

“COVID has Brought Us Closer”: A Proleptic Approach to Understanding ESL Teachers’ Practices in Supporting ELLs In and After the Pandemic

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Article abstract

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“COVID has Brought Us Closer”: A Proleptic Approach to Understanding ESL Teachers’ Practices in Supporting ELLs In and After the Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper uses “prolepsis,” a process of reaching into the past to inform present and future practices, to understand 12 English-as-a-second language (ESL) teachers’ practices of supporting English language learners (ELLs) through remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020-2021 in British Columbia and to envision some different current and future post-pandemic classroom literacies for diverse learners. Accounts of these ESL teachers’ syncretical moments of teaching and supporting ELLs during the pandemic suggest that they had to navigate “new” areas of teaching, including attending to students’ social-emotional learning (SEL), connecting with ELL parents, teaching and engaging students via technology-supported instruction, and co-teaching with mainstream teachers, on the basis of limited or no pre-pandemic experience. These insights suggest a need to widen the focus on ESL teachers’ knowledge and expertise in applied linguistics and instructional strategies to include classroom literacies in integrating SEL into ESL instruction, adopting interactive, student-driven instructional designs and practices afforded by multimodal technologies, maintaining multiple channels of communication with parents and students, and team-teaching with classroom teachers to provide tailored language support for ELLs.

Keywords: ESL teachers, social-emotional learning, parental involvement, technology-enhanced language teaching, team-teaching, pandemic, classroom literacies

Introduction

In the 2019-2020 school year, public schools in British Columbia accommodated 68,982 English language learners (ELLs)¹ or emergent bilinguals, accounting for 12.6% of total student enrolment (BC Gov News, n.d.). For school districts with higher immigrant student concentration, such as West Vancouver, 50% or more of its students are designated ELLs, which means that almost half of the students require varying degrees of English as a second language (ESL) support to be able to succeed in academic content learning in the regular classroom (Seyd, 2020). Moreover, the number of students with ESL designation

¹ In this article, the acronym ELL (i.e., English language learners) is used to refer to students themselves who are learning English as their second language in the Canadian mainstream educational context and their position of currently learning the English language. The term ESL (i.e., English as a second language) is adopted in conjunction with the programs and classes that are specialized for ELL students as well as teachers and specialists who work with the ELL student population.

continues to increase by around 10% each year across BC, reflecting the recent demographic shift due to the influx of new immigrants (Seyd, 2020). Given the considerable size of the ELL population, it becomes particularly concerning that persistent achievement gap between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers has been reported from studies on immigrant children's social and academic integration in Canadian schools (Deschambault, 2015; Garnett, 2010; Gunderson, 2007; Pavlov, 2015). This disturbing finding is consistently corroborated by the evidence yielded from studies conducted in other North American context that ELLs are not sufficiently supported in their academic learning in the public school system (Escamilla et al., 2018; Guo & Maitra, 2017; Han & Cheng, 2011). On the one hand, teacher education courses have been failing to either sensitize teacher candidates to cultural and linguistic diversity they are expected to encounter in future classrooms or to provide pedagogical tools or strategies to grapple with these differences (Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Gunderson, 2000; Li & Jee, 2021; Webster & Valeo, 2011). On the other hand, the quality of specialized support that ESL (and special needs) students are entitled to receive is often most severely compromised in the face of the perennial issue of teacher shortage. It has become a commonly accepted practice to reassign learning support teachers to cover the temporary absence of classroom and on-call teachers (Benning, 2017).

The existing challenging situation for ELLs has been unavoidably exacerbated due to the substantial changes that COVID-19 has inflicted on our life and education. Since the outbreak of this pandemic, a marked decline in language and literacy growth has been identified among children, particularly those who are second language learners. These young learners face both socioemotional and academic challenges due to the reduced social interactions and language input resulting from COVID-19 health measures and the limit of online instruction (Granados, 2020; Pier et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2021). In the meantime, the sudden shift of remote teaching and learning mode due to school closures resulted in ESL teachers' significant increase of workload to migrate instructional materials online and coordinate with families with updated learning schedules. These challenges were intensified due to the widespread lack of training and professional support. Even teachers who taught face-to-face under the pandemic safety protocols (e.g., students sitting at their desks and maintaining social distance; having their faces covered by masks) found it impossible to carry out learning tasks that were central to building students' academic English proficiency, including shared book reading and small group discussion (Li et al., 2021). As Reimers and his co-contributors (n.d.) noted in their annotated online learning resources, "For educators, the COVID-19 pandemic is a quintessential adaptive and transformative challenge, one for which there is no pre-configured playbook that can guide appropriate responses" (p. 3).

Frontline teachers' experiences and coping strategies for trudging through this uncharted educational landscape can serve as valuable first-hand resources for reimagining school-based practices in English language support. Using prolepsis, the anticipation of a future act or development as if presently existing or accomplished, as a tool of analysis, this paper aims to reach into the past experiences of 11 ESL teachers (also called ESL specialists in BC; ELL experts in Ontario; ESL consultants and teacher specialists in Alberta) who taught ELLs in Grades 1-8 both online and in a blended model during the pandemic school closures from 2020-2021 in British Columbia. The goal of this paper is

to build on teachers' past experiences of teaching before and during the pandemic and "flash forward" to structure classroom literacy instruction to be consistent with what they imagine to be for ELLs post-pandemic (Cole, 1996, p. 185).

