

# Thinking in English:

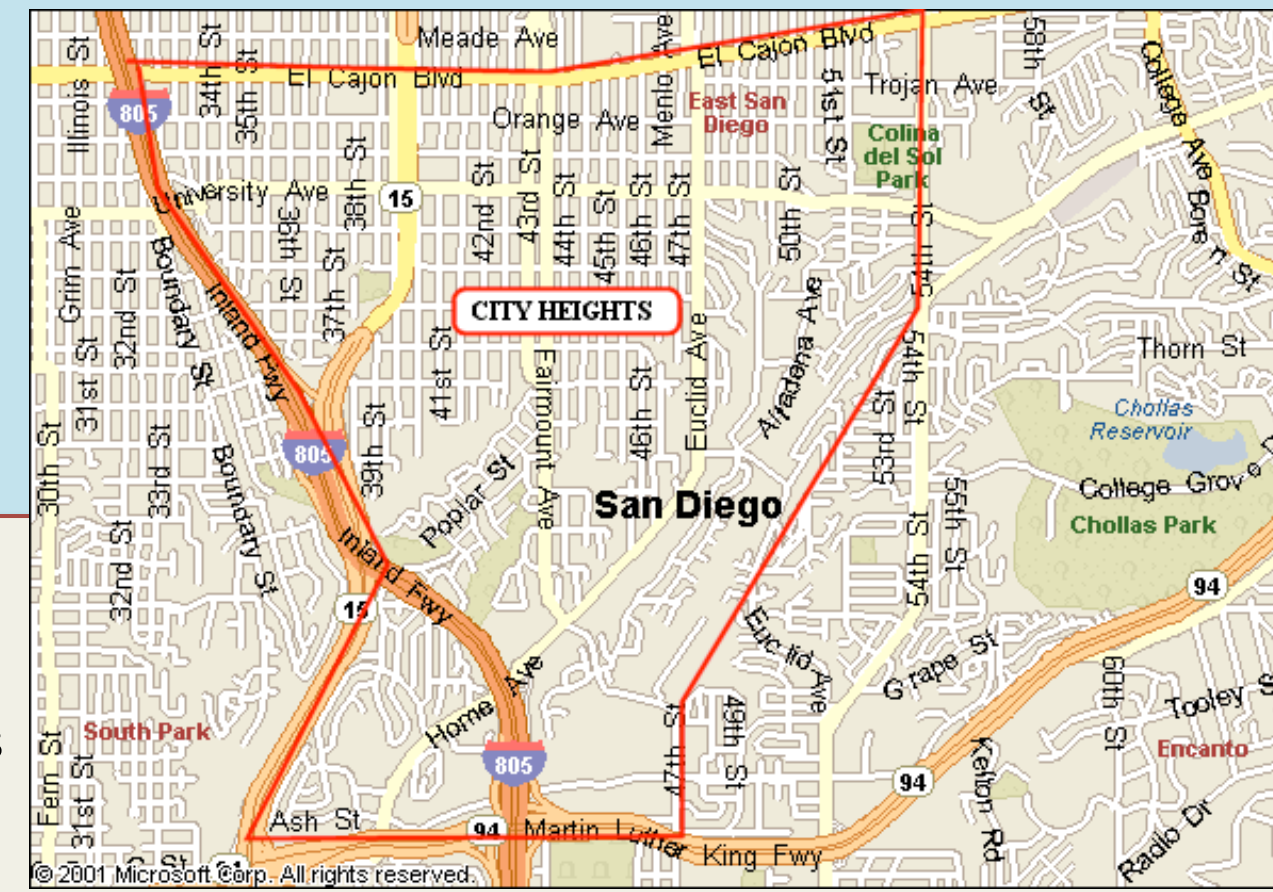
## Building Critical Literacy with Refugee English Learners

### Context of the study:

- Diverse neighborhood of City Heights in San Diego, California

- high school English as a second language classroom

- classroom setting with multiple languages spoken by students from a variety of countries around the world



### Abstract of the Thesis

There is a very unique population of students who are not often represented in research and literature. These are beginning English learner, secondary students who are recent immigrants from areas with limited or interrupted formal education. These students are often from areas of great conflict and many of them have had traumatic experiences before being resettled in the United States and many of these students arrive in the US with a strong desire to better their circumstances through education.

