Engaging Adult English Language Learners in Distance Education: An ESL Program's Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
Traditionally, adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, also known as English as an Additional Language (EAL), deliver instruction through in-person classes rather than distance education, as was the case at Georgia Piedmont Technical College (GPTC). However, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, distance education became a tool used at GPTC to engage students in learning while school campuses were closed. This paper gives details about how administrators, instructors, and staff at GPTC quickly built a distance education program for adult English language learners in response to the pandemic, including resulting challenges, insights, and successes. Research on the topic of distance education and its possible benefits for adult English language learners is explored in order to inform the efforts of building this type of program. The information provided can help guide other adult EAL programs seeking to incorporate distance education for adult English language learners.

Keywords
adult ESL/EAL programs, language program administration, English language learners, distance education

Background

On Thursday, March 12th, we were in the midst of a robust and successful adult English as a Second Language (ESL)[1] program at Georgia Piedmont Technical College (GPTC). Our program consisted of day and evening classes and our building housed students from 8:30 in the morning until 9:00 at night most days. With 43 paid instructors, administrators, and staff and approximately 700 students, we were one of the largest adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) programs in the state of Georgia. Our student population consisted of immigrants and naturalized citizens who had been in the U.S. for many years as well as recently arrived refugees and immigrants. Students represented more than 50 countries and more than 70 languages. Educational experiences covered the spectrum, from students with graduate degrees to students with interrupted or no formal schooling. On March 12th, aside from normal classroom instruction, our staff was planning 2020 Census activities, working to incorporate digital literacy in each class, connecting volunteer

[1] The official name of the school is Georgia Piedmont Technical College's ESL Program. Therefore, the term ESL is used in coordination with the program name while the term EAL is used elsewhere in the paper as a recognition that English may not be a student's second language but an additional language to several already learned.

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tutors with students, and preparing for our program's annual International Fashion Walk and Talent Show. When classes were dismissed on March 12th, staff had no way of knowing that none of these preparations would come to fruition, nor did we have the opportunity to prepare our students for the drastic changes they were about to experience.

Friday, March 13th brought the sudden, but not entirely unexpected, news that due to COVID-19 in-person classes would not resume on Monday. The news prompted a scramble to quickly develop and implement a fully online EAL program to serve as many students as possible. This paper details that process and our staff's efforts to create an inclusive distance education (DE) environment that serves our students in the midst of a global pandemic. It shares our staff's experiences and draws from research about DE in order to provide insights into building a DE program for adult English Language Learners (ELLs). For the purposes of this paper, DE is defined as "…the delivery of instruction to students who are separated from the instructor, using some type of technology to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and instructor, synchronously or asynchronously" (McCain, 2009, p. 10).

Literature Review

Diversity is inherent to an EAL program. Students have a variety of backgrounds and identities including age, religion, education, occupation, cultures, learning ability and motivations (Eyring, 2014). Students also have a wide array of learning styles, which can vary depending upon a student's background and cultures (Eyring, 2014). Because of this diversity, inclusivity and equity are fundamental to a successful program. This is especially true in the current climate of racial tension, policies against minoritized populations, including immigrants, and growing divisiveness:

> At present, a strong anti-immigrant sentiment has resurfaced in the country…The new immigration policies are negatively impacting immigrants living and arriving in the United States…This anti-immigrant sentiment has generated anxiety and confusion among immigrants who are afraid of being deported. Even immigrants who are legal residents fear losing their jobs or their work permits. (Larrotta, 2019, p. 54)

Students of diverse backgrounds need a safe and inclusive environment that supports rather than hinders language acquisition. While this is most often considered within the traditional classroom, DE programs can also serve to foster inclusivity and participation by offering accessibility, varied and relevant content, and opportunities for autonomy and self-directed learning. The administrative team of GPTC sought to capitalize on these strengths in order to engage as many students as possible when transitioning to DE during the pandemic. At the same time, the team recognized that DE is not a perfect solution for all students.

