



Empowering ESL Students for Leadership and Literacy

SUMMARY

Middle school educators at Ditmas IS 62 use current events and social justice as a springboard to tap into ESL students' life, content and cultural expertise. While the following article shares how students expanded a unit on Malala Yousafzai into a forum on children's right to education, educators can use a great number of topics related to relevant cultural, historical, or social issues to initiate rich classroom discussion and to empower ESL students as learners and leaders.

Too often middle school content

teachers, and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in particular, are focused on making sure that their students show measurable academic score improvement in second language acquisition. For all students, literacy skills that translate to real-world situations may be more valid as they have the potential to lead to empowering social competencies. English language learner (ELL) students bring familiarity with international culture, and their political and educational life experiences are often different from those of their U.S.-born peers. Facilitated reflections that

incorporate individual life experience foster student empowerment and give students the opportunity to discuss important social issues while honing their language skills. Collectively, these experiences can be employed to develop real-world products for an authentic audience beyond the classroom. Such activities offer the ELLs tremendous opportunities for second language acquisition and personal achievement gains. And in the process, the students are also becoming advocates for social justice and crucial participants in an increasingly global society.

In devising an academic program that would build upon students' diverse

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backgrounds, we contemplated the following questions: *Can the study of a social justice issue using a literary analysis of digital texts work for ELLs in a Title 1 middle school? Is this a viable approach for staff who are evaluated on students' standardized test scores?*

At Ditmas IS 62, teachers have been able to address the rigorous academic English language skills by deliberately focusing on relevant social justice issues. In this way, they are not forced to sacrifice good curriculum for the sake of preparing students for mandatory standardized tests. Beyond just having ELLs read, analyze and comment on news articles and digital media sources, the educators encourage ELLs to exercise social justice and American citizenship rights by publishing their ideas in an online/print newspaper *The Ditmas Bulldog Buzz*. Students also lead discussions on these issues with their peers from the regular school population and with peers from other public and parochial schools. Students run events with their peers and for large audiences of adult community stakeholders as well. As they acquire

second language skills, they are able to immediately demonstrate and utilize the hard-won international life experience and cultural knowledge they bring to the table as citizens of the world.

A Diverse Student Body

Ditmas IS 62 in Kensington, Brooklyn is a Title 1 school and ELLs comprise more than 23 percent of its student body. The ELLs who arrive at Ditmas are not homogeneous. Thirteen percent of them are Newcomers from a range of diverse countries including Bangladesh, China, India, Uzbekistan, Russia, Haiti, Mexico, Ecuador, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Liberia. A majority of our students come from families receiving public assistance. Some live with guardians who are not their parents. They have had varying degrees of educational experience and language proficiencies can range.



Ms. Sofia Rashid and students.



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SIOP: Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

The SIOP method includes 8 interrelated components:

- Lesson preparation
- Building background
- Comprehensible input
- Strategies
- Interaction
- Practice and application
- Lesson delivery
- Review and assessment

(Center for Applied Linguistics, 2015)

In recognition of these students' differences, students with little or no previous schooling in their native countries are placed in "welcome classes" on each grade level. Others are placed in advanced beginners, intermediate and advanced classes. Each of these classes is taught by one licensed ESL teacher. Several of our ESOL staff members were ELLs themselves in elementary and secondary school.

Infusing the SIOP Protocol across the Curriculum

The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is an instructional research-based model used to target the needs of English language learners. The model is focused on developing

multi-content vocabulary and building background so that content can be connected to the academic and linguistic needs of English language learners.

While our licensed ESL professionals work diligently and use the SIOP to achieve their goals, they do not work solo with their ELLs (Eschevarria, 2010). Validating the insights of Villegas and Lucas, our educators believe, "The knowledge of a child derived from personal and cultural experience is central to . . . learning (2002, p.25)." ESL professionals work on collaborative teams with English language arts partners, social studies partners, reading teachers, schoolwide media production teams and literacy support educators to engage international hard earned expertise in politics, comparable educational systems, human rights, and American dreams of the ELLs. This authenticates the research of Villegas & Lucas (2002) that drawing on students' experiences with opportunities to represent student background and life experience in the curriculum is meaningful for the students.

