



ELT in 2021 and Beyond: Building a Bridge Over Troubled Waters

by [Kisha C. Bryan](#) and [Kisha Cox](#)

As we enter 2021, we are hopeful that the experiences of 2020 have fueled a new outlook on life, a renewed passion for the English language teaching (ELT) profession, and a sense of urgency in advocacy for the students we serve. Last year was characterized by the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that has touched almost every corner of the globe; social unrest due to police violence that disproportionately resulted in the loss of Black lives; climate-fueled natural disasters, such as the wildfires and bushfires in the western United States and Australia, floods in Central Africa, and powerful cyclones in East Asia; and a lengthy U.S. presidential election season that tested one of the strongest democracies in the world. In 2020, it seemed as if we were testing the depths of a river with two feet.

Though the events of 2020 can be described as traumatic, the much-needed illumination of existing social, health, and education disparities that impact our global society, including minoritized and/or immigrant students (and their families), occurred. In this essay, we provide a broad vision for how we can build bridges over troubled waters. We address what ELT might (need to) look like in 2021 and beyond in three contexts: adult education, teacher education, and K–12 education. Our vision highlights current efforts of ELT professionals and reimagines the future of varying facets of ELT based on our experiences and our beliefs in [abolitionist teaching](#) (Love, 2019).

A Vision for Adult English Language Programs

Issues in adult English language teaching often go unaddressed or are minimized within the educational community. With the COVID-19 pandemic, adult ELT professionals, like their K–12 counterparts, have had to transition to language teaching in virtual spaces that were not the most conducive to language learning. Some had maximum assistance from their institutions, while others had little to no support due to lack of materials and infrastructure.

Yet, ELT professionals around the globe made the best of their situations and ensured that language learning continued. Their students, most often adult English learners (ELs) who are not digital natives, resorted to learning English online while working essential jobs and in many cases, parenting their children who were forced to learn from home. In the context of the United States, adult ELs (the majority of whom are immigrants), have also had to face constant demoralization by an administration that has consistently characterized non-White immigrants as

criminals (Etiesit Samuel, 2020) and drains on the U.S. economy, health, and education systems (Lowrey, 2018).

As eternal optimists, our vision for adult ELT in 2021 and beyond reflects a confluence of the lessons learned in 2020.

- As they value the language(s) of their ancestors, adult ELs will continue to utilize their agency to learn language skills that will make them more marketable in their contexts and more valuable to the economy and society.
- Adult ELs will be lauded for demonstrating unyielding determination in the face of natural and man-made disasters (including anti-immigrant sentiments and anti-immigration policies).
- Adult ELs and their teachers will embrace effective technologies and virtual spaces as supplements and/or acceptable alternatives to face-to-face language learning.
- Adult ELT professionals will not view themselves as linguistic saviors, but will learn from their students and engage in critical pedagogies that allow for the exploration and integration of social justice issues in the teaching and learning of language skills.
- With the new administration in Washington DC, governmental policies and legislation in the United States will support immigrants and adult ELs who contribute positively to their respective societies. Other countries will also support their immigrant populations to a greater degree.

A Vision for K–12 English Language Programs

These past months have brought about changes that were previously unimaginable. The sudden closure of our educational facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about many trials and struggles. The transition to remote learning, which began in spring 2020 in the United States and around the world, has not been seamless or even adequate for most families (Umansky, 2020; Yi & Jang, 2020). But the challenge has proven even greater for historically marginalized groups and families of ELs who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic's effects. According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data, almost all children who died of COVID-19 in the United States were Latino, Black, American Indian, or Alaskan Native (Bixler et al., 2020).

Well-known equity gaps due to language, income, and immigration status have come into greater focus and are at risk of widening in the months ahead, especially as states face budget shortfalls and consider cuts to education spending. Teachers and schools across the country have been reporting that students—especially low-income students and ELs—are not showing up online, and that schooling has essentially come to a halt for many ELs (Bartolone, 2020). Without computers, reliable internet access, and other technologies as well as school staff who can communicate in languages other than English, the shift to home learning has left many ELs behind.

