

english for **NEW  
BOSTONIANS**

**IMMIGRANTS  
UNMUTE:  
VOICES FROM  
BOSTON'S ADULT ESOL  
PANDEMIC RESPONSE**

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# IMMIGRANTS UNMUTE: VOICES FROM BOSTON'S ADULT ESOL PANDEMIC RESPONSE

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## INTRODUCTION

*The pandemic dealt Boston's ESOL system a brutal blow. ESOL programs worked furiously to learn new tools and stay connected with students. With support from English for New Bostonians (ENB) and other funders and partners, ESOL staff assisted students to get online, while also becoming resource navigators, social workers, and grief counselors. ESOL students – workers, business owners, parents – were in crisis. Many lost livelihoods while others worked in frightening conditions. They struggled to access food and desperately tried to protect their families from the virus, often with limited information. Some students died; others lost family members. Parents were thrust into managing children's online learning with little or no guidance, exacerbated by language and technology barriers.*

*After an intensive period helping our 20 citywide grantees shift to virtual programming, ENB designed new evaluation tools to capture the impact of the pandemic on students and programs, as well as implications for Boston's ESOL system. Here we present outcomes and recommendations gleaned from an online student survey completed by 316 students across 20 community programs and four workplace ESOL classes, five focus groups with 30 students, six virtual site visits, a June all-grantee convening, and reports from 20 programs offering 40 classes across English levels.*

*One key lesson for the ESOL system and City of Boston: Given support and appropriate technology, the vast majority of ESOL students – professionals, students with low native language literacy, entrepreneurs, parents, unemployed or underemployed – persisted. They improved their English, became digitally literate, and joined the mainstream of information exchange and opportunity. Findings point to the tremendous flexibility and increased access that a blend of online and face-to-face English learning opportunities can offer. Indeed, the pandemic prompted all stakeholders in the ESOL system to take a giant leap.*

*As ENB and ESOL programs now move forward under tremendous pressure, we shine a light on what has been learned, to build on our collective successes and to improve wherever possible. This report includes key findings and recommendations, characteristics of students and programs that fared better and less well, what was lost and gained, and what is needed going forward.*



*English for New Bostonians creates opportunities for immigrants to learn English and pursue their educational, economic and civic aspirations. ENB is an activist grantmaking organization that funds high quality English language learning programs that provide free or very low-cost instruction to over 1,000 immigrants each year. We conduct community and policy research and share it with English learning language programs, policymakers, funders, and employers. Through our English Works Campaign, we elevate immigrants' own voices among employers, community leaders, students, unions, and educators to advocate for greater public and private investment in English language learning programs.*

## KEY FINDINGS

- 82% (259 of 316) ESOL Online Student Survey respondents reported they learned new digital technology skills. Students believe these are skills that will help them to get a job or a better job, assist their children with online learning, and continue accessing online learning opportunities.
- ENB partnerships secured Zoom accounts for teachers, and Chromebooks, tablets, and Internet for students, which were linchpins for student participation in virtual ESOL classes. Partners including Tech Goes Home, the City of Boston and a family foundation provided roughly \$196,000 in equipment for over 400 students.
- Aside from access to devices, key barriers to online participation included inability to adapt to the virtual environment; illness, stress, depression; managing children’s learning at home; and jobs that precluded participation.
- Online classes filled functions beyond English instruction: classes helped students feel less isolated, depressed, and scared.
- Teachers provided critical resources: help filing for unemployment, where to go for food/legal assistance, and support for parents with children at home.
- Online learning offered logistical advantages, including elimination of commuting time and a more compatible schedule.
- There was some natural tension between those students needing a lot of tech support, and others anxious to cover more ground in learning English.
- Online learning disrupts the in-person question/answer dynamic. Online listening is more challenging, and students aren’t as comfortable speaking.