A common assumption is that adult ELLs are unable to access DE due to age or lack of access to a computer or the Internet (McClanahan, 2014). There are, however, many ways these students can engage in DE learning, beginning with their personal devices. In the United States, 81 percent of adults now own a smartphone and "smartphone ownership is relatively common among Americans of different economic, educational and racial and ethnic backgrounds" (Anderson, 2019, para. 10). This wide ownership of smartphones suggests many ELLs may have access to DE via their phone even if they do not have a computer or tablet, provided that the DE is designed to be accessible via smartphone. It also suggests a level of comfort with a technological device because smartphones are likely readily available and already familiar to students (McClanahan, 2014). Another benefit to the smartphone is that it can provide connectivity for adults who have no access to traditional broadband. Many people now rely on their smartphone

instead of broadband to access the Internet (Anderson, 2019). As a result, our administrative team and instructors selected platforms that worked well with smartphones, acknowledging that this is how a majority of our students access the Internet. However, as we discovered, despite having access to such devices students often ran into technical difficulties when attempting to participate in DE via these devices.

In addition to the potential accessibility of DE via smartphone, DE is capable of providing engaging and interactive content that can appeal to learners of diverse backgrounds and experiences. This is in part due to the scope of available content. According to McCain (2009), "technology does provide access to a far wider range of material than is available from a bookstore, library or school, and frequently at low or no cost to the individual" (p. 13). While many instructors in classroom settings may depend on textbooks, the DE environment necessitates instructors finding a variety of material to use with students, including audio, video, and interactive activities. As the awareness that many people use smartphones to access online content increases, more materials are designed to be accessible via smartphone and thus can be used by students on their personal devices. Our program administrators and instructors took advantage of this diverse online content and identified varied synchronous and asynchronous material to offer to our students.

Another benefit to DE is the relevance it has in the lives of students. Increasingly, social interaction is taking place via technology and ELLs need to learn how to navigate technology in order to participate (Nisbet & Austin, 2013). DE can help students develop a knowledge of both language and technology by incorporating authentic materials such as email, videos, podcasts and phones, which in turn provide opportunities for connecting language learning to authentic communication (Huang et al., 2011). Our staff used technology both as an instructional tool and as a means to communicate with students, particularly in regard to smartphones and email. It is important to acknowledge, however, that not all students want to participate in technology and may find it intrusive or unnecessary, which can lead to DE programs being inaccessible to these students. This was the case for some of our students who did not want to participate in DE despite having the technology.

Finally, DE has the potential to promote autonomy, motivation, and self-guided learning by giving learners varied opportunities for participation (Ally et al., 2007; Eyring, 2014; Nisbet & Austin, 2013). One of the reasons is due to the frequent access students have to their personal devices, although this access can be constrained by factors such as having to share the device with other family members (Pettitt, 2017). This availability allows students to interact with instructional content from any location, and as they progress through material and achieve success they may be more motivated to continue their learning (Ally et al., 2007). Many asynchronous online platforms are accessible by personal devices and allow students to complete work on their own time, according to their own schedules, and around the responsibilities of other commitments. Instructors can provide various activities and opportunities for students to accomplish work outside of the synchronous classroom and students can self-pace and self-direct their learning. At GPTC, administrators hoped that moving to a DE program would give students additional opportunities for autonomous and self-directed learning beyond the traditional classroom setting, particularly through the offering of asynchronous material, and would motivate them to continue studying during the pandemic.

DE can be an asset to students and EAL programs by engaging students in these ways and thereby fostering inclusivity. It must be viewed as a viable instructional method. As McCain (2009) states, "evidence abounds that distance education offers increased flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and successful outcomes, but until the classroom is no longer viewed as the focal

point for all learning, significant change . . . will not occur" (p. 19). In the case of GPTC, the pandemic forced staff to shift our perception of the classroom as the focal point to embracing DE as an effective instructional method. The remainder of this paper details our staff's efforts to bring our program online and what we learned in the process.