In literary terms, the word "prolepsis" describes the moment in a short story or novel when the reader becomes fully cognizant of past, present, and future events all in one instant (Hall et al., 2017). In this paper, we use prolepsis as a way to reach into the past research on how ELLs were supported pre-pandemic, spring into the contemporaneous reflective moments of the teachers who shared their experiences during the early stages of the pandemic, and "flash forward" to the current and future possibilities (Hall et al., 2017). We foreshadow the emergence of events or experiences perceived by the teachers to be similar to what Pinar and Grumet (1976) call the 'synthetical moment' that totalizes the fragments of their teaching experience during the pandemic. We aim to place this integrated synthetical understanding of the ESL teachers' experiences into the current educational and sociocultural context in order to envision a more equitable future for ELLs' language and literacy education and insert that future vision into the present educational systems to enable transformative change. This proleptic approach is therefore "regressive— progressive— analytical— synthetical" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 51). By locating these teachers' synthetical moments and "experiences of profound insight that merge time, space, and self in a seamless transhistorical moment" (Slattery & Langerock, 2002, p. 349), we hope to deepen awareness of the complexities of supporting ELLs during the unprecedented pandemic time and invoke a reimagining of post-pandemic literacies for teachers to better support their ELLs moving forward. Specifically, we examine the following two questions:

1. What were the ESL teachers' experiences with supporting ELLs in online and blended model of instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What future post-pandemic classroom literacies did these teachers evoke for ELLs?

Reaching into the Past Practices of ESL Teachers: ELL Supports and Services Pre-Pandemic

While much research in the past focused on mainstream in-service teachers' beliefs and practices in supporting ELLs in regular classrooms (see Lucas et al., 2018), relatively little research touched upon ESL teachers' beliefs and practices in ESL classrooms. Limited research and policy documents in BC and Canada suggest that ESL teachers' supports and services were mostly provided in-school contexts. While parental engagement was emphasized in all schools and in some provinces, ESL teachers in BC contributed a component to the ELL report cards on "ways the parents can support the student in their learning" at home, but only the mainstream in-service teachers had direct communications with parents (Government of British Columbia, n.d., p. 13). In some cases, ESL teachers joined the mainstream teachers in parent-teacher conferences.

In schools, ESL teachers generally supported ELLs through two program models, the pullout model and the push-in model or the integrated model. In the pull-out model, ELLs were separated from regular class sessions to receive additional English language instruction from ESL teachers with other ELLs. In contrast, the push-in/integrated model describes the collaboration between ESL and classroom teachers to work closely in the

general education classroom to provide instructional support and differentiated instruction for ELLs (Alberta Education, n.d.). This model was preferred in many schools and districts because “integrating language teaching with the teaching of curricular content in thematic units simultaneously develops students’ language, subject-specific knowledge, and high-order thinking skills” (British Columbia Ministry of Education [BCMOE], n.d., p. 9). In this model, support for ELLs was mainly the responsibility of regular or mainstream classroom teachers who often worked in collaboration with ESL teachers. The decisions on which model of ELL support to adopt was dependent upon each school or district’s policies and resource availability. It was a common practice that several schools shared one ESL teacher who had to travel to different locations to serve ELLs (see Trahey, 2018).

In terms of pedagogy, support services provided by ESL teachers focused primarily on language instruction with attention to ELLs’ development in both social and academic language with specific attention to listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in English. Informed by Cummins’s (1979, 2008) distinction between *basic interpersonal communicative skills* (BICS) and *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP), social language attended to conversational fluency in English while academic language focused on students’ ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school (Cummins, 2008). The goal of these supports and services was to enable students to become competent in social and academic communication to “achieve the expected learning outcomes of the provincial curriculum; develop their individual potential; and acquire the language proficiency, skills, and learning strategies and interpersonal skills needed to succeed in school and contribute positively to society” (Government of British Columbia, n.d., p. 11).

Although the nature of the ELL supports may vary by teacher, school, and district, the general recommended ELL supports and strategies included explicit language instruction that intentionally teaches language form, function and vocabulary in all content areas; differentiated instruction that adapts resources, learner tasks, and teaching strategies based on the proficiency of individual ELL students; culturally responsive practices that acknowledge and use ELLs’ first languages (L1s) and prior knowledge for English language and academic concepts learning; and use of multimodal resources representing multiple perspectives which included realia and visuals to build background knowledge, manipulatives, visually supported texts, and digital resources such as videos, websites, apps and tools such as translator dictionary, text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, and interactive multimedia (Alberta Education, n.d.; Government of British Columbia, n.d.; Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.). It must be noted that even though these resources were recommended and used sometimes in ESL and mainstream classrooms, there was an absence of explicit instruction on school-related new literacies and technologies and a disconnection from ELLs’ language and content-learning needs; and these resources were mostly used as teacher instructional demonstration tools in the face-to-face instructional mode, rather than as student-centred, integrated learning tools (See Li, 2017).

As such, teacher knowledge and expertise pre-pandemic focused mostly on ESL teachers’ background in applied linguistics (e.g., how English works, including language variation, language features, and metalanguage), first and second language learning and acquisition, language assessment and testing, and understanding the distinction between

BICS and CALP (Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Schleppegrell, 2020; Téllez & Mosqueda, 2015) and repertoire of instructional strategies for ELLs including differentiated instruction and linguistically and culturally responsive teaching (Goldenberg, 2010; Li, 2018; Lucas and Villegas, 2013). In British Columbia, for example, the ELL Policy Guidelines (n.d.) specified that qualifications of ESL teachers (or ELL specialists) should include post-secondary academic preparation in a combination of areas including:

- Methodology and appropriate approaches for teaching ELLs;
 - Applied linguistics;
 - First and second/additional language acquisition/learning;
 - Language assessment/testing theory and practice;
 - Cross-cultural communication, understandings, sensitivity, and strategies;
 - Multicultural studies
- Adapting instruction to meet the diverse language needs of students (p. 14)