- Teachers invested enormous amounts of time getting students online, offering support, adapting curricula and materials for new platforms, as well as attending ENB trainings and receiving technical assistance (via phone, Zoom, email).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Systems Level

- Augment resources to ensure every student in an adult ESOL class has a personal device and Internet.
- Through funding, training and technical assistance, enhance program and teacher capacity to conduct virtual programming, support students’ English and digital literacy skills, and ensure lessons are easily accessible via tablet, computer and smart phone.
- Increase class staffing capacity by 25% during the pandemic to provide greater intensity, additional hands, and increased prep time.
- The City and State should look to national and international models for providing low-cost, high capacity wireless access citywide
- The pandemic exposed in high relief the lack of a safety net for immigrants without work authorization. Investment is needed in developing viable pathways for employment and business ownership, such creation of worker-owned cooperatives, for immigrants regardless of immigration status.
- Continue to develop innovative virtual and hybrid online/face-to-face models to offer greater access and flexibility.
- Enlist volunteers. ENB’s Allies for Immigrants ESOL Corps recruits, trains and places volunteers across 10 ENB sites. Volunteers proved critical to support students and teachers – More are needed.

## Program Level

- Convene a student orientation at the beginning of the semester to explain classroom protocols and expectations regarding participation.
- Take time before/outside of classes to assess tech needs, get devices/hotspots to students, and help people get online.
- To the extent possible, offer longer or more frequent class periods.
- Ensure each class has at least one “monitor” or assistant. Engage volunteers to help communicate with/assist students and to support teachers running a virtual classroom.
- Build in additional paid time for teachers to prepare classes and share practices with each other, attend trainings, build their own digital skills.
- Many parents have children learning remotely/needing support – be flexible when scheduling classes. A class that normally meets mornings may find after-school time works better.
- Provide student guidance on enrolling in skills training, up-to-date information on labor market trends, and job openings.
- With the fast-changing labor market, students are an excellent source of updated openings. Create time and means, such as a virtual bulletin board, for students to share information.
- Conduct regular updates on students’ progress toward re-employment, including whether jobs are at similar levels of hours and compensation as pre-pandemic.
- Create or revive program “councils” comprising students, staff, and volunteers to provide feedback continuously, identify

problems as they emerge and find creative solutions.

## Class Level

- Create a group chat at the start of class (e.g. with WhatsApp) to facilitate all-class communication and help with transition to online.
- Use online tools to incorporate additional means for group activities such as games.
- Explore options for improved audio and breakout rooms to address students’ difficulties in speaking, listening and asking questions.
- Increase opportunities for students to practice English outside of class (including one-on-one), to get individual help, and to exchange information with classmates.
- Release class materials ahead of time and review more often.
- Incorporate more grammar, writing, and listening, as well as more reading and conversation.

## I. ESOL STUDENTS: WHO ACCESSED ONLINE CLASSES

### *Technology access, work and parenting responsibilities, and other personal circumstances impacted remote learning participation rates*

A great majority of survey respondents (247 of 316; 78%) said they did access classes after the shutdown on March 15. These students tended to have better tech access and more time, and were generally able to adapt to the format. Among those who did not, the biggest challenge for more than one third (37%) of students was lack of time. While this may seem counterintuitive, since many were stuck at home, it was a newly complicated and stressful world turned upside down, with altered family and work burdens. At least one third (33%) said

not accessing class was due to lack of a suitable device, reliable Internet, or other tech issue, despite massive efforts by ENB and our grantees to equip all students. Tech issues may have also been a factor for the 21% who said “the online class was not good for them.”

ENB found that having children at home impacted students’ ability to participate. Older students also had somewhat greater difficulty transitioning to online learning than younger peers. Beginner and intermediate level students transitioned at relatively similar rates, and remarkably, nearly all Literacy ESOL students were able to transition – thanks to program staff determination in reaching out to every student to help them gain access to online classes.

The pandemic affected all students enormously, but some programs saw more students directly impacted. One program suffered more than 40 students with COVID-19, and 3 deaths.

Programs reported regularly contacting every student in whatever way they could (phone, email, WhatsApp) to conduct wellness calls, persist in attempting to get them online, and post class activities. For those who finally did not access virtual classes, programs stated they would reach out to these students in September “when we will be better prepared to help them.”

