



# Community Building in the ENL Classroom and Beyond

## SUMMARY

Relationship building among students, teachers, staff members, and parents, is very important to the overall success of the greater school community. In this practical and innovative project, English language learners create a virtual video tour of the school community using a variety of learning activities. This project enables ELLs to work on language skills and enhance their writing, listening, speaking, and reading skills in English, while motivating and building their confidence.

*In 1916, John Dewey said, “If we teach*

*today as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow,”* this is true today as much as it was then. The role of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has progressively changed over the past two decades. Over time, the cultural origins and population of students in New York has drastically altered and our public schools have become increasingly diverse.

According to the New York City Department of Education’s 2013 Demographic Report, more than 41 percent of students enrolled in public schools speak a language other than English at home (NYC DOE, 2013). The numbers appear to be on the rise; currently, approximately half a million students qualify for English as a New

Language (ENL) services and accommodations in the five boroughs. These numbers only reflect New York City and do not include the recent massive influx of undocumented minors on Long Island. Our school district is a small district on the East End of Long Island, where nearly half of the students in the district speak a language other than English at home. Given the recent changes in the school population, students and teachers are challenged to keep up with the pace.

Education is constantly evolving and in this age of technology things are moving at a much faster rate. Teachers, especially ESOL teachers, are now feeling even more pressure to do it all: implement the Common Core State Standards in our daily lessons, prepare our students for the NYSESLAT and other state tests, and utilize technology in our teaching techniques. ESOL

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teachers not only have to teach language skills, prepare students for rigorous academic content, utilize technology, but at the same time help students to adjust to their new environment and adapt to both their school and greater communities. Partnerships and outside communities can translate into productive interactions among students and bring the kinds of improved learning outcomes that education reform seeks (Zacarian, 2015). To this end, we created a project in which the English language learner students would utilize technology to develop academic and language skills, while at the same time promote their knowledge of and interaction with the greater school community.

**Speaking English Can Be Scary**

Sometimes ELLs, because of their language limitations, feel isolated and lack the self-confidence needed to interact with their peers and members of the community. Likewise, native English speakers can be reluctant to engage with ELLs because of their own possible difficulty communicating. ELLs are often reluctant to speak in English

for fear of making mistakes, mispronouncing words, and speaking with an accent. However, being able to communicate with others, communicative competence, is far more important than perfect grammar and pronunciation (Gass, 2001).

Focusing on interpersonal communication outweighs speaking with native-like proficiency, since the primary goal of language is communication (Lessow-Hurley, 2003). Additionally, ELLs often do not know the roles of various school community members and/or how to appropriately interact with them. Some language varieties can be construed as less socially acceptable than others, what is appropriate to say to a friend or peer might not be appropriate to say to an adult or a stranger. ELLs may also be apprehensive about approaching unknown people in their new surroundings.

Getting students motivated to converse in English with native English speakers can be challenging. Varying pedagogical practices in the classroom increases the levels of students' motivation to complete tasks. While students can be reassured by consistent routines in the

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classroom, if not diverted from time to time, they can also lead to inattentiveness and boredom. In order to improve students' enthusiasm and self-confidence, cooperative projects allow all students to participate in the activity and contribute to the final product (Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

When teaching, increasing enthusiasm and getting students motivated is often half the battle. Motivation is one of the strongest indicators of

success, only second to intelligence (Skehan, 1989). Additionally, today's students get excited by and want to interact with technology more than ever. Creating a high level of interest leads to better participation and better language output (Swain, 1985).

With the variety of technology available teachers can differentiate for each student's individual needs and the ease of mobility allows for interaction outside of the classroom with

### Common Core State Standards addressed in this project:

#### **Comprehension & Collaboration**

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

#### **Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas**

4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

#### **Text Types & Purposes**

2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

#### **Production & Distribution of Writing**

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others. Research to Build and Present Knowledge
7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

the greater community. Having the students interact with members of the school community gives the students higher levels of comprehensible input by exposing them to various native English speakers and helps students to gain knowledge about and connect with people outside of their classroom (Krashen, 1985). Teaching can be done more effectively and meaningfully when all the community members are working collaboratively to make learning much more successful for all involved, by drawing from various strengths and knowledge of the community as a whole (Zacarian, 2015).

