Shell Education
A Division of Teacher Created Materials

TEACHING AND SUPPORTING English Learners

A Guide to Welcoming and Engaging NEWCOMERS

Lessons and Activities

Grades K–12

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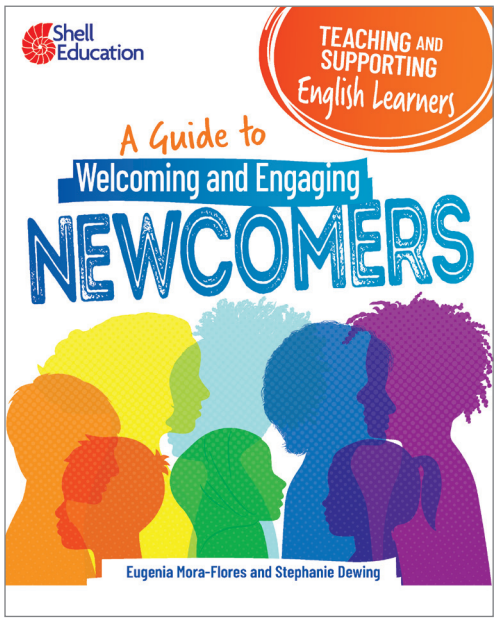

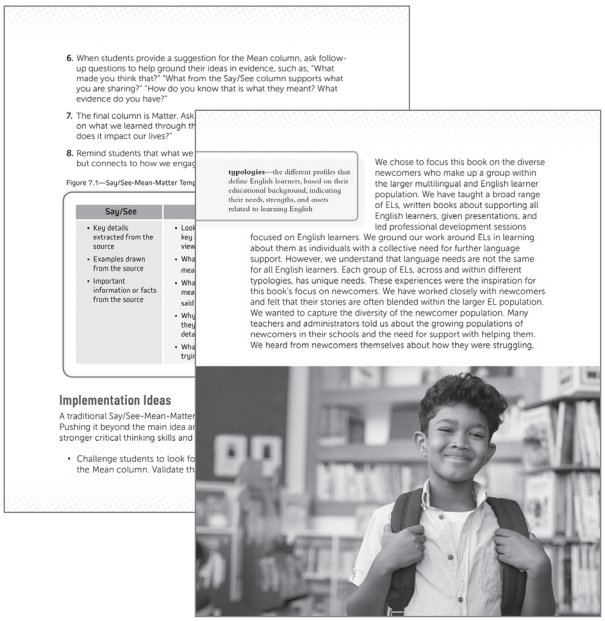

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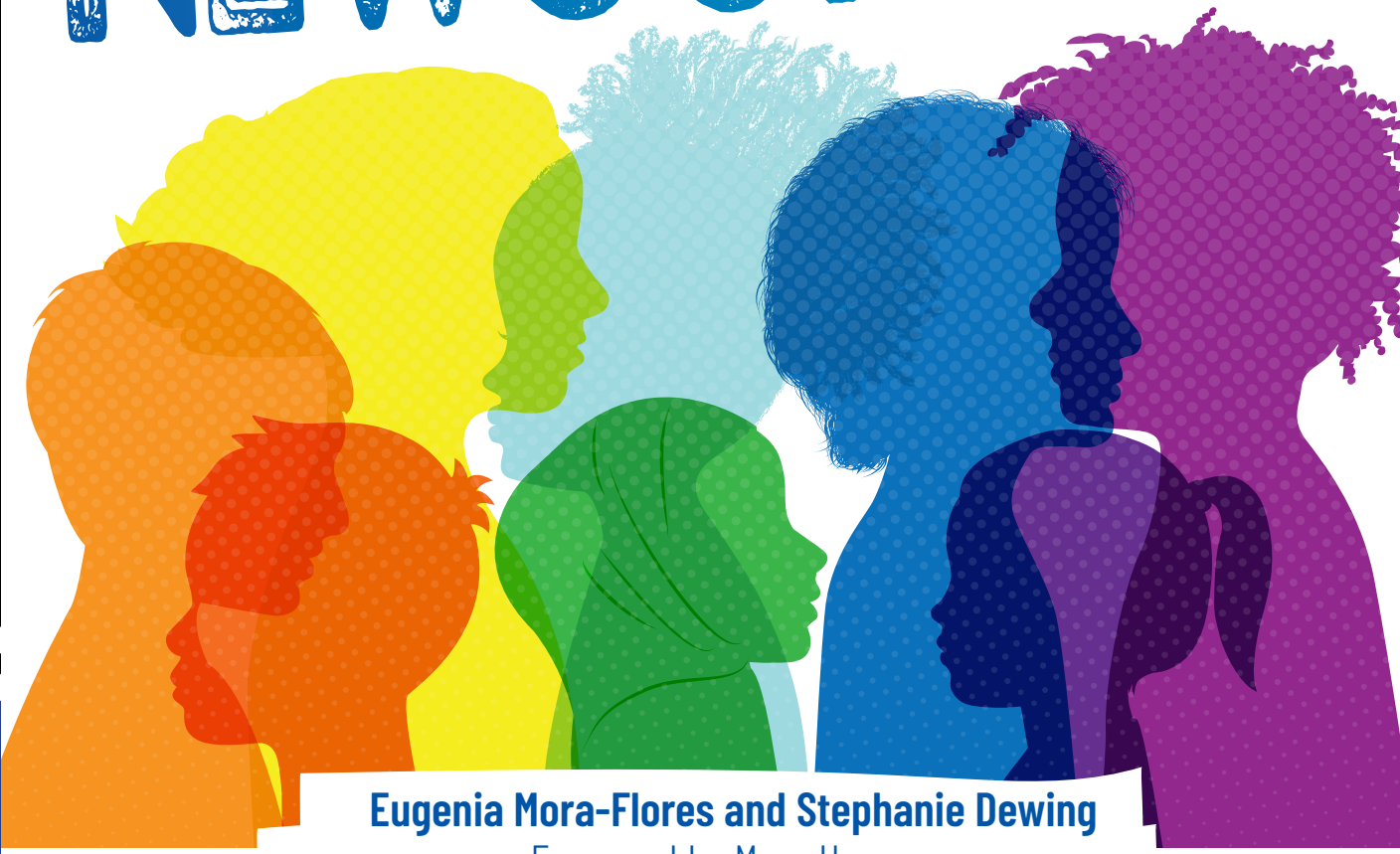