Given the unique and much needed expertise of ESL teachers, they were often considered a resource for mainstream teachers to “learn about ESL methods and materials, modifying the curriculum and exchanging vital information about students’ abilities and progress” (Baltus & Balhiah, 2013, p. 11). In fact, educating ELLs was seen as a shared responsibility between ESL teachers and mainstream teachers; and districts often promoted collaborative practices “among the educators who have contact with the ELL student” (Government of British Columbia, n.d., p. 7). Research has also documented some productive collaborations between ELL teachers and classroom teachers (e.g., Balthrop, 2018; Li et al., 2019; Van Viegen Stille et al., 2015). However, regardless of both group of teachers’ beliefs in the importance of a cohesive educator team in ESL education and their strong willingness to work together, research evidence suggests a limited, surface-level collaboration between ESL and classroom teachers due to limited training, technology, time, and administrative support to fulfill the meaningful teamwork (Li et al., 2019; Vintan & Gallagher, 2019). For example, in Li and colleagues’ (2019) account of ELL and subject area teacher collaboration in Vancouver, it occurred by chance through the initiation of the ESL teacher and only on one particular topic (e.g., lab-report writing). In another self-study of learning how to initiate and sustain collaboration with a seventh-grade social studies teacher at a suburban middle school in the southeastern United States as an ESL teacher, Giles (2018) revealed serious misconceptions of ESL teachers’ role in such collaboration (e.g., as an aide in the classroom, rather than an equal partner in co-teaching and co-planning). Others have also noted structural challenges in such collaboration where ESL teachers were marginalized in the schools and had no real contact with regular classroom teachers due to high workload, the need to travel between schools, and lack of regular space for ESL instruction (e.g., Li, 2022; Li & Protacio, 2013; Trahey, 2018).

Due to these barriers, ESL teachers and the services and supports they provided were frequently misunderstood and/or undervalued. Research on the perceptions of ELLs and parents of ESL supports (especially the pullout programs) documented negative perceptions and widespread dissatisfaction with pull-out ESL programs among parents of ELLs, believing that they were not effective in helping ELLs gain the cultural, linguistic, and academic competence needed to integrate into the school community (Deschambault, 2015; Guo & Maitra, 2017; Hittel, 2007; Van Ngo, 2007). In fact, ESL classes were widely

seen as a stigma or obstacle by many ELLs and their parents to their academic success and social integration and they sought to exit the programs as quickly as possible even though they were unable to progress through regular English language classes without language support (Gunderson, 2007; Li, 2018; Li & Locher-Lo, under review). To date, existing studies have mostly focused on students' and parents' perspectives and mainstream teachers' experiences and practices. Few studies have examined ESL teachers' experiences and practices. We could locate just a handful of studies on K-12 ESL teachers and their practices: Li (2018) and Li and colleagues (2019), who focused on one ESL teacher's program revision effort and collaborative project; Giles (2018), who reported her own experiences of collaboration with a content-area teacher; and Trahey (2018) who reflected on her 20 years of teaching ESL in St. Johns, Newfoundland. Since ESL teachers shoulder a major part of the ELL supports and services, their perspectives and experiences matter, especially through the uncharted territory of the pandemic time. This study aims to capitalize on their insights and lived experiences during this challenging period. We hope by documenting what it was (and is) teaching ELLs remotely during the pandemic, we envision what can be for both ESL and mainstream teachers alike post-pandemic (Pinar & Grumet, 1976).

Zooming in on ESL Teachers' Practices during the Pandemic: Method, Participants, and Contexts

The ESL support teachers included in this analysis were identified through their responses to an invitation for a follow-up interview via a teacher survey on language and literacy instructional approaches in Spring 2020. Of the 16 teachers who were interviewed during September 2020 to May 2021, 12 (see Table 1) were ESL support teachers working with Grade One to Eight ELLs and were included for the purpose of this analysis. All the 12 teachers provided remote language learning support during the pandemic school closures between March and June 2020, and had transitioned to teaching under a blended model by the time of the interviews.

Table 1
Background information of participating ESL teachers

| Teacher Code | Gender | Ethnicity | Highest Degree Completed | Years of Teaching ESL | Model of ESL Support | How Many ESL-related Course Taken? |
|---------------------|---------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| T1 | F | White/European Canadian | BA (Secondary Education) | More than 15 years | Integrated | 1-2 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|-------------------------|---|--------------------|------------|------|
| T5 | F | White/European Canadian | MA (Curriculum Design) | 3-5 years | Pull-out | None |
| T7 | M | White/European Canadian | MA (Humanities) | Less than a year | Pull-out | None |
| T9 | F | Asian | BA (Elementary Education & ESL/Second Language Acquisition) | More than 15 years | Integrated | 7-8 |
| T12 | F | White/European Canadian | MA (ESL/Second Language Acquisition) | 1-2 years | Pull-out | 7-8 |
| T14 | F | White/European Canadian | MEd (Educational Administration) | 9-11 years | Mixed | 1-2 |
| T15 | F | South Asian | BA (Elementary Education) | 3-5 years | Mixed | 3-4 |
| T17 | F | White/European Canadian | BS (Geography) | 1-2 years | Pull-out | 1-2 |
| T18 | F | White/European Canadian | MA (Secondary Education) | More than 15 years | Integrated | 3-4 |
| T27 | F | Asian | PDP (Secondary Education) | 3-5 years | Pull-out | 5-6 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------|---|--------------------------------|---|-----------|----------|------|
| | | | & ESL/Seco nd Language Acquisitio n) | | | |
| T29 | F | South Asian | BA (Special Education) | 6-8 years | Pull-out | 3-4 |
| T40 | F | White/Eur opean Canadian | MA (Gender, Sexuality and Women Studies) | 1-2 years | Pull-out | None |

