

## Shifting Gears: Driving New Literacies Home

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### **Paving the Way for Community**

Literacy is how we engage with the world itself (Peterson, 2020). So, when we think about students, we must ask, How do they understand the world around them? How can we help them feel at ease connecting with their new community and practicing literacy in this context? How do their daily interactions in this environment lead them to success in another language? These are important questions as we explore the world of literacy, which leads to the ideas presented next.

### **Putting Students in the Driver's Seat**

Emerging language and literacy skills can sometimes make English Learners (ELs) feel excluded from academic and school activities. However, it is important for students to realize they have power. They are not just passive receivers of language and knowledge; they actively make meaning. In our English classes for adolescent students, they can choose activities, do literacy tasks for real readers, set and review their learning goals, and use strategies like translanguaging to understand and respond to texts.

We use a teaching method called multiliteracies, which encourages student empowerment (New London Group, 1996). This approach lets students interact with and create different kinds of texts (Rajendram, 2015). For example, in English 9 classes, students worked on a project using art to promote change in our community. They identified areas in our school that needed artwork, suggested designs, considered how it would represent our school, and planned how to put it into action.

They learned about art by talking about pictures, learned art-related words, and practiced making persuasive arguments through sales pitches. Then, they used these skills in real-life situations, like

analyzing a Banksy mural in a war-affected area like Ukraine. Then, they displayed their projects in a gallery walk, and school leaders and students voted for the best art project that would benefit our community. This experience let every student show a part of themselves, making our community stronger and reflecting our school's values: care, community, communication, and consistency. Here are a few examples of student ideas in Figure 1 and 2.

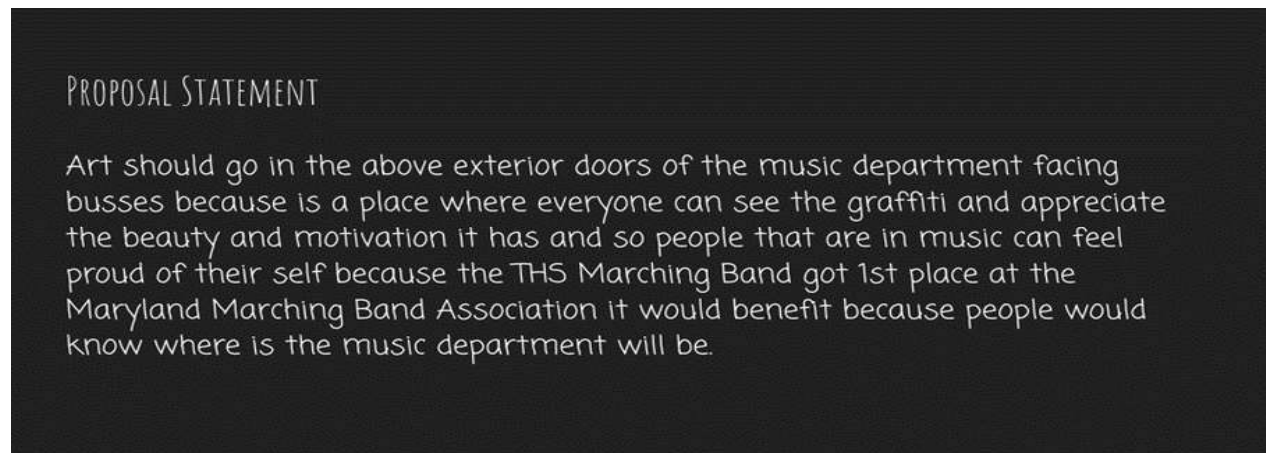
**Figure 1**

*Help Wanted Ad*



## Figure 2

### *Proposal Statement for Placement*



### **Create Time for Reflection – Pump the Brakes and Reflect**

Another concept we emphasize is how students learning English can benefit from self-assessment and reflection. To enhance their growth, it is helpful to provide enough time for revisions (Jamrus & Razali, 2019). You can take this a step further by using media to trigger and facilitate reflection. For example, in a project for an English 12 / ESOL 100 dual enrollment class, students who had been learning English for three or four years explored language, culture, and identity. They read "The Secret Language," a personal narrative by Nicaraguan poet-revolutionary Daisy Zamora (2014), about her experiences learning English. They also watched the documentary film "God Grew Tired of Us" (2006), showing how some lost boys from Sudan dealt with culture shock in the U.S. Afterward, the students made presentations with slides reflecting on their own journeys with English and acculturation, and how these experiences shaped their identities. There were no specific questions or formats. Students talked about what mattered most to them, guided by prompts such as:

- What challenges and successes did you have in learning English?
- What are your thoughts about your first language and English?
- What other languages do you speak or want to speak? Why?

- Describe your home culture and how it compares/contrasts with U.S. culture.
- What challenges and successes did you have in acculturation?
- How does your culture shape your identity?
- Do you belong to any subcultures?
- How do you live in multiple cultures (including subcultures) and languages?
- Which languages and/or cultures fascinate you?

### **A Smoother Ride**

We also organized a special field trip for English 10 and English Learner students. We went to see a play called *El Otro Oz* (2022), inspired by *The Wizard of Oz*. It was a bilingual play with both English and Spanish. Taking over 400 students to the theater and arranging lunch afterward was a big job, but it turned out to be something special. During the play, something interesting happened. Some jokes were in Spanish, and students who only speak English didn't quite get them. It made the students realize how our ELs feel when they do not understand everything.

They also thought knowing Spanish could help them understand more, and some were interested in learning it. As we walked to the restaurant, students were excited, talking about the play. The excitement continued during lunch and all the way back to the buses. For those 400 students and some very tired chaperones, the trip showed how our hard work in building a community is paying off. It was more than just a fun day out: it brought us all closer together. It is all about helping our students succeed in literacy as they explore new worlds.

### **English Learner Program Scenario**

We would like to end this article by sharing the following scenario, which demonstrates the culture we are working toward and are proud of building.

The loud music echoed through the hallway as students gathered for our high school's end-of-the-year pizza party. It was lively, and soon it was time for a speech. "Sofia" spoke to the students,

with one student interpreting her words into Spanish. She talked about how the school's English Learner (EL) program began five years ago with thirty students, but the interpreter mistakenly said thirteen. The crowd playfully teased him for the mix-up. In that moment, the students took charge, adding their own spirit to the words and emotions. This moment allowed them to be themselves in a place that was not always so welcoming. This sense of ownership continued when it was time for a group photo. Everyone squeezed together so that everyone would be part of the picture. Then the music started again, and bachata music filled the air. The student photographer, who had been plucked from the hallway, found himself surrounded by teenagers eager to teach him their dance. "This is not how they do it at the BBQ!" He laughed as he tried to follow the 1-2-3-4 rhythm. It was hard not to join in the laughter, both with him and the students teaching him. Soon, more students came to see what was happening. A bigger circle formed, and students danced in the center. They pulled others into the circle, showing them the steps. It was an incredible energy, a vibe that could only come from leaders who genuinely care about the students as individuals, not just learners. In the five years since starting the EL program, the greatest achievements have been making students feel welcome, encouraging them to try new things, and helping them feel like they belong. They are comfortable so they can confidently navigate their journey to success in literacy and beyond.

## References

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