

**INSIDE STORIES: STORIES WITHIN**  
**Personal Narrative in the Classroom**

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This project by Carol block is accepted in its present form.

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## **Abstract**

This discussion of a project conducted in 2004 involved two ESOL Middle School Students. The project used personal narrative and autobiographical elements to produce booklets based on these students' experiences which created a bridge into the academic community, for themselves and their families. This paper discusses the elements that made this project successful and the reasons that personal narrative is so powerful and meaningful for all students and, most especially, second language learners.

## **ERIC descriptors:**

English(Second Language), Autobiography and Second Language,  
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Cultural Awareness, Teacher Effectiveness, Teacher Developed Materials

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Everything that is written is in some way autobiographical. Our backgrounds and personal histories filter our perceptions of the world. When we treasure these experiences, we validate ourselves and our self-esteem grows.

This paper discusses the evolution of an after-school project based on the autobiographical elements in student participants' lives. Initially, I thought this project was solely about autobiographies. However, in reflecting on the meaning of this project, I realized that the personal narratives my students wrote had a deeper meaning for their personal and academic lives. Writing about themselves was a powerful learning tool. It helped them learn language, improve their reading, writing and speaking skills, gain self-esteem and value their heritage. It provided a space for these students to express and value their experiences, opinions, feelings, and backgrounds. This experience allowed the students to see themselves as a part of a learning community and especially as successful members of that community. While there are perhaps differences between autobiography and personal narrative, with autobiography taking a more chronological approach and memoir and personal narrative being more about a snapshot, slice or moment in a person's life, for the purpose of this paper, I will use the terms personal narrative and autobiography and, at times, memoir interchangeably.

For me, the idea of guiding a writing project was and is startling. I have always loved new ideas and learning but have had trouble presenting my thoughts in an academically acceptable and appreciated form. Paradoxically, the fact that I found writing hard, I have often thought, made me a better teacher. My thinking was that as I never imagined writing to be easy, I could explain and understand the agony of communicating through writing.

### The Value of Autobiographies

Most recently, I was reintroduced to the power of personal narrative in graduate school at School for International Training (SIT). There, my classmates and I were asked to write our stories, our autobiographies, as a way to identify the communities we belonged to. This assignment made us look at the presumptions we brought with us into our classrooms. First, we wrote about ourselves, then we interviewed a partner and finally wrote up each other's stories. We were to ask each other questions along the way for clarification and explanation. It was a revelation to me to put my life on an ordered continuum like that. It was a life that had peaks and valleys, as well as a logical progression. When I looked at events that had seemed to be disconnected, there was a surprising logic. Writing the autobiography celebrated the events and range of feelings I've had in my life. It made me think about my life objectively and with a bit of wonder. Somehow seeing the shape of my life in print validated it. Through the writing and questioning process, the meaning of the events were negotiated



and clarified. That simple experience instructed me of the validity of examining one's life and cultural affinities.

What then is the power and meaning, the why of writing about ourselves in personal narrative and in autobiographical form? As William Carlos Williams said, "Their story, yours, mine---it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them." (Coles 1989, 30) The pedagogical research and literature is extensive and supports the value and power of personal narrative. McEwan and Egan (1995), Rossiter (2002), and Steinberg (2000), among others, talk about the importance of using students' own voices and stories to make sense of their own experiences. They point out that these personal narratives provide the opportunity for growth, identity, and exploration as well as linguistic development. This form also helps move students beyond preconceptions about writing and gives them strategies for making sense of themselves and their experiences. (Rossiter 2002)

Personal narratives "... are effective as educational tools because they are believable, rememberable and entertaining." (Neuhauser 1993) Stories are credible because they involve the reader as an "active meaning maker" (Rossiter 2002, 3) and thus our memories become a source of knowledge and instruct us in the answers we need. They also stimulate the reader to relate to the printed word. The details of the personal experience allow the reader to respond cognitively as well as effectively. In educational programs the dynamics of the story can be used to appreciate diversity as well as give both the writer and reader perspectives on their lives. (Rossiter 1992)

Personal narrative is now used extensively in many areas of academic education, among them, science, history and math, and the development of language skills. Its critics claim that personal writing causes narrow introspection that does not teach content, that students cannot “move beyond their own stories to understand larger discourses” (Rosenberg 1995, 7) and thus has no place in the academic world. However, according to Peter Elbow (1995), making writing personal is a more engaging method for the student. Rather than giving the student permission to be self-absorbed, it provides a strategy for questioning and prioritizing information as well as giving meaning to reading and writing skills.

Do students become more involved in expressing themselves rather than learning to be objective about their topic? I believe not. Personal narrative is a way for students to express their identity. Since these language learners have unique and worthwhile information to contribute, writing personal narrative lessens some of the gaps between them and their classmates. It allows them to participate as equals. By focusing on the individual's experience, a connection to the topic is created, allowing a way into the subject. (Rosenberg 2002)

Narrative gives students opportunities to explore what they know. “To be a person is to have a story.” (Kenyon & Randal 1997, 1) This is why personal narratives resonate in all of us. The power of our stories makes sense of our lives and so this makes our stories useful in learning and teaching. In this way, students direct their own learning, and are empowered. Personal stories are effective because they are authentic sources of knowledge. These details of one's life lead from the known and can create a bridge to the unknown, thus

providing a way for personal growth as well as an entrance into more abstract thinking and prescribed forms of writing. (Rossiter 2002) In writing personal narratives the students' stories are accessible and they begin to use their own voices.