Program Administration Successes

A vital component to any program's success is administration. GPTC's ESL program has a strong administrative team of five full-time staff that worked collaboratively to make the transition to DE classes possible. The administrative team recognized the need to capitalize on the strengths that were already in place. We initially accomplished this transition in two ways. The first was to use existing teacher and student relationships. Administrators were prepared to call and email students and explain our DE classes to them but determined that it would be more efficient and effective for each instructor to reach out to his or her own students. By doing this we believe we received a greater response from students.

Second, administrators drew on instructor and staff strengths and expertise. When we transitioned to DE in March, we were able to maintain the positions of only three of our 25 instructors due to the low number of participating students. We gave all instructors the opportunity to apply and then selected three instructors who were flexible, creative, and demonstrated a high comfort level with technology. These instructors were already regularly incorporating technology into their classes and were able to shift easily to teaching online. They were also creative and self-motivated to develop their own online curriculum. In addition to the instructors, staff stepped up in various ways to brainstorm how to move processes online or how to redesign processes to fit the DE environment, such as student intake and testing. Each person was eager to participate and saw the circumstances as an opportunity rather than as an insurmountable obstacle.

When GPTC transitioned to DE classes, our staff went from 43 employees consisting of 38 part-time instructors and staff and five full-time administrators to eight employees consisting of three part-time instructors and five full-time administrators. In building our DE program, administrators gradually added back staff and instructors as our student numbers increased rather than trying to maintain the same or a similar number of classes and staff as we had with in-person instruction. Once the need for another instructor or staff member became evident, we opened the opportunity to those who were not teleworking and they had the chance to apply to join as a DE instructor or staff member. As of August 2020, we have 19 employees, an increase that took place over four months.

One of our administrative team's first tasks when transitioning to DE was to create a working student database that helped us track student contact efforts and enrollment. Pulling the initial data from the Georgia Adult Learners Information System (GALIS) into a working spreadsheet, which included student names, class levels, and contact information, we then added columns to track new phone numbers or emails, whether or not the student had been contacted and enrolled in class, and the student's access to technology, such as a computer or smartphone and Wi-Fi. Administrators housed the database in a central drive that all staff had access to, and as staff heard from students, we updated the spreadsheet. This became a helpful tool in all our contact efforts and record keeping and is a form that we continue to work from as we connect with additional students.

When starting DE classes, the majority of instructors taught in the morning with the exception of a couple of afternoon classes. The morning classes were to mirror the program's original morning class schedule, although the DE classes were shorter, and the afternoon classes

were scheduled based on student availability. As our student numbers increased and administrators added instructors and classes, we scheduled synchronous classes based on instructor availability. We had classes at 10am, 12pm, 12:30pm, 1pm, 2:30pm, 6pm, and 8pm. However, this soon proved to be too difficult for our staff and the students to keep up with, and fewer students were available in the afternoons. In hindsight, our administrative staff should have established a strong schedule at the onset of DE classes rather than deciding what to do with each class as we added it. We have since reorganized our schedule to be more clearly structured into nine mostly morning and evening classes that start and finish at the same time.

In order to create a robust DE presence, we as administrators knew we needed to offer not only classes but all program services, including intake and testing. Therefore, our staff worked hard to create DE processes for these services. Intake staff piloted a new student enrollment procedure for the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) which has now become our regular system for enrolling new students. This process includes registration appointments using the video conferencing tool WebEx (webex.com) during which intake staff take screenshots of student documents, go over our school documents and have the student electronically sign, and review all student information in GALIS. If classes are in session during a registration appointment, intake staff will often show the class to a new student by entering the class session and sharing the screen with that student. The new student then receives a welcome email from the instructor with information about joining the class.

