

Neera

Neera is a Tibetan student who grew up in India. Her family moved to the United States in the spring of her third-grade year, and she is currently a fourth grader. In India, she received some English instruction as part of her schooling, but in the United States she was classified as an English learner (EL). Neera is a very conscientious student, and it is evident that both she and her family value school and learning. Because Neera has excellent literacy skills in her native language, her English language development has progressed consistently. She enjoys writing and sharing her ideas through writing that she often elaborately illustrates. Neera's teacher uses dialogue journals with her ELs. The dialogue journal, a personalized notebook that is kept at school and is shared only between each student and the teacher, has fostered writing development and relationship building.

A recurring challenge in Neera's writing relates to verb tense. She tends to write in the present tense even when describing something she did in the past. Although she has acquired a sizeable vocabulary, and her writing is comprehensible to the reader, she is cautious when it comes to grammar or sentence structure. She prefers shorter, simpler, well-formed sentences to longer, more grammatically complex structures. Her teachers are working on this through some targeted scaffolding strategies, such as sentence frames and sentence starters. Over the course of a year in U.S. schools, Neera has improved her language abilities in all areas. She actively participates in her stand-alone language development classroom and has surpassed the language skills of some of her EL peers who started out in the same proficiency group as she did.

→ STOP AND REFLECT ←

What were Neera's greatest assets as a new arrival to the United States?

What could her steady progress be attributed to? What would you do to help her further expand her language and literacy skills?

Sergei

When Sergei first came to the United States, he was eleven years old. He was identified as a newcomer from the Ukraine, with a strong academic background, fluent in Ukrainian and Russian, with a solid understanding of French but minimal English language proficiency. He was placed in the fifth grade in a suburban neighborhood where his dad accepted a position with an American technology firm. The school provided at least two full periods of language development classes a day to all ELs during their initial phases of language acquisition and home language support whenever possible. Coincidentally, one of the school's instructional aides was originally from Lithuania and spoke Russian, so she was available to translate whenever Sergei's mother came for meetings at the school. She also tried to make Sergei welcome and comfortable in his new school. When she saw him in the hallway or in the lunchroom, she stopped to chat with him in Russian for a few minutes. Although Sergei was reserved at first, he became apt with his electronic dictionary and made friends with two boys, one from India and one born in the United States. The three of them seemed inseparable in the after-school program that offered gaming and coding classes. By the time he finished fifth grade, he made steady progress in English and showed early signs that he would excel in math and science. His mother explained that he was

in accelerated STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) classes back home and really enjoys challenging math problems.

As a sixth grader, he is adjusting to the forty-two-minute block schedule in middle school and not seeing his friends from fifth grade every period. He is a hard-working and serious student, frequently attending the extra-help periods, especially in English and social studies. The pace in some of his core content classes overwhelms him, and there are frequent quizzes, tests, and projects. He continues to do well in math and science and gets by in all his other classes, but he feels frustrated when he cannot express himself with fluency and accuracy. When he gets stuck with schoolwork, he becomes angry with his parents and seems to give up. His content teachers and the English language development (ELD) specialist agreed to meet with the guidance counselor to develop and coordinate a multifaceted intervention.

→ STOP AND REFLECT ←

What are Sergei's challenges? What are his assets that his teachers could tap into? What would you recommend if you were to attend the upcoming team meeting to help him strive in middle school and make continued progress in English?