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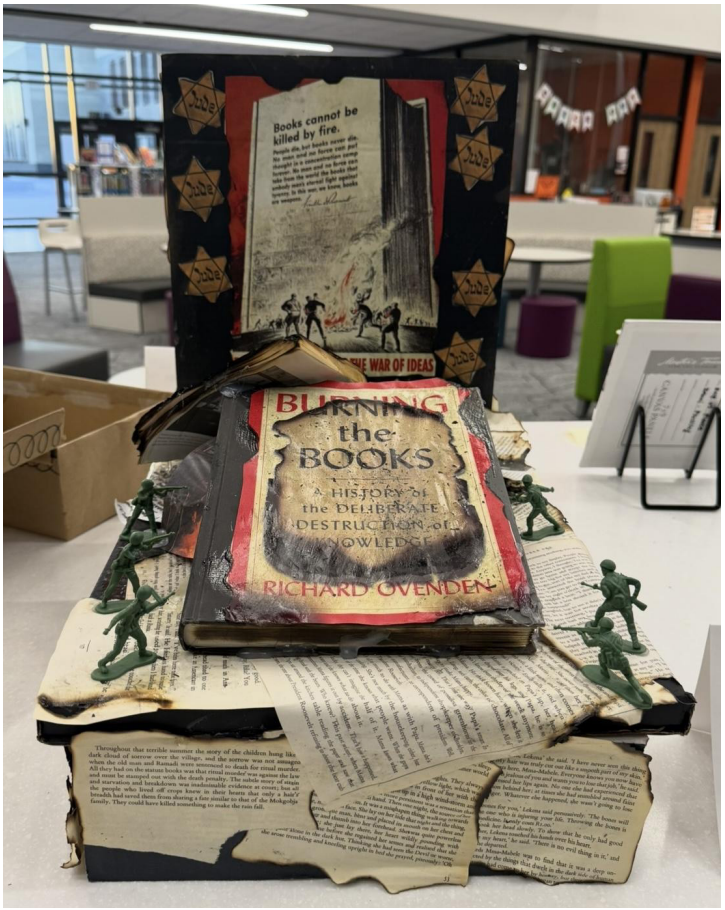
# TEXAS VOICES

A NEWSLETTER OF THE TEXAS COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

## President's corner

By Eva Goins, President

### A story about authentic assessments that create diverse learning




At the end of a school year, I think back to the first day of school when my students first walked into my classroom. I remember students that were excited to be back with their friends and ready to take on the new year with such excitement. Then I remember the students that were half awake wishing that summer break was maybe a month or two longer.

Whatever type of students showed up in my classroom last August, by the last bell of the last day of school, when my family of students walked out my classroom for the last time, my main goal, my main wish, is that they are better thinkers, writers, speakers, readers, listeners, and humans than they were when they first walked in.

Throughout the year during every quarter, even if it is not in the curriculum, I strive to give my students the opportunity for authentic assessment. When a student knows their final work is going to be assessed by opinions other than their teacher's for a grade, they tend to try harder and go above any expectations set.

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## In memory of Dr. Kylene Beers

By Amanda Palmer, *Texas Voices*

**Kylene Beers**
**September 16, 1957-June 20, 2025**

In a profession synonymous with selflessness, Dr. Kylene Beers set the standard. Known for her research, many publications, and speaking engagements, she was always a teacher–and champion of teachers–before any of those roles. Her passing on June 20th left the literacy community bereft and short of a dynamic leader who could be counted on to say what needed to be said–often with a quick quip and trademark grin.

As the TCTELA Board shared personal memories at a recent meeting, we noted the openness and heart for teachers Dr. Beers exhibited had left an indelible mark on all she encountered. We celebrate Dr. Kylene Beers' memory with a few of our own regarding her impact on our professional lives:

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## President's corner (continued)

One of the most impactful authentic assessments our eighth graders partake is during our nonfiction unit where we focus on World War II era texts. At the end of the quarter our students are given four choices for their final summative assessment to present at our annual student-created museum and performances that we host for our community in the spring.

Choice one is for students to create an original performance. Students can work alone or together in a team of up to four members. Students are encouraged to use their talents to create a performance no longer than three minutes. Students write original music, poetry, and monologues. They create tableaus, songs, and interpretative dances. They combine their various talents within their friend groups and showcase the learning that they experienced during the quarter.

Choice two is to create a thematic art project. Students are able to use any medium they wish to work with and create a 3-dimensional masterpiece to illustrate a theme inspired by the novel they chose to read. These projects are the main attraction to the student-created museum where community members witness the knowledge and creativity of our students. The museum is open for half an hour before the performances begin on the stage.

Choice three is to create an original poem and enter the annual school contest. Students take a quote by Anne Frank, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world," as inspiration for their poem. The poems are judged by a group of teacher volunteers at our campus. The winners are announced during the performances that evening.

Choice four is to create a graphic essay about the texts we have read in class and their novel. While this is the most traditional assessment that students can choose, a majority of our students do not select this project. When completed, these graphic essays are also displayed in our student-created museum.

On the evening of our student created and led program, community members are greeted at the door by student volunteers that help them walk through the museum and direct them to the performance area displaying their knowledge as experts of their creations. So much pride can be witnessed among students as they show their work to their families and friends.

As an added bonus, any student that performed on stage that evening or placed in the top three positions for the best poem or thematic art project gets to attend a field trip to the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum. This year the learning that they experienced while reading their novel, creating their original pieces for our community event was extended by witnessing a Holocaust Survivor tell his story in person.

I never want to give my students a single choice to assess their learning. While I understand that traditional assessments are needed, I also think that authentic assessments are where the real learning happens. It is the type of learning that sticks.

## In memory of Dr. Kylene Beers (continued)

*I will never forget the moment Dr. Beers changed my perspective on teaching my students. After the TCTELA Sunday workshop, as a novice teacher, I timidly approached and asked her how I could get my students to pass the state test.*

*I will never forget her response: She smiled and said to focus on getting my students to learn to love reading and everything would work itself out. She was right.*

—Eva Goins, 2025 President

*The first time I saw Kylene in person, she told us to stop giving up on social media. She said if we didn't like our Facebook feed, we could do better. She challenged us to unfollow the negative voices and follow more teachers, researchers, and authors so that our social media can bring us joy!*

—Heather Alambarrio, Vice President Elect, Memberships & Affiliates

*Kylene's joy for learning and teaching has inspired me for decades. I still remember listening to her and Bob Probst talk with Louise Rosenblatt at NCTE and hearing Kylene acknowledge in that moment that she was rethinking some of the work she and Bob had been doing on "reading strategies." She was fierce in her reflection—something that made her a teacher, no matter her title at any given moment. I also remember her graciously welcoming me at Tyrolia in Waco after a day of learning alongside her, Penny Kittle,*

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### In memory of Dr. Kylene Beers (continued)

*Linda Reif, and Lester Laminack at Baylor University. She opened her home on so many occasions for so many to share in her joy for life and learning. I will dearly miss this inspiring, courageous, and brilliant mentor and friend.*
—Valerie Taylor, 2000 Past President

*For many years, I have utilized Dr. Beers' reading strategies in professional development and university methods courses. Her innovative work helps teachers provide powerful literacy instruction. Her strategies support purposeful and meaningful reading experiences for students*.
—Stephen Winton, CoEditor, *English in Texas,* 2020 Past President

*When Kids Can't Read by Dr. Beers opened my eyes to the importance of building relationships before teaching. The professional book remains on my shelf. Watching Dr. Beers, along with Dr. Probst, discussing kids and literacy left me in awe of her knowledge and calming spirit. Thank you, Dr. Beers. for your love of kids, literacy, and educators.*
—LaWanda Williams, Executive Secretary

In 2018, while promoting their book, *Disrupting Thinking,* Kylene and Bob–as so many in our community refer to Dr. Beers and co-writer Dr. Robert E. Probst–shared in a video that skill and will are interdependent. Kylene discussed the importance of building a learner's confidence in order to build their skills. Kylene, it seems, felt the same regarding the teachers she coached and worked beside. She often appeared on community organized groups for her materials, responded to individual messages, encouraged educators, and always advocated for teachers, children, and education. In fact, one of her last Facebook posts read, "Teachers– Without you we don't advance. Don't ever doubt how much you matter."