Staff members are also administering the BEST Plus 2.0 speaking test once again to our students, which we did not have the capacity to do when we first moved to DE. Test administrators are either meeting students during a registration appointment or scheduling appointments throughout the day to conduct both pre- and post-tests. Similar to registration, the test is administered via WebEx using methods approved by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), creator of the BEST Plus 2.0 test.

GPTC's ESL program has been successful at DE because it was built with long-term goals and vision rather than as a short-term stop gap measure. Instead of giving up on our program and resigning ourselves to the seemingly impossible task of engaging adult ELLs in DE, our staff and instructors rose to the challenge, going above and beyond in effort and creativity to assemble and implement a fully DE program. The administrative team's vision is that this will not only benefit the program and students during the pandemic, but will broaden the scope of our program when we are finally able to return to in-person instruction.

Student Contact Efforts

One of the first challenges staff faced was contacting students to notify them of our DE classes. As stated above, our staff and instructors were unable to prepare our students for this shift but instead had to reach out to them once the move to DE classes had been made. Our first effort was simply to notify students that we would not have class that following Monday, March 16th. The administrative team spent most of Friday and the weekend calling and texting students to tell them not to return to school the following week. Our subsequent contact efforts were focused on bringing students into our DE classes. This process took place in three phases:

Phase I – Our initial efforts focused on what we termed 'low-hanging fruit.' Administrators focused on higher-level students we could easily contact and encourage to come to DE classes. Four of our five administrative team members began contacting students by phone and email. We chose to start with these students because they had a strong grasp of the English language and were able to communicate easily, and also because most of them were comfortable

with and had access to Wi-Fi and a computer or smartphone. Students responded quickly and positively and were soon participating in the new DE classes. Another effort during this phase involved our instructors. They each contacted the students from their classes to explain our developing DE program. This allowed us to reach students quickly across all levels and begin developing DE classes to meet the demand of students interested in DE. In addition, our instructors had a stronger rapport with their students than the administrative team did, and we believe we received more responses as a result.

Phase II – During the first phase, staff heard from many students who wanted to participate in DE classes. However, the numbers of participating students were much smaller than those who originally expressed interest. We therefore went back to our student database, identified students who were not yet attending but who had expressed interest, and reached out to them again. Not only did we call to tell them about classes, but we also took extra measures to assist students with understanding the technology and how to enter classes, which are discussed later in this paper. We believe these efforts brought more students into our program.

Phase III – Having focused on higher-level students during the first two phases, the final efforts of staff consisted in calling through the remainder of our student database, primarily intermediate and lower levels, and encouraging them to join classes. For our lower-level students, this often involved speaking with multiple family members and having bilingual staff make phone calls to students whose languages with which they were familiar. If our staff did not speak a common language with a student and no bilingual family members were available to assist, the effort often involved numerous phone calls to that student with creative explanations for how to access the classes. As before, we began with the higher levels and gradually moved to the lower levels, knowing that the lower-level students would require more time and effort. An unexpected benefit to this method was that we as staff grew in our understanding of how to communicate with students regarding DE so that by the time we reached the lower-level students we had identified wording and techniques that allowed us to more easily engage them. While we had students participating from all levels by June 2020, we recognize that we still have not engaged many students, especially our pre-literate students.

Contacting over 700 students required a great deal of work, but it was rewarding to see students via online platforms and watch them re-engage in English language learning. Communicating with students by phone or email also gave them the opportunity to engage in authentic language use via technology. Administrators recognize, however, that despite our efforts many students remain unengaged and either unable to access classes or unwilling to participate in DE. When speaking with many of them by phone, they tell staff that they want to wait until in-person classes resume. This is not because they have tried DE classes and disliked them, but because they prefer in-person classes and do not want to try DE classes. Students' attitudes about the usefulness of DE, therefore, can preclude them from participating in classes. Our current students can help change these attitudes as they spread the word about the dynamic classes. Many students have asked to join DE classes not because of a phone call from GPTC staff, but because of what they heard from other students.

