

Hurdling Over Language Barriers: Building Relationships With Adolescent Newcomers Through Literacy Advancement

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Language barriers between teachers and newcomer English learners may pose seemingly insurmountable hurdles to building relationships, but teachers can clear those through engaging literacy activities.

ricia (first author) felt pretty confident walking into the high school classroom for the first day of the summer literacy institute. After all, she was a seasoned educator. However, by the end of the morning after stumbling through a few introductory activities, she realized that she had some pretty daunting language barriers to overcome with her students. One student in particular, Jessie (all student names are pseudonyms), a 17-year-old from Mexico, did not speak at all that first day or even the first week. Yet, to Tricia's surprise, by the end of the summer, Jessie was one of the most talkative students. Through the literacy engagement activities that we present in this article, Tricia learned about Jessie's difficult decision to move to the United States the previous year. He told her how his father, who was his best friend, died. He also shared how his older brothers encourage him to work hard in school so he can be the first in his family to go to college and fulfill his dream of becoming a lawyer. Jessie and Tricia had formed an unlikely relationship.

Jessie and the students in this class are newcomers, a subpopulation of the larger category of English learners (ELs), students who are in the dynamic process of acquiring English as an additional language. The term *newcomer* is used to accentuate the short amount of time students have been in the new country (Short & Boyson, 2012), usually three years or less. Sometimes the term *late arrivals* is also used to describe high school newcomers to emphasize the short amount of time they have to master the necessary skills to graduate from a

U.S. high school. They need to acquire both grade-level content and English language knowledge to receive credits and pass high-stakes exams. Despite decades of research demonstrating that it takes five to seven years to acquire the academic proficiency in a second language, and even longer if one has limited former schooling opportunities (Baker & Wright, 2017), these students are on a race against time.

Beyond the pressing language needs, newcomers often feel an urgency to adapt to their new environment. Sometimes they are pressured to become familiar with the beliefs, values, and customs of a new culture and educational system (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Consequently, studies have illustrated how newcomers need support that can only be provided when teachers know their circumstances (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008); thus, it is imperative for educators to develop caring relationships with them.

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However, language barriers are often present between teachers and newcomers, which may pose seemingly insurmountable obstacles to develop rapport that can support students in their learning. Most secondary teachers do not share the same language skills or lived experiences as newcomers. Consequently, we explored how literacy instruction may serve as a vehicle to build relationships between teachers and students when all languages are valued in the classroom.

In this article, we share our work with newcomers, highlighting the experiences of Tricia and Tamra (second author) to illustrate how teachers can hurdle over language barriers in the classroom. Specifically, we focus on three specific activities that we designed to build relationships with newcomer ELs while simultaneously developing their written, oral, and digital literacies across languages. That is, students read, wrote, and spoke in English and in their first language (L1) while using technology and artistic expression to further their literacy learning.

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching

Often, there is a cultural divide between teachers and newcomers, promoting instruction that purposefully addresses those differences. Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges and celebrates student diversity and provides equal access to education for students from all cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This includes teaching characteristics such as empathy, compassion, and flexibility (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2014). It often requires teachers to become learners in the classroom as they seek to know as much as they can about their students.

Literacy teachers have put these abstract ideas into practice with ELs in various ways. Specifically, studies have illustrated the importance of ELs reading literature that reflects their cultures (Ebe, 2012) and writing about their own lived experiences (Jacobs, 2008; Olson, Scarcella, & Matuchniak, 2015). Much research has suggested using various modes of communication, such as visuals and audio along with print, to support students in their language and literacy development. Examples of teachers guiding their adolescent ELs to express themselves multimodally are sharing their migration journeys through comics or graphic stories (Danzak, 2011; Stewart, 2015). Additional examples are students expressing their transnational and hybrid identities through photo-essays (Honeyford, 2014) and digital podcasts (Wilson, Chavez, & Anders, 2012).

However, because a defining feature of newcomers is their language distinction from the mainstream

population, teachers must also consider a teaching style that is linguistically responsive. This includes appropriate scaffolding to make the academic content in English comprehensible (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2014) and also viewing students as multilinguals who can competently use all of their linguistic knowledge to learn (Daniel & Pacheco, 2016). Researchers have referred to this as taking a translanguaging stance (García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017) as teachers learn about their students' language use in various contexts and their multilingual abilities. Translanguaging involves multilingual people drawing from all of their languages to make meaning and accomplish specific purposes, an act in which most bilinguals regularly engage (García et al., 2017).