### **The Project: Encouraging Intercommunication**

The School Community project was created to enable the ELLs to navigate their new language, culture and community by creating a virtual video tour of the school, interviewing various members of the school population and relating information about the places around the school building and grounds.

The project began with discussion about the important people and places in the community. Students were given a blueprint of the school building and grounds, a photo directory of key people for the students to refer to, along with key vocabulary directly related to the project. An important part of the learning process is involving



*Students prepare to record their video.*

parents as partners to make a connection between home and school.

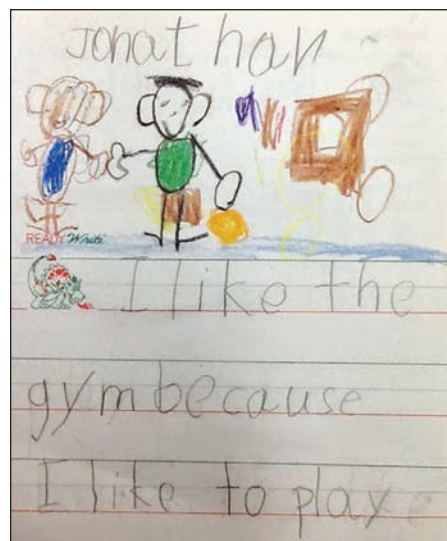
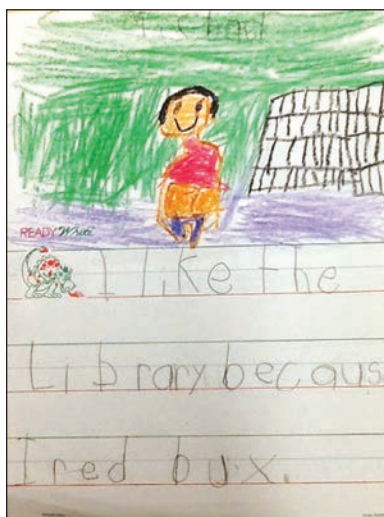
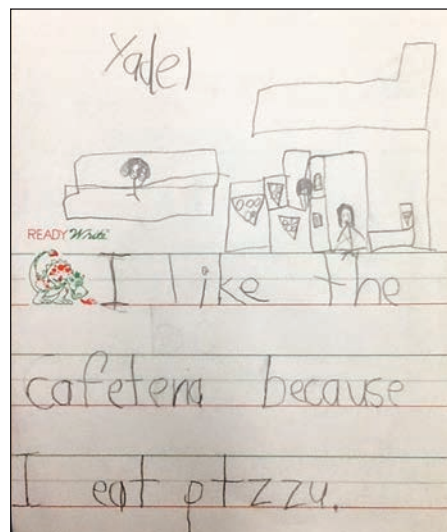
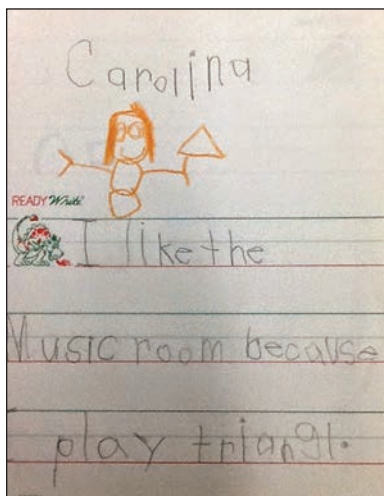
Parents were notified about the school community project and information was sent home for them to review as a family. The discussion was a precursor to having the students interact with the greater school community. Prior to engaging with the people outside the classroom, students went on a scouting mission where they were able to view, photograph and record the people and places they encountered. They then took their digital data back to the classroom for discussion and analysis.

