Experiences of Elementary-Aged English Learners
& Their Families Due to the Remote Learning
Conditions Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts at Kalamazoo College.
Preface

As my family and I were getting ready for our first days of remote learning, I thought a lot about how others were dealing with the situation. My siblings and I were lucky enough to have devices and internet to be ready on our first day, though I knew others would not. For a while, I thought it would be fine since they would probably have work packets and we would be back in our classrooms soon enough. As the time when we were supposed to go back to in person learning continued to get pushed back, I began to think about how so many families were probably not doing anything school-related because they did not have the resources for it. I started to think about the elementary students at El Sol Elementary that I worked with through Kalamazoo College’s Center for Civic Engagement and how many of them were probably struggling then, especially because many of their parents did not speak English and were probably having a hard time communicating with the schools. El Sol Elementary had a large population of students who were newer to the country, so they were still learning English and the education system in this country. I thought back to my early elementary years when I was an English as a Second Language (ESL) student. I remember being so frustrated when my teacher would speak faster because it was hard to keep up with her instructions. I could not imagine what this must have been like for current ESL students to have to try and follow a new language, while learning new technology, and not even being able to ask for help while being physically in front of their teachers.

As the pandemic continued and I would see my younger sister interact with her classmates who speak both English and Spanish in her bilingual classes, I wondered how younger English learners were doing during remote learning. In the fall of 2020 when I was asked to choose a topic for my final project in my educational psychology course with professor Sally Read, I
knew exactly what I wanted to research. Professor Read encouraged me to pursue this topic of how English learners were doing during remote learning and what kind of resources school districts were providing to them and their families during those difficult times. She knew this topic was personal to me, which would make this research even more meaningful. I started to research this topic and conducted some quick interviews with teachers I had previously worked with who had ESL students in their classrooms. During the time, for that project, it was early in the pandemic, so the findings I was reading were being published during those same days. I was fascinated by the information I was finding, but also worried by how these students might be falling behind. It was then that I realized exactly what my Senior Integrated Project would be about. I wanted to bring awareness to these situations so teachers and administrators could find ways to support their students. All the research I was finding was recently published during that time (Fall of 2020) and I started to wonder what it would look like to follow this topic as remote learning continued.

I would like to thank everyone at Northwest Center (Chicago, IL) and at RAWK-Reading & Writing Kalamazoo (Kalamazoo, MI) who helped me recruit people to interview. I appreciate everyone who participated in interviews; I have always believed that personal experiences are such important resources when it comes to this type of research. And of course, I would like to thank everyone (my SIP advisor- Dr. Larissa Dugas, professors, CCE staff, co-workers, family, and friends) who encouraged me to research this topic more thoroughly to spotlight some challenges during difficult times for a group that represents so many of the students in the United States.
Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences of elementary aged English learners during their time in remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the reasons for which English language learners in the United States might have had a more difficult time transitioning and participating in remote learning in comparison to their English-proficient peers. Based on interviews conducted (with elementary English learners, their parents, and their teachers), online blogs (run by local community organizations and teachers), and others’ research on this topic, it was concluded that English learners had a difficult time during remote learning due to a lack of devices and internet connection, limitations due to family and home situations, and culture and language barriers between the families and schools. There were also some positives for English learners and their families that came out of these learning conditions such as a better understanding of the academic curriculum from the parents’ perspective and an increase in technological skills and resources for English learners. This information is valuable since English learners make up 10% of the K-12 students in the United States, and that number continues to rise every year. These students may have already been falling behind their peers in pre-pandemic times. It is important to take note of their experiences during the pandemic to assure that these students are receiving additional support, to ensure that they do not continue to feel left behind and frustrated like many did during remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
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1.0 | INTRODUCTION

School closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic (starting in early Spring of 2020 and extending through the 2020-2021 school year) brought a lot of uncertainty to students, parents, teachers, and administrators as to what learning would look like during this unprecedented time. There would be obstacles to assuring that students had the devices and internet connection to be able to log onto their online classes. There was also uncertainty as to whether students would be able to learn while at home in this online environment. Not only did students have to try and focus on their schoolwork, but they were also stuck at home without any connection to their friends and classmates. Other history making events, were taking place around the same time, such as the riots and protests that began in late May 2020, adding to the uneasiness nation was feeling. Although everyone was going through a rough time, some groups of students who may have been falling even more behind due to their limited resources and limited English skills. This research focuses on the experiences of English learners in the United States and their families during remote learning (from early Spring of 2020 through the 2020-2021 school year) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to a lack of internet connection and tech devices, other home and family situation limitations, and language and cultural barriers, the COVID-19 pandemic remote learning conditions often made it difficult for many English learners to stay on task and learn efficiently during their remote learning time. However, parents often developed a deeper appreciation for educators and the curriculum being taught. The development of technological skills and an increase in usage of online resources were also outcomes of remote learning.
Before we explore these students’ experiences during remote learning, it is important to specify what type of students this research is focused on. There are several ways to denote a student who is learning English when English is not their native language. A different acronym or name might be used to describe these students depending on the context and country being referred to. In this paper, the students who were referred to as ESL, ESOL, ELL, and EL students in other articles and blogs will be referred to as English Learners (EL). ESL stands for English as a Second Language. This refers to when a student is learning English in a country where “English is dominantly spoken or where English is the official language” (Hyte, 2008). For example, this would be any student who is coming to the United States and is learning English here since it is dominantly spoken in this country. ESOL stands for English for Speakers of Other Languages. This term was created since for some students, English may not be their second language, but in fact their third or fourth language. The importance is that they are not native English speakers but are learning it to be able to communicate effectively in this country. ELL stands for English Language Learners. “The term ELL originated as an alternative of ESL” (University of the People, 2020). Like ESOL, ELL is now more commonly used since some of these students know more languages and therefore English would not be their second language. EL stands for English learners. This term is more regularly used by the government. For example, in the United States Department of Education’s Fact Sheets, they refer to this group of students as ELs. Many of these acronyms were used interchangeably in different sources and all these students are not native speakers of English and are learning English in school. For this paper, these students will be referred to as English learners (EL).
This paper focuses on elementary-aged students. There are some sources which talk about K-12 English learners since they often refer to entire school districts. The students, parents, and teachers interviewed for this research are or are affiliated with students in kindergarten through fifth grade. This is important to specify since many of these students are starting to learn a new language while trying to get adjusted to a new country with a new education system at a younger age. It may also be easier to reach the same level of proficiency as their peers since they are learning some of the more basic components of the language in contrast to English learners who are in middle school or high school who need to reach the same proficiency as their peers (which is much more advanced) and get adjusted to the education system and learn more complex academic content all at the same time. Even before the pandemic, these students may have been falling behind because they had to do double the work of their English-speaking peers: “In addition to learning everything a native kindergartener is learning, ELL students are also having to learn a second language” (Little Sponges, 2017).