Eugenia Mora-Flores and Stephanie Dewing

Foreword by Mary Hanson

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Introduction

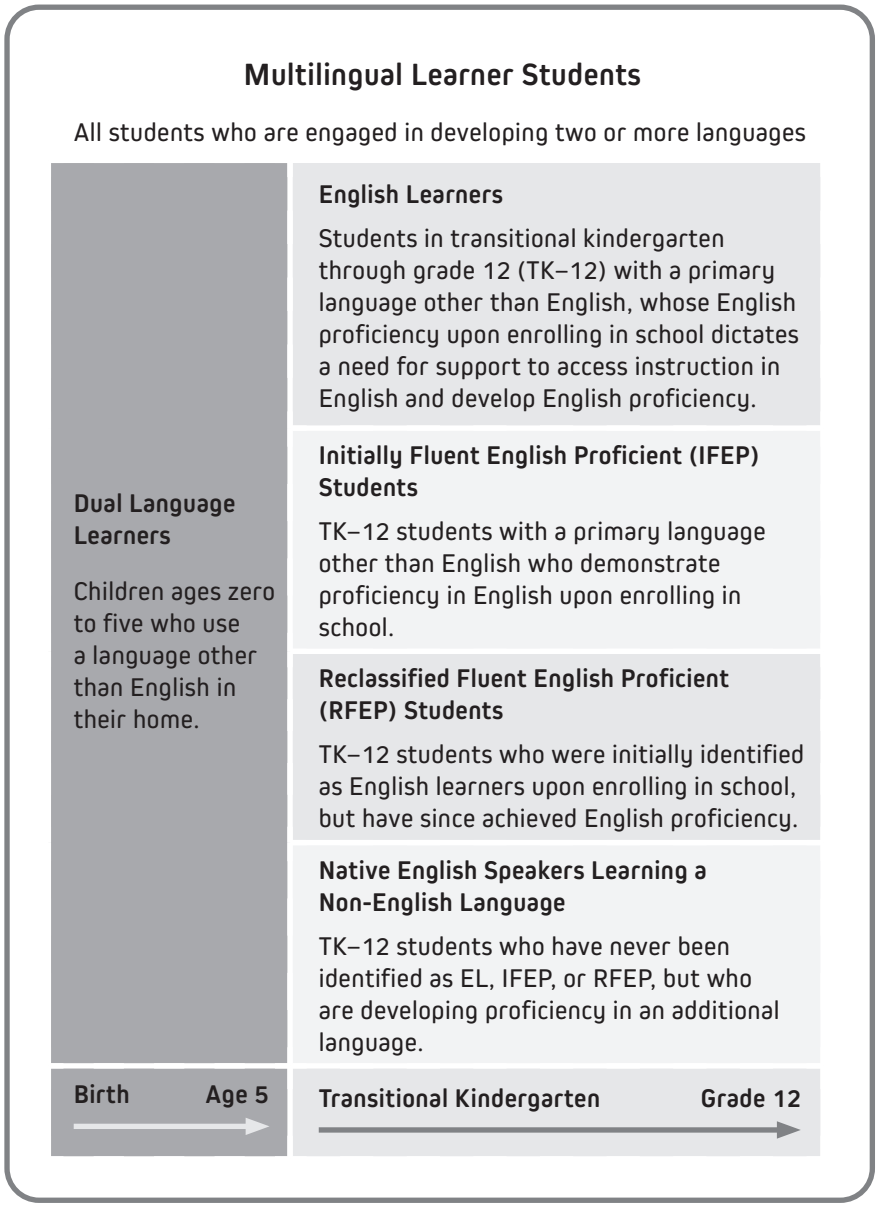
We started writing this book on our very first day of teaching. As teachers, we remember the many moments we shared with students, families, and colleagues who taught us what it means to listen and learn from others. Day to day, for over 25 years, we kept our ears, our minds, and our hearts open. There were days when we felt successful as teachers and other days when we struggled and could not figure out how to connect with and engage our learners. But these struggles taught us so much about ourselves as teachers and as partners in the education of our students. This book is a reflection and a celebration of our careers as teachers working alongside diverse student populations who enriched our lives with their stories and made us part of their educational journey.

We believe all students are learning and developing their language skills in diverse linguistic settings. Throughout the years, we have worked with a range of language learners. However, we focused our work on the education of students who were learning English as a new language in the United States. This population has been generally referred to as English learners (ELs), and over time has come to be seen as a group of language learners with some common needs but with unique histories and language experiences that inform how we teach them. We believe that these students should be encouraged not only to learn English but to continue to develop and celebrate their heritage language *and* to learn languages other than English.

While we believe that ELs are truly multilingual learners, we use the term *English learner* in this book to represent those multilingual learners who have been identified as needing additional support in English language development. When students enroll in school, their caregivers complete a home language survey that indicates whether a language other than English is spoken by the student or their family at home. Once a language other than English is identified, students are administered a language exam to determine their level of English language proficiency. Students who have a strong grasp of the English language are considered initially Fluent English Proficient and are not identified as needing additional support to develop English. Those students who do not demonstrate a certain level of proficiency are classified as ELs and provided additional support to guide their language, literacy, and content needs. In this book, we use the term *English learner* because in our scholarly and professional work as teachers we have focused on students who were identified as needing additional language support. This does not represent our comprehensive understanding and support of students' maintaining and developing their multiple languages. We advocate for all ELs to be supported as multilingual learners.

