

“My Life, My Stories”: Reading, Writing, and Belonging in the ESL Classroom

*Collaborating to develop
a curriculum for English
learners, a teacher and
a teacher educator
focused on creating a
sense of belonging, both
in the United States and
in the classroom.*

As I looked around the room, I noticed my students had their heads down, nearly falling asleep.

“Class, what’s wrong?”

From across the room, José responded, “Miss, we don’t like the topic of pyramids. And who cares about nomads?” (Student names are pseudonyms.)

In that moment, I questioned if this was a teacher win or fail. We had recently learned the vocabulary word topic, and José used it correctly. On the other hand, my students were unengaged and uninterested. This was not due to the language demands of our reading, but it was because they simply did not connect to the content we were learning. Suddenly, I saw the irony: my students are not nomadic people and they’ve never been to the Egyptian pyramids. The beginning ESL curriculum was just not working!



When we began working together to conduct research in Holly’s classroom because of our shared interest in literacy instruction with high school English learners, Holly’s frustrations underscored Mandy’s experience that the prepackaged secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum used in many classrooms does not effectively engage students or further their English acquisition. This article shares our story of creating a curriculum we believe other teachers can emulate to successfully teach adolescents who are new to the country. The curriculum is based on students’ lives and stories.

Although our primary goal in this endeavor was to develop students’ language skills, we encountered a serendipitous yet more notable outcome. As students shared from their experiences to make English gains, the classroom became a place of belonging. In sharing this curricular unit, we highlight the language acquisition and the sense of belonging gained by the newcomer students.

Many schools reserve the designation of newcomer for students who are in their first or second year in the country and are acquiring English as an additional language. High school newcomers are among the most vulnerable subgroups of English learners due to the limited amount of time they have to acquire language and content to graduate (Short and Boyson 3). Often, newcomers experience trauma or difficulty due to culture shock, family separation, economic hardships, or fear of deportation (Patel et al. 163). These factors may negatively contribute to their academic progress and mask their many strengths.

Understanding newcomers’ unique potential and challenges (Stewart 95), we generated our own curriculum based on the rich experiences of the diverse students in Holly’s ESL classes. This included thirty-seven students from seven different countries with English language abilities ranging from beginning to high intermediate. The three-month unit titled *My Life: My Stories* centered on students’ lives guided by relevant theories of second language acquisition as explained in this article. We submit that this

curriculum was not only more effective at teaching language than the textbook, but more importantly, it also achieved the goal of creating a sense of belonging. We believe that goal is achievable for students in any classroom.

DESIGNING THE UNIT FOR SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The most obvious need for newcomers is to acquire English. They need to develop fluency and accuracy in all four language domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking in their second language (Rodríguez et al. 112). Furthermore, competency in understanding and using academic language is required to be successful on grade-level assessments. Research suggests that it takes five to seven years for language learners to acquire academic language, even longer for students who lack adequate schooling in their home countries (Baker and Wright 164). Because of this pressing need, teachers of English learners should emphasize instructing for second language acquisition (SLA). Consequently, we designed our unit based on SLA research, focusing on five key ingredients for a classroom geared toward language learning identified by Lourdes Ortega in a review of multiple studies: (1) comprehensible input, (2) pushed output, (3) negotiated interaction, (4) attention to the language code, and (5) a positive attitude toward the second language (55).

COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT

To begin, we considered comprehensible input, the print text and oral language we wanted the newcomers to understand. According to Stephen Krashen, input should be just slightly beyond the learner's individual level of English acquisition, such as vocabulary and sentence structure knowledge (21). The language past the student's current mastery should be contextually embedded in prior knowledge and made comprehensible through visuals and/or first language support. Thus, we made students' lives—a topic they knew intimately—the content of the unit. Since we removed the task of learning large amounts of new content, the primary learning objective became English acquisition.

To honor each of the students and provide input grounded in their prior knowledge, we located eighty-eight books about the homelands represented by the classes through the Worlds of Words website (wowlit.org/), an elementary school library, and Internet searches (see Table 1). These books contained accessible English, rich visuals, and sometimes even first language support to aid comprehension. Students read these books independently for sustained reading and to conduct research throughout the unit. Additionally, they read online informational texts about their countries on websites such as NewsELA and Kids National Geographic. Belinda, an older student from El Salvador who had previously shown little interest in reading, was surprised we had found books just for her. She asked if she could keep one of the books about El Salvador so she could read it at home.

We supported students' individual inquiry through whole-class activities, modeling the reading, research, and writing activities the students would complete. For these purposes, we chose texts about the United States, their new country, and explicitly demonstrated each assignment for individual or group work (see Figure 1). Because this content was new, we made the information comprehensible to students by using visually rich texts in whole-class activities.