1.1 | RELEVANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

School closures occurred all over the country which means that most students were required to transition to remote learning. So why is it important to note that English learners might have experienced this transition more drastically? English learners make up a large portion of students in schools. “According to recent findings from the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), there are more than 5 million English learners (ELs) in the public school system, thus accounting for over 10% of all students in the country” (Peterson et al., 2021, pg. 14). It is important to understand some of the difficulties that this group of students were likely facing during remote learning because
4.9 million English-language learners (ELLs) were among the students who were asked to stay home due to the pandemic (Napolitano, 2020).

The concept of summer slide was a potential fear for administrators for English learners in remote learning. School districts feared that these students would fall even more behind than they may already have during previous, ‘normal’ school years (Cano & Thompson, 2020). Already, most ESL students are likely to fall behind over the summer if they are not practicing what they learned during the school year. This was happening when students were not regularly practicing their English skills for a two-month period during summer break; now imagine the drastic negative effects that would come from no face-to-face lessons for several months.

As mentioned, even before the pandemic, many English learners were falling behind in comparison with their native English-speaking peers. “ESL students are categorized as a vulnerable population. Nationally, 82 percent of students graduate from high school, and, comparatively, only 63 percent of ESL students graduate from high school” (GoGuardian, 2020). Without a high school diploma, it is difficult for them to find jobs with higher paying wages to ensure a better life for themselves. This also affects the future generations of their families which may have fewer resources due to their parents’ lower education levels. School districts hope to help students improve their English and academic skills to ensure that they will graduate and be prepared for what is next in their lives, but many English learners are falling behind when it comes to graduating and gaining the diplomas needed to go to college and get better jobs with greater benefits. If many English learners were falling behind pre-pandemic, it is unsettling to think what may happen post-pandemic since many English learners seemed to feel behind in their
classrooms. “Tim Boals, executive director of WIDA, a group that provides educational resources for multilingual learners, worries the shutdowns will result in an even greater marginalization of those students” (Napolitano, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that there were disparities between English learners and their peers pre-pandemic, which may have become greater during remote learning to ensure that we play close attention to English learners as they return to in-person classes.

1.2 | ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENTS WAIVED

Before diving deeper into the challenges of ELs during remote learning, I would like to acknowledge some of the adjustments that some school districts made after receiving suggestions from The United States Department of Education. The United States Department of Education gave guidance as to what schools with EL students should do and how their responsibilities might have shifted as an effect of school closures (Belsha, 2020). Many school districts were unsure of what their responsibilities looked like since schools were closed and did not have contact with many EL families. A fact sheet from the United States Department of Education was published on May 18, 2020, about two months after most schools closed. “This fact sheet outlines States’ responsibilities to English learners (ELs) and their parents during the extended school closures and, in some cases, the move to remote learning due to the national emergency caused by the novel Coronavirus disease 2019” (United States Department of Education, 2020, pg. 1). The United States Department of Education gave districts permission to waive the administration of English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessments. If a state could not administer an English language proficiency assessment in spring of 2020 due to school closures, the U.S. Department of Education would waive that requirement (United States
Department of Education, 2020, pg. 1). States were allowed to continue with their testing if they had already started before May 18, 2020, but were not required to do so.

English language proficiency assessments are important for English learner students because it helps track a student’s progress and helps properly place them in the correct level/class the upcoming year. “An SEA [State Education Agency] and its local educational agencies (LEAs) typically use the annual ELP assessment to inform instruction and placement of ELs, in addition to decisions on exiting students from EL status” (United States Department of Education, 2020, pg. 2). If ELP assessments were not conducted soon enough to know proper placement for the 2020-2021 school year, then schools should use other resources “to make instructional and placement decisions for its ELs when school resumes”, such as EL specialists and homeroom teacher input (United States of Education, 2020, pg. 2). Without the proper scores from ELP assessments, a student’s placement had to be based on other progress notes and observations. However, this made it difficult to accurately determine whether the student had “tested” out of certain levels, or if they should even go down a level.

Schools should be on the lookout for students whose English language proficiency decreased “because they may have experienced limited instruction for an extended time during the school closures.” Students who were close to being classified as proficient may now need more support, and students who already took the proficiency assessment and were set to stop receiving English services in the coming school year should be closely monitored in case they need additional help or need to be re-classified as English learners (Belsha, 2020).

It was important to also keep track of the progress of students who had been exited from EL programs pre-pandemic since their English proficiency may have declined during the school closures. In both Kalamazoo Public Schools and Chicago Public Schools, during
the 2019-2020 academic year, ELP assessments were not completed. During the 2020-
2021 school year, ELP assessments were completed.

