Toward equitable education in the context of a pandemic: supporting linguistic minority students during remote learning

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Abstract

Purpose – Without universal access to a Covid-19 vaccine, many countries seek to prevent coronavirus outbreaks by closing schools and having students learn remotely. This study aims to examine its challenges for linguistic minority (LM) students and some practical strategies – both generally for all students and specifically for LM students.

Design/methodology/approach – This study synthesises the research literature and practices across countries on equity and remote learning. It helps (1) understand the differential difficulties during an epidemic across primary, secondary and tertiary school students, especially LM students from low socioeconomic status (SES) families who lack economic, human, cultural or social capital in family or school contexts, based on Bourdieu’s theory, and (2) identify additional resources and flexible, creative solutions for improving access and learning conditions for LM students. The authors discuss examples from 13 countries and territories (including developed and developing economies) of transformations of in-class learning to online learning in part or whole.

Findings – The limited economic, cultural and social capital of LM students, especially from low SES families, and their schools, along with communication barriers hinder their remote learning. Crisis-induced school budget shortfalls require creative ways to transition teachers, students and parents to remote learning and to provide customised support for LM students. Schools can (1) partner with non-governmental organisations, religious organisations, businesses and government services to access/share remote learning resources for LM students; (2) help teachers, students and parents develop needed skills (via online systems, peer support groups and hotlines); (3) restructure teacher lessons and duties for remote teaching; and (4) capitalise on technology (e.g. texts, chats, whiteboards) to support LM students’ remote learning – some of which can exceed their traditional face-to-face learning experiences.

Originality/value – This article is among the first to examine how the Covid-19 crisis disproportionately affects the remote learning of LM students, to specify effective, practical remedies and to inform suitable education and social policies across countries.

Keywords Coronavirus/COVID-19, Capital (economic, cultural, Social), Equity, Language minority students, Remote learning, Online learning

Paper type General review

1. Introduction

After the first confirmed COVID-19 patient in China on 17 November 2019 (Ma, 2020), over a million people have died within ten months (Worldometer, 2020). As developing, manufacturing, distributing and ensuring the use of coronavirus vaccines for 7.8 billion people within a year is unlikely, many nations closed schools to prevent coronavirus outbreaks, leaving 1.5 billion K-12 students at home in April 2020 to learn remotely (e.g. online). However, few societies are adequately prepared to help so many students learn remotely for such a long time. The challenge is heightened for linguistic minority (LM)
students and their families, a substantial portion of the population. In this paper, we define LM as a minority group whose mother tongue differs from that of the majority in the region. In the European Union, 50 million people predominantly use minority languages, instead of the official ones (European Parliament, 2016). In addition to communicative barriers, many LM students are further disadvantaged by their limited capitals (economic, cultural, social) at home and school (Chiu et al., 2016). For instance, 83% of South-East Asians in Hong Kong with sub-poverty line incomes primarily speak minority languages (Government of the HKSAR, 2018).

To overcome these problems, schools can access alternative resources and apply creative strategies to address individual needs, thereby fostering educational equity. We define educational equity as equality of opportunity on three dimensions of education access, conditions and outcomes – extensively documented as rights in education in the literature (e.g. Lynch and Baker, 2005; Onder and Petek, 2019). Students should have equal opportunities to benefit from education (fair access, Onder and Petek, 2019). Furthermore, their schooling should provide learning and teaching experiences of equal respect, recognition, love and care, which in turn motivate and engage students to learn (learning conditions, Lynch and Baker, 2005). Also, schools should support students’ learning outcomes to help them secure a decent adult life (Equality of Opportunity and Education, 2020). Inadequate proficiency in the dominant language of a society limits job opportunities and hence, a family’s economic and social capital. Prestigious languages (e.g. English or French) were a way of becoming a well-paid global elite, while the LM were often in poverty (Rampton et al., 2008). Hence, many LM students are in lower socioeconomic status (SES) families, though there are exceptions (Slootman, 2019). As few articles have examined LM learning outcomes during COVID-19, we focus on their access and learning conditions. As many difficulties faced by LM students are shared by other disadvantaged groups, we discuss general challenges before focusing on those specific to LM students.