To illustrate, we first directed students to notice the cover of the book and make observations. For example, one cover has subdued colors that prompted students to predict the story might be sad. Then, Holly read each text aloud while students followed along in their own copy or through viewing the screen, providing them the aural, print, and visual cues to make meaning. Each reading was interspersed with questions for individual thought, group discussion, and journal writing. At the end of each reading, students wrote questions that pertained to the story. Rosa asked, "What freedoms do I have in America?" after we read about the Pledge of Allegiance. Her relevant question, as well as other student-generated questions, formed the basis for the next class where everyone engaged in small-group discussion and individual journal writing about

TABLE 1.

The authors had eighty-eight books available to students for research, independent reading, and inspiration for their writing.

Books for Homelands Represented by Students in Holly's Classes			
Brazil	<i>Brazil ABCs: A Book About the People and Places of Brazil</i> by David Seidman and Jeffrey Thompson (I)	<i>B Is for Brazil</i> by Maria de Fatima Campos (I)	<i>Pelé, King of Soccer</i> by Monica Brown and Rudy Gutierrez (NF, B)
Cameroon	<i>The Market Bowl</i> by Jim Averbeck (F)	<i>Cultures of the World: Cameroon</i> by Sean Sheehan and Josie Elias (I)	<i>Fang: The Heritage Library of African People</i> by Chike Cyril Aniakor (I)
El Salvador	<i>René Has Two Last Names</i> by René Colato Laínez and Fabiola Graullera Ramírez (NF, B)	<i>Cultures of the World: El Salvador</i> by Erin Foley and Rafiz Hapipi (I)	<i>Exploring Countries: El Salvador</i> by Walter Simmons (I)
Honduras	<i>The Good Garden: How One Family Went from Hunger to Having Enough</i> by Katie Smith Milway (NF)	<i>Discovering Central America: History, Politics, and Culture: Honduras</i> by Charles J. Shield and James D. Henderson (NF)	<i>Cultures of the World: Honduras</i> by Leta McGaffey and Michael Spilling (I)
Mexico	<i>My Diary from Here to There</i> by Amanda I. Pérez and Maya C. Gonzalez (F, B)	<i>Let's Go Traveling in Mexico</i> by Robin Rector Krupp (I)	<i>Diego Rivera: His World and Ours</i> by Duncan Tonatiuh (NF, PB)
Myanmar (Burma)	<i>M Is for Myanmar</i> by Elizabeth Rush (I, B)	<i>Global Hotspots: Burma (Myanmar)</i> by Nathaniel Harris (I)	<i>I See the Sun in Myanmar (Burma)</i> by Dedie King (F, B)
Puerto Rico	<i>Parrots over Puerto Rico</i> by Susan L. Roth and Cindy Trumbore (I)	<i>Roberto Clemente</i> by Dona Rice and William B. Rice (I, SP)	<i>What's Great About Puerto Rico?</i> by Anita Yasuda (I)
Venezuela	<i>Exploring Countries: Venezuela</i> by Kari Schuetz (I)	<i>Country Explorers: Venezuela</i> by Helga Jones (I)	<i>How Iwariwa the Cayman Learned to Share</i> by George Crespo (F)
Various Countries	<i>Bravo! Poems about Amazing Hispanics</i> by Margarita Engle and Rafael López (PO, SP, I)	<i>Yes! We Are Latinos: Poems and Prose about the Latino Experience</i> by Alma F. Ada and F. Isabel Campoy (PO, SP, I)	<i>The Sky Painter: Louis Fuertes, Bird Artist</i> by Margarita Engle (PO)

F = Fiction

I = Informational Text

NF = Nonfiction

PO = Poetry

SP = Companion Book Available in Spanish

B = Bilingual Book in English and Spanish or Burmese

these texts. After two class periods working with each mentor text, Holly shared her own response to model what the students were expected to create. She explained her writing and told the students about their assignment. The primary purpose of each reader-response assignment was for the comprehensible input to lead to output in English.

PUSHED OUTPUT

In an argument based on Merrill Swain's output hypothesis (97), Ortega explains that learners must have opportunities for pushed output in the second language—essentially, comprehensible input is not enough for optimal language growth (62). Indeed, we wanted the newcomers to respond to their

Texts for Whole-Class Modeling Activities	
Read-Alouds	Writing/Research Assignment Modeled
<i>I Pledge Allegiance: The Pledge of Allegiance, with Commentary</i> Bill Martin, et al.	Country Poem
<i>North America (Continents)</i> Mary Virginia Fox	
<i>Artists, Writers, Thinkers, Dreamers: Portraits of Fifty Famous Folks and All Their Weird Stuff</i> James Gulliver Hancock	Pictorial Autobiography
<i>How Many Days to America? A Thanksgiving Story</i> Eve Bunting with illustrations by Beth Peck	Personal Memory Paragraphs
<i>We Came to America</i> Faith Ringgold	We Came to America Poem

FIGURE 1.