ENB staff encountered online class issues during virtual site visits. In one, we couldn’t access the Zoom video link and had to phone in, making the class hard to follow; this window into students’ experience was illuminating. In another site visit, students experienced a great deal of distraction from family members in close living quarters. The desperate need for income clearly affected participation. One program with many students in the restaurant industry found students lost jobs and were forced to take any ‘odd jobs’ available, leading to lower attendance/retention.

**TABLE 1: Barriers to Accessing Remote Classes**

Students, reason for not accessing class online	#	%
I did not have time	23	37
The online class was not good for me	13	21
I don’t have a computer	10	16
I don’t have Internet in my home	7	11
Tech Difficulties	4	6
Children related	2	3
No reason listed	1	2
Other	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	

**II. DEVICES/TECHNOLOGY**

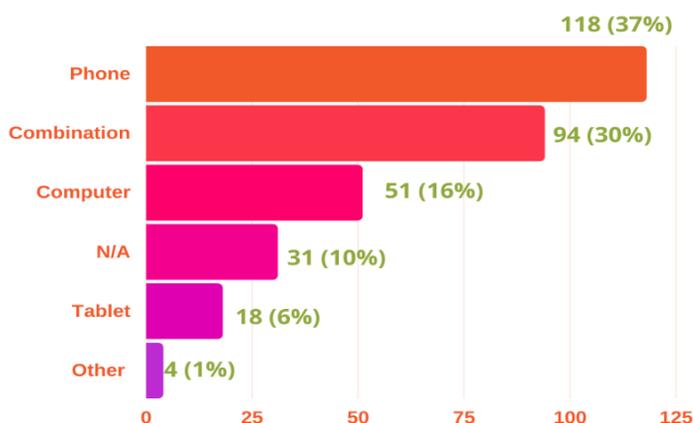
***Programs struggled to assess needs and secure equipment.***

“Pivoting” to online learning was extremely complex for ESOL programs. Programs mapped out what students had in terms of devices, Internet and skills, and re-established classes. One director said, “We shut down for two weeks to plan an online program. We were not ready nor were our students. Our students’ digital skills were all over the map as was their access to technology. Therefore, the main task of the first few weeks was getting students email and helping them access the platforms.”

By late April, with assistance from ENB, Tech Goes Home and The City of Boston, programs were able to get Chromebooks and tablets out to programs.

Notably, even after this enormous effort, 37% of students said they accessed their online class only on their phone.

How did you access the online class? (Check all that apply)



***As students re-gained their footing and proper devices, they participated and excelled.***

Survey responses illustrate how varied students' access was, but their comments illustrate how important having a computer or tablet was to their persistence and success. "My teacher explained how to download Zoom. I think it is easy. If I can do it, anyone can."

***"Now I know how to meet with my children's teachers online on Zoom. I feel happy!"***

### III. WHAT WAS LOST/WHAT WAS GAINED?

***Students missed class time due to technical issues and revised class scheduling.***

Class time was often reduced due to technical issues. All programs reported they expended a lot of time assessing student tech needs, getting devices to students, helping students use devices/software, setting them up for online instruction, and ongoing troubleshooting.

Some classes met synchronously for the full original schedule and hours per week, while some used a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, giving assignments for outside time. A few classes met just once a week for an hour or less of synchronous time.

***Students also missed social interaction, time to ask questions and some educational basics.***

An overwhelming majority of students cited missing physical interaction with teachers and classmates. They also missed the efficiency of in-person practice, asking questions, and sharing with teachers and classmates. Online learning can disrupt normal question and answer dynamics and students aren't as able or comfortable to speak up due to poor audio and inadequate time. Many community and workplace ESOL students also said they would have wanted more writing and grammar practice, and others said they missed games, small groups (breakout rooms were insufficient), and field trips.

***Yet online learning provided some students with flexibility and greater ease speaking in front of a camera rather than in class.***

A large portion of students enjoyed the accessibility of online learning, and attendance was higher in some classes due to lack of commute and in many cases, a more compatible schedule.

There were aspects of online learning that students particularly enjoyed. In one advanced-level class, students delivered final oral presentations on Zoom, screen-sharing their PowerPoints, responding to chat questions, and giving each other virtual "applause." This experience honed important professional skills; one student even dialed in from his workplace in a 15-minute break to give his presentation. Notably, some students said speaking English to a camera rather than in-person reduced their feelings of fear and intimidation.