In response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in BC first modified their instructional practices to remote teaching during school closures from March to June 2020. After the summer break, schools resumed face-to-face instruction in September but offered remote teaching as well as hybrid options from September to October 2020. Since November 2020, schools in BC have returned to face-to-face instruction. The structure of ESL support varied across schools where the participating teachers taught before and during the pandemic. During face-to-face instruction, it was up to individual schools to decide what changes to the class arrangement were in the best interest of their students and faculty in response to the COVID-19 safety regulations in BC. Some schools suspended pull-out ESL sessions to minimize the contact between students from different cohorts and ESL teachers were asked to provide in-class language support instead. Other schools that adopted an integrated ESL teaching decided to switch to pull-out sessions to reduce the number of people sharing a single indoor space.

Data Collection

All participants were interviewed individually from September 2020 to May 2021 via Zoom meetings using a semi-structured interview protocol. Each interview lasted about one hour; and all interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording function. The audio recordings were later transcribed and entered into NVivo 12 for further analysis. The interview protocol probed into participating teachers' educational and professional backgrounds, overall beliefs and classroom practices about working with ELLs, as well as how they interacted with and provided support to ELLs and parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Considering the salience of change in school operations and teachers' instructional behaviors in response to COVID-19, questions were also devised to tap into teachers' comparative views on the pre- and in-pandemic teaching experience as well as their insights into the change of ESL support structure schools introduced under the pandemic safety protocol.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method (Clarke et al., 2015) was employed for a systematic examination of ESL teachers' experience and classroom practices through different stages of the pandemic. An open, inductive coding method was first applied to the interview data to identify commonalities, which included teacher perceptions of COVID-19 impacts on teaching, impacts of COVID-19 on ELL learning, teaching strategies during COVID-19, communicating and working with parents, etc. by looking for "profound insight that merge time, space, and self" (Slattery & Langerock, 2002, p. 349). In their reflections on impact of COVID-19 on ELL teaching, two recurring experiences included the swift switch to online instruction and the opportunities of team-teaching with mainstream teachers. In terms of the impact of COVID-19 on ELLs' learning, social-emotional learning (SEL) emerged as common experiences.

Informed by the proleptic approach, the data chunks around the four aspects of the teachers' common experiences (SEL, parent engagement, online instruction, and team teaching) were further coded using temporal codes to contrast teachers' experiences that happened before/at the beginning of/during COVID-19. Finally, these temporal categorizations before and during the pandemic were linked across the participants using axial coding to present synthetical accounts of the ESL teachers' experiences (Pinar & Grumet, 1976).

Entering the Proleptic Moments of ESL Teachers' Practices of Supporting ELLs during the Pandemic: Findings

Our proleptic, thematic analysis of the teachers' past experiences during the pandemic identified four important classroom literacies for ESL (and mainstream) teachers for language and literacy instruction post-pandemic: The need to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) into ESL instruction, adopt interactive, student-driven instructional designs and practices afforded by multimodal technologies, maintain multiple channels of communication with parents and students afforded by technological tools (i.e., different language settings and translation tools), and team-teach with classroom teachers to provide tailored, timely language support for ELLs through co-planning and co-teaching. These findings illuminated how the teachers translated pandemic teaching experience into constructive perspectives and practices to continue supporting ELLs from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds through hybrid instructional models.

"As Human Beings We Need It More Than Ever": Integrating Socio-Emotional Learning into ESL Instruction

ELLs' socio-emotional state hadn't presented itself to ESL teachers as a major concern before the outbreak of COVID-19. Only three teachers in the interviews indicated that they had taken some actions to show their care about learners' socio-emotional well-being at this stage despite observing mental struggles among their students. Teaching in a school with a large number of young international students over the years, Teacher 17 had encountered many students who experienced separation from one or both parents and she recognized that "it could be quite traumatizing ... coming to a completely new country

where you don't know the language and it would just be so alone and it's really hard." Teacher 40 similarly observed that students often

... felt they could not share the pressure and the fears ... when they so badly wanted to impress their parents, to make their parents and grandparents proud. And the fear of that was so overwhelming that their socio-emotional state was one of stress, was one of anxiety and they had no one to talk to.

Regular socio-emotional check-ins were adopted by some teachers to help develop an understanding among the students that "it was ok to have these human feelings" (Teacher 40). For instance, Teacher 17, who placed her ELLs' socio-emotional well-being at the top of her priority list, made sure that her pull-out sessions began with a regular socio-emotional check-in to show her students care and attention. As she mentioned in the interview, "So usually like a check in, a social-emotional check in. How are you feeling? Do you want to share?" At times, she would also invite "a written response... that can be written in English or home language or just pictures" to encourage the expression of emotions for learners of various English proficiency levels.

The issue of students' mental stress became salient at the beginning of COVID-19 as the remote learning mode created additional challenges and burdens for ELLs' academic learning. Being cognizant of students' heavy workload from after-school programs, Teacher 40 expressed her concern that "sometimes I worry a few students could be a bit burnt out... some of them express so much anxiety about their performance and express directly that they don't feel like they're good enough." To help lessen the mental burden on academic learning, Teacher 40 reduced the assignment load and came up with more self-guided, optional learning resources for learners, elaborating in the interview,

I am also cognizant that a lot of them have tutoring outside of school. So, I gave them access to the resources, but also tried to reassert that it's just to support them and that it's self-guided and it's not something that they need to do, something that will help them. But I know that a lot of them have a lot of classes outside of school, so I try not to give them more.