The SIOP system focuses on word knowledge and extensive analysis of content which is aligned to grade level subject curricula. Students are aware at the start of the lesson that they have a specific stated content objective and specific learning objectives. These learning objectives are posted in terms

In terms of social justice issues and American civil liberties/freedoms, the ELLs have tremendous comparative political systems knowledge which they can bring to the classroom.

of what students will be able to do. They include literacy tasks such as: take a position and defend it in a paragraph with two details, argue a position in words and defend it, develop an opening sentence for a paragraph, and develop a Venn diagram comparing two topics. Students are often put into groups and also work from and use rubrics to assess their work as well as direct comments from teachers. SIOP encourages the use of digital media texts, print texts, group discussions, project-based learning and individual student products.

Unlike other middle schools, where SIOP may be a well-researched teaching methodology for enhancing ENL vocabulary and content gains only, at Ditmas the SIOP structure is the schoolwide accepted lesson plan structure for every teacher. Since the SIOP structured lesson plan is common to all teachers at Ditmas, its use facilitates collaboration among ESOL educators and colleagues who teach native language speakers. But at Ditmas, team teaching potential is deliberately tapped by Principal Barry Kevorkian, other administrators and ESL Coordinator Toniann Hammel. Its goal is to build ongoing collaboration from all educators into regular academic programming. This approach favors student-centered, project-driven, authentic learning goals, and related student outcomes can transcend

traditional English academic reading and writing gains.

The SIOP approach explicitly connects each content objective as much as possible with the content knowledge the ELLs bring to the content. Often this is vast, but the ELLs do not yet have the English to express it. In terms of social justice issues and American civil liberties/freedoms, the ELLs have tremendous comparative political systems knowledge which they can bring to the classroom.

The Malala Unit

Over the last two years, ESOL, social studies, and literacy support teachers have tapped into one particularly relevant social justice issue by using Malala Yousafzai and her personal human rights movement on universal education for girls. Malala was shot in the head on a Pakistani school bus for advocating for girls to be educated. Two years later, at 17-years old, Malala became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

The study on Malala offered a readily accessible and visually recognizable focus for study. Of course, with every ENL class having at least two to three students from Pakistan or from countries where education is not free for all, Malala’s movement resonates far more

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Some of the key Malala quotes selected by the team of teachers for their powerful imagery:

“One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world.”

“When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.”

“I raise my voice not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard.”

“I told myself, Malala, you have already faced death. This is your second life. Don’t be afraid — if you are afraid, you can’t move forward.”

deeply for some ELLs than for their U.S.-born peers who know education as something available to all.

The Malala Unit uses Yousafzai’s book as a core text in addition to the available online footage of her speeches and awards. Students first view the videos and then focus as readers, writers and thinkers on a selection of Malala’s quotes. They collaborate with peers to write their own news articles by taking a position on the issues presented in the interviews. Finally, they create a poster, and give an oral presentation about Malala’s social justice movement.

Although SIOP content objectives are all connected, in the units on constitutional freedom and Supreme Court decisions, the learning objectives ask students to explain or retell Malala’s short quotes. Some of the key vocabulary for the unit included: social justice, extremists, universal rights, advocacy, terrorists, and crusade.

Teachers used online American broadcast and print media sources to trigger ELLs’ prior knowledge. Sadly many have had experiences of violence close up. In addition, when *New York Times* video showed the Taliban publically beheading persons who violated their orders (which some students thought was a staged film component), the students from Pakistan — two from Malala’s Swat Valley region said they did not think the footage was staged

for a feature. The students from Swat shared that they had witnessed beheadings. Of a class of 14 students, at least six had seen killings close at hand with guns and knives. One mentioned seeing, when he was only 8 years old, a person attacked and bleeding. Educators Rashid and Reissman exchanged telling glances as they both reflected on how these comments highlighted the way that student prior knowledge can result in authentic ownership and sometimes painful student sharing. Several students from Pakistan talked about Malala and mentioned the fact that she was not always viewed positively by some native Pakistani; the attack on her and her international presence ultimately brought negative attention to Pakistan. Many of the students — beyond those from Pakistan but including those from Uzbek, Bangladesh, and Haiti watched the CNN interview and footage after Malala’s shooting intently.