In particular, the secondary classroom is a rich place for teachers to systematically use every language known to the students to any degree, even if the teachers do not speak those languages (Ebe & Chapman-Santiago, 2016). Although there is certainly a lack of awareness in how to use languages other than English in the secondary classroom (García, & Kleyn, 2016), a growing body of research has shown the benefits for students' academic, English language, and identity development when teachers take a translanguaging stance (Collins & Cioè-Peña, 2016; Stewart & Hansen-Thomas, 2016). This might occur through reading in the L1 and discussing the reading in English with a group. Alternatively, it could mean reading in English and discussing the text with a partner in the L1 to clarify meaning. Other purposeful ways to leverage students' languages are prewriting in the L1 to work toward a final product in English, using translation devices to construct meaning, or even writing bilingually to express critical thinking. Subsequently, in the classroom we highlight, we purposefully paid attention to students' cultural and linguistic knowledge in planning and implementing the lessons.

Building Relationships With Students

An essential component of culturally and linguistically responsive instruction is the student–teacher relationship. There are many positive effects of teachers developing relationships with students. During the formal schooling years, teachers play a pivotal role in positive student learning outcomes (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008), and strong teacher–student relationships are important for all adolescent students (Dika & Singh, 2002). Research has further suggested that when high school students experience positive relationships with their teachers, students experience higher levels of self-esteem, are less likely to drop out, and are more confident in future employment opportunities (Dika & Singh,

2002). Noddings (2003) explained that caring student-teacher relationships should be the teacher's foremost goal. Students must feel that they are more important and valuable to the teacher than the subject matter. This is a precursor for authentic, deep learning to occur.

Yet, this is even more crucial for immigrant youths who show greater academic engagement when they have a positive relationship with a caring adult such as a teacher (Green, Rhodes, Hirsch, Suárez-Orozco, & Camic, 2008). Indeed, immigrant students who achieve success both in and out of school have often cited teachers in addition to family as important contributors to their accomplishments (Sadowski, 2013). Researchers investigating how to best teach writing to culturally and linguistically diverse youths have claimed that language arts educators must first learn about their students' lives and how they define themselves, relating to them on a personal and relational level (Wickstrom, Araujo, & Patterson, 2011). Becoming aware of students' unique strengths, needs, and desires leads to more effective writing instruction.

Stewart, Babino, and Walker (2017) described a pedagogy of care for adolescent ELs, in which literacylearning activities were designed to not only increase academic achievement but also for teachers to respond to individual students. This pedagogical approach is based on constructivist literacy teaching, refined for newcomer students learning both a new language and a new culture (Au, 2011). For example, the goal of instruction should be an avenue for ELs to share their lives, lived experiences, and cultures with the classroom community and, foremost, the teacher. This is facilitated by a purposeful inclusion of curricular materials that mirror students' past and current lives. Written expression provides a path for students to voluntarily share what is important to them. This approach requires students to take ownership of their own learning, prompting the need for choice and relevant content in the literacy classroom. Furthermore, a pedagogy of care includes the manner in which teachers set up their classrooms. This might occur through arranging groups for collaborative work, greeting students in their L1, or facilitating a community where the members of the class share personal writing with one another.

In classrooms with greater numbers of adolescent newcomers who are taught by teachers who do not speak the students' home language(s), communication is key to build positive and caring relationships. This communication can take the form of literacy instruction, as reading, writing, listening, and speaking are opportunities to share ourselves and learn about our students, setting the foundation for caring relationships (Stewart

et al., 2017). In other words, teachers might build these relationships most effectively through the teaching enacted in the classroom. Literacy instruction that responds to newcomers' cultural and linguistic strengths and their needs can lay the foundation for strong relationships to form. Then, as those student–teacher relationships develop through literacy engagement, literacy learning increases.