Scouting the targets before engagement assisted in developing background knowledge of the various roles and purposes of people and places around the school, and helped the ELLs to obtain a familiarity, in order to make their experience less intimidating.

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*Kindergarten students completed informational pieces about areas of the school they had visited.*

The project was divided into different activities that were scaffolded for different language ability levels, each with a content and language objective, ensuring that all tasks and lessons were observable and measurable. The activities included a photo scavenger hunt, creation of a photo-map of the school, vocabulary building through class discussions of people and places around the building including their roles and uses, writing summary reports of their

favorite people and places, creating interview questions, conducting and filming interviews, peer editing and reshooting as needed, as well as giving each other constructive feedback. Heterogeneous partnerships were formed and the work was differentiated to meet the individual levels and needs of each student.

The students were split into groups, each with their own goal, which would form a piece of the final project. The first task required the students to write an informational piece about several places around the school that they had visited. See examples of student work at left.

The groups were given choices of several different writing activities of varying levels, from completing a graphic organizer, writing one or two paragraphs, to writing an essay, in order to describe what they had learned about each location and the people within it. For example, "Mrs. C is from Ecuador. She speaks English and Spanish. She works in the office talking to people on the telephone, she is the lady that calls my mom." or "The bus driver is important to all kids, he gets us to school on time and takes us home. He also is in the cafeteria at lunch time to help."

The students then used their writing as reference in creating monologues for a virtual video tour of the building, or

compiling a list of questions for interviewing school community members.

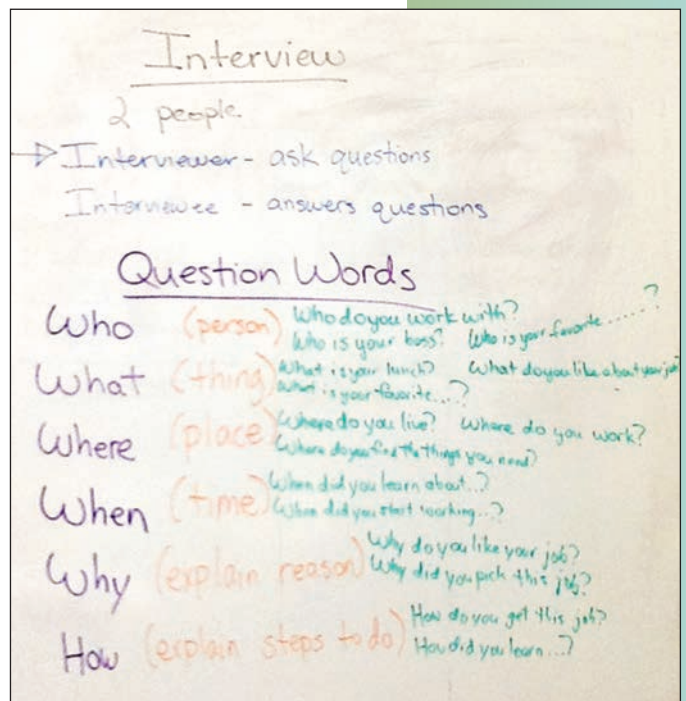
The groups were given tablets or allowed to use their personal devices and assigned the task of going to the different locations around the school to film segments for a virtual tour. Each group was in charge of writing, filming, and editing their own segments. The students visited their favorite places and people in the school and reported on them, explaining the purpose of each place, the reason to go there and why they like it.

Edwin, for example, chose the office: “You can go there to talk to the principal or call home. In the office I can talk to staff. I like the office because it’s a nice place and there are nice people.” Another student, Michael, visited the science lab: “I can learn about science in the science lab with magnets and microscopes. I like doing experiments with my lab partner.”

After filming, the groups then came together to view and analyze their work, score the segments on a rubric and give constructive feedback. Students were able to reshoot and edit their segments as needed. Each group compiled a pool of potential interview questions which were later narrowed down (see sample at right). For example, Danesha asked the art teacher, “Why do you like teaching art to kids and who is your favorite artist?”

