

Brunswick Believes: Student Success, Professional Excellence, Community Connections
Brunswick School Department, Brunswick, ME



ESOL: English for Speakers of Other Languages

Creating cultural competence, compassion, and connections one flutter at a time.

The Conversation

October 2018

From Russia, With Surprise

Renata Tysiachniuk traveled nearly 4,000 miles and crossed 9 time zones to learn something she never expected.

Renata had always considered school important. She had always done her best. In fact, Renata spent the night before the first day of school stressing that her best might not be good enough now that she was in the United States. What if her English wasn't good enough?

What if she didn't understand the topics? Would she be lost and alone because she didn't know anyone? But on Freshman Orientation Day, a Brunswick High School teacher told

Renata something she had never heard a teacher in Russia say: "School is a place where you can have fun."

At first Renata was confused, then curious, and finally relieved. "When I heard that, I was, like, whoa!" said

Renata. Before the day was over, Renata felt much more relaxed.

"It is so different here," said Renata. "In Russia, school is very serious.

All of the programs are only to prepare for exams. They are not so interesting, actually they are really boring. And it is the same every year." The idea of elective classes appealed to her, and she took advantage of the opportunity to take

courses in Photography and Drawing. Renata explained that her school in St. Petersburg runs from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., and students wear black and white uniforms. Co-curricular or athletic opportunities do not exist. Students who want something extra join clubs or studios in the city. Renata participates at a modern dance studio.

"At my school, we do not have events," continued Renata. "I really like the football games here, and Homecoming was so fun and interesting. Everyone here – the teachers and the students – are so sociable."

In St. Petersburg, Renata prefers math classes. At BHS,

she enjoys her Academic English class because she likes the student discussions and finds the texts more relatable than classical Russian literature.

Renata admits that she hasn't spoken much in class, but she admires how freely the students and teachers communicate. Sometimes, the students seem overly free. One classmate asked her if she was a "Commie," and she

was not sure how to respond. She said she does not spend much time worrying about the affairs of her government or ongoing current events spotlighted in the U.S. media. Renata added that she preferred someone say what he or she is thinking, rather than make assumptions.

"People here are so free," said Renata. "I find it easier to communicate with my teachers here in English than with my teachers in Russia in Russian."

While her classroom experience has been a noticeable change, daily life in America has been a mixture of experiences. "In Russia, all students watch American films. Some Russians use American slang. When we are not in school, our clothes are the same as Americans'. But I lived in a big city with lots of shopping malls and you can use the subway or buses. Some of the food is the same, but we have smaller neighborhood markets with not so much variety of products."

Renata will return to St. Petersburg before the end of October. She came to the U.S. with her mother, who received a Fulbright Scholarship to teach sociology at Bowdoin College. She said she will take with her happy memories and new ideas. "I will tell the teachers about the events here," said Renata. "Maybe some will be possible there. Maybe it will be possible to have a little fun in school."

Please share YOUR stories of culture and language, and join "The Conversation." You can email them to edarby@brunswick.k12.me.us



When is English “good” enough?

FAQs

Q: Are English learners identified the same way in each state?

A: Yes and no. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 introduced a requirement for more uniform identification. A language survey is given to every new student enrolled. States then follow their own regulations and proficiency definitions.

Q: How does Maine identify English learners? ?

A: Maine requires that schools administer the online WIDA Screener, which tests a student’s listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in academic contexts. Scoring is done on a 1-6 scale, with 1 being least proficient and 6 being “excellent.” Each year, the state requires identified students to take the WIDA ACCESS test, which assesses the same language domains and uses the same scoring scale.

Q: How does Maine define English proficiency?

A: At the beginning of last school year, Maine defined proficiency as a score of 6 on the WIDA assessments. In the spring, Maine changed the cut-off score to 5, which means the student has “strong” skills. Just this week, Maine lowered the proficient score to 4.5. Many students who score a 4 or 5 often perform better in the classroom than their native English-speaking peers, especially in the early grades. Other states use different cut-off points, different assessments, and different definitions. Many states use a “beginner, intermediate, and advanced” scale.

Q: How are the scores arrived?

A: WIDA (a consortium based in Wisconsin), calculates the reading and listening responses by computerized methods. For the Screener, the speaking and writing components are scored locally according to a rubric. For the ACCESS, all scores are calculated remotely and then reported to schools.