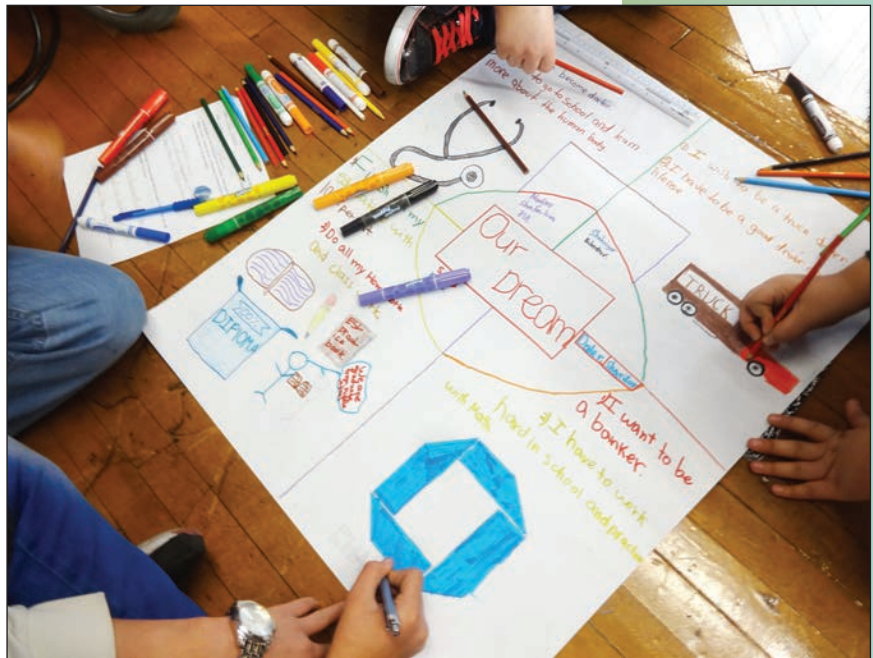
The important element here, as with all discussions that bring to surface the pain students have suffered outside the classroom and in their native countries, is to allow them to voice their emotions using their own words. By respectfully and sensitively allowing this expression, emotions and experiences are dignified and to some extent let out for sharing. Often the teacher can comment that having seen and experienced this at a young age makes the student all the stronger and wiser about the

realities of life. The respect students give one another within the classroom and the respect with which the teacher acknowledges this sharing concretizes and deepens the true life lesson component of this unit. ESOL educators Helms (born in Russia) and Reissman infuse current events content with their own autobiographies to bring content to life in a personal context for students and assure them that like the teachers, students are part of a world social justice community.

Social Justice Leadership

- After viewing different videos or her speeches and interviews, students discuss the selection of Malala quotes, which are then printed on the large chart paper.
- Students were then divided into groups of no more than four per group (classes had a maximum of 20 students) and were asked to focus as a team on the quotes.
- Student teams spent five minutes at each poster chart, talking about the quote and creating an artistic or written reaction to it.

The type of commentary to be placed on the chart was left up to the team. Some teams chose to reword the saying. Individuals in other teams wrote or drew their graphic responses to the quotes. Next, team teachers did a



“gallery walk” which served as an Expo of learning.

The final half of the lesson was spent discussing and reacting to the written and graphic responses presented on the poster charts. Because some students were too self-consciousness about their ability to communicate in English, Rashid developed special prompts encouraging them to expand on their arguments for or against Malala’s key social justice ideas. Reissman (who told the students that their work would probably be the centerpiece of the biannual Ditmas Writing Institute Expo and might be included in the Ditmas Bulldog Buzz newspaper) also asked students to respond in writing to selected prompts:

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Students create a graphic response to a selected quote.

Writing Prompts:

1. Do you, based on your life experience agree or disagree with Malala that one voice rose to protest and use of writing or communication can change the world? Malala is saying that she believes young persons can be involved in making social justice happen. Do you agree with her or not? Explain why or why not? There is no single correct answer to this question. Many adult citizens agree with Malala and many do not. In addition to using writing to voice your position, you can also create a graphic illustration or poster to express whether you agree or disagree with her about the ability of one young person to change the world.
2. Malala paid a price for her belief in social justice and use of her voice, pen, and books to fight for others. Malala was shot in the head. She took a bullet for her beliefs in social justice. While Malala had been threatened and did not believe that as a girl she would be shot, she resolved after coming through the shooting alive and competent (but physically disfigured because the bullets passed through her head), that she would continue to be physically and vocally visible as a fighter for social justice. She certainly knows that even though she is a celebrity, her speeches to the

United Nations and meetings with leaders make her even more of a target for those same extremists who would want to kill her because she is such a well-known symbol of social justice. In light of what she has already suffered while she is still a teenager (even in 2015, Malala is just 18 years old), should Malala continue to make potentially dangerous appearances or should she return to private life and studies? Should she save her own life (she and her family now live in the United Kingdom) or continue on her mission without thought for her safety? Again there is no correct answer but use at least two to three details to support your argument. You may also make a graphic art display. You may also pose this question to your family members living here with you or to those living abroad and do a presentation based on their life experience and perspectives.

