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Using The 6 Principles to Support Language Learning in Times of Crisis
by Deborah J. Short and Grazzia Maria Mendoza

The COVID-19 virus has created a genuine crisis for educators around the world. Many of us have had to adapt to online teaching, teleworking, connecting remotely, and keeping ourselves and our loved ones safe and healthy. Some of us have lost jobs or have family members working as first responders. We are grateful to all of you for what you are doing for our English learners and colleagues.

The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners® has been a TESOL International Association initiative for several years now. At this time, we'd like to explore how these principles can more actively inform our teaching practice in this unprecedented period of upheaval and adaptation.

Principle 1. Know Your Learners

This principle encourages us to learn basic information about our learners: their families, languages, cultures, and educational backgrounds. With this knowledge, we can engage students in class, use the background experiences as a resource, and prepare and deliver lessons more effectively.

P6: Engage and collaborate within a community of practice

P2: Create conditions for language learning

P3: Design high-quality language lessons

P5: Monitor and assess language development

P1: Know your learners

P4: Adapt lesson delivery as needed

COVID-19 Considerations

One consideration during this time of COVID-19 is the social-emotional aspect of learning and understanding how contexts influence learners' ability for distance learning. We need to be aware of

a. the type of support our students require to manage the challenges of physical distancing from their habitual learning environment,
b. how will they remain positively productive, and
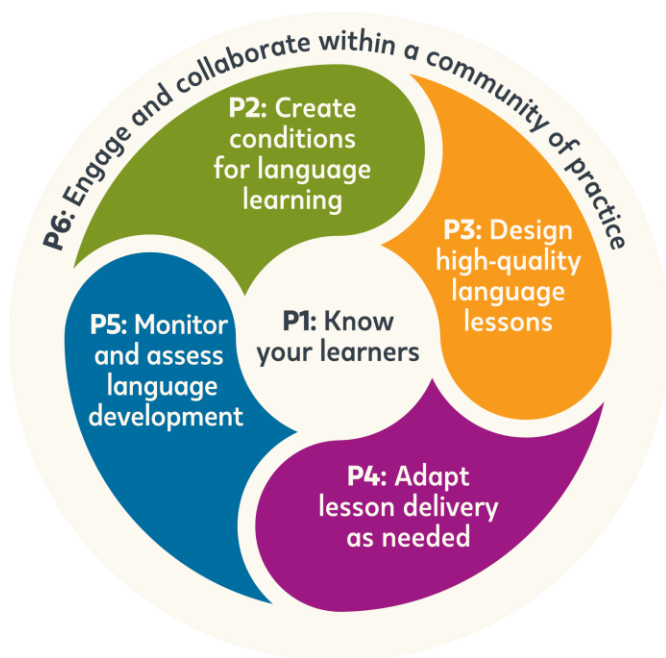
    c. how this will contribute to their engagement in the learning process with tools they may not use regularly in class.

In other words, how do we care for our students' well-being during these challenging times? Are they ready for the additional burden of distance learning, which may also involve equipment and connectivity issues? How can we better engage families as our partners in the promotion of their children's academic success?

Action Steps

We can begin by asking our learners questions related to these concerns. Set up a simple survey or have students email responses to you. For family members, provide some tips, like the following:

1. Think about how your child learns (through modeling? oral instructions? reading and viewing? trying things out?). Use that knowledge to help explain new concepts.
2. Expect new learning to take time. Be patient and teach your child to be patient.
3. Provide plenty of practice. Deliberate, repeated practice helps us learn new language skills.
4. If your child doesn't understand right away, try another example or wait a day.
5. Talk with the teacher, other parents, or your child's classmates if help is needed.

Principle 2. Create Conditions for Language Learning

To address Principle 2, we create a classroom culture where learners feel comfortable, respected, and free to make errors. We make decisions regarding the physical environment, the materials, and the social integration of students to promote language learning. We hold high expectations for our learners and motivate them to raise their performance.

COVID-19 Considerations

Now, the conditions have changed. We do not control the classroom seating, the books on the shelves, the anchor charts on the wall. It may be harder to create a culture of risk-taking, recognition, and routines. We have to support learners and determine if they have time and space to learn at home.

Action Steps

Host online office hours, meeting with students one-on-one. Add online tools like those that let students record their voice and give feedback to others. You may also need to train learners to use the online learning tools. This investment in training—how to take a turn speaking online, use a chat box to ask a question, download a video, or participate in a virtual breakout room—is a valuable first step.

Principle 3. Design High-Quality Lessons for Language Development

This principle is the crux of effective instruction. We plan lessons that are meaningful and promote language learning. These lessons evolve from language and content learning objectives and include a variety of instructional techniques. The lessons encourage learners to practice the four language domains and develop critical thinking. Most importantly, well-designed lessons engage English learners as active learners, not passive listeners.

COVID-19 Considerations

We hear from our colleagues that online teaching has plusses and minuses. It's harder, sometimes, to make new information accessible. We may have less time for explicit instruction. How do we encourage that active participation needed to strengthen language development?

