely through online translation services. Even without the added difficulty COVID-19 presented, English Learners often have less support at home due to difficulty accessing information for parents, less time to process information, and less confidence in their understanding of vocabulary. Through targeted small group support, students improved significantly in understanding the central ideas of a text, accurately comparing characters, reading more effectively, and annotating the text. However, they could also benefit from more support in building vocabulary, identifying evidence in fictional texts, and analyzing the main ideas of informative texts. Through school wide initiatives (such as providing in-home support services or opportunities to learn in Spanish) and modest adjustments in the classroom (such as learning strategy workshops and adaptations to note taking), schools could help these students excel in English Language Arts classes. While students and schools have a long way to go to close these gaps, the lessons learned from the pandemic have been valuable, providing a launching point for a new beginning in English Learner education.

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