The students had a few days to work on their arguments for Malala's positions to which there are really no clear cut correct answers. Just as citizens in our global world grapple with their individual positions on social justice and the value of one individual's ability to effect change, so did the students produce writings and art that expressed their diverse views on this issue.

Poetry Response to Prompt 1

Grief

I awoke in the night.

In a terrible fright,

I stay still-

Careful not to move

Listening to the silent thumping of the hearts.

I continue to think-

To link-

A nightmare to the reality,

When I get up-

I feel like giving up.

“He is dead”

: Deep words

That make you sink

And think-

Is this really grief?

Then over time you realize

To accept an evil-

That you can change.

It helps you to stop reaching.

— By Ifa F.

Impact beyond the ENL Classroom

Our ELL students had additional opportunities to share their learning after the Malala Unit. The students

and their ESL teacher Rashid were invited to share their responses and poster gallery to a sixth-grade social studies honors class who were asked to connect Malala’s thinking with other advocates of social justice. The students also took their poster boards and their jigsaw approach to the younger peers and shared their international perspectives on Malala and some of their first-hand experiences in societies where beheadings in a public square are not unheard of or access to free public education was not a right but a paid privilege. They explained that access to education was usually based on economic, social and gender status. Educators Rashid and Nolan developed a feedback survey so that the ELL presenters not only experienced the immediate positive interaction of their younger sixth-grade peers, but also had written responses as concrete evidence of their leadership experience. The younger peers were excited to be taught by the older ones. They recognized and were thrilled to hear that some of the older students actually were from Pakistan. They asked questions and applauded. Several wrote that they would like these eighth graders to return and “teach” them again.

Inspiring a Ditmas News Network Broadcast

The ELL student leadership and peer teaching experience at Ditmas did not end with a visit to one regular

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education classroom. These student leaders were then interviewed by the Ditmas Network News team for a broadcast. The question was: *Would you be a single voice for social justice as Malala is, even if you had been shot in the head?* Student reporters distributed this question to a sampling of students at Ditmas, adults and



Ms. Rashid teaching

neighborhood community members. Afterward, the ELLs had a chance to reflect on the reactions of their American-born peers. The survey showed that the majority would not take a bullet for social justice as Malala did. The survey also showed that most would not be inclined to continue advocating for universal rights to education after surviving a traumatic shooting. Clearly, the ELLs had a deeper appreciation of the mandatory public education system in the United States than did the American natives. For many of the ELLs, even those from China and Mexico, mandatory sustained regular school attendance was not a given. Some came from families who could not afford to pay for their private schooling. Some came from families where they attended

school sporadically or were kept home because they had work to do for the family. Many came from cultures where they had experienced the social, financial, and emotional consequences of not having an education. They had a deeper prior experience, life knowledge grasp of what the consequences of no schooling or limited schooling were in the context of their societies.

Leading and Networking

At Reissman's schoolwide Writing Expo, which featured displays produced by more than 475 Ditmas students, participants met with local community parents and adults. Their interactive discussions with adult visitors (including educators from a Jewish Special Education High School) and the poster board presentations were an extension of the classroom-based project and validated their leadership work.

The adult members were asked to respond to the same questions students had wrestled with in Ms. Rashid's class. Students heard firsthand from adults about how the issues pose threats that are real for all citizens. They helped to develop artifacts of multilingual responses to their classroom work. Among their artifacts were editorial cartoons of social justice issues and graphic illustrations/posters using images of education from Malala quotes. They used their own native

language and comments from their neighbors and families in tandem with English language responses. In addition, alongside the other leaders of Reissman's Writing Institute, the ELLs teamed up with their American native student peers (as did Rashid, Reissman, Nolan, and Downes) in running a general Expo using classroom developed displays of learning to converse with adult parents, community members and civic leaders.

