
PROMOTING SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' COPING STRATEGIES

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Special Challenges for Second Language Learners during the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to language and literacy learning this past year. Globally, we have witnessed a COVID-19 induced decline in the growth of language and literacy among many children, as early as in kindergarten (World Literacy Foundation, 2020). While all children are affected, students who are second language (L2) learners of French or English face additional challenges. Ensuring these L2 learners' continued language and literacy success has been one of the top priorities among parents and teachers during the pandemic.

In order to be successful in school and in society, children need to become proficient in both social and academic language in their L2. Social language is the set of language skills that children learn for use in daily interactions, such as casual conversations during recess or in the hallway with their friends. On the other hand, academic language, typically learned through school instruction, refers to specialized vocabulary, transition words, and phrases used in subject-area materials and assignments (e.g., books and lab reports). For learners of a new language, it may take 2-3 years to acquire social language but it can take between 5-7 years to acquire academic language.

Input and interaction from fluent speakers are fundamental to developing social language. Most parents of FI children do not speak French, and similarly, many parents of ELL children are English learners themselves. As a result, FI and ELL children do not have much L2 input at home. They acquire the L2 through direct instruction from teachers and social interaction with peers. Unfortunately, the pandemic vastly reduces the amount of social interaction critical for language learning and parents reported that their children lacked opportunities to speak French or English with others. Children did spend a significant amount of time watching television, playing video games, or on social media. While these activities exposed students to some social language, they were not a replacement for face-to-face interactions. Further, providing academic language support (e.g., explaining concepts) was also a difficult task for parents who were not proficient in the language. While they desperately needed resources to support their children's homework assignments, many parents had trouble discerning which ones were at the right level for their child.

At the same time, online instruction limits students' academic language input. In the first few months of the pandemic, teachers reported little to no systematic guidance. As a result, some teachers offered a few hours of synchronous learning per week, while others had to teach completely in the asynchronous mode. In many cases, it was impossible to implement the kind of pedagogy (e.g., group projects or pair work) that enabled sustained academic language learning. Teachers who had to follow the new COVID-19 protocols in face-to-face classrooms faced similar challenges. For example, students were forced to sit at their desks and work individually, so the social distancing restrictions prevented important activities for academic language building, such as shared book reading and small group discussions. They also had to cut experiential learning activities such as field trips, school community gardening, or science experiments. Further, to adapt to the new reality, many teachers had to create curriculum materials and make them available to students in multiple learning options (face-to-face; remote, or hybrids of both), though they often lacked the time or technical support to do so.

How did teachers and parents tackle these challenges during this unprecedented time? In 2020, we conducted two research projects in Vancouver and Toronto to understand the coping strategies they gained to promote their children's L2 learning. Our studies identified many innovative practices among the teachers and parents as they learned to manage these swift changes and keep children engaged in social and academic language learning in L2 in and out of school.

How Teachers Innovated

The challenges brought by COVID-19 safety protocols have also provided opportunities for both in-class instruction and after-school support. COVID-19 has affected learners' language and literacy learning in different ways, so teachers have identified several strategies that work well under the new conditions to ensure that academic language is accessible to all. First, given the disparities in children's language and literacy skills, teachers modified learning tasks, as well as texts, for struggling learners to better scaffold literacy learning rather than giving the same assignments to all learners. These could include shortening complex tasks, simplifying the language, adding visual aids, using Google Translate to provide dual language texts to support understanding, allowing students to use different ways to show their understanding, and providing choices of multimodal texts. Another recommendation was for classroom teachers to work more closely with ESL or resource teachers so they could pre-teach academic vocabulary and background information necessary for ELLs to participate in the classroom discussions.