Autobiographical writing can be a kind of transformational learning. Writing their own stories allows students to conceptualize their experience in abstract ways. "When individuals externalize their stories they are better able to locate and access their own stories in larger cultural contexts." (Kenyon & Randall 1997, 3) By externalizing their experience they look at the ideas behind what happened to them. This process lays the groundwork for their entrance into academic expository thought. When students write their stories, they are also making sense of academic prescriptions. Seeing things they and their families do through an abstract framework and gaining a more "critical and empowered perspective" on their lives. Kenyon and Randall (1997) This process can then be transferred to academic work. Personal essays create a bridge to the more academic forms of writing: exposition, argumentation and criticism.

When students see themselves as experts, they take more control of their learning. The students who often have difficulty with schoolwork can relate to their peers when they are able to share their backgrounds and feelings. When their writing is personal, students become more interested in writing; this allows students to be successful, often for the first time. (Nicolini 1994)

My own experience with autobiography shows this process at work. My graduate school experience at S I T helped me find a way to put words together.

One reason why I was more able to write was that my readings and discussions there helped me to find a voice. If I could mimic or get into a register, I could write. Just like fingerprints, my written voice not only identified me, but also helped me communicate my meaning more easily. Through modeling I gained a style and register, through writing I learned to get perspective on my life and to value experiences.

Thus stories, autobiographies and personal narratives have meaning in everyone's life, especially that of a language learner. These forms of writing value the knowledge students have within them. To listen, to read, to value students gives the students a voice and their self-esteem grows. Writing, reading, talking about and listening to these stories increases language skills as well. Students are given a way into the classroom arena, using what the students already know as a basis for their learning for themselves and that of their classmates. In short, their experiences become their teachers.

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND

#### Context

Like my students my private, professional and academic lives cannot be separated. My experiences, too, are my teachers. I had been teaching ESOL for many years in Asia prior to becoming a teacher with the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) which is an organization that operates for school districts that do not have sufficient population to require a full-time specialist in special needs areas. This job requires that I travel between districts to service small populations of limited English proficient (LEP) public school students in rural districts. Typically, I have to travel great distances between schools and have little support. I feel a great deal of isolation as do my students. The job can be quite frustrating and isolating since I come into the school not being acquainted with faculty or school procedure. I often feel like a foreigner. My professional situation mirrors that of my students, who are also cut off in their classes by cultural, linguistic and academic factors. We are both newcomers, foreigners to this school system. Even though I know the language, I don't fully understand the dynamics and terrain of that new culture. Similarly, the ESOL students are new to their school world and do not understand that community; the rules of engagement, language and are often isolated from their peers. I didn't realize this when I began the project, but I now realize that I identified with my students unconsciously through our connection of isolation. A bond was forged between their situations and stories, and mine.

## The Teachable Moment

There is a Buddhist proverb, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” I think this means that without the student being open to what is presented there will be no learning. Conversely, if the teacher is not alert to the student’s readiness or opening, there will also be no study or teaching. During my experience at SIT I was told to watch and wait for organic moments that presented themselves in our classrooms. Teachable moments are moments of educational opportunity, a time at which a person, especially a child, is likely to be particularly disposed to learn something or particularly responsive to being taught or made aware of something. (Encarta World English Dictionary) If we, as teachers, recognize these moments, students will indicate what they want, need, or are ready to learn. At these moments, students learn more easily and are receptive to the information presented. These moments are openings, doors, to our students’ deepest needs.

One such moment presented itself in the Spring of 2004 when a Title III grant was awarded to the district I teach in. Title III is a title under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 that addresses the education of limited English proficient and immigrant students. This funding is intended to upgrade programs, strategies, objectives, materials, curricula, training and professional development. In 2004, the goal of the grant was for teachers to develop a program integrating technology into ESOL programs and to improve the academic achievement of ESOL students through the use of technology in both elementary and secondary schools. It sought to help every child become

technologically literate by the end of the eighth grade and to make sure teachers had adequate training and professional development in technology integration.

At the beginning of the program I was not really sure what the students and I would do. I knew that we would meet three times a week for six weeks, for two and a half hours each time. I borrowed two laptops and arranged to use, when necessary, the main computer lab. My plan was to use this extra time to work on some weak language areas (spelling, writing and reading, vocabulary) and, possibly investigate some Internet links or perhaps use a book as a model for writing. The students were, at once, weak and resistant to writing. I wanted to use the computers as an incentive to get these students to do more reading and writing.

