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Engaging LESLLA Learners During Covid-19: The Nexus of Reading Strategies and Digital Tools

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Abstract

For LESLLA instruction to be successful, it should include creating an engaging learning environment that relates instruction to learners' lives, designing separate learning stations for individualized projects and more independent learning, and choosing adult-appropriate materials. Pivoting on a dime to cope with Covid-19 has illustrated the need for incorporating training in language skills alongside digital tools not only for second language (L2) learners but most importantly for LESLLA learners. This paper describes the professional experiences of a LESLLA teacher attempting to identify the relationship between reading strategies and new technology-rich instructional practices to support LESLLA learners during the pandemic. It highlights a promising technology integration framework known as the Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition (SAMR) model (Puentedura, 2006, 2013) in an attempt to find the nexus of reading strategies and digital technology tools in an online LESLLA class in Western Canada.

Keywords: reading strategies, digital tools, SAMR, pandemic pedagogies

Introduction

In March 2020, Covid-19 imposed a lockdown of many educational facilities in Canada, including Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) and its two programing streams: Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs) and Foundations Literacy, which caters to the needs of Adult ESL Literacy Learners (ALL) or Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) learners, leaving teachers with only the online delivery option of their classes. The change happened rapidly and altered how we teach in dramatic ways, requiring the incorporation of "Pandemic Pedagogies" (CASAE, 2020) to cope with the status quo. According to Symthe et al. (2021), LINC teachers developed a range of inventive and dynamic pedagogies oriented to social solidarity. For example, establishing WhatsApp networks to translate and contextualize information, dropping off customized learning packages on families' doorsteps and conducting telephone tutorials to walk them through the materials, and exerting efforts to bring classes online using Microsoft Teams, among other platforms. Teachers gradually started to incorporate training in digital literacy skills and, in the course of time, gained comfort aligning instruction to technology integration frameworks that guide balanced and technology-rich skill-based learning and instruction (Vanek & Harris, 2020).

Setting

I teach in a Foundations literacy LINC program in Western Canada. LINC programs are federally funded to support adult newcomers, whether immigrants or refugees, by providing English language instruction for resettlement purposes. My students are mainly refugees who have a range of 0-9 years of education in their first languages (L1s). It sometimes feels that my classroom mirrors Canada's multiculturalism (Multiculturalism Act, 1988) where the linguistic and cultural mosaic feeds daily interactions for 4.5 hours between representatives from different parts of the world, such as Somalia, Syria, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eretria, Thailand, Nepal, and Rwanda. Despite the differences in students' cultural backgrounds, beliefs, gender identities, and familial responsibilities, students have one goal in common and that is the desire to learn reading and writing in English so they can fit in the highly literate society they live in by accessing government services, such as going to the doctor's office and reading a prescription without having to ask for L1 support. Since reading is hard, as my students like to vent, and takes a long time to develop for ESL literacy learners (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011), pivoting to remote teaching and resorting to pandemic pedagogies were necessary measures for students' learning to continue.

This paper describes my professional experiences working to identify the relationship between reading strategies and new technology-rich instructional practices to support ALL/LESLLA learners during the pandemic. It offers a review of ALL/LESLLA learners' evidence-based needs in relation to reading research and digital literacy, which is defined as "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills" (Digital Literacy, 2021, p. 1). It also highlights a promising technology integration framework known as the Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition (SAMR) model (Puentedura, 2006, 2013) in an attempt to find the nexus of reading strategies and digital technology tools in an online ALL/LESLLA class. I share my journey moving from addressing the immediate needs imposed by the pandemic to aligning my instruction to the SAMR model to adapt to the "new normal"

during the year 2020-2021 to help Foundations LINC Literacy teachers find connections to their own instruction. The paper concludes with suggestions for future digital programming for ALL/LESLLA instruction to envision on building more sustainable programming for learners and instructors.

