Pedagogy of the Elusive: Teaching English Learners in Uncertain Spaces

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Abstract

This pedagogical exploration considers how teaching marginalized English learners in the pandemic revealed entrenched and exacerbated schooling inequities in spaces of distance, absence, and silence, through which elusive pedagogy is used to navigate. Teaching with an understanding of the elusive nature of students on the margins may help educators to grasp what this looks like, while reconciling the inability to not always know and understand concretely what this means within the parameters of a traditional education system of teaching, learning, and academic success. Conducting empirical research on elusive teaching and learning inside and outside the classroom are recommended next steps.

Keywords: *elusive pedagogy; absence; silence, distance; English learner*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the midst of educators having to quickly adapt their pedagogies and approaches to reach and teach their students, many discovered that a great deal more was needed than minor adjustments of the technical or best practices in teaching, especially if having to teach completely online (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020). These adaptations in schooling made by teacher and student were often surrounded by chaos, fear, and uncertainty. This not only created an inability by many to concretely grasp and understand these new expectations in pedagogy, especially for English learners (Dorn et al., 2020), but it further exposed disparities in the current education system (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020). Vulnerable student populations like English learners may have had computers, but were without an adequate wireless connection. They may have had a space to sit and attend online class in the home, but in a room shared with other family members or many distractions. They may have had parents present, but students were not able to receive help from them with school because the parents were working, looking for work, sick, or did not know sufficient English (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020; Dorn et al, 2020). Schooling during the pandemic reiterated how teaching and learning is more than just a cognitive endeavor, but one that often is needed to meet the nutritional, social, personal, emotional, and psychological needs of students in our schools (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Xiao, 2021). This showed the extent to which school systems do and do not provide equitable educational opportunities (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

The pedagogical exploration in this paper is based on what has quickly been revealed about education during the COVID-19 pandemic with recent research, commentaries, news articles, and anecdotes, nationally and internationally – that teaching and learning with marginalized communities during the pandemic has exacerbated educational inequities (Dorn et al., 2020; Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020; Schuck & Lambert, 2020). These inequities will be explored not just as gaps in the

education system for the marginalized, but as obscure spaces found in distance, absence, and silence, revealed by what I call elusive pedagogy. Outlined here is how identifying and defining elusive pedagogy may help us navigate better the work needed to teach and learn through such spaces.

Defining Pedagogy of the Elusive

Why give this complicated space in the teaching and learning of English learners a name such as elusive pedagogy? First, it is a way to acknowledge the need to embrace the uncertainty during this pandemic (Rutter, Wolpert, & Greenhalgh, 2020) and what uncertainty brings in education through these gaps or spaces. In schooling, without accepting that there will always be pedagogy, processes, and spaces we do not understand, we may not approach them with the need to know, and ultimately to question and concretely address. Second, gaps as uncertainties in the educational lives of marginalized English learners can be much more pronounced and consequential than for the racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically privileged. Spotlighting what may have gone ignored or minimized, like a stable Internet connection, is much more significant for the marginalized when they have little resources or power to remedy the situation. These gaps as uncertainties are real, concrete in terms of their effect on English learners, while also taking on elusiveness because they are difficult to grasp and manage.

Elusive pedagogy is a form of teaching in the classroom and through educational leadership that aims to address issues of equity by, first, engaging in the act of recognizing. This ability to recognize within the context of the pandemic looks at spaces of 1) distance; 2) absence; and 3) silence, in the teaching and learning of marginalized students in and outside of the classroom, virtually and in-person. An elusive pedagogy is teaching that occurs with the awareness that marginalized student presence—physical, cognitive, emotional, and linguistic—is fluid, never guaranteed, and complicated to address. Elusive pedagogy acknowledges a daily new reality of teaching the marginalized student demographic virtually, and the after-effects we are seeing in the classroom now with learning loss and social-emotional issues (Dorn et al., 2020). In this vein of thinking about teaching, both the pedagogy and the student are elusive.

