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Transient ELLs: A Teacher's Inquiry Into Literacy Instruction

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This narrative describes my learning process in becoming a teacher-researcher as I worked with an ELL, Jayla, who experienced a transient lifestyle. As a member of a teacher-inquiry group, the Bilingual Teacher-Research Forum I collaborated with other bilingual and ESL teachers from schools in a large city in the northeastern part of the United States. I learned to systematically investigate my practice to identify instructional strategies that promoted ELL students' literacy in English. My first inquiry was guided by one query: What instructional strategies may promote the language and literacy development of transient ELLs? In this article I describe how I investigated Jayla's literacy growth. I reflect on my transformation from a teacher to a teacher-researcher and propose some practical suggestions for teachers who teach ESL with transient backgrounds.

In this article I discuss my trajectory in exploring effective ways to work with English language learners (ELLs) who experience a transient lifestyle. Transiency refers to the high mobility of students because of economic and political pressures on their families or what Jiménez (2003) calls the "transnational character of literacy" for many Latino students in the United States. Transient children are often behind academically due to their movement from school to school during primary and secondary grades. Lack of a consistent instruction serves to delay their language and content learning.

As a member of a teacher-inquiry group, the Bilingual Teacher-Research Forum (the Forum) I collaborated with other bilingual and ESL teachers from schools in a large city in the northeastern part of the US. I learned to systematically investigate my practice to identify instructional strategies that promoted ELL students' literacy in English. My first inquiry was guided by one query: What instructional strategies may promote the language and literacy development of transient ELLs? To answer this question I diligently observed and took copious notes of Jayla's[1] (a transient ELL) learning process. I also collected and analyzed written work that she produced, I examined videotapes of my lessons, and reflected on the instruction I implemented to develop literacy. This narrative describes my learning process in becoming a teacher-researcher.

The article opens with a description of my teaching context, a discussion of transiency within the Latino community, and my professional background. I then portray my role as an ESL teacher and discuss the investigation of Jayla's literacy growth. In the final section of the article I reflect on my transformation from a teacher to a teacher-researcher and suggest some practical suggestions for teachers who teach ESL with transient backgrounds.

Context for Inquiry

I work at Maxton Elementary School, located in a neighborhood that has gone through many changes in its ethnic composition during the past 30 years, from being predominately Caucasian to Latino and African American. The area is economically distressed and many families are on public assistance. On any given day the neighborhood is full of children playing and riding bicycles. Elderly citizens can be seen outside sweeping clean their porches and sidewalks. The crossing guard greets many children by name as they walk to school, while parents watch protectively from their front porch. There are a few corner grocery stores and one major grocery store that tailor to the needs of the Latino community by offering Latino produce. The nearest public library is about a mile away. A few churches and bars are places where the community also gathers to socialize. A couple of community organizations have labored for many years to revamp the area through economic and housing development projects.

The community residents must deal with neighborhood hazards such as abandoned houses and cars scattered around the block. The evidence of economic and safety struggles of the community is suggested by homes that are protected by barred windows and barking dogs.

On warm days one can hear Spanish music blaring out from a local video store and Hip-Hop music from another corner grocery store. Friendship and camaraderie are evident as people sit on steps laughing and drinking. Still others are busy under the hood of a car, trying to fix it.

The nights are filled with the sounds of booming car radios, screeching tires, and sirens. The neighborhood park, which is calm and safe during the day, becomes a busy place of drug transactions at night. Neighborhood leaders and families worry about the empty crack vials, broken glass, and trash that litters the park. It is from these surroundings that over 650 kindergarten through fourth-grade students daily walk to school.

Within the city's school district there are schools that have bilingual programs where children receive instruction in English and in Spanish, Russian, Chinese, or Vietnamese as a native language. Other schools have only English as a second language support programs. Our school offers both programs to Spanish-speaking children.

In 1997, our school was designated as a bilingual school. This happened because the enrollment of Latino students has been increasing every year. The school's population is approximately 57% Latino and 43% African American. The majority of the Latinos are Puerto Rican. Others are from the Dominican Republic and South America. A designation as a bilingual school requires that any vacant teaching positions are to be filled by bilingual personnel.

At the time of my inquiry project, 1999–2002, our teaching staff numbered about 38, of which 10 are considered bilingual. This means that they speak another language besides English. In our school, the second language is Spanish. In efforts to meet the needs of our Latino families, the majority of the classroom assistants are also bilingual in English and Spanish.

There are many reasons for the increase of Latinos in the neighborhood. One major reason for families moving into the area is that of better opportunity for work and living. One

aspect of Latino culture is the value they place on a close-knit family unit. It is not uncommon for one family to invite another family to come and live with them temporarily while the parents find housing and work. While the invited family is searching for housing and work, the children attend the neighborhood school. Then, when housing is found, the family either moves into a house in the same neighborhood or, more commonly, to another neighborhood and a different school. Many times things do not go as anticipated by the guest family and, within a matter of months, they go back to their country or move in with different family members in another state.