2. Challenges faced by linguistic minority students
Before the pandemic, most schools in the world taught students in class, so a major effect of the pandemic is to close schools and sharply increase remote learning, effectively changing many students’ schooling from in-class to remote learning and vastly increasing the scale of remote learning. As remote learning relies heavily on available capital (economic, human, cultural, social) at home and access to corresponding capital at school (Hodges et al., 2020), it can reduce fair education access and learning conditions. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of capitals (2018), we discuss key challenges that students, especially LMs, face during COVID-19-induced remote learning and some societies’ adaptations to address their needs. Although some LM students are from elite families, most LM students are from working-class families.

2.1 Less linguistic minority family capital
As many LM students are from low SES families (less economic capital, Bourdieu, 2018), they face many common challenges. Materially, they are less likely to have a computer, high-speed internet or a room for quiet study (Chiu et al., 2016). They also often have inferior devices/connections that malfunction more frequently, have restrictions (e.g. bandwidth) or incur logistic or technical difficulties (e.g. online security breaches, disconnected cameras, Todd, 2020). These students might resort to smartphones with tiny screens or even physical mail to learn remotely. Such limited resources can reduce learning opportunities and yield poorer learning outcomes (Chiu, 2010). In addition, poor LM parents are more likely than other parents to work multiple jobs or have low-skilled jobs, so they share less time, knowledge and skills with their children (human capital). When few students, especially young children, are
sufficiently self-disciplined to study independently without adult monitoring, such limitations erode LM parents’ self-efficacy as they struggle to foster their LM children’s learning (Pelletier and Brent, 2002).

Other issues tend to be more specific to LM students. LM parents from low SES families often have less understanding of the dominant culture, fewer of its cultural possessions or lower status within it (cultural capital, Bourdieu, 2018), so they might not model or explain the norms/expectations of their school/culture to their children (Chiu, 2010). Differences in communicative style/cultural knowledge can drive teachers/classmates to misunderstand/ undervalue LM students’ contributions and discursively marginalise them, contributing to their negative self-images (Choi, 2017). Such differences may reduce LM students’ academic motivation, social learning opportunities and learning outcomes (Chiu and McBride-Chang, 2010). Moreover, language barriers multiply the demands on LM parents trying to support their children’s learning; LM parents often revisit their learning in their native language, find resources in the dominant language and navigate among multiple languages to customise explanations for their children (Choi, 2020).

With less cultural capital and poorer communication skills in dominant language(s), LM students and their families often have more difficulty making friends with non-LM students, neighbours or colleagues (especially when LM families live in ethnic enclaves), and thus have less access to the latter’s typically greater capital (social capital, Bourdieu, 2018). When COVID-19 forces LM students to stay at home, it curtails their access to social capital outside their family and to opportunities to interact in the dominant language, which further hinders their language learning. Thus, remote learning can sustain or aggravate gaps in family capital (Choi, 2020).

2.2 Schools and linguistic minority students

Schools also face scarcity of economic, human, cultural and social capital as they foster the remote learning of their students. Notably, an epidemic increases safety costs (masks, dividers, air filters, etc.) and shrinks economies and tax revenues, yielding smaller school budgets and less economic capital (Nguyen and McDermott, 2020). Thus, many schools must access additional resources to provide for these new needs, both educational (e.g. computers, high-speed internet access) and basic survival (food, shelter) – for those whose parents lost jobs or face evictions (Cholera et al., 2020).

