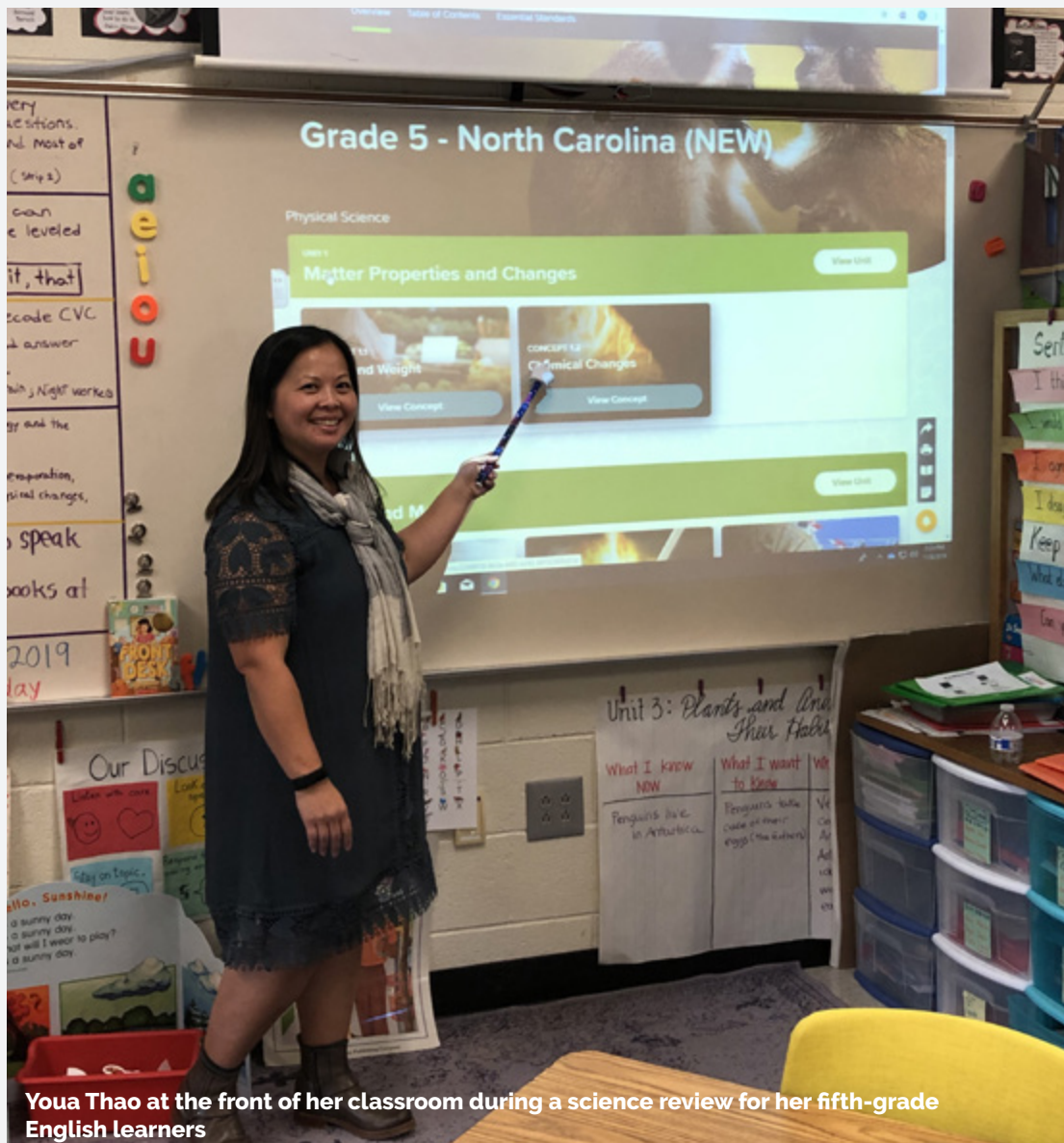


Stepping into Youa Thao's English classroom at Blythe Elementary School, you can see clearly that she is an organized and thoughtful educator who makes every effort to create a welcoming environment and build positive relationships with the learners she encounters. The walls are covered in colorful charts detailing conversation starters, story elements, habits of effective learners, shared classroom agreements, and more. Chairs are arranged around a main table to encourage interaction and collaboration amongst students; there are carpeted areas with comfortable seating options as well.



Youa Thao at the front of her classroom during a science review for her fifth-grade English learners

About 950 students are enrolled at Blythe, and almost a third are language-minority students, meaning they actively use a language other than English at home.