Over the last 15 years, advocates for the education of English learners have encouraged a more intentional asset-based approach to how we refer to these students, using *emerging bilinguals* and more recently *multilingual learners*. Using more diverse and inclusive language is important in showing support for individuality and for equity-minded approaches to teaching and learning. The California Department of Education (2020) released a comprehensive resource to guide the education of multilingual and English learners. This guide uses the term *multilingual learners* to represent the range of diverse students who are developing two or more languages. The document further explains how the term *English learner* is situated within the diverse group of multilingual learners (see figure I.1. below).

Figure I.1—Multilingual Learners



(California Department of Education 2020. Used with permission.)

typologies—the different profiles that define English learners, based on their educational background, indicating their needs, strengths, and assets related to learning English

We chose to focus this book on the diverse newcomers who make up a group within the larger multilingual and English learner population. We have taught a broad range of ELs, written books about supporting all English learners, given presentations, and led professional development sessions focused on English learners. We ground our work around ELs in learning about them as individuals with a collective need for further language support. However, we understand that language needs are not the same for all English learners. Each group of ELs, across and within different typologies, has unique needs. These experiences were the inspiration for this book's focus on newcomers. We have worked closely with newcomers and felt that their stories are often blended within the larger EL population. We wanted to capture the diversity of the newcomer population. Many teachers and administrators told us about the growing populations of newcomers in their schools and the need for support with helping them. We heard from newcomers themselves about how they were struggling,

feeling that some of their teachers did not understand who they were and what they were going through. They struggled to learn English and keep up academically. These interactions with educators and students inspired us to tell their stories and ours to support this unique group of ELs. This book looks at newcomers, but we understand other groups of English learners deserve the same dedicated focus and we hope to share their stories and address their needs in future books.

How This Book Is Organized

This book begins with a discussion of the diversity of the newcomer population and leads into hearing from a range of newcomers who were brave enough to tell us their stories. We ground our work in this book in those stories to help educators learn how to provide comprehensive language, literacy, and content support to maximize learning, including social-emotional support and family engagement strategies. The book is organized into nine chapters that move from learning about students and their families to instructional approaches to guide learning.

Chapter 1, "Who Are Our Newcomers?," introduces newcomers as a unique subset of the overall EL population. We review the identification and assessment processes, the different categories of newcomers, and demographics, such as percentages and top languages spoken. In addition, we share ideas for how to get to know your newcomers and ideas for how to foster their first-language development while simultaneously teaching English. We conclude with a discussion about the power of story.

In **Chapter 2**, we are honored to share the stories of 13 different newcomers who had the courage to tell us about their experiences. They represent five continents and range in age upon arrival from 3 to 17, preschool through high school. This chapter is the heart of this book. It is the students' voices that provide the greatest insights into how we can be most effective in supporting them. In each story, you will hear about the newcomer's background, journey, first time in the U.S., and school experiences. In addition, each newcomer shares their advice both for teachers working with newcomers and for other newcomers.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the social and emotional needs of newcomers. Even though their experiences are diverse, they have one thing in common—being new. They are new to the country, the culture, the language, and the school system. Before learning can happen, we must ensure that our students feel safe and have a sense of belonging. We provide multiple strategies in this chapter for how to accomplish that important goal.

Strategies for engaging newcomer families are presented in **Chapter 4.** Some newcomers come alone as unaccompanied minors. However, many come with family members. It is critical for schools and educators to extend their support beyond the student to include the family and/or caregivers. We share a variety of ways in which you can create a welcoming environment for newcomers' families, communicate in their preferred language, help them navigate the school system, and connect them with essential resources.

Chapter 5 gives an overview of designated English language development. Providing newcomers with a time of day that is focused on instruction in the English language helps differentiate language needs for newcomers. Designated ELD meets students where they are in language. It provides instruction based on students' English development level and literacy needs, rather than being content or grade-level dependent.