As the pandemic situation continued, ESL teachers raised stronger awareness of students' social-emotional state. As the effects of increased social isolation and screen time began to kick in, it appeared evident to teachers that their students were becoming exhausted both physically and mentally. It became more urgent than ever for ELLs, who had been suffering from socio-emotional burdens before the pandemic to receive stronger support and encouragement for their expression of emotions. As such, language and literacy activities were integrated into their ESL support sessions (e.g., regular socio-emotional check-ins, games with emotion vocabulary, written response about feelings in either English or home language, reduced assignment load) to enrich ELLs' expressive vocabulary repertoire so that their social-emotional issues could be well monitored, and needs responded to promptly.

Teacher 18 shared that she was very anxious about COVID-19 and was worried about her own son and his friends, as well as her elderly parents whom she had not visited since the outbreak of COVID-19 for fear of making them sick. Her own anxiety and fear

made her realize that her students may have similar worries and concerns, as well as expected ones about their learning during this precarious time, and “they need a safe place, soft place to land.” She elaborated,

Students need places to talk. And now in COVID more than ever, they need a safe place to talk... We need to provide environments for them. ... They need that soft person to talk to and in my school, I know that that was me. And I want that in every school for our students.

She believed that providing social-emotional safety learning for ELLs was the responsibility of not just ESL teachers but all teachers, commenting “Where is the place that [ELLs] can go? Not just your ESL teacher. But how about just the classroom teacher offers that? Is there a club? Is there a group? Is there a place? Because as human beings we need it more than ever.” As a district ESL coordinator, Teacher 18 initiated an international club, “a place where you could come and we would start with simple things like what makes you happy, ... [ask them to] go around the room and we’re gonna break up into groups and to share anything making you sad”.

In addition to providing a safe place for students to talk, ESL teachers also believed that it was important to provide tools for ELLs to do the talk. In several schools, regular classroom teachers often came to ESL teachers to express their concern about ELLs having difficulty with problem solving because they were not able to express themselves. Teacher 17 realized that ELLs “don’t have the vocabulary”, so she came up with the idea to prepare ELLs with the language to express their emotions. Teacher 27, while working with beginning level ELLs in pullouts, identified the same issue as being more urgent for learners at lower English proficiency levels. She creatively incorporated the teaching of words of emotions with fun games. After a Halloween pumpkin-cutting activity, Teacher 27 introduced the vocabulary by asking students to label the emotion or the feeling of the pumpkins that had different facial expressions, “like it could be surprised or it could be angry, ..., it depends on how the student sees it”. In a following session, she reviewed these emotion expressions through a Bingo game, “I picked up a random pumpkin, then students would have to tell me what emotion that was and then you were trying to like make a bingo line”, as Teacher 27 explained.

The teachers’ quotes presented in this section consistently pointed to ESL teachers’ enhanced awareness of the urgent need to maintain ELLs’ social-emotional well-being as they provided sustained language support throughout the pandemic. This shift of attitude was coupled with the teachers’ enriched instructional repertoire to enact their socio-emotional support, especially as an integral part of the English language teaching and learning process.

“We’ve Had a Lot More Familiarity and Time With It”: Adopting Multimodal Technology

Teachers had long been resorting to a multimedia classroom environment to enrich their instructional approaches and enhance the engagement of ELLs in the learning process. Teacher 9 shared her experience with the successful integration of interactive projector in

her pullout sessions. She highlighted the interactive nature of the technology that significantly promoted ELLs' investment in drill practices,

When I was in my last school, I had an interactive projector and they loved it. It was still reading, but ... I would say ok I want you to go and just highlight the words that you think are science words. So, they would take the interactive pen. Or I would throw up some comprehension questions, [ask them to] fill in the blank, really boring. But if they could take that pen up there and write on the board, they were like, happy.

However, as was revealed in the interviews, in comparison with teachers' familiarity with multimedia classroom configurations and readiness to adapt to such novel instructional tools, their teaching repertoire was constrained by the sudden shift from in-person to remote learning mode at the beginning of COVID-19 school closure. Even teachers who had routinized online instructional platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom) in their everyday teaching before COVID-19 mostly resorted to these platforms as online space for storage and file transfer. "They posted things online, sometimes kids even hand the things in online," as Teacher 5 shared. Teacher 40 mentioned that in her school Teams were only used among fellow teachers for the purpose of communication prior to the pandemic. "Beforehand we weren't using Teams at all. We were using it among teaching staff, but we weren't using it with students". Teachers who provided online English language support described the risk of losing students' attention without proper integration of interactive instructional elements. Teacher 17 shared a similar concern while describing an oral practice session she had with Level One and Two ELLs online that "there are many different reasons ... that it [online ESL teaching and learning] was beneficial for a lot of students. But at the same time, I think it was very detrimental ... it was disengaging, and they didn't get all of that oral practice". As remote teaching and learning became the new norm of ESL support through COVID-19, teachers embarked on active exploration of functions and features of online communication platforms for pedagogical purposes rather than mere information sharing or communication among colleagues. Their growing familiarity with these platforms resulted in some enriched informal, interactive, student-driven instructional designs and practices that continued to benefit ELLs after school return. For instance, Teacher 40 noted that the most significant change for her was the expanded use of online teaching and learning platforms such as Teams, "After March, we've had a lot more familiarity and time with it". Like all the other teachers, she had to learn how to teach and provide support for her pullout ELL groups through the platform. For instance, she noted down the student-generated questions during discussion activities in a pullout session with her Grade Six students and posted them on Teams for home-based, less stressful practices. She explained,

My pull-out groups, and I will have a page for them on Teams. So, I have one that one group I mentioned, where we have a lot of discussion-based activities. I'll often take a picture of the notes that I took about vocabulary, terms or questions they had and then post them on their Teams page. And I make a kind of an informal activity, say like, can you answer one of the questions we asked in class? Or read this at

home with your parents and see what they think? So, I do use it more and integrate more, and it's easier to give them something to practice at home that is not too onerous, but it's connected to what they're doing in class.

