Valuing and Supporting Multilingual Learner Students in High School English Language Arts Classrooms

SUMMARY

In this article, the authors explain the strategies frequently used in their own ELA classrooms to support and value ELLs. The authors' schools are affiliated with the Internationals Network for Public Schools and the strategies discussed reflect the five Core Principles developed by the school network.

We are Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and English language arts (ELA) teachers working at three different small high schools in New York City — International High School at Lafayette, Brooklyn International and Flushing International. Our schools are affiliated with the Internationals Network for Public Schools, which is a network of 22 schools and academies in New York City, the San Francisco Bay Area and the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Although our three schools have distinct traits, all of the schools are structured in a similar model that we believe best supports our English language learner (ELL) student population.

While we appreciate working in schools based on the Internationals Network for Public Schools model, we realize that many school contexts are structured very differently. In this article we will focus on the strategies we use to help our beginning, intermediate and advanced ELLs feel valued and supported in our ELA classrooms. We will also address how these strategies can be used by teachers in other contexts. These strategies have been informed by many of our esteemed colleagues' practices, our own classroom trials and tribulations, and many professional development opportunities within and outside the network.

Robin Perenchio teaches 11th grade English language arts at International High School at Lafayette in New York City and is a member of the United Federation of Teachers.

Sheila Aminmadani teaches 11th grade ELA at Brooklyn International High School in New York City and is a member of the United Federation of Teachers.

Natalie Solomon teaches ninth and 10th grade ELA at Flushing International High School in New York City and is a member of the United Federation of Teachers.

Claire E. Sylvan, Ed.D, founded the Internationals Network for Public Schools in 2004, and served as its first executive director until Jan.1, 2016. She was a teacher and leader for more than 25 years in New York City public schools.

Robin Perenchio, United Federation of Teachers
Sheila Aminmadani, United Federation of Teachers
Natalie Solomon, United Federation of Teachers
Claire E. Sylvan, Ed.D.

The model incorporates both instructional and structural elements. Our belief is that students come to us with tremendous, but very diverse assets that can best be actualized by creating opportunities for students to work together on projects. These projects, designed by teachers who work together in interdisciplinary teams, incorporate both language and content supports, goals and skills, and require students to collaborate. Since adult work and student work in schools always mirror each other, both the adults and the students work in collaborative groups that are project-oriented.

For the adults, time is structured into school schedules for regular interdisciplinary team meetings. Teams are responsible for working with students who travel in cohorts. Unusual for high schools, teachers from various disciplines work together and teach the same students, so they can learn from each other and best support the students. Any high school with large numbers of English learners can choose to adopt both the structures and the instructional practices, and any teacher in any school can implement the instructional strategies in his or her own classroom.

Throughout the school day, students at our schools simultaneously learn language and are immersed in an engaging and rigorous high school curriculum. The Internationals Network model values five Core Principles: heterogeneity and collaboration in our classrooms, experiential learning, language and content integration, localized autonomy and responsibility, and one learning model for all (Internationals Network for Public Schools). In addition to the five Core Principles, we also promote the integration of students' native languages into the curriculum. Students' native languages are both used as a vehicle to learn their target language (English) and valued as a core part of their multicultural and multilingual identities (Garcia & Wei, 2014). The five Core Principles will be discussed at further length throughout the article and are notable in that they inform our teaching practices and decisions, how our schools are organized, how faculty and staff interact with each other, as well as how we interact with students and families.

As high school teachers we only have a few short years to ensure our ELLs graduate high school ready for the next stage of their lives. Our students have

> Students come to us with tremendous, but very diverse assets that can best be actualized by creating opportunities for students to work together on projects.

Valuing and Supporting Multilingual Learner Students in High School English Language Arts Classrooms

> We embark on the challenge of ensuring our ELLs can graduate high school, ready for post-secondary success, by trying to provide ... opportunities for our students to use their new English language skills, while also supporting the development of their home languages.

rich experiences and knowledge acquired in prior schooling, their home countries and on their journeys to the United States. In our schools, at the time of admission all students have been in the U.S. for four years or less. More than 90 percent of students across the Internationals Network are eligible for free and reduced lunch. About 70 percent of our students have been separated from one or both parents in the course of immigration to the U.S., and many students do not live with their immediate, or even any, family members. In many of our schools, 30 percent or more of our students have had interrupted formal education. We embark on the challenge of ensuring our ELLs can graduate high school ready for post-secondary success, by trying to provide as many different opportunities for our students to meaningfully use their new English language speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, while also supporting the development of their home languages.