Furthermore, many schools lack the human capital to optimally foster their students’ remote learning, especially to address the language needs of LM students (Hodges et al., 2020). Before COVID-19, most teachers taught students face-to-face, so few teachers can quickly transition to remote teaching without sufficient training or technical support (Galperin et al., 2020). Schools often lack staff with adequate LM language and cultural understanding (inadequate cultural capital for LM) to adapt teaching and school services to LM students. For example, some schools have existing support such as language translators for their LM students’ remote learning, but many do not (Cholera et al., 2020). Likewise, some school have business and community partners from which they can draw resources and services (social capital) to address these issues, but most schools do not.

Remote learning poses specific communication challenges for teachers to (1) clearly explain new learning activities/routines, (2) prepare their students for these activities, (3) elicit their attention and understanding and (4) ask for and give clear feedback. Teachers must explain to students and their families (via texts, emails, videos, virtual meetings, etc.) how they will revise their lectures/demonstrations, whole-class discussions, question-and-answer, small group work and so on for remote learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Whereas students simply attended classes for face-to-face learning, teachers now must prepare students for remote learning, which requires appropriate equipment (computers, internet cables,
headphones), technology competence (access internet, navigate websites, etc.), organisational skills (scheduling, punctual logins, sharing computers with family members) and creative perseverance (troubleshooting internet connection problems) (Galperin et al., 2020). Remote learning reduces the multi-dimensional sensory stimuli of a classroom to two-dimensional, small-screen images with reduced sound quality; these limited stimuli reduce the social presence of the teacher (Richardson et al., 2017), obstruct teacher monitoring of students and hinder student attention, especially in homes with many distractions. Moving from in-class learning to remote learning can change not only demands and resource allocation but also schooling culture, norms and expectations, which can be challenging for schools, teachers, students and parents.

For LM students seeking to use non-verbal cues to compensate for their limited language proficiency, the small images of teachers or classmates (if any) hinder interpretations of their gestures, body postures or facial expressions – indeed, some students leave their video camera off for privacy (Symeonides and Childs, 2015). Also, the poorer sound quality interferes with listening, and a teacher cannot place a gentle hand on a student’s shoulder for reassurance. These limited stimuli also hinder LM students’, classmates’ and their teachers’ understandings of one another during presentations and discussions (Symeonides and Childs, 2015). For example, a teacher who sees the confused facial expressions of individual students in a class room or hears their hesitancy can ask a follow-up question, but discerning such clues remotely is more difficult. Furthermore, limited information during remote learning discourages LM students from requesting feedback and interferes with their understanding of it. Likewise, this limited information stream hinders other school staff (e.g. counsellors) trying to recognise student distresses (Mishna et al., 2015).

3. Adaptations

3.1 Improving access

Unlike extremely poor countries without adequate resources or technological infrastructure, richer countries can substantially improve LM learning during a pandemic with digital resources (Houlden and Veletsianos, 2020). We focus on adaptations in eight developed countries and territories (USA, South Korea, New Zealand, UK, Germany, Estonia, Singapore and Hong Kong), four developing countries (China, Sri Lanka, Mexico and Turkey) and one newly industrialised economy (Thailand) that have transformed traditional curricula to blended learning, remote learning, distance learning or digital learning as examples. These regions rapidly introduced remote learning, increased capacity to accommodate remote learning and responded quickly to COVID-19-driven learning challenges. We selected relevant examples based on the availability of publications in the English literature (which may not represent the typical circumstances of different developed and developing countries).

LM students benefited from measures taken to address the needs of families with inadequate economic capital (Bourdieu, 2018). For instance, schools in the USA and the government in Singapore have increased access to technology by distributing tablets and computers to disadvantaged students, including LM students (Richards, 2020; Sin, 2020). When facing resource shortages, some governments have asked non-profit organisations and businesses to donate laptops and hotspots (Longhi, 2020). To help bridge the technological capital gap, some US teachers set up the necessary software and applications on the devices before distributing them (Richards, 2020). Moreover, they accommodated the work schedules of LM working parents and found ways to communicate with them to distribute devices to all students (Richards, 2020). To increase internet access for students, (1) some US districts parked buses with Wi-Fi in different neighbourhoods (Longhi, 2020), (2) companies changed their data download times (The European Commission;
Sørensen, 2020) and (3) some teachers in Sri Lanka consider teaching early in the morning to avoid the high costs and unstable internet connections during high-demand afternoons and evenings (Srinivasan, 2020).