2 | METHODS

For this study, I consulted academic resources, online blogs (ran by local community
organizations and teachers of English learners), and government fact sheets. Furthermore,
I conducted interviews with elementary aged English learners, their parents, and their
teachers. Please see Appendix A for a full list of interviewees and additional information
about each interviewee. I was able to conduct twelve student interviews (elementary
students from kindergarten to 5th grade during the 2020-21 school year), nine parent
interviews (parents of EL elementary students from kindergarten to 5th grade during the
2020-21 school year), and three teacher interviews (teachers who work with elementary
EL students in grades Kindergarten through 5th grade). The students interviewed were all
considered EL students by their schools. The proficiency levels of English these students
possessed varied. Some students were born in this country but did not speak English at
home and therefore the first time they were learning English was in school; others had
immigrated to this country and have been here for anywhere between two to four years.

Since many of the interviewees did not know English very well, interviews were done
in their language of choice. All students interviewed in this project came from a Spanish-
speaking home and were learning English at school. Interviews ranged from 25-35
minutes depending on how much each person had to share. Parent interviews tended to be
closer to the 35-minute range and students spoke closer to an average of 25 minutes. I
conducted these interviews between October and December 2021. During that time
frame, all students interviewed had returned to in-person instruction for the first time
since March 2020. This meant that they had been back in the classroom for about two to four months at the time. This is important to indicate since the experience of being remote was easier to remember for these students, parents, and teachers than it would be if they had been in-person for a longer time. All students and parents interviewed considered themselves to be Latinx. I am a native speaker of Spanish, which facilitated my interactions with the Spanish speaking population I interviewed. I was able to fully comprehend what they were saying and ask follow-up questions. The same base questions were used for both English- and Spanish-speaking interviewees. Then, follow-up questions were posed based on the interviewees’ previous answers. The interviews were limited to Latinx families since they make up most of the demographic in the two school districts from which the interviewees came. It was also easier to assure that language barrier would not be an issue when conducting interviews.

Students, teachers, and parents interviewed came from two separate public-school districts: Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS). Appendix A notes which school district each interviewee is associated with. CPS is the public school district for the nation’s third largest city, Chicago, IL (World Population Review, 2020). In the 2020-2021 school year, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) had 340,658 students enrolled and 636 running schools (CPS, 2021). In the 2020-2021 school year, 18.6% of the district were considered English learners (CPS, 2021). KPS is the public school district for the smaller city of Kalamazoo, MI. Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) consists of twenty-four schools with a little over 12,000 enrolled students and 8% of the student population are English Language learners (KPS, 2021). Both school districts went fully remote in March of 2020. Chicago Public Schools offered a hybrid option during
spring of 2021, which allowed students to attend in-person for half of the school week. None of the students interviewed for this project enrolled in that option. KPS stayed virtual for the entire 2020-2021 school year. All student interviewees returned to in-person instruction in the fall of 2021. Due to my connection with several Chicago Public School families through my job at a community-based organization on the Northwest side of Chicago, I was able to recruit interviewees there. As a college student and resident of Kalamazoo I have held tutoring positions in this city, which is how I was able to recruit students attending Kalamazoo Public Schools.

Since the interviewees were from different states and due to COVID precautions, interviewees could choose between virtual or in-person interviews. All interviewees chose the virtual format and thus all interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone call. A phone call was an option since many parents did not have access to a device that they could connect to Zoom on or did not have the skills to be able to connect to Zoom. All interviews were recorded to ensure that exact quotes could be pulled. Minors under the age of eighteen filled out an assent form with their guardian’s permission before participating in the interview. Adults filled in a consent form that explained the research and gave permission for their responses to be used in this paper. The type of questions for parents revolved around how strong their own English skills are, what their biggest fears were during remote learning, what a typical day during the pandemic looked like, if they noticed a change in their children’s focus and motivation, and what resources they used to help their children with their schoolwork. (Please refer to Appendix B for base questions for parents). The type of questions for students focused on how much they learned during remote learning, whether things were easier or harder online, if they felt
behind, and what kind of resources they used while being online. (Please refer to Appendix C for base questions for students). The type of questions for teachers revolved around what modifications they made to their curriculum to fit the online format, how much support they offered for students and parents, and whether they saw a difference in their students’ participation and motivation. (Please refer to Appendix D for base questions for teachers).

The findings of this study are based on a combination of literature (articles and online blogs) and English learners and their families’ experiences shared through interviews. The foundation of this paper is the literature review. I read and analyzed several sources to find the main challenges that English learners, and their families were facing during the remote learning conditions. The interviews were recorded; I took preliminary notes in order to remember what comments were said that would support the findings from the sources. Interviews were listened to once more after all interviews were conducted to listen carefully for direct quotes or comments that fit well in this paper. Due to a small sample size for this study, the experiences of the people interviewed cannot be generalized to all English learner families in the United States. Interviews are meant to support the findings reported in the literature. This study is not based solely on interviews, but they serve to emphasize families’ personal experiences.

3.0 | Discussion

3.1 | CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH LEARNERS DURING REMOTE LEARNING

3.1.1 | LACK OF DEVICES AND INTERNET CONNECTION

At the beginning of the pandemic, one of the biggest concerns for many families of English learners was how they were going to connect to their online classes. As many of
my sources discussed, most EL students’ families across the United States did not have internet service in their home’s pre-pandemic. This was also prevalent among the families I interviewed. As mentioned, all families interviewed for this project consider themselves to be Latinx. “Latina/o students in the United States are three times as likely as White students to have no internet access at home” (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg. 2). Families across the country also had few to no devices that could be used to connect to online platforms. For many, parents’ smartphones were their only way to access their online schoolwork (Sayer & Braun, 2020). It was more difficult to access assignments and pay attention to class at the same time while being on the small screen of a smartphone. A lack of devices was especially a problem for families who had several children who were going to connect to online classes. As Parent B shared, her family only had access to one computer, which was difficult when her two sons and herself were all attending online class. This was extremely stressful because she had to coordinate a schedule for when each person had access to the device to ensure that they could take the most advantage of one device. “Some students may be sharing the devices they use for remote learning with other family members, causing them to be late or absent from live online classes” (GoGuardian, 2020). If students were not able to connect to class due to having to share devices, having no internet service, or constantly disconnecting due to slower internet speeds, it was difficult for parents to communicate that to teachers because of language barriers between students/parents and teachers. Student D mentions how although she was trying to connect to class, if her internet was lagging and she disconnected for a certain amount of time then her teacher would mark her as absent. It was frustrating for her since she was worrying about missing all the important
information her teacher was giving but then was also worried about her attendance record.