Kylene, we will continue to advance because of you.

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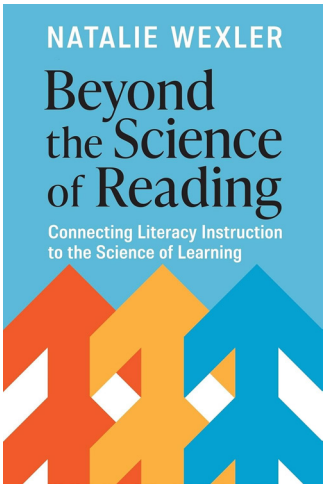
# Beyond the science of reading: A call for knowledge, representation, and writing in today's classrooms

By Doug Frank, Vice-President




The science of reading (SoR) has become a central talking point in curriculum and instruction. The need for explicit, systematic phonics and decoding instruction is a tenet of this body of research. While much attention has been paid to this research—which focuses on the early learning grades—Natalie Wexler's newest book, *Beyond the Science of Reading: Connecting Literacy Instruction to the Science of Learning* (2025), goes further to address what she believes we must do to help students read complex texts. In its nine chapters, Wexler discusses classroom, district, and policy issues; however, her focus consistently returns to background knowledge and writing. Each of these is explained thoroughly in the book, though there are areas where we must explore and further develop the suggestions that *Beyond the Science of Reading* proposes.

## Background Knowledge

Much like she addressed in *The Knowledge Gap* (2020), in *Beyond the Science of Reading,* Wexler emphasizes that attention must be paid to background knowledge over abstract skills. As she states in the first chapter, "One problem with a system that prioritizes supposedly abstract comprehension skills and strategies over building knowledge is that it ends up widening the gaps between more and less privileged students" (25).

Wexler spends a great deal of time criticizing literacy standards. While she focuses on Common Core, the connection to TEKS is evident as she describes them as *"essentially lists of comprehension skills that are supposed to become incrementally more sophisticated as grade levels go up"* (194). No standards specify which texts this should occur with, and for Wexler, this is a central issue in her argument. She believes one reason to consider this is that *"[n]ewspapers and magazines are replete with references to Western culture,"* (151) which is a problematic assumption to frame as universal. Is Western culture the driving force for all background knowledge content? Who decides whose stories are told and whose are not? As book and text selection become increasingly fraught and political, there is a danger of amplifying certain voices while silencing others.

I agree with much of what Wexler says about background knowledge and its role in reading comprehension; however, we cannot sacrifice representation of our students for the goal of centering one group's narratives in the name of building background knowledge. In addition, until state policy aligns with best practices, districts will remain reluctant to fully embrace a knowledge-building curriculum.

## Writing

Wexler dedicates an entire chapter to writing, which is a highlight of her book. Much of what she includes connects with *The Writing Revolution 2.0* (2024), though the latter goes further

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**Beyond the science of reading: A call for knowledge, representation, and writing in today's classrooms (continued)**

by providing immediate examples of how to implement effective, daily writing strategies in the classroom. This does not diminish what Wexler presents in *Beyond the Science of Reading.* Rather, the fifth chapter makes a compelling case for the critical need for writing to be a daily occurrence in all classes, not just English Language Arts.

Early in the chapter, she explains why the teaching and learning of writing is such a challenging task for both teachers and students: *"Writing requires [the student] to decide what's most important about a topic, to make connections between different bits of information, and to decide how best to organize the information they're writing about"* (116). Furthermore, Wexler points out that writing often does not reflect the natural way we speak, so the explicit teaching of complex syntax is essential.

The highlight of the chapter is how focusing on the sentence level can significantly improve student writing. This caused me to reflect on how I often expected my students to understand the full scope of essay writing and organization when I should have first ensured they were able to clearly convey their ideas in a sentence. This chapter lays out three principles central to effective writing instruction:

- Ensure that writing instruction is embedded in the content as much as possible.
- Teach grammar and conventions in the context of students' writing.
- Adjust the cognitive load that writing imposes on students.

This final principle is important because it emphasizes that students *"use writing as a lever for learning—and to learn to write well"* (131). This awareness of the cognitive demands of writing should be evident in the way we deliberately teach, model, and practice writing in the classroom.

### Conclusion

A knowledge-building curriculum is becoming more prevalent as districts in Texas continue to adopt these types of programs. Building students' background knowledge can positively impact their reading and writing; however, an awareness of the skills embedded within the content will continue to be an essential part of our work. No curriculum or resource can fully capture the needs of all students, and the ability to customize lessons remains a critical skill for teachers. Wexler's book may at times be heavy in its use of research (both concrete and anecdotal), but when she connects ideas to clear classroom practices, she offers teachers another valuable tool to help students become confident readers and writers.

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# Elementary energy in middle school: Circling up to elevate 8th-grade short constructed response writing

By Markesha Tisby, President Elect

As an educator with an elementary background, stepping into an eighth-grade classroom initially felt like entering uncharted territory. The developmental differences, academic expectations, and social dynamics presented both challenges and opportunities. Let's not forget that most of the students I encountered were taller than I am. This cross-grade teaching experience began when current TCTELA President Eva Goins and I met for lunch so I could support her with implementing small-group instruction into her eighth-grade classroom. What started as a conversation about instructional strategies quickly evolved into plans for a classroom visit. Before I knew it, I was scheduled to teach in both Eva's classroom and her teammate's classroom.

This unexpected opportunity to bring my elementary energy and teaching strategies into the middle school environment created unexpected engagement and deeper learning. This article shares how a kinesthetic, collaborative approach traditionally used with younger students transformed a writing lesson for eighth graders.

### The challenge: middle school writing instruction

Any middle school ELA teacher knows the struggle: getting students to write thorough, evidence-based responses in an ongoing battle. Worthington Middle School uses the CEJ (claim, evidence, justification) model across content areas. Students are expected to craft responses that make clear claims, support them with textual evidence, and explain the connection between the two. However, many students still approach this task mechanically, creating formulaic responses that lack depth and genuine engagement with the text.

The pressure of producing "perfect" written responses often leads to anxiety, writer's block, or rushed work that doesn't reflect

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**Elementary energy in middle school: Circling up to elevate 8th-grade short constructed response writing (continued)**

students' true understanding. Many 8th graders are so focused on "getting it right" that they aren't truly developing their analytical thinking skills.

### An elementary approach: the circle up activity

Drawing from my elementary teaching background, I decided to implement a concentric circles activity— a strategy commonly used with younger students to build verbal skills and collaborative thinking. While this approach might seem "too young" for middle schoolers at first glance, I believed its interactive nature would break down the writing process in a fresh way that would engage even reluctant writers.

The concentric circles format creates a structured environment for partner discussions, with students rotating through different partners while focusing on specific discussion prompts. This kinesthetic approach gets students out of their seats, talking through their ideas before committing them to paper— something we often prioritize in elementary classrooms. You can't teach emergent writers without emphasizing and utilizing oral rehearsal.

Click here to access a detailed copy of the implementation details.

### Student engagement and outcomes

The impact was immediate and striking in some cases. Students who typically sat quietly, staring at blank pages, were actively engaged in discussion. The pressure of producing a "perfect" written response was temporarily removed, allowing them to text ideas verbally before committing them to paper.

What particularly impressed me was how students naturally began to challenge and refine each other's thinking. When one student claimed that the character's "approach changed from being worried to being collaborative," their partner pushed them to be more specific about the transition. This peer feedback was far more effective than similar guidance would have been coming from Mrs. Goins or me.

Student reflections revealed insights from their learning process. When asked "How different was your final draft from your messy, thinking draft?", many students noted improvements in clarity. Their responses to "How did circling up impact your final draft?", consistently highlighted how hearing peers' perspectives helped them reconsider their own interpretations and discover textual evidence they had overlooked.

One particularly insightful student shared that while they cannot talk during the actual assessment, they can "ask themselves the questions that they asked their partners,"— demonstrating an internalization of the dialogue process that could transfer to independent work. This metacognitive awareness represents exactly the kind of self-regulation skills we hope to develop in middle school writers.