English Learners on the Margins

Border educators, in particular those who work on the US-Mexico Border, teach with the knowledge of the spaces and history from which their students often come in schools (Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016; Olsen, 2010; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002). They understand that their English learners will struggle more during this pandemic. Many English learners live in communities where they must already navigate poverty, the complexities of language and literacy, and lack of resources (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). The pandemic exacerbated these lived realities for English learners, and made more complicated the ability to adapt to a new type of schooling with different expectations in this time of disruption (Dorn et al., 2020). Essential, and basic, practices such as student presence in virtual classes has been intermittent at best in these transitions, and has taken on different meanings. Even when visible on a computer screen, the complexities of being an English learner have surfaced in new and challenging ways for both teacher and student (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). Present or not, teaching English learners, and their learning, in this climate has become elusive. Teaching and learning during this Pandemic has revealed more clearly

what Freire (1970) argued on the dangers of looking at learning as the simple depositing of information into a child's mind. We see the complexity and fragility of the interconnectedness between school and schooling and the social, economic, and community variables of life (Sahlberg, 2020).

Distance

One of the effects of student learning in this pandemic has been lack of engagement, in particular by low-income Hispanic students, where only 60%-70% have been logging onto class regularly (Dorn et al., 2020), many of which are English learners. This initially may have been due to the transition to online learning, but was also due to the adjustment to lack of social and in-person interaction (Garbe, Ogurlu, Logan & Cook, 2020) created by the physical distance of online learning. Researchers predicted the reduced, quality academic language practice and interactions as a result of the teacher-student distance and peer-peer distance created through virtual learning (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic immediately revealed the power and role of in-person instruction when it was there no more. This is especially the case for marginalized student populations like English learners, who often depend on their peers for support, language practice, or for affirming identity (Reyes, 2020).

Learning from a distance also revealed the social and emotional effects that family dynamics may play on motivation (Dorn et al., 2020; García & Weiss, 2020). That is, the economic impact this pandemic has had on a family's ability to meet basic physical and emotional needs negatively impacted a student's ability to log on, focus on school, and be present and engaged. The lack of engagement by English learners has been especially telling. Online learning creates a physical distance not only between student and teacher, but between student and many other concrete resources. Not being physically present in the classroom complicates the communal learning that occurs organically when English learners can, for example, see in proximity the physical in facial expressions, body movements, and the nuance of language when vocalized. There is also the negotiation of meaning between peers in the immediate, verbal exchanges during problem-solving or dyadic or small-group exercises (August, 2018). These small English-learning groups are often the site of mixing languages, called translanguaging, where the goal is to reach individual and group understanding (Garcia et al., 2017). Even in ESL classes or non-bilingual mainstream classes, where English is the target language, the primary language support or the use of translanguaging has become more of an acceptable, and even encouraged, practice in the teaching and learning of English, especially when learning more complex concepts (Kleyn & García, 2019). These language exchanges and practices are lost in the gaps and spaces created by distant learning.

Absence

During the pandemic many school districts found their English learner students were not logging on during school (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). Some were absent for extended periods of time. In terms of physical presence, whether online or in-person class, students are considered chronically absent, which includes being absent from school for any reason (London, Sanchez, & Castrechini, 2016). Gottfriend (2019) found that chronic absenteeism not only results in poor academic performance and lower test scores, but a broader influence, where "individual actions impose negative outcomes on others" (p. 26). That is, when one student is elusive in its many manifestations in the classroom – whether physical, virtual, linguistically – it becomes a community issue. One student being absent turns into several absences by other students. Non-engagement by

one English learner linguistically turns into many ELs not engaging. An entire student community within a classroom is at risk of engaging in elusive behavior.

Educators who are also advocates of the marginalized understand the pedagogical nuance needed to work through such daily and systemic disruptions and complexities that lead to student absence and silence in the classroom brought on by the reality of lived experience. It has been done with the teaching of historically marginalized students such as migrant students, English learners, and students experiencing homelessness. Like a student experiencing homelessness, a migrant student's presence in the classroom is never guaranteed. A teacher knows they are an enrolled student, but acknowledges the complexity of the student's ability to be physically present in the classroom. Like a homeless student whose family must seek shelter where they can, a student whose family is part of the migrant stream must move according to seasonal harvesting. Unless there are advocates who understand their lived experiences and hardships that impede educational goals (Salinas & Reyes, 2004), a migrant student's absence, many of which are English learners, simply remains their not occupying a physical space in the classroom or on the computer screen. Elusive pedagogy reframes this absence to engage in work that looks at the root of and nature of absence and accompanying silence. An educator will ask: Where are they? If here, are they really here? Am I contributing to their absence or silence? If so, how?

