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## Tutoring ELL Students in the Digital Age of Zoom: An Abundance of Resources

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## **Tutoring ELL Students in the Digital Age of Zoom: An Abundance of Resources**

Hannah Lee

Abstract:

*Tutoring during Covid has been a challenging adjustment, but it has brought a flood of new resources for ELL tutoring. These resources are what ELL students need to succeed and break previous patterns of ELL struggles. Nontraditional students are now able to attend the writing center more easily than before. Asynchronous tutoring is a powerful resource for language learners who struggle with grammatical concepts and errors.*

Keywords:

English Language Learners, Tutoring ELL students, Covid, Zoom, Writing Center Online,

Asynchronous

Let me paint a picture of a writing center on an average day, pre-Covid: A student walks into the Writing Center a few minutes before their appointment. The tutor introduces themselves to the student and recognizes the student's apprehension. It is the first time the two have met, the first time the tutor has seen the paper, and the clock is now ticking. They have 20-25 minutes to address the student's concerns. As the student explains the assignment, it becomes apparent that English is not their first language. The student stumbles over-explaining the requirements and expresses concern over the grammar of the paper. For many English Language Learners, or ELLs, this is a common concern. However, the tutor knows they do not have enough time to address the grammar with such limited time. They instead use the time to talk about the major rhetorical issues in the essay, and at the end of the appointment, the tutor provides online grammar-checking resources. After fumbling around the language barrier for 20 minutes of tutoring, the appointment is over, and the student leaves. The tutor wonders if they helped the student enough. They likely never see each other again.

This scenario is one that many tutors are familiar with, but one that I am not. As a tutor who first started tutoring in the middle of the pandemic, my experience has been vastly different from other tutors at our writing center. At times I've been frustrated while navigating both Zoom teaching and the tutoring world in general. Still, as I have interacted with other tutors and ELL students, I have concluded: Although Zoom has been inconvenient in many ways, it has immensely improved tutoring. Specifically, it has improved tutoring for ELLs. The pandemic has caused isolation and separation, but we have adapted in ways that have brought us closer than ever before. Despite the drawbacks, online tutoring for ELL students is a step in the right direction and provides a plethora of resources that were not available to ELLs or their tutors before.

I will acknowledge that some frustrations have accompanied our transition to online learning. Let's face it—Zoom can be awkward. Technical difficulties can cause stress and potentially impact communication if the internet lags or audio fails. It can also seem less personable because there is a screen separating the student and the tutor. In my own experience as a language learner, my Spanish learning has struggled. I've completed three semesters of Spanish during the pandemic, and it hasn't been easy. When my supervisors discovered my Spanish experience after a few weeks of working as a tutor, I was quickly assigned to work with ELL students. I was terrified—and all the other tutors knew it, too. I didn't expect at all that I would fall in love with ELL tutoring.

Since students now can schedule online with specific tutors through WOnline, seeing returning students is very common. I've been lucky enough to work with a handful of returning students over the course of the semester, one of them being a nontraditional, returning student from EL Salvador named Ruth. In our first meeting, we took a significant amount of time to get onto the same page. She had sought out the writing center for help with her grammar, specifically after receiving comments of concern from her professor. We began meeting together weekly and quickly grew to be friends. I learned the names of her children and we talked about our lives often. The relationship we fostered allowed for her language skills to grow in a way that would not have been possible in a traditional tutoring setting. Her full-time job, parenting responsibilities, remote learning location, and anxiety about in-person tutoring would have come in the way. Online tutoring eliminated all these obstacles in her path and allowed her to receive the help she needed.

One of the most essential elements when working with ELL students lies in helping the student feel comfortable and safe so they can be vulnerable with their writing, yet have a positive

and encouraging experience. When working with ELLs and prioritizing among errors, tutors should begin by “looking for what has been done well in the paper, acknowledge that, and move forward” (Harris, 526). Positive feedback should be the first priority because learning in a second language is very discouraging. We see this statistically, as only 63 percent of ELLs graduate from high school, compared with the overall national rate of 82 percent (Sanchez). For those ELLs who do graduate from high school, their struggles with literacy and writing continue into college. Through Zoom tutoring, a connection can be established with these students, allowing them to receive support and lasting encouragement. This also allows the tutor to know beforehand the student’s strengths and struggles. For example, one student could excel at speaking in English but struggle to write it, whereas another student could dislike speaking English but write their ideas clearly. The tutor can keep in mind these weaknesses and track progress, making specific comments of encouragement such as, “You’ve been applying the sentence frames I shared with you,” and “You’ve been organizing your paragraphs much more clearly!” This support is also received in the comfort and familiarity of the student’s home, which can help ease their anxieties about the vulnerabilities of navigating an unfamiliar language.

This collaboration is powerful because ELL students' progress lies in the time they spend outside the writing center. Tutors provide tools and encouragement for students to progress over time. In a recent conversation with Ruth, she told me she was initially scared to approach the writing center because she thought we were “critics, not guides.” As her writing ally, I have seen exceptional progress in her abilities. She has learned to apply rhetorical advice and suggested online resources, such as higher-level translation applications, grammar checking software, and sentence starters. These resources are shared easily through screen sharing. It has been said in the

past that one of the reasons “ELLs are struggling (is) because they have little or no access to quality instruction tailored to their needs” (Sanchez). With online tutoring, we have the ability to tailor each appointment to the students’ needs.

My favorite ELL tutoring resource has been, by far, asynchronous tutoring. Asynchronous tutoring, which is completed without oral communication, is an excellent option for ELL students who have anxiety speaking English aloud. It is also perfect for addressing grammatical issues, which is a common concern with ELLs. It is often difficult for a tutor to address both paper content and grammar in a single session. For many reasons, the overall content is usually prioritized. However, if the grammar of a paper restricts readability or is a major student concern, it should be addressed. Last semester I met over Zoom with a strong writer named Julio. I learned he was an ELL student in his appointment form, and that his only primary concern was grammar. He told me he often switched in and out of different tenses, which can be a common issue for Spanish speakers. We fixed his grammar together, and I praised his paper’s argument. He expressed his gratitude and opened up to me, saying that he liked to write but often missed points on his essays for his grammatical mistakes. I introduced him to our asynchronous tutoring, and his whole demeanor changed. He asked enthusiastically if I was also an asynchronous tutor, then asked how to set up an appointment. This simple resource took a student from anxious and concerned to ecstatic in just a moment. Now, I constantly refer students to the asynchronous writing center. I also sometimes offer to asynchronously correct grammar myself after the appointment is over or after a second draft has been finished.

In our world now post-Covid, tutoring looks vastly different: An ELL student will set their appointment days before. The tutor sees on their form that they are an ELL student, then reads through the paper. The tutor selects a few things to work on, prepares ways to help explain

recurring issues, then thinks of some online resources that can be of help. The tutor sends a warm email to the ELL student, telling them that they enjoyed the paper and they've prepared for the meeting. The ELL student has time to look over any comments the tutor has made on the paper and then arrives at the meeting knowing that there is already common ground between them and the tutor. Despite the computer screen sitting between tutors and students in our 2021 world, we are more connected than ever. In an age of isolation, we have found a way to communicate on a level we never have before. As we emerge from this pandemic, I hope we will carry on these unconventional communication trends in order to continue breaking down the walls of isolation that many ELL students face, not just within the pandemic, but within their everyday lives.

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