Delivering Engagement and Learning Amid Challenges

An exploration of online teaching skills and strategies across contexts

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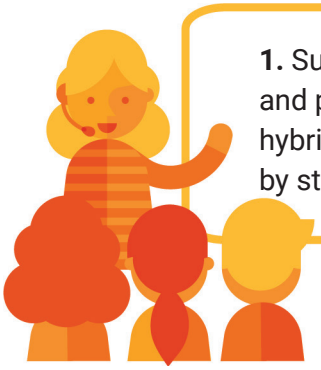
I'm becoming a much better teacher every time I teach with VIPkid because I carry it right into the classroom. And so I had all those techniques from VIPKid that helped me.

- Special education teacher from Virginia

Executive Summary

Since the spring of 2020, there has been a paradigm shift in K-12 education. Millions of educators have been challenged to adapt to rapidly changing teaching and learning environments that require a range of skills and strategies. In this report, we explore the challenges of K-12 contexts around the country, the skills and strategies educators have developed through teaching EFL online with VIPKid, and the value of these VIPKid behaviors in addressing K-12 challenges. This report offers education leaders new evidence that many of the skills and strategies developed through teaching EFL online to young language learners may be valuable strategies across ages, grade levels, and diverse content areas.

Key Findings



1. Surveyed educators reported a range of new and perennial challenges in K-12 online and hybrid contexts, with a striking 88% challenged by student engagement (n=335).

2. Surveyed educators reported developing skills and strategies at VIPKid across three areas: delivery, pedagogy, and technology (n=335).

88% **Delivery:** reported learning to use TPR, movement, and gesture

63% **Pedagogy:** reported learning to provide error correction in class

55% **Technology:** reported learning to navigate the courseware and teaching platform

73% **Delivery:** reported TPR, movement, and gesture helpful (n=278)

69% **Pedagogy:** reported error correction skills helpful (n=210)

61% **Technology:** reported courseware and platform skills helpful (n=183)

3. Overall, 85% reported that VIPKid prepared them for their current contexts (n=335). Across contexts, surveyed educators reported skills and strategies developed at VIPKid were helpful in addressing their K-12 online and hybrid teaching challenges.

Introduction

Preparing New Online Teachers

For decades prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was little evidence to suggest that new online teachers were prepared to take on their new roles (Moor-Adams et al., 2016; OECD, 2020; Rehn et al. 2016; Rehn et al. 2018; Rice & Dawley, 2009). Online teaching positions were often created in response to a growing number of online learners, and the support provided was not sufficient to develop effective online teaching practices (Archambault, 2011).

As a response to COVID-19, almost all teaching positions in the US swiftly became remote positions (Centers for Disease Control, 2021). Challenges like navigating a new online platform with students may have resulted from being introduced to emergency remote teaching[1] overnight (Ferri, Grifoni, & Guzzo, 2020; Hodges, et al., 2020), while challenges like catering to the needs of diverse learners (Arp, Woodward, & Mestre, 2006) and helping parents navigate roles (Borump & Archambault, 2020; Woodard & Mestre, 2006) may be perennial challenges that were suddenly being experienced in new ways.

In response to these challenges and the paradigm shift in education worldwide, stakeholders have been more invested than ever in helping teachers develop new skills to meet the needs of online learners, including how to best leverage new technology and modes of learning. This investment has taken a number of forms, including funding proposals like the Biden Administration's American Families Act (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2021), corporate thought leadership on post-COVID professional development (Patterson, 2021), and philanthropic efforts to build learning experiences for online teachers (Chan Zuckerberg Initiative) and innovative "tools, technologies, and platforms" (Schmidt Futures, 2021).

But as we make these investments, how much do we really know about the skills educators need? More specifically, do we know which skills promote confident pedagogical engagement through technology within and across contexts?

[1] The term emergency remote teaching describes a "temporary shift" to a different mode of teaching and learning in response to an emergency situation and has been used to highlight the difference between it and planned implementations termed "online learning" (Ferri, Grifoni, & Guzzo, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020).