Blythe is one of 176 schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, which serves about 147,000 students in the city of Charlotte and surrounding areas in the state of North Carolina. About 950 students are enrolled at Blythe, and almost a third are language-minority students, meaning they actively use a language other than English at home. Ten languages and 11 birth countries are represented in the student population. Amongst the 151 students who qualify for English language support—usually through specialized language instruction—due to their proficiency scores on an annual English language assessment, about 40 percent are intermediate level and around 35 percent are beginners or newcomers (newly arrived to the United States or to U.S. schools).

The school district’s English Learner (EL) Services department supports teachers like Ms. Thao and students learning English. There are around 47,000 language-minority students and about 24,000 English learners throughout the district in kindergarten through grade 12. The EL Services department is supported with a combination of local, state, and federal funding. These funds are used to pay teachers, purchase specialized curriculum materials, buy technology to be used with students learning English, provide professional development, and more.

At the start of each school year, Ms. Thao shares a presentation titled “What My People Group Means to Me” with her students. The

presentation is about her cultural heritage. She tells the story of her parents coming to the United States as Hmong refugees from Laos, her early life with her siblings growing up in the state of California, and how far her family and community have come since arriving in the United States. She reflects that her students are often in awe of what they learn about her and, as a result, feel more inspired to share their own stories. Speaking about her students, she says, “We need to realize that their stories matter and their stories help us as educators to push them so that they will have the motivation to strive to want to be lifelong learners.” This thoughtful consideration and valuing of the unique qualities and needs of each learner is the driving force behind Ms. Thao’s teaching philosophy and everything she does for her students.

Although she has always been familiar with the experiences and challenges faced by families similar to her own, Ms. Thao didn’t start her career as an English teacher. After she completed her bachelor’s degree in education focused on teaching science and social studies, she accepted a position teaching history to first-year high-school students. One of her classes had many students who were English learners. She became fascinated by a student who was unable to read in English but could read fluently in Arabic. Working with this student inspired Ms. Thao to pursue a master’s degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL).

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In most U.S. schools, language-minority students are generally required to take the same subjects and examinations as students who are native English speakers. However, they often receive support and specialized instruction from an EL teacher, like Ms. Thao, who has extensive training in delivering content-based English language instruction. Education policy varies from state to state, but there are usually guidelines for how much specialized instruction English learners receive, often based on each student’s English proficiency level.

Most states require all English learners to take an annual assessment to measure their proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The annual assessment is rigorous and designed to elicit responses that demonstrate students’ social language skills and their fluency with academic English vocabulary and language structures. Scores from the assessment help EL teachers group students and plan their schedules; the scores also determine the amount and type of English language instruction students receive

and when students no longer need English language support.

Many EL teachers in the United States have some flexibility in terms of how they deliver instruction. Sometimes, learners are pulled out of general-education classrooms to form small groups that meet in the English classroom, often referred to as the “pull-out model.” In this model, EL teachers provide instruction on the same subject being taught in the general-education classroom, but with more emphasis on integrating language and content. Another option is co-teaching, sometimes called the “push-in model,” where EL teachers and general-education teachers plan and teach together in the same classroom, for a whole day or a portion of the day. Models of co-teaching include having both teachers teach together, splitting classes into two groups, using stations with each teacher leading a small group while other students work independently, and others. There are also bilingual education and language immersion programs in the United States, but they aren’t common.