I was especially pleased with one student whose messy, thinking side of the notecard was completely blank at the beginning of the activity. After engaging in the "Circle Up" activity, he was able to compose a response during the final draft. This illustrated for me how the verbal processing provided an accessible entry point for a student who initially struggled to begin writing.

Perhaps most importantly, students approached the writing task with noticeably less anxiety. Having already verbalized and refined their ideas through multiple conversations, they wrote with greater confidence and fluency.

### Lessons learned

This teaching experience reinforced several important principles across cross-grade instructional strategies:

First, the fundamental need for verbalization before writing doesn't disappear as students age— if anything, it becomes more crucial as the writing tasks grow more complex. The elementary practice of "turn and talk" remains valuable even for sophisticated middle school writing tasks.

Second, the physical movement aspect of the activity served multiple purposes. Beyond simply providing a break from sitting, it created natural transitions between different thinking stages and prevented students from getting "stuck" in unproductive thought patterns.

Finally, I observed that the structure provided a sense of safety for 8th graders to share their ideas. While middle schoolers are often reluctant to volunteer thoughts in a whole-class setting, the one-on-one rotations created low-pressure opportunities for them to test and refine their thinking, even with me, a stranger, all up in their business, asking questions and continuing to prompt partnerships.

This activity is just one example of how elementary strategies can be successfully implemented in middle school classrooms. By bringing diverse teaching approaches to our students, we not only enhance engagement but also provide multiple pathways to mastery, honoring the fact that adolescent learners, like their younger counterparts, benefit from multisensory, collaborative learning experiences.

As we continue to break down the artificial barriers between elementary and secondary instructional approaches, we create richer, more diverse learning environments that better serve all of our students.

# Share your #TCTELAHistorias

By Aisha Atkinson, Digital Coordinator

Literacy—it lives within us as a precious gift that never depreciates in its value. The child you see depicted in this image is the eight-year-old version of Aisha. During this chapter of my life, I was a very shy, soft-spoken child who would seldom ever be seen without a book in hand. This solace would inevitably build an appreciation for creation not only for writing but for drawing, too. All the while creating the spaces and places where belonging could never be erased.

When TCTELA Board President Eva Goins announced her conference theme - this little girl and the stories she created with words and art reemerged from the past as a "historia" living within me.

TCTELA Members,we know as passionate educators, every literacy journey has a story. As your Digital Coordinator, vulnerably sharing my story, I want to encourage you to share yours. As part of our #TCTELAHistorias campaign, we're inviting all members to share the experiences that shaped you as a literacy educator and advocate.

To make it easy to participate (and beautiful!), I've created a Canva design template for you to customize your own historia. But please feel free to be as creative as your heart desires if making your own design is what you'd prefer.

Use your story to inspire others, celebrate your passion for teaching, and connect with our amazing community of educators. Don't forget to tag @TCTELA, use the #TCTELAHistorias hashtag, and include a special shoutout for #TCTELA2026, happening January 30–February 1, 2026, at the Kalahari Resorts & Convention Center in Round Rock, Texas!

Let's lift each other's voices and celebrate the power of literacy across Texas. We can't wait to see your historias!


Create Your Historia Here

**More information available at: www.tctela.org**


# Say "Yes!" to a preservice teacher in the fall

By Dr. Ann D. David

Summer stretches out in front of us. It's a time for doctor's appointments, hobbies, time with family, travel, and staying cool. As you reflect on last year and, at some point, look ahead to the fall, I invite you to consider hosting a preservice teacher (PST) in the fall. Last August I offered some pointers on how to support PSTs in the "observation" phase of their certification programs. All those suggestions still apply. This article offers reasons to consider saying "Yes!" to a PST in the first place, even when you're already juggling a whole bunch of things.

First, inviting a PST in your classroom is an excellent way to grow your capacity for leadership. There are not always clear moves for a classroom teacher to become a leader without changing job titles or adding significantly more work. Mentoring a PST, though, allows you to take on some aspects of supervision and coaching to see if they are a good fit for you. PSTs need to be told, often very directly, what to do in the classroom. When working with students or teaching, PSTs need lots of coaching to make the most of their own learning during their time in your classroom. Practicing these skills with a PST is a low-risk, high-reward way to testing the leadership waters.

As you mentor your PST, you can realize your own skills and areas of growth. Are you comfortable giving direct feedback for improvement? Do you draw on the PSTs assets enough? Do you enjoy turning over instruction to the PST and giving feedback later?

Second, when you have a PST in your classroom, you will talk to them about your planning, how a lesson went, how the students are responding, how you make classroom management choices, and a host of other things. All of this verbal processing is certainly valuable for the PST to begin to understand the thought process of a teacher. It is also a powerful way to grow professionally because of its influence on your reflection practices.

To explain: Donald Schön (1983, 1987) defined two kinds of reflection, on action and in action. Classroom teachers, as I'm sure you're aware, reflect in action endlessly. Any time you adapt, adjust, or modify your instruction in the moment you are reflecting in action. Classroom teachers, though, get very little time for reflection on action, the reflection that happens after a lesson has been taught or a behavioral situation is dealt with. Because there's always the next thing that needs doing.

Verbalizing your *in action* decisions to a PST, though, increases the reflective value by highlighting the *on action* component of reflection. Narrating those choices makes you more aware of them. Experts don't always know why they do something, and often that something works well, so there's no reason to reflect on it. That move is incorporated into the lesson for the next class and then becomes just part of how you teach that concept. But in sharing with a PST, they may ask you questions that encourage you to reveal more of your thinking, which makes it available to be examined. You can also find yourself in the position asking yourself "Is that really why I made that choice?" or "Did that decision pan out the way I thought it would?" While I'm sure the designers of the T-TESS hoped it would encourage reflection on action, and it certainly can, PSTs are better partners in this work of regular reflection.

Finally, all of this work with a PST has the potential to reorient you to your foundational beliefs about teaching and learning. As you explain your choices to your PST, or as they ask you questions about your instructional decisions, what you choose to share points to what you value. How you talk about your students reminds you that you believe the best of the students, even if they may drive you bananas sometimes. Sharing the choices you make while navigating departmental, school, district, and state expectations reflects what you believe matters in this work of teaching. Because teachers are busy, we may not always think about those foundational beliefs. Regardless, they are there and they guide us. Inviting a PST into our classroom offers us many opportunities to reinforce our beliefs, contribute to the profession, and share our teaching expertise.

So when your principal or district human resources person reaches out in August asking for volunteers to host a PST, please say yes! Then invite them to join TCTELA as a student member!

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# Diversifying your bookshelf: Read out of your comfort zone

By Kelly E. Tumy, Co-Editor, *English in Texas*

In 2021 I came across an Instagram (IG) account that gave me pause. Sharon McMahon, IG handle @sharonsaysso, was breaking down Supreme Court cases for her viewers, explaining different executive orders, even outlining how the cabinet secretaries work and what their roles were, and simply put—I was hooked. As a history nerd and someone categorically concerned with what goes on in our government from day to day, I knew I had found my new home. Enter: Governerds.

McMahon is a former high school government teacher turned Instagram rock star for her work not only on the topics listed above but also on helping government make sense to non-government devotees. Her followers quickly deemed themselves the Governerds, and her book club was born from this group of dedicated followers. As a former government teacher, her comfort zone in reading skews to nonfiction.

When she first announced her book club, I wondered if it would have a broad appeal to me. While I was an AP English Language teacher for more than 10 years, I don't run toward nonfiction day to day; in fact, I rarely sought it out before joining the book club.