Since there were barriers for students to connect to class, there was a high rate of absent students during remote learning. A professor at Ohio State University who also works with local schools in Columbus, Ohio mentions, “In our district, schools closed mid-March; however, a May 5 poll found that only 35% of ELs were participating in remote learning” (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg. 2). This was a problem since not only would students’ English skills decline, but they would also not be practicing the knowledge and skills they were learning in other subjects. Bilingual instructional assistants and social workers were often the ones tasked to check in with EL families. “The priority in initial contact with families was to document whether their children had access to food, internet, and a device to make remote learning possible” (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg. 3). It was not focused much on whether they were completing assignments or understanding the material that was being taught. Students would therefore often fall behind in their academics.

Since some families have not been in this country for a long time, they are still adjusting to their new jobs and trying to figure out what things may be needed in this country to help their students with their academics. Many English learners are a part of families that are considered low-income, namely, for the same reason that they are starting their journey of saving up and living in this country. These students are more likely part of districts that may not have many resources or funds allocated specifically for English learners. “Among the many consequences of this resource gap is that districts with more ELs had far less technology infrastructure to manage the transition to online
learning” (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg. 2). It was more difficult for them to transition due to a lack of resources that they experienced even pre-pandemic. “The English learning population of students is often one that lacks access to critical services in the school and community” (Peterson et al., 2021, pg. 14). Schools want to support their English Language Learners but it is often difficult to do so without any funds or support allocated to them from higher up in the district.

There were some school districts that were able to distribute laptops or tablets to those students who needed them. However, that was only half of the problem. “Although some schools have made efforts to distribute laptops to families, many are not providing support with internet access” (Peterson et al., 2021, pg. 14). Without internet access, there was only so much that students could do with their devices. Then, those families who did have internet service may have small plans which were cheaper since they only used the internet on a limited basis pre-pandemic. These students were connected, but often with slower speeds, especially problematic if multiple children were trying to attend class at the same time.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that some school districts across the country worked towards having more equality for low-income families, many of which are English learner families. An example is the Chicago Connected program that was created for the students of Chicago Public Schools. A partnership between CPS, the City of Chicago, Comcast, and RCN brought free internet service to eligible students in CPS in June 2020. Roughly 228,000 of CPS students are eligible for the program if they choose to enroll. As of December 2021, a little over 40,000 families have been enrolled in this program which will bring internet connection to them for four years through July
1st, 2024, if eligibility status does not change (CPS, 2021). I have seen on a firsthand basis how this program has impacted the lives of several families who would not have been able to engage in remote learning otherwise. I worked as the Chicago Connected program manager for a community-based organization in Chicago and was given the opportunity to share with families that they were eligible for this program and the steps they needed to take to enroll. Unfortunately, there were other school districts in the nation which did not have this resource, especially smaller cities; internet connection was another obstacle for them.

Even when EL students were lucky enough to connect to internet service and receive a device, there was another obstacle to connecting to online platforms. It would be difficult to operate online applications and platforms because they were in English. Many of these parents did not have a strong background in technology and digital literacy. Some cultures may have been afraid to use the technology previously because they did not know how or were worried about other users who may use technology to cause harm. Parents had to rely on the resources that would be given to them by the school district and possibly some community organizations in the area. It would be difficult for most families to know how to start navigating these platforms without the aid or instruction of others, which would lead into a greater disconnect from students’ classes and teachers. By the time most of the material would be translated into their native language, several days without instruction or assignments could have passed by.

3.1.2 | HOME & FAMILY SITUATION LIMITATIONS

Some of the ESL families who switched over to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic are refugees and immigrants who are newer to the country. Many of them
did not travel with family and may have started from scratch when arriving in this country. They may not have necessarily understood what was happening at the beginning of the pandemic with the virus. If they did not realize there was a virus going around, having to transition to remote learning could have been very confusing and strange. It was crucial for schools to share updates on the virus to EL and immigrant families: how it spreads, who is most affected, what to do if you are sick, and other resources. It is likely they did not have access to news sources or close-by relatives to keep them in the loop. If they saw and heard things on the TV and other news outlets, it may have been difficult to understand (Colorín Colorado, 2020). It is possible that although these families needed resources and help, they were afraid to reach out to their children’s schools because of their immigration status (Napolitano, 2020). With immigrant families, there is always a fear that something about their citizenship status will be asked whenever receiving aid and to avoid that risk, they often go on without the help they need. Immigrant families were also likely scared of getting sick because they most likely did not have access to resources like insurance or sick leave (Colorín Colorado, 2020) like others in their neighborhood. A teacher at a school with several immigrant families commented, “‘I think it’s triggering for [recent] refugee and immigrant families,’ she said. ‘Here they are in a new country, and everything is turned upside down and restricted’” (Napolitano, 2020). It would be scary to not understand the situation and suddenly everything you know is chaotic and shutting down.