The Classroom Setting and Participants

The classroom we describe took place in a summer literacy institute for newcomers at one U.S. high school. The institute was six weeks long (three days a week) and taught by Tricia and Tamra, who had no interaction with the students prior to the first day. The students participated voluntarily and received no course credit for attendance. They explicitly stated that they came to improve their English skills. Thus, we wanted to honor the students' reason for coming while simultaneously investigating how literacy could be used to build relationships despite language obstacles.

Students

The institute was open to any student at the high school who had attended a U.S. school for three years or less, that is, newcomers. The students who regularly came were all Spanish or French speakers and, thus, had someone to communicate with in their language inside the classroom. All of the students had many years of formal education in their home countries, yet their English proficiency levels differed greatly. Table 1 provides the students' information.

Teachers

Tricia and Tamra reflect the majority of teachers in the United States: white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), self-identified monolingual English speakers (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2016). Furthermore, although they have years of teaching experience, they possessed limited knowledge at the beginning of the institute about second-language acquisition and bilingualism, much like other secondary teachers (Menken, 2013). Throughout the summer, Tricia and Tamra learned about translanguaging, which led them to consider inviting students to discuss texts or instructions in their L1 with partners. The teachers also considered the importance of ownership in language learning, drawing them to activities where

Table 1
Students in the Summer Literacy Institute

Student pseudonym	Age	Gender	Grade	Country of origin	Years of schooling in the country of origin	Years in the United States	English proficiency based on Texas's four-part rating system
Adrianna	17	Female	11	Venezuela	12	1	Intermediate
Alex	16	Male	10	Honduras	10	2	Beginner
Elena	18	Female	11	Honduras	5	1	Beginner
Estela	16	Female	11	Venezuela	13	1	Advanced
Felipe	15	Male	10	Mexico	7	1	Beginner
Jacqueline	16	Female	11	France	11	1	Intermediate
Jessie	17	Male	11	Mexico	12	1	Intermediate
Luis	16	Male	11	Mexico	11	1	Beginner
María	18	Female	12	El Salvador	13	2	Intermediate
Reyna	16	Female	12	Venezuela	12	3	Advanced
Rose	16	Female	11	France	11	1	Intermediate
Selina	15	Female	10	Honduras	10	1	Beginner

students had options. Mandy (third author) oversaw the institute, coached the teachers, and occasionally taught lessons; however, because Mandy speaks Spanish, we focus in this article on Tricia and Tamra's experiences, which we think can be applied to other linguistically diverse secondary classrooms.

Throughout the institute, we focused on how teachers could overcome language barriers in building relationships with their students through literacy activities that could be implemented across disciplines. In the following section, we share our greatest takeaways that we think other teachers can use in their classrooms with newcomer students.

Literacy Activities to Support Relationships

We identified three literacy activities that supported relationship building with the students while also developing their written, oral, and digital literacy skills across languages: heart maps, All About Me presentations, and graffiti boards. These activities provided a creative space for students and teachers to know and be known by others in the classroom community in addition to teaching high school literacy standards. All of the activities had commonalities that served to build

and nurture positive relationships over the course of the institute:

- The activities were multimodal and provided a space for students to creatively represent their personal and social lives (cultures).
- The activities provided a space for teachers and students to use technological supports, developing students' digital literacy.
- The activities were collaborative in nature, allowing teachers to become colearners with their students and acknowledging the strengths that everyone brought to the classroom.

Next, we describe the implementation of each activity, how it facilitated relationships while developing literacy, and students' responses. In the remainder of this section, in detailing the classroom activities, we refers to only Tricia and Tamra.

Heart Maps: Showing and Telling What Is Important

All learners have various emotions, such as love, fear, hurt, and joy, in their lives. Heart maps allow students to show and tell teachers their self-selected feelings. A

heart map is a visual reminder of what a person loves and cares about (Heard, 1999) and provides a creative space for students to share what is important to them. Using heart maps as springboards into writing helps eliminate the phrase "I don't have anything to write about!" When used as a culturally responsive tool, a heart map serves as a mirror to reflect one's lived experiences (Bishop, 1990).

To begin, we explained to the students that writers typically keep a collection of things that they care about so they always have a writing idea. We modeled this by telling students what is important to us, showing them are own colorful heart maps. Next, we gave the students a heart template to fill in with the person, place, or thing most important to them in the middle. Students filled in the spaces around the center by adding more pictures or words that were meaningful to them. We also encouraged the students to color-code the sections of the heart (e.g., purple for people, green for places, yellow for things). See Figure 1 for heart map examples from two newcomers with different English proficiencies.