Our first set of books included the following selections: *American Sherlock: Murder, Forensics, and the Birth of American CSI* (2021) by Austin author Kate Winkler Dawson; *The Woman They Could Not Silence: One Woman, Her Incredible Fight for Freedom, and the Men Who Tried to Make Her Disappear* (2021) by Kate Moore; and *The Island of Sea Women: A Novel* (2020) by Lisa See. None of these books would have graced my shopping cart in a normal run to Blue Willow Books in Houston. But their draw was extraordinary. McMahon contracted each author to speak to us and to respond to our questions. We were all on Zoom, and I will never forget the glee in Winkler Dawson's voice when she saw over 3000 readers there to listen to her talk about her book, her research, and her writing process. This is the book that hooked me, and it was well out of my comfort zone. I am a thriller reader. I love a well-crafted spy novel featuring anything connected to the clandestine services, and I gravitate much more toward fiction than nonfiction. What I love about this book club is that it pushes me to diversify my reading habits, to learn about challenging eras in history, to see nonfiction as a much more engaging genre than I ever gave it credit for in the classroom. Even though *The Island of Sea Women* (2020) was fiction, it was historical fiction, and it allowed me to learn about a culture whose existence was completely unknown to me. To learn about a female-dominant culture that operated, flourished, then decimated during World War II made me want to learn as much as I could about this culture. But it was *The Woman They Could Not Silence* (2021) that turned me into a devoted nonfiction reader.

Moore's book shattered every notion I had about nonfiction. She spun the tale of Elizabeth Packard, her main subject, as deftly as any fiction writer I've read. She crafted the harrowing story of a 19th century woman imprisoned in an insane asylum (term used in the book and indicative of 19th century nomenclature) for the sole reason her husband was furious at her attempts at independence and her bold demonstrations of personal aims in life. Moore's prose kept me up until 2:00 am to find out if Elizabeth would triumph in her endeavors to find a way out of an unthinkable prison. Sitting and listening to the author talk about the work she put into her book…let's just say, it was a distinct pleasure simply to be a fly on the wall on Zoom and learn from her. Each author in this first year made me inspired to read much more out of that easy zone we all love to default back to. Whatever it is for you, we do settle into a genre and relax and read.

I've gotten to meet John Green since we read *The Anthropocene Reviewed: Essays on a Human-Centered Planet* (2023); I was able to ask David Grann a question when we discussed *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (2018). Both of these authors were funny and self-deprecating; moreover, they were genuine, engaged conversationalists who loved to talk books and writer's craft and who completely enthralled our Governerd audience.

Let this serve as an encouragement to find something new to read this summer or even join a new kind of book club. While I am interested in how our government works, I never envisioned myself in a nonfiction book club learning about the US prison system, the opioid crisis, or fascinating early American history with Stacy Schiff's *The Revolutionary Samual Adams* (2022). What I can tell you is that today, I'm so glad I took the plunge and joined, and I am—forever–a proud Governerd.

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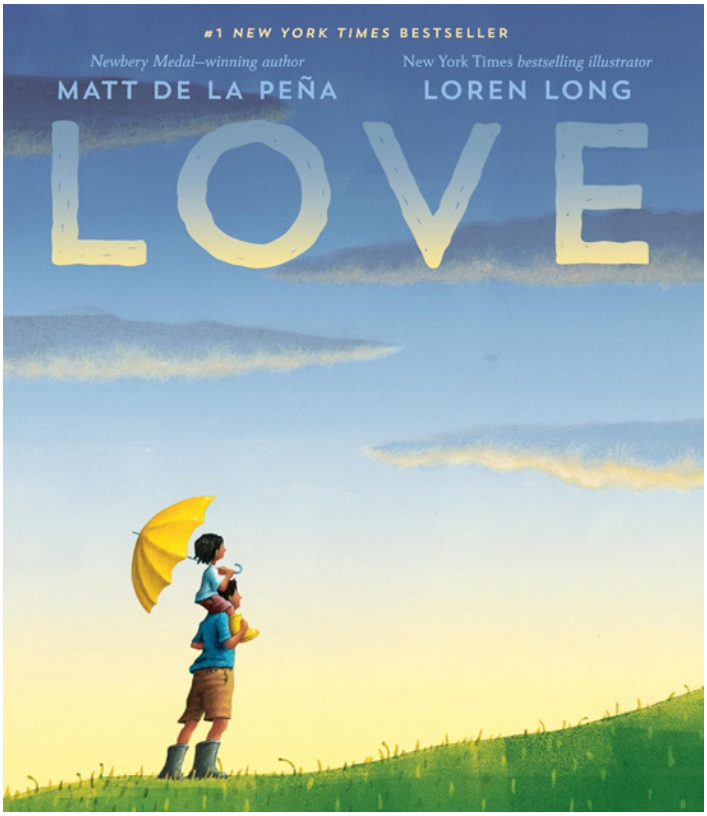
# Beyond age boundaries: Why picture books belong in secondary classrooms

By Janeth Cornejo, Middle Section Chair

*"You wake with a start in the arms of a loved one who bends to your ear and whispers, 'it's okay, it's okay, it's love.'"*
—Matt de la Peña




Picture books have long been relegated to primary and elementary classrooms, dismissed as tools only for emerging young readers rather than sophisticated texts worthy of adolescent analysis. This misconception overlooks their remarkable utility in secondary education, where they can serve as powerful catalysts for critical thinking, literary analysis, and creative writing. The brevity and visual elements of picture books allow teachers to model close reading techniques in a single class period, inviting students to examine how text and imagery work together to create meaning–a skill increasingly vital in our visually-saturated digital landscape.

For students struggling with reading engagement or comprehension, picture books offer accessible entry points to complex literary concepts. Rather than simplifying content, skilled educators use these texts to scaffold discussions about theme, symbolism, characterization, and narrative structure. The visuals in picture books support diverse learning needs while challenging students to articulate connections between illustration and text–essentially teaching multiliteracy through a format that doesn't intimidate reluctant readers. This approach often reveals that students' analytical abilities frequently exceed their technical reading levels. As writing mentors, picture books provide concise, powerful models of literary craft. Secondary students analyzing an author's deliberate word choices in a short picture book can immediately recognize the impact of precise language, evocative imagery, and narrative pacing.

One of my favorite picture books is Matt de la Peña's *Love* (2018), which offers a compelling case for the inclusion of picture books in all classrooms. This beautifully illustrated collaboration with Loren Long presents a profound meditation on love that transcends age boundaries, making it an exceptional teaching resource for adolescents.

As an educator, I've found that *Love* creates unique opportunities for developing critical literacy and emotional intelligence. The book's accessible text paired with beautiful illustrations allows secondary students to engage with sophisticated themes through multiple entry points. What makes *Love* particularly valuable is its unflinching portrayal of both light and shadow. De la Peña doesn't water down reality; he acknowledges that love exists alongside hardship– "a slice of burnt toast that tastes like love," parents arguing while you hide under the piano, "and the face staring back in the bathroom mirror." These honest depictions validate adolescents' complex emotional landscapes while modeling how to find beauty amid difficulty.

Using picture books like *Love* also disrupts assumptions about what constitutes "serious" literature. When we invite secondary students to analyze the relationship between text and image, we're teaching visual literacy alongside traditional textual analysis. This multimodal approach prepares students for a world increasingly communicated through visual media.

Perhaps most importantly, *Love* creates a safe space to explore vulnerability. Secondary students, often hiding behind carefully constructed personas, find in this picture book permission to discuss emotions without the self-consciousness that might accompany more explicitly "teenage" materials. This is exemplified in a lesson that I have used with students from middle grade to college undergraduate students. I provide illustrations from picture books and students write their own story with the image as their mentor texts. Students can take an image like the one with the boy sitting under the piano with his dog, and write what they know, what they want to share. Some may tell a story of a little boy playing hide and seek, others weave a story of an argument gone wrong and the mess that is left in its wake.

For secondary classrooms, *Love* isn't a regression to elementary materials-- it's an invitation to sophisticated analysis, emotional growth, and meaningful discussion. As we prepare adolescents for increasingly complex worlds, de la Peña's masterful picture book reminds us that sometimes the most profound truths come in the most accessible packages.

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# Voices unheard: My advocacy for language inclusion in the classroom

By Esmeralda Cartagena Collazo, Teacher Development Chair, TCTELA

In 1995, when my family moved to the United States from Puerto Rico, I entered the fifth grade filled with enthusiasm about learning English and engaging with a new educational environment. However, this enthusiasm quickly vanished as I faced the harsh realities of linguistic discrimination in the U.S. public schools.