The *Thinking in English* curriculum addresses the notion that when English learners are challenged to use critical literacy in a series of activities that include a common theme of goals, their language proficiency will improve, as well as their critical thinking and decision-making in relation to their understanding of the educational system of the United States. It was implemented in a large, urban district in southern California where students were enrolled from a variety of countries around the world and spoke a variety of languages and dialects. Over a series of activities, the students were challenged to think critically through receptive and expressive tasks that built on a theme of goals and provided them appropriate scaffolding to meet their language needs. The data shows that students with limited prior education with very beginning English proficiency can successfully improve their proficiency while also building critical literacy that will help them become more successful as members of the social and educational community of the United States.

### Evaluation of the project:

Goal #1 - New arrival students with interrupted formal education will improve English language proficiency to enable them to successfully take part in mainstream classes.

✓ **Finding 1: Students were highly engaged and motivated in activities and were motivated to improve their proficiency in the four modalities of language proficiency: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.**

Goal #2 - New arrival students with interrupted formal education will be able to use critical literacy skills to build and use higher-level thinking in all of their classes and across a variety of subjects.

✓ **Finding 2: Students demonstrated an increase in critical literacy as evidenced by the increase in specificity in expressed goals.**

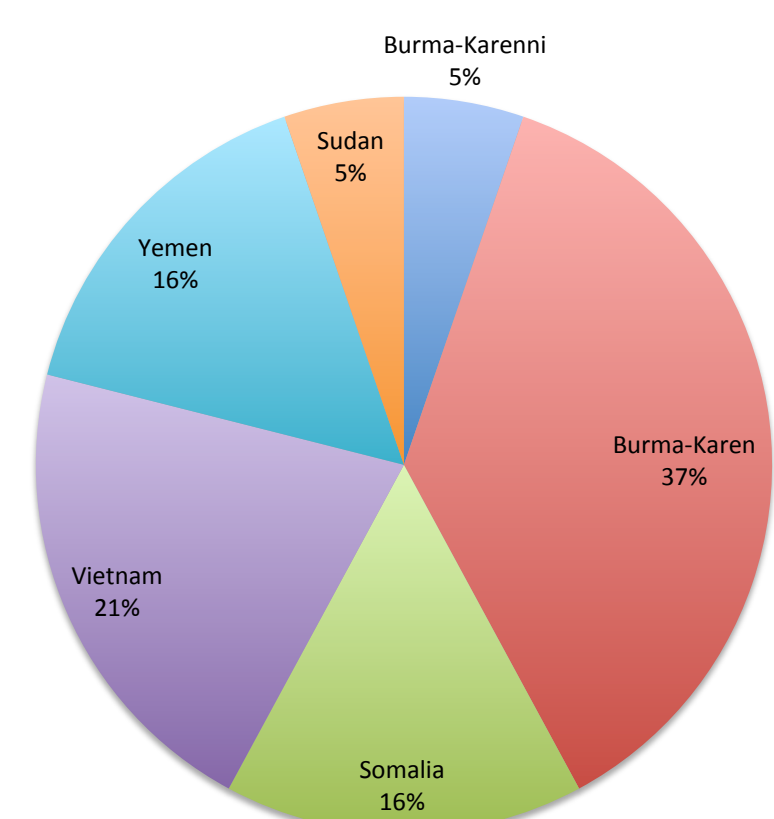
✓ **Finding 3: Students demonstrated an increase in critical literacy as evidenced by their performance on the progression of receptive tasks.**

Goal #3 - New arrival students with interrupted formal education will make better academic decisions about coursework, graduation requirements, and college and career planning to become effective self-advocates as they learn to maneuver through our educational system in the US.

✓ **Finding 4: There are indicators of students' growing ability to set and pursue goals and successfully navigate the system of education here in the United States.**

✓ **Finding 5: Reflecting an increased sense of support and community, students were empowered to seek out help from one another and to offer help to each other, regardless of language similarities or differences.**

Final Demographics of Class Countries of Origin as of June, 2014



### Design/Implementation of the project:

- Five Activities over a course of four months
- Unifying theme of goals
- Receptive and expressive tasks

#### Activity One – I Have a Dream, too!

➤ Students read and listened to "I Have a Dream" and analyzed it to study Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s goals. They then wrote original speeches about their own goals for their future.