Ms. Thao's English classroom at Blythe Elementary School



The front of Blythe Elementary School

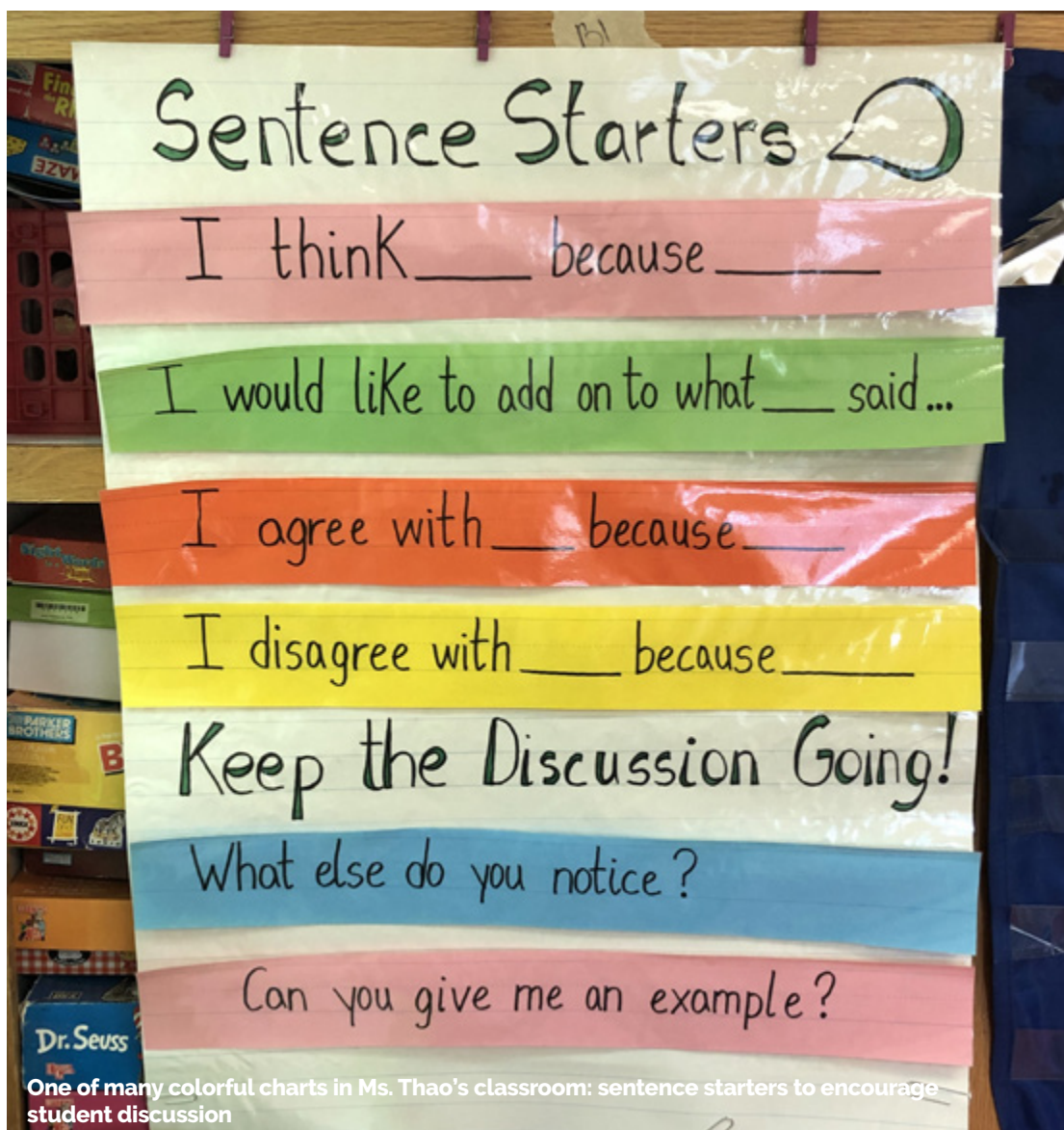
Ms. Thao works closely with another full-time EL teacher at her school to develop a student-centered schedule for learners who receive specialized English instruction. She says, “We just don’t stick to one program. It’s based on the child’s needs or the group’s needs, and so we are flexible. We’re willing to reevaluate and even discuss with one another. My coworker and myself will look at data; we’ll look at the overall learning styles of the students to see which group would actually fit their needs.”

In a typical week, Ms. Thao teaches about 14 to 16 groups of students, which works out to about ten groups per day. (Some students receive English instruction every day, and others only once or twice per week.) Generally, she uses the pull-out model for newcomers or beginner-level students and the push-in model for intermediate or

higher-level students. Her groups usually meet for 20 to 40 minutes, depending on the students’ needs and schedules for each grade level. Some more-proficient learners fall under consultative status, meaning that Ms. Thao checks in with their general-education teachers regularly to determine whether the students are succeeding academically or may need additional English language support.

Ms. Thao says the materials she uses during her lessons vary. “It just depends on my learners. I am flexible. My lesson plans are never the same from year to year or month to month.” She notes that she is fortunate to have access to many types of teaching materials. The EL Services department supplies EL teachers with resources such as leveled book sets for guided reading; textbooks with accompanying songs, graphic organizers,

Generally, she uses the pull-out model for newcomers or beginner-level students and the push-in model for intermediate or higher-level students.



manipulatives, workbooks, and assessments; phonics kits with music, big books, and practice books; grade-level content-based reading materials; and picture dictionaries. Additionally, Ms. Thao is able to access the textbooks and curriculum resources that her general-education co-teachers use in their grade-level classrooms.

However, in a recent lesson, Ms. Thao created something from scratch: an interactive study guide for students to complete on the classroom laptops. The guide reviews concepts from the fifth-grade science curriculum, such as physical vs. chemical changes. However, Ms. Thao has tailored the content and activities

for students who are learning English by including visuals, fill-in-the-blank exercises, sorting activities, familiar anchor charts from the classroom, videos, and other scaffolds. Throughout the lesson, the four students are engaged and eager to work. Ms. Thao has created a classroom environment where they feel comfortable because they can ask questions and are not afraid to make mistakes. The students feel free to speak up and share ideas, but they also respect each other and Ms. Thao. She encourages them to help each other and work together.