The migration or transience, although necessary to improve the economic conditions of families, may become a challenge for families and many schools. Families lack a sense of security that comes from stability while the memories of home are symbolized by packing boxes and suitcases. It is hard for children to adapt to new neighborhoods, make new friends, and to keep up academically when they are constantly changing of schools.

Transience is a problem in many schools in the North section of the city. For example, in one academic year, 1999-2000, we had about 54 students transfer out of our school and 66 students transfer into our school. Keep in mind that we are a K–4 school with a student enrollment of over 700, of which 58% are Latinos. Our third-grade teachers took a survey and discovered that only 50% of the third grade has been with us since kindergarten.

A related problem for schools with transient students is record keeping. If a child is transferring from one school to another within the city, it can often take up to two to four weeks for his records to arrive at the new school. It can take longer if the child transfers from another state. Information like the child's attendance record or reading level is not readily available for the receiving teacher. Schools rely on the parents for the child's school history. This situation becomes even more challenging when dealing with culturally diverse families, because school programs vary among states and countries. In some instances parents do not understand the different programs that the school offers, and some do not know which support program their child received, if any. Also, schools might not have staff who speak the language of the parent or understand their culture. Thus, key instructional information about the transient child is not available early enough to provide the best instructional plan for the student.

Some schools might wait passively for records to arrive. Others might rely on the incomplete information they get to provide a "fit for all" academic program for the child. Still other schools might have the human resources and materials to assess the child's strengths and weaknesses in language and content and place him/her accordingly. In any case, the role of the ESL teacher is indispensable when transient ELLs first arrive at the school.

My teacher training was very traditional. I attended college in the United States and the teacher education program included courses in theory and practice, methods and materials, history of education, and classroom management techniques, all geared for instruction in English. I never took a course in cultural or linguistic diversity while completing my undergraduate degree. Now I have started a master's degree program in reading and hold an ESL teaching certificate and reading specialist certificate.

When I joined the teacher inquiry group, I had been teaching for 11 years, 9 of them in the bilingual program at Maxton Elementary School. As a teacher I followed a prescribed curriculum, had a pacing schedule to keep, and goals and objectives, which students either met or did not meet. The curriculum is very behavioristic in nature, emphasizing formal aspects of language instruction. As a former first-grade teacher, I remember how frustrated I felt when I had a student who could not meet the goals or who could not keep up with the class pace. They were the children my colleagues and I griped about in the teachers' lounge. These were the children I thought required greater attention than I was able to give. I needed outside support. I wanted someone else to take responsibility for educating them, since they perform at a different literacy level than most students in my class.

A few years ago, the shoe was placed on the other foot. I became an outside-classroom-support teacher. In that position I worked with the teachers in the bilingual program, offering support by instructing the children who were struggling in their academic studies. I did this by reinforcing whatever the teacher was doing in her class. We did a lot of rote and drill activities.

My Role as an ESL Teacher

As an instructor for ESL, working with children in grades K–4, screening linguistically diverse students for English dominance and proficiency is one of my responsibilities. Depending on the screening results, linguistically diverse students are placed in one of two programs: a bilingual program or a monolingual English class with ESL support. A short description of the screening process will help the reader understand the rationale for students' placement.

I usually begin the student screening process with an informal interview in Spanish and in English. This allows me to hear in which language the child is better able to orally express ideas. If possible, a parent interview is done in order to obtain more information on the child's home life and academic history. Although important, meeting with parents does not always occur. From my experience I have learned that some of the obstacles that may prevent communication with parents of a different cultural and language background are that (a) the school personnel do not know the language of the home and if the parents speak English, (b) parents are not able to visit the school because of work hours, (c) teachers or counselors in the school may not know culturally appropriate ways of approaching the home, and (d) the teacher and parents do not understand cultural behaviors and lack mutual trust. For a helpful discussion of strategies to overcome these obstacles see Carrasquillo & Rodríguez (2002), Harman (1994), Kotler & Kotler (2001), Peregoy & Boyle (2005), and Pérez & Torres-Guzmán (1992).

After the informal interview, I administer a series of informal inventories and standardized tests in English and in Spanish to determine language proficiency and literacy levels. In terms of language proficiency a child who is a Beginner (preemergent or basic) may or may not have literacy in his native language and his knowledge of the English language is minimal. An Intermediate student is able to communicate in English, though grammatical errors

are still made. This student begins to focus more on English reading and writing. An advanced student (proficient) is a child who is performing close to his/her academic grade level but may still need some help with various aspects of the English language, for example idioms.

In our school the children who are classified as Beginners are usually placed in the bilingual program. Our bilingual program is set up for children in Grades K–4 who are Spanish dominant. The program follows a transitional model to bilingual education. This model provides instruction in the home language for 1 to 3 years to "build a foundation in literacy and academic content that will facilitate English language and academic development as students acquire the new language. After the transition to English instruction no further instruction in the home language is offered" (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005, pp. 24–25). At Maxton the bilingual teacher is responsible for ESL instruction in these classrooms. In kindergarten, 90% of the instruction is in Spanish and 10% is in English. In first grade it is 80% Spanish and 20% English. In second grade it is 70% Spanish and 30% English. In third grade it is 60% Spanish and 40% English. Finally, in fourth grade it is 50% Spanish and 50% English. It is expected that as soon as the children reach the advanced level in ESL, they are transitioned into an all-English mainstream classroom.

