

## How the Pandemic Has Impacted the Chinese Immigrant Students

Tingting Wu

My interest in the research topic stemmed from my experience working as a volunteer to help the Chinese immigrant students (CISs) with their remote learning in a community learning center in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. I witnessed their struggles in learning English during remote learning, and with limited resources that prevented their families from helping them effectively. I began to wonder—how could I help them cope with the double challenges of learning the English language and learning remotely? What about the plight of other children like them in the city and beyond? In this paper, I argue that remote learning deprived CISs of optimal conditions of second language acquisition. In addition, very little of CISs' challenges were known to the public because, in spite of some media reports about the negative impact of remote learning on English language learners, the CISs and their unique struggles were often left out. Fortunately, research studies have begun to emerge, revealing the extent of the negative impact of Covid-19 lockdown and remote learning on English language learners (ELLs).

The Chinese community learning center where I volunteer is located in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and it serves Chinese immigrant families. Sunset Park is known for its dense and large Chinese population. According to the data of *Statistical Atlas*, 56% of residents in Sunset Park are Asian; and among them, 49.2% are Chinese. In the Sunset Park Chinese community, 79% of the business signs are in Chinese, and the remaining 21% are in English. Over the past forty years, Chinese immigrants have established their own markets, shops, restaurants, and health clinics in this neighborhood. They can survive without speaking English in this community. However, limited English proficiency in the Chinese community perpetuates marginalization and isolation. When the city locked down, the immigrant families found themselves struggling to

provide academic support to their children who were learning at home. They are among the smallest language minority groups residing in Brooklyn. According to *World Population View*, 55% of the total population in Brooklyn only speak English, 15.5% speak Spanish, and 17.5% speak other Indo-European languages, while only 8.7% of the population speak Asian and Pacific Island languages.

As English language learners, the CISs lost even more than just the opportunity to learn and interact with their peers and teachers in the classroom during the lockdown. In the book, *How Languages are Learned*, language experts Pasty M. Lightbown and Nina Spada stress three optimal language learning conditions which are essential to the second language learners. The first condition is exposure to the second language environment. It allows the ELLs to have more opportunities to communicate with others and practice their second language (38). The second condition is feedback on error. ELLs benefit from constant feedback from their teachers so that they can clarify themselves, try out different expressions, correct their pronunciation, grammar, word choice and syntax in conversations (167). The third condition is the modified input. When a native speaker/English teacher modifies speech directed at ELLs, such as using simplified sentence structure and common vocabulary, it is easier for the ELLs to understand. Therefore, communication becomes easier and learning English is less challenging. Modified input helps ELLs understand the content of the conversations and subjects (106).

However, during the lockdown, all three of these optimal conditions for second language learning were severely limited for CISs in my neighborhood. Classes were held remotely via video conferences. Students could only stay at home from morning to the afternoon to take the class. Besides, due to health concerns, their parents did not allow them to go out. Even when they occasionally went out shopping, they would not need to speak English in their

neighborhood. As a result, many of these CISs had little to no exposure to the English language at home and in their neighborhoods. To make matters worse, due to limitation of technology and underprepared online curriculum, remote learning didn't allow the teachers to give the CISs sufficient and timely feedback to their language learning. Since all the assignments and assessments were carried out on the Google apps (Google classroom, Google Doc, and Google Form), they didn't accurately capture student learning in a timely fashion. The CISs couldn't get the same immediate feedback and attention in remote learning as they would in in-person class. Therefore, if the teachers didn't have accurate assessment information of the students, they would not know how to provide properly modified input that meet the needs of the students. For the CISs in my neighborhood, remote learning often meant sitting in front of the tablets with their video on, but they barely talked or participated. They were just faces in small frames on the teachers' computer, and it was hard for their teachers to notice or gauge their level of engagement or understanding.

The struggles and challenges that the CISs faced seem to be unique. But the CISs and their families suffered quietly, and the public remained unaware of their realities. To prove this point, I searched and reviewed news reports published from March 2020 to March 2021, and I have selected six articles out of thirteen which reported the pandemic impact on the ELLs. Three of the articles zoomed in on the ELLs in New York City while the other three addressed this issue with a wider-angle lens.