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1 My interviewees were not asked what their immigration status is, but many of them mentioned when they first arrived in the United States which helped me understand their family/home situations better. Since interviewees’ immigration status is unknown, whenever I refer to an immigrant/refugee family in this paper, it is referring to families talked about in academic sources and online blogs.
Since most ESL students have not yet mastered the English language, they need additional support from those at home in order to understand their assignments and be able to participate in class. However, this was a barrier for EL students since many of their parents had to continue to work. “Many parents of ELs may not have the option to work from home because many are essential workers” (Peterson et al., 2021, pg. 16). Where other parents maybe had the option to work from home, parents of the majority of ELs did not have that luxury. Many parents of ELs did not receive a higher education, which meant that most of the jobs that they were in required them to work on site (maintenance, fast food, retail) (Cano & Thompson, 2020). This meant that these families were still at a high risk of getting the virus since family members were still going to work in person. Kids would have to stay home with older siblings, other family members, or at day cares (though many daycares were closed at this time as well, which meant more limited options) while their parents were working. Since parents were not at home for work, that limited how much time they could spend on helping their students. The time they were at home, they had to first focus on getting dinner going and assuring that the home was clean.

When parents were available to help, they had to take some time to try and understand what was on their child’s to-do list for the day. They had to understand how to access the assignments and learn what kind of material they covered. Since parents were not always available to help, they had to ask others for help. This ranged from encouraging their children to ask their teachers more questions and asking other family members for help. An often-used resource was asking older siblings to help their younger siblings. However, in many families, these older children were also English learners
themselves, so their help was limited. When a mother was asked what other resources she used to help her child with his assignments, she mentioned that she “has put her older son in charge of helping his little brother with homework, but she is concerned that neither of them are getting the support they need” (Rami, 2020). Many of the students I interviewed mentioned that this was the case in their experience as well. Older siblings said that when they had breaks between classes, they often used those to help their younger siblings when they were struggling. The younger students I interviewed mentioned that oftentimes they could not continue with their work until an older sibling or other family member helped them because their teachers were helping other students.

An appropriate, distraction-free workspace was not feasible for several English learners. “As many ELs reside in urban areas, they also struggle with smaller living spaces that make it difficult to participate in virtual learning without environmental distractions” (Peterson et al., 2021, pg. 14). With multiple children and smaller living spaces, it was very likely that English learner students would not have a room that was mostly distraction free for the best possible learning experience. It was difficult to pay attention, try to understand English, and complete assignments when there were so many distractions occurring around them. If their camera or microphone was on this also affected their fellow classmates who could see what was going on. Then, there were some students who were embarrassed by what was going on around them, which led them to turn off their cameras. This often made it easier to start daydreaming and not pay attention to class.

3.1.3 | LANGUAGE & CULTURAL BARRIERS
Due to language barriers, remote learning could be frustrating on both ends (for teachers and for families at home) for ELs. In frustrating moments, it was difficult to be motivated to teach and learn. “Although still relatively important, the priority for teaching and learning decreased for both the practitioners and their students during the pandemic due to a variety of new stressors in their lives” (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020, pg. 140).

Not only did teachers and students have to focus on doing things remotely, but there were also other events going on that created distractions and anxiety for people, making it more difficult to focus on work and gaining knowledge. “The results of [our] study show that the effects of COVID-19 pandemic increased stress for both students and teachers across an array of contexts” (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020, pg. 151). Schools were required to continue providing language instruction services to ELs during the school closures.

However, during the COVID-19 national emergency, the Department recognizes that physical school closures may affect how services are provided to ELs… The Department understands that during the national emergency, schools may not be able to provide all services in the same manner they are typically provided” (United States Department of Education, 2020, pg. 3-4).

Although e-learning existed before the pandemic, it was not necessarily meant for an ESL curriculum. Several academic resources that students could use online to aid the material being taught in class exist. However, there was not a vast selection of programs or activities for English learners. “Programs designed for English language learners are not even available through online instruction” (Cano & Thompson, 2020, pg. 33). There would be additional help needed for students to assure that they got their work done.

In order for family members to help their students, they must first understand the assignments they need to help with. This was not always feasible since some school
districts did not have the resources to translate material in an efficient amount of time. “Some districts, especially small or rural ones, do not translate content into languages other than English, or have limited resources to do so” (Rami, 2020). This was especially a problem at the beginning of the pandemic because there was an overwhelming amount of information being sent home and so many things were uncertain and up in the air.

“There were often a flood of information in English to students and parents with minimal accommodations for EL families” (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg. 1). School districts who did have more limited resources for people to translate, especially for languages that are not spoken widely in the United States, often had to use Google Translate, which often led to meaning being lost in translation. Parents also used translation services often to understand school announcements and their children’s assignments. For those who did not know how to use online translation services, they relied on others in their life to help translate such as other family members and neighbors. Ms. Alomari, as quoted in a New York Times article said she “makes sure her daughter Maysa, 15, is around to serve as an interpreter, handing her the phone mid-conversation” (Rami, 2020). She must rely on the help of her older child to understand what the school is trying to communicate.

Given the language barrier, it is difficult for these students to learn English online because of the structure during remote learning. “During regular classes, students routinely engage in listening and speaking, whereas the hastily assembled learning packets focused almost entirely on reading and writing” (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg. 4). The curriculum during the pandemic focused on reading and writing, not listening and speaking like in-person classes. These students also did not have an opportunity to speak and socialize with their fellow classmates, which was often a way for them to improve
their English skills, interacting with native English speakers and others learning the language. During remote learning, ESL students were no longer receiving the 1:1 help or small group work that was so critical to the improvement of their English skills. “Early grade ELs often receive literary instruction from a combination of the classroom teacher, bilingual instructional aides, and the ESL teacher or literacy coach” (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg. 4). Students were struggling to get connected to one link to attend a class with their homeroom teacher. It was even more difficult to keep up with attending several different classes and keep track of different links if they were asked to meet with other teachers, such as designated ESL teachers. ELs then felt lost upon their return to their homeroom. It was difficult for ESL teachers to teach all of their EL students in a smaller group setting or 1:1 since they were being asked to take on other tasks to make sure that all EL students were connecting to their classes. “Many teachers reported that it was only near the end of the school year [2019-2020] that they were able to reliably hold synchronous real-time small group sessions using tools like Google Meet” (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg. 4). It is important that ESL students do things at their own pace, and that was more difficult to track and accomplish during remote learning.