Exacerbating the problem, the pandemic has triggered new or more serious economic and food insecurities that are likely contributing to disruptions in ELs' home learning (Lazarin, 2020).

Based on the events of 2020, reimagining K–12 ELT in 2021 and beyond might consist of the following actions:

- Increase multilingual mental health services and social-emotional learning for ELs who have been severely impacted by both the health and racial pandemics as well as the lack of social interaction that in-person school previously provided.
- Increase professional learning for teachers so they are comfortable leveraging virtual learning in ways that complement in-class activities to increase content and language learning.
- Promote abolitionist teaching that will lead to language and social justice proficiencies through integration (and interrogation) of critical issues in content-area classes.
- Find innovative ways to engage families so that they feel empowered to support their children.
- Increase access to technology needed for online learning.

A Vision for (English) Educator Preparation Programs

As U.S. schools closed their doors in spring 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an unintended consequence was the impact of school closures on the preparation of the next generation of educators. Teacher candidates had their field experiences abruptly cut short, and educator preparation programs—in partnership with school districts and education agencies—had to adapt quickly to ensure candidates continued to receive high-quality preparation and were able to complete their licensure requirements (Hyler, 2020).

In the United States, during fall 2020, there were a myriad of university-school partnership adjustments that were made. Some school districts opted to not have teacher candidates, others agreed to have teacher candidates work alongside a mentor teacher in a virtual space, while other school districts allowed teacher candidates as long as they followed CDC and school district COVID-19 guidelines.

In many ways, language educator preparation programs in the United States were better prepared for the transition to virtual learning because many of them were already offered in hybrid or fully online formats to accommodate working professionals. Based on our experiences teaching and learning in language educator preparation programs, we envision innovation in educator preparation as the silver lining of the 2020 clouds of calamity. As such, for 2021 and beyond, language educator preparation programs might consider the following innovative practices:

- Design new courses on teaching language online and critical pedagogies for virtual teaching and learning.
- Revise TESOL field experiences (that rely solely on candidates being physically in schools) to include innovative virtual language pedagogies and assessments that could lead to global collaborations and increased technological and language teaching proficiencies.
- Connect candidates to communities in new ways, such as supporting district food distribution and online tutoring for individual ELs and small groups (which can be

counted toward clinical hours as a result of the new flexibility states are giving educator preparation programs).

- Model trauma-informed practices through meditation, affinity groups, and critical resilience practices that address social ills that most often impact the academic and psychological well-being of minoritized and immigrant students.
- In the United States, lobby for state departments of education to reconsider traditional admission exam requirements for educator preparation programs. In many states, the entrance exam for educator preparation programs has been suspended. This is an opportunity for state and educator preparation programs to reevaluate their policies around entrance exams to determine if they are vetting for the best candidates, or barring potentially effective teachers as many standardized assessments are known to do.

Pandemic Panorama

As an ELT profession, we can and must be proactive and provocative. How do we use the authentic experiences of international students who have been left in limbo because of federal policies and the logistical and financial challenges of having to leave campus to help us be better advocates? In what ways can we support our Black immigrant population as they witness police violence toward people who look like them? George Floyd was the latest in a long line of Black (and immigrant) men killed by the police (e.g., Amadou Diallo, Alfred Olango, Jonathan Deng, Mohamed Bah, and countless others). The events of 2020 have presented us with opportunities to leverage our academic and social experiences, responses to events, and knowledge to reimagine English language teaching in new and innovative ways to provide students (and families) with high-quality English language services and meaningful access to content instruction.

Although we do not know the potential long-term educational effects of 2020's COVID-19 pandemic, remote teaching and learning, natural disasters, and sociopolitical uprisings, we have attempted to outline a vision for building bridges over troubled waters. As we look to 2021 and beyond, we must endeavor to become better advocates and educators by embracing new technology tools, integrating critical issues in language pedagogy, and initiating/supporting governmental policies that empower students and educators.

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