I provide ESL instruction for the Intermediate and Advanced students who are in the regular monolingual English classroom. This program is geared toward children who have never been instructed in their native language, have a history of transience, or whose parents prefer English-only instruction for their child. I usually meet with them once or twice a day, either first period in the morning or in the afternoons, so that the child does not miss much of his/her Reading, English, and Language Arts (RELA) instruction. However, they will miss one of the content classes (i.e., social studies, science) or special classes (i.e., music, computers) offered in the curriculum. I prepare lessons that cover listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. The goal of the English as a second language program is to help the child attain mastery of the English language as a native speaker as soon as possible. In elementary school this ESL program model focuses on learning language at the expense of learning content (Baker, 2006).

The educational context I described above presented me with many challenges and questions that I did not know how to resolve or answer. The next section explains how I became a teacher-researcher to confront some of the issues engrained in this contested setting.

Becoming a Teacher-Researcher

In the summer of 1996, I was a mentor teacher in an institute on Bilingual Education for beginning teachers offered by the school district. It was there that I first heard the words, "teacher researcher." I had the opportunity to sit in on a few lectures and hear new teachers talk about their own research projects. My curiosity was peaked. What did these new teachers know that I did not know, even when I had many more years of experience?

A year later, I joined the Forum to find out more about teacher research. There I also learned about the latest research on quality bilingual programs and some effective strategies to

promote biliteracy in English and Spanish at an early age. At first I attended the monthly Forum meetings to share with other teachers who work in bilingual schools and learn more about what they were researching, but I was not planning on doing "research." However, the more we talked about and shared our school experiences, I realized that here was a place where colleagues could help me investigate and reflect on some of the school issues that I felt were frustrating and, thus, important.

The school year I became involved in the Forum was also my first year providing ESL instruction for the Spanish-speaking children in the monolingual English classrooms at Maxton elementary. It was here at the Forum monthly meetings that I got to share my questions, observations, and reflections with other bilingual and ESL colleagues and receive feedback that provided me with greater insight into my inquiry and practice. Being that this was to be my first teacher inquiry, I decided to focus on one child, Jayla. One of the challenges I encounter is teaching children with a transient school history.

In the scholarly literature discussed with my Forum colleagues I found helpful explanations about the nature of transiency and its implication for educating ELLs. For example, Grinberg & Saavedra (2000) explain that the transient nature of some students' existence reflects the political relationship between their country and the United States. This is the case of the neocolonial relationship between United States and Puerto Rico. Moll and Ruiz (2005) argue that "This is not a new phenomenon, especially with Mexicans living in the borderlands, or among Puerto Ricans [and Dominicans] and their 'circular' migration to and from the island" (p. 315). They understand this phenomenon as a necessary response to strengthen and build social networks across geographical spaces and create economic opportunities to survive in a new land.

Jiménez (2003) argues that because of this reality, educators, in particular those who work with Latino ELLs, should learn about the "transnational nature of students' lives and why knowledge of the Spanish language and literacy are still important, even necessary," for their survival and academic success in the United States and their home country. "Studies of reverse migration are revealing how success or failure to become orally proficient and literate in both English and Spanish influences students' lives in their country of origin" (Jiménez, 2003, p. 124; see also Martinez-León and Smith, 2003; Nieto, 2000).

In my experience economic instability and lack of job security are some reasons for many Latino families to move frequently. Some of the children who I instruct were born in the United States, moved to Puerto Rico for some period of time, then returned back to the United States. Many times this movement deprives a child of a continuous education, especially in the early years when the foundation for literacy is being built. As a result, many children reenter our school system with gaps in their academic foundation. The children need to work harder to catch up to their peers. The greater the gap the more likely the child will demonstrate frustration or a lack of motivation. Many times they try to hide their lack of academic skills and literacy

strategies. Some children act out their frustration through inappropriate behavior like classroom disturbance or fighting.

I have observed that these are the children that teachers at my school dread the most because they are some of the most challenging to teach. “I don’t know what to do with him/her. This child can barely read or write. Are you sure this child doesn’t belong in the bilingual class?” These are some statements I usually hear when a linguistically diverse child with a transient background is placed in a monolingual English class.

I used to get angry when I heard such statements because I felt that by rejecting these children, my own Puerto Rican ethnicity was being attacked and devalued. I was aware of the negative attitudes of some of my colleagues. They did not know enough about the different ethnic groups in the city and held misconceptions about their cognitive ability, attitudes toward schooling, and family values. They expected Latino children to learn the English language before they entered their classroom, and a few of them wished not to bother with teaching them at all.