#### Activity Two – Photo Gallery

➤ Students studied a collection of photos to determine what the subject or the photographer's goals were. The students then took photos that represented their own goals.

#### Activity Three – A-G Pathway to Graduation

➤ Students filled out a four-year schedule planner of high school courses and studied an article and an accompanying presentation about the A-G requirements for graduation. After the article and presentation, they were given the opportunity to redo their planner for graduation.

#### Activity Four – Art Analysis

➤ Students studied a portrait and a sculpture and analyzed both to determine what they thought the subject and/or the artist's goals were. They then chose to do either a painting or a sculpture of their own that represented their own goals.

#### Activity Five – Visual Storytelling

➤ Students read and analyzed a story, *More Than Anything Else*, by Marie Bradby and studied how the main character set and took steps to achieve his biggest goal. They then wrote their own, visually rich stories to explain what is their own biggest goal and how they planned to accomplish it.

### Frameworks and how they were applied and shaped the project:

**Sociocultural and Ecocultural theories**  
Individuals learn through interactions with each other and with the influences within their environment

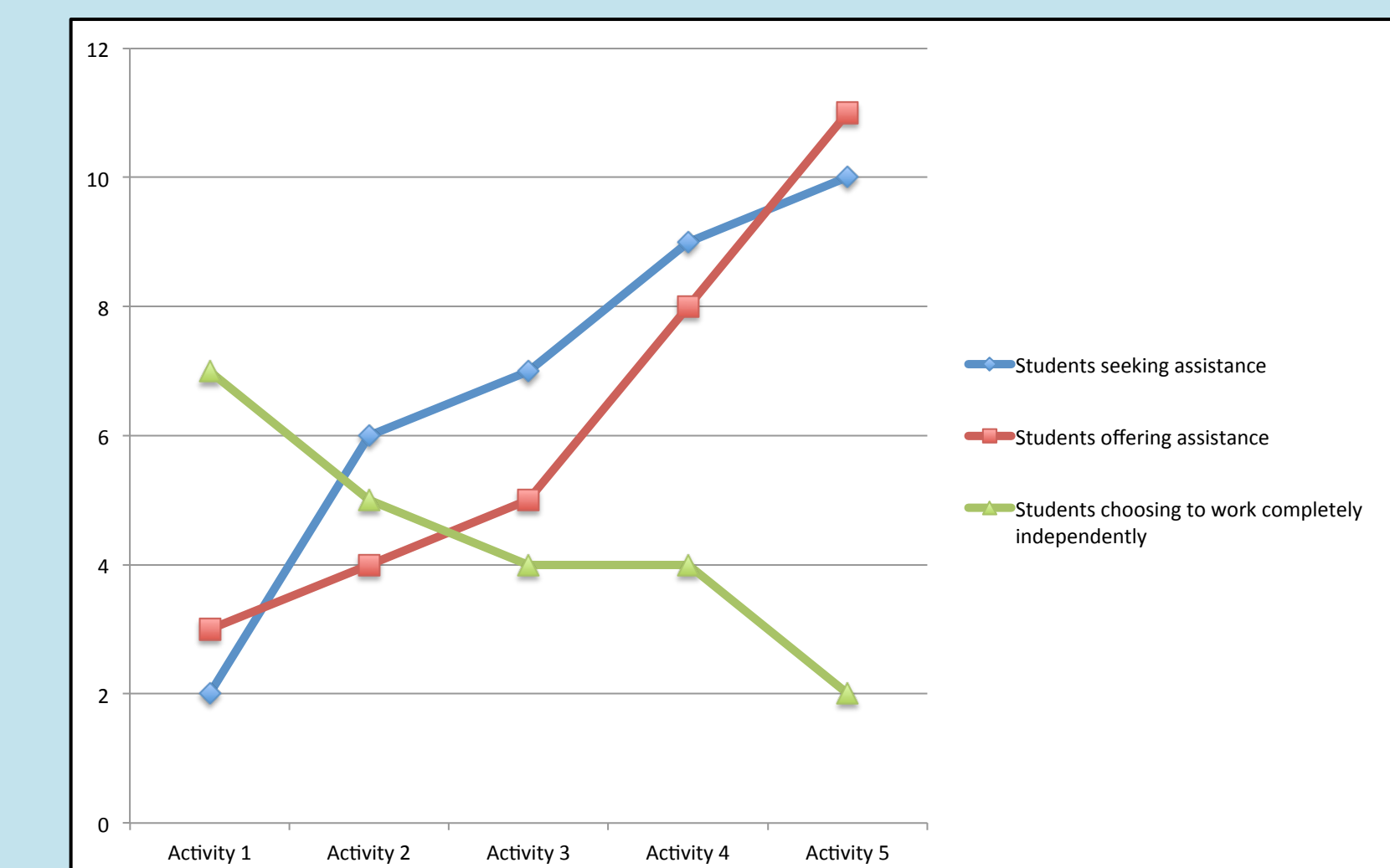
**Critical literacy**  
Thinking more deeply about a topic or concept and using personal application to question or challenge it