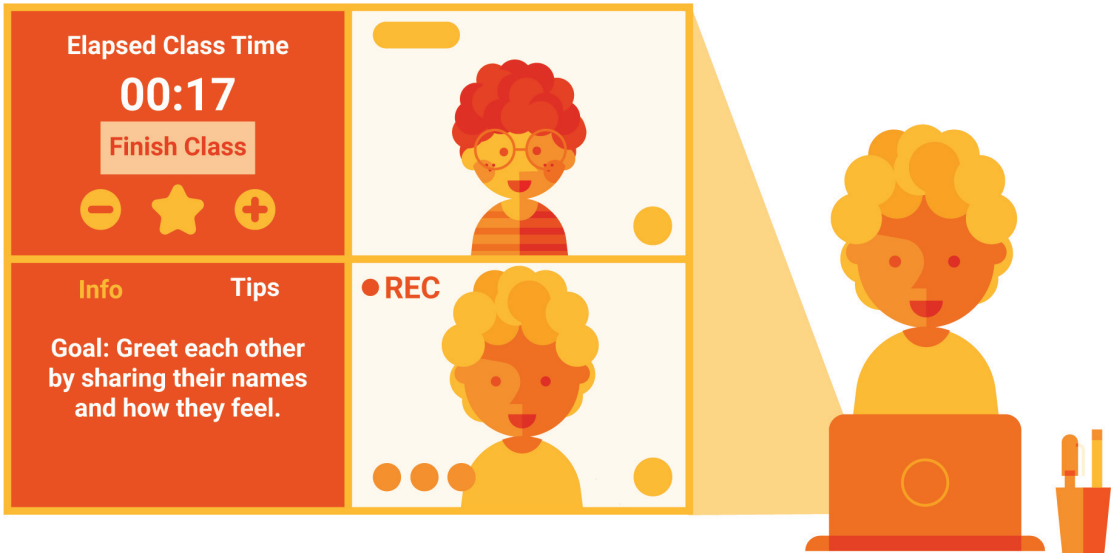
The answers to these questions have not always been based on empirical evidence (Moore-Adams et al., 2016), and there is a need to bring together core ideas of teaching and learning with the present challenges of online education (Konig et al., 2020). Prior to the pandemic, there was limited research conducted on the skills teachers develop to work online with K-12 learners (Archambault, Debruler, & Freidhoff, 2014) and even less regarding the skills to reach young learners (Dong, Cao, & Li, 2020) and language learners (Arnesen et al., 2020; Lin & Zheng, 2015). This research has been limited in terms of contexts and sample sizes explored.

A Leader in Getting Teachers Online Since 2013

VIPKid has supported North American teachers[2] of diverse backgrounds to confidently teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) online to learners (ages 4-15) since 2013. As of 2021, 100,000 of these teachers use the VIPKid platform. Many of these teachers also have experience as K-12 educators.

Teachers use VIPKid's proprietary platform to conduct primarily 25-minute, synchronous one-to-one classes to students in China. The platform includes lesson materials in the form of an interactive slide deck to guide the students' learning. The slides include learning activities and teaching tips for the teacher. An example of the lesson platform is shown in **Figure 1**, which is the teacher's view of an interactive slide.

Figure 1. Example of Teacher-Side Lesson Platform



[2] The terms "teacher" and "educator" are used throughout, to be inclusive of community use and the diverse roles held by study participants (e.g., administrator, speech language pathologist). "Teacher" is used here, consistent with its use in the VIPKid teacher community, to describe the role and activity at VIPKid.

Moving the Conversation Forward

The study featured in this report is a formal exploration of the experiences of K-12 educators who also teach with VIPKid. Three questions guided our research:

1. What challenges do K-12 teachers face in (new) online and hybrid[3] teaching contexts?
2. What skills and strategies do K-12 educators develop through teaching EFL online with VIPKid?
3. What skills and strategies developed through teaching with VIPKid are most helpful in addressing the challenges of K-12 online and hybrid teaching?

Method

This was a mixed-methods study, involving two surveys and ten semi-structured interviews with survey respondents.