They saw Latino children as a problem they did not want in their classroom. I heard derogatory comments during school meetings and in the teachers’ lounge. Although I did not care about their prejudicial nature, I kept quiet when I heard them. Part of me felt unprepared to respond objectively, without emotion. I had conflicting feelings and did not know how best to make them confront their own ignorance. But, I have to confess, I also kept quiet because deep down I, too, wanted them to know English before entering my classroom. This, I believe, would have made instruction somehow easier. These children required a different way of teaching and after years in the classroom using the same methods and curriculum, some teachers resisted any change to their instructional routines.

I believe that if a person is skilled in the art of teaching, then s/he could teach any child, regardless of the challenges the child presents. However, the more I thought about this issue, I came to realize that the teachers who made these statements were expressing not only ignorance and prejudice but concern that they were not able to provide an appropriate education for these children, because they did not know how. It can be frustrating and stressful to teach children with age-appropriate ability, two languages, but who are behind academically, and as a teacher have no control over the socioeconomic forces impinging on the family stability. Other teachers perhaps did not care or did not know any better. However, there were a few who did care, but, like me, were lost as to how to teach these children. Their comments were more a cry for help than a demeaning statement against ELLs.

Inquiry Into Teaching a Transient ELL

Determined to help myself and these teachers, I began to investigate the issue of teaching a linguistically diverse child with a transient history. If I could identify instructional strategies that would help such a child succeed in school, then I would have something valuable to share with my coworkers and be able to help them provide quality education in the all-English classes.

If I were to teach these children effectively, I would need a greater understanding of their strengths and weaknesses.

I focused my inquiry on one transient child, Jayla, who I felt exemplified many other students. I had two interrelated goals in mind. First, I wanted to find effective instructional strategies to help this ELL child in her literacy development. Second, I wanted to share these effective strategies with mainstream classroom teachers who taught ELLs hoping that they would take ownership for their growth. I hoped that we could collaborate to benefit ELLs in the school.

The first thing I noticed when I met Jayla was her pretty smile. She was only 10-years-old, but she seemed older because of her height and of the way she carried herself in behavior and conversation. Jayla did not appear shy or nervous. She spoke freely in English about her teacher and classmates. Even though this was her first year at our school, she seemed to be adjusting well to her new environment. Her friendly nature served as a survival skill to deal with a transient school history. Jayla exemplified many of the students I teach.

Upon interviewing Jayla's mother, I found out more about the child's history. She was born and raised in the city, but had spent her early school years moving around from school to school. Her mother was from Puerto Rico and spoke both Spanish and English in the home. Jayla did not attend kindergarten. She did attend a pre-first class at one school where she received instruction in English. Then she attended another school for first and second grades. However, she was placed in a bilingual program that approached literacy in English and Spanish at the same time. Her mother noticed that by second grade her daughter could not read or write in either language. Wanting the best for her child, Jayla's mother decided to send her to Puerto Rico for third grade, where she was instructed in Spanish. It was there, with after school tutorial help, that Jayla began to read and write simple words in Spanish. The following school year, Jayla came back to the United States and was enrolled into fourth grade at Maxton, where she was placed into a traditional English class pending the outcome of language assessments. This child was behind in her literacy development both in English and in Spanish. Jayla's transient history and the lack of interest in working with her demonstrated by her mainstream teacher motivated me to choose this child for my first inquiry.

I began my research by screening the child, wondering how best I could help her. Looking for effective instructional strategies, I began data collection with the language assessments that I administer to all ELL students. I met with Jayla every day during first period and conducted interviews weekly to monitor her growth. Interviewing her mother shed more light into the child's school history. I documented daily observations and collected writing samples once a month.

The first assessment that was done was an informal interview. I asked Jayla various questions about herself, her family, hobbies, friends, and school. She was able to communicate orally with fluency in both languages. When I asked her about language preference for learning, she had mixed feelings. She would not have minded going to the bilingual class where instruction

in Spanish was dominant; however, she did not want to leave her friends in the monolingual class. When asked about academic ability, Jayla was aware that reading and writing proved more difficult for her than math. Nevertheless, she expressed a willingness and desire to learn.

The assessment of oral language proficiency demonstrated that her understanding and ability to use both languages orally was fairly equal. In addition, she scored high on the listening and speaking portions of the exam but did poorly on the reading and writing portions. Usually, this is all the screening I do when assessing a linguistically diverse child. However, in Jayla's case, I needed more information because I could not tell from these tests results which instructional program would be best for her, a bilingual class or a monolingual English one.

Unlike other children who use the dominant language in most settings, Jayla's dominance changed according to the setting. When we discussed school issues, her English was strong. When we switched to her home life, Jayla preferred to speak in Spanish. She was what I considered "on the fence." She could go in either language direction; orally she could function in both languages.

I completed the battery of assessments with a few academic screenings in both languages. Her English reading level was at a pre-primer level. She did not write any sentences, but was able to write simple words like *mom* and *cat*. She knew all but four alphabet letters by name, she did not know over half of the alphabet letters by sound. In Spanish, Jayla was reading on a first-grade level. She was able to write a simple sentence of three words, *Amo mi mama.* (*I love my mom.*).