Our heterogeneous classrooms include students with many diverse needs. For example, in one 11th grade English language arts classroom it is likely there are students with limited or interrupted formal education (SIFE); students who are no longer classified as ELLs because they have passed the NYSESLAT exams; students who excel in speaking English, but struggle with academic writing; and students who have a disability. We utilize a number of different strategies in our own classrooms that provide our diverse students with many opportunities to accomplish their academic goals and prepare them for the next stage of their lives.

Why do we focus on these particular strategies? The Internationals Network for Public Schools' unique model has proven successful in addressing the academic, social, and linguistic needs of ELLs at the high school level (Ancess & Darling-Hammond, 1994; Zeiser et al., 2014). Research on tracking students has shown that those who might otherwise struggle academically actually do better in heterogeneous settings and in the long-run, all students perform better academically in untracked classrooms (Catambis, Milkey, & Craig, 1999). Furthermore, moving away from student tracking toward heterogeneous groupings has been shown to have broader-reaching impacts, with increased academic achievement resulting, together with students' increased self-esteem and improved interpersonal relationships (Oakes & Well, 1998; Slavin, 1993; Villa & Thousand, 2003).

The core structural element in our schools organizes teachers into interdisciplinary teams who share heterogeneous cohorts of students. The goal is to promote the development of academic English, credit accumulation and academic success for our students. Rather than ESOL teachers

being solely responsible for academic language development, interdisciplinary teams plan and design their instruction to maximize the development of academic language (Francis & Rivera, 2006). School structures and other supports are very important in ensuring teachers' effectiveness: heterogeneous grouping must be coupled with support for teachers to learn appropriate strategies to adapt their instruction (Daniel & King, 1997). Collaboration among teachers, particularly those with knowledge of language development and disciplinary knowledge, has been shown to enhance multilingual learners' academic performance (August & Hakuta, 1997; Desimone, Prater and Steed, 2011; Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly & Callahan, 2003; Varghese & Jenkins, 2005). Teacher collaboration provides a powerful format for teacher learning and has been shown to have a positive impact on English language development measures.

The need for collaborative experiential projects to promote academic achievement across the content areas is borne out of research that points out the need for collaborative tasks in order to effectively integrate language and content (Swain, 1999). The integration of language and content as well as developing collaborative experiential projects are instructional strategies that will provide ELLs access to and benefit from implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Saunders and Goldenberg (1999) demonstrate the importance for ELLs of language development techniques to grade-appropriate academic development and success. Finally, students' home languages are an often overlooked instructional resource. The creation of ample opportunities for students to use English in meaningful ways in experiential projects contributes to development of proficiency in English, and the use of students' home languages makes a significant contribution to their academic development (Saville-Troike, 1984).

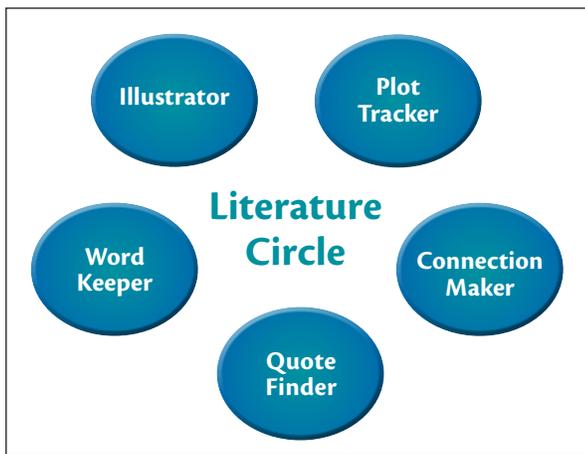**Our Strategies for Best Supporting Multilingual Learner Students:**

1. Heterogeneous grouping:
In alignment with the Core Principle "Heterogeneity & Collaboration" we strive to provide many opportunities for our diverse students to work with each other and support each other in our ELA classes.

■ Literature Circles: When reading a complex text, students participate in heterogeneous literature circles. A visitor in the room during a literature circle would see small groups of four to five students with a range of skill levels and native languages supporting one another as they read their assigned text. The main

> Teacher collaboration provides a powerful format for teacher learning and has been shown to have a positive impact on English language development measures.