Demands of Reading Instruction for ALL/LESLLA Learners

Although learning the oral second language (L2) and written L2 language while functioning in the new L2 context is considered to be a "superhuman task" (Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007, p.10), it can be achieved through targeted instruction (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011). Given that there are three contributing factors to L2 learners' reading comprehension ability (Bernhardt, 2011) – i.e., 20% L1 literacy, 30% L2 language knowledge, and 50% universal variance, e.g., motivation, trauma, and age— Johnson (2018) advised that ESL literacy teachers are most effective by selecting evidence-based literacy methodologies and scaffolding authentic as well as level-appropriate teaching materials for learning to become autonomous.

Delving into the recommended methodology to equip ALL/LESLLA learners with basic literacy skills, a few recommendations indicate invaluable lessons that can be learned from the K-12 system. For example, Vinogradov (2013) encouraged LESLLA teachers to explore early literacy learning experiences in K-12 classrooms to enhance their own literacy instruction practices. Second, Johnson (2018) found that LESLLA teachers can benefit from using a multisensory, systematic, and direct approach to reading similar to those used with L1 children with dyslexia. Additionally, Ghanem (2020) adapted Wren's (2000) reading framework originally developed for K-12 learners to meet ALL/LESLLA learners' needs. Finally, Ghanem (2021) used the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach to introduce evidence-based assessment tools to identify the needs of ALL/LESLLA students who deviated from the literacy level profile of ability and developed Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) to adapt to the students' needs in order for them to successfully catch up with their classroom peers.

Such targeted attention is very much needed to cater to the unique characteristics integral to ALL/LESLLA learners and distinct from L2 learners. For example, Finn (2010) explained that trauma is a barrier to learning because ALL/LESLLA learners are often distracted, suffer from a lower level of concentration, and possibly experience memory loss. Wilbur (2016) recommended incorporating trauma-informed strategies, e.g., space out the instruction, repeat the information, and spiral instruction to accommodate students' needs. Similarly, Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) explained that learners' *engagement* consists of active participation and involvement in the learning activities, provided that the activities are related to students' sense of purpose and their ability to perform the activities with a level of autonomy and mastery. Finally, Kurvers, Stockmann, and van de Craats (2010) recommended increasing the amount of exposure to the target language to achieve the basic literacy levels by working on the computer, individually or in small groups, continuously attending classes and doing homework, stimulating all possibilities of contact with speakers of the target language, and using a portfolio to keep the teacher and learner attentive to the achieved skills and areas of improvement.

With regards to instruction, Vinogradov (2004) recommends the use of ubiquitous authentic materials introduced incrementally to match students' literacy development. Additionally, Vinogradov and Bigelow (2010) recommend incorporating LESLLA learners' skills and strengths as a resource in the classroom to enhance their self-confidence which eventually leads to autonomous learning.

In the LINC context, cognizance of the ALL/LESLLA learners' exigent needs meant that attention was deemed necessary to the selection of appropriate strategies to support them during the pandemic's unparalleled circumstances.

Pandemic Pedagogies and Digital Skills

March 2020 marked the lockdown of all the LINC schools in Canada, among many other educational facilities, thus leaving teachers with only one modality for offering their classes: online. Instantly pivoting to distance learning led to various attempts to continue to use strategies to meet the needs of ALL/LESLLA learners AND training for digital skills, a practice that many called "Pandemic Pedagogies":

> Adult educators across Canada are doing extraordinary things to deal with a multitude of issues associated with Covid-19: home/social isolation, (health) literacy, trauma, and stress, poverty, and unemployment, racism, changing means of communication, and work, just to name a few. With what we do, we are revitalizing adult learning and education as a field of pedagogies, praxis, activism, methodologies, and scholarship (CASAE, 2020, as cited in Smythe et al., 2021, p.15).