Upon examining this assessment data and taking her age, grade, and school history into consideration, I recommended that Jayla's instruction should occur in a monolingual English setting. Although orally she was fluent in both Spanish and English, she was behind in literacy in both languages. However, at the school there was more instructional support available for her if her instruction was conducted in English. Support services could include remedial English reading classes, one-on-one tutoring with the Parent Support Group and the English as a second language program.

In my professional opinion, for program-placement decisions there is really no single best answer that can apply to all cases. It really depends on the situation and the factors at play. The availability of resources was a key factor that I considered in placing her (see Baker, 2006; for discussion of other factors that need to be considered, see Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2001; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). In our school there were no curricular resources to offer in Spanish that could help Jayla develop that language consistently, since our bilingual program was designed to mainstream students by third grade. Thus, the best for a child her age and skills was to offer the curricular program with the most resources available, at our school that was the mainstream English program.

Another important factor that I addressed was to gradually build rapport with the parents and offer information, as requested, about the community and neighborhood. Although I was not naïve in thinking that Jayla's schooling was the only or most important issue for her

parents, who were struggling economically, I wanted them to see that their child's education should at least be considered by them before making a decision to relocate. I was also willing to help them identify local community resources that could assist the family. By doing this some people might think that I went beyond my role as a teacher. Nonetheless, in my experience, many urban issues, like transiency, poverty, and violence, impose on practitioners the challenge to "go the extra mile for their students." Personally I see it as part of my responsibility in teaching, rather than as a role that somehow is outside of what is expected and necessary, in such contested conditions, to promote success among ELLs. Some literature discusses and supports this perspective on education, see, e.g., Hamayan & Freeman (2006), Lazar (2004), Reyes & Halcón (2001), and Steinberg & Kincheloe (2004).

Unfortunately, although there was an ESL program in the school, it did not have many current resources that I could use with Jayla, or other ELLs. When I looked into the ESL instructional closet, I was disappointed with what I found. There were some commercial games and made-up cardboard games with missing pieces, old filmstrips from the 1960s with missing cassette tapes and dusty yellow posters hidden under a pile of ESL books. Even though we had a collection of ESL books, probably dating back to the time this program began in our school in the 1970s, I did not want to use them, because they did not match my ESL group's needs. They were meant for ESL beginners, those students with no or very little fluency in oral English.

Jayla was one of nine ESL intermediate students I was working with. All of these students know how to speak fluently in English. However, their reading and writing in English lagged behind. The research literature suggests that practitioners many times see this as a problem they cannot understand. They think "if these students are able to speak to me and others using good English, then why can't they read it and write it?" or "How come they can speak it but fail any written assessment?" The literature that I discussed with other colleagues in the Forum meetings suggests that the answer to these questions lies within the differences between social and academic languages. Essentially I learned that social language is acquired in less time (1–3 years) than academic language (5–7 years). Also, we need to consider a multitude of factors to really understand oracy and literacy development in one or more languages (Baker, 2006; Peregoy and Boyle, 2005).

Everyone in the intermediate ELL group, which consisted of two fourth graders, three third graders and four second graders, was one to three years behind grade level in reading and writing. I knew that these children needed to make a year's growth in reading and writing, but I did not know how to help them get there.

Fortunately, I recalled reading an article that dealt with literacy in an educational magazine back in college. It was about a little boy who had trouble learning how to read. This little boy could not read his basal reader no matter how many flashcards were practiced by drill. Then one of his teachers put aside that basal and told the child that he could read his own stories, since the basal stories proved too difficult. As the child wrote his own stories, with the teacher's help, he finally began learning how to read. His teacher concluded that because they

were *his* stories, he learned to read. I do not remember how the article ended but I was left with the thought that if a child can write then he can read. The thought of learning to read through writing became the basis for the type of ESL instruction I wanted to incorporate in my class. I could use the children's oral fluency in Spanish with that of English (since their oral English was stronger than their English literacy), then their talk (in Spanish and English) could be used to promote their literacy in English.

Now I understood that the course I took back in college was built around a sociolinguistic view of reading and writing. One of the elements of this perspective is that language use in real situations is needed to create and communicate thought (Vygotsky, in Tompkins, 2006). Therefore, in the ESL as well as mainstream classes, ELLs need to listen native speakers and talk in order to develop their thinking (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 2002). This perspective could certainly help ELLs develop their language skills more. In my classroom children needed to talk before they wrote. This was my first instructional epiphany of many to come. I became excited about teaching ELLs.

When I shared this revelation with my Forum colleagues, it prompted us to rethink the curriculum that was given to us to teach. Behaviorism was at the heart of the drills we did with ELLs. Were these drills really helping our students to think, to communicate ideas orally and in writing? The fact that so many ELLs were behind academically prompted me to search for other instructional avenues.

I also remembered the positive effects that writing had for my first-grade children in years past and a course on literacy that I took that emphasized the importance of conversation integrated with writing. After discussing the idea with a teacher colleague, she told me about a writing program that another teacher was implementing in her class called "The Writing Workshop" (Atwell, 1998). The only materials needed were blank paper, a pencil and crayons or markers. The children were divided into small groups of about four to six students. Each day or whenever Writing Workshop was done, one group would conference with the teacher, working on revising and editing, while another group would be given the opportunity to read their published stories before the class. Everyone else would be working on their stories, using inventive spelling and peers for help. I liked the way the children were engaged in their writing and the way the teacher was able to meet individual needs. After observing this teacher's class, I decided to try the Writing Workshop with my ELLs.