When I arrived at the classroom, I was asked to sit in the back of the classroom alongside my Hispanic peers, distinctly separated from the predominantly white students who engaged actively in singing songs, read-alouds, and interactive learning activities. My "education" consisted of worksheets that I struggled to understand but I had to complete without any language support, and coloring pages, far removed from the interactive learning experienced by our classmates who were sitting in the front of the classroom. Crucially, the use of Spanish, my native language, was explicitly forbidden within the classroom walls. This lack of linguistic support not only stifled our academic growth but also my basic communication needs—I remember the days I held back from using the restroom or drinking water because I couldn't express my needs in English.

Reflecting on the broader historical context, this experience wasn't an isolated incident but rather a reflection of the ongoing challenges within education in U.S. schools. Currently, no single language has been legally designated as the official language of the United States at the federal level. However, 31 states have declared English as their official language (Álvarez, 2020). The practice of forbidding the use of native languages in classrooms, especially among emergent bilingual students, has deep historical roots and continues to be a subject of controversy and debate within the U.S. educational system (Lucas & Katz, 1994). Historically, such practices stem from policies that were explicitly or implicitly designed to assimilate minority populations into mainstream American culture, often at the expense of their linguistic and cultural identities (Kymlicka & Norman, 2000).

Research has highlighted several negative impacts of these English-only policies. For instance, when students are not allowed to use their native languages, it can hinder their learning and engagement in the classroom (González-Howard & McNeill, 2016). This is because understanding complex academic concepts is significantly more challenging when also trying to learn a new language. Moreover, such policies can negatively impact students' self-esteem and identity, as their home languages and cultures are devalued (Macedo, 2017).

There are several benefits of using students' native languages in the classroom that can improve their emotional and academic well-being. Research indicates that allowing students to use their first language helps them better understand and internalize new concepts. According to Cummins (2000), students who obtain cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in one language are more likely to acquire CALP in another, indicating that the transfer of skills between languages improves learning in general. This benefit of being bilingual promotes both conceptual thinking and linguistic development (Bialystok, 2001). Incorporating students' native languages into the classroom fosters a more inclusive classroom environment. Multicultural education, including language inclusivity, promotes a sense of belonging and respect among students from diverse backgrounds. By integrating students' native languages, schools communicate a message of acceptance and respect for cultural diversity, thereby enhancing students' self-esteem and school engagement (Banks, 2010).

## Subtractive vs. Additive Language Models

English-only policies in schools often represent a subtractive model of language education, where the sole aim is to enhance proficiency in Standard English while undervaluing the linguistic assets that students from language-minoritized backgrounds bring to the classroom (Flores & Rosa, 2015). These policies operate on the assumption that students must shed their native linguistic practices to gain proficiency in Standard English, inherently suggesting that their primary linguistic identities are obstacles rather than assets (Cummins, 2000).

In contrast, additive models of language education seek to acknowledge and build upon the diverse linguistic repertoires of students (García et al., 2017). Such models treat students' skills in languages other than Standard English as valuable assets, promoting the ability to switch between different English varieties and other languages as needed. This approach recognizes both nonstandard English and other languages as valid for out-of-school settings, while encouraging students to incorporate standard linguistic practices into their repertoire for school contexts (Delpit, 2006).

## Advocacy for Change

Today, two decades later, similar stories unfold in classrooms across the nation. The persistent reluctance to integrate native languages in educational settings undermines not only the academic but also the social and emotional well-being of emergent bilingual students. Languages other than English are often viewed by schools as issues that need to be addressed and corrected (Gándara & Escamilla, 2017).

Allowing students to use their native languages in the classroom not only enhances engagement and comprehension but also fosters a deep sense of belonging and identity affirmation.

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### Voices unheard: My advocacy for language inclusion in the classroom (continued)

This practice recognizes the cultural richness and cognitive assets that multilingual students bring, leveraging these for academic and social-emotional development. Multilingualism equips students with essential cognitive skills that enhance their ability to function in a globally interconnected world, demonstrating both practical and cultural benefits of embracing linguistic diversity (Bialystok, 2017).

My personal journey, shaped by early experiences of linguistic isolation, has fueled my dedication as an English as a Second Language specialist. I am committed to transforming educational practices to be more inclusive. Advocating for the integration of native languages in education goes beyond mere permission; it involves a fundamental appreciation of the diverse linguistic backgrounds students bring to their learning environments. The sense of isolation I once faced has turned into a powerful motivator, driving me to ensure that current and future generations do not encounter the same barriers.

This recognition of linguistic and cultural assets is critical in reversing disengagement and boosting self-esteem among students, who might otherwise feel marginalized due to linguistic barriers. It is important for teachers to have an open mindset, and see the benefit of allowing students to use their native language in the classroom. Some effective strategies that teachers can employ to support language inclusion in the classroom, even without being fluent in the languages of their students are:

- **Use of Multilingual Resources:** Incorporate books, videos, and other learning materials in multiple languages, especially those spoken by students in the classroom. This helps all students see their languages reflected in their learning environment.
- **Visual Aids:** Utilize visual aids such as pictures, charts, and diagrams to support verbal instructions, making content more accessible to students of all language backgrounds.
- **Translanguaging Approach:** Encourage translanguaging, where students are allowed to use their native languages alongside the language of instruction to make meaning, express themselves, and engage with the content more deeply.
- **Language Buddies:** Pair students who are proficient in the language of instruction with students who are learning the language. This peer support can help improve language skills and foster a more inclusive classroom culture.
- **Culturally Responsive Teaching:** Understand and integrate the cultural contexts of the languages spoken by students. This includes recognizing the cultural significance of language for students and using examples and references that are culturally relevant to the diverse student population.
- **Encouraging Multilingual Expression:** Allow students to express themselves in their native languages in certain activities or projects. This can enhance creativity and comfort, promoting better learning outcomes.
- **Inclusive Communication:** When communicating with parents and the community, use translation services or bilingual documents to ensure that all families can participate fully in the school community.
- **Respect and Validation:** Show respect and appreciation for all languages spoken by students. This positive reinforcement can boost students' confidence and encourage them to maintain and develop their native language skills.
- **Interactive Language Walls:** Create language walls in the classroom where students can contribute words in their native languages along with translations. This interactive wall can serve as a learning resource for everyone and validate multiple languages.
- **Incorporate Technology:** Use language learning apps and translation technology to aid understanding and participation in lessons. This can help bridge communication gaps and support students in accessing the curriculum.
- **Group Work and Collaborative** Projects: Design group activities that require cooperation among students who speak different languages. This not only helps in language practice but also promotes cultural exchange and understanding.
- **Role Plays and Simulations:** Include role-playing games or simulations that encourage students to use different languages. This method makes learning active and contextual, helping students use language in practical scenarios.
- **Storytelling in Different Languages:** Encourage storytelling in students' native languages, either by the students themselves or through guest storytellers. This can be a powerful way to engage students and honor their linguistic heritage.
- **Multilingual Signs and Labels:** Label objects in the classroom with multiple languages. This not only aids vocabulary development but also makes the classroom more inclusive and linguistically rich.
- **Cultural Celebrations:** Organize events that celebrate different cultures and languages, allowing students to showcase and share their linguistic and cultural practices with peers.
- **Supporting Language Development in All Subjects:** Ensure that language support is not limited to language classes but extends to all subjects. This integrated approach helps students use and improve their language skills across the curriculum.


The journey I embarked upon as a fifth-grader from Puerto Rico to an English as a Second Language specialist is not just my story but a narrative shared by countless emergent bilingual students across the United States. My personal experiences and the subsequent research underline the undeniable benefits of incorporating native languages into educational settings—not only to bolster academic achievement but also to enrich emotional and social well-being.

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### Voices unheard: My advocacy for language inclusion in the classroom (continued)

This advocacy is not merely about allowing the use of native languages; it's about transforming our educational practices to recognize and value the diverse linguistic landscapes our students navigate. It's about creating an environment where linguistic diversity is seen not as a barrier but as a bridge—a bridge that connects us to our students and allows them to access their full potential. As we continue to push forward, we must challenge outdated paradigms and embrace a more inclusive, respectful, and equitable approach to education. Only then can we ensure that no voice goes unheard and that every student has the opportunity to thrive in a truly supportive learning environment.