Valuing and Supporting Multilingual Learner Students in High School English Language Arts Classrooms

Literature Circle

- Illustrator
- Plot Tracker
- Word Keeper
- Connection Maker
- Quote Finder

way the students support each other in the literature circle is by performing a specific task as the group reads and reflects on the text. This process continues over several classes and the roles are rotated amongst the students in the group. Example roles may include the "Connection Maker" (who is responsible for making connections between the text and another story, life or the world), the "Quote Finder," the "Illustrator," the "Word Keeper" (who keeps track of the important new vocabulary words) and the "Plot Tracker." We suggest assigning stronger students the more challenging roles, such as the "Plot Tracker," during the first few sessions to have them model the process for the other students in their literature circle.

■ Partner and small group work: Throughout the reading of a text, teachers use strategies such as Think-Pair-Share to help students organize their thinking about the text. A Think-Pair-Share uses the following protocol: the teacher proposes a question; students have time to think about their response; the students pair up with a partner to discuss their ideas; and finally,

some students share their pair's ideas with the whole class.

■ Seating arrangements: Our students sit in small clusters of desks or tables that seat three to five students. We consider factors such as gender, native languages, English proficiency, and personality traits when creating assigned seats. We hope that in their assigned seats students will use their fellow groupmates as a resource and support system. For example, when we provides our students with instructions, we also give students time to discuss and clarify the next steps in both English and their native languages.

2. Student choice:

The Internationals' Core Principles encourage all members of the school community to create environments that value "Localized Autonomy and Responsibility." As teachers, this informs our decision to provide our students with many meaningful choices throughout the year with the intention of encouraging students to take more ownership over their learning (Internationals Network for Public Schools).

■ Layered Curriculum: Based on Dr. Kathie Nunley's method for differentiating instruction, Layered Curriculum supports the variety of learning styles students come to the classroom with and allows them to

take ownership of their work, as they choose which projects they complete (Nunley, 2004). There are three layers, and each layer is composed of different activities that touch on varying levels of understanding and skill development. The foundational layer tests for understanding and helps build students' background knowledge. The second layer asks students to build on this understanding and apply the knowledge gained in the first layer. The third and most complex layer provides ways for students to extend their knowledge through critical thinking and analysis. Within each layer, students select the tasks to complete based on their individual learning styles and complete the work at their own pace. Each option comes with points, and students can acquire a certain amount of points per layer to complete the project. In the most ideal situation, a student will have a chance to complete all three layers.

■ Independent Book Project: The Independent Book Project is a simple but effective way to encourage students to approach reading with more excitement and interest. At the beginning of the project, we use the public library, our classroom libraries, and a variety of online resources to expose our students to many different novels. Students are then responsible for selecting a novel that they will read independently. Before they start reading, students must receive approval from their teacher to ensure that the novel is matched to their reading levels. Students read their books at home while completing a series of assignments that help demonstrate their understanding. Last year, 11th grade students chose books ranging from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.

3. Creative and meaningful student-centered projects:
Along with student choice, we also strive to create opportunities for our students to engage in creative and meaningful projects. We find that student-centered projects facilitate deeper thinking in a supportive environment.

■ Debates, performances, presentations, and Socratic discussions: All of these projects provide students with the essential opportunity to express their ideas and ask questions orally before writing a more formal essay. We often find many of our ELLs have important and interesting ideas they are ready and excited to share with their classmates in a structured project such as a debate or presentation. However, they may have less confidence when trying to write down these ideas in an essay that requires

Student-centered projects facilitate deeper thinking in a supportive environment.

Valuing and Supporting Multilingual Learner Students in High School English Language Arts Classrooms

Interdisciplinary projects help provide students with the vocabulary and broader contexts required to access the texts they are reading in their ELA class.

formal academic language. We find that if we provide students with the opportunity to prepare and present a debate in a group or participate in a Socratic discussion before requiring them to write down their ideas, they are much more successful in accomplishing their goals. These meaningful and student-centered projects also provide opportunities for students to collaborate and support each others' learning.

4. Interdisciplinary Projects:
The Internationals Core Principle "One Learning Model for All" means that the teachers and students collaborate with one another on a daily basis. Teachers try to plan interdisciplinary projects that help students develop language and content knowledge in a more streamlined and meaningful manner (Internationals Network for Public Schools).