**Visualization**  
Learning occurs through imagery and seeing oneself in the position of a particular context.

**Oral discourse**  
Individuals can learn through speaking to others as a means of processing thoughts

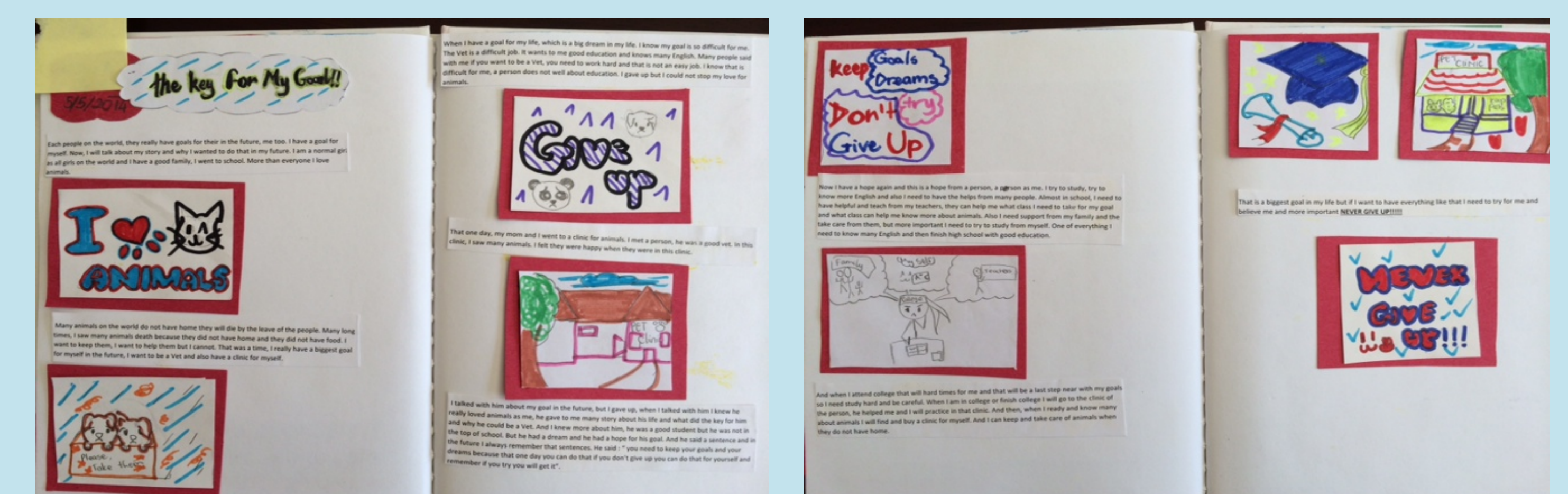
**Metacognition**  
Students can think about their own learning and self-regulate their actions based on their thoughts

**Motivation**  
Allowing a level of autonomy and empowerment will help students develop more intrinsic motivation to work hard and persevere in school



### Implications/Conclusion:

- ✦ A challenging, and critically engaging curriculum benefits all students, including students with interrupted formal education who are English learners.
- ✦ Though difficult, it is possible to scaffold activities to make it possible for beginning English learners to participate while still leaving the activity open-ended to allow for creative and critical thought.
- ✦ In teaching recently arrived students how to be better understand the US system of educators, students become more comfortable seeking out and providing peer assistance and are better equipped to be effective self-advocates in US formal educational settings.



Copy of a two page story from the class book showcasing students' goals and plans to achieve their goals.