Silence

Elusive pedagogy is teaching within spaces of silence. An already historically marginalized group, English learners have experienced a great deal of isolation in classrooms when their home language, a key part of their identity, is not acknowledged as a part of the learning process. So their presence as a learner is already minimized. As a result, they may be physically present, but they are often relegated to being or becoming, in essence, invisible because of their eroding confidence in their language and academic abilities (Menken, Kleyn & Chae, 2012). English learners will also resort to self-isolation in mainstream classroom settings in order to prevent the possibility of social ridicule because of language differences (Pappamihiel, 2002). So they often will not speak, or speak only when prompted. Education during COVID-19 has increased this isolation and anxiety with disruptions to normal life, these effects exacerbated by already endured social, linguistic, and socioeconomic marginalization (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020).

An elusive pedagogy considers that student presence during this pandemic is not solely an individual, physical manifestation that appears on a computer screen. Using the understanding that students and teachers are part of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in their classrooms, participation and presence within that community is essential to learning, where learning and enacting one's identity is defined as engagement in practice. A community of practice actively promotes student learning by doing. Elusive pedagogy addresses gaps in the perception of what learning is and where it can be seen or be given meaning. According to Wenger (1998), presence is participation in a community with others where "we recognize ourselves in each other, in reification we project ourselves onto the world, and not having to recognize ourselves in those projections, we attribute to our meanings an independent existence" (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). An elusive teaching and learning experience recognizes that even when present on a screen, the marginalized will still feel alone because they may misunderstand their role in a new learning environment and community. An English learner may feel too distant from teacher and peers to be compelled to engage and speak. Their engagement may be complicated or confusing because of geography – school is not where it was, and home does not feel like school. Elusiveness for English learners in

this time of a pandemic presents an especially critical situation considering their history of schooling, where it was common for them to not feel compelled to speak because the classroom community was not designed to accommodate spaces for English learners of all language ability levels.

Toward a Pedagogy that Uses Distance, Absence, and Silence

In online teaching, the teacher is tasked with attempting to address time lost in interactions, scaffolding, or collaborative sessions with peers in a pedagogical space that is difficult to recreate or is simply not present. These pedagogical efforts are challenging when mainstream school or classroom policy, curriculum, or pedagogy historically have not allowed for the creation of spaces where such students can engage, advance, develop, and express their learning (Yoon, 2008). English learners may physically, verbally, and cognitively withdraw because their identity has become stigmatized with not only the label of being ESL students, but because school structures have allowed this to happen to them (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). For example, English learners may have been tracked into classrooms where their potential is minimized or erased (Callahan, 2005), often left to languish in "ESL ghettos" that stifle academic and language development and practice (Faltis & Arias, 2013). An elusive pedagogy recognizes this history and effects on identity and practice in English learners, and how in-person versus virtual time is much more significant and takes on different meanings for this student demographic and their teachers.

Time is elusive. And silence by English learners is often misunderstood by teachers because it involves the tension of lost time. How might time and the silence of English learners that occupies this time be viewed? As Bao (2020) suggests from his research on the meaning of silence by English learners and how teachers can integrate it in their planning and pedagogy, silence "needs to be managed with acute awareness of why, how, when and how long a student needs it to support their own learning and when the verbal mode of learning should take over" (p. 9). If not, learners will endure the frustration of not being given the time to process, plan, and prepare their thoughts and language to produce something that fully represents their efforts. Through an elusive pedagogy, silence can be managed effectively when it is viewed as part of learning, processing, and expression of understanding in its many forms in the classroom.

In situations where many students are absent, knowing what and how to teach are difficult to grasp or there are few ways to determine some sense of accomplishment or having reached a concrete goal in the teaching-learning dynamic. Student learning or progress may be documented, but the reality of how much they have learned remains questionable and elusive itself. Traditional forms of assessment may or may not capture their learning. Informal ways of assessment, such as conversations on the topics under study or checking for understanding in small group discussion, may not be possible or, when online, be too complicated when too many students are missing, a microphone remains off, or the camera is not functioning. Such dynamics remove students from engagement and learning, even when "there." Elusive pedagogy, then, must rely not just on best practices or sound teaching, but an openness to working with and through lack of concreteness, instability, and the daily unknown.