In **Chapter 6** we explore integrated English language development, which is part of a comprehensive approach to supporting newcomers. We explore what it means to provide language support across the curriculum. All content-area teachers at all grade levels are teachers of language. But what does that mean? This chapter provides a framework that guides teachers in explicitly supporting newcomers as they access, comprehend, interpret, and produce language across content areas. We share questioning practices, language supports, and a guide for identifying the language opportunities within different content areas. In addition, we consider essential daily practices that can be used by all teachers to support teaching content through a focus on language.

Chapter 7 pushes beyond daily practices shared in Chapter 6 to provide a wide range of language input strategies teachers can use to help students comprehend content and language when reading and listening. These strategies are intended to be used for specific purposes. All strategies shared in this chapter come from our work in classrooms as teachers and professional developers. They have been used in all grade levels and content areas.

Practicing language for a variety of purposes further supports language development. Language output strategies are the focus of **Chapter 8**, which reminds us that we cannot rely on students to simply understand language; they need opportunities to *use* language as well.

The content and strategies shared in this book are presented through the lens of working with newcomer English learners. However, we understand that many of the practices support all learners as they develop their language skills. We encourage teachers to take what they learn from this book and make it their own. Whether or not any strategy or instructional practice is a success depends on how well it meets the needs of the students in each individual classroom. We wrote this book to be a companion, a colleague that teachers can connect with to get ideas for improving and reflecting on their own practice. To support this, each chapter ends with reflective questions that guide teachers to celebrate their current practices and find ways to continue to improve their teaching for the language, literacy, and social-emotional development of their students.

CHAPTER 4

Strategies for Engaging Newcomer Families

> The ways schools care about children is reflected in the ways schools care about children's families.
>
> —Joyce Epstein (2019, 11)

Some newcomer students come alone as unaccompanied minors. Some end up living with relatives, while others end up living in foster care or with a sponsor. Some come with siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other caregivers. It is important to consider the unique and varying circumstances of newcomers' reasons for coming to the U.S., their journeys to get here, and their living situations upon arrival. The reasons for coming typically involve either seeking better educational or economic opportunities or escaping war, violence, or political unrest (U.S. Department of Education 2016). The journey can be arduous and, in some cases, traumatic. And the living situations upon arrival are often less than ideal. Imagine being in a new country where you do not speak the language, the norms and traditions are different, and the school system is completely foreign. And then, you drop off your child at school.

While we have multiple systems of support in place for the students, we cannot forget about the needs of parents and other caregivers. In this

chapter, we share tips and strategies for welcoming, supporting, engaging, and empowering newcomer families to foster positive home, school, and community partnerships. When we mention "family" or "parent," we are referring to anyone caring for the newcomer students in our classrooms.

Welcoming Newcomer Families

When schools and teachers welcome newcomer families and collaborate with them in ways that respect and value their cultures, aspirations, and needs, while focusing on their strengths and assets, the schools and the entire community are enriched (U.S. Department of Education 2016). First and foremost, learn as much as you can about the family, their background and lived experiences, and their current circumstances. That said, be mindful of privacy and potential triggers. Some families may not be comfortable or willing to share all those details. And just as we highlighted the importance of building trust over time with students, we must do the same with families. If we want them to feel safe and have a sense of belonging, we should form a solid partnership between home, the school, and the community.

> "I think it's key not to work in isolation—it goes beyond building a relationship between the teacher and the student. Oftentimes, our information is very limited because the kids don't remember—you know, if they came from an orphanage or from a refugee camp—they just don't remember that experience. But there could be residuals from that—physical, mental, or emotional—that they bring with them that we have to try and figure out. And that can be very complicated. So I think the more people we have around the table, the better off we are. It takes a village."
>
> —District ELD Coordinator

To start, find out who is the first person in the school or district that will be welcoming and registering the students and their families, where this process takes place, and what steps are involved. If that is you, there are steps you can take to make that process as smooth and welcoming as possible.