Second, teachers integrated students' well-being into language and literacy learning by giving them the language (e.g., vocabulary about emotions) and space to express themselves and talk about how they were feeling (e.g., about the pandemic, missing school, frustrations with technology, etc.). Teachers practiced culturally relevant teaching by inviting students to share their home lives and interests in storytelling sessions. Relevant topics included their siblings, pets, the things they loved doing with their family, the favorite food, the traditions they celebrated, or the stories they read. These lessons can also be a great place for anti-bias education and for leveraging first language (L1) into academic learning in the L2.

Third, teachers shared strategies to use technology to help develop social language, alongside academic language, when teaching online. For example, breakout rooms can be set up for group work, reading buddies, or playing fun games such as Kahoot quizzes. Some teachers also recommended turning students into teachers by asking for their help. For example, a teacher may invite students to show them how to use the "share screen" function on Zoom, or figure it out together with their students. Many teachers continued to carry out inquiry-based learning online synchronously or asynchronously, supported students with multiple online resources, and encouraged students to showcase their learning outcomes in different ways.

What Parents Did

Parents also developed many useful strategies to improve their children's social and academic language skills. Like teachers, parents emphasized the importance of maintaining a reading routine, often having their children read at the same time every day such as in the morning after breakfast, before using digital devices, or before bedtime. Some parents encouraged their children to develop healthy reading habits by having them read to younger siblings (or pets), providing books based on their interests, and allowing them to choose between digital and paper books.

Many parents also incorporated a daily journaling routine to cultivate a writing habit. Some parents asked their children to copy selected sentences from a book every day to enhance spelling skills. In other cases, parents followed the writing guides from commercial workbooks, such as Canadian Curriculum, to encourage daily writing. Others supported their children’s writing by asking probing questions and providing content ideas. While many parents did not have the English or French proficiency to correct their children’s writing, they oriented their children to online tools (e.g., Siri/Google) for help.

Parents have found creative ways to encourage their children to use the L2 during the pandemic. Some parents set up video calls so that their children could communicate with relatives or peers in English or French. One new immigrant parent had her children translate for her when they ordered food from restaurants or went shopping. Another mother asked her child to recite phrases heard on English cartoon shows to make up the lost English speaking opportunities during the lockdown. Some families arranged outdoor activities for their children to connect with peers and practice speaking the L2 in a safe space. Connecting with peers socially can have many benefits. One family reported that peer influence had motivated their daughter to read more than 300 books in the few months during the lockdown in 2020.

As parents reported a dramatic increase in children’s screen time, both for online learning and recreational use, they are advised to closely monitor this through the Screen Time App on their children's devices. Parents can also prioritize the use of apps approved by teachers as learning tools and work with their children to lay out a plan to balance screen time between educational and recreational use. Many parents recommended the use of parent dashboards available in well-designed EdTech applications, such as built-in Assignment and Progress Reports in Squiggle Park and Dreamscape literacy learning games to track their children’s progress.

The Key is Two-Way Street

While both teachers and parents’ coping strategies validated many best teaching and parenting practices, the key to success during the pandemic is strong communication and partnership between the two. Teachers stressed the importance of regularly updating parents so they can support their children more effectively at home. This can be achieved by sending home weekly summaries of learning, sharing PowerPoints or notes, and keeping a learning blog for the class. Supplementary online learning resources were shared so that students could reinforce the concepts they learned in the classroom after school. Teachers also mentioned the need to work with parents to reduce the amount of additional work and extracurricular tutoring at home to focus on the children’s wellbeing. Teachers unanimously underscored the importance of reading in either L1 or L2 in expanding vocabulary and reinforcing academic language at home. Working with teachers, many parents made full use of reading apps (such as Raz-Kids, Epic Books, Squiggle Park, and Dreamscape) recommended by school teachers to keep children motivated.

While the adjustment to online learning has been challenging, it has also shown us the dedication, creativity and resilience of teachers, parents and students. As we are confronted with the pandemic fatigue, teachers, students, and parents will face additional challenges as they continue online learning and “home-schooling.” As such, we believe more lessons will be learned from these adaptable and creative partners in the months to come.

References:

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