

ESL Classroom Observation Report

Hellgate High School in Missoula, Montana

Program type: Secondary ESL support program. Classes observed: Beginner (instructor: Addie) and Intermediate (instructor: Aria). Grade levels: Mixed high school (grades 9–12). Emphasis: Beginner reading comprehension and foundational writing; Intermediate academic argumentation and content-area literacy. Students: ESL learners, many with refugee status, ages 14–18, mixed ethnic backgrounds.

For my observations, I spent five mornings at Hellgate High School's ESL classrooms. The students were split into two class levels. Addie's class served beginner students ranging from freshmen to seniors, while Aria taught intermediate students across the same grade span. Many students have refugee status and are still navigating life in an English-speaking environment. The beginner class focused on comprehension, reading, and writing skills, while the intermediate class emphasized academic skills such as building thesis statements supported by research-based evidence, which transfer directly to students' other classes.

The classrooms were small, tucked into a corner near the other language classrooms, reflecting the modest size of Missoula's refugee population. With only five to ten students per class, the space felt intimate rather than sparse. An old, built-in cabinet reflecting Hellgate's age sat near the front board and was stocked with snacks, chargers, pencils, and notebooks for students to take freely; my first glimpse of how both teachers strive for a learner-centered environment. Students regularly chose this classroom to eat lunch and study, which said everything about the atmosphere. The walls displayed posters debunking refugee myths and stereotypes, along with printed deadline reminders. The overall vibe was relaxed and welcoming; ESL students not enrolled during that period felt comfortable walking in to ask questions or grab a granola bar.

Each day, intermediate students were greeted by a warm-up prompt projected on the screen. They were expected to sit down, open their notebooks, write the date, and respond. Many didn't write a full response, but the prompt drew their eyes to the board as they settled in. One example: *"Are you a proponent or opponent of warning labels on snacks? Why?"* was posed the day after a lesson in which both vocabulary words had been explicitly taught. After a few quiet minutes, Aria read the prompt aloud and called on students individually. If a student was unsure, she asked whether they remembered the word's definition, then pointed them to their vocabulary handout, where they had previously written definitions themselves. By observing far into the school year, I could tell this was routine and that its purpose was to build accountability: students could anticipate being called on, and they already had the tools to answer.

The most memorable teaching technique I observed was Aria's use of student interest to bridge academic vocabulary. Her fourth-period class consisted of six boys, all passionate about soccer. When introducing the word *opponent*, she first asked for a definition. Silence. She then asked what an opponent was in soccer. A student in a soccer jersey answered immediately: *"The team you're against."* Aria used that as her bridge. *"An opponent can also mean someone who's against an idea or a policy."* I appreciated her connection with the students and her use of their interests to drive home ideas.

The dominant methodology in both classrooms was Content-Based Instruction (CBI), an approach in which language is taught through meaningful engagement with subject-matter content rather than through isolated drills. As Richards and Rodgers note, in CBI "the subject matter content is used as the vehicle for second language learning." This was evident throughout. Aria's intermediate class was built around an authentic academic task, a research-based argumentative essay, because that is exactly what students were being asked to produce in their other classes. Vocabulary was selected because it appeared in the writing students were doing, not because it appeared on a generic word list.

In the beginner class, Addie's focus on reading comprehension served the same purpose: building the literacy students needed to access content across the school day. Both teachers demonstrated the core principle of CBI, that language is most effectively learned when it is in the service of something meaningful.