Q: If a student performs well in class, can he or she be considered proficient?

A: In linguistic terms, proficient means that a language user is able to communicate and function easily and comprehensibly in the target language. In institutional terms, standards are set arbitrarily. For example, most U.S. colleges and universities require international students to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Scores considered proficient can range from 70 to 120, on a scale of 0 to 120, depending on the institution. The same is true for private secondary schools. For Maine public schools, the reality of a student’s positive classroom performance does not exempt him or her from the state definition, which is strictly and solely based on a WIDA score. The level of services can vary depending on the student’s needs for success. Maine continues to reevaluate its English proficient definition.

Q: Can a student opt out of English learner services?

A: Parents and guardians have the right to decline services. The school cannot change the identification until the student “tests out.” Schools must continue to administer the ACCESS test to be in compliance with state regulations, and parent permission is not required.

Maine public schools are required by the Department of Education to use the following WIDA rubric for writing when screening for English learners. The speaking domain has a separate and similar rubric. WIDA uses the same rubric when calculating ACCESS scores.

Writing Rubric of the WIDA™ Consortium* Grades 1-12

| Level | Linguistic Complexity | Vocabulary Usage | Language Forms and Conventions |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6 Reaching* | A variety of sentence lengths of varying linguistic complexity in a single tightly organized paragraph or in well-organized extended text; tight cohesion and organization | Consistent use of just the right word in just the right place; precise Vocabulary Usage in general, specific or technical language. | Has reached comparability to that of English proficient peers functioning at the “proficient” level in state-wide assessment. |
| 5 Bridging | A variety of sentence lengths of varying linguistic complexity in a single organized paragraph or in extended text; cohesion and organization | Usage of technical language related to the content area; evident facility with needed vocabulary; | Approaching comparability to that of English proficient peers; errors don’t impede comprehensibility. |
| 4 Expanding | A variety of sentence lengths of varying linguistic complexity; emerging cohesion used to provide detail and clarity. | Usage of specific and some technical language related to the content area; lack of needed vocabulary may be occasionally evident. | Generally comprehensible at all times, errors don’t impede the overall meaning; such errors may reflect first language interference. |
| 3 Developing | Simple and expanded sentences that show emerging complexity used to provide detail. | Usage of general and some specific language related to the content area; lack of needed vocabulary may be evident. | Generally comprehensible when writing in sentences; comprehensibility may from time to time be impeded by errors when attempting to produce more complex text. |
| 2 Emerging | Phrases and short sentences; varying amount of text may be copied or adapted; some attempt at organization may be evidenced. | Usage of general language related to the content area; lack of vocabulary may be evident | Generally comprehensible when text is adapted from model or source text, or when original text is limited to simple text; comprehensibility may be often impeded by errors. |
| 1 Entering | Single words, set phrases or chunks of simple language; varying amounts of text may be copied or adapted; adapted text contains original language. | Usage of highest frequency vocabulary from school setting and content areas. | Generally comprehensible when text is copied or adapted from model or source text; comprehensibility may be significantly impeded in original text. |

By the numbers

Of those living in the United States who are five years old and older, 21% use a language other than English at home.

- In California – 44%
- In New Mexico – 36%
- In Texas – 35%
- In New Jersey – 30%
- In New York – 30%
- In Nevada – 29%
- In Arizona – 27%
- In Florida – 27%
- In Hawaii – 25%

West Virginia has the lowest percentage – 3%.

Maine is at 7%, tied with Arkansas, Iowa, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wyoming.

- California has identified 22.1% of its K-12 students as English learners (meaning not proficient).
- New Jersey has identified 5.1%, and Arizona has identified 6.5% of K-12 students as English learners.
- Maine has identified 2.8%. Portland Public Schools has the highest percentage with 25%. Brunswick School Department has about 1% who fall within the state's definition of English Learner.

More than 60 million people in the United States speak Spanish as their first and primary language.

Maine's most common language other than English is French. About 5% of those who are 5 years old and older speak French at home.



Can you tell which of the students above would be identified as an English Learner according to the Maine's definition in September, but now in October no longer is?



Multilingual Mainers meet during lunch each day at Coffin School. Bowdoin College students share their native languages so that all students can experience the richness of language and culture. The grant program is coordinated by Coffin School teacher Annie Young.

“If we spoke a different language, we would perceive a somewhat different world.” – Ludwig Wittgenstein