But the ELL leadership in literacy did not end with the Expo. When Reissman and Downes developed a print/online student newspaper, the ELL leaders used their Malala project to react to world events as journalists do. With that leadership and citizenship experience, they contributed stories on how the collapse of a Pakistani school, the spread of Ebola, and the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks affected them as citizens of the world and also as young leaders bringing international perspective to the issues of appropriate reaction to terrorist actions in face of religious values. Just as world opinion did not offer a single clear cut and justifiable response, nor did that of the students (see excerpts from *Ditmas Bulldog Buzz* Issue 3). It was clear that the Malala study for ELLs set the groundwork for lifelong social justice and leadership engagement in global and local news.

Student Work Samples:

More Mental Health Facilities Needed

Having more mental health facilities will prevent teen brawls. Most of the students who are arrested for violent crimes have smiles on their faces. These smiles show they are not functioning properly in terms of mental and emotional health.

When you are mentally ill, it is difficult to comprehend the borderline between right and wrong.

— *Jasmine C.*

Pro Immunization

I remember getting shots as a child. I was screaming the whole time. But my mother forced me to get them. . . . Various parent and citizen groups whose children attend public schools want to opt out of shots.

While I screamed as a 6 year old, now as a 12 year old journalist who has done the research, I want the adult world to opt into having children get these shots in the arm to keep them from harm. My mother was on target!!

— *Starlin V.*

Cross Curricular Connections

The Malala story focused on education rights and Yousafzai's reaction to

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Sample expo visitor comment:

"It is so awesome to be talking about international issues with students and to hear their passion! I am touched by how I see so many commentaries and works of art about international freedom, rights and children's needs. It was great not only to visit the Expo but to hear how proud the students were of their work and see how the team from many different classes worked together."

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being barred from school by the Taliban. So it was natural for students to share some prior life experiences from different international cultures. Students compared the United States with their native school systems (if they had gone to school in these countries).



Student Javariya B. works on the Ditmas News Network.

ESL teacher Rashid asked them to compare other school disciplinary policies with those of Ditmas.

During the 2014–15 school year, changes in New York City public school suspension policies added a relevant contemporary layer to this discussion. Rashid, Helms and Reissman had the students draw, act out and then

write about school punishments and suspensions in their native countries. School administrators came in to class to share first-hand the details of their school discipline code responsibilities.

Students read articles about the changes in the city department of education suspension policy and compared them to punishments administered in Uzbek and other students' homelands. In comparing and contrasting the systems' differences, many admitted sharing a preference for the stricter expulsion rich policies of their native countries.

Conclusion

Citizenship starts in your middle school classroom and is boundless; one voice expressed, one piece of artwork, one written response or discussion at a time. Malala Yousafzai's experience with terror and her efforts to launch a global education campaign for girls serves to inspire all of our ELLs to express, examine, and investigate what they can filter through the mosaic of their own perspectives. Although this paper has focused on one unit of study, engaging students to study Malala Yousafzai is not the sole focus of this strategy. Any Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages can use the day's news to find a local or international event that may serve as a relevant springboard for a literacy- and content-rich investigation for the classroom. ELLs bring so much prior international life experience to our schools. This experience can help to initiate rich classroom discussion on a great number of topics related to relevant cultural, historical, or social issues.

Sometimes we as teachers seem to stay focused on improving only the measurable gains of English language acquisition and students' test taking abilities. With that, it is easy to miss the rich content and authentic learning experiences that invite students to grow both academically and socially. A curriculum rich in social justice issues does not detract from the goal of improving

Through content-rich experiences ... seamless literacy gains will be accelerated by authentic speaking, listening, and discussing, and through writing and artistic expression.

measurable learning outcomes. By focusing on content that is relevant to students as adolescents and aspiring citizens of the world, we allow students to express their life experiences, connect these to ongoing social issues, and serve as school/community proactive leaders. Gay notes that the goal of culturally responsive education is to “connect in-school learning to out of school living (2010, p.4).” Through such content-rich experiences like running an Expo, partnering with U.S.-born school peer leaders, and serving on a schoolwide newspaper, seamless literacy gains will be accelerated by authentic speaking, listening, and discussing, and through writing and artistic expression.

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