In my early pandemic teaching, pandemic pedagogies resulted in these instructional strategies designed to support ALL/LESLLA learners despite the digital divide and internet connectivity:

1- Establishing connections with students through phone calls and WhatsApp,
2- Mailing educational packages (*ESL Story Bank,* Minnesota Literacy Council, 2013),
3- Training students to use virtual conferencing tools, e.g., BigBlueButton and Jitisi,
4- Focusing on teaching more interactively by using picture books for adult learners, e.g., (http://www.eyeonliteracy.com/), so they can get the "optimal input" to be able to acquire and produce the language (Krashen, 2020, p.29),
5- Incorporating social-emotional learning strategies (Weissberg, 2015) to help regulate their feelings and cope with the new reality that restricted physical activity. Exercises e.g., Qigong (https://livinglifeinjoy.com/) were helpful.

Those steps allowed establishing and maintaining a connection with the students, and continuity of distance learning delivery. Nonetheless, a more comprehensive review of digital literacy tools and distance education models was necessary to choose the most appropriate one for my ALL/LESLLA learners.

Technology Integration Framework

As I gained comfort with online instruction and my students developed confidence in themselves using many digital skills needed to engage in learning, I became more strategic in designing and attending to the specific learning needs of my ALL/ LESLLA learners. I also started learning about integrating technology frameworks following Vanek and Harris's (2020) recommendation to adopt an evidence-based framework for technology integration, such as

Technological, Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK)[1] (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) , Engage in, Enhance, Extend Learning Goals (Triple E)[2] (Kolb, 2017), and Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, and Redefinition (SAMR)[3] (Puentedura, 2006, 2013) models. Since Vanek and Harris (2020) emphasize that technology integration should aim for creating opportunities for students to learn content and simultaneously develop their new digital literacy skills, I chose the SAMR Model, which allows incremental adoption of educational technology while maintaining students' engagement. Moving along the continuum of enhancement to transformation, digital technology becomes increasingly important and indistinctly woven into the demands of good teaching and learning.

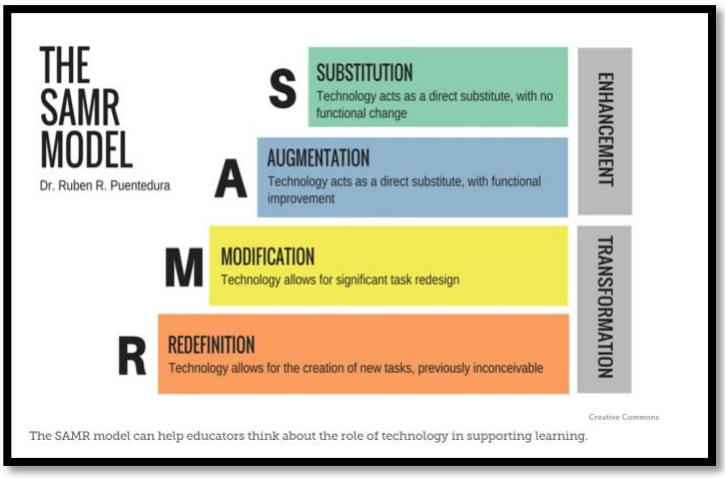

Figure 1: The SAMR Model (Creative Commons)

Ruben R. Puentedura developed the SAMR model as part of his work with the Maine Learning Technologies Initiative (Puentedura, 2006). The objective of the model was to encourage educators to significantly enhance the quality of education provided via technology in the state of Maine. The SAMR model is a set of two hierarchical levels (enhancement, transformation) that represent four tiers of online learning in order of cognitive enhancement and transformative power: substitution, augmentation, modification, and redefinition (Puentedura, 2013). This is a closer look at each level in the model and sample lesson, Canada Day, from my Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) 3L Foundations Literacy LINC online class.

