



# Authentic, Relevant, and Rigorous Literacy Practices for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Newcomer Classrooms

By Kimberly D. Garcia

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**Abstract:** Teachers routinely report that they feel pressured to teach to standardized assessments. Narrowing the curriculum may help students succeed on standardized assessments, but it rarely leads to long-lasting academic success. Authentic, relevant, and rigorous instruction in newcomer English learner (EL) classrooms, however, can create long-term learners while assisting students in mastering standardized exams. It is critical that adolescent ELs are academically challenged because they are in a race against time to master content and assessments in order to graduate. This article provides research-based activities and ideas to facilitate learning in linguistically and culturally diverse adolescent EL classrooms.

**Keywords:** authentic, relevant, rigorous, secondary, literacy, newcomer

Teachers routinely feel pressured to help secondary students pass standardized assessments. Research suggests this may be especially true for teachers of ELs because this population of students consistently underperform in US schools (Koelsch, Chu, & Bañuelos, 2014; Menken 2010). Many teachers report that they are underprepared to adapt rigorous academic content so that it is comprehensible for ELs, especially newcomers (Luster, 2012). The term *newcomer* refers to an EL who has spent three or less years in the new country (Short & Boyson, 2012). Newcomers who arrive in high school are also frequently referred to as *late arrivals* to underscore the brief amount of time they have to master coursework and standardized assessments. For these students, it is particularly critical that they are academically successful because if they lack the ability to master the assessments, they fail to succeed in school and to graduate. Language and cultural barriers can make working with newcomers more challenging for teachers.

## Building Relationships Through Authentic, Relevant, and Rigorous Instruction

Studies show students need teachers who are caring and who try to understand their lived experiences (Gay, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, many of my students report feeling as though they do not fit in with their peers. They often feel inhibited to

speak aloud in class, and they frequently do not know how to communicate with their teachers. Literacy instruction can pave the way for teachers to learn more about their students. Studies have demonstrated the importance of ELs connecting to texts that reflect their cultures in some way (Ebe, 2010). Additionally, when students write about their own lived experiences, the writing is authentic. When students write about their own lived experiences, teachers and peers can begin to understand one another better.

All students bring assets, but some of those may not be accurately reflected in their knowledge of English. Moll and colleagues Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) are well-known for developing the concept “funds of knowledge” which suggests drawing upon students’ home languages, family values and traditions, responsibilities outside of school, after school activities, and knowledge about family occupations.

Teachers can utilize strategies for literacy instruction to build on students’ funds of knowledge. When practitioners frame literacy lessons through sociocultural activities that encourage students to utilize their first languages, work with others, and read and write about topics that are relevant to their lives, they provide avenues to connect to ELs’ funds of knowledge to school knowledge. Additionally, teachers are able to learn about their students’ assets while honoring all of the students’ unique cultures and languages. These writing opportunities help students make connections to authentic writing, allow them to interact with peers, and give them opportunities to read and analyze texts while also making connections to the text through their own response.



Figure 2: Another student’s Map of My Heart showing things the student loves.

### Assisting Students in Making Connections to Their Writing

Through case study research, Behizadeh (2014) determined that authenticity means different things to different students and that teachers need to allow students to make connections of their own. She asserts that self-chosen topics, expression in different forms of writing, and an inquiry-based approach, like that found in a writer’s workshop approach, tend to be in line with what helps students feel connected to their in-school writing.

My students begin each school year using the Map of My Heart activity (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2017). The heart map is easy to understand even when language barriers exist between teachers and students. After I explained and modeled the Map of My Heart activity, students filled in things they love (see Figures 1 and 2). Most students chose to write in English, but I gave them the option of writing in their first language. After filling in their hearts, they chose three topics to share orally with a partner. Then, I asked students to add more to their heart if their partner’s responses sparked a new idea in them. The following class period they wrote about things they do not like on the outside of the heart. They glued the Map of My Heart in their notebooks, so they can easily access it for future writing assignments.

A few days later, we revisited the heart, and I asked students to choose one thing from their heart to write a paragraph about in their notebooks (see Figures 3 and 4). Again, they wrote in their first languages if they chose to do so, but they had to prepare one phrase or sentence to share in English with the class. This process of writing about topics from their heart maps can continue as often as the teacher likes, and these smaller writings can be transformed into lengthier essays throughout the course of the school year.



Figure 1: A student’s completed Map of My Heart.

# Dance

Dancing is my favorite thing in the world. I have been dancing since I was 5 years old so it's been 11 years since I started. I've been dancing at the same studio all this 11 years and my friends there are like my second family we all get along very well and we love to hang out. I don't only dance as a hobby I dance because it's my life. I love traveling with my dance team to many different dance conventions and competitions. I love having the opportunity to learn from dance teachers from all around the world also the adrenaline of dance conventions is so real because you get to meet a lot of talented dancers. Competitions can be hard sometimes but it's the best feeling to win because all the hard work of other folks pay off. Dance conventions can take a lot of money but I think I loved traveling to New York and my favorite trip was to Guadalajara because it was the first time I got to go to a dance convention without my mom. When I grow up I would love to be a dance teacher or a choreographer or maybe a teacher at a dance convention. But for now I would love to be part of the \_\_\_\_\_ or be at a dance studio here.