The multimodal design, specifically the use of visuals and color alongside the print, served to build bridges across the language barrier between students and teachers. Students were also encouraged to use one another or technology to determine the best way to express their ideas in English. They could also choose to write in Spanish or French if they thought that place in their heart would be best represented with words in their own language.

We used the heart maps as speaking and writing prompts throughout the institute. These opportunities laid a foundation of trust as students shared how they felt about living in a new country. For example, we asked the students if they wanted to share an area of their heart map with the class. Students shared treasured cultural traditions, such as greeting friends with a kiss on the cheek, in stark contrast to the U.S. greeting of shaking hands. We also regularly asked students to select one section of their heart map to write about in their journals. Giving students the choice in their writing instead of an assigned prompt made the writing more authentic and increased student engagement. Figure 2 shows two student journal entries stemming from the heart maps.

The heart maps became avenues for students to elaborate about special people, places, and events in their lives. These colorful hearts brought the students' personal experiences of living in the world and being part of a specific cultural group to the classroom. Using heart maps at the beginning and throughout the

summer allowed us to sow the seeds of relationships with the students.

All About Me Presentations: Leveraging Technology to Make Meaning

Teachers can overcome many language difficulties through using technology, particularly videos, songs, visuals, and translations. We combined all of these supports with a project that focused on autobiography. All About Me presentations provide a creative way to get to know one another because the subject matter for this activity is the students' own lives, their autobiographies. Centering learning on students' lived experiences is a research-supported approach for language acquisition (Herrera, 2016). Illustrating the importance of choice, students can consider what they want to share about their own cultures and lives, moving beyond what has been dubbed as "the Fs": food, famous people, festivals, flags, folklore, and fashion, or the surface features of culture (Bennett, 2015; Nieto & Bode, 2012). Of course, students can share superficial elements about their culture, which are still important parts of their biographies, but they have choice as to what they want to present to the class. Students also have the space to share more personal information, such as family members, cultural norms, and major life events, to the extent they feel comfortable.

We used technology for this activity so students could access images from the internet, which is more time-efficient than drawing pictures, like they did for the heart map activity. In addition to conducting internet searches for images, students also downloaded some of their own photographs from their social networking sites to share personal aspects of their lives. In this instance, the visuals were the prime communicator of meaning, and written language was used to provide titles or short, descriptive phrases. This was important to give students a space to express themselves creatively in ways not entirely constrained by written expression in English (Chappell & Faltis, 2013).

First, we created our own All About Me presentations and shared them with the students before we invited them to create their own. They engaged in much oral language development as they asked us questions about our families and lives outside of school. Then, we provided the criteria for the students to create their own presentations using tablets (see Figure 3). Specifically, students needed to create at least one slide to share particular information to the extent they felt comfortable. The slides could contain words, pictures, video, and music and could be in English and their L1. However, to

Figure 1 Two Newcomer Students' Heart Maps



 $\textit{Note}. \ \text{The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.}$

Figure 2 Two Newcomer Students' Journal Entries About Their Heart Maps

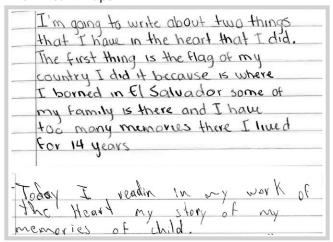


Figure 3 All About Me Presentation Criteria

- 1. Title: "All About Me"
- 2. Your name
- 3. Your age
- 4. Home country: Picture of the flag, picture of a map, and three important facts you would like others to know about your country
- 5. Where does your joy come from? What do you like to do, eat, listen to, read, etc.? Who do you like to spend time with?
- 6. Pet peeves: What do you dislike? What are things you do not like to do, eat, listen to, etc.? What actions annoy/anger you?
- 7. Your motto: What or who inspires you? What saying, quote, song lyric, person, etc., tells others what you believe in or dream to be someday?
- 8. 5-10 slides
- 9. Remember that most of your audience will have no prior knowledge about your country.
- 10. The written presentation can be in Spanish/French and English.
- 11. The oral presentation will be in English.

communicate with us, the students knew they needed to do their oral presentation in English even if they also used words in their languages in their slides.