Action Steps

One approach is to apply flipped learning principles. Learners may study the topic through a recorded mini-lecture, posted text, and/or related video; complete a task; and then be ready to participate in the online environment.

For example, if young learners were studying recycling, you could ask them to conduct a treasure hunt to collect and show items from their home and apply what they learned from the video lecture. They might categorize them as recyclable or not, or separate them into different substances (paper, plastic, etc.). They might then create a poster encouraging recycling or promoting new uses for some items.

Principle 4. Adapt Lesson Delivery as Needed

As teachers who implement this principle well, we continually assess as we teach—observing and reflecting on learners' responses to determine if we are reaching lesson objectives. When learners struggle or find the material too easy, we adjust our lessons. We may reteach to a subset of the class or differentiate assignments, so some students feel more challenged and grow in their learning.

COVID-19 Considerations

It may be harder to adapt and adjust lessons in real time online. We cannot easily walk around the room and listen in on group discussions. We may not readily notice that we have to adjust our talk or the task.

Action Steps

If you have the time, give yourself more flexibility with materials by preselecting a collection of readings, perhaps choosing from what learners have at home or have access to through other online services. With older learners, you might discuss and agree on these materials based on their

interests in order to make learning more relevant and engaging. For young learners, your choices may provide a level of safety and reassurance of the familiar.

If you need to differentiate for a multilevel classroom, you could create different activities with the same materials, such as

   a. buddy readers—pairing up a more experienced reader with a less experienced one,
   b. using a jigsaw reading approach and assigning sections of different word counts based on ability, and
   c. providing comprehension questions with different levels of difficulty.

Additionally, you can provide search tasks of weblinks that support comprehension or provide assorted practice tasks that learners can opt to complete.

One piece of advice is to be flexible and patient. Develop some key words that a learner might put in a chat box, for example, to signal the need for clarification or repetition. Recognize that something may have happened to a family member or friend that affects participation. Acknowledge that if the Internet goes down, some assignments can't be turned in on time. The key is to be attentive and nimble to respond to the online needs as they occur.

Principle 5. Monitor and Assess Student Language Development

We know that learners develop their language skills at different rates, so this principle reminds us to regularly monitor and assess our learners' language development. Such assessment, informal and formal, can help us plan lessons and give appropriate feedback to students.

COVID-19 Considerations

Online learning has complicated some of the informal assessment tools we use in class. Concerns have been raised about learners using translation tools to circumvent a reading comprehension assessment, for example. Further, technology may not be reliable and online assessment formats might limit the amount of information or reasoning a learner can share when explaining an answer.

Action Steps

Consider using tools and actions that may appear as a hindrance in a virtual setting instead as an analytic or a vocabulary enhancement opportunity within an assessment. For example, you could use translation to compare and contrast language and understand what makes the second language similar or different from the first language, or to increase vocabulary by searching for synonyms and antonyms in both languages.

Furthermore, projects and other performance-based tasks are reasonable alternatives to paper-and-pencil tests. You can record observations about language use in running notes, on a check list, or with a rubric while oral presentations take place or when written assessments are submitted.

Principle 6. Engage and Collaborate Within a Community of Practice

Principle 6 calls on us to collaborate with others in the profession to provide the best support for our learners. This involves coplanning with colleagues, sharing expertise about second language acquisition with nonlanguage teaching faculty, and recommending instructional techniques for students at different levels of proficiency. Principle 6 also reminds us to participate in continuous learning and ongoing professional development.

COVID-19 Considerations

Due to these unforeseen circumstances, professional development has had to transform, shifting to virtual formats and building online communities to allow educators to provide support to colleagues and make contributions to the field. This transformation has spotlighted the need for mastering a new set of technical skills, for reimagining how to convey information and receive feedback, and for differentiating the ways we can build our communities of practice.

Action Steps

This is one area where the COVID-19 world has really stepped up to meet our needs as educators. Our global TESOL community—through our affiliates, interest sections, and professional learning networks—has come together over the past 2 months to offer webinars, online courses, town halls, and various meet-ups to let teachers learn together. These activities are a few examples of how our communities of practice are sharing a wealth of ideas that either fit our context or are easily adaptable. The value of our teaching circles and learning groups that have now moved online is evident; we readily support our colleagues despite the difficulties and constraints we are all experiencing.

Attend the TESOL International Association Virtual Convention 16–18 July, where presenters will share their knowledge and expertise (watch the Convention website for updates).

Engage with your TESOL community and find relevant resources, such as

- myTESOL COVID-19 Resources Group (TESOL International Association)
- Coronavirus Resources for ELT (The TESOL Blog)
- CALL-IS webinars (TESOL's Computer-Assisted Language Learning Interest Section)

The 6 Principles for All

The 6 Principles are relevant to all programs and educators, even in a distance learning environment during times of crisis. Now more than ever, the principles allow us to face challenges proactively and know that colleagues are willing to go to great lengths to enhance teaching and learning. Even from afar, we can design and deliver lessons that meet our learners' needs, promote their educational success in a positive way, and express our care and support.

Learn more about The 6 Principles here.

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