

C. Lynn Jacobs

Long-Term English Learners Writing Their Stories

High school teacher C. Lynn Jacobs noted that the long-term English language learners in her class had improved in reading comprehension but still lacked writing skills. Inspired by a state humanities project, she worked with the students to publish a collection of stories and poems. Writing about their lives provided the motivation, and writing from models of published texts provided the necessary structure for students' success. She offers step-by-step suggestions for teachers interested in helping English language learners "write better, with more confidence."

Six years ago I wrote an article for this journal about a group of advanced English learners I had taught who had become enthusiastic readers in the two years we worked together (Jacobs, "Those Kids"). At the time, I reveled in my good fortune at being able to learn from them. However, although they had begun to take charge of their reading, they still had difficulty writing clearly, and I had no ideas about how to change that. Writing was a frustrating experience for all of us. Their work was disorganized, fraught with mechanical errors, and short on content. I realized that I next needed to learn to help students to write better, with more confidence.

I decided it was more important that students' work be organized than free of errors. I reasoned that if they spent more time thinking before they wrote, they would be able to produce work that was comprehensible, even if it still contained mechanical errors. I began to base the units we did on big ideas such as identity or conflict, and include a variety of different texts all based on the theme I had chosen. Students were assigned carefully designed maps and art projects prior to writing, to give them time to think. These changes seemed to help and the writing began, slowly, to improve.

At about the same time, I read journal articles about students who had been studying in the United States most of their lives, yet retained the designation of *English learners*. I realized that my students fit this description and determined to learn more about them: who they are, how they differ from English learners who are more recent arrivals, and what they

need to be more successful in an academic setting. Several years and a master's degree later, I have learned so much about the students I work with, and my respect for them has grown immensely.

Long-Term English Learners

The phenomenon of long-term English learners is not new; however, it presents a conundrum for many educators and students. The students are frequently criticized for lacking academic fluency in English, despite having been educated in US schools for a long period of time (Freeman and Freeman; Harklau, Losey, and Siegal). Having taught both newly arrived English learners as well as those who have been in the United States since early childhood, I have noticed some significant differences between the needs and responsibilities of the two groups. A new immigrant who speaks little or no English needs to learn to navigate in US society—to learn enough vocabulary to be able to go shopping or to the doctor, for example.

Long-term English learners typically have been enrolled in US schools for at least seven years, yet still have not reached the criteria for reclassification as fluent in English. Yvonne S. Freeman and David E. Freeman call them "Long-term English Learners" while Linda Harklau and others call them "Generation 1.5." They are the generation between the newcomers and those who were born here. Although they speak English, their academic skills are often considerably below grade level, which they may or may not realize (Freeman and Freeman;

Harklau, Losey, and Siegal). Linguistic markers of their first language, which are evident in their written English, set their writing apart from that of native English-speaking students. Long-term English learners face a different set of issues than do immigrants with little or no grasp of the language and customs. The students with whom I work are predominantly non-migrant Hmong and Mexican Americans. They, like other long-term English learners, know how to blend into the dominant culture, speak English well, and in many cases have adopted the same sort of “teen-speak” as their non-English learner friends. They face conflicts between the dominant culture in which they work and go to school and the home culture of their parents. Their ability to speak English places them in adult roles at a young age, as they translate for their elders. They are often expected to work after school to help support the family, and in many cases do the cooking and housework. Many have little time left to do homework, yet they are chastised by their parents when they bring home less than outstanding grades (Vang).

In 2004, as I studied what the research had to say about long-term English learners, my students and I published a collection of their personal stories. That year the California Council for the Humanities was doing a California Stories project and was challenging communities throughout the state to collect and present stories from and about community members. Our book, *Love Ties My Shoes*, was our contribution to this project (Jacobs et al.). It is a collection of stories and poetry written by juniors and seniors in my English language development (ELD) class called English for Academic Success. Their book is in some places surprising in the rawness of the truth it shares. The students’ willingness to give a glimpse of their lives is demonstration of both their courage and their innocence of other ways of life.

The work is important on several levels. First, the stories tell of lives lived in poverty and violence, of adult responsibilities borne by children and of the hopes and dreams they dare to carry, despite evidence to the contrary. It provides a window into their lives that is not normally available.

On another level, the book demonstrates the power of a project that has a real purpose. Writing for publication did not dampen what students had to say, but it certainly influenced how they said it

and the correctness they strived to attain in producing it. An even more important outcome was the way in which being recognized as authors of a book empowered and motivated them. It gave them permission to participate in the greater academic community in a way that other, more structured curriculum could never do.

This project had a significant impact on how English learners were viewed by the school community and local public. Most of the students who participated in the project are Hmong and Mexican American; both groups are often stereotyped because of their ethnicity and not noticed outside their own social groups. Publication of *Love Ties My Shoes* changed that.

