



Focus: Virtual Learning for English Learners Receiving Special Education Services

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“Being an English Learner is NOT a Disability”: Insights on Virtual Learning for Dually-Identified Students

Vanessa Lopez is in her second year as a Coordinator for the [Imperial Valley SELPA](#) (Special Education Local Plan Area) and most recently worked at a school site in the [Calexico Unified School District](#) as a classroom teacher with general education students as well as in the Resource Specialist Program (RSP) and Special Day Class (SDC) settings. Vanessa’s experiences as an EL coach, a resource teacher, an academic support teacher, and an educational technology integration specialist have uniquely positioned her to provide valuable support in the pivot to distance learning.

An Asset-Based Approach Focused on the Whole Child

Vanessa tells us, *“It is important to remember that being an English Learner is not a disability.”* Vanessa challenges us to see each person’s experiences, culture and language to *“mine the assets that are there.”* Of the [13 categories of disabilities](#), the largest type is the Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Vanessa reminds us that many identified disabilities do not limit language learning and will not impact students’ progress in English language proficiency.

In her work with teachers of dually-identified students, Vanessa emphasizes the importance of each student’s [Individualized Education Program](#) (IEP), but also stresses the importance of getting to know each student as a whole individual coming from a unique context. Given the spectrum of moderate to severe needs, educators need to focus on current levels of performance and data that inform the baseline - especially important if there is no data from English Language Proficiency Assessments for California ([ELPAC](#)) or other locally identified measures. Then, educators can develop linguistically appropriate goals specific to the needs of each student. Vanessa advises teachers to look for red flags if the IEP is written with deficit language. She says, *“What I want everyone to keep at the forefront is that we’re talking about and working with individuals with diverse identity dimensions, gender, culture, the whole nine [yards].”* Thus, considering who each child is uniquely and their unique gifts is of key importance in building their learning plans.

Leveraging Teachers’ Collective Innovation – “Building the Plane While We Fly”

Vanessa supports teachers’ creative use of technology, insisting on [research-based pedagogy](#) for ELs with disabilities. Along with teachers, she co-constructs innovative adaptations of existing apps and devices that integrate technology, content learning and language acquisition. Vanessa shares two approaches to keeping [Universal Design for Learning](#) in the forefront in one high school and one elementary school classroom.

Optimizing Digital Modes and Tools to Meet Outcomes – Vanessa describes her collaboration with a high school history teacher who has students with active IEPs and who transformed the use of existing resources using an [app smashing](#) strategy – combining two or three apps to get a desired result. This teacher adapted his virtual classroom to resemble his physical classroom. Before the pandemic, he used [Google Suite](#), which he continues to use while teaching on Zoom. He posts updates, needed documents, and reminders, Google Slides, and Google Docs. In the physical classroom, he used side-by-side translation for ELs with disabilities. Wanting to transform and translate his notes and slides prior to delivering online instruction, he and Vanessa discovered the [Slide Translator](#) extension to highlight text and select the language students need for text comprehension. He keeps the translation on a side panel for continuous reference, which for special education students with executive functioning issues alleviates having to toggle to a separate tab.

For students with visual motor integration issues, this teacher uses [Read and Write](#) purchased by his district. In addition to switching between the written English and Spanish text, ELs can plug in headphones, listen to the slides read aloud multiple times, attuning their ears to English while following along visually. They can simultaneously practice their reading skills in the primary language. He’s combined this with the use of [Screencastify](#) for students to record and send questions orally in real time to their teacher. The “aha” moment for the teacher was that students could be taught to use these strategies independently for all classes. Vanessa emphasized that students are not only learning content via technology, but they are learning *“life hacks that will help them in their academic journey.”*

Maximizing Comprehensibility and Interactions – With her elementary students, one fourth grade general education teacher - like many others - is using paper and pencil tasks in addition to synchronous virtual spaces. Parents or students pick up materials. Students use their workbooks, snap a picture, and submit it to their teacher. Special



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Education teachers then meet with the student to work on specific goals and adjust material based on accommodations specified in their IEP. Technology supports like Speech to Text in [Google Chrome](#) help the students meet grade level standards during [integrated ELD](#). To support students' writing, they can use speech to text, run it through [Grammarly](#), and then make the revisions and edits for English conventions. This process represents an integration of essential California Common Core State Standards for [English Language Arts](#) (e.g. W.4.4-6 *Production and Distribution of Writing*) and CA [English Language Development Standards](#) (e.g. ELD.PI.4.10. *Expanding – Writing*).

For younger dually-identified students during designated ELD time, chants, songs work well in the virtual environment to develop phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and uplift students' backgrounds. The lessons encourage students to "play" with language and tap into personal experiences. Younger students may not have mastered using the mouse or keyboard, thus many extension activities are completed with physical "drag and drop" or circling on the iPad. Some teachers are using platforms like Seesaw where students can use tools on a touch-screen device to show what they know by recording videos, taking pictures, and drawing.

"Don't Sweat the Small Stuff"

Amid what has been an enormous change for teachers, Vanessa has a straightforward approach. She advises us to "use what we have in our pantry" to look at existing resources and adapt them to our new context. She wisely tells educators and district leaders, "It's about one thing at a time." It is easy to get overwhelmed by uncertainty and to-do lists, but, *"if we focus on one thing at a time – doing a deep dive into one IEP at a time, getting to know one disability category at a time, one feature in Zoom and perfecting it, or getting to know one app specific to students with auditory processing issues,"* virtual teaching and learning can be more manageable.

There are still questions unanswered and critical needs to be met, but Vanessa reminds us to look for the bright spots. She is overwhelmed with emotion and amazement at what is being achieved; she says, *"multiply that times 100, by 1000s throughout the state, throughout our country. And to me, that's just great!"*



Addressing the Whole Child

In addressing the whole individual, Vanessa points to the example of one teacher in an SDC classroom (grades 4 – 6) who took a deep dive into her students' IEPs before the new school year began. In addition to familiarizing herself with the AT (Assistive Technology) section to guide how she might adapt programs and apps, she realized the critical [social-emotional needs](#) of her students. Every morning, this teacher checks in with her students to find out how they are feeling, and, additionally, to build community. The teacher then artfully transitions to

some physical movement which relaxes the students. This primes the brain and the body to be engaged, receptive to new learning, and for students to express what they know. To further ensure that the needs of her students are met, this teacher maximizes the support of her two Instructional Assistants. If, for example, one of the IEP goals says to develop writing, they plan Zoom breakout sessions that include writing models, and slides with sentence frames and word banks. As a core instructional component, they group strategically by language proficiency to provide additional supports during designated ELD time.



Addressing Unique Family Needs

As the parent of a dually-identified autistic son, Vanessa fully understands the challenges they face and brings this unique perspective in working with families. The pivot to virtual learning in a largely rural, agricultural county that currently is experiencing a widespread transmission of COVID-19 has been challenging for everybody, especially for families of students with disabilities. However, Vanessa reports that every school site was able to provide devices and upgrade some mobile towers and vehicles to provide connectivity. There is still work to be done -

the [demand for internet bandwidth](#) has increased exponentially; students need devices and bandwidth that can handle multiple users in households with multiple children. Families continue to reach out with their distinct stories and needs; for many, family members have contracted the virus, lost work, or had to return to Mexico for support. Vanessa emphasizes the uniqueness of each family and appreciates the experiences, assets, and resilience they bring to the table; this is especially evident in families of dually-identified students. She is moved to see *"the way the human connection is so important, highlighted, and how many people are just making outstanding efforts."*