Being online would not lead to the same progress as being in person. “Students with lower English proficiency may have had difficulty fully understanding what was happening and may have struggled to communicate their needs or concerns” (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020, pg. 141). It would be more difficult for students to express their struggles while online. They often rely on body language and physical gestures to fill in the blanks for the material they might not understand and that was difficult to do through a screen. Slang, new vocabulary, and acronyms were also hard to learn when remote,
especially when classes were asynchronous. For teachers, it was also harder to tell who was struggling academically or mentally, especially since most students did not participate due to language barriers or inability/reluctance to turn on their cameras. By not being in person, it was more difficult for teachers to make “the moment-to-moment adjustments teachers make every day to help these students keep up with their material” (Napolitano, 2020). In their general classes, ELs followed the same assignments as their English-proficient peers and could fall behind more easily. Nonetheless, teachers were “trying their best to make the switch to online classes a positive learning experience, teachers were still very concerned about how well students were progressing in their English proficiency” (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020, pg. 149). Teachers felt their students were falling behind, but it was difficult for them to give them more 1:1 attention since they had to help other students who kept disconnecting from class or could not find the online assignment. Since students did not have this dedicated time or teaching, it was burdensome to complete all assignments.

It was also difficult for parents to keep track of their student’s progress, especially if they were newer to the country, due to a lack of knowledge of the United States’ educational system. “The shift to distance learning has created unique challenges for English language learners and their parents, who are tasked with keeping them on track despite their own struggles and lack of familiarity with the educational system” (Cano & Thompson, 2020, pg. 32). Many parents left their children at school but were not very aware of their daily schedules or the curriculum their students were learning. Due to several districts’ choice of having asynchronous or a combination of synchronous and asynchronous classes, schedules varied from student to student, even if they attended the
same school. Students were often getting out of class earlier than they would have if they were in-person. Several of the parents I interviewed mentioned that they were skeptical of that. They often did not believe their children when they said that they were done for the day. Students mentioned to me how most teachers used the end of the day to hold office hours for those who did not finish the day’s assignments or needed extra help. If students did not take advantage of that, they often did end their day earlier than if they were in person.

3.2 FEELING BEHIND & FRUSTRATED

![Students Feelings During Remote Learning](image)

**Figure 1. Students’ Feelings During Remote Learning**

When I asked students if they felt supported by their teachers and parents, 100% of them said that they felt supported by both. 100% of students also said that they felt behind in class during remote learning. 100% of students said that they often felt frustrated during remote learning, either because of internet disconnection, feeling lost/behind, or other undesirable learning conditions. When asked if they preferred
remote learning over in-person, 70% of students said no. The other 30% said they were not sure since they enjoyed remote learning because of the increase in breaks and being able to do class from bed. Only 20% of students said that they felt like the remote learning environment was better for learning, while the other 80% disagreed and prefer in-person instruction.

When I was speaking to students, it was very noticeable that teachers and parents were constantly trying their best to support their students. However, due to the circumstances, they may not have always been very successful. Student H talked about how it was a lot harder to get a hold of his teacher when remote because if they were doing a group project, instead of just walking up to her and asking, he had to wait for her to join his Google Meets breakout room. And although it might have been comfortable to take their class from bed and in their pajamas, as several students mentioned, 70% of students preferred in-person learning over remote learning. 80% of the students agreed that that was the best way for them to learn because they often felt unmotivated or not focused on their teacher and what was going on in class. It was a lot easier for them to get up from their seat and go do something else while at home. Students often felt like they needed to take a break from the screen so they would check-out from class for a bit, which would lead into them not knowing what the instructions were for the next task. It was also frustrating when their own, their teachers’, or their classmates’ internet would go out because things were often missed, which would mean that class would become difficult, or they would fall behind. 100% of students felt like they were behind in class because it was harder to be able to practice what they were learning and could not ask for help right away from a desk neighbor or the teacher like they would in-person. Student D
mentioned how the teacher would not teach her all the learning or study strategies she typically would because they would be hard to explain online and did not want to focus their attention on that. “I am now learning so many new strategies and things in 4th grade that my teacher said I should have learned in 3rd grade.”

The most surprising information I came across is that many students do not feel like their English proficiency decreased significantly in comparison to other subjects. Although they did not feel like there was a decline, they did not feel like there was an increase in proficiency either. They were stuck at the same level as before in terms of their English proficiency, but they did feel frustrated due to not understanding English very well during remote learning. Students felt behind and do not think that they learned as much, but it seems to be across the board with all subjects. On the other hand, when I asked teachers and parents, they felt like their students did fall behind since they were not practicing their English as much during the day like they would in a physical classroom, including all specials classes and recess. It could be that the students just did not notice the decline themselves since it was happening with most subjects. It is also encouraging to see that many students speak about how they now have a deeper appreciation for school and are trying to catch up and do their best now that they have returned to in-person because they do not want to feel so frustrated again. This is something that educators and administrators should take advantage of. They should provide and encourage more extracurricular options and other support for their students such as more 1:1 time allocated for these individuals with mentors and ESL specialists.

As many have acknowledged that schools were possibly not able to give it their all during remote learning conditions for the past year and a half, this information is
presented with the intention that educators will acknowledge that students, specifically English learners, were going through some difficult times and that they should be provided with additional resources in the coming years. Hopefully this is also eye opening for school districts to see where they can bring in more funding and resources to assure that communication with families, especially non-English speakers, can improve.