The complex lives of these long-term English learners are demonstrated by the stories they tell in *Love Ties My Shoes*. It is a testament to their struggles to be the best they can, despite the incredible burdens they carry. In the rest of this article, I describe the steps we took to publish the book.

Reading

During the school year, the English for Academic Success class read a variety of texts, some intended to provoke authentic discussion, others to model styles of writing, and still others to consider the values of a variety of cultures. Once I heard about the California Stories project, I decided we would focus on the places we come from and attempted to weave this idea into discussions of the texts we read. The first core text was *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. This little book, subtitled *A Fable about Following Your Dream*, works a sort of magic with long-term English learners. It seems to give them the words with which to talk about their feelings as well as the permission to do so. As a result of reading *The Alchemist*, the idea of following one’s dreams became infused with everything we did that semester.

We read this book using literature circles. I assigned students to a reading group for the duration of the book. Each week they read a section and looked for two meaningful quotes that they wanted to talk about. The motive was to teach them to discuss their reading as readers do, with authentic interest. Once a week they met in their groups to talk about what they had read. They used a double-entry journal graphic organizer to prepare for the discussions

(Jacobs, “Using Double-Entry”). The expectation was that they would arrive at the group prepared to talk, not looking up quotes. This took some training before it became a smooth process, but eventually they arrived prepared and eager for the discussions.

Quietly Torn also had a big impact (Saechao and Saechao). It is a small collection of stories and poems written by young Iu Mien American women in Richmond, California. The Iu Mien are a tribe who come from the same part of Laos as the Hmong and who share many of the same cultural mores and traditions. The Hmong students in the class identified strongly with the stories and traditions collected in this volume, and because of its small size they were attracted to the idea of writing a book themselves. It made it seem possible that they, too, could write a book when they read this one that had been written by young women of their age and an ethnicity similar to many of theirs. It was after reading it that they asked if I thought they, too, could write a book. Given my experience with their writing, I seriously doubted they really would, but I didn’t say so. I encouraged the idea and began to investigate the feasibility of it.

Writing

Students wrote several different pieces over several months, using various texts for ideas about content and structure. We read sections of Susan G. Wooldridge’s *Poemcrazy: Freeing Your Life with Words* to learn how to find interesting words to use in our poems. Gary Soto’s short story “The Jacket” helped students learn to write descriptively and use metaphors. We listened to the National Writing Project’s *Rural Voices Radio* CDs before writing about the places we live and read part of G. Lynn Nelson’s *Writing and Being: Taking Back Our Lives through the Power of Language* to think about how and why to keep a journal. A lesson called “Sweet Learning” from Linda Christensen’s *Reading, Writing and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word* was the impetus for writing about the lessons we had learned from important people in our lives.

Tying the assignments to texts of similar formats helped support writing development. I did not grade the writing. Students turned it in and I read and returned it with little comment. I just asked that they keep it in their binders for later. I wasn’t sure

what we would do with it, but I wanted to focus for a while on production rather than revision or correction. Using structural models seemed to free the students to express ideas more succinctly. Two of the models we used are described below.

I Am, I Remember, I Let Go Of

In *Poemcrazy*, Wooldridge suggests activities for helping students develop more vibrant language in their writing (3–4). As a class we spent two class sessions collecting colorful and interesting words. She also suggests using a frame such as “I am, I remember, I let go of” for beginning poets (55), which helps them organize the truths they speak. Paochoua’s poem is an example of this structure.

Finding Myself

I am Hmong, full of knowledge and pride
My culture comes from a country with no land
I am angry, not with myself but with those that
 judge me
I am my grandma
I carry my language and my culture on the weight
 of my back
Feeling the pressure of hatred

I remember the struggle my family
Went through to get us where we are
I remember my mom’s heart when Dad left us
I know it was hard, but she put on a smile
And pretended everything was okay
I remember my childhood
Feeling not wanted, alone because I wasn’t perfect
Getting picked on not because of my color
But for being myself

I let go of my past
Memories of struggle and hopes
I let go of fear
Scared to follow the steps of my father
I let go of myself
Wishing the war between me would end.

Cubing

“Cubing” is a way of writing a reflective essay that almost always leads to writing that is surprising to the writer as well as to the reader, both for its depth and detail (Delp). I have seen it used successfully as personal reflection, as well as in content classes such as history or science. For reflective writing, I begin by giving students time to make a detailed map of their lives, which includes a few important incidents.

Then I ask them to choose one incident to focus on in this piece of writing. I show them a cube and point out that it has six sides and ask that they make sure they write all six parts of this essay as I introduce them. While the process is simple, and the rules are few, I do have a few strong feelings about how it works best.