***Using devices and learning online was crucial not only to students' ability to continue learning English but an opportunity to build tech skills vital to survival and employment.***

Programs encountered access challenges, days of low bandwidth, and choppy audio, but students learned to troubleshoot and communicate solely through technology, reaching levels of digital literacy most had never previously needed.

Students improved digital skills they had begun learning pre-pandemic, such as navigating Google Classroom and email. Post-pandemic, they learned new tools: Google Hangouts, Zoom, phone voice recorder, and activities on their textbook's online-supplement website. At one program, a student who contracted COVID-19 in April worked through her sickness and was able to recover and used the donated tablet to complete the class.

***ESOL classes provided information, resources and stress relief to students and their families.***

Students were grateful for the opportunity to socialize, and classes served as a distraction from the pandemic. Most (82%) of community program students and 80% of workplace ESOL students said their ESOL teacher told them about resources to help them and their families; 73% of community students and 85% of workplace students agreed their online class helped reduce their stress.

***“The classes have helped me to not feel depressed and keep my mind occupied. I feel safe at home studying English and I will continue in September.”***

In one virtual site visit, a student said she was sad because her friend and coworker, a mother of 3 young children, had died of COVID-19 over

the weekend. She said, “I want to be here today. What page are we on?”

Teachers provided critical COVID-19 related resources such as where to get food and access unemployment, and help for parents including how to enroll children in BPS summer programs. For parents, online learning taught them to help their children in their own transition to virtual learning, or vice versa – their children helped them.

In one program, several childcare staff shifted roles and translated resource documents into Spanish and Portuguese, and contacted lower-level students who needed assistance in their own language. In another program, a student was terrified for herself and her family, and visibly distressed during Zoom classes. After being reassured by her peers and teacher that it was safe to go out wearing a mask and social distancing, she ventured out with her family, identifying the class as the source of her relief.

***While gains were lower during the pandemic, students overwhelmingly said their English improved.***

Standardized test scores were limited due to low testing rates, but programs that were able to post-test showed that 60% of students made significant learning gains. Asynchronous assignments may not have fostered the same robust English gains as a communicative ESOL class, especially in speaking/listening skills. However, when ENB asked students to gauge their own progress, 89% of students felt their English class over the course of the whole year helped them improve their English; 77% said the same about their virtual classes since March

**TABLE 3: Impact of the pandemic on student employment**

What is your job status?	#	%
I had a job before March 15th and I lost it because of the COVID19 pandemic	94	30
I am not employed this year and I am not looking for work	89	28
I have the same job and same number of hours I had before March 15th	66	21
I have the same job I had before March 15, but they cut my hours	48	15
I have a new job since March 15 <sup>th</sup>	19	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>316</b>	

***The pandemic claimed the jobs of many; students say English will help get them back.***

It was a tough year for student employment, with a lot of lost ground. One student said:

***“I’m worried I’ll catch the virus if they call me back to work, I’m worried they won’t call me back to work, I’m worried about not having work and not being able to pay the rent.”***

Program directors reported the following:

Student employment changes	FY 19	FY 20
% Job gains among students “not employed, looking” at beginning of year	56%	39%
% Job retention among students who started the year “employed”	98%	75%

***With job losses and the continuing labor market challenges, English will make students more employable.***

Nearly all respondents (89%) said “English classes will help me find a job or a better job.” One advanced student expressed: “I am very satisfied by the support by teachers and advisors who assisted me in navigating the process for job hunting especially during COVID-19. I was afraid about not finding a job because of my English skills. The team helped me build confidence and trust in my capacities as an immigrant.”

Among workplace ESOL students, 90% agreed “The class will help me to improve communication with coworkers, supervisors, and guests;” 85% said “the class will help me be more efficient at my job;” 80% agreed they “learned new online skills including Zoom, Google Classroom.”

#### **IV. LOOKING FORWARD**

***Students had words of advice for new students starting to learn online.***

Students in focus groups said that commitment to learning, a persevering attitude and ability to overcome difficulties are critical to learning English. Things that helped students adjust to online learning were having a routine, setting

boundaries with family over their time, setting up reminders for class, and asking for help when needed.