Screening Survey

In spring 2020, current VIPKid teachers were invited to participate in a screening survey through the VIPKid teacher platform to identify teachers who met two criteria: (1) currently teaching in a K-12 online or hybrid context as a result of COVID-19 and (2) currently teaching with VIPKid. In addition to screening items, demographic data was collected on context (e.g., currently online, hybrid, or brick and mortar), role (e.g., grade level taught), experience (e.g., number of years teaching K-12), and education (e.g., highest degree earned) to better understand this group of teachers.

Primary Survey

A sample of 3,534 VIPKid teachers responded to the screening survey, and 1,450 qualified for the study. All qualified teachers were sent the follow-up and primary survey to explore our three research questions. The primary survey consisted of three sections: Challenges, Skills and Strategies Developed at VIPKid, and Skills and Strategies Transfer. Three hundred and fifty-one educators responded to the second and primary survey from around the US. After data cleaning, 335 respondents were included for analysis (**Table 1**).

[3] In this report, the authors use "hybrid" to refer to contexts in which the teacher teaches in two modalities, often simultaneously (e.g., teaching students in the physical classroom and students attending remotely). This is also referred to as "blended" learning (Watson, 2008).

Table 1. Summary of survey respondents, n = 335

Location	41 US States
Mode	Hybrid: 67%; Online: 33%
Education	Bachelor's degree: 28%; Master's degree: 62%: Doctorate degree: 2%; Professional Degree: 7%
Grade Levels Taught	Elementary and multi-grade level educators: 66%; Middle school educators: 19%; High school educators: 15%
K-12 Experience	10+ years: 70% ; 5-10 years: 18% ; 2-5 years: 10% ; 1-2 years: 2%; 6 months - 1 year: 1%
Professional Certifications	48% of educators reported possessing professional certifications (e.g., Reading Specialist, Special Education, Bilingual Education, or ESL)

The first section of the primary survey was based on a list of K-12 online teaching challenges (see **Table 3**). The list of K-12 online teaching challenges defines key challenges addressed in the literature: making materials engaging and appropriate (Archambault, Debruler, & Freidhoff, 2014; McCarthy & Wolfe, 2020); establishing a learning schedule (Borup & Archambault, 2020; Gao & Zhang, 2020); communicating with parents (Borup & Archambault, 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; McCarthy & Wolfe, 2020); navigating technology and new modes of learning (Black et al., 2009; Gao & Zhang, 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Tucker, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2004); feeling connected to other teachers (Hartshorne et al., 2020; Trust et al., 2020); and accessing professional development (Hartshorne et al., 2020; Kennedy & Ferdig, 2018).

The second and third sections of the surveys were based on a framework of online language teaching skills developed by the authors (see Table 4). The framework of online language teaching skills was designed to represent the core skills and strategies of VIPKid teachers, encompassing skills effective for the online synchronous instruction of young language learners. The framework was developed through a focus group process involving VIPKid teachers who serve on a rotating "Teacher Advisory Council" and a review of existing frameworks from language education (Compton, 2009; Hampel & Stickler, 2005, 2020; van Gorp et al., 2019) and technology-mediated teaching more broadly (Archambault & Barnett, 2010). Based on this process and review, a list of skills and strategies was compiled and organized into three skill areas: technology, which includes skills to manage basic technology issues and those to apply technology strategically for teaching and learning; pedagogy, which includes skills to facilitate effective learning experiences; and delivery, which includes skills that enable teachers to use creatively style their lessons and promote positive engagement.

Descriptive statistics were produced and analyzed for survey quantitative data. Qualitative free response data were analyzed using an exploratory coding approach (Saldaña, 2016) involving the sequential application of two methods: Descriptive Coding to identify topics in the data (Miles et al., 2014; Wolcott, 1994) and Concept Coding to help researchers "transcend the local and particular to more abstract or generalizable contexts" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 120).

The Interviews

From the sample of educators who responded to the primary survey (n=335), ten were interviewed to further investigate the survey data (**Table 2**). Participants were selected based on two considerations: (1) whether their survey free responses referenced patterns identified in the quantitative data (e.g., the challenge of engagement) and (2) demographic diversity (e.g., location, mode, role).