Teacher 40 also reflected her journey of overcoming the online teaching barriers and incorporating interactive teaching elements in her synchronous sessions with tools offered by the online teaching platform:

I feel like I've incorporated more technology, just because we had so much of that over the break and I had to find other ways to adapt. I think it forces me to think more creatively about how like content and lessons, because games you can play in person or activities that you can do in person, you can't necessarily adapt, or you have to be creative with over video calls. ... I know that Teams has the whiteboard feature. So, if you get to a concept, you can invite students to add visuals or texts to see if they really got to the meaning.

Even when she incorporated videos as multimodal learning resources, she utilized them responsively, "I'll pause throughout, especially in my small group, and be able to discuss the concept or make sure that I check for understanding on what they're watching".

In addition to teaching through online technology, ESL teachers also shared that they provided individual feedback and close monitoring of students' reading at home. Several teachers used online reading programs such as RAZ Kids and EPIC, through which they could check students' reading progress online during COVID-19. Teacher 27 shared an example of her feedback to a student who needed more practice reading at her level, "I will attach her with a program called RAZ Kids, and then tell the mom that I can look online to see how much she's done. I would like her to read this book by next Friday so I can discuss it with her during pullout time." Whereas prior to COVID-19 school closure, considering the sufficient face-to-face teaching time, ESL teachers preferred self-made multimedia slides developed to support direct instruction of the focal language knowledge of the session. The online guided reading apps were typically utilized as supplemental resources for home-based, self-guided learning. For instance, Teacher 40's school had access to programs such as RAZ Kids and Reading A-Z and she would share the log-in information with the parents so that "they can help children practice at home if they're wanting to and have the time".

Teaching online allowed some ESL teachers to provide support more aligned with the regular classroom teachers. For example, Teacher 14, who was teaching a pullout ESL class for fifth and sixth graders, found that a regular classroom teacher for some of her ELLs was doing a unit on the solar system. She searched for very simple YouTube explanations for ELLs and put them on a blog on Teams. For some ELLs who she thought might have difficulty understanding the content, she also used Google Translate to translate small chunks of information into their home language, a simple gesture that was appreciated by parents. She noted, "It [Google Translate] might not have been perfect because I know the translation is sometimes peculiar, but one of the parents wrote back and said thank you for the translations."

Regardless of teachers' existing knowledge with the technology-enhanced face-to-face teaching, the interview excerpts showcased the unique challenges that distant learning posed to ESL teachers and the learners they had been working closely with. Teachers' proactive navigation of the embedded interactive tools in the online teaching platforms yielded innovative ways of engaging students in the learning process. Retrospectives into the problematic instructional moments also drove teachers to explore additional educational resources to guarantee their ELLs' sustained progress in English even though they were receiving support from home.

"COVID has Kind of Helped Us to Be Even Closer": Maintaining Multiple Channels of Communication with Parents and Students

It was commonplace for ESL teachers that the parents were not aware of the type of ESL support their children were receiving in schools. Speaking from the district coordinator perspective, T9 and T18 both regretfully mentioned that most parents only had conversations with classroom teachers; and some of them even couldn't name their children's ESL teacher. They were not fully informed of their children's progress in the ESL class or when they could become exempt from receiving additional English language support. This concerning situation began to change with the arrival of COVID-19. Remote teaching required both classroom and ESL teachers to frequently check in with students individually to ensure their process of learning. In this sense, "I think COVID has kind of helped us to be closer," Teacher 27 commented.

The ESL teachers appreciated the convenience of online teaching/learning platforms which greatly eased their communication with parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds during COVID-19. The multiple language settings, translation tools, and asynchronous written communication design eased the stress of English-mediated interactions for immigrant parents who may have refrained from direct communication with teachers due to the lack of confidence or comfort in speaking English. Teacher 17's experience attested the advantage of technology-assisted channels of communication. She explained,

I think that online there are so many tools to make communication more accessible for parents. ... and I think parents were a lot more confident communicating that way when they had the time to translate, an email for example, and then translate their response before they sent it back. Or their child used Microsoft Teams, which has a translate tool, so parents were able to.

The availability of different methods of communicating with teachers was well received by parents of ELLs. Teacher 40 mentioned that parents started to reach out to her since the school closure asking for more support. In response to their requests, she send home PowerPoints she made. To Teacher 40, sharing class materials was also an indirect way of communicating with parents,

...especially if the parents are not comfortable speaking in English or don't have as much English language exposure. If we give them PowerPoints at least they can go

through it and have that that visual as well and have resource that is...They have continuity with what they are doing in the classroom.

The synchronous class session served as another channel of indirect communication, as parents were offered a valuable opportunity to get to know the rich and solid language support their children were receiving. Teachers 5 and 27 identified the shift of attitudes among parents who used to regard “being an [ELL] as a stigma, and their child is lesser” but “slowly...they begin to learn to appreciate ESL” (T5). Similarly, T27 observed that due to her constant communication with the parents, they “no longer felt confused or seeing ESL as a disadvantage... or worried or questioning what is my child getting for English support.”

