



## Research Base

Core Curriculum for Secondary ELA/ELD

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## Introduction

Newsela *Threads & Themes* is a comprehensive ELA/ELD curriculum for grades 6–8 built on a foundation of research spanning literacy development, language acquisition, knowledge building, and equitable instructional design. Every element of the curriculum, from text selection to lesson structure to assessment, is grounded in evidence about how adolescents learn to read, write, and think critically.

The curriculum’s instructional design is grounded in the Science of Reading, integrating evidence-based practices that build both foundational skills and deep content knowledge.

This document summarizes the key research pillars that inform the design of *Threads & Themes* and highlights the evidence base for its approach to supporting *all* learners, including multilingual learners (MLLs), in secondary classrooms. Newsela’s content library has itself been linked to measurable student growth: an efficacy study in Ohio found that Newsela ELA use closed achievement gaps (Hurwitz & Shivaram, 2024), and a quasi-experimental evaluation linked consistent Newsela Social Studies use to nearly one additional year of growth in middle school (Ryherd, 2024).

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*This work was informed by [research and analysis](#) developed by Student Achievement Partners.*

## Section 1: Evidence-Based, Comprehensive Literacy

Research consistently demonstrates that systematic, explicit literacy instruction is essential for reading development (National Reading Panel, 2000; Stockard et al., 2018), yet such instruction remains relatively rare in middle and high school classrooms (Stark et al., 2024). In California, only 29 percent of eighth graders were proficient in reading in 2024, underscoring the urgency of this gap (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Structured literacy, which emphasizes systematic strategies for decoding unknown words alongside comprehension and vocabulary instruction, provides a framework for addressing these needs (Cowan, 2016). *Threads & Themes* addresses this gap by embedding explicit instruction in decoding, fluency, vocabulary, morphology, and comprehension strategies into every unit. The curriculum reflects the reciprocal relationship between literacy skills and content knowledge, what researchers call the “virtuous cycle” (Duke et al., 2011), so that as students build reading skills, they simultaneously deepen the knowledge that fuels further comprehension.

For multilingual learners, this explicit approach is a matter of linguistic equity. The California ELD Standards call for integrated instruction that helps students understand how English functions at the word, sentence, and discourse levels (California Department of Education, 2015). Systematic attention to morphology, how meaningful word parts work across languages, is particularly powerful for MLLs, building the metalinguistic awareness that supports both decoding and academic vocabulary acquisition (Carlisle et al., 2010; Crosson et al., 2025).

## Section 2: Integrating Content and Language Development

A growing body of research demonstrates that language and content learning are inextricably connected, and that instructional materials should be designed to develop both from the outset, not treat language support as an afterthought (Walqui & Bunch, 2019; Walqui & Heritage, 2018). Historical approaches often reduced language learning to rote memorization of vocabulary or discrete grammar skills disconnected from meaning-making (Valdés, 2018). Current evidence calls for a fundamentally different approach: one in which language instruction is embedded within activities focused on communication and meaning-making in the context of rich content.

As the English Learners Success Forum (ELSF) articulates, “From a sociocultural perspective, language does not stand alone; a language cannot be conceived as a codified set of structures, grammars, and lexical items. Rather, languages shift and change across context, users, places, and time” (Hawkins, 2019, as cited in Wang et al., 2021, p. 3). *Threads & Themes* operationalizes this insight by integrating language development into every lesson through dedicated Language Study activities, text-based vocabulary instruction grounded in morphological analysis, and structured opportunities for students to use academic language in authentic contexts (Bunch et al., 2012; Larsen-Freeman, as cited in Weiss & Sandstead, n.d.).

## Section 3: Collaborative Student Conversations

Language is built through meaningful interaction, and language is best learned when used in context (Weiss & Sandstead, n.d.). Research shows that collaborative student conversations provide essential spaces for

MLLs to use all of their linguistic resources, including home language and lived experiences, to make meaning with peers, clarify misunderstandings, and support thinking (Turner et al., 2013). Conversations empower students to build off others' thinking, expand their positions, and develop both content understanding and academic language simultaneously (Webb et al., 2023).

Effective collaborative talk goes beyond Turn & Talks and whole-group discussion. Instructional materials must include intentional spaces, structures, and supports for sustained student conversation (ELSF, 2024). *Threads & Themes* incorporates varied collaborative routines—including Stronger & Clearer structures and peer discussion protocols, designed with open-ended, discussion-worthy prompts that elicit divergent thinking and knowledge building. These routines position the teacher as facilitator and observer, creating formative assessment opportunities while students refine their language through authentic use (Bailey & Heritage, 2018; Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).