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# Cultivating literacy across languages: Practical strategies to support multilingual readers and writers

By Ángeles Muñoz, Elementary Section Chair

Across Texas, classrooms are enriched by students who speak, read, and write in multiple languages. Multilingual learners possess valuable knowledge and skills that deserve recognition and support in our schools. By employing thoughtful, research-based strategies, teachers can create learning environments that enhance English literacy while valuing the literacy students bring from their home languages.

This article presents effective and practical reading and writing strategies from *Reading, Writing, and Learning in ESL* by Peregoy, Boyle, and Amendum (2023) and *Rooted in Strength* by Espinosa and Ascenzi-Moreno (2021), along with examples that Texas teachers can implement in their classrooms.

### 1. Translanguaging: Encouraging strategic use of all language resources

Multilingual students simultaneously use English and their home language to understand academic content and express their ideas. Strategically allowing students to engage with their full linguistic repertoire during content learning can enhance their comprehension, metacognition, and metalinguistic skills and improve classroom participation.

For instance, during writing an essay, students might brainstorm ideas or draft a piece of writing in their home language and then


revise or translate it into English with the help of technology, a teacher, or a peer. Encouraging students to write in their home language validates their thinking and helps them make cross-linguistic connections while transferring literacy skills between languages. Espinosa and Ascenzi-Moreno (2021) state that multilingual students' confidence and competence improve when they are allowed to use all their linguistic resources during

*Continued on next page.*

**Cultivating literacy across languages: Practical strategies to support multilingual readers and writers (continued)**

reading and writing activities in the classroom.

### 2. Windows and mirrors: Making reading meaningful

Students are more likely to engage with texts when they encounter familiar experiences, characters, or places represented in what they read. Selecting books reflecting students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds can enhance their motivation and connection to new reading strategies.

Teachers might include titles such as *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales or *My Name is María Isabel* by Alma Flor Ada to help students explore themes of belonging and perseverance. After reading, students can write personal responses, narratives, or "I Am" poems incorporating English and their home language vocabulary. Peregoy et al. (2023) note that read-aloud enables students to draw on their prior knowledge, which supports reading comprehension and helps build a stronger foundation for writing.

### 3. Scaffolding reading: Using background knowledge and visual support

Multilingual learners benefit from explicit connections between their existing knowledge and the new content being introduced. Teachers can support students by activating their background knowledge and incorporating visuals, word banks, and graphic organizers.

For example, before reading a text about the weather, a teacher might discuss recent local weather events, introduce key terms in English, and allow students to write in their home languages. Providing images, diagrams, or videos further enhances understanding and engagement.

These techniques help make abstract content more concrete, allowing multilingual learners to actively participate and develop a sense of belonging in the classroom and during the learning process.

### 4. Writing: Drawing on multilingual learners' voice and skill

Writing assignments that allow students to share personal stories, opinions, or family experiences can motivate them and enhance their linguistic and writing skills. Teachers can design writing activities that encourage creativity while focusing on specific writing objectives and standards.

For example, students could create a bilingual "Where I'm From" poem incorporating descriptive language from both languages. For example, a student might describe the aromas from their grandmother's kitchen in Vietnamese or the sounds of a Sunday market in Spanish. Teachers can provide sentence starters, multilingual word walls, personal dictionaries, or writing checklists to support students in developing structure and grammar while still expressing their unique voices. According to Peregoy et al. (2023), writing becomes more impactful when students are personally invested in the topic.

### 5. Collaborating: Strengthen language and confidence

Reading and writing activities are often more effective when students collaborate. Peer interaction promotes language development and creates meaningful opportunities for speaking, listening, and solving problems together.

One simple yet effective activity is paired reading. In this activity, one student reads a section of the text aloud while the other summarizes it or asks questions in English or their shared home language. For writing, peer editing conferences allow students to give and receive feedback using bilingual checklists or sentence starters.

Collaborative learning fosters community in the classroom and provides multilingual learners additional opportunities to practice language in authentic contexts.

Literacy growth through strength-based practice

Texas teachers are deeply committed to their students' growth. Incorporating strength-based literacy practices can help multilingual learners become confident readers and writers. These practices include strategically using language as a dynamic tool for learning, selecting relevant texts, providing visual scaffolding, encouraging writing, and fostering collaboration.

By engaging with students at their current level and appreciating the languages they utilize for learning, we empower them to excel academically, linguistically, and personally.

For more strategies for supporting multilingual learners, see the references listed in this article.

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# Back in school: A returning teacher's observations of the people who teach young people

By Heather Alambarrio, Vice President-Elect

After years of leading literacy at the campus level and across districts in Texas, I am back home in an English classroom with my own rosters. The current school funding crisis continues to wreak havoc on campuses and districts all over the state, and my business of providing staff development and model lessons around literacy suffered.

My return to the classroom has brought a lot of joy though, as I feel I can make sense of how to handle what happens between the four walls of room 211 at the end of the long, second floor hallway. My eighth grade students had substitute teachers from the seventh day of school until the last days of January, when I took on the job of teaching them to read, write and think. Together, we digest texts of all shapes and sizes and craft our own with their unique voices. Watching them begin to bloom along with the spring wildflowers renewed my hope.

An unexpected byproduct of being back on campus is being part of a team again, a department, a grade level, and a campus working together to meet the needs of every child who walks into our building. There are newcomers to our country, kids living in poverty, kids with single parents, those who have moved multiple times this year, who have learning disabilities, are word bereft, and a number who struggle with anxiety (in addition to living as a modern teen). The staff have welcomed me, provided tech support, insight to students we share, baked goods, and words of encouragement. I did not realize how much I missed having a home on a public school campus.

The staff of teachers and paraprofessionals who folded me into their school family walk in the doors each day with struggles of their own. They are fighting their own battles as they also fight for our Texas kids. I want to share a few profiles of teachers across Texas right now, in hopes that we can appreciate them and approach them with the empathy they need and deserve. These are amalgamations of teachers I have met across Texas this year.

There is the brand new teacher, who never student taught and needs to pass more tests to complete certification. They are working hard to stay on top of the planning, instruction and paperwork while hoping that they can pass that exam the second time around. They listen to the latest new music releases so that they can connect with students at lunch. Becoming a teacher felt like a calling, but they are not sure if they are doing a good job. Veteran teachers on the campus seem stressed and disillusioned. They are not sure teaching is right for them.

A veteran teacher on another campus mentors a student teacher while grading papers for the long-term sub's classes because a new teacher quit before the end of the third quarter. She bakes cakes for staff birthdays.

Another teacher was planning to retire next year, but her spouse was laid off from a government position last month. Last week, her car died. She sits with her teacher friend during treatment; her friend's cancer diagnosis is terminal.

One teacher is a single parent who has already downsized her house and car, but isn't sure how to continue paying for high school band for her teen. She buys snacks and sanitary items to keep in her filing cabinet because students cannot always afford them.

A friend has lost their position as an instructional coach because their district had to carry out a Reduction in Force. They create playlists for the halls and participate in dress-up days because they know those things might make people smile at school.

These teachers anxiously watch the news to see what will happen with school funding and teacher raises, but they also want to know if they will feel supported by their communities. These individuals are working on behalf of our young Texans, our future. Thank you, Texas teachers, for being the people who teach young people.

from the blogosphere...