The sustained communication with ELL parents through COVID-19 school closure led ESL teachers to seriously reflect on their practices of parental involvement. Teacher 18 had planned for systematic incorporation these technology-assisted channels of communication into future practices. As she envisioned, “this is our next stage to get parents... non-English speaking parents to be involved more by using the tools that are accessible to them.” Teacher 17, in comparison, regretfully commented on their failure to maintain this constructive relationship with parents after students returned to face-to-face instruction. According to her,

I think that's definitely one of my goals is more communication with my families, and it's interesting because online learning really had an effect on how much I communicated with my families. And, it's funny cause I haven't really thought of it in the spring [during school closure] when you were in it; but I missed that. It was a necessity I think to be in constant communication with parents and once we are back in school. I guess we've kind of lost that again.

Taken together, regardless of the challenging and regretful moments ESL teachers were faced with in their teaching during COVID-19, they recognized the fortuitous experience of elevated degree of quality interaction they had with the ELL parents at the same time. The benefits of technology-assisted communication between mainstream teachers and parents from non-English-speaking background (e.g., available translation tools, a less stressful medium for parents to interact with mainstream school teachers) also shed light on the future practices of school-home communication as the back-to-school mode of learning resumes in the future.

“Magic is Happening”: Team-Teaching with Mainstream Teachers

According to Teacher 9, “the culture of teachers ... used to be teaching solo, ... a lot of teachers. They are not used to having people attached to them or people coming in”. Teacher 1 indicated regretfully that “even before COVID, teachers, they like to do things the way they like to do them. It’s hard to make change.” She suggested that there had been a general lack of training or experience among classroom teachers to provide tailored academic content lessons and supporting materials to classroom teachers’ general lack of training in accommodating academic content lessons and supporting materials for students with limited English proficiency. Such knowledge gap, as was indicated by Teacher 9, had

resulted in classroom teachers' reluctance to collaborate with their fellow ESL teachers. According to Teacher 9,

We are trying to train more teachers to use the SIOP model. At this point mostly ELL teachers have been tried using the SIOP model but it would be nice if they also include classroom teachers to do that. It's not what our ideal is, we're not there yet.

There were also practical reasons that hindered meaningful collaboration between teachers, with the shortage of time for substantial planning and coordination being the most salient issues. As Teacher 14 elaborated,

It's really difficult to do because teachers are under stress with all the needs in their classroom, and they don't allow us any collaboration time to sit and plan with classroom teachers to really effectively support them so that they can make adjustments to their delivery, their program to allow these kids to be successful and to participate. So, it's also frustrating for me to see that these students are often just sitting in the classroom and then some teachers say, well, can you give them something to do?

ESL teachers also found their caseload overwhelming, and it was almost impossible for them to establish meaningful partnership with the teachers from each of the classes they were assigned during regular school

... in my ideal world, I would be co-teaching with the class teacher. But our system is not set up for that. There's not enough time to divide yourself between 20 teachers and be in every classroom enough time to follow [and], do a program.

The consequence of minimal collaboration between classroom teachers and their ESL support colleagues appeared particularly prominent at the initial stage of COVID-induced remote learning. Classroom teachers' overall lack of awareness or tools to work with ELLs made it even more challenging for students who had been struggling academically with the language barrier. For example, Teacher 5 mentioned in the interview,

The lockdown was very eye opening in that, I discovered that, not all teachers adapted or modified ELL students' classroom work. So, for example, if kids in a classroom of 23 or 25 are given a list of gallery words, the number of words or the type of words weren't ever changed to accommodate ELLs.

Despite the challenging circumstances posed by the pandemic, the school COVID-19 specific safety regulations (i.e., keeping students in the same cohort together) also coincided with districts' efforts to promote integrated ESL support rather than the conventional pull-out model. ESL teachers mentioned the increased time and opportunities to provide tailored, timely language support for ELLs through planning and teaching with classroom teachers during COVID-19 school return. Teacher 18 who had been passionately promoting the integrated approach to ESL support provided a positive comment on the

change of dynamics COVID-19 had actually exercised with respect to collaboration between the different teaching forces,

COVID couldn't have happened at a better time. ... Everybody has to stay together in their cohort. So, if they stay together in their cohort, that means students aren't being taken away. They are all staying together. And the ESL specialist, the teacher is staying and working alongside the classroom teacher. And you know what? Magic is happening. ... and our learners are actually benefiting from two teachers and everybody working together, so we're actually seeing some success because of COVID.

Her observation was further corroborated by the experience shared by other teachers during the interviews. Teacher 27, for example, was able to spend extended time in the same space with one cohort after in-person instruction was resumed, "Instead of my past experiences working with like five divisions in a year, I've been only working with two divisions, so I really get to spend a lot of time with the students." As such, Teacher 27 had more opportunities to discuss with the classroom teacher at various occasions throughout the day, "for instance, I'll ask them when the students are washing their hands, 'what do you think will be the best use of my time today?'" She was able to better plan for in-class support "because the visual schedule is on the board and I know what's going on," she said. Teacher 27 provided a further description of how she approached in-class ESL support after being informed of what the classroom teacher had planned for the day,

It's owl project time for the students right now. They just finished reading this book called Owl. For the Science Project, they need to look up a specific owl of choice and then doing inquiry questions. So, inquiry questions itself is a difficult idea for ELL students to understand. What is an inquiry question? It has to be an open-ended question; it can't be just a yes or no answer. So, I would take some of the ELL students ... if I see that they are falling behind.