These reports exposed the multi-faceted nature of the struggles and challenges the ELLs and their families faced during the pandemic. First, the articles revealed the lack of access to technology for the ELLs. Some ELLs had to share their electronic devices with their siblings at home. For example, Reema Amin and Shumita Basu, in an article called, "For NYC Students

Learning English, Remote Learning Can Come with Steep Barriers” reported that a Brooklyn immigrant high school student, Kelitha and her five siblings had only three laptops among in their family, and all the siblings must share the laptops, and complete their school assignments with slow Internet during the remote learning. Second, the widening gaps in the students’ education would threaten ELLs academically. Remote learning deepened the learning gaps caused by language barriers, leaving the ELLs further behind in language learning and other school subjects. According to a report on USA Today News, the nationwide 5 million ELLs were losing ground during the pandemic. For them, the loss doesn’t only mean a lower GPA or having to attend a less-selective college. It means they might be potentially not graduating or not advancing to post-secondary education (Richards). Third, most of the ELLs’ parents were essential workers, and it was hard for them to stay at home to assist their children’s learning. According to a report on Washington Square News titled, “NYC Public Schools Are Failing English Language Learners,” immigrant families are more likely to live in poverty and have lower median earnings than U.S. born citizens, and they are more likely to take up the essential work to support their families (Ramachandran). Fourth, during the remote learning, a lot of high school ELLs must work to support their families. Some would have poor school attendance, and others would log into their classes from their jobs. The need to help their families financially outweigh the need to focus on learning. According to *USA Today NEWS*, a high school ESL teacher reported that some of his ELL students worked many extra hours to make ends meet, and one of his students logged into his remote class from his landscaping job.

However, while most media reports lumped all the ethnic groups together, they failed to offer substantial insights about the challenges that CISs faced in particular. For example, none of the articles mentioned the fact that the CISs in my neighborhood speak Mandarin or a specific

Chinese dialect both at home and in their neighborhood. Therefore, schools are one of the few places to provide them with a language learning environment. In addition, none of the articles discussed the unique challenges CISs face at home—many are being cared for by their grandparents or mothers while their parents or dads work in other states in the restaurants and nail salons. As a result, the CISs not only lacked academic and language support, but they also suffered from family separation and emotional stress, lack of technology and learning resources. All of these still remain unknown to the public.

To determine the extent of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and remote learning on ELLs and their families, I turned to empirical research, and I found that the impact of Covid-19 on CISs and their families has been severe and multifaceted. Based on my review of nine research articles published from 2020 to 2021, there are seven ways that Covid-19 and remote learning have impacted the CISs and their families: (1) financial hardship, (2) worsening family separation, (3) limited abilities to provide adequate academic support by CISs' parents/caregivers due to their unfamiliarity with the American school curriculum and culture, (4) worsening racial discrimination and increased harassment, (5) underprepared and ineffective online instruction in meeting the learning needs of ELLs during remote learning, (6) deteriorating socioeconomic status and marginalization, and (7) lacking access to resources and high quality remote learning.

The first negative impact is that the pandemic caused financial hardship for the Chinese immigrant families. In a qualitative study of low-income Chinese American mothers' material hardship and racism-driven disparities in the Chinese immigrant community of Sunset Park, Brooklyn, Carol Duh-Leong and H. Shannon Yin, revealed the impact of the pandemic on these families. They found that the Chinese immigrant families in Sunset Park neighborhood were very anxious about the cost of daily living during the pandemic. They found that "The language