## Section 4: Knowledge-Building and Diverse, Complex Texts

Comprehension is not simply a skill; it depends fundamentally on what students know. Generalized knowledge about the world plays an essential role in understanding text, and this is particularly supportive for multilingual learners as they build and express knowledge across languages (Catts, 2021–2022; Cervetti & Wright, 2020). Students need exposure to high-quality, content-rich texts organized into conceptually coherent topics to build the deep domain knowledge that supports reading of increasingly complex material (Hattan & Lupo, 2020; Lupo et al., 2018; Willingham, 2009). Moreover, a recent meta-analysis confirms that skill instruction alone is insufficient; students also need content-rich reading experiences to develop strong comprehension (Peng et al., 2024). Research further demonstrates that students require explicit grammar instruction and inference-making to bridge the gap between their current ability and grade-level expectations (Shanahan, 2020).

*Threads & Themes* anchors each unit in a full-length novel or short text supported by a comprehensive set of connected Newsela content spanning science, social studies, and the arts. Texts are selected through careful analysis of quantitative and qualitative complexity features as well as their cultural relevance (ACT, 2006; Adams, 2011; Bishop, 1990). Materials affirm students' identities and provide windows into diverse perspectives and experiences, reflecting research showing that culturally relevant content boosts engagement and supports deeper learning (Djonko-Moore et al., 2018; Muhammad & Mosley, 2021; Moll et al., 1992).

## Section 5: Writing Across Genres and Modes

Writing about texts and topics is essential for students to extend and solidify their learning (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Research supports explicit instruction in the fundamentals of writing, including critical thinking, syntax, text structure, and self-regulatory strategies, with strong emphasis on sentence-level construction (Hochman & Wexler, 2019; Saddler & Graham, 2005). *Threads & Themes* provides frequent, text-anchored writing opportunities that move from sentence-level practice through process writing of paragraphs and essays, with grammar and usage instruction contextualized within authentic texts (Jones et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2023).

## Section 6: Formative Assessment for Content and Language

Formative assessment for language alongside content is a critical, and often missing, component of instructional design. While materials may include opportunities to assess content, they rarely provide guidance on formative assessments for language (ELSF, 2024). Research demonstrates that formative assessment data informs the implementation of contingent scaffolds and supports the development of future learning experiences (Walqui & Bunch, 2019; Heritage et al., 2015).

*Threads & Themes* embeds formative assessment throughout instruction with clear “Look-Fors” and “Listen-Fors” that attend to both content understanding and disciplinary language use. Teachers receive specific guidance on analyzing student performance, providing actionable feedback, and adjusting scaffolds, including when to add and when to remove supports to promote continued growth. Opportunities for peer- and self-assessment using explicit success criteria further support student engagement, reflection, and metalinguistic awareness (Heritage et al., 2015; Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021; Shepard, 2005).

## Section 7: Equity, Engagement, and Student Agency

Student engagement is a key driver of reading achievement (Wigfield et al., 2008), and adolescents in particular need opportunities for voice and choice in their learning (Armstrong, 2016; Frankel et al., 2019). Reading full-length novels is one powerful way to build engagement and empathy, as students connect with characters whose experiences differ from their own (Wexler, 2025–2026). Student-centered approaches such as choice and self-evaluation further enhance motivation, particularly for culturally diverse learners (Anyichie & Butler, 2023). *Threads & Themes* fosters agency through authentic anchor texts, including graphic memoirs, verse novels, and diverse literary nonfiction that reflect the lived experiences of historically marginalized voices. Dedicated Flex Days, student-led research units, and integrated ELD supports, including home language encouragement, ensure that learners are not just consuming content but driving their own inquiry. Research demonstrates that materials leveraging students’ existing linguistic resources and home languages as assets build both engagement and academic knowledge (García et al., 2017; CUNY-NYSIEB, 2020; Walqui & Heritage, 2018).

## Section 8: Teacher Capacity and Ease of Implementation

The most effective teaching occurs when teachers feel a sense of autonomy and are supported by clear, purposeful materials (Chen et al., 2026; Fink et al., 2024). *Threads & Themes* follows a consistent, predictable lesson structure with explicit teacher-facing guidance, “If/Then” callouts for responsive instruction, and pre-scheduled Flex Days for differentiated, data-driven small-group huddles. This design reflects research showing that regular routines, concrete materials, and built-in flexibility promote both implementation fidelity and instructional quality (May et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2020; Am et al., 2023).

# Appendix

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