Holly read a book with the whole class to begin each writing project.

reading in ways that would facilitate the production of authentic English through oral and written forms. In this unit, students were pushed to use English to write about their lives and then share that information through speaking. We purposefully created spaces for them to share their stories with us and with their classmates who do not speak their language. In these spaces, students were positioned as the expert of the curriculum (their own culture and experiences).

Each output opportunity was modeled by Holly as she shared her writing as an example and mentor text. Additionally, the output was scaffolded as students used graphic organizers to plan their writing or digital compositions in English. These supports provided the place for us to push them in their English use. For example, during one class period, Elena from Venezuela read each of her memory paragraphs aloud

to Mandy and then explained them in further detail. Elena possessed the information and Mandy was the learner, showing genuine interest as she asked clarifying questions regarding the life stories the student shared. Elena wanted to share her experiences and explain the current situation in her beloved Venezuela to others.

NEGOTIATED INTERACTION

Ortega further identifies negotiated interaction (Long 488)—low-risk opportunities to converse with others in English while using body language, gestures, and facial expressions alongside spoken words to make meaning—as a key component of the SLA classroom (65). In this unit, negotiated interaction occurred as students used oral language to communicate about their home countries and lives with classmates. Their reading provided them the vocabulary to do this effectively. As one student shared, others asked questions, calling on the speaker to further explain or clarify a detail. This occurred in partners and small groups as well as with us as we talked about the content of students' writing with them. We negotiated meaning together through language, visuals, and gestures.

This was particularly important for students who were reluctant to speak in English. Carmen, from Honduras, had refused to speak in English and had shown little progress during the previous semester. However, through using the visuals in books about her country, she spoke to us to begin describing concrete ideas that later progressed to abstract feelings. These conversations were guided by

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the structure of the Country Poem (see Figure 2). At first, Mandy asked Carmen about the Honduran flag as they viewed images in the books. They progressed to talking about Carmen's feeling about her country. She desperately missed Honduras and wanted to return. This helped us understand why she regularly refused to speak and was generally unhappy in the United States. We could then acknowledge her feelings and allow her to share more about the place she missed so much.

A primary goal was for the newcomers to feel successful as users of the English language and know that other people, particularly their teachers, cared deeply about them and wanted to learn more about what made them unique.

ATTENTION TO THE LANGUAGE CODE

The fourth ingredient to foster SLA is attention to the language code. As students acquire English as a second language, they need to be aware of structures in place to make their language production comprehensible to others and engage in academic discourses (Ortega 63). Consequently, throughout the unit we used sentence stems (Rodríguez et al. 86) for students' writing and speaking to provide support in grammatically appropriate ways (e.g., I

felt ____when I found out I would be moving because _____.). However, we were cognizant to not focus on accuracy over fluency to the detriment of language production. We only focused on language structures at specific times and to the extent that it guided students' writing and speaking.

We also assisted students in revising their writing individually and in small groups during writer's workshop. We provided direct instruction to help students correct one kind of error at a time. In the case of Carmen, we just wanted her to write anything and begin participating in class. Our initial goal for her was language production. However, Elena was a different student. We helped her revise the large quantity of text she could produce in English by understanding verb tenses. Since these students represent two extremes within the same class, beyond providing sentence stems, we tailored grammar instruction to individuals to move them along, yet not shut them down.

ATTITUDE TOWARD THE LANGUAGE

Finally, teachers must consider students' attitude toward the second language (English) and speakers of that language (Ortega 68). We taught this unit in a time when students heard disparaging remarks about their countries in the media from prominent Americans. Nevertheless, we wanted to create a classroom that celebrated their rich cultures. Following research that illustrates the profound writing that results from English learners writing about their own experiences (Jacobs 88; Newman 28), we wanted the students to teach us about their lives through their narratives and structured poetry.

We also wanted to give students positive experiences using the English language by providing them choice and ownership in their writing, speaking, and creating. A primary goal was for the newcomers to feel successful as users of the English language and know that other people, particularly their teachers, cared deeply about them and wanted to learn more about what made them unique. Throughout this unit, students shared their strengths, cultural traditions, and experiences with us. We wanted them to know we viewed their presence in the United States as an incredible addition to our nation. In turn, our hope was that

Directions for Writing a "Country Poem"

1. Describe the colors and shapes of your home country's flag.
2. Ask your country a question.
3. Describe what your country sounds like.
4. Describe what your country tastes like.
5. Describe what your country smells like.
6. Describe what your country looks like.
7. Describe how your country makes you feel.
8. Ask your country a question that expresses your feelings.