captured in our interviews emphasized the high level of stress families experienced. Mothers used specific dollar prices of household items when describing their pandemic experiences, extending prior evidence that lower-income respondents are more likely to know the exact cost of small items due to the heavy consequence of each dollar spent” (54). In the interviews, one of the mothers reported that she used to buy liquid milk for the baby. But it became too expensive, so she had to switch to powdered milk (Duh-Leong and Yin 54). Another mother stressed that the price went up during the epidemic, and everything became very expensive and rare. As a result, she didn’t dare to throw away wilted and stale vegetables, using them in their meals instead (Duh-Leong and Yin 52). Another research conducted in NYC also echoed the financial crisis among the immigrants in the city. Amndolare & Gallagher, in their research, “Under Threat and Left Out: NYC’s Immigrants and the Coronavirus Crisis” found that during the pandemic, 76% of Chinese Progressive Association clients, including those who work in restaurants and beauty salons, lost their jobs. According to the Chinese American Planning Council, 50% of community members have lost their income or jobs. In one preschool class of 24 CISs, 20 out of 24 families lost their jobs in March 2020. In addition, the Chinese immigrant youth who were helping to care for younger siblings while their parents went to work were experiencing anxiety about food as they did not know how to cook enough to eat at home. Some of them had even resorted to rationing their daily food intake to make sure their food did not run out (Amandolare & Gallagher). Food insecurity was a direct crisis brought on by financial hardship the CISs and their families were facing during the pandemic.

Second, besides financial crisis and food insecurity, COVID-19 had worsened the family separation of the Chinese immigrant families during the pandemic. According to Duh-Leong and Yin, “Families tried to protect infants by having parents who worked in high contact jobs live

separately. One mother shared, “His [the baby] father cannot live with us since he works [in food service]... it’s dangerous... (53).” This finding confirmed what I had witness in the Chinese immigrant communities in Sunset Park. While most Chinese immigrants work in high contact jobs such as restaurants and beauty salons, some worked in other states. The pandemic had prevented them from coming back to Brooklyn to spend time with their children. I had one fourth grade student whose father worked in a restaurant in Iowa and hadn’t come back home for twelve months since the start of the lockdown for fear of bringing the virus home. Another second-grade student whose parents both worked in a restaurant in Michigan hadn’t come back home for more than a year, leaving the children in the care of their aging grandparents in Sunset Park.

The third negative impact is that the Chinese immigrant parents/caregivers struggled to help their children during remote learning. In Emma Chen’s case study, “Supporting Online Learning in an Unfamiliar Language”, she found that immigrant caregivers were expected to navigate remote learning platform without sufficient English proficiency or familiarity with technology. In addition, unfamiliarity with the school curriculum made it challenging for the immigrant caregivers to help their children’s remote learning at home. Similar to the parents in Chen’s case study, the Chinese immigrant parents/caregivers in Sunset Park have limited educational background. According to “Map of Educational Attainment in Sunset Park, New York”, 65% of the Asian population do not have high school diplomas, which is the largest ethnic group lacking a high school equivalent in this neighborhood (Statistical Atlas). Their limited educational background made it difficult for them to meet their children’s remote learning needs. In the cases of grandparents, not only do they have limited educational background, they also have limited to no English proficiency.

To help the CISs academically requires educators to have training in second language acquisition as well as teaching expertise that allow them to respond to the CISs' individual learning needs. Education policy experts Julie Sugarman and Melissa Lazarin in their article “Education English Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic” pointed out that ELLs’ English language development may stall without persistent school engagement. They maintained that, although not yet empirically demonstrated, inferences could be made about the effects of remote learning on learning loss based on existing research. In addition, studies of chronic absenteeism that include ELLs indicate that the effects of missed schooling can influence English language development years later. In another study, ELLs who were chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade scored lower on their second and third grade English language proficiency assessments than other ELL students (Sugarman & Lazarin). Disrupted schooling had been a chronic problem, and school absenteeism was worse during the remote learning in the Sunset Park Chinese community. It has been common for many Chinese immigrant parents to send their babies back to China to be cared for by grandparents or relatives because their long work hours as laborers make it impossible to take care of them. When the children reach school age, they come back to the U.S. to be reunited with their parents. However, even though they would join other children their age in the US schools, some had interrupted schooling in China. Still, they had to learn a new language besides learning different subjects in that language. Lockdowns and remote learning further exacerbated the situation. The emotional toll on these children who grew up away from their parents is often hidden as few immigrant parents recognize the importance of bonding with their children during the early years. When the children arrive in the United States, they are already at the age of second or third grade, and some are about to attend middle school. As a result, they not only have to deal with the language barrier, but also psychological and



emotional challenges of separating from their caregivers in China and adjusting to new life with their parents. Remote learning during the pandemic only compounded all these challenges for the immigrant Chinese children and their families. They were left further behind.