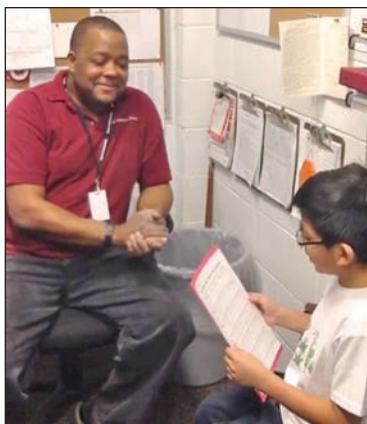
The students first recorded mock interviews of each other in order to practice oral fluency, projection and pace, as well as consider possible answers and follow up questions. By recording themselves, the students were able to self-critique and give peer feedback, which helped to build their confidence and was a valuable tool in preparing them to engage with native English speakers.

Once prepared, the groups interviewed the targeted people from the photo-directory, who conversed with them at higher levels of comprehensible input compared to their peers. The students even learned the expression, “Top of the morning to you!” from an Irish staff member. The students were allowed to film as many retakes as needed and felt reassured knowing that they would be able to revise their work until they got it right, which allowed them to relax and have fun, while at the same time yielding a higher output level.



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*A student interviews the school custodian.*

### Screening and Critiquing

After the filming was completed, students came together to view all of the segments together to evaluate and critique each other's work. The students then discussed, debated and decided on the proper sequencing of the segments for the virtual video tour. The segments were compiled into both an interactive presentation (Prezi), as well as a video to be viewed by the greater school community. The final project was made available on a link for the school community to view and comment upon.

Students, parents and adult community members alike were amazed at the depth of knowledge and fluency the students displayed. Students involved in the project felt a better connection to the community and were no longer hesitant to go to different places in the building or approach people in the school community. Furthermore, the project's interactivity and synthesis allowed the students to use critical thinking skills, while at the same time promoting their language development and aligning with the Common Core State Standards.

Throughout the project, the multitude of tasks the students participated in and performed allowed them to converse and collaborate with diverse partners, build on each other's ideas and express themselves clearly in an organized manner, while using a range

of academic and domain-specific language.

### Assessment

The ELLs were assessed on oral language proficiency, pronunciation, syntax and grammar throughout the project using an assortment of methods and techniques, and given a rubric to guide the content and progress of the project.

Assessments ranged from vocabulary games (matching words with places and the objects found in them, school vocabulary bingo and word clouds), quizzes (using traditional quizzes combined with Quizlet online, identifying objects, places and occupations around the school community), grammar and syntax worksheets focusing on present tense, nouns and adjectives, rubrics as project guidelines and for peer review, written texts summarizing the various locations, people and purposes around the building, to ongoing teacher observation and discussions giving oral feedback of video recordings of their performances and interactions.

For the final project, the class discussed the specific guidelines for the video, and was given a rubric to guide the content and expectations of the project (see appendix). Throughout this project the students were required to work cooperatively, both with each other and members of the larger



school community, which promoted engagement and increased student-initiated talk, as well as encouraged students to communicate at a pushed output level.

Throughout the course of the project, students gained insight into the function and members of the school community, while improving upon their vocabulary and language (syntax and delivery). At the same time, they were able to build relationships with community members, and create their own individualized learning communities. The cooperative learning groups allowed students to communicate and share information as the ELLs learned and developed both content and language in a nonthreatening manner.

### **Feedback**

Upon completion of the virtual video tour project, we asked for student feedback on the entire process. The overall feedback from students, parents, and community members was positive. One student said, “I really liked that I could practice and do retakes to make my project perfect.” The school greeter commented, “I thought that these kids didn’t speak any English, but I was impressed by how they talked to me.” The parents were amazed at the final video that students produced and felt that they had made huge gains.