Students will do better if their families are involved with their learning, and that will happen if we can overcome that language barrier that many schools still face. Policy says that things should be translated and sent home, but the quality of those translations and communications should be closely evaluated so all families feel like they are a part of their school’s community and that they are welcomed, no matter their background.

3.3 | NOT ALL SO BAD

Although remote learning was difficult for everyone involved, especially for English learners, there were some positive outcomes that resulted from the remote learning situation. When there was a way to overcome the language barrier, through the help of translation services or through others, parents encouraged their students to reach out to their teachers more frequently when they were falling behind. By being able to better understand their daily schedules and the curriculum that they were learning, they knew that teachers were creating the spaces for their students to ask for help. Since parents were more aware of the lesson plans and curriculum their children were learning, there was a greater appreciation for educators and all the work they put into their classrooms. “Parents gained more insights into the actual content and processes of their children’s learning, which for many immigrant families likely helped them better understand the ‘inner workings’ of U.S. classrooms” (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg. 4). Parent A shared how
she would always take her daughter to school, drop her off, wish her luck, and hoped that she learned a lot that day. Besides whatever her daughter shared with her, which was limited, she had no idea what or how she was learning inside the classroom. During online learning, she was able to see a little bit of what was happening in a physical classroom.

This also worked the other way around. Teachers were able to get a better insight into their student’s family and home situations. When reflecting on any positives noted during remote learning, Teacher A (a third-grade teacher) said:

I literally was able to enter their world and see where they come from and what their home lives were like. I was able to use that to my advantage. I knew their interests. I knew all of their siblings and their names. I knew their pets and got to see their favorite toys. It was an opportunity to get to know students on a deeper level and I hope teachers did not take that lightly and took advantage of it.

It was easier to see some of the challenges their students might be facing at home that interfered with their learning or academic growth. This would make it easier to try and accommodate lessons and activities for students to be able to show their best potential.

Technology is being used more and more in our society. The COVID-19 pandemic improved student’s technological skills and created an emphasis on the technology resources available at their fingertips. It is now easier to incorporate digital tools in the physical classroom to aide their learning. During the pandemic, schools tried to emphasize the use of these features with parents to encourage better communication between parents and teachers. An example of this would be teaching parents about chat applications with translation features that would make communication more efficient. It did not just stop with resources that could be used in a classroom; students were now more experienced with real-world applications of technology (Sayer & Braun, 2020, pg.
4) such as using an email to communicate with adults in a more professional setting. Student C mentioned how she is so happy that her typing skills have improved because she knows she will continue to use that over the years. Yet, she did mention how typing was a cause of a lot of her frustration at the beginning of remote learning since all her assignments required her to type, especially in language arts class.

4 | LIMITATIONS & NEXT STEPS

Due to the size of this study, the number of people interviewed did not cover a wide range. Students were in grades kindergarten through 5th grade during the 2020-21 school year. These students came from two different-sized school districts. Students' experiences could have differed if they came from school districts in different states or different cities than the ones observed, especially those districts that may have more access to resources and funds for help with interpreting materials and other support. If students attended schools that specialized or focused on language learning or specific to English learners, then those schools may have been more prepared with an online curriculum, and they would have known how to better support students when the schools closed in March of 2020. The students and parents interviewed in this study came from a Spanish-speaking background. “In the U.S., 13 percent of the population speaks Spanish at home, earning it the title of the most common non-English language spoken” (Thompson, 2021). This means that the likelihood of having access to someone who could help interpret information being sent home was higher for Spanish speakers than for other languages. EL students who spoke other languages that were not Spanish might have had an even more difficult time than those interviewed for this project.
Remote learning effects due to the COVID-19 pandemic is a topic that has not been thoroughly studied yet for any group of students due to how recent the year of remote learning is. As this paper is being written, we are still in the pandemic and there is a chance that remote learning could be reimposed. We still have not had a full school year back in-person and may not for a while as some schools are having to quarantine several classrooms at a time due to rising COVID-19 cases. Since there have not been many studies that have focused on this material, there was not a substantial body of literature to help support or argue my findings based on interviews. The personal experiences that were mentioned but did not come from an interview conducted specifically for this project came from an online blog or article that could have been published at the beginning of school closures (March 2020) through the end of the remote learning year (2020-2021).

Something researchers could focus on in the future would be the long-term effects that remote learning due to COVID-19 had on ESL students’ performance, motivation, and confidence. It would be interesting to see if researchers and educators see a dip or spike in students’ performances when comparing students’ academic performance and test scores from pre-COVID school years and the years post remote learning. Although students’ English skills tend to improve the longer they are in the country and taking ESL classes, there might be a difference in the expected trajectory pre-COVID in comparison to how students end up performing due to the pandemic. There may be other factors that are affected by remote learning, such as students’ social interactions when coming back into the physical classroom that would alter a students’ academic performance and improvement of English skills.
5 | CONCLUSION

Many students around the world had to make a shift in early Spring of 2020 from being in a physical classroom surrounded by peers and teachers to remote learning at home for what at the time was an unknown amount of time. Students faced all forms of changes and challenges while transitioning to online learning. Many were lucky and had an advantage because they had support at home from parents, already had devices and internet access, and were familiar with the education system. However, not all groups of students were making the transition so effortlessly. English learners were a group of students who seemed to have more of a difficult time while participating in remote learning. The COVID-19 pandemic remote learning conditions brought difficulty for English learners due to a lack of devices and internet, home and family situation limitations, and language and cultural barriers.