Table 2. Interview Participants Summary, n = 10

Location	AL, MI, NC, TN, CO, TX, PA, and VA
Mode	Hybrid: 6; Online: 4
Education	Bachelor's degree: 2; Master's degree: 7: Doctorate degree: 1; Professional degree: 0
Current Role	6 classroom teachers (Grades: 2nd , 5th, 7th/8th), an administrator, a high school librarian, a speech language pathologist, and an ESL teacher
Experience	7 with 10+ years and 3 with 20+ years experience in K-12 contexts

A semi-structured interview guide was developed and then adapted for each participant based on survey responses. The interview followed up on topics from the survey, including challenges of online and hybrid instruction, skills and strategies learned and developed with VIPKid, and how those skills and strategies transferred to online and hybrid K-12 contexts.

Transcripts of recorded interviews were first analyzed using Saldaña's (2016) suggested set of "generic" first cycle coding methods: Attribute Coding (2016), Structural Coding (Guest et al., 2012), and In Vivo Coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2016; Strauss, 1987). The authors used Attribute Coding to record participants' demographics and contexts and Structural Coding to label segments of the transcript by topic for further analysis. With In Vivo Coding, the authors took an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing any initial organization. Importantly, In Vivo coding works to "prioritize and honor the participant's voices" by coding the actual language participants used (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106). Next, Focused Coding was used to further develop major categories and themes (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). Validity is supported by the triangulation of quantitative data, qualitative data, and the literature.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we report the key results of the study by research question. Quantitative survey data are introduced alongside qualitative insights from the primary survey and interviews to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of the results.

RQ1: What challenges do K-12 teachers face in (new) online and hybrid teaching contexts?

Surveyed educators reported a range of new and perennial challenges in the K-12 online and hybrid contexts when asked to select three top challenges among the list provided in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Percentage of teachers selecting each challenge as a "top three challenge,'" n=335

K-12 Online and Hybrid Teaching Challenges	n	%
Making Materials Engaging and Appropriate	295	88%
Navigating Technology and Modes of Learning	221	66%
Feeling Connected to Other Teachers	179	53%
Communicating with Parents	140	42%
Establishing a Learning Schedule	122	36%
Accessing Professional Development	48	14%

Strikingly, 88% (n=335) of educators surveyed reported the challenge of making materials engaging. For a fifth-grade teacher from Alabama, the engagement challenge was defined by competing practical concerns regarding both how to "get the curriculum in" and a constant "flip-flopping" of schedules. They continued, "When teaching in a classroom..., you can move around a room, you can show everything, you can have something on the wall over there to show something... With the kids in the classroom, it works great. But for the kids that are virtual, it does not work."

As a backdrop to the challenge of student engagement, teachers described a rapid transition online marked by uncertainty: Schedules changed and school districts scrambled to respond to device and connectivity issues. Even for those educators whose districts had invested in technology prior to the pandemic, there were still challenges. A high school librarian from Texas reflected, "I think at the beginning we were just like, how do we get kids to log into Zoom? Like, how do we just get through that?" As the pandemic continued to impact education, conversations surrounding instruction evolved. The same Texas librarian reflected that educators who may have initially been in survival mode thinking "How do we get through it?" had to pivot to more pedagogical considerations like "What does engagement really look like?"

Beyond engagement, 66% reported the challenge of navigating new technology and modes of learning, which can be especially challenging with young learners and a frustration for parents. From helping six- and seven-year-olds navigate a range of apps, to working with students' parents and troubleshooting technology issues, "It's been difficult," shared a second-grade teacher from North Carolina bluntly.

Feeling connected to other teachers (53%) and communicating with parents (42%) also challenged surveyed educators. **Table 4** includes relevant in vivo codes organized by theme/sub theme showing how teachers described these challenges in interviews, reporting specific challenges related to disrupted patterns of peer collaboration and parent communication.

Table 4. In vivo codes by theme/sub-theme (Challenges/Peer Collaboration and Parents)

Challenges

Peer Collaboration (A)	Parents (B)
"in the building"	"so many places for parents to check"
"legally share"	"diverse community"
"share materials"	"sometimes hard to communicate"
"texting me on the phone [for help]"	"have to be careful"

Setting a learning schedule (36%) appeared to be a less prevalent challenge due to the influence institutions have in this area, but educators also reported occasional disconnects between their district's desired learning schedule and the actual needs of students and families. Despite only 14% of educators reporting the challenge of accessing professional development, educators said more on the issue in interviews. Educators described a variety of disconnects between the professional development they receive and some aspect of their or their students' needs, including appropriateness for their current teaching mode and system compatibility.