There is still much for our staff to learn with regard to engaging students in the DE environment. One of our recent challenges is student attrition. Staff members who contacted students to inquire why they have stopped attending were most often told that the cause is being unable to connect. Therefore, even though DE can be more accessible to students because they can participate via smartphones both synchronously and asynchronously, that accessibility is largely dependent upon overcoming technical difficulties. As a possible solution, administrators plan to

open the computer lab on campus for two days each week with safety protocols in place to provide a space where students can meet with an instructor to resolve technical problems that have been unresolved via phone call or email. Another possibility for administrators to explore is equipping higher-level students to assist lower-level students and pre-literate students with whom they share a common language with accessing DE.

Curriculum and Learning Platforms

Another challenge administrators faced when moving to a DE program was the selection of curriculum and online platforms. We needed asynchronous programs that provided EAL content, were easily accessible to students, and tracked student hours. We needed synchronous programs that were intuitive for both instructors and students and facilitated classroom dynamics. Finally, we needed programs that were free of cost because neither our program nor the students had the resources to pay for subscriptions or memberships.

Prior to the pandemic, when offering in-person instruction, a majority of our instructors used the Ventures curriculum from Cambridge University Press. It provided a framework for our classes at each level, helping our instructors maintain consistency. Instructors had student books, instructor manuals, and access to online materials such as additional handouts and activities. When administrators implemented DE classes, some of these materials were still useful for some instructors and students, but they no longer met the needs of all. Instructors therefore had to deviate from their traditional materials and develop web-based curricula that included synchronous and asynchronous instruction. They were able to draw from the variety of online resources, including videos, images, and websites, that were easily integrated into DE.

Synchronous Instruction

When administrators and instructors began setting up DE classes, we did not have any experience with video conferencing platforms. In order to select a platform that was user-friendly for our students, who sometimes had beginning-level digital knowledge in addition to being ELLs, we experimented with several before selecting. We looked at popular Internet platforms such as Skype (skype.com) and Zoom (zoom.us), as well as WebEx, which was provided by our college. After working with the various features available with these platforms, we decided to begin our DE classes using Zoom. We chose Zoom because the features it offers (such as breakout rooms and polling) created multiple methods for engaging students and because it was easy for students to access. They did not need an account but could simply follow a link they received by email in order to access the class. While getting students onto Zoom sometimes proved to be a challenge due to device incompatibility or the time needed for students to become familiar with the platform, once everyone learned the process and resolved compatibility issues there were few problems.

Shortly after beginning Zoom classes, administrators were notified of potential security concerns and encouraged to discontinue usage. Around the same time, TCSG made Collaborate (blackboard.com/blackboard-collaborate) available, which is a video conferencing tool used in conjunction with Blackboard, a Learning Management System. Collaborate offers features similar to Zoom that facilitate engaging DE classes, including breakout groups, polls, and file sharing. Moving students to Collaborate after they were comfortable with Zoom was challenging. Students had to familiarize themselves with a new platform and staff had to help them make their device compatible with Collaborate by instructing them on how to update permissions and settings. Administrators and instructors were able to gradually move our students to the new platform, but

having to change platforms with our students reinforced the importance of researching and establishing the appropriate platform before onboarding students.

Asynchronous Instruction

It was important for administrators to identify ways for students to accumulate student contact hours, which drive funding for the program. DE class times were initially greatly reduced from in-person class times and fewer students participated. We therefore needed an asynchronous component in order to increase student contact hours and give students additional learning opportunities. We hoped that by adding this component our students would have more autonomy in their learning and be able to self-direct their studies in a way that best fit their needs. We had two classes that easily incorporated asynchronous instruction in addition to the synchronous classes, while increasing contact hours.