We noticed how vested the students became in the planning of their presentations. Students used writing journals to make notes and organize. Students often wrote in their L1 to plan their slides but then needed to determine how to express the same ideas in English. Our teacher–student interactions presented challenges when helping students translate their writing to their second

language, yet confronting this challenge strengthened our relationships. Specifically, we used digital translators, visuals, and student translators within the class to understand one another. The amount of support often depended on the student's English level. Sometimes we asked another student to translate for a beginner, but other times we used Google Translate for selected words and phrases to help a more advanced student. For all students, we wrote words or phrases on the board that we wanted to communicate and acted out the meaning, eliciting much laughter from the students. Our theatrics built a place for students to do the same in trying to communicate concrete actions and abstract ideas with us. The great effort that the students put into communicating with us paid dividends in relationship building and language growth.

For example, Tamra worked one-one-one with Reyna, a 16-year-old from Venezuela who shared provocative images that related the political unrest in her country. Over the course of a few days, Reyna's comfort level and trust grew as she opened up about her friend who had been involved in a youth protest but was shot as a result of standing up for his beliefs. Estela chose to include a song in Spanish in her presentation. Because we did not understand the lyrics, she carefully translated them the best she could to explain how the song reminded her to smile and dance, even when struggling through life. The video she showed us, accompanied by her translation, helped us understand her outlook on life.

Other conversations were lighthearted and often ended in laughter. We learned a lot about each student's individual country, region, and cultural experiences. Students were proud to teach us the rich histories of and points of pride in their countries. We were pleasantly surprised when María, an 18-year-old student from El Salvador, brought homemade pupusas, a popular Salvadoran food, for our class after she had talked about it in her presentation. By sharing a part of her culture, we were able to have a better understanding of María's life outside the classroom, specifically how her mom now worked in a local restaurant specializing in Central American food, requiring María to care for her younger siblings many days of the week. We gained insight into why she needed to miss some days of class during the summer. This allowed us to think of ways that she could remain involved on the days she missed by taking handouts or books home. This also paved the way for us to open up the lines of communication with her family with a thank-you note to her mother. Overall, the All About Me presentations provided a wealth of opportunities to develop relationships with the students.

However, the means to get to the actual presentation, the negotiation of meaning, was the richest part.

Graffiti Boards: Collaborating for Rich Learning

Teachers and students can share personal details about their lives by making connections to characters. A graffiti board is a reader response activity to a common text that facilitates sharing connections to content through both visuals and words (Serebrin, 2004). Students work individually or in groups to draw pictures and write words on a large sheet of chart paper that connect to a theme, character, problem, or solution from the text.

In understanding the importance of engaging with a text in community for language acquisition (Ivey & Johnston, 2015), graffiti boards can facilitate conversation as students share their personal connections or responses to the book they are reading. This also contributes to the students' comprehension of the story and provides needed differentiated linguistic support in mixed-level classes.

In the institute, we read John Green's The Fault in Our Stars, which the students selected among many other young adult books because it is a love story and many had seen the movie. We read the book through independent and shared reading, where we read aloud while students followed along in their own copies. Because the English-language proficiency levels varied in the class, some students read the Spanish version independently but still participated in the shared reading in English during class. To help students make sense of their reading of the first half of the book, we gave them a list of themes from the novel. Students needed to illustrate their personal connection to one of the themes on the chart paper. They worked in pairs and talked to each other in their shared L1 as they were discussing and drawing their connections to one of the themes. When presenting the connections to the class, the students spoke in English with help from their peers as needed.

We also chose a theme and drew our connections to model the task for the students. For example, Tricia chose to draw a picture that represented the theme of love. She drew seven stick figures, symbolizing members of her family, beside a lime green ribbon, which symbolizes lymphoma. She explained that her mother was battling this cancer, and discussed the ways that love kept her family close together. We both noticed how our students began to draw similar representations of love, personalizing their own drawings and including the name of a person or place (the class's graffiti board is shown in Figure 4).