RQ2: What skills and strategies do K-12 educators develop through teaching EFL online with VIPKid?

Surveyed educators reported learning or developing skills at VIPKid across three areas: **delivery**, **pedagogy**, and **technology**. Table 5 shows the number (Column A) and percentage (Column B) of respondents who reported learning or developing the skill at VIPKid. Column B includes the percentage of respondents who reported learning or developing the skill at VIPKid and reported the skill helped with their current K-12 teaching challenges.

Table 5. Percentage of teachers developing skills at VIPKid in three areas: delivery, pedagogy, and technology, n=335

Areas and Skills	(A) Total (n=)	(B) Learned or Developed Skill at VIPKid	(C) Total Learned or Developed Skill at VIPKid (n=)	(D) Helped with K-12 Challenges
Delivery				
Using TPR, movement, and gesture	335	83%	278	73%
Using physical props	335	71%	237	67%
Creating a learner-friendly teaching background	335	68%	228	64%
Using digital props	335	65%	219	68%
Using videos, songs, stories, and rhyme	335	47%	157	69%
Celebrating milestones and other achievements	335	42%	141	76%
Sharing and soliciting personal background information	335	20%	68	63%
Pedagogy				
Providing error correction in class	335	63%	210	69%
Modeling target responses Measuring	335	59%	199	69%
student learning Setting	335	32%	108	70%
student learning goals	335	28%	94	72%
Communicating with parents outside of class	335	21%	70	76%
Technology				
Navigating the courseware or teaching platform	335	55%	183	61%
Using multiple apps or online tools together during class	335	53%	179	77%
Identifying and summarizing IT problems	335	49%	163	79%
Explaining courseware or learning platform to students	335	48%	161	73%
Sharing challenges and successes with peers	335	27%	92	74%

In the area of **delivery**, teachers learned a variety of flexible, low-resource skills. Eighty-three percent reported learning to use TPR[4], movement, and gesture. “Something like TPR is so simple,” said a special education teacher from Virginia. “And it doesn’t cost anything.” Other delivery skills learned by over 60% of educators included the use of physical props (like a handheld miniature whiteboard) and creating a learner-centered teaching background. Surveyed teachers reported these skills being some of the first they encountered in experiential learning opportunities, including onboarding, certification, conferences, and VIPKid online communities (e.g., Facebook groups).

Reflecting on some of these learning opportunities provided by VIPKid, a second grade teacher from NC observed: “They would do simple things [like TPR] that were kind of over the top, but yet with kids, they were very effective, you know?” This aligns with the suggestion that the language of the classroom “ought to have its own pedagogical naturalness...” because of the central role the classroom environment plays in student attitudes toward learning (Cots & Luzon, 1994, p. 53).

The **pedagogy** learned by educators included providing error correction in class (63%) and modeling target responses (59%). These skills are strongly associated with online EFL instruction at VIPKid and are likewise features of popular language teaching certifications (CELTA) and significant research agendas (Loewen, 2019; Maggilloli, 2018). In interviews, educators described developing new patience to address errors at appropriate time, preserving both flow and learner confidence and an instructional routine with modeling built in. This patience came from including correcting a variety of error types and modelling target responses based on age and skill level.

To successfully achieve those pedagogical objectives, educators reported learning **technology** skills to navigate the courseware (55%) and identify and summarize IT problems (48%). VIPKid provides extensive community support for its platform and an on-duty IT support staff called “Firemen” to handle in-class issues. Educators described how positive interactions with the Firemen and active community supported the learning of these skills.

[4] Total Physical Response (TPR) is an approach to language teaching which involves connecting language to body movements (Asher, 1974). It has been a common feature of professional development for teachers of young learners for decades (Cameron, 2010; Pinter, 2017). By definition, TPR requires that a student respond with a physical response. However, it is worth noting that within the VIPKid teacher community, teachers use “TPR” to describe a range of techniques, including more generic use of movement and gesture.