■ Teachers work on grade-level teams (ninth and 10th graders are on the same team, so the 9/10 teacher teams mirror this). This collaborative work environment helps facilitate our success in providing students with the opportunity to complete interdisciplinary projects. We believe that interdisciplinary projects help provide students with the vocabulary and broader contexts required to access the texts they are reading in

their ELA class. During the 2013–14 school year, a ninth and 10th grade team of teachers at Brooklyn International High School collaborated on developing an interdisciplinary project focused on music. After learning about world music in social studies class, creating and performing an original song in theater arts class, examining the roots of American music in English class, studying fractions and musical notation in math class, and examining the science of sound in science class, the interdisciplinary project culminated in groups of students performing an original song and then leading a roundtable discussion about a topic of their choice related to music and music's role in all five disciplines. This is an example of a large-scale collaboration that happens once a year and requires that time be carved out and also demands plenty of patience. We recognize that this is not possible in all schools, but we strongly recommend interdisciplinary collaborations on smaller scales, as well. For example, during the 2014–15 school year, students in an 11th grade ELA class wrote different types of poetry from the perspective of various people in the Civil War, a feat that could not have been achieved without the history teacher's Civil War unit.

5. Support for native language development:

The "Language and Content" Core Principle shapes our belief that language is inseparable from content and that both components must be taught explicitly (Internationals Network for Public Schools).

■ Native language projects: Students complete projects in their native languages in many of their content courses. In an ELA class, this can include students writing poetry, memoirs or short stories in their native language.

■ Text-to-self journaling in native language: As students read a text, they write journal entries in their native languages that are connected to the text thematically. The journal entries help the students access their background knowledge and improve their writing fluency in their native languages (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

■ Active reading: Students practice annotating and text coding as they read, often using their native language to help them access the text. In an 11th grade English class, students will text code a short story by underlining sentences they think are important, circling new vocabulary words and putting an exclamation point next to events that surprise them.

6. Multiple modalities:

As ESOL and ELA teachers we are responsible for developing our students speaking, listening, writing and reading skills. As such, we strive to provide opportunities for students to use many different modalities for learning new content and language.

■ As we read a novel or play, we will watch the film version or look at images depicting important plot events. After reading an act of *A Raisin in the Sun*, we will show the film (with subtitles in English) to help solidify and expand on students' understanding of the text. It is also especially helpful for ELLs' language development to hear the words as they read the subtitles and watch the action on screen.

■ We also provide opportunities for students to listen while reading the text through using audio recordings and read alouds. For example, in the aforementioned Layered Curriculum, students may be asked to describe the main conflict in a novel. One project option could have them draw the conflict on paper or digitally, while another option could be to write a well-developed paragraph. Both tasks would require the student to provide a description of the conflict, whether it is internal or external, and the resolution.

As ESOL and ELA teachers we are responsible for developing our students speaking, listening, writing and reading skills.

Valuing and Supporting Multilingual Learner Students in High School English Language Arts Classrooms

7. Differentiated texts:

Our students are purposefully assigned to their classes to maximize heterogeneity. To include and support our diverse students in our projects we aim to provide them with differentiated versions of texts.

■ When possible, teachers will use graphic novels, simplified texts, summaries and chunks of texts to help diverse learners access complex texts. For example, when reading *Romeo and Juliet* in a ninth and 10th grade class with a mix of beginning, intermediate and advanced multilingual learner students, the teacher provided students with four different versions of the text: a beautifully illustrated graphic novel version of *Romeo and Juliet* by Gareth Hinds that includes small chunks of the original Shakespearean language; the *No Fear Shakespeare Romeo and Juliet* with Shakespeare's language "translated" into modern English; the Folger Shakespeare Library version with original Shakespearean English; and then a teacher-created version of *Romeo and Juliet* in which the teacher made copies of the Gareth Hinds graphic novel, whited out the Shakespeare text and added modern English appropriate for a beginning ELL student. Developing this many differentiated texts to help diverse students is a time-consuming process that can happen over many school years.

Conclusion

We have been using these many different strategies in our classrooms and have enjoyed adapting them to our students' different needs, interests, and backgrounds. We hope that other teachers will also embrace and experiment with these strategies in their classrooms. We know these strategies work because students come in with varied English proficiency and extremely varied academic skill and content knowledge. Yet, because they are using language actively to work with their peers in the variety of ways we describe above, students develop oral and eventually written proficiency in their new language as evidenced by their increasing proficiency in presenting projects, explaining summative portfolios of their work as well as passing New York State ELA exit examinations (Regents).

These strategies, which have been informed by the Internationals Network's Core Principles, have had a powerful impact on our students' success in high school. During the 2013-14 school year, Internationals Network schools had a four-year graduation rate of 64 percent compared with New York State's ELL graduation rate of 36 percent and New York City's ELL graduation rate of 37 percent, for August graduation rates (Kolodner).