This research was meant to bring awareness to others of how a group that makes up 10% of students in the United States likely experienced remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic, this group on average was already falling behind in comparison to their peers in terms of high school graduation rates, which would therefore lead to higher unemployment rates and getting jobs without benefits and or good work conditions. They also had to work twice as hard to learn the material being taught and learning the language it was being taught in. As many of these students are new in this country, they are adjusting to several changes- the language, the food, the school system, etc. It is also important to note how there may have been resources used during remote learning that can now be used to improve the experiences of English learners and their families that should be incorporated as students and teachers return to physical
classrooms. An example would be to continue to encourage students to use technology as a resource to improve their English skills such as recording themselves in English so they can play it back and compare it to how others are speaking. It is important to use the findings from this research to continue to support this specific group of students, so they do not continue to feel left behind and frustrated with school, but instead look forward to attending school every day and learning more and more.
### APPENDICES

Appendix A. List of Interviewees with their identifier, grade associated with during the 2020-2021 school year, and district they belong to.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>District</th>
<th># Of Years in ESL classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent A</td>
<td>Parent of 4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grader</td>
<td>CPS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent B</td>
<td>Parent of 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; &amp; 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grader</td>
<td>CPS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent C</td>
<td>Parent of 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Grader</td>
<td>KPS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent D</td>
<td>Parent of 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; &amp; 8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grader</td>
<td>KPS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent E</td>
<td>Parent of Kindergartner &amp; 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Grader</td>
<td>KPS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent F</td>
<td>Parent of 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Grade</td>
<td>CPS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent G</td>
<td>Parent of 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; &amp; 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grader</td>
<td>KPS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>CPS</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>KPS</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student F</td>
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<td>KPS</td>
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<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Grade Teacher</td>
<td>KPS</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
<td>ESL Teacher</td>
<td>KPS</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B. List of base questions for interviews with parents. (Questions were posed in Spanish for Spanish speaking interviewees).

1. On a scale of 1-10, how comfortable are you at reading, writing, speaking, and understanding English? (a number for each skill)
2. How many kids do you have? What grades are they in? How many of them are in an ESL program?
3. How many years have you been in this country? What was the last grade you attended in school?
4. What were your initial thoughts/ reactions when you realized that school was going to be online for an uncertain amount of time?
5. What were your biggest fears about remote learning? Why?
6. What do you do for work? Did your employment status or hours change during the pandemic?
7. Could you walk me through a typical day of remote learning? Were things synchronous, asynchronous, or a mix?
8. Overall, in all subjects, how much do you think your child learned these last couple of months?
9. Did you notice a decline or improvement in your student’s English skills? Or did you not notice a change?
10. Was your student less or more motivated during remote learning? Or was there no noticeable change?
11. Were there any tools you used to help your students with their work (older children’s help, neighbors, translators, teachers, online web pages, etc.)?
12. Any other coping strategies that got you through, whether it was for schoolwork or just being stuck indoors because of the pandemic?
13. Have you noticed a shift in the ESL curriculum, whether what is being taught or how teachers teach the material, after remote learning? (Are there examples of online activities/ assignments that your student has learned a lot from?)
14. Have you noticed yourself to be more or less involved in your student’s learning pre or post remote learning? How much were you expecting to help your student during remote learning?
15. Were there any good parts about remote learning in your opinion?
16. Are there any additional comments you would like to make that you think would be important in this study?
Appendix C. List of base questions for interviews with students. (Questions were posed in Spanish for Spanish speaking interviewees).

1. What grade are you in? How old are you?
2. How many years have you been in ESL classes?
3. Do you have siblings? If so, how many of them were also learning from home?
4. Were you excited or worried about going to school on your computer? Why or why not?
5. Could you walk me through a typical day of remote learning? Were things synchronous, asynchronous, or a mix?
6. Did your classroom set up change throughout the year? For example, did you go from fully virtual to hybrid?
7. Was there any subject that was easier online? Why?
8. Was there any subject that was harder online? Why?
9. What was the hardest part about learning online? Why?
10. Do you think you were less or more motivated during remote learning? Or was it the same? Why?
11. Was it easier or harder to do your work in English while being remote? Or was it the same? Why do you think that is?
12. Did you receive any additional help from anyone to do your work or to study (for example, from your teachers, classmates, internet, etc.)?
13. Is there anything you do differently when studying or doing your work now that is different from pre-COVID?
14. I’m going to list some statements; can you tell me whether or not you felt these during remote learning during the pandemic?
   1. Felt like you were behind in class
   2. Felt supported by teachers
   3. Felt supported by my parents
   4. Felt frustrated during remote learning
   5. Preferred remote learning rather than in-person
   6. Felt like I learned as much as if I were in the classroom
   7. Were excited for class everyday
15. Were there any good parts about remote learning in your opinion?
16. Are there any additional comments you would like to make that you think would be important in this study?
Appendix D. List of base questions for interviews with teachers. (Questions were posed in Spanish for Spanish speaking interviewees).

1. What is your official title?
2. How long have you been teaching? Specifically at this location?
3. What subjects and grades have you taught in the past?
4. How has your ESL curriculum shifted because of the pandemic’s online learning situation?
5. What were some online activities/assignments that you saw your students learn a lot from, or engage the most in? In any specific subjects?
6. What are some online activities/assignments that you saw your students struggle with the most? In any specific subjects?
7. Did you teach synchronously, asynchronously, or a mix of both during the pandemic? Did it shift over the school year?
8. Did benchmarks or exam scores change for ESL and ELL students? During or after the pandemic? (For example, did English language proficiency assessments change?)
9. Did you see a change in your students’ participation and/or motivation during remote learning? If so, what kind of changes?
10. Did you communicate with parents often? If so, how were they handling the pandemic and remote learning?
11. Was there any kind of additional support you created for students? (for example, 1:1 tutoring)
12. Was there any kind of additional support you created for parents? (for example, sharing phone number, having office hours, etc.)
13. Are there any additional comments you would like to make that you think would be important in this study?


Napolitano, J. (2020, April 29). *How teachers are trying to reach English language...*