Each child in Jayla's group was given a manila folder with a word list of high frequency words stapled inside the cover. This list served as a reference guide whenever someone asked, "How do you spell _____?" I would take a highlighter and highlight the word or write it below, if it was not on the list. I wanted the child to write for various purposes, so each month I planned a specific kind of writing project. They wrote letters, stories, a newspaper article, instructions to daily activities, poems, and personal expressions. We began each project with a demonstration as I modeled the writing and did think alouds in English, verbalizing my thinking as I wrote. We did a lot of talking and set up word walls on the chalkboard for spelling assistance. I used

sentence starters and questions as writing aids. I provided them with colored markers for illustrating and made a manual typewriter and the computer available for publishing the finished product. Once they were done with the writing project, we would have a share circle where each student would read his/her piece. Classmates were encouraged to either ask questions or make positive statements.

At first I did not know how Jayla would react when she learned that the ESL program would focus on writing. Would she get easily frustrated and give up? Would she find excuses or busy herself with other activities in efforts to avoid writing? Would she rely of her oral vocabulary in both languages or just in one to express her ideas? It was important to me that I make her first writing experience a positive one.

I decided to start the year with a writing piece about one's favorite season. This first piece would give me a baseline on what the child can do and how she does it. Knowing that Jayla had limited writing skills, I tried to structure the activity so that she would not feel frustrated.

We began our project with many prewriting activities. I read books about the seasons to the children. We did a lot of talking in English about the seasons discussing clothes, food, holidays, and activities. We made a word wall on the chalkboard. She contributed much to our discussion and suggested numerous words for the word wall. This signaled to me that she had a strong background on this topic, and that she could communicate her ideas in English. However, when distributed the blank piece of paper for writing, Jayla just stared. It was like she was either afraid to write or did not know what to write. Then I put a sentence starter on the board: My favorite season is _____ because _____. She copied the sentence as it was on the board, choosing summer as her favorite season.

Jayla waited until I called her up to my desk. When we started talking in English about why she chose summer, she gave me some good reasons, such as there was no school and she could go swimming with her friends. It was then that I suggested that she should first draw some pictures about summer and then try to write about them. I noticed that Jayla's pictures kept to the topic and that they were small and detailed. Once she finished her pictures, she waited for my assistance. I tried to help her by showing her how to use the word list that was stapled into her folder. However, if one does not know what sounds the letters make, this writing aid would not be useful. It was not useful to Jayla. I then asked her what she wanted to write and drew the lines for each word in the sentence. This was not helpful because by the time she reached her seat, she had forgotten what exactly she had told me and wrote something similar but worded it differently, so that the line did not match up with her sentence.

We finally got through this project with me writing out almost every word. This Writing Workshop idea was not going the way I had expected. I thought the students would be more independent, but they were not. Jayla made no attempts to use any inventive spelling. Perhaps she thought she would be a failure or feared others would laugh at her if she wrote with too many errors. She needed more confidence to take risks in writing her ideas. Her writing was small, as if she did not want anyone to see her mistakes. Yet, she worked really hard and waited

patiently until I was available to help. When it came time to share our written work, Jayla was one of the first ones to volunteer to read her book. I could tell she was proud of her accomplishment by the way she read and smiled. Yet, I knew I had to work on her confidence as "Jayla the writer" if I was to make any progress.

Over the next few weeks I was becoming frustrated, because Jayla was verbalizing good ideas and thoughts but was not attempting to write them on paper. She did not have any trouble making up a fairy tale. Jayla was one of the few students that actually had a problem and a solution in her story plan. Once again, she dictated her story to me and I wrote it down for her. However, she was still not confident to take ownership of her writing. She would need more time to observe me writing her ideas, to take risks in writing her ideas, and to make connections between her oral and written language in English.

It was not until late November that I began to see signs of Jayla becoming a more confident writer. We were working on a thank-you letter to someone special in our lives. Jayla asked if she could write a letter to her grandmother in Puerto Rico. I said it was fine, but she said her grandmother could read only Spanish. Up to this moment I had never thought of the idea of Jayla writing in Spanish. I think this was because Jayla was in the monolingual English class. Her English oral literacy skills were so strong that I had not yet heard her use Spanish in my class setting.

After Jayla asked me if she could write in Spanish, I knew this was the key that I was waiting for to unlock her fear of writing. I was hoping this could be the beginning of Jayla becoming a risk taker. I told her to write it in Spanish. In the Forum I read some of the research that shows how children can transfer skills learned in one language to another when the learning context is conducive to help them do so (Baker, 2006; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005).