First, preparation is important; taking time to make a colorful life map ahead of time loosens memories,

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giving the writer a collection of ideas for topics. Making a map is the only preparation I recommend, because the power of the writing seems to stem from its spontaneity. Cubing results in

a collection of quickwrites that must later be modified and revised for public use. Prewriting, or practicing for cubing, dilutes it, making it seem more like drudgery to students, especially those who doubt their writing ability. Students are always surprised to see that they have been writing for forty-five or fifty minutes and are quite proud to see how much they have written and how deep they have been able to go. They often say that the structure helps them know how to write deeper, without stifling their language or creativity. I give students the following instructions for cubing:

- > Make a map or timeline of your life so far. Put at least ten events on it. These events should be things that have affected your life in a significant way, either positively or negatively, and they should be specific events.
- > Choose one event and write randomly about it for five to ten minutes. (This loosens up your memories of the event, reminds you why you chose this one over the others.)
- > Keep writing and write to all six sides of the cube, even if it is difficult or annoying.
- > The six sides are as follows:
 - > Describe: Use similes, colorful interesting words to describe this memory.
 - > Associate: "This makes me think of . . ." Connect it with something else you know about.
 - > Compare/Contrast: How might it be the same now, how might it be different? Compare your viewpoint as it would be now with how it was then.

- > Analyze: What is important about this event? Why did it matter to your life?
- > Application: What was this event good for? What did you learn from the experience? How do you or how can you apply this learning to your present situation?
- > Argue: Argue for or against it. This is your final word on the subject, your ultimate opinion about it.

Reading these prompts, it is noticeable that each one connects to the previous one, and each requires a slightly deeper level of thought. The outcome of the exercise is a reflective essay. I always write this one along with the students, so I can get an idea of how long to allow for each section. The first time through we just do it, like a series of quickwrites about the same topic. Later we go back to reread and revise. In Mailee's piece about her mother the cubing structure is easy to see:

My Lost Mother

When I was in sixth grade my mom had a disease called Tuberculosis. They gave her some treatments for a few years but it didn't help her that much. So Doctor Cassady decided to send her to U.C. Davis for surgery. The first time she had surgery she was okay, but the second time she passed away after a week. I didn't get to see her when she died or have one last word with her.

During the funeral there was so much sympathy. A lot of people came to the funeral with sad faces. Standing and staring at my mother, cousins, and relatives burst in tears like raindrops. There were two people jumping around with their *qeej*, an instrument that is played near the coffin and one person beat the drum. Drinks were served to welcome people. Flowers surrounded her coffin. Hanging from the ceiling were many colorful origami boats, to carry her spirit to the next world.

This event makes me think of how my life would be different if my mom was still here with us. She would have been so proud of me on my graduation day in eighth grade and to see me in High School now. She would be sad to see me doing all the hard things that I did last summer, when my sister Tao was sick.

If my mom hadn't died, she would have supported our family and made us a happy life like other people. We could have had all the things that we want, like other families have. She warmed our family's heart. She was the light and shadow for our family. Things are changing right

now; no one will support our family if we don't support ourselves. No one is doing the chores if Tao and I don't care, but we do care about it, and we take care of our home and family.

Without my mom, my life was miserable. At the time I was still young and I didn't really know how to cook and do all those chores by myself. I couldn't help my dad to support the family like I can right now. Everyday I looked at my dad's sad face, like when a baby is looking for the sense of its mother. Even now, when I see other people with their moms, shopping together, it hurts a lot inside of me, so much that I can't explain it to anyone. When people say negative things you can't say or do anything about it. They can tease you because no one will care. My mom always stuck up for us. All I can think of is why my mom had to leave us behind.

I learned that without a mom I feel lonely and sorrowful. Without a mom who will teach me to do the right thing? When I want to learn how to make things and whenever I have a problem, I can't express my feelings to someone who cares for me like she did. Without my mom, the rest of my family is closer, and that helps some, but there will always be a hole in our family.

Originally I didn't ask students to argue for or against the event they chose to write about, because doing so had been unwieldy to me when I first "wrote a cube." Since then I have come to recognize this as a critical part of the essay, because it speaks powerfully to the writer's final word on the topic.

Conclusion

Keeping our curriculum authentic is perhaps more difficult today than it has ever been, with the heavily structured, skills-based curriculum and pacing guides we are required to follow. More and more schools in which English learners are enrolled are falling into Program Improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act. As this trend continues, it will become even more necessary to find ways to develop critical literacy and honor the life experiences of students as we strive to build the basic skills that will enable them to pass the standardized assessments they face if they are to graduate from high school and move into college and careers.

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While recognizing the magnitude of this task, I firmly believe that to do anything less will jeopardize not only the futures of the children with whom we are entrusted but also those of our own communities and beyond. English learners at all levels of English proficiency are the fastest-growing segment of our classroom population. While opinion is strong about how to teach the newest arrivals, we must not neglect the academic literacy needs of those who are long-term or Generation 1.5 English learners. We must recognize and be outspoken about the real fact that their needs are unique and must be attended to if they are to have a chance at the futures they dream to achieve.

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