Viewing from the teachers' interview quotes, although the already problematic mode of collaboration became even more salient at the initial stage of COVID-19, ESL teachers also recognized the unexpected opportunities for more intimate collaborations with their fellow classroom teachers for a consistent and productive learning experience for ELLs. The ESL teachers also critically identified institutional constraints as roadblocks for productive co-teaching to take place, which provided insights for school districts and teacher educators to better envision their support for promoting integrated model of ESL education post pandemic.

*Flashing Forward: Rethinking ESL Teachers' Knowledge Base for ELL Education
Beyond the Pandemic*

The ESL teachers' synthetic accounts emerging from reflections on their experiences supporting ELLs revealed several "new" areas of importance in teachers' knowledge base post-pandemic: How to integrate socio-emotional learning with L2 development, how to connect with ELL parents, how to engage students in learning through digital tools, and how to co-teach and co-plan with mainstream teachers. These revelations

suggest that the focal areas on teachers' knowledge base in applied linguistics and repertoire of instructional strategies pre-pandemic are insufficient for educating ELLs; rather, these "new" areas of expertise must be systemically integrated in pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development programs.

The ESL teachers' awakened awareness and recognition of the importance of SEL for all of their ELLs during the pandemic suggest the need to expand teachers' literacies or knowledge base in how to integrate SEL into students' L2 development. Although the importance of SEL for all students, particularly for marginalized students, has been recognized by many teachers to promote students' academic achievement in a safe and supported learning environment (Denham & Brown, 2010; Domitrovich et al., 2017), special SEL programs were often taught isolated from the regular classroom curriculum (e.g., Positive Action, Second Step) and mostly designed for those identified as needing support, ELLs or not. In most cases, it remained the responsibility of classroom and ESL teachers to attend to ELLs' socio-emotional well-being in the process of academic/language teaching and learning (Kao, 2017; Melani, Roberts, & Taylor, 2020). Moving beyond the pandemic, it is also critical for ESL teachers to infuse SEL-oriented teaching practices for the ELL population. Among the many classroom-based efforts to engage ELLs in SEL, ESL teachers can break the English only policy and integrate learners' L1, e.g., by using digitally mediated, dual-language book-reading activities with young ELLs (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2019) or high-level texts with older ELLs (Gibb & Li, 2018), as native language literacy support bolsters relationships in the classroom and provides opportunities for positive social-emotional interactions. Other practices include the integration of movement and dance into classroom lessons to bolster peer interaction, which can lead to their stronger sense of belonging and improvement of oral English proficiency (Greenfader & Brouillette, 2017). Teachers can also adopt a dialogic reading approach to promote social interaction with teachers and peers and social-emotional skills (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006).

Connecting with ELL parents can also enhance ESL teachers' attention to ELL's SEL. Before the pandemic, even though ESL teachers contributed suggestions for ELL parental involvement, they had less opportunity to directly communicate and connect with ELL parents due to large case load and ESL program structures. Their experiences during the pandemic gave valuable opportunities for them to be in direct contact with ELL parents and learn about students' home literacy practices. However, having been exposed to different cultural and educational models from the North American mainstream schools, parents of ELLs have been found to be reluctant to participate in their children's schooling in the ways their teachers would expect, including showing up in schools and having direct interactions with schoolteachers (Guo, 2006; Li & Sun, 2019; Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004). Sometimes, the physical absence of these parents was misinterpreted as parents' lack of investment in their children's education, and the actual barriers to ELL parents' involvement are overlooked (Harper & Pelletier, 2010).

The ESL teachers' experiences with ELL parents during the pandemic suggest that ESL teachers are in the perfect position to break down these barriers and misconceptions of language minority parents. In fact, they should play a central role in connecting with ELL parents through maintaining regular, multimodal communication channels to lower the language barrier for parents with reservations about their English use (Olmos, 2022;

Panferov, 2010), keep parents informed of the structure of the ESL program and their children's progress in English learning (Guo, 2006), and approach parents through cultural reciprocity (Li, 2013, 2020) to value and respect the multicultural and multilingual backgrounds of parents and their communities.

In addition to attending to ELLs and connecting with parents, ESL teachers also need to relearn some technology-enhanced L2 instructional practices. While pre-pandemic emphasis on provision of multimodal resources is still relevant, the ESL teachers' experiences of struggling to teach and engage students via technology suggest the need for ESL teachers to advance their multilingual, multimodal teaching practices in classrooms by enriching their pedagogical repertoire with different digital technologies including PowerPoint, iMovie, iPhoto, and iPads beyond the pandemic. There is a need to support learners of various English proficiencies through engaging multilingual voices, images, songs, drama plays, and writing in both ELL's L1 and English where their family/community funds of knowledge are acknowledged and valued (McGlynn-Stewart et al., 2017).

Finally, more than ever, the serendipity of the ESL teachers' productive co-teaching experiences with the mainstream teachers suggests the need for school districts to enact genuine, systemic co-education for ELLs. ESL teachers cannot be just "a resource" (Baltus and Balhiah, 2013), a "teaching aid" (Giles, 2018), or "an ELL dumping ground" (Li, 2022), but an equal educational partner in sharing the responsibilities of ELL teaching. School districts must revise the ELL guidelines to ensure structural support for training, technology, time, and administrative assistance to fulfill the meaningful teamwork (Vintan & Gallagher, 2019). There is also a need to provide "ongoing professional learning, through ongoing dialogue with [both ESL and mainstream] colleagues about students, teaching practices, resources and assessment" (Premier & Parr, 2019, p. 66) to ensure constructive collaborative practices.

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