Related to **delivery**, **pedagogy**, and **technology**, educators also reported developing a confident presence in front of the camera (**Table 6**). It is important to highlight the significance of both "confidence" and "presence," especially in relation to teaching during the pandemic: Educators need more than skills and knowledge (Konig et al., 2020, p. 611) to be successful teaching online but are often "under-prepared with strategies to project presence" (Rehn, 2016 p. 1). without special training.

Table 6. Coded survey responses by concept (Confidence/Camera)

Confidence
Camera
"Self Awareness when in front of a camera."
"Getting comfortable with teaching online. aBefore VIPKID, I hated to be on camera. Now I feel more comfortable."
"I learned how to be ok with being on camera for an extended amount of time."
"Simply knowing how to manage myself on camera has been a very useful tool that I learned through VIPKid."

RQ3: What skills and strategies developed through teaching with VIPKid are most helpful in addressing the challenges of K-12 online and hybrid teaching?

Overall, 85% reported that VIPKid prepared them for their current K-12 online and hybrid teaching challenges (n=335).[5] Furthermore, surveyed educators reported that skills from all three areas of the VIPKid framework (**delivery**, **pedagogy**, and **technology**) were helpful across contexts (e.g., grade levels and roles). Table 5 shows the number of educators who reported learning each skill (Column C) and the percentage of those educators who reported that skill helpful in addressing their challenges (Column D).

When teachers transitioned online in their K-12 contexts, they reported a confident transfer of familiar **delivery** skills. Even for those who had experience with delivery techniques like this before VIPKid, there was an increased confidence applying them with students in newly remote situations. For example, 75% surveyed found celebrating milestones and achievements helpful in their newly remote situations. When asked by a colleague how they learned about using reward systems in online classes, one speech language pathologist from Pennsylvania commented, "With VIPKid, we do that all the time."

[5] This includes respondents who selected 4 or 5 on a Likert scale (1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree) in response to the following statement: "Teaching with VIPKid has prepared me for the challenges of mycurrent online or hybrid teaching role."

Of those educators who learned to use TPR, movement, and gesture, 73% reported finding the skill helpful with their K-12 challenges (**Table 5**). In a representative case, a middle school AVID teacher[6] from Virginia described using a gesture for "click the link" to direct students' attention to the chat box during class.

The use of props was also described across grade levels (physical: 67%; digital: 68%). In Colorado, a second-grade teacher used whiteboards and "silly little things" with her online learners. They note, "You can still have fun with the kids, even though they're in a different city - if I can do it with a kid in a different country." Other teachers noted how the skill transferred across ages. "I think props are huge because of engagement," said a former superintendent and middle school administrator from Michigan. "And it doesn't matter what age they are." Even for a high school librarian from Texas, "VIPKid took all of the fear out of [online teaching] for me." This suggests that educators find this skill helpful in bridging the "transactional distance" (Moore, 1997) they experienced in their new distance learning contexts.

Skills in the areas of **pedagogy** and **technology** also transferred to K-12 contents in similar ways to cross the "psychological and communications spaces" (Moore, 1997) created online between teacher and learner. In interviews, the transfer of these skills was often discussed as it related to teaching in one-to-one versus brick and mortar contexts (**Table 7**, Column A) and the needs of young EFL learners (Column B). For example, educators learned to adapt lessons based on student interests and encourage language production. More broadly, teachers discussed synthesizing what they've learned at VIPKid through one to one language teaching with their brick and mortar experience and subject matter expertise (Column C).

Table 7. In vivo codes by theme/sub-theme (Transfer: One-to one, Teaching language learners, and Bringing skills together)

