CASE STUDY

San Francisco International High School

Across the country from Midtown West Elementary School, a 9th- and 10th-grade biology class at San Francisco International High School (SFIHS) focuses on a central question: "Should soda have a tax?" The group of 25 students, roughly divided between 9th- and 10th-graders, includes several students who have been in the United States for 6 months or less. In this high school designed for newcomers, even the class veterans have been in the United States for less than two years.

SFIHS is one of 30 U.S. schools in the Internationals Network for Public Schools, an organization that designs and runs public school programs for refugee and immigrant multilingual learners in collaboration with school districts across the county.

As in other project-based learning environments, instruction for this heterogeneous class connects learning principles (here, in biology) to real-world issues (nutrition and policy). The veteran teacher, Patricia, has built into her lesson extensive scaffolds designed to meet students at their English language acquisition, content knowledge, and skill development levels. She moves through the classroom engaging individual students, small groups of students, and the whole class.



She intentionally leverages the assets that her students have brought to the classroom, particularly their native language fluency. The core question is written in English and the five other languages spoken by students in the class to give them an immediate starting point for engaging with the content questions. She also employs other techniques that allow students to

use their native languages to support themselves and one another in engaging with the rigorous content. For example, throughout the classroom, students use Google Translate to translate words from Spanish, Arabic, and other languages. In contrast to classrooms in which students' native languages are minimized or seen through a deficit lens, students leverage their home languages to make meaning of complex grade-level academic content. With students from multiple linguistic backgrounds, English is the common language and the language of formal academic discourse, yet English is not positioned as the only valuable language. The assets-based classroom environment makes students comfortable taking risks to speak, read, and write in English, but they also use their native languages as a valuable tool to be harnessed and developed.

Patricia also takes steps to make instruction and content accessible and to further students' vocabulary and writing development. For example, she prominently displays visuals from earlier lessons that students have labeled, and she has research articles and documents readily available so that students can access them throughout the inquiry process. In addition, each portion of the lesson is carefully chunked into discrete sections to allow students to understand the content and to apply their emerging English skills. For instance, students examine pictures relevant to the soda tax debate and connect those pictures with academic English words they have learned in previous lessons (e.g., "glucose"). One chunked exercise includes the following stages:

> *Each student chooses one picture and labels it in English with scientific terms that have previously been taught.*
>
> *In small groups, students discuss the pictures using English:*
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> * *What did other people write?*
> * *What did it make you think?*

Next, using the labeled pictures from their groups, students individually write "a complex sentence" in English that can be used in their final essays. In doing so, students need to use the English words "but," "because," or "so," e.g., "When you don't eat, the glucose decreases because your body uses the energy."



During the lesson, the teacher moves throughout the room meeting individually with students to make sure can successfully engage with the language and content. She also draws on the board, points to visual scaffolds arrayed on the walls, and gestures as if playing charades, all to make her meaning clearer. She has developed a series of sounds that the students associate with an action (e.g., an action that encourages students to look at their peers who are speaking or an action that encourages students to use sentence starters that are on the walls). This simple yet effective method for providing reminders and tools seems to help ease the cognitive load for her students, who are doing far more than the typical native English speaker would be doing in such a class. She repeatedly reminds her students of her expectations for participation and reinforces participation and structural routines to keep students engaged.

Eventually, students build from these smaller tasks to craft thesis statements and ultimately write persuasive essays in English that support their position on the value of soda taxes. While the development of academic English related to the content is clearly scaffolded through these steps, Patricia also focuses on science, engaging the students on both the biology and chemistry around sugary drinks' effect on humans and the social science behind their impact on communities. Over the course of multiple weeks, students develop the content knowledge and the English literacy skills needed to engage orally and in writing on the topic in sophisticated ways.

This instructional approach does not occur by happenstance; it is an intentional approach supported by a web of mutually reinforcing school design features.

For instance, the Internationals Network deliberately uses mixed-age, heterogeneous classes to support students' language, academic, and sociocultural development. Mixed-age grouping, which pairs 9th- and 10th-graders or 11th- and 12th-graders, recognizes that students are multidimensional and are not at the same level for all areas of knowledge, including life experience, content knowledge, and different language modalities. In addition, this heterogeneous structure allows students with more developed language and academic skills to support novice peers. This practice is particularly valuable for new students who are recent arrivals to the United States. In the 9th- and 10th-grade class described earlier, two 9th-graders

had arrived in the United States and at the school just a few days before that observation. The teacher had intentionally grouped those students with 10th-graders who spoke their native languages (in this case, Spanish and Arabic) and who could act as mentors and provide academic, language, sociocultural, and emotional support to the newcomers.



In the 9th and 10th grades, these mixed-age classes also loop, or stay with the same set of interdisciplinary teachers, for 2 years, enabling the development of strong relationships between students and teachers. This continuity also generates academic benefits, as teachers can use their knowledge of students' strengths and struggles to meet their academic and linguistic needs over a longer period of time. Each student is also part of an advisory group that loops for 2 years, meeting several times a week; the advisor is the point person and advocate for the student and family, operating advisory classes that provide a family environment for academic, social, and emotional learning and support. Overall, the structures of mixed-age grouping and looping allow Internationals to support students in deeper learning while scaffolding their academic and linguistic development.

In addition to advisories, SFIHS provides extensive supports for students. Internationals have dedicated staff (e.g., social workers, counselors) who work closely with teachers and students to provide academic and social–emotional supports. School staff also provide access to services and programs as part of typical day-to-day school operations. For instance, schools have devised age-appropriate approaches to providing students with meals so that little public attention is called to their needs. At SFIHS, there are before- and after-school clubs where full meals are included, as a significant number of students eat all of their meals at school. The schools also have strategies to address a number of other issues that immigrant youth face, including tackling mental health challenges, providing education and support regarding immigration rights, and offering assistance to access food stamps, health care, and other social services; housing; part-time employment; and college. Taken together, each of the design features articulated above combine to create a strong web of support so students can learn and grow.

Source: Adapted from Roc, M., Ross, P., & Hernández, L. E. (2019). *Internationals Network for Public Schools: A deeper learning approach to supporting English learners* (pp. 1–2, 11–12, 23). Learning Policy Institute.