Figure 3: One student's writing about a topic from the Map of My Heart.

Harry Potter.

Since I've memory, I had always love Harry Potter Movies and books. The spells, the wands, the dark wizards, Hogwarts, ghosts, Hogwarts houses, Quidditch.

Almost everything from the wizarding world of Harry Potter, my mother was the responsible of my love to HP (Harry Potter), she used to play HP Movies once at the week, my fascination was growing up while I was doing it too. I really like how J.K. Rowling express her feelings with the characters, it's an incredible story with also an incredible message.

I consider my self as a wizard and I know it's physically impossible but just with imagine living in a world like Harry Potter's makes me feel quiet excited. I've a small collection that I just started like 2 years ago. I want to go to HP Thematic Park the Next Summer, it's on Orlando, Florida.

If somebody comes and tell me that I can be good at I spell I'll obviously say Quidditch, a Unique sport could known for almost all the wizards.

In that perfect world for me I would work as a wizard, I'll probably have a 14 inches wand with Phoenix core and Oak wood, and my Pottermore account says that I belong to Ravenclaw, and I'm very proud about it.

Figure 4: A student's essay about Harry Potter, a topic from the heart map.

When I use this activity with newcomers, I notice that students have a much easier time finding something to write about. I have not heard one student say, "I don't know what to write about!" Also, I frequently encourage students who feel intimidated to write in English to complete their notebook writing entries in their first languages, which seems to help them become more engaged in writing. The Map of My Heart activity helps students produce authentic writing that is relevant to their lives. As the teacher, I learn about my students from their likes, dislikes, and writing work. I become the learner as they teach me about their lives, cultures, and experiences.

## Writing Through Social Interactions

During the writing process, peer and teacher feedback provide sociocultural contexts that help ELs learn (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Mislevy and Durán, 2014). Peer response is an excellent

way to promote knowledge building through social interactions. Additionally, it can encourage students to use all four language domains: reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

Two Stars and a Wish, adapted from Bomer's (2010) and Messner's (2011) work, is an effective peer response tool that helps my students complete essay drafts in English. In pairs or small groups, students take turns reading their essays aloud to their peers. Only after they have read their own paper aloud can they give their essays to a group member to read over for clarification. Student respond to one another's essays in writing and orally; they can use sentence starters to help them form their responses. (See Figure 5 for example sentences starters. See Figure 6 for student examples.)

An additional benefit of peer response is that it seems to help motivate students to try to produce quality drafts. When they know their peers will be their audience, students have expressed that they feel an overall greater purpose while writing their essays. Likewise,

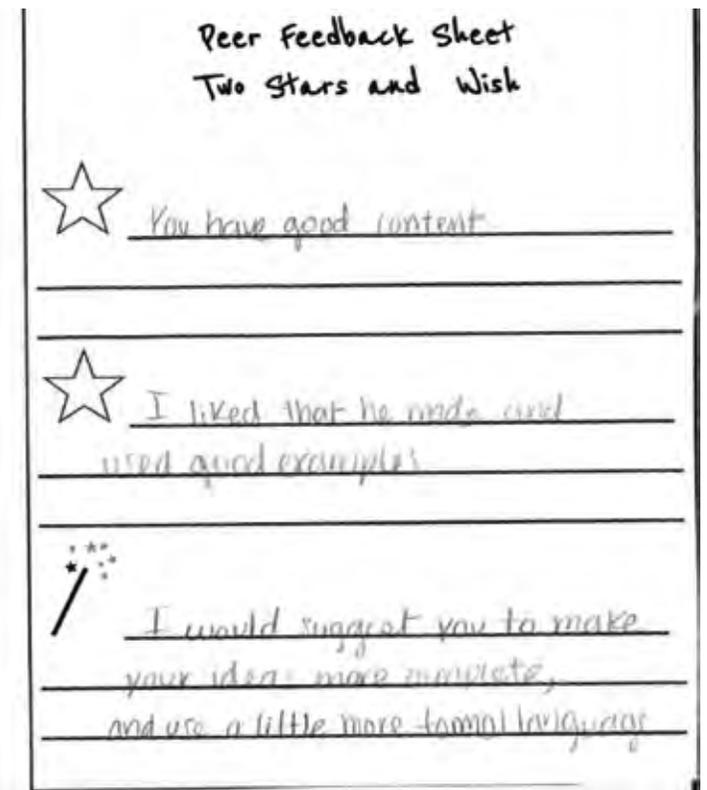
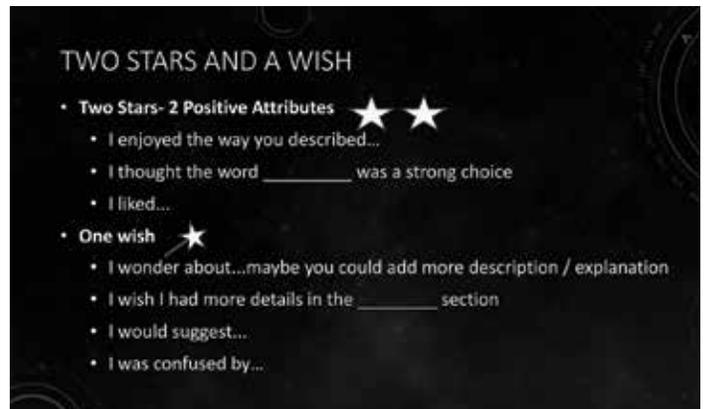