Schools and countries also need to address families’ inadequate human capital (Bourdieu, 2018). For example, Estonia created a systematic, support network of educational technologists and expert teachers to help other teachers deal with technical problems and innovatively incorporate technology into their teaching. They both supported local schools and offered national hotline guidance (Pfister, 2020). Proactively, in the USA, some teachers taught students how to use and care for their devices before starting online lessons (Richards, 2020). To facilitate communication about remote learning, schools in the USA and China used parent and student contacts to send them texts, email or video announcements/instructions about lessons and homework (Davies et al., 2020; NCEE, 2020). In countries without such online infrastructure, schools post notices at the school entrance or send handwritten notes (e.g. Mexico; Kalman, 2020).

South Korea, China, Thailand, New Zealand and the UK provide teacher development support through online systems to help teachers collaborate and share ideas, lessons, techniques and tools for remote learning (Wong, 2020). For example, South Korea’s Ministry of Education also created a peer support program to help teachers transition to remote learning. Volunteer teachers work with ministry officials to create online classes nation-wide. They share daily lesson plans, activities, learning games, YouTube learning videos, live Q&A and one-on-one consultations via a government-managed platform (http://onschool.edunet.net/onSchool/listBoardForm.do?board_seq=6). With teaching and learning materials organised by subject, school level/year and theme, this searchable site provides (1) government- and teacher-shared resources and (2) remote teaching tips on motivating students, reducing tardiness and absences, maintaining their well-being and managing them during online videoconferencing lessons. Notably, South Korean teachers call any student who misses a lesson.

Other measures specifically targeted LM students. Some school districts such as Oakland, California, Nebraska and North Carolina in the USA provide customised support to LM students and their teachers. Some use software to automatically generate multilingual texts for LM students (Rani, 2020). When LM students face technical difficulties, frontline teachers often try to troubleshoot, so several US schools provide hotlines/help desks to address technology-related problems (NCEE, 2020). The USA and Germany directly address the needs of LM students and families with language preparatory classes and interpreters for new immigrants and their children, which for example, can help LM students understand school assignments and engage in discussions during remote learning (Barakos and Simone, 2020; Richards, 2020). Meanwhile, Turkey had their pre-service teachers remotely teach language lessons in their teaching practice, which enhanced their awareness of online classroom management issues (Ersin et al., 2020).

3.2 Improving learning conditions

Schools can improve students’ remote learning, not only for LM students but for any students with unstable internet connections and therefore disruptions in engagement, by flexibly restructuring their lessons and staff, as well as modifying their instruction. To overcome limited bandwidth problems, some schools might have fewer, lengthy, remote lessons with more students, while other schools might choose more, short remote lessons with fewer students. The shorter lessons require dividing class lessons into small units but allow greater attention to a smaller group of students, which can especially benefit LM students. Specifically for LM students (though other students with additional needs may benefit), some schools might re-assign teachers with multilingual skills to teach more, while other schools...
might have them teach less and collaborate with other teachers on online lectures/lessons/resources in multiple languages (Todd, 2020).

Teachers can adapt their remote teaching to flexibly enable different modes of student participation (e.g. Blackboard Collaborate Ultra: observe, anonymous, concealed, discursive, episodic), which allow LM students to engage safely and progressively with less concern about loss of face (Macnaught and Yates, 2020). An LM student can observe online demonstrations and listen to the class discussion. LM students can engage more by voting anonymously in class polls. A further step up is sending concealed text messages only to the teacher or specific classmates. In breakout rooms, students can openly chat or share drawings/writings on virtual whiteboards with group mates (discursive), and lastly, students can openly speak in the virtual classroom (episodic).