The students stated that they had been very nervous and reticent about interacting with people outside the ENL

classroom, but that the step-by-step process of the project allowed them to build up both their language skills and confidence. This in turn, prepared them for the face-to-face meetings with native English speakers. Likewise, community members were astounded by the ELLs’ abilities to communicate, especially when they had not been able to engage in conversation with them prior to the project. The staff and parents were impressed with students’ usage of technology and the fact that they could see the progression of student learning throughout the course of the project, as they practiced and reviewed their takes.

At the beginning of the project, the students had difficulty creating and speaking in complete sentences. As the project progressed, the students were able to speak with fluidity and detail, even using slang and expressions. What started out as a few difficult to understand words for some, ended in polished verbal exchanges.

The students enjoyed working cooperatively, each with different roles, directing and editing their own work until they were comfortable sharing it with the class. This project demonstrated that students who were lacking self-confidence in their language abilities were able, through the use of technology and cooperative learning, to build their vocabulary, develop their fluency, and interact with people outside of the ENL classroom.

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*Student collaborating with school nurse.*



## Feedback

A few comments received from parents, students, and community members upon viewing the final project: "How amazing!", "That's so good!", "This was a cool project, don't you think so?", "My Jose did this?!", "Wow, but I thought these kids didn't speak English yet."

The virtual video tour project is now shown to the new ELLs in the district and their families to not only acquaint them with the people and places around the school, but to also inspire and demonstrate how they, too, will be able to communicate and interact within the school community.

As the years progress, the ELLs will continue with the project to both keep the video current and engage the new ELLs and community members cooperatively in their environment. The other teachers and staff members are eager to get involved in the next edition and found that the entire experience was both fun and helpful in getting to know and communicating with the ELLs.

We found that the students were extremely proud of their hard work and wanted to share their accomplishment with their peers, and family members. We feel that overall the project was a huge success, in that it met the students' academic goals while at the same boosting their linguistic confidence and engaging them with entire school community. Whereas previously there had been little interaction between the ELLs and the outside community, the project helped remove the walls around them and fostered a deep connection within our whole school community.

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## Appendix 1

### Video Rubric

Category	Oscar Winner	Oscar Nominated	Cult Classic	B Movie	Score
	4	3	2	1	
<b>Facts &amp; Info</b>	Gives more than five facts	Gives three to five facts	Gives one or two facts	Does not give any facts	
<b>Clarity</b>	Crisp and clear easily understood	Mostly audible and understood	Somewhat audible and understood	Inaudible / Cannot be understood	
<b>Editing</b>	Limited errors, many attempts to make corrections	Some errors, several attempts to make corrections	Many errors, some attempt to make corrections	More than ten errors or no corrections made	
<b>Organization</b>	Amazes audience with introduction and explanation	Grabs attention of audience and clearly introduces and explains topic	Somewhat introduces and explains topic	Does not introduce or explain topic	
<b>Team Work</b>	Effectively shares work	One member does most of the work	One member does all the work	No one talks	

### Peer Review Rubric

	Excellent 4 points	Good 3 points	Average 2 points	Poor 1 point
<b>Fluency</b>	Speech flows smoothly and evenly without interruptions.	Speech flows smoothly with only a few pauses and restarts.	Some speech flows well, but other parts stop and go.	Speech doesn't flow easily, many stops and restarts.
<b>Pronunciation</b>	Pronunciation is clear with almost no errors.	A few pronunciation errors, but can be understood.	Some incorrect pronunciation makes dialogue difficult to be understood.	Difficult to understand, because of mispronunciation.
<b>Word Choice</b>	Uses appropriate and varied words.	Makes a few errors in word choice.	Makes some errors in word choice.	Makes many errors in word choice.
<b>Grammar</b>	Uses present tense verbs, nouns and adjectives correctly.	Makes only a few errors in verb tense, nouns and adjectives.	Makes some errors in verbs, nouns and adjectives.	Makes many errors in verbs, nouns, and adjectives.
<b>Total Points</b>				