Teaching through an elusive pedagogy first begins by recognizing distance, absence and silence and what is lost within them in teaching English learners with the present and history in mind. What is lost for English learners in their education in these elusive space reflects the scale of inequities. During the pandemic, it was found that such inequities can be addressed in a classroom and district-wide through leadership and agency to recognize and act. When leaders and educators take an equity leadership approach that acknowledges inequities, while institutionally

recognizing the individual and collective agency of educators to create change (Lavadenz et al., 2021), the elusiveness is manageable and reduced. For teachers at the classroom level, there is more clarity for possibility working with elusive English learners and their communities.

Next Steps: Research

This pandemic has exacerbated and/or made more real the gaps in education for the marginalized like English learners, through spaces that make teaching and learning elusive. Perhaps it is in those spaces that are difficult to define, grasp, or navigate is where we can begin to be more successful in providing a more equitable education to those who have been left without resources and perpetually on the margins. What would this look like empirically, especially with more intimate qualitative research? The next steps are to ask the questions of those who have taught and are teaching under the umbrella of elusiveness. Are their students – in a pandemic or not – existing in a state of elusiveness? When looking at silence by English learners through elusive pedagogy, "the structure of learning might fundamentally change when this knowledge is applied so that learners can employ both silence and talk as learning tools in conscious, informed ways" (Bao, 2020, pp. 9-10). In what forms does this elusiveness come inside and outside the classroom? How have these teachers taught through this elusiveness? Does their teaching reflect a deeper understanding of student elusiveness? And does their pedagogy reflect an ability to teach, reach, and empower students like English learners and emergent bilinguals?

Naming and defining elusive pedagogy was a way to begin thinking of how we might ask questions of these elusive spaces that have always existed, but call for closer examination through research, in particular qualitative, case study research inside the classroom or online. Elusive pedagogy of the marginalized may also reveal a great deal about the internal workings of teachers and what they do in the uncertainties of teaching in times like a pandemic. Both teacher and student experience at this unusual time of teaching and learning has revealed another dimension of pedagogy when dealing with all things elusive, which now needs to be explored through research.

Conclusion

The physical dimension of school is currently re-defined for the majority of US students. This reflects the potential consequences of when "we project our meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, as having a reality of their own" (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). Teaching and learning in this pandemic has revealed that schools, teachers, and policy still have much to learn about what they believe to be true or real in the lives of their marginalized students. The distance created by virtual learning contributed to these gaps in knowing. Perhaps this thinking about teaching through elusiveness can provide guidance on asking questions through research that will lead us to more revealing stories that can help us to get a better grasp of the lived realities of English learners in this pandemic, and what they mean through the lens of an elusive pedagogy.

Moving forward in this pandemic, being able to work with elusive students, such as English learners, and within a reality of the need to embrace and apply an elusive pedagogy is part of a new and present reality. But this reality is also one that will not go away even after seeing the effects of having kept most students physically out of the schools. Students will return post-pandemic, but there will remain the residual effects of lost time and proximity to elusive students (Dorn et al., 2020; Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). Research has found that a focus on specific stu-

dent populations who are especially vulnerable to chronic absenteeism, such as the homeless, migrant, and low-income families, may help increase school attendance while relaying a message to these families and communities that schools are working to assist their children (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Although this contributes to our understanding of outreach effectiveness for students not present in schools, it may not help us to understand how to address COVID-19 absenteeism and the elusive nature of their presence behind the computer screen when learning from home, or the residual effects of school engagement when they return to in-person. The most important question will not be what we learn about teaching marginalized students from schooling during a pandemic. The most important questions will urge educators and advocates to adapt and adjust pedagogy from this experience to address the entrenched inequities that became clearer, as well as see the impact of the new inequities that emerged. Otherwise, historically elusive students (e.g. English learners, migrants, the homeless) will be a demographic whose needs will continue to not be met within the current system, pandemic or not.

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