Our schools also have strong college acceptance rates. For example, at Flushing International High School, 94

percent of students graduating in 2015 were accepted into college. During the 2014–15 school year, the International High School at Lafayette's college acceptance rate was 100 percent, with 60.3 percent of students accepted into four-year colleges; 39.7 percent were accepted into two-year colleges. Brooklyn International High School's college acceptance rates are similar. During this current school year, 2015–16, 78 students out of 80 students at Brooklyn International applied to college and 100 percent of those students have been accepted into either a four- or two-year college.

References

Ancess, J. & Darling-Hammond, L. (1994). Authentic teaching, learning, and assessment with new English learners at International High School. New York: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching.

August, D.L., & Hakuta, K. (1997). *Improving schooling for language-minority learners.* Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Catambis, S., Milkey, L.M., & Craig, R.L. (1999). To track or not to track? The social effects of gender and middle school tracking. *Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization*, 12, 135-163.

Francis, D.J. & Rivera, M. (2006). *Research-based recommendations for serving adolescent newcomers.* Houston, TX: University of Houston, Center on Instruction.

Gandara, P., Rumberger, R., Maxwell-Jolly, J., & Callahan, R. (2003). English Learners in California Schools: Unequal resources, unequal outcomes. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 2, (36)1-54.

Garcia, O. & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Internationals Network for Public Schools. (2013). Internationals' Approach. Retrieved from *http://internationalsnps. org/about-us/internationals-approach/*

Kolodner, M. (2015, May 8). These schools graduate English learners at a rate nearly 75 percent higher than other schools. What are they doing right? The Hechinger Report. Retrieved from *http://hechingerreport.org/these-schools-graduate-english-learners-at-a-rate-nearly-75-percent-higher-than-other-schools-what-are-they-doing-right/*

Nunley, K. (2004). *Layered Curriculum: The Practical Solution for Teachers with More Than One Student in Their Classroom* (2nd ed.). Amherst, NH: Brains.org.

Oakes, J., & Wells, A.S. (1998). Detracking: The social construction of ability, cultural politics, politics, and resistance to reform. *Teachers College Record*, 98, 483-511.

Slavin, R.E. (1993). Ability grouping in the middle grades: Achievement effects and alternatives. *Elementary School Journal*, 93, 535-552.

Varghese, M. & Jenkins, S. (2005). Challenges for ESL teacher professionalization in the United States: A case study. *Intercultural Education*, 16 (1), 85-95.

Villa, R. & Thousand, J. (2003), Making inclusive education work. *Educational Leadership*. 6 (2), October 2003, pp: 19-23.

Zeiser, K, Taylor, J., Rickles,J., and Garet, M. (2014) . Evidence of Deeper Learning Outcomes (3 of 3). Findings from the Study of Deeper Learning: Opportunities and Outcomes. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

Additional Resources

Colombi, M.C. (2002). Academic language development in Latino students' writing in Spanish. In Schleppegrell, M. & Colombi, M.C. (Eds.), *Developing advanced literacy in first and second languages: Meaning with power* (pp. 67-86). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Creese, A. & Blackledge, A. (2010). Translanguaging in the Bilingual Classroom: A Pedagogy for Learning and Teaching? *The Modern Language Journal*, 94(1), 103-115.

Cummins, J. (1991). Interdependence of First- and Second-Language Proficiency in Bilingual Children. In E. Bialystock (Ed.), *Language Processing in Bilingual Children* (pp. 70-89). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49, 2222-2511.

García, O., Kleifgen, J., & Falachi, L. (2008). From English language learners to emergent bilinguals. *Equity Matters: Research Review No 1.* New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University. Retrieved from *http://www.tc.columbia. edu/equitycampaign/index.asp?Id=PUB LICATIONS&Info=Equity+Matters+Re search+Reviews*

Mansilla, V.B. & Jackson, A. (2011). *Educating for Global Competence: Preparing Our Youth to Engage the World.* New York: Asia Society. Retrieved from *https://asiasociety.org/ files/book-globalcompetence.pdf*

The Shape of Deeper Learning: Strategies, Structures, and Cultures in Deeper Learning Network High Schools (1 of 3) | American Institutes for Research. (n.d.). Retrieved from *http://www.air. org/resource/shape-deeper-learning-strategies-structures-and-cultures-deeper-learning-network-high*