> "The best way to let families know that they are welcome is to tell them."
>
> —Colorín Colorado (2018)

We know how important it is to reflect students' languages and cultures in the materials and resources throughout our classrooms. The same is true for our families. For example, our names are part of our identities. Pronouncing students' names correctly is important. We should also learn how to pronounce their families' names correctly—the first step in building that positive relationship. It is similarly critical to check that their names are spelled and entered correctly in the data systems and on any necessary paperwork or communication. Have a laminated card or reference guide for the front desk, for those who answer the phones, or for data entry personnel with phonetic pronunciation guides, as a reminder. The main office is an excellent place to reflect the languages and cultures of all families.

Camila: "For my family it was kind of hard. I didn't know English, they didn't know English, so nobody really knew English." Camila appreciated that some of her teachers were able to talk to her mom in Spanish at parent-teacher conferences so she could understand.

We cannot underestimate the importance of communicating in the family's preferred language. A few strategies shared in Chapter 1, such as infographics, language boards/posters, and group holiday calendars can get you started. Remember to involve the entire school team—volunteers, support staff, office personnel, administrators, and so on.

Multilingual Key Phrases

Display common phrases for greeting students and families, such as "*Welcome*" and "*How may I help you*?" in all the languages spoken by students and families. Other phrases might include "*Sign here, please*," or "*Please have a seat*." As you determine the most common phrases used, add those to the list. This shows that you care by taking the time to learn phrases in their preferred language and sends the message that you value their linguistic and cultural diversity.

Infographics and/or Flags

These can be displayed in the classroom. Or you can create infographics about the countries represented by the families and students within the school. (See Who Are Our Newcomers?, page 9, for additional details on creating infographics.) Display them proudly at the entryway or in the front office. Another option is to display flags or images of flags from each of the families' countries of origin. This creates a welcoming environment for all.

Travel Book

A travel book is handy as a reference for when new families arrive. If a family comes from a country that is not currently represented by visuals on the walls, or who speaks a language that is not translated on the language boards, pull out the travel book and have them show you where they are from as a starting point and opportunity for connection.

Multilingual Staff

Determine who in the building and/or district is bilingual or multilingual. Create a list of staff members and volunteers, and the languages they speak, to use as a reference when new families arrive. Find out if there is a family liaison or family resource center within the school or district; this equips you with knowledge about who families can connect with for additional support.

Reference Guides

Keep reference guides at the front office and for those who answer the phones. These can include the names of newcomer students and families

with phonetic pronunciation guides, and even some common phrases, such as, "*How can I help you?*" in multiple languages. This will help ensure that students' and families' names are spelled and pronounced correctly by all staff and support newcomers' sense of belonging.

Newcomer Kit for Families

In Chapter 3, we discussed newcomer kits for students. Why not have newcomer kits for families, too? The kits could include the following:

Information card. Provide a card with their name(s), language, address, and phone number, along with their children's names and dates of birth as a tool to use during registration.

List of important contacts and information. Have a list of important phone numbers and websites translated into all the languages represented. Add the school's website along with numbers for the front office, attendance office (if different), family liaison (if applicable), and community resources. Adding a school calendar and map would help, too.

Information on how to navigate the school system. Learning to navigate a new system is challenging. As one ELD teacher shared, "I think their biggest challenge is learning or relearning how to do school in America." Create short, translated videos that can provide valuable information on processes that are pertinent to the school. For example, what is the dress code or uniform policy? Where can they get uniforms? What is the grading system like? What do they do if their child is sick, late, or needs to leave for an appointment? It is fun to get students and community members involved in making the videos. They can even provide a tour of the school in their home language to share with their families. This does not have to come in the form of a video, though. Step-by-step written instructions for navigating the school system, translated of course, preferably with visual support, will be an essential resource.

Adult English classes. If parents and caregivers are new to the country and are interested in learning English, there are often opportunities within the community for adult English classes. Having information about available classes ready to share in their newcomer kit can get them started.

Say/See-Mean-Matter

What Is It?

This strategy helps students think about what they have read, viewed, or experienced by starting with the details and moving toward abstract concepts and themes. Students use a graphic organizer to capture what they extract from a text, what they think about it, and how it impacts their learning beyond the text. Moving students from the concrete to the abstract can help scaffold complex text or media.