Figure 5: Two Stars and Wish sentence starters. Figure 6: Peer feedback using Two Stars and a Wish.



Figure 6: Peer feedback using Two Stars and a Wish.

presenting their written work to peers is a form of publication, and research has illustrated that some students feel their writing is more authentic and relevant when they display it to other students (Behizadeh, 2014).

### Analyzing and Connecting to Poetry

The use of carefully selected mentor texts is an excellent way to engage students in rigorous literacy practices. “My People” by Langston Hughes is a great example of a mentor text for newcomers because it is short and contains vocabulary that students can easily understand. This allows teachers to spend less time explaining difficult vocabulary and more time helping students analyze and make connections to poetry.

Before reading the poem, students brainstorm a list of ideas they have about the people who live in the communities in which they were raised. After discussing their lists, we begin previewing “My People.” Together, we define poetry, examine literary elements we find in the poem, and we analyze elements of poetry, such as the speaker, patterns, rhythm, repetition, stanzas, lines, and rhyme.

Once students have a good understanding of the poem, we all create our own versions of the poem. We look back over the list we brainstormed to see if we can utilize any of those ideas. We use a template (see Figure 7) to complete our own poems about our people. This activity also becomes a grammar activity because students must have a grasp of subject-verb agreement to fill in the blanks correctly. For example, one student wrote “The mountain are beautiful” instead of “The mountains are beautiful” which allowed for a brief grammar lesson about singular and plural nouns (see Figure 8 for student responses).

This activity gives newcomers a chance to learn about poetry and assists them in making connections to the text by modifying the poem to become part of their own story. Some newcomers may already have background knowledge of poetry and poetic elements in their first languages. Activities like this one can assist them

in making connections and transferring their understanding of poetry in their first language to English while aiding them in building new knowledge.

“My People” Original Poem	“My People” Student Template
“My People” by Langston Hughes	“My People” by _____
The night is beautiful, So the faces of my people.	The _____ is beautiful, So the _____ of my people.
The stars are beautiful, So the eyes of my people.	The _____ are beautiful, So the _____ of my people.
Beautiful, also, is the sun. Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.	Beautiful, also, is the _____. Beautiful, also, are the _____ of my people.

Figure 7: Poem and template for students to create their own “My People” poem.

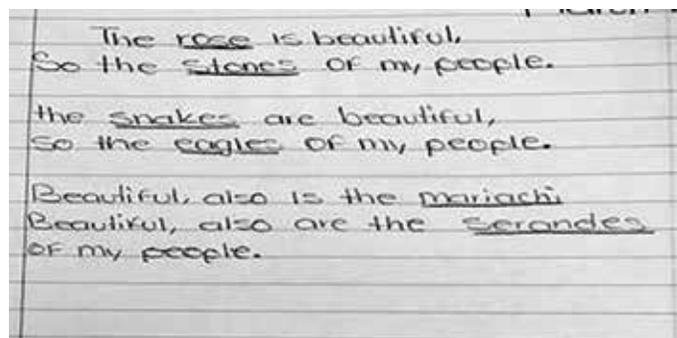
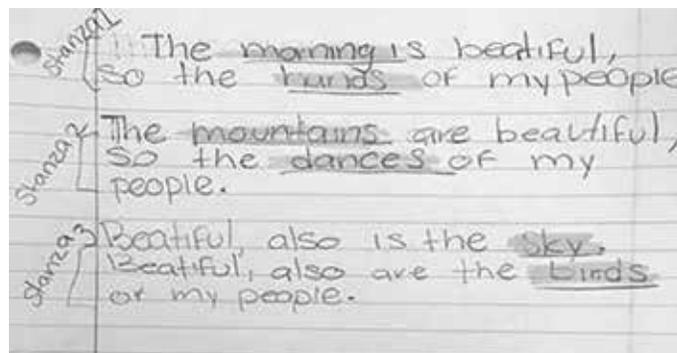


Figure 8: Student poems using the “My People” template.

### Making Connections Through Effective Literacy Practices

Teachers of newcomers are confronted with overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers to create authentic, relevant, and rigorous literacy activities for their secondary students. These students come to school with assets and funds of knowledge that educators need to find ways to build upon. When newcomers share their lives through writing practices such as these, they provide their teachers with unique glimpses into their worlds which can result in teachers understanding their students better and creating more effective instruction.

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