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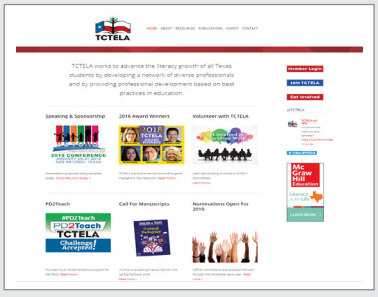


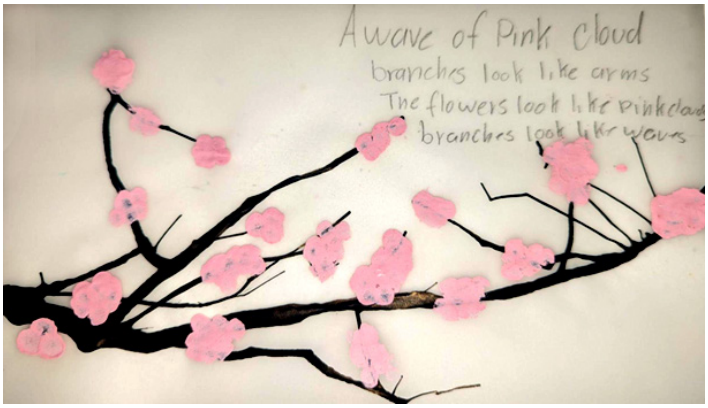
# Poetry shouldn't be intimidating

By Donna Herrera, Recording Secretary

*Porque suena mejor en Espanol!* It flows better. It rhymes better. Tiene mas ridmo y mas corazon.[1] These are the thoughts that cross my students' minds when we write poetry.

The challenge of teaching poetry: How can we get students to understand what the speaker is trying to say when worried we might or might not understand the speaker, either? Put that on top of a teaching through language barriers and our students will often get overwhelmed, shut down, or act out. I navigate this dilemma by introducing Latino writers and allowing my students to express themselves in Spanish as well.

Feelings are universal, and they run deep. That is what writing poetry is like. It is an expression of the soul that has no boundaries or listens to the biased rules of grammar. It is being allowed to play with words and mix cultures and languages. Some things are better felt in your native tongue. This is the safe space within the pages I want to provide for my students.




It helps to enter poetry by having students discuss themes and look through their favorite music playlists and find themes within their music. Next, I ask students to create a poem using song titles and welcome the titles in either English or in the language of their choice. If students don't know what to write about, I ask students to draw on emotions from a character they are reading about or a character we are analyzing in class. It helps to create a living word wall with different themes that they either encounter in their personal readings or in class.

Model. Model. Model.

If I have 3 classes, I write a new poem with every class. I let my mind wander and allow myself to be selectively vulnerable with what I write. If my poem calls for a word in Spanish because it just fits better, I do it happily so as to create a safe space that welcomes all kinds of poetry. Students can sometimes create poems about happiness and hope, although using song titles that may have sad undertones. Some phrases can only carry meaning in Spanish.

**ABCD ABCD**

Sometimes we need to **gritar,**
Yell as loud as a **chachalaca,**
Let your voice be **escuchada,**
Here there is no **silencio,**

Let our hearts **palpitar,**
Move your body **chamaca,**
Because together we are an **armada,**
Here there is only **movimiento!**

**AABBCCDD**

I walk not knowing el **camino,**
It is me a quien **defino,**
I look forward **solamente,**
It's the only way to clear la **mente,**
I'm tired from head to my **pies,**
To give up, I'll leave it for **después,**
Fear no existe para **nada,**
Because here, together, we are a **manada.**

Another way I introduce poetry is by remixing a song or a familiar poem the students already know–a poetry style I learned from my first TCTELA conference back in 2022. It helps to have songs that they like to change the order, omit words, or add in phrases in either English or Spanish to give it a new meaning. Yes, it is important to cover literary devices or analysis, but creating poetry together feels like freedom, allowing students to explore, make connections, make low-stakes mistakes, and not worry about the dreaded grammar monster lurking within every red ink pen.

The beauty of poetry is that it lends itself to various languages. Although Haiku and Tanka poems originated in Japan, that doesn't mean students can't venture into these with their native language to create art. I like to challenge my students; I push their understanding of rhyming schemes to explore blendings of rules. I have watched students use the rhyme scheme ABCD ABCD by creating a poem consisting of two stanzas, 8 lines, and allowing for the end words to, yes, rhyme, but they must rhyme in Spanish. I feel pure orgullo[2] when my students rush to me the next day or throughout the year with poems they wrote on their own, at home, or with their friends. Poetry in my classroom is not an isolated activity. It's a standard practice that no longer feels like a chore but is met with, "Poetry today, Miss H? Can we choose our own style or are you showing us another way?"

Poetry shouldn't be intimidating for teachers or students. Poetry is an avenue for bilingualism or multilingualism in the classroom. Creating poetry is the only way to help students approach it and yearn to unleash their full potential through word choice–free of constraints.

[1]Because it sounds better in Spanish! It has more rhythm and more heart.

[2]pride

# Summer professional learning—to PD or not to PD, the big debate

By Alissa Crabtree, TCTELA Past-President

The final school bell rings, classroom doors close, and teachers across Texas breathe a collective sigh of relief. Summer break—those precious weeks that represent both restoration and freedom—has finally arrived. Yet as educators pack up their classrooms, a familiar tension resurfaces: what role should professional learning play during these months?

For many educators, summer represents a sacred boundary between work and personal life. After ten months of lesson planning, grading, student interventions, parent communications, and countless other responsibilities, summer offers the chance to recharge depleted emotional and intellectual reserves. The notion of attending workshops or engaging in curriculum development during this time can feel like an infringement on well-earned rest.

On the other side of the debate are those who view summer as an ideal opportunity for deeper professional growth. Without the daily pressures of the classroom, summer can provide space for reflection and learning that isn't possible during the academic year.

This tension—between protecting much-needed restoration time and leveraging the unique opportunities for growth that summer provides—lies at the heart of the summer professional learning debate. What's often missing from the conversation is nuance: the recognition that both perspectives hold truth, and that balance rather than all-or-nothing approaches might better serve our profession.

## The pros and cons of summer professional learning

### Potential benefits

- **Deeper engagement without competing demands:** The most compelling argument for summer professional learning is the quality of engagement it can foster. Without the constant interruptions and time constraints of the school year, educators can immerse themselves in learning experiences, process new information, and consider implementation with greater depth.
- **Space for reflection and innovation:** Teaching is a reflective practice, yet the school year rarely provides adequate time for meaningful reflection. Summer learning opportunities can create space to analyze what worked and what didn't, and to envision new approaches for the coming year.
- **Reduced stress environment:** Professional learning during the academic year often occurs after full teaching days or on designated PD days that may feel rushed and overwhelming. Summer sessions can unfold at a more deliberate pace in a lower-stress environment.
- **Community building across schools:** Summer learning frequently brings together educators from different campuses who might not otherwise connect. These cross-campus relationships can spark collaboration and prevent the isolation that sometimes characterizes teaching.

### Legitimate concerns

- **Unpaid labor expectations:** Perhaps the most significant concern is that summer professional learning often represents unpaid labor. In a profession already characterized by work that extends beyond compensated hours, requesting uncompensated summer participation can feel exploitative.
- **Burnout and lack of recovery time:** Teaching requires emotional, intellectual, and physical stamina. Without adequate recovery time, burnout becomes increasingly likely. Educators who don't fully disconnect during summer may begin the new school year already depleted.
- **Family and personal obligations:** Many teachers have caregiving responsibilities or summer employment that make professional learning participation difficult or impossible. Creating expectations that don't account for these realities can exacerbate inequities within the profession.
- **One-size-fits-all approaches:** Mandated summer professional development often fails to account for teachers' varied needs, interests, and experience levels. When all educators must participate in identical learning experiences regardless of relevance, resentment rather than growth becomes the primary outcome.

## Three innovative strategies to provide PD and maintain connection without crossing boundaries

The tension between professional growth and personal boundaries need not be an either/or proposition. The following approaches offer ways to nurture teacher learning and community while respecting summer as personal time:

### 1. Micro-learning communities with clear parameters

Rather than extended workshops or courses, consider facilitating micro-learning communities with explicit time boundaries and flexibility. These might involve:

- Optional book clubs with two or three summer touchpoints (virtual or in-person) where participants discuss a professional text they've chosen to read.
- Single-session deep dives into specific topics identified by teachers as interests or needs.
- "PD passports" where teachers choose from a menu of brief, focused learning experiences based on personal interest.
- "Podcast obsessed" where teachers share valuable podcast episodes that address teaching and learning.

The key to this approach is establishing clear expectations upfront: exactly how much time is involved, which portions

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## Summer professional learning—to PD or not to PD, the big debate (continued)

are synchronous versus asynchronous, and an explicit acknowledgment that participation is optional without professional consequences for non-participation.