First, GPTC was already piloting an online curriculum with Burlington English (burlingtonenglish.com) before the pandemic began. That class moved seamlessly to DE due to the instructional content being web-based. A major benefit to the program is that it includes built-in student lessons that track student hours spent outside of class. Students had been introduced to the student lessons while still in the physical classroom, and they were able to continue this work remotely in order to accumulate more contact hours. As of the writing of this paper, administrators plan to expand the use of Burlington English to other classes for fall 2020.

Another class that transitioned well to the DE environment and includes asynchronous learning was our Integrated Digital English Acceleration (I-DEA; sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/i-dea) class. This is a curriculum that integrates digital literacy and English language learning into one course. It is a flipped classroom model in which students complete assignments before the lesson is taught. Under non-pandemic conditions, the material is presented in the classroom by displaying web-based content on a smartboard, and this portion of the class was easily moved to a DE classroom via a video conferencing platform. Students in this class had been using school laptops as a part of the curriculum, which also facilitated their transition to the DE environment. In-class assignments became online homework assignments that allowed students to accumulate contact hours.

For the remaining classes and instructors, a platform was needed that gave students English practice while tracking their hours and that was no cost to our budget or our students, as described earlier in this paper. Administrators settled on a program that some of our students had already used on campus for computer lab practice and that was approved by TCSG for tracking student hours: USA Learns (usalearns.org). USA Learns is a free program with four courses that provide beginning and intermediate English practice. According to the website, the curriculum includes videos and activities that focus on "listening comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, pronunciation, reading, writing, speaking and life skills" (Sacramento County Office of Education, 2020, para. 1). The site also has a citizenship course that helps immigrants prepare for the naturalization interview and civics test. It was a significant benefit that many of our students were already familiar with the program as this helped with the onboarding process.

One of our DE instructors spent the first week of telework aligning USA Learns content to our class levels. While the program offers only beginning- and intermediate-level English courses, the citizenship course covers a higher level of English and was appropriate for our higher-level classes. Instructors who did not already have an asynchronous component to their curriculum assigned homework in USA Learns and then incorporated some of the material into synchronous instruction, along with instructor-created materials.

USA Learns allows instructors to create an account and assign a class key to each English course in the program. Students can then enroll in the instructor's course using that class key and the system reports the hours and progress of each student. Realizing it would be difficult for our lower-level students to create accounts and enroll in specific courses, we created their accounts for them using their personal email addresses and a common password which we then shared with them along with instructions on how to access the classes. This process reduced confusion for the students, ensured that all students were enrolled in our classes and having their progress tracked, and gave staff the ability to update student accounts or help students make changes. Our higher-level students were given detailed instructions on how to create an account and enroll, which gave them practice with authentic English language use. These students were able to access USA Learns and enroll in our courses on their own.

Overcoming Technology Barriers

An inherent challenge of using technology to deliver instruction is the prevalence of technical difficulties. Like other adult education programs moving to DE during the pandemic, our staff had to learn flexibility and patience as we dealt with our own technology issues as well as those of our students. We learned how to share important information and to stay connected, whether by video call, email, chat or phone call. This helps us to maintain the same vision and goals and to align our work efforts.

While our school staff had our own challenges with technology, they are modest compared to the learning curve our students faced when joining DE classes. For most of them, DE was a new experience and we knew we would need to offer a great deal of support to help students develop the digital literacies necessary to succeed in this modality. Technology difficulties such as unfamiliarity with devices and programs or device incompatibility, coupled with the lack of a common language and an inability to see students' screens in order to provide support for whatever they were attempting, presented challenges during the onboarding process. Through the process, however, we discovered several ways of providing assistance that proved beneficial to students and helped them to access classes.