1- Substitution: This level means replacing traditional activities and materials, e.g., in-class presentations or paper worksheets, with digital versions. While there is no substantial change to the content, there is a change to the way it is delivered. Synchronous and asynchronous versions of the content presentations were made available to keep things simple for the learners. The following links provide examples of asynchronous content presentation:

[1] http://tpack.org/
[2] https://www.tripleeframework.com/
[3] http://www.hippasus.com/

1. **Canada day worksheet part 1:** https://youtu.be/BFzX_BXBuV4
2. **Canada day worksheet part 2:** https://youtu.be/7SSA0U4qN1w
3. **Canada day worksheet part 3:** https://youtu.be/oLhxdoHmc-U

2- Augmentation: This level involves incorporating interactive digital tools and features like hyperlinks. Although the content remains unchanged, teachers enhance the learning experience and gamify the quizzes using Quizlet, as per this example (https://quizlet.com/_8h25vo?x=1jqt&i=2sh8r6)

3- Modification: At this level, teachers are encouraged to use technology to transform their task design by using learning management systems, such as Canvas, Google Classroom, or Moodle to handle the logistical aspects of running a classroom, like tracking grades, messaging students, creating a calendar, and posting assignments. I started by developing a Google site and linked a few apps to it, e.g., Google Classroom, Quizlet, YouTube, and Edpuzzle. As students became increasingly comfortable with digital technology tools, they transitioned into Avenue[4], a Moodle platform, where the SAMR model was used to develop activities.

4- Redefinition: At this level, the technology is used to fundamentally transform and redefine the learning experience and create *new* tasks that were unthinkable in the classroom. For example, The Royal Tyrrell Museum's virtual tour (n.d.) (https://bit.ly/3v01w9k).

Implementing the SAMR model with ALL/LESLLA learners in mind allowed me the opportunity to find the nexus of L2 reading skills and technological tools because my learners seem to have benefited from three trends in technology of learning (Liaw & English, 2017).

First, reading is ubiquitous because we are surrounded by reading materials and our mobile devices allow numerous means of communication. For example, my ALL/LESLLA students were trained to watch the instructional videos, record themselves reading, send to the teacher for feedback or Veedback, audio-visual feedback (Sabbaghan, 2017). My ALL/LESLLA students were also trained to take theme-related pictures and record themselves reading them, for example, reading a store sale flyer and using Google Translate App to decipher new words.

Second, reading can be adaptive since the LINC CLBs and Foundations literacy classes are learner-centered (CLBs, 2012), thus making students' needs and choices the focal points of activity design and technology tool selection to develop learner-fit instructional materials. To illustrate, in my LINC Foundations Literacy class, Edpuzzle activities were developed to pace the instructional materials and were phased out to accommodate my ALL/LESLLA learners' reading progress.

Third, reading becomes autonomous when learners "read a lot" (Grabe, 2002, p. 280) and participate in activities that foster learner autonomy, e.g., project-based tasks. For example, unlimited access to the instructional videos and reading activities on my class's Learning Management System (LMS) helped to enhance my students' reading fluency because listening to audio recordings of texts helps building fluency, especially when they keep listening and reading along until they can read the text independently (Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2019). Additionally, my students' autonomy has improved through their frequent use of digital tools while participating in online project-based tasks. For example, my students participated in a project that highlighted

[4]The Avenue (https://avenue.ca/) – LearnIT2teach Project is supported by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to offer LINC teachers and managers in IRCC-funded programs the tools and training to integrate Technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) into language training programs.

the importance of mental health during the pandemic. It included an individualized written recipe of manageable exercise, eating well, hours of sleep and communication with loved ones as well as a recorded video of each ALL/LESLLA leaner demonstrating their recipe (Egan, 2020).