Teachers can also set up open synchronous chat rooms or asynchronous online message forums for students to discuss issues at convenient times outside of class. For example, they can post questions and answers, or give feedback on preliminary problem solutions or essays (Peermark, Lim, 2020). Asynchronous forums might especially benefit shy LM students who can use software to spellcheck and grammar check their writing before posting, unlike speaking in traditional, face-to-face classrooms (Davies et al., 2020). Thoughtful, flexible use of online teaching and learning can allow for safer, more interactive and inclusive student-centred learning opportunities via student sharing and multi-modal, concurrent classmate interactions (Lim, 2020), which can exceed traditional learning methods for LM students.

Religious groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can also help support LM students. For example, Hong Kong Christian Action translates important notices into the home languages of new immigrants. Meanwhile, Hong Kong Unison provides on-demand support, such as helping LM students create online accounts via interactive software to join an interactive school lesson online.

4. Policy implications

Whether targeting general groups of students or LM students specifically, many individuals and organisations separately try to level the learning field for potentially underprivileged students, but systemic efforts are more comprehensive and hence, more promising. Government-level platforms (e.g. South Korea, Estonia) enable (1) wide access and sharing of remote teaching and learning resources, (2) exchanges of one-on-one live support for both students and teachers and (3) mobilisation and networking of volunteers. All of this can lessen the burden of frontline teachers and schools (as they transform educational materials and troubleshoot problems), reduce regional differences in resources and ultimately reduce the society’s costs. Spaces catering to the needs of underprivileged students or with special needs can be created independently of or in conjunction with such general platforms by NGOs, religious groups or parent support groups. These measures also foster creative solutions (e.g. Sri Lanka, European Commission).

In addition, we need measures to ensure “sustainability” and “scalability” (Lim et al., 2018), e.g. student training to troubleshoot technical issues (e.g. the USA) and pre-service teacher education involving online practicum (e.g. Turkey). Such initiatives should consider both access and learning conditions (especially regarding differences in economic, cultural and social capitals across families) to ensure equitable learning opportunities and social mobility (e.g. by allowing the system to resort to a manual mode as in Mexico; Lynch and Baker, 2005). Teachers should be supported with development opportunities, both customised to changes and sufficiently flexible to accommodate differential capacities and needs across students and teachers (Choi and Walker, 2018). Last but most importantly, when facing new changes and challenges such as the crisis-triggered, large-scale remote learning,
governments should review the learning conditions and engagement of potentially marginal groups of students such as LMs, so transitions to remote learning do not harm the learning of vulnerable groups.

5. Conclusion
As universal access to a COVID-19 vaccine is unlikely in the near future, many countries will continue closing schools to help prevent outbreaks, forcing students to learn remotely. In this new mode of learning, many students, especially LM students, must overcome limited family and school resources and communication challenges. Schools can address these challenges by mobilising both general supports and vulnerable group-specific measures, which requires reviewing the learning processes and outcomes of diverse disadvantaged groups (including possibly newly disadvantaged groups). The identified needs can be addressed through accessing more resources, enhancing stakeholders’ skills for remote learning, re-organising traditional staff duties and capitalising on technology. Specifically, schools can capitalise on available government and community resources and build more partnerships to serve their students. As remote learning requires new skills, schools can help teachers, students and parents acquire them via online systems and peer support groups. The COVID-19 crisis also provides opportunities to restructure staff duties and activities to cater to the needs of specific students, such as LM students. Furthermore, schools can capitalise on technologies that increase communication opportunities, including low-technology options (e.g. phone or school-wall messages) for households without internet access.

Governments must serve as coordinators, to organise, link and disseminate the efforts of individuals and organisations. They can systematically mobilise the resources of volunteers, businesses and NGOs and liaise with other governments. By doing so, they can ensure equitable education, especially for marginal groups such as LM students, in their society and beyond.

References


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