### 2. Teacher-led knowledge exchanges

Professional learning need not follow traditional formats. Consider approaches that position teachers as knowledge-holders rather than recipients:

- "Expertise exchanges" where teachers volunteer to share a teaching strategy, technology approach, or classroom management technique they've mastered in brief, recorded segments. This would be great housed in a Facebook group or other social community.
- Digital resource libraries where educators can contribute and access classroom-tested materials, lesson plans, or assessment strategies. Padlet would be great for this!
- "Passion project" showcases where teachers share personal interests that connect to the curriculum in unexpected ways.

These approaches acknowledge that our faculties already possess immense knowledge while giving teachers agency in determining what and how much they contribute. The asynchronous nature allows participants to engage when it fits their schedule.

### 3. Relationship-centered connections with professional boundaries

Sometimes the most valuable summer connections aren't explicitly about learning but about nurturing the relationships that sustain our professional community:

- Optional social gatherings are explicitly framed as just that, rather than work sessions.
- "Welcome wagons" where veteran teachers voluntarily connect with newcomers to the school or district before the year begins.
- Attending TCTELA monthly section meetings. These meetings are only one hour long and address real-world issues and solutions. Not only are they a great way to learn, but these meetings promote connections and building relationships with teachers across Texas.

What makes these approaches boundary-respectful is their transparent framing as relationship-building rather than disguised work sessions, combined with genuine optionality.

### Finding the balance

The summer professional learning debate reflects deeper questions about teacher professionalism, sustainability, and growth. Rather than prescribing universal answers, we should focus on creating conditions where educators can make thoughtful choices that align with their professional aspirations and personal well-being.

Sustainable professional learning—summer or otherwise—requires trust in teachers' judgment and commitment to growth. When we design learning opportunities that honor teacher expertise, provide meaningful choice, offer appropriate compensation, and respect legitimate boundaries, we create conditions where professional learning can flourish without contributing to burnout.

The question may not be whether summer professional learning should exist, but rather how we can reimagine it to better serve teachers and students. Moving beyond one-size-fits-all mandates toward flexible, teacher-centered approaches, we might discover that the middle path offers the richest possibilities for our profession.

### We want to know

As we navigate this important conversation about summer professional learning, the voices of Texas ELA educators are essential. Your experiences, perspectives, and innovative approaches enrich our collective understanding of balancing professional growth with personal boundaries.

We invite you to join this dialogue in several ways:

- **Share your story:** How do you approach professional learning during the summer months? What boundaries have you found essential to maintain? What innovative PD experiences have proven most valuable during your summer breaks? Your authentic experiences—challenges and successes—provide valuable insights for our community. Share with us on social media using #TCTELA and #SummerLearningBalance.
- **Contribute your innovations:** Have you developed or participated in summer learning opportunities that successfully respect teacher boundaries while fostering growth? Consider submitting your experience to feature in future TCTELA publications and conference sessions.
- **Join the conversation:** Connect with fellow Texas ELA educators across platforms using #TCTELA and #SummerLearningBalance. Share articles, resources, or thoughts on creating sustainable professional learning cultures.
- **Propose a conference session:** Consider facilitating a roundtable or workshop exploring innovative approaches to year-round professional learning that honor teacher wellbeing at our next conference.
- **Connect with your regional representatives:** Reach out to your TCTELA Ambassadors (regional representatives) to share local perspectives and organize regional discussions on this topic.

Your engagement matters—not just for our current teaching community, but for shaping how we approach professional learning for future generations of Texas ELA educators. Together, we can develop approaches that nurture both teacher growth and sustainability.

Connect with us through our social media channels using #TCTELA to continue this important conversation.

# Call for submissions

**Review the submission guidelines at https://www.tctela.org/english_in_texas.**

***English in Texas*, Vol. 55.2—Fall/Winter 2025**
**Theme: Moving the Needle: A Paradigm Shift to Language Architecture.**
**Manuscript Deadline: September 1, 2025**

**Call for Submissions:** *"Teachers [can] support … language exploration by providing students with opportunities to break down and analyze the language choices of speakers and writers to determine if and how they are using particular language forms for particular effects. [They bring] together the language choices of published authors and their personal language choices as racialized students navigating a range of different communities of practice. Adopting the perspective of language architecture frames … students as already understanding the relationship between language choice and meaning through the knowledge that they have gained through socialization into the cultural and linguistic practices of their communities."* –Nelson Flores (2020, pp. 25, 29).

For the Fall/Winter 2025 issue of *English in Texas*, we ask you to consider the theme, Moving the Needle: A Paradigm Shift to Language Architecture.

The Fall/Winter 2025 issue of *English in Texas* draws upon Flores' (2020) concept of language architecture. According to Flores (2020), language architecture emphasizes the need to rethink how language is taught and understood, particularly for bilingual, multilingual, and multidialectal students. "State standards are not demanding mastery over academic language but are rather calling for students to be language architects who are able to manipulate language for specific purposes" (p. 25). Students who draw upon linguistic and cultural influences craft and mold language every day, constructing language with interconnected and complementary parts. They make arguments daily; they explain topics they care deeply about; they are constantly crafting a new language to communicate in digital spheres never imagined; they are already architects. Leveraging the work students are doing and teaching them to recognize the architect's role in their own craft helps teachers close the gap between a simple understanding of academic language to success in state standards—identifying how and why authors craft tone, meaning, purpose, and point of view. This approach calls upon educators to acknowledge and celebrate cultural backgrounds and linguistic talents as integral to academic achievement and success.

For this issue, we welcome insightful and reflective contributions from educators, researchers, and practitioners about language architecture and architects, with the following questions serving as a springboard:

- How do you position your students as language architects who can use cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge to analyze craft, read critically, and write persuasively?
- How does positioning students as language architects vs. language academics connect to culturally sustaining or asset-based pedagogy (Alim et al., 2020)?
- How have you used texts to model language architecture in your teaching environment?
- How can a language architecture approach help students develop as readers and/or authors?

More broadly, you may also consider the following:

- How do you incorporate and celebrate students' cultural and linguistic practices in your instruction?
- What new and supportive classroom structures and practices are needed for PK-12 educators to "move the needle" from the more typical academic language approach to the more inclusive language architecture stance?
- What is needed for teacher development specialists, administrators, or educator preparation programs to "move the needle" from the more typical academic language approach to the more inclusive language architecture stance?

**FOCUS ON THE THEME:** We invite interested individuals to submit manuscripts, conceptual, creative, reflective, student-authored, pedagogical, research-based, and/or theoretical, as related to this topic of Moving the Needle: A Paradigm Shift to Language Architecture.

**INQUIRIES AND INNOVATIONS:** Additionally, we welcome educational research relevant to the work of ELAR educators. These submissions could either be theme-dependent or could be more generally relevant to the ELAR education community.

**STANDING COLUMNS:**

We also encourage brief contributions in the form of standing columns. These center on topics that interest you but do not necessarily align to an issue's theme or full-length manuscript requirements.

**A Seat and a Voice at the Table**

This column focuses on supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion to empower groups that are too often marginalized in the ELAR classroom.

What does your seat at the table look like day-to-day? How are you striving to bring diverse texts, methods, and instructional design to the forefront of 21st -century instruction?

*"Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice be heard."* –Liz Fosslien

**Keeping Your Wits About You**

This column focuses on teacher self-care in today's often challenging educational environment.

How do you keep your wits while the world spins—often wildly!—on its axis each day? What are your personal and professional approaches to bringing hope and balance to the world of teaching?

*"If you can keep your wits about you while all others are losing theirs, and blaming you… The world will be yours and everything in it…"* –Rudyard Kipling

**Teaching Outtakes**

This column focuses on sharing the "aha" lessons from the "uh-oh" moments in your classroom.

As educators, we often talk about "what works," but how has the "not working" turned you into a more knowledgeable practitioner and a more streetwise professional? How did the "not working" inform you in your teaching and help you to grow?

*"Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to error that counts."* –Nikki Giovanni

**To submit any of these standing columns for publication consideration, please contact the editorial team at EnglishinTexas@uhd.edu with a 100-150-word summary of your idea BEFORE submitting.**