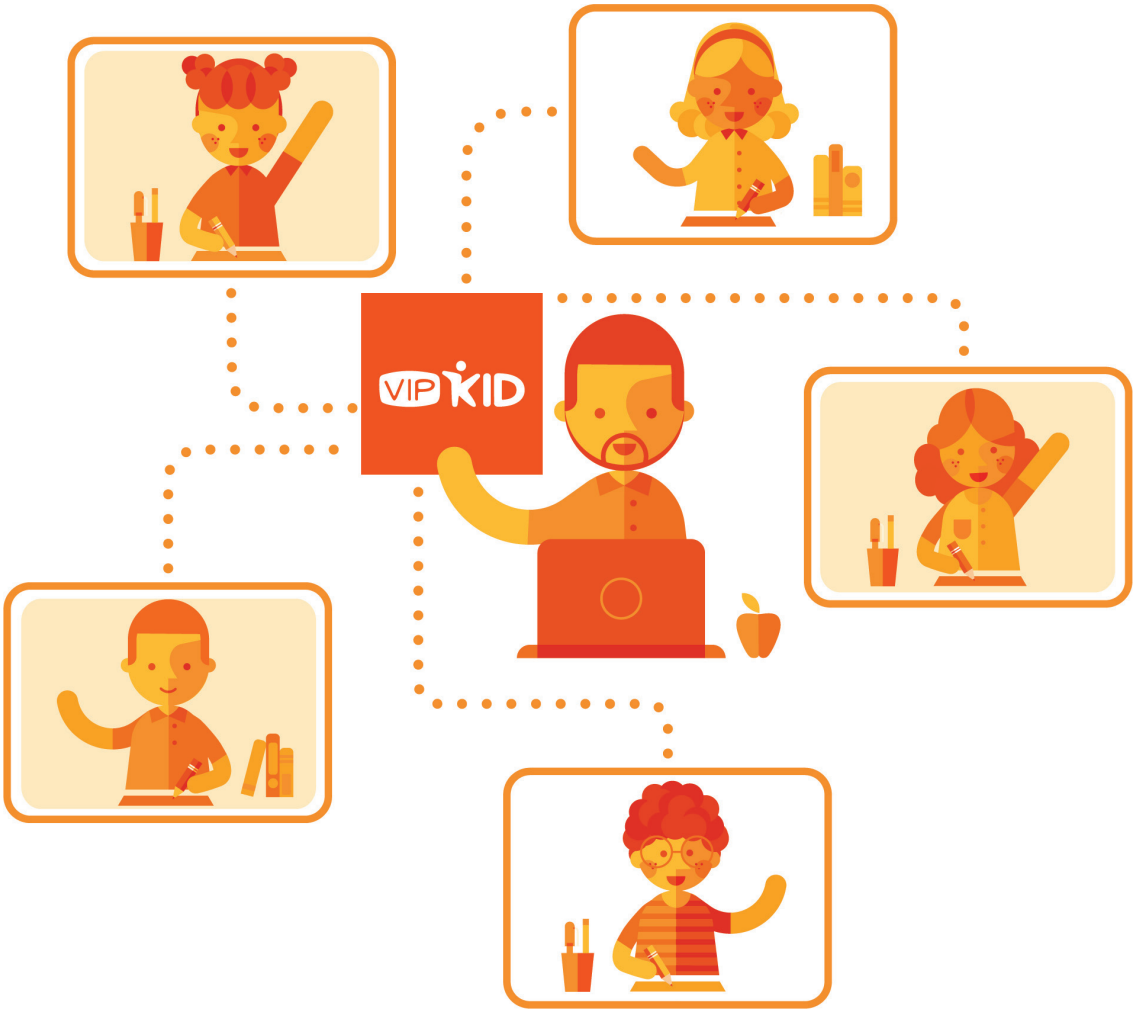
Transfer		
(A) One-to-one	**(B) Teaching language learners**	**(C) Bringing skills together**
"Just for the 30 minutes"	"Get them to extend"	"Bring all those pieces together"
"Like a team working through this"	"Language expansion and extension"	"Put it together"

[6] Advancement Through Individual Determination (AVID) is an academic support program for middle and high school students (AVID).

Conclusion

As stakeholders consider the future and direction of their investments in online education, this report offers a new understanding of the skills K-12 educators need to be successful online and explores how teachers are developing skills across contexts: online, hybrid or in-person.

When brick and mortar educators taught with VIPKid, they developed online teaching skills and strategies in the areas of **delivery**, **pedagogy**, and **technology** and found what they learned helpful when facing the most common challenges across K-12 contexts. Educators were clear about the value of their experiences across contexts and modalities: The skills they learned at VIPKid enable them to deliver effective pedagogy through technology, from a classroom to a living room.



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