The fourth negative impact is the racism that directly targeted the CISs and their families. While the Chinese immigrant families could still cope with the financial hardship, they were completely powerless when facing racism. According to Duh-Leong and Yin, “There were over 3,700 reports of discrimination targeting Asian Americans in the United States, as well as increased calls for research to document potential racism. In addition to stress from direct discrimination, low-income Chinese American families quickly contended with specific damage to Chinatown-based small business economies (49).” For example, a Chinese immigrant mother reported in the study that when they took their car for annual inspection during the lockdown, the American inspectors worked normally before their arrival, but they immediately zipped their uniforms and covered their faces when they saw her husband and her (52). Jingshun Zhang and Clarisse Halpern, in their research “The Experiences of a Chinese Immigrant Family During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” interviewed a Chinese immigrant family with twins who attended middle school in North Carolina. One of the children told the interviewers that she had experienced hostility and insult from her classmate shortly before the lockdown. When that classmate sneezed, she offered him a tissue, but he said, “You are a Chinese, and this virus is all your fault.” Verbal attacks like this were far too common for many Chinese Americans living in the US (61).

Fifth, schools were not prepared to effectively teach ELLs in remote learning, which impacted CISs more severely. When WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic, schools were suddenly forced to transition to remote learning. As most elementary schools in the United States

had never handled such an extensive online education that involves students from various backgrounds, learning needs and language backgrounds, schools appeared to be unprepared in many ways. Remote teaching and in-person teaching are different in terms of teaching strategies and resources. In addition, as most of the teachers weren't trained to teach remotely, they struggled to move their curriculum online and deliver their classes through remote platforms. Teachers of ELLs had to work with the huge challenge of teaching the English language and wrestling with how to support the ELLs oral interaction and providing comprehensible input and timely feedback while navigating the remote learning platform. The precipitated transition to online platforms left the teachers little time to consider how to recreate the optimal learning environment for the ELLs in remote learning. Some scholars point out that the hastily assembled online education is likely to be both less effective, in general, than traditional schooling and to reach fewer students as well. In Peter Sayer and Derek Braun's research article "The Disparate Impact of COVID-19 Remote Learning on English Learners in the United States," they found that districts with more ELLs had far less technology infrastructure to manage the transition to online learning. Often EL teachers turned to Google Classroom and other open access resources, but they struggled to find online content that included accommodations appropriate for ELLs. Furthermore, the interfaces of most sites were not designed with ELL students in mind, and they often frustrated the ELLs and their parents (2). Similarly, the schools that the CISs attend in Sunset Park often have large ELL populations, and remote learning presented the same challenges for these schools to come up with curriculum materials and methods that were compatible for remote learning environments.

The sixth negative impact is that Covid has further worsened the CISs' low socioeconomic status and marginalization. According to Sayer and Braun, the U.S. suburban

school districts usually have much better education funding than urban school districts. They posited, “City schools receive an average of US\$2,100 per student less than suburban schools, and even within urban districts, predominately White schools receive US\$1,321 more per student than schools with a majority of culturally and linguistically diverse students” (2). Unlike middle class families where parents, who worked from home, could help their children during remote learning, or hire tutors for their children, the CISs’ parents/caregivers were either essential workers and couldn’t work from home, or they didn’t have sufficient English or technical know-how to help. They couldn’t afford tutors for their children either. This was why many CISs came to the Sunset Park community learning center during remote learning so that the center staff and volunteers could supervise and provide assistance. As a volunteer in the community learning center, I often witnessed the CISs sitting quietly in front of their tablets. It was hard to gauge their engagement in the learning if they were not sending communication signals. I also saw anxiety and unease of some of the CISs after they finished their online classes. Once when I asked two fifth graders what they had learned in class, they told me they couldn’t understand anything. I had to google-searched their class content in Chinese, and let them read it in Chinese. After they understood the content, I went over and explained their homework. This example showed that the remote learning these students received was inadequate, and without assistance, they would not be able to comprehend the learning task or complete homework, thus falling further behind.