Students also had suggestions as to how programs could optimize learning.

Students emphasized the importance of clear communication and expectations. They suggested that teachers create group chats, for instance in WhatsApp. In one focus group, all but one person had a group chat at the start of class (pre-shutdown) and this helped with transition to online learning. Programs should clearly convey class expectations such as attendance and participation.

Students believe it is critical that students and teachers receive tech support and have a clear understanding of online learning.

Some students felt class time could be managed more efficiently, and more can be done to exploit the flexibility online learning provides. They also suggested having more days of class, longer class times, and evening online classes. Students also said they need more time to practice English, for example through dedicated time with staff.

Clearly, there is some tension between some students' need for significant tech support and others anxious to cover more ground in learning English. Students felt that help with tech issues from teachers or dedicated staff/volunteers should be provided outside class time; some expressed how disruptive and time consuming it is having the teacher help a student during class. Further, students need to be made aware about using technology properly (e.g., the microphone) as lack of knowledge also can be disruptive.

Some students requested that teachers release class materials ahead of time and review more often, as well as include more grammar, writing, reading and listening activities. They

also requested help maintaining their English outside the class.

With regard to student recruitment, most ESOL students find ESOL classes via word of mouth. In a virtual world, programs will need to rely more heavily on Internet presence and social media. When asked how programs could recruit, students offered to spread the word via their own social media. One student suggested creating an informational video explaining how to apply.

Program staff learned, adapted and created new ways to engage and teach their students. Teachers creatively transferred their use of rich, student-centered content to new formats. During one Zoom site visit, for a lesson about the Census, students read charts of East Boston immigrant percentages in 1990, 2000 and 2010 and made predictions for 2020. Several classes observed during site visits were conducting lessons related to COVID. On the other hand, textbooks provided structure and were a resource for learning that students could touch. One program director said, "Our teachers have shown remarkable versatility and never-ending dedication. One used SoundCloud to record listening activities. Another used Zoom breakout rooms to divide students into conversation groups into which she could move about. Another had her students email her pictures of things that made them happy and then she incorporated them all into a PDF that she was able to show the class online."

Program staff also added time to communicate with each other, incorporating weekly online staff meetings for teachers to support and learn from each other. One program met weekly to share instructional resources, troubleshoot and pinpoint needed interventions, and the director also met with teachers individually to help with technical and instructional issues.

***Volunteers proved invaluable in helping students to access online learning and helping teachers manage classes.***

Many programs reported deploying volunteers. One group of tutors created a blog and worked with teachers to create content. A volunteer facilitated a weekly, 2-hour ESOL Review class for students who wanted more instruction. Another worked with a literacy student who had never attended school but had a good command of spoken English; this student in June transitioned into a level 2 class with continued support of her volunteer.

One Literacy ESOL teacher used volunteers to break the class into smaller practice groups based on their skill levels. Another had a tutor managing Zoom controls and breakout rooms so the teacher could focus on lessons; some volunteers ran small conversation groups on off-class days. Programs used volunteers who spoke Spanish, Vietnamese, Haitian Creole and other languages to help students get online, or to call to find out why they weren't participating.

One program reported: "After the last class in May, an 8-week, 2-hour class led by the ENB volunteer was offered to beginning level learners."

## **V. CONCLUSION**

At the time of publication, the season is changing and Bostonians are thinking about our imminent move back indoors for the winter. A second pandemic wave may keep us fully remote for the foreseeable future; or improving conditions could allow us more choices. Immigrants continue to seek opportunities to learn English by any and all effective and available means, knowing it is crucial to bettering their lives and contributing to society. English and technology skills are the pathway to economic opportunities in a time of great losses.

By attending carefully to all that we have learned in this time of crisis, we will better our ESOL field for the long term. The pandemic has forced us all to be quick, creative thinkers; to learn new ways of communication which will change our lives forever; to strengthen our empathy; and to appreciate the tremendous importance of communities such as ESOL classes. By listening to the voices in this report, we will better our teaching and ourselves.