Selena, a 15-year-old from Honduras, had been in the United States only a few months. During the institute, she spoke nearly exclusively in Spanish and relied on her friends to help her understand directions. The graffiti board activity was especially helpful for Selena because of the use of visual supports. She had chosen to make a connection to a personal battle similar to the main character's battle with an illness. During the activity, Selena worked intently on her drawing. Using black, brown, and gray markers, she carefully drew two short swords and a shield. When it was her turn to share, we asked, "What is a battle that you face?" Without the slightest hesitation, she answered, "English." Through this communication, we better understood her frustration and great desire to become English proficient. This provided us a more complex view of her resistance to speak English with us in class and inspired us to find ways to work with her one-on-one to give her small victories in using her second-language skills. This illustrates how our collaboration with the students brought many of the themes in the novel to life, making our learning even richer.

Concluding Thoughts

Our overarching goal for the institute was to develop students' literacy and language skills in English to honor their purpose for attending. Knowing the importance of enacting a pedagogy of care for adolescent ELs (Stewart et al., 2017), we also wanted to explore how literacy instruction could be a vehicle to relationship building despite language barriers. Through the three activities and a classroom that welcomed students' languages, cultures, and lived experiences, Tricia and Tamra, although self-described monolinguals, developed personal relationships with each student. Other secondary classrooms can implement these specific activities or others that focus on communication through creative, multimodal, and collaborative means to build relationships with newcomers.

We acknowledge that the students in the institute all had a language partner, someone who shared their L1, which is not true of all classrooms. Nevertheless, we submit that the literacy activities described in this article are scalable to other classrooms with even more linguistically diverse populations. We suggest that when students do not have a language partner in the classroom, the teacher should become their partner and provide linguistic support through translation devices and visuals. Teachers should leverage all resources available to creatively meet individual students' needs and facilitate their classroom participation. As





 $\textit{Note}. \ \textbf{The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.}$

teachers put forth effort to communicate with their students, teachers express the genuine care they have for them.

Indeed, as the summer progressed and our relationships with students deepened, we began to see our students as colearners. We relied on them to influence how we would teach curricular standards in effective ways. Thus, it is particularly important for teachers to openly acknowledge and invite students' knowledge, skills, and experiences into the classroom. Although students might just be beginning to learn English, they are also young adults who have a wealth of knowledge, experiences, and opinions that they want to share (Faltis & Wolfe, 1999).

In addition to the teachers' stance toward newcomers, we want to highlight the common threads in these three activities: creativity, multimodality, and collaboration. Classroom work with ELs has shown the benefit of employing various forms of technology (Parris, Estrada, & Honigsfeld, 2017) and the arts (Chappell & Faltis, 2013) in language instruction. Multimodal and creative expression allows students to share their learning in more equitable ways.

In addition to student expression, the teachers also heavily relied on multimodality and creativity to negotiate meaning with students through using technology, images, color, and drawings. Through these collaborations of meaning making, a sense of community

TAKE ACTION!

- 1. For all activities, provide specific expectations for students using both written and oral language. Encourage students to talk to one another in their languages to ensure understanding. If you have a student who does not have a language partner, be that student's partner, using translation devices, gestures, and visuals.
- 2. Participate in the activity alongside your students.
- Allow enough time for students to share their products, and encourage everyone to ask questions and make connections.

emerged. By the end of the summer, Tricia and Tamra had personal relationships with the students in their classroom despite language barriers, cultural differences, and a myriad of other obstacles. They knew mundane and cherished details about each other's lives. The three literacy-learning activities—heart maps, All About Me presentations, and graffiti boards—facilitated the formation of these relationships.

However, we reached a strong conclusion: Activities do not build relationships. People build relationships. As those relationships form, you, too, can hurdle over language barriers in the classroom.

NOTES

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MORE TO EXPLORE

- "Alphabiography Project: Totally You," a ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan by Lisa Storm Fink: http://www.readwritethink.org/classroomresources/lesson-plans/alphabiography-projecttotally-937.html
- Bio Cube, a ReadWriteThink.org interactive, can assist students in writing their own autobiographies: http://www.readwritethink.org/classroomresources/student-interactives/cube-30057.html.
- Teaching Bilinguals (Even If You're Not One!), a video series provided by the CUNY–NYS Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals: https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/ teaching-bilinguals-webseries/