

# Speaking from Experience

By Kim Hamill



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– Ara McKelvey, ELA Teacher and Coach, Tavelli Elementary, Fort Collins, Colorado

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### Hands-on language learning

In Jerelyn Hurley's classroom, students have explored the Arizona desert, held a giant boa constrictor in their arms, made green slime and learned how a mummy is mummified.

And while these experiences may seem like an unusual way for students to learn the English language, they are a key part of the award-winning ELA program called [Real Life Language](#).

Hurley, who works with all the English language learners at [Rockaway Borough School District](#) in New Jersey, says the idea came from a former superintendent who read a study about the impact of field trips on kindergarten students' language skills and wanted to apply the same concept to the district's English as a second language (ESL) program.

"My students have been to places and have experienced things that they would have never been able

to experience if we didn't have the field trips program," Hurley says. "Field trips promote hands-on, real-life experiences that lead to faster English language learning and better retention of the English language."

Since the Real Life Language program began in 2002, Hurley has taken her K–8 students and their parents on more than 40 field trips throughout New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The program was so successful that it was recognized by the New Jersey Department of Education as a model program from 2004 to 2006. It was also recognized as a Best Practices program by the state of New Jersey and was awarded the New Jersey School Leader Award by the New Jersey School Boards Association.

However, in 2010, because of budgetary restrictions, the field trip component of the program ended. Knowing how her students

benefited from the authentic learning experiences the field trips offered, Hurley turned to classroom technology. With her [SMART Board interactive whiteboard](#), which she had been using since 2005, she could take her students on virtual field trips, enabling them to experience the world around them without leaving the classroom.

"I bring the places to the students instead of the students to the places. An example of this was our virtual field trip to the desert," Hurley says.

That virtual field trip was inspired by a summer vacation Hurley took to Arizona. While hiking through the Sonoran Desert, she realized that her students would love to see the plants, wildlife and geography.

"I knew that one of our stories in our reading book was titled *A Walk in the Desert*, and I thought it would be great to bring the desert to my students. I took loads of pictures of the desert landscapes and wildlife," she says.

When Hurley returned from her vacation, she used the images to create a Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentation. She then gathered all the second-grade students and the students in the ESL program for a classroom assembly and told them she just flew in from hiking in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona.

"I was dressed in hiking clothes with all my equipment, but some students were skeptical. When I

showed them a picture of me in the desert and had the identical clothes on, I won them over," she laughs.

Hurley used the SMART Board interactive whiteboard to show the students her pictures, and then they talked about the pictures of plants and wildlife in their reading books. Students asked questions about her experience, including a question about where a person goes to the bathroom in the desert. Hurley's creative answer – behind a cactus!

For Hurley, the SMART Board interactive whiteboard is a way to make learning fun and accessible for English language learners. She uses the interactive whiteboard daily and the [SMART Response PE interactive response system](#) weekly.

"The SMART Board, as well as the SMART Response system, is used to enhance my lessons when we are learning about a topic. The SMART Board is used to expand the experience of virtual field trips, learn and clarify new vocabulary, interactively study a topic with educational games and explore the theme we are studying," she says.

And the virtual field trips aren't limited to experiencing places. Hurley's students have acted as the "fly" from the rhyme *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* while on a virtual field trip

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exploring the human digestive tract. They've also used the SMART Board interactive whiteboard to explore the Oregon Trail and take a trip through an Egyptian tomb.

"The hands-on classroom assemblies engage the English language learner in authentic, hands-on, real-life and meaningful experiences. They enable the English language learner to acquire vocabulary at a quicker pace by experiencing the situation firsthand, thus contributing to knowledge retention and academic success," Hurley says.

In addition to virtual field trips, Hurley uses the SMART Board interactive whiteboard, [SMART Notebook software](#) and online resources to help her students acquire language skills and apply them to the other academic subjects they are learning.

Hurley teaches kindergarten through third-grade classes at [Lincoln Elementary](#) and she teaches a grades 4–8 class and provides in-class support for different content areas at [Thomas Jefferson Middle School](#). This means she is teaching students who not only range in their heritage languages – this year, she has students from countries such as Jordan, the Dominican Republic and Pakistan – but also students of varying ages and academic levels.