As such, learning to read can be made ubiquitous, adaptive and autonomous, using different digital tools such as YouTube Videos, Quizlet, Edpuzzle, an LMS, and virtual tours, all linked to one website developed to help LESLLA learners access digital materials outside of class. In my context, as the site was made available as an open-source platform for learners to access, I noticed that their learning and level of engagement improved. It is also worth mentioning that those aspects of L2 learning in the context of reading and learning online are essential, not just to cope with the realities faced during the early months of Covid-19, but also to maximize the lessons learned during the pandemic. For instance, ALL/ LESLLA teachers are encouraged to continue finding connections between digital tools and teaching L2 reading in their ALL/LESLLA classes while focusing on learning to precede technology. Hence, ALL/ LESLLA teachers might find these suggestions helpful:

1. Plan instruction: objectives, videos, class slides, asynchronous work drawing on a technology integration framework (e.g., SAMR) to select technology tools,
2. Utilize the digital tools to help make the learning engaging, ubiquitous, autonomous, and adaptive for learners,
3. Provide means of support: "how-to" videos and 1-on-1 meetings for intervention purposes, and
4. Allow time for learning to happen because digital literacy skills progress throughout three developmental categories that can take time to fully evolve: developing familiarity with digital technologies, understanding information with digital technologies, and creating digital technologies (CCLB, 2015).

Suggestions for Distance Learning

Distance learning is a modality of instruction that promises direction and development for educational institutions, including adult basic education, to not only enhance learning experiences but also to meet the needs and demands of our reality. This paper illustrates that the adoption and implementation of technology for ALL/LESLLA learners might be nascent, possibly because ALL/LESLLA teachers used to focus on literacy skills in their instruction without necessarily including digital literacy training into the mix (Reder et al., 2011). What can we do to accelerate the adoption of distance learning to this underserved population? Such question bears asking because whether teachers are experimenting with technology tools or are becoming experts at incorporating them in their classes, their practice can be enhanced in different ways. Firstly, learning by example from the global community of practice can boost teachers' knowledge and empower their classes and organizations with the necessary skills to thrive. For example, Vanek et al. (2021) led a national six-month scan study to identify and describe the pandemic pedagogies that proved promising and helpful for adult remote ESOL programs, practitioners, and learners. The pedagogies that rose to the top were those that came about as a result of administrators and practitioners reflecting on student recruitment and orientation; various instructional platforms, materials, and approaches; student persistence strategies; student access to digital skills, devices, and internet; support for students' basic needs; and professional development as well as support for staff.

Secondly, teachers can bridge the gap between enthusiasm and effective implementation of learning by going back to the basics, since the basics play an essential role in establishing and implementing distance education. To illustrate, Vanek, Simpson and Goumas (2020**)** discuss distance learning in seven elaborative chapters, in addition to appendices, covering: setting the stage, recruitment, screening, orientation, instruction, assessment, and administrative issues and how to address them. In order to enhance practitioners' practical knowledge, the Transforming Distance Education Course developed by EdTech Center @ World Education (2021) offers a learner-friendly four-module course for providers and practitioners of adult basic education to equip them with essential strategies for planning and implementing distance education or teaching with a blended approach.

Conclusion

While Covid-19 disrupted educational programming in 2020, it also meant that practitioners had to employ some form of online instruction (e.g., remote live instruction or asynchronous distance instruction). Pandemic Pedagogies for ESL teachers in general and ALL/LESLLA teachers, in particular, emerged to help and support learners during such unprecedented times. The experiences and examples discussed above illustrate my journey as a LESLLA teacher in a Foundations Literacy LINC program in western Canada, evolving from addressing the pandemic needs right there and then to aligning instruction to the SAMR model to adapt to the "new normal". The experiences illustrate a helpful nexus between reading skills and digital tools that emphasize reading as a ubiquitous, adaptive, and autonomous activity. Scaffolding the components of reading to meet the learners where they are at by developing YouTube videos, Quizlet activities, learner-friendly LMSs and project based tasks seems to have engaged my ALL/LESLLA learners and enhanced their reading autonomy. Finally, suggestions were put forward regarding setting up and implementing distance learning to envision building more sustainable programming for learners and instructors.

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