One of the most effective methods for helping students was done before we even introduced them to DE platforms. Administrators and instructors spent ample time on each platform, familiarizing ourselves with how the platforms operated on computers, tablets, smartphones and other devices to better understand and prepare for guiding students through the various experiences. For example, if an instructor tells a student that icons are on the bottom of the screen, this may be true on a computer but may not necessarily be the case on a smartphone. This step also helped administrators to select platforms, knowing that a large portion of our students only have Internet access via smartphones. Finally, while experimenting with various platforms we made notes of what issues might arise with students so that we would be able to help them with those issues. These problems included selecting the best web browser, giving permission for programs to access the features on a personal device such as the camera and microphone, understanding and using links, and accessing email accounts.

Having an email account was particularly important because it was the way GPTC staff sent links and class websites to the students. Many students had family members who let them use their email address if the student did not have one, but there were also scenarios in which staff helped to create new accounts for students. A staff member spent several days working with one particular student to set up an email account and teaching the student how to access that account, all by phone. It was an arduous process but the student felt included and validated by the time

spent on it and was better equipped to participate in DE. If a student had an email address, staff were able to use that method to correspond and show the student how to access other platforms. For example, when trying to encourage a student to use the Chrome web browser (google.com/chrome) because another browser was not compatible with a particular platform, a staff member emailed the student pictures of the Chrome icon along with a link to download the browser. This was done while attempting to explain the process by phone. Upon receiving the email, the student then understood what was meant by "web browser" and "the program you use for the Internet." Staff would often use email and phone calls to explain to a student how to access a video conferencing call if they were unable to access it on their own. Once students successfully accessed video calls, we were able to share our screens and explain other platforms and websites such as USA Learns.

Another method that proved successful was working with students individually outside of class to identify and troubleshoot issues. In order to do this, instructors often had other staff members on standby during class hours to assist students. If a student was unable to access the class or had other problems and contacted the instructor, the instructor was then able to refer the student to the designated staff member for help so that the class was not disrupted. We were able to help many students access their DE classes as they were being conducted using this method.

Finally, with the student's permission, staff found family members of students to be useful in our efforts to help students access their class. This was especially true of students at beginning levels of English and even more so for students at beginning-level digital literacy. Many teenage or adult children or other household members would be able to speak with GPTC staff and then work with the student to accomplish the task at hand. If there was not a family member at home who could help, we at times enlisted the interpretation help of a higher-level student who spoke the same language, provided that both students gave their permission.

During our first several weeks, instructors and staff spent many hours working with students to overcome technological challenges. We still have those interactions occasionally, although they are less frequent. During these interactions it is important to maintain patience and to be willing to think creatively in order to explain a concept in different ways. Throughout this process, our view has been that if a student wants to participate, we can make it happen no matter the challenges. This vision for supporting students who desire to and are able to attend English classes helped sustain our staff during long and sometimes exasperating phone calls and email chains and ensured that we maintained an inclusive environment regardless of students' prior experience with technology. The result is that as of the writing of this paper, we have had close to 300 students participate in our classes, almost half of our pre-pandemic population.

Conclusion

While the pandemic shut down GPTC's in-person classes, creating incredible challenges, it also facilitated new opportunities for expanding beyond the status quo and creating innovative solutions to meet students' needs. In order to transition our ESL program to DE, administrators relied on the strengths and expertise of instructors and staff and we exercised patience and creativity when working to engage students. We also maintained the strong central vision that we were developing a long-term DE program that will continue even after in-person classes resume, rather than offering DE classes as a stop-gap measure during the pandemic. As we experienced, with work from program staff and instructors, DE can be accessible to many students with various devices and flexible enough to accommodate their schedules and competing priorities. Additionally, via DE, our instructors can incorporate a wide range of content and learning opportunities through

synchronous and asynchronous instruction with the hope of promoting student autonomy and self-directed learning. Challenges remain, however, and GPTC staff continue to seek ways to engage additional students, prevent attrition, address technical issues and counter assumptions that in-person classes are more effective and that DE participation is too difficult. We will continue to work together and grow in our understanding of how to serve ELLs through DE for the remainder of the pandemic and beyond.

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