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Hurley to differentiate instruction in her classrooms, she can help her students access lessons that meet their academic levels and the four areas of English language learning – speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Whether it's watching videos, listening to audio books or playing interactive games, students use the SMART Board interactive whiteboard to help them make connections between words, pictures and sounds and access lessons that address their own learning styles.

The success Hurley has had with her ESL program prompted her to share her experiences and resources with others. She started a website, [Mrs. Hurley's ESL](#), that includes links to online resources, SMART Notebook lessons, homework help for her students and teaching resources for those in her district and the rest of the education community.

### A bridge between cultures

Colorado educator Ara McKelvey knows from personal experience what it's like to be a language learner. As a French major in college, she moved to France to study.

"In France, I learned firsthand how difficult it is to be a language learner. Every minute requires concentration to make meaning of what's going on around you," McKelvey says. "There were

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definitely classes that were easier than others – those professors understood that I was from a different culture, and they also took the time to make the content comprehensible.

"I want to do that for our students. I want them to feel successful both socially and academically," she adds.

McKelvey is an ELA teacher and coach at [Tavelli Elementary](#) in Fort Collins, Colorado. Depending on the needs of the 50 students she works with, she either co-teaches them in an inclusion environment or instructs in a separate small-group setting.

"I strive to help them navigate the culture here, while still maintaining their sense of self. It's important for them to see that they are incredibly fortunate to speak more than one language, that they are truly an asset," she says.

As a SMART Exemplary Educator, McKelvey is a proponent of using classroom technology to help her students communicate bilingually and biculturally. She feels it can be "a bridge between cultures and help facilitate the communication

that we need to move forward" – a philosophy that resulted in McKelvey being named the [2009 Colorado ESL Teacher of the Year](#).

Differentiation is a key reason McKelvey uses classroom technology. She says that English language learners need to learn and keep up with grade-level content or they will never catch up to their peers. Using SMART products enables her to build in extra language support to help her students overcome the additional challenge of learning a new language while learning grade-level content.

She incorporates the SMART Board interactive whiteboard, SMART Notebook software and [SMART Response CE interactive response software](#) to provide context to her lessons and help her students acquire language and technology skills.

"I realized right away that a SMART Board could help the English language learners – and all students for that matter," McKelvey says. "No matter what their language proficiency is, there is a way for them to show what they know."

McKelvey says the SMART Board interactive whiteboard helps her students succeed outside of the ELA classroom. For instance, she was recently working with students who were going to be learning about food webs in their regular classroom – a concept that required understanding of specific vocabulary.

Before the lesson, McKelvey used the SMART Board interactive whiteboard to create hands-on activities about food webs, in conjunction with some reading and the introduction of terminology beyond the scope of the upcoming lesson, so the English language learners could obtain the vocabulary needed to participate in the lesson.

After completing the activities, the students went back to their regular classroom, where they not only participated in the discussion using words such as *producers*, *consumers* and *decomposers* but also helped elevate the conversation by introducing supplementary ideas and terminology, such as *primary*, *secondary* and *tertiary* consumers.

She often works on concepts with English language learners before these concepts are introduced in the regular classroom. The ability to manipulate digital objects on the interactive whiteboard makes it easier for her students to explain concepts, resulting in their using verbal language skills more often.



“The discussions lead to a lot of higher level thinking. They are also participating a lot more when they go back to the regular classroom. They have had a chance to interact with the content, and to practice the language needed to talk about it,” McKelvey says.

“I hear frequently from teachers that the English language learners are raising their hands, contributing to discussions and feeling good about themselves as learners,” she adds.

When her school incorporated netbooks into instruction, McKelvey began using SMART Response CE software as another way to engage students and have them demonstrate their knowledge.

“Sometimes, English language learners are hesitant to answer questions in class. By using SMART Response CE software, it’s easy to see whether they are understanding

what is being taught or whether more instruction is needed. The ability to ask different kinds of questions and to add visuals is really helpful when adjusting for language proficiency,” McKelvey says. “Immediate feedback is great for the teacher but even more important for the students as they monitor their own comprehension.”

Part of McKelvey’s role is to coach other teachers how to differentiate instruction for the English language learners in their classrooms and to show them how to incorporate the SMART Board interactive whiteboard into their instruction.

McKelvey often works with other teachers to find learning resources on the [SMART Exchange website](#) and then adapts the resources not just for the English language learners, but for every student.

“What is critical for English language learners is good for all students,” she says.