How to Do It

1. Select content that students need to process and analyze. This can be a traditional written text (informational or narrative); a media source such as a video, an image, a meme, or a political cartoon; or an experience such as a demonstration, experiment, or performance.

2. After reading or viewing the content, have students begin by thinking about the details or examples from the source. Using the Say/See-Mean-Matter template (figure 7.1), ask students to capture the details in the Say/See column. (The figure includes guidance on how to complete the template).

3. Ask students questions such as, "What did the text say?" "What did the video share about (topic)?" "What do you see in the image?" "What did they do in the performance?"

4. For the next column (Mean), ask students to consider what they read or saw and analyze it. Say, "Take a look at the details. What connections do you see? What do they mean?"

5. Guide students to look for patterns in the details, to consider what the author was trying to say through the details, and to explore multiple possibilities of the author or creator's thinking. Ask, "What is the main idea?" "What is the author's intent? "What message does the author want to convey?" Guide students to recognize the main idea or big idea.

6. When students provide a suggestion for the Mean column, ask follow-up questions to help ground their ideas in evidence, such as, "What made you think that?" "What from the Say/See column supports what you are sharing?" "How do you know that is what they meant? What evidence do you have?"

7. The final column is Matter. Ask students, "Why does this matter?" "Based on what we learned through the source, why does it matter to us? How does it impact our lives?"

8. Remind students that what we read and view in class is not just for class but connects to how we engage with the world around us.

Figure 7.1—Say/See-Mean-Matter Template and Guiding Questions

Say/See	Mean	Matter
• Key details extracted from the source • Examples drawn from the source • Important information or facts from the source	• Look for patterns, key ideas, point of views. • What did the author mean by . . . ? • What did the author mean when they said . . . ? • Why do you think they shared these details? • What are they trying to teach us?	• How is this related to your own life? • Why does this information or story matter to you? • How does it impact your life? • What connections can you make to your life?

Implementation Ideas

A traditional Say/See-Mean-Matter is simply the completion of the chart. Pushing it beyond the main idea and theme will help students develop stronger critical thinking skills and use diverse academic language.

- Challenge students to look for more patterns and relationships in the Mean column. Validate that all ideas are possible main ideas but

use any similarities in student comments (such as words that are repeated) to determine patterns. The true main idea may be found in these patterns.

- Use the Matter column to help determine a theme. Themes are universal concepts that can transfer across settings, contexts, and disciplines, and are related to the world we live in. Ask students to again look for patterns or repeated words or ideas. Can they use one word or phrase to capture why all of it matters? For example, is it all about change, or relationships?

Accommodations for Newcomers

Scaffolding from details to ideas to relevance helps guide comprehension. A few additional supports can further guide newcomers to engage in the strategy.

- Allow students to think on their own or collectively in any language that is comfortable and accessible to them and their peers. This allows the content to be processed prior to sharing what they learned and understood in English.
- Present the content through different modalities, such as text, videos, and images. A range of sources still supports the goal of the content and development of critical thinking skills.
- Allow for think-time. This strategy involves a lot of prompting. When asking a question, give students time to think before calling on someone to answer. As many newcomers noted, extra time was imperative.
- Oral rehearsals help with processing thinking and language. Students can talk about their ideas at every stage of the strategy with a peer or table group.
- Allow students to produce draft Say/See-Mean-Matter charts in their heritage language before transferring their ideas into English.
- Allow students to use bullet points with simple phrases or even one-word ideas.
- Provide a list of possible themes with cognates where applicable.
- Help students connect to the content based on who they are and their own experiences, to make it feel personal and inclusive to all learners from diverse backgrounds.

A Final Thought

Say/See-Mean-Matter is a favorite among teachers during both designated and integrated English language development because of its flexibility. Use it in any content area, at any grade level, with any text type, and with varied sources of information (e.g., media, images, demonstrations, texts). It draws students in because they make real-world connections, which makes learning authentic.