Two things stood out for me about this project, her awareness of audience and use of invented spelling. She started the greeting, "Querida Abuelita" (Dear Granny), then, she stopped. Instead she decided to write to our school principal. I thought it interesting that even though our principal does not read Spanish, Jayla wrote the letter in Spanish to her. Although Jayla did not provide me with any explanation for the sudden change of audience, I was encouraged to see her work more independently. She still requested some spelling assistance but this was the first time I had seen Jayla take ownership of her writing.

Her writing in Spanish was hard to read because of her immature spelling. However she used invented spelling to communicate her thoughts. This was great to see happening. Jayla was writing fluently and demonstrating use of invented spelling. I realized that she finally wanted to write, and she chose to do it in the language she felt more comfortable with. Although she felt at ease communicating orally in English, with writing, Spanish was the language she chose to use.

When I allowed Jayla to write in her comfort language, I believe she finally saw herself as a writer. I saw this confidence demonstrated in the next writing project I did. The children were asked to pick a picture and write about it as a newspaper reporter. Jayla chose one of a little boy

and an old man. I was surprised to see how much she wrote about it in Spanish, mostly all by herself, though I needed her to read it to me because I had difficulty understanding what she wrote using invented spelling in Spanish. Then I had her translate it to me and I wrote in English. There was definitely a difference. Since Spanish is a phonetic language, it was easier for her to write the way she spoke. In English she was not writing the way she talked as an intermediate ELL, rather, she wrote very simple sentences like a beginner. Her English writing seemed to be based on simple words she had memorized from various word lists and sentence starters. She was not transferring the skill of writing phonetically that she used to write Spanish to writing in English.

Over the next few months I witnessed how Jayla had changed in her attitude about writing in English. Her last piece, done in May, definitely demonstrated her growth. Her handwriting was bigger. Her sentences were longer. I believed she had finally overcome her fear of writing. By the end of the year, she was no longer dictating to me what to write. She had taken ownership and was writing independently in English, seeking assistance from other sources besides me. But what exactly caused this transformation? To answer this question I had to retrace my steps in instructing her, as the following discussion describes.

Initially, I expected to see dramatic end results in the student's academic achievement, but that did not happen. Following a suggestion given by a Forum member, gradually I started keeping a daily journal recording the happenings of the day and my thoughts and feelings. As I read my notes I observed a change in the child's attitude. I noticed that as I worked with her more closely she became more motivated to learn and use language in my classroom. Also, I noticed that she as well as the other children came to me less frequently for direct assistance, as I modeled ways to use writing tools like the word wall, sounding out words, and using their personal word list and invented spelling. I noticed her handwriting got bigger as opposed to the tiny script she began with. By observing how this child looked around the room seeking words she recognized in order to write, I noticed she was a visual learner and was able to prepare visual pictures of the short vowel sounds that were giving her some trouble.

As a former first-grade teacher, I was used to a role in which I provided a lot of assistance to my students. However, by reflecting on this practice I realized that as much as I wanted Jayla to be an independent writer, I feared that I was encouraging her dependent behavior by writing down her dictated sentences. My job as an educator is to teach children to become independent lifetime learners. This dependence went against my goal of creating independent learners.

A colleague from the Forum videotaped me teaching one class period to assist me in my inquiry and reflection of my teaching practice. When I watched the video, I liked the way I asked the children questions. However, I did not like the way I took a child's pencil away from her in order to write down a word that she needed help spelling. I believe my actions taught the children that they did not have to think about how to spell a word. They knew, just as Jayla knew, to come to me and I would tell them. This exercise provided another epiphany for me as a teacher. I was promoting the children's dependency on me for spelling words.

At one of the Forum meetings, I expressed my concerns about encouraging that teacher dependency. We talked about the writing process. Jayla did need a lot of support. However, I was challenged by my colleagues to find other avenues of support (besides me) for Jayla. I did this by assigning her a partner that was a good speller (buddy writer) and teaching her to use the word wall, picture dictionaries, and personal word lists. This strategy seemed to work, because, over time, Jayla came to me less often for help.

I think the major breakthrough was when she wrote in Spanish. She was so determined to express her ideas that spelling was not an obstacle. There was a difference in the way Jayla wrote in Spanish and in the way she wrote in English. In Spanish, she wrote phonetically, using inventive spelling. In English, she depended on copying and word recognition. If Jayla did not know how to spell a word and it was not on a list or in a book that she had memorized, then she would ask a friend for the spelling. Although she use invented spelling in Spanish, she would not use it when writing in English.

However, I remembered one piece my students did in which she surprised me. We were writing a snow story. Jayla had asked me for a picture dictionary. Instead of asking her friend how to spell her story words, she used a picture dictionary. I was thrilled to see her become more resourceful. Nevertheless, I still wanted her to move beyond word recognition and memorization and begin to use inventive spelling in English. For a visual learner like Jayla, an auditory task like inventive spelling was difficult. I implemented some instructional strategies to build on the strengths she was developing and expand her use of inventive spelling across languages.

1. Use of cognates and similar sounds across languages; whenever we had a conference, I tried to point out the similarities of Spanish sounds and English sounds. For example, if Jayla wanted to write the word *money,* I would ask her how she would spell *mama.* She would say the words listening to the beginning sound (which was the same in both languages).

