



ESL Teacher Leadership: Lessons From Distance Learning

by [Amy Stolpestad](#) and [Michelle Benegas](#)

In our book, [Teacher Leadership for School-Wide English Learning](#), we present the critical role that nonevaluative peer observation plays in English as a second language (ESL) teacher leadership. Not only has the global pandemic dramatically shifted the way that teachers deliver instruction; it has also shifted the responsibilities of ESL teachers in schools. Little did we know when we were writing this book that ESL teacher leadership was about to become *essential* in schools that serve ELs.

As we learn more about the effects of Emergency Remote Distance Learning (ERDL) on all learners, but particularly English learners (ELs), it is clear that distance learning has had a negative impact. This year has been a balancing act between learning and safety—as education equity and COVID-19 outcomes both put our immigrant communities at a disadvantage. In this challenging environment, EL teacher leaders have developed creative ways to teach and lead in the distance learning environment that we can carry forward post pandemic.

We have trained almost 300 EL teacher leaders in Minnesota and Oregon. The school-wide English learning (SWEL) model for EL teacher leadership provides a framework for how schools can improve instruction for ELs by positioning ESL teachers as site-based experts and teacher trainers. (Read more about the SWEL model in our earlier article, “[ESL Teacher Leadership: Delivering Professional Development](#).”) In our work with the SWEL model, we’ve learned some key lessons that influence how nonevaluative peer coaching and professional development support can be delivered by ESL teachers. One of the single most common prepandemic concerns for the teachers we train to be EL teacher leaders, or SWEL coaches, is time. The research on teacher leadership bears this out as a significant roadblock to positioning practicing teachers as leaders in their schools.

Teacher leaders who retain classroom duties worry about where they will find time to support their colleagues’ efforts to improve instruction for ELs in their general education classrooms. Despite our work with administrators to ensure that there is time carved out in the EL teacher’s schedule for this work, it is not always possible. School closures related to COVID-19 forced us to think creatively about how SWEL coaches can continue to serve in their roles, and many of the new methods for providing this support can be carried forward as a measure to manage time efficiently. These methods include using video for teacher observations and expanding our understanding of what is “observable.”

Using Video for Teacher Observations

Prepandemic, videotaping lessons and sharing those videos for a variety of purposes, including observations and reflective peer conversations, was relatively uncommon. It appears that the synchronous distance learning classroom changed this in schools across the country. Teachers in all content areas are becoming practiced in recording the live lessons that they deliver to students, and we are collectively growing more comfortable with seeing ourselves on screen.

SWEL coaches have been able to conduct nonevaluative peer observations in the distance learning environment using these recordings of live class sessions, which means that they can work with colleagues with whom they might otherwise have conflicting schedules that would make a live observation difficult or impossible. In other words, both teachers involved—the SWEL coach and the general education teacher—are able to participate on their own time rather than try to shuffle around their schedules, cancel small group instruction for ELs, or give up their prep time to do an observation.

In addition, a single videotaped lesson can be used to serve multiple purposes. A SWEL coach might use the videotaped lesson from one of their colleagues to observe using the [SWEL Support Tool](#), which focuses on effective instruction for ELs, while the principal might use that same videotape for one of the required annual observations. Perhaps the general education teacher is assembling a portfolio for National Board Certification or another similar endeavor, and the same videotape can be added to those efforts. Underlying all of these options are two clear benefits: efficient use of time and teacher agency. Videotaped lessons can serve multiple professional development purposes, while a live lesson usually only serves one.

As time is such a limited commodity for teachers, it stands to reason that video continues to be utilized as a professional learning tool postpandemic, especially given our newfound comfort with using it. Teacher agency plays a role, too, in that the teacher doing the videotaping is able to choose when and how to do the recording. This may help to alleviate some of the stress that comes with having someone in the “back of the room” watching.

Expanding Our Understanding of What Is “Observable”

Not all schools have offered live or synchronous class sessions to their students during ERDL, online schooling, and hybrid instruction. Teachers we have interviewed for a related study reported that their schools and districts felt that expecting students to attend live sessions was inequitable, as there were varying degrees of access to technology among the students and their families. This was particularly the case in the spring of 2020, when teachers had very little time to transition from in-person teaching to ERDL.

If synchronous teaching is not being delivered, then videotaping a lesson is rendered impossible. So, what is a SWEL coach going to do to ensure that their colleagues know how to support ELs in the remote environment? We have learned that there are a number of ways to serve as a SWEL coach in these situations, so long as we are willing to reframe what we consider observable as we are using the SWEL Support Tool. Some of the methods the teachers we work with have discovered follow.

1. **“Observing” the lesson plan.** In an effort to figure out how SWEL coaches could still be supportive when their schools were only offering asynchronous instruction to students, it became clear that they could play an important role in the planning for asynchronous instruction. SWEL coaches and their general education colleagues shared their lesson plans, which stood in for a live observation using the SWEL Support Tool. It turns out that this is not only an efficient workaround, because it is done through shared digital documents rather than in-person observations or coplanning, but it also provides a new vantage point for SWEL coaches to support their colleagues’ instruction of ELs in the general education classroom *before the instruction takes place*. In many cases, SWEL coaches reported that more colleagues than ever before had sought out their advice to plan lessons that were accessible to ELs. While “observing” the lesson plan was meant as a triaged measure to maintain the efforts of SWEL coaches, it turns out to be a popular method that can be carried beyond distance learning.
2. **Supporting the design of the student-facing learning platform, such as Schoology or Google Classroom.** Many teachers throughout K–12 are using learning management systems to organize and deliver their content to students. SWEL coaches can play a critical role in “observing” the structures and design of these systems in an effort to ensure that the instructions are clear, there are visuals and other scaffolds to support learning, and the content is differentiated in a way that makes the content materials accessible to ELs. Given that many schools were already using learning management systems like [Schoology](#) and [Google Classroom](#) to support in-person instruction, it stands to reason that schools will continue to do so in the post-COVID-19 environment. SWEL coaches can continue to play an important role in ensuring that the digital content delivered to students meets the needs of ELs.
3. **Reviewing teacher-created materials.** Though some teachers have been creating digitized versions of their instructional materials for years, COVID-19 has forced anyone who was not doing so already to transition to online materials creation. As such, teacher-created materials—including (but definitely not limited to!) the slide decks used in prerecorded instructional videos; assessments, such as quizzes and tests; anchor texts; and worksheets—are great options for SWEL coach review and support.
4. **Delivering prerecorded, asynchronous professional development related to supporting ELs in the general education classroom.** SWEL coaches are taking advantage of the same tools they are using to teach, like [Screencast-O-Matic](#) and [FlipGrid](#), to offer self-paced professional development for their colleagues using both SWEL-created materials and their own resources. Allowing teachers to participate in professional development at their convenience turns out to be a terrific time saver that helps to increase participation. There is no reason to discontinue this method of professional development delivery post-COVID-19 if it is proving effective during ERDL and hybrid schooling.

Though there will surely be a collective sigh of relief when we are able to return to schools in person safely, there are many ways in which SWEL coaches and other EL teacher leaders will be

able to streamline and improve instruction for ELs because of what we learned during COVID-19–related distance learning. These new ways of supporting teacher colearning are time efficient, have a broad reach, and support teacher choice and agency in their professional learning. They are worthy of maintaining in a postpandemic world.

Reference

Benegas, M., & Stolpestad, A. (2020). *Teacher leadership for school-wide English learning*. TESOL International Association.

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