How often Ms. Thao teaches science can vary from year to year, but providing science

In a recent lesson, Ms. Thao created something from scratch: an interactive study guide for students to complete on the classroom laptops.

instruction tailored to English learners is one of her strengths. She has presented science-based professional-development sessions at district meetings for other EL teachers. At the end of fifth grade, all students in North Carolina are required to take a state assessment in science. Ms. Thao presented a professional-development session on using an online program to conduct virtual interactive lab experiments. The school district subscribes to the program, which provides educational videos and other digital content for science, social studies, and math. She also created several video playlists based on fifth-grade science content that teachers could adapt and use with activities to prepare learners for the state test. The lab experiments and playlists help students build background knowledge and review key concepts that will be included in the state assessment.

Ms. Thao has also led training for her general-education colleagues. In the past, she delivered workshops on co-teaching models, working with refugee students, and guided reading instruction. At Blythe, she has trained her colleagues on how to use a state database to access demographic information and annual proficiency scores for English language learners. Additionally, Ms. Thao says that while co-teaching in the classrooms of her colleagues, she models teaching strategies that she uses with her students and answers questions from co-teachers about best practices.

Ms. Thao has also served as a supervising teacher and mentor for a university student working toward a master's degree in TESOL. The student teacher completed a practicum (usually referred to as "student teaching" in the United States) in Ms. Thao's English classroom and received advice and feedback on lessons and interactions with students.

Along with her fellow EL teacher at Blythe, Ms. Thao has also led sessions for parents and families about how to support their child's education at home and through involvement at school.

Despite Ms. Thao's rapport with her students and colleagues, she acknowledges that there are challenging parts of her work. Communication between home and school can sometimes be difficult, and some students arrive late due to heavy morning traffic near the school. In order to complete her lesson planning and preparation, she comes to school early in the mornings, leaves late in the afternoons, and often dedicates time to school work over the weekends. The planning time built into her daily schedule is often spent in meetings with grade-level teachers or her EL teammate, catching up on paperwork, checking on consultative students, or squeezing in extra support for learners who need it.

Ms. Thao also reflects that helping newcomer students in a traditional school setting can be difficult. She explains that many newcomers need to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills in English and learn routines and expectations of U.S. schools; at the same time, newcomers are expected to grasp grade-level content through instruction that is delivered exclusively in English. In addition, not all general-education teachers who have newcomer students in their classes know where to start or how to help. In North Carolina, some school districts have established newcomer schools that provide these students with an intensive orientation to U.S. schooling and English language skills for one or two years before they join a traditional school. Ms. Thao's district currently has no newcomer school, so she provides teachers and newcomer students with as much support

“I do tell a lot of my newcomers, ‘I need you to realize that your first language is important and that when you grow up it will help you. It will help you understand the world that you’re living in.’”

as she can. Always focused on her students’ strengths, Ms. Thao says, “I do tell a lot of my newcomers, ‘I need you to realize that your first language is important and that when you grow up it will help you. It will help you understand the world that you’re living in, but at the same time it will also give you opportunities to do more.’”

Ms. Thao has adjusted to teaching virtually during the global pandemic by conducting about seven 30- to 40-minute sessions per day on Zoom. She meets daily with the teachers she works with and has planning time for herself. She has adapted her teaching and the curriculum to meet the needs of her learners. This includes prioritizing time to model language and give students opportunities to practice speaking with prompts and content-area vocabulary during virtual lessons. Her students also watch recorded lessons in English that are provided by the school district. The biggest challenges she describes are issues with technology or Internet hotspots and a chaotic learning environment for multiple siblings sharing space and resources at home.

The overall impression of Ms. Thao is of a flexible teacher who is nurturing and supportive while setting high expectations and demanding the best work from her students. She acknowledges that every learner has his or her individual needs and strengths, and she adjusts her expectations accordingly to meet students where they are and help them grow. When asked what she is most proud of as an educator, Ms. Thao says, “Building relationships with my students and helping them understand that they matter and that they are valued and they are able to actually succeed.” With such an inspiring and

dedicated teacher as their guide, it is likely that they will.

This article was written by **Amy Hanna**, who has trained teachers and taught English to students in primary school, university, and adult education classrooms in the United States and abroad. Currently, she supports the U.S. Department of State’s English language programs by developing digital content for English learners and teachers.

Photos by Amy Hanna