FIGURE 2.
Students in the class wrote "country poems" that they shared with each other.

students would develop a positive attitude about learning English and using their new language to communicate who they are and everything they have to offer.

REFLECTING ON STUDENT RESPONSES

Students created written and visual products for the four parts of this unit: Country Poems, Pictorial Autobiographies, Memory Paragraphs, and “We Came to America” Poems. These products were accompanied by small-group presentations to further oral language development.

COUNTRY POEMS

Students used images and text to share elements they deemed important about their countries (see Figure 3 for Dan’s poem about Cameroon). They

Dan’s Poem about Cameroon



Oh green flora cut down, red blood spilled for
her freedom, and yellow golden not anymore
our own
Cameroon what about your sons?
Oh beautiful beating drum, remind me the storm
of languages from where I am from
Your sweet taste of baguette, vegetables and
corn, keep you up in a healthy form
I know you by your tropical smell that I am
effectively at home
And I can not be more depressed when I miss the
beauty of your rainforest
Even with nothing you make me feel nothing
more than the happiest of your sons
Oh Cameroon have you forgot the smell of sun?

FIGURE 3.

As the only student from Cameroon, Dan had much to share with the class through his “country poem.”

played with language, color, and arrangement to offer factual information about their country, as well as their political views. Elena begins her poem by describing the Venezuelan flag (a yellow, blue, and red vertical stripe with white stars in the middle) accompanied by a picture of a modern-day protestor wrapped in the flag with her mouth taped.

The bright yellow shines just like the sun
Above the blue deep ocean
Playing with the white stars that fade into the
blood red
Of those who keep fighting for freedom

These lines illustrate that although newcomers might not possess English language proficiency, they are not limited in their ability to think critically. Students shared thought-provoking statements and their conflicted feelings about the countries they left or even fled. While providing beautiful descriptions of the people, traditions, and natural wonders of their countries, students also posed questions that illustrated their complex sentiments. Students from Chin State in Myanmar wrote, “Why do you let your people suffer?” and “Why do you make me feel happy and homesick at the same time?” Marco, from Mexico, ended his poem with these lines:

In the past all the people worked together for a
beautiful city.
But now . . . Gangs drugs and violence innocent
people dying
Hurting for the innocent lives lost. But . . .
I still love my country and my people

PICTORIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

After viewing examples of learning about someone through a creative juxtaposition of images, words, and phrases in the book *Artist, Writers, Thinkers, Dreamers: Portraits of Fifty Famous Folks and All Their Weird Stuff* (Hancock), we guided students to share themselves using the text as an example. The visuals they chose were accompanied by limited text, making this activity appropriate for beginners but also scalable to challenge students with more language proficiency. Using specific words or phrases

to describe themselves increased students' vocabulary as well as reinforced grammar such as past tense verbs. Manuela, from Brazil, used written phrases with pictures of her past such as "I moved here in 2017," "I suffered an accident on a carousel," and "I won a trophy for best school theater presentation." She reinforced the use of the past tense as compared to the phrases she used to describe pictures that represented her current life: "enjoy this," "learn this," and "play this," which had arrows pointing to a visual (see Figure 4). In total, she included nineteen pictures in her collage, providing her that number of important elements of her past or present life to share with others through speaking and writing. In

addition to sharing her life and practicing grammatical patterns, she was able to practice her oral language skills when she presented her project, guided by sentence stems.

MEMORY PARAGRAPHS

Building from the visually rich autobiographies and country poems, we guided students into more traditional writing through an assignment for which they composed short narratives about their lives. Students wrote between four and seven narratives, depending on language proficiency, about topics such as the saddest and happiest days of their lives, their journeys to the United States, or their first day in a new school.

Holly modeled each of these narratives and supported students by providing guiding questions for prewriting. Through mini-lessons, students viewed her prewriting and final paragraph for each memory, making note of verb tense and how to use details to convey meaning. For example, the prewriting organizer for the prompt "A Day That Broke My Heart" included these questions: What happened? When did it happen? Where were you? Who was there? Why was your heart broken? How did it change you? The graphic organizer also directed students to include sensory imagery and a simile. Cho chose to write about something personal for one of her memory paragraphs. With her emerging English proficiency she writes:

A day that broke my heart is when my mom passed away. It was in the year of 2015. I was in Burma when my mom died. My whole family were there. It was really sad because it's the day I lost my mom it was hard to live without my mom in the beginning, My heart was broken like a glass. I still miss my mom so much.