## VI. APENDIX I: English for New Bostonians 2020 Student Survey

Please answer the following questions:

\* Required

1. What's your name?
2. What's your Email address?
3. What is your English teacher's first name? \*
4. What is the name of your ESOL program? \*
  - Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD), Roslindale
  - Asian American Civic Association (AACA), Chinatown
  - Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence (ATASK), Chinatown
  - Blackstone Community Center, South End
  - Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC), Chinatown
  - Boston Public Schools Department of Adult Education, Roxbury
  - Brazilian Worker Center, Allston
  - College Bound Dorchester, Dorchester
  - East Boston Harborside Community School at the Otis
  - East Boston Ecumenical Community Council (EBECC)
  - Educational Development Group (EDG), Roxbury/South End
  - Gardner Pilot Academy (ESOL) Adult Education Program, Allston-Brighton
  - Gilbert Albert Community Center (GACC), Dorchester
  - Haitian Multi-Service Center (HMSC), Dorchester
  - Jamaica Plain Community Centers (JPCC) Adult Learning Program, Jamaica Plain
  - Jewish Vocational Service (JVS), Hyde Park
  - Maverick Landing Community Services, East Boston
  - Neighborhood of Affordable Housing (NOAH), East Boston
  - St. Mark Community Education Program, Dorchester
  - YMCA International Learning Center (ILC), Boston
  - Other:
5. Why are you studying English? *(Check all that apply)* \*
  - For my current job
  - To get a job in the future
  - To get into a school/ university
  - For my family
  - For myself
  - To get my citizenship
  - Other:
6. What is your job status? \*

*Mark only one*

  - I am not employed this year and I am not looking for work

- I had a job before March 15th and I lost it because of the COVID19 pandemic
- I have the same job and same number of hours I had before March 15<sup>th</sup>
- I have the same job I had before March 15, but they cut my hours
- I have a new job since March 15<sup>th</sup>

7. English classes will help me find a job or will help me find a better job. (1: Disagree, 3: So-so, 5: Agree) \*

1      2      3      4      5

Disagree

Agree

8. How long have you studied English at your program? \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to one year
- More than one year

### ENGLISH CLASS AND OTHER SUPPORT

ALL STUDENTS please answer the following questions and write us your comments. It will help us improve classes and services.

9. The English class helped me to improve my English. (1: disagree, 3: So-So, 5: agree)

1      2      3      4      5

Disagree

Agree

10. The English class helped me to improve the following (check all that apply) \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Speaking
- Listening comprehension
- Grammar
- Writing
- Reading
- Vocabulary
- Other:

11. My English teacher told me about resources to help me and my family. (1: disagree, 3: So-So, 5: agree) \*

1      2      3      4      5

Disagree

Agree

12. If you have children in your household, has the teacher given your ideas about activities you can do with your children? \*

- Yes
- No
- I don't have children in my household



21. Your comments are very important to us. If online classes have to continue next fall, what would be your advice to the programs and teachers? You can write your comments in any language you want.
22. What are you and your family most concerned about right now? You can write your comments in any language you want.

## **VI. APENDIX II: Student Focus Group Questions**

1. Names, country of origin, how long in the program
2. What do you miss most of your face to face class? Which kind of activities has the class been able to continue doing online, and which one not?
3. What do you like most about learning English online? Now that you are experts in online learning, which advice would you give to a student that is about to start learning English online for the first time?
4. What English skills did you learn before moving to online, oral presentation, more speaking and writing, or less reading or writing?
5. Besides learning English, has the class helped you in other ways this spring? How? (connection with other resources/basic needs, social/emotional health, children's school)
6. If programs are closed again next year, or if they start open and then move online again, what is important for teachers and program directors to know and do? (Get at tech access, teacher training—what do teachers need to be able to do, to teach effectively, what should happen in FTF startup, etc.) Do you think teachers notice when a student is not understanding/following the class?
7. how it was to make the transition to online and did it turn out to give them skills/confidence/anything despite the initial difficulties?
8. What are your recommendations for how programs can recruit students virtually?
9. How can your English program help students after Covid-19 to get jobs and/or other services?
10. Is there anything we missed, that is important for us to know?

The questions were translated into Spanish, and some of the focus groups were conducted in Spanish.