The seventh negative impact is that the CISs were less likely to have access to high quality of remote learning. Since high-quality remote learning requires various conditions, such as a quiet space with minimal distractions, computers or iPads they do not have to share with others, high-speed Internet, and parental academic supervision. Many CISs didn’t have these

conditions in their lives. In the Sunset Park Chinese community, most Chinese immigrant families live in small apartments of one or two rooms. Their rooms are often cramped with bunk beds and the only table is the family dining table. While several siblings all had to take the Zoom class simultaneously, some CIS used their parents' phones when there weren't enough devices in the family. As a result, the cramped spaces and noises all prevented the children from focusing on their learning. In addition, the lack of access to the Internet was another big challenge during the lockdown. While some Chinese parents figured out how to contact an Internet company like Spectrum to inquire about the deal for those who couldn't afford, others who couldn't speak or understand English were left to their own devices. Some CISs joined the online class through the iPhone hotspots when there was no Wi-Fi. But when the cell phone's data ran out, they couldn't attend classes. Since the qualities of remote learning directly relate to student's academic achievement, students who couldn't receive adequate and explicit remote instruction suffered various learning loss. Research has uncovered that students could lose three to four months of learning if they receive average remote instruction, seven to eleven months with lower quality remote instruction, and twelve to fourteen months if they do not receive any instruction at all (Dorn & Hancock 3).

This research has taken me on a journey. I not only understood why the CISs and their families struggled the most to survive and to learn remotely during the pandemic lockdown, but also realized that little of their plight was made public, as no media reports truly reflected their realities trying to learn the English language and other subjects with limited technology and academic support, while living in cramped apartments with limited resources. More importantly, I have gained deeper insights into the severity of impact of Covid-19 and remote learning on their lives and education from reviewing evidence-based research studies of Chinese immigrants,

English language learners, and the school systems serving immigrant students. One of the studies asked, “Coronavirus’ online school is hard enough. What if you’re still learning to speak English?” My research has led me to ask further, what if you also live in poverty and face Asian hate? I hope that my study helps to raise public awareness of the realities of CISs in Sunset Park, and give voice to their silent suffering. Finally, I hope the information I have uncovered in this research can be useful to the schools, teachers, parents and organizations that advocate for immigrants as they work together to support the learning of CISs.

To help CISs in my neighborhood, I plan to continue to bridge the two programs at the TESOL Program of the Hunter College School of Education—COPE and SPELL-- with the CISs and their families in Sunset Park. These programs offer free English classes to immigrants and assist the immigrant parents to access education resources. I have helped translate the COPE/SPELL flyer into Chinese and disseminated it in my community. In addition, I have helped to connect the CISs in Sunset Park with Literacy Space, an after-school tutoring program at Hunter College that provides elementary and middle school students with weekly one-on-one tutoring. I shared these resources with the Chinese immigrant families in my neighborhood, and some mothers have already reported positive feedback about how Literacy Space has helped their children. For them, this was the first time their children had quality literacy tutoring from certified teachers who are completing their master’s degree in literacy education. I will continue to advocate for the Sunset Park Chinese community, and bring more citywide resources to the CISs and their families.

## Acknowledgement

This paper and the research behind it would not have been possible without the constant and exceptional support of my mentor, Professor Yang Hu. Her broad experience and extensive knowledge in education have provided me with effective direction throughout the research. I am deeply grateful for her insightful comments and guidance. I also appreciate that Mellon Public Humanities and Social Justice Scholarship has allowed me to speak up for the Chinese immigrant students and their families in my community. Through the research process, I have learned how important it is to have a voice in order to speak up for social justice, equity, diversity and inclusion.

## Work Cited

Amandolare, Sarah & Gallagher, Laird & Bowles, Jonathan & Dvorkin, Eli. "Under Threat & Left Out: NYC's Immigrants and the Coronavirus Crisis." *Center for an Urban Future*.

June 2020.

<https://www.city-journal.org/html/brooklyn%E2%80%99s-chinese-pioneers-13640.html>

Amin, Reema & Basu, Shumita. "For NYC Students Learning English, Remote Learning Can Come with Steep Barriers." *Chalkbeat: Essential Education Reporting in New York*, 20 April. 2020.