"WE CAME TO AMERICA" POEMS

For a culminating project, we discussed Faith Ringgold's picture book *We Came to America* and asked students to write about why their families or people from their countries migrated. Jorge's poem about people from Mexico talked back to the current political discourse that often disparages people like him

Manuela's Pictorial Autobiography



FIGURE 4. Manuela practiced present and past tense verbs as she shared her life through a pictorial autobiography.

(see Figure 5). Other students used this assignment to express their frustrations at being seen as criminals, gang members, intruders, job stealers, and outsiders. They voiced their belief that the American dream was theirs, too. Through writing, they boldly stated who they are and all of the recourses they bring with them to the United States.

SHARING STORIES TO FOSTER BELONGING

Surely, newcomers need to acquire English, stressing the need for instruction grounded in second language acquisition theories. However, in developing and teaching this curriculum, we learned that the less visible need for belonging might be even greater. Throughout this unit, we were constantly reminded to view newcomers as individuals, not just as students who need second language skills. They shared information with us through their writing and speaking that we might not have learned had we not invited them to discuss their lives before and after immigrating to the United States: a near drowning, a tumultuous relationship with a parent, pregnancy, the process of requesting political asylum, and riches-to-rags experiences. We also learned of many positive aspects about the students' lives such as the heroic efforts their parents made to provide them a better life, the deep love and concern they have for their homelands, and their dreams for the future. Reyna, for example, moved from Puerto Rico so that her mother could receive medical care that might save her life. Although Reyna's mother passed away, she began the pursuit of a dream to become a pulmonologist to help others before it is too late—as it was for her mother. She comes to school every day to further this deeply personal dream rooted in her experiences.

We also learned that the process of bringing these stories to life is often more valuable than the final products because it brings the class together. One day in class, Chesa seemed to be stuck. She knew what she wanted to write but did not have the words in English to express herself. Holly asked Chesa questions and determined that the day she wanted to forget happened in her country, Myanmar.

Jorge's Poem



FIGURE 5. Jorge talks back to negative rhetoric about his country through his “We Came to America” poem.

Chesa began to speak with another student in Haka and then said, “Weather.”

She made a motion with her fingers above her head, prompting Holly to ask: “Was there rain?”

With a huge smile, Chesa said, “Yes.”

But, she was not satisfied with just rain. She and her friend spoke more and came up with the words *storm* and *lightning*, but this was still not the right description of the day Chesa wanted to forget. After help from other students, Chesa finally communicated the day she wanted to forget. Her village in Chin State, Myanmar, was destroyed by a mudslide. Her family lost everything, including their home and farm. After that experience, Chesa was separated from her father because he went to work in Malaysia and to apply for refugee status, leading to her family's

migration journey. She could now start writing her memory so the class would know more about who she is and how she came to Holly's ESL classroom.

As Chesa and the other newcomers furthered their language skill set by sharing their lives, the class began to develop as a community. Our mission as literacy and language educators is to craft environments that not only further develop students' English acquisition but that also embrace the stories they have to share. Our classrooms can become powerful places of reading, writing, and belonging as newcomers to teach us about themselves—their opinions, stories, cultures, and journeys. Iván, a student from Venezuela, reminds us of all our students have to share:

We came to America
We brought along memories
Our culture
Our traditions
Beautiful futures and dreams
Our food, our fashion, and our art
Make America great

We believe our students' lives and stories make our classrooms great as well. 

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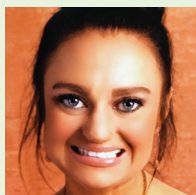
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READWRITETHINKCONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

After reviewing the literary elements of tone and point of view, students work in small groups to read and summarize Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," Langston Hughes's "I, Too, Sing America," and Maya Angelou's "On the Pulse of the Morning." They identify the tone and point of view of each poem, citing specific text references. Finally, students compare the three poems using a Venn diagram, synthesize the similarities and differences they identified, and then discuss their findings with the class. <http://bit.ly/2eUqdZB>

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS: 2019 DAVID H. RUSSELL RESEARCH AWARD

The David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English at any level. Any work or works of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years (between January 2013 and December 2018) are eligible. Works nominated should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time.

Nomination information can be found at <http://www2.ncte.org/awards/david-h-russell-research-award/>; nominations must be submitted by **March 1, 2019**. The award will be presented at the NCTE Awards Session during the 2019 NCTE Annual Convention in Baltimore, Maryland.