2. Writing by making sound analogies; after viewing the tape of myself teaching, I decided to use the word list differently. Instead of pointing to the needed word, I would give clues. I would ask her to listen carefully to the sounds and gave examples of other words with similar sounds. For example, if Jayla wanted to know how to spell the word *that,* I would say the word *the*, which she knew also began with the same sound. Eventually, she would find the word herself by making connections with what she knew.

3. Word sort; I tried to increase her word recognition by playing games with the given word list. The children began each class period with flashcards and drilled each other. Occasionally, I would ask them to group words according to beginning sounds, vowel sounds, or according to word families and rhymes. Sometimes we grouped them by alphabetical order or by syllables.

By the end of the year, I finally began to see the fruits of our labor. Jayla wrote her last piece independently, using her own resources in English. I could tell she was writing the way she

spoke, with the word *with* spelled "if" and the word *the* spelled "de" (as in Spanish). Even when she wrote *fruit* when she wanted to write *flowers* showed me that she was beginning to listen to beginning letter sounds.

Jayla was becoming an independent writer in English, learning to use resources besides the teacher. I saw many changes in her attitude, work process, and in her writing projects. When I compare her first writing to her last, I am amazed at the difference. At the time I anticipated that as she continued to use these strategies, her writing and reading in English would improve and it did.

In her first piece she had numerous misspelled words. The *b* was substituted by *d* in words like *because*. This reversal was common in other pieces of writing. Letters were omitted and/or added in words like *summer* spelled "smmmer." Her sentences were short and choppy. In her last piece Jayla independently wrote a paragraph about a secret garden. Only two words were misspelled. Her sentences were slightly longer and more coherent. There had definitely been an improvement in the written work she was now producing.

Transformation

As I participated in the Forum and conducted my inquiry, the way I perceived my teaching also began to change. I wanted the child to feel successful in everything, so I would just tell them what I thought they needed to know. This was especially true when it came to writing. When I watched a video of myself teaching, I saw myself taking a pencil away from the child in order to write a word in her story. I realized that this was not going to teach the children to become independent learners. As a result, I stopped telling them how to spell the words. Instead, we would sound out the word. Even the word list was used differently. Before, I would point to the word they wanted to spell. Now, I gave them clues like "It rhymes with _____." In this way, the child has to think about it and I guide them to the word.

Through the research process I was learning to become a kid watcher instead of implementing in rote fashion the tasks dictated by the curriculum for an instructional support teacher. The work of the Forum helped me to see the little steps of progress the child was making and challenged me to reflect on my teaching and the impact it was having on the child. I found myself watching what a child was doing or not doing. My plans became more student-driven as opposed to curriculum-driven. Even the questions I ask myself were more inquisitive: "Why is this happening?", "How can I get this child to . . .?", "How is learning happening in my class?" Reflective questioning is helping me to see beyond the rights and wrongs in the work of children, to see instead their learning process.

I cannot fully explain why Jayla had so much difficulty with writing and reading. I do know that not being stable in one school or in one language may weaken the foundation needed in order to achieve literacy in any language. It is also possible that Jayla is facing more than just language and transience issues. However, in the year of my inquiry she attended my class

consistently and the strategies I implemented in my classroom worked for her. Although she is still not performing at grade level, her performance suggests that she is on the road towards literacy.

Working individually with children like Jayla can be very challenging, especially in a classroom of 30 students. Through my inquiry I developed some general principles and instructional strategies that guided my practice and proved to be fruitful. These could be useful to practitioners who work with students similar to Jayla: (1) Validate the child's culture and wealth of knowledge by allowing the child to write in his/her comfort language; (2) tape the stories the class is reading. This benefited the ELLs in my class by providing many opportunities for them to hear English and connect to the printed page. If possible, let the child dictate his paraphrase of the story. It allows them to express ideas orally, their stronger form of English. This, then, can be his/her reading book; (3) do a lot of prewriting activities like talking, drawing, and creating word walls and personal word lists to be used when writing. All of these allow for extra reinforcement of language that ELLs can use; (4) provide visual aids like picture dictionaries and wordlists of high frequency words; (5) allow students to write with a partner (buddy writer). The buddy writer can provide an excellent model of the English language, can reinforce understanding of classroom routines and rules, and provide for emotional support; (6) make comparisons between sounds in Spanish and in English, highlighting similarities; (7) whenever possible, give clues about words instead of pointing to words directly; and (8) introduce word play to promote students familiarity with the written word.

Teaching a linguistically diverse child with a transient background is a challenge, but not impossible. Doing inquiry in my classroom helped me realize that learning is always occurring. I believe that had it not been for my participation in the teacher's inquiry group, I would have missed seeing the improvements and growth Jayla achieved over the year. This teacher-research process helped me reflect on my teaching as well as opened my eyes to see the whole child and the way the child works. I have learned that not everything goes exactly as one anticipates, but each situation is an opportunity to learn more about your own practice.

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Notes

1 To respect the anonymity of participants and schools, their names have been changed.