<https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/4/20/21230497/for-nyc-students-learning-english-remote-learning-can-come-with-steep-barriers>. Accessed 13 September 2021.

Babinski, Leslie. Amendum, Steven J. Knotek, Steven E & Sanchez, Marta. "English-Language Learners Need More Support During Remote Learning." *Education Week: Classroom Technology*. 19 June. 2020.

<https://www.edweek.org/technology/opinion-english-language-learners-need-more-support-during-remote-learning/2020/06>. Accessed 13 September 2021

Chen, Emma. "Supporting Online Learning in an Unfamiliar Language: Immigrant Parents and Remote Schooling during COVID-19." *International Journal of Multicultural Education*. December 2021.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357455923\\_Supporting\\_Online\\_Learning\\_in\\_a\\_n\\_Unfamiliar\\_Language\\_Immigrant\\_Parents\\_and\\_Remote\\_Schooling\\_during\\_COVID-19](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357455923_Supporting_Online_Learning_in_a_n_Unfamiliar_Language_Immigrant_Parents_and_Remote_Schooling_during_COVID-19)

Dorn Emma, Hancock Bryan, Sarakatsannis Jimmy & Viruleg Ellen. "Covid-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime." *McKinsey & Company*. June 2020.

<https://www.apucis.com/frontend-assets/porto/initial-reports/COVID-19-and-student-learning-in-the-United-States-FINAL.pdf.pagespeed.ce.VHbS948yF4.pdf>

Duh-Leong, Carol & Yin, H. Shonna. "Material Hardship and Stress from COVID-19 in Immigrant Chinese American Families with Infants." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*. 2021.

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10903-021-01267-8>

- Lightbown, Pasty M & Spada Nina. *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Mitchell, Corey. “English-Learners May Be Left Behind as Remote Learning Becomes ‘New Normal.’” *Education Week: English-Language Learners*. 17 March. 2020.  
<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/english-learners-may-be-left-behind-as-remote-learning-becomes-new-normal/2020/03>. Accessed 13 September 2021.
- Ramachandran, Asha. “NYC Public Schools Are Failing English Language Learners.” *Washington Square News*. 24 April. 2020.  
<https://nyunews.com/opinion/2020/04/24/nyc-schools-failing-immigrants/>. Accessed 13 September 2021.
- Richard, Erin. “Coronavirus’ online school is hard enough. What if you’re still learning to speak English?” *USA Today News: Online Learning*. 13 may. 2020.  
<https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/education/2020/05/14/coronavirus-online-classes-school-closures-esl-students-learn-english/5178145002/>. Accessed 13 September 2021.
- Sayer, Peter & Braun, Derek. “The disparate impact of COVID-19 remote learning on English learners in the United States.” *TESOL J.* 2020;11: e546.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/tesj.546>
- Stavely, Zaidee. “Teachers Struggle to Recreate Language-rich Classes for English Learners Online.” *EdSource: Highlighting Strategies for Student Success*. 7 October. 2020,  
<https://edsources.org/2020/teachers-struggle-to-recreate-language-rich-classes-for-english-learners-online/641191>. Accessed 13 September 2021.



Educational Attainment in Sunset Park in Sunset Park, Brooklyn New York. *Statistical Atlas*. 2018.

<https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/New-York/New-York/Sunset-Park/Educational-Attainment>

National Origin in Sunset Park, Brooklyn New York. *Statistical Atlas*. 2018.

<https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/New-York/New-York/Sunset-Park/National-Origin>

Sugarman Julie & Lazarin Melissa. “Educating English Learners during the Covid-19 Pandemic.” Migration Policy Institute. September 2020.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-english-learners-covid-19-final.pdf>

Zhang, Jingshun & Halpern Clarisse. “The Experience of a Chinese Immigrant Family During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Educational Research and Development Journal*. 2021. Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 52-72.

<https://www.proquest.com/publiccontent/docview/2603457071?accountid=27495&parentSessionId=4qnfyqD9WUL5yTTmOP%2BdlkKfWMy92E%2Ba0H69UmVGmEk%3D&pq-origsite=primo>