### The Students' Situation

Students are placed in ESOL programs based on state regulations and continue to receive services based on their performance on state mandated tests. These students usually have difficulties academically as well as socially. Many of the tasks they are asked to perform are alien to them. The topics discussed are foreign to anything in their backgrounds or previous educational training. The things that these students are acquainted with, the things that their families value and discuss over dinner, are rarely included in the curriculum. The language that they speak at home is different from the language of the classroom. This limits their contributions in class. As a result, these students are

isolated conceptually, linguistically and culturally and don't see themselves as successful.

In the following discussion of this project, I have changed the names of the two elementary school students who participated to Yolanda, a fourth grader, and Jimena, a sixth grader. By the New York State

Language Assessment Test (NYSESLAT), both students were classified as intermediate English language learners. Yolanda arrived in New York City from Ecuador in the first grade. She entered a bilingual program there. Her family moved from New York City to this upstate district when she was in the third grade and the state assessment classified her as a beginner. Like many language learners she appeared to be verbally fluent; however she had great difficulties with reading and writing. The other student, Jimena, came to the United States from El Salvador when she was in the third grade. Her spoken English was limited and her reading and writing skills were very weak.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE PROJECT

In the normal school day each of the girls met alone with me, the ESOL instructor. This after school project gave them the opportunity to relax and find comfort in talking and joking in their native language. It was a change of pace from feeling isolated and simply going home and watching television. Both were excited at being able to use the computers that were provided. They were novel, portable and convenient.

The activities of the first days of the project seemed haphazard. We experimented with different strategies to familiarize the students with the computer. I asked the students to write and type a letter. We did some spelling practice using CD programs. Because typing their short letters on the computers took the students an inordinate amount of time, I decided that writing during each meeting would be done by hand. Since both students were behind academically and not contributing in their mainstream classes, I wanted to use the time to strengthen their language skills.

That first day the students talked about what they would like to find out about. After much discussion they decided on wanting to know more about Hawaii. The next meeting each student started looking for information. We found sites on the Internet that were "kid friendly". Towards the end of our second session I could feel the excitement rise when Yolanda and Jimenez found pictures and the seemingly limitless information that was available on the web.

It was then the teachable moment appeared. The girls had explored the sites and had stumbled upon information about their own countries. I could hear them talking to each other about what they had discovered. Before going home that day, the students begged to find out more about their own home countries and to make that their project. There was my teachable moment. An idea, initiated by my students, had presented itself and I decided to listen to it. This was the turning point of the project, that moment in which I moved from my teacher-directed priorities of time, logistics and preconceived notions of classroom management to putting the students' excitement and decisions first.

At our session the next day we talked about what was involved in changing topics and the extra work the girls might have to do at home to accommodate the time involved in following this new topic; they agreed. I could feel their excitement and sense of empowerment growing. *They* had changed the direction of our study.

### The Springboard

As the project continued my role as teacher changed, but I still provided structure. I knew I needed to have some print model to give the girls a starting point. I chose *Got Me a Story to Tell* (Yee and Kokin 1992). The subtitle of this booklet is: *a multi-ethnic book: five children tell about their lives*. We had begun reading a section of this book in our regular ESOL class. My students, the readers, identify with the personalities, interests and journeys of these child authors always shine through book. Their stories strike a chord of commonality

that is genuine, not trite or simplified. When Jimena and Yolanda read a story from this book, they reacted as my other students had in the past. They could see themselves in these pages; they were no longer two isolated students in a rural school but similar to the children in the pages of that book. The reactions of my students confirm the rationale put forth by Ernest Gaines, in the introduction to this book: "We want the children to be proud of who they are. We want them to know their own culture as well to learn about the cultures of other children."(1992).

### Reading and the Descriptive Outline

This book became the springboard for writing about themselves. In our next meeting, we read another chapter in *Got Me a Story to Tell* (1992), that neither of the girls had read before. We discussed what the character talked about and what made the story interesting. Together, we listed the details that helped us get to know this character and then listed the kinds of information that were included in this story. After that each of us took another story from that book and did the same thing. Finally, we compared our lists and created one long master list that included all the topics we had read about in this book. This became our descriptive outline (see Appendix 1).

*Got Me A Story to Tell* (1992) inspired the students to find a voice. It showed the students that other children were just like them. These stories connected Jimena and Yolanda to the world in a print form.

## Writing the Story

It was now time for each student to write her own story. We didn't talk about what would be included or where to start. Each found the areas that she wanted to write about. As we had agreed, each student wrote her own story at home and dropped off her handwritten story with me during the school day. When the students returned in the afternoon, I had typed up their stories. I duplicated the stories so that each girl had a copy of the other's work. In our after-school meeting, we shared the typed copies. Sometimes the students would work with each other on one person's story; sometimes each student would work on her own. This activity encouraged reading and also writing and correction skills.

As we talked, the elements of the writing process were reinforced. We talked about grammar and content; we predicted what would come next; we discussed organization and what was interesting and not. Then we brainstormed and expanded relevant information. At first the girls wrote about whatever they liked, then I gave the girls specific topics; family, homes, memories. We talked about sense memories: sound, smell, sight and added appropriate vocabulary. When the students came to a standstill and there was a cry for what to write about, they could refer back to that descriptive outline and they could see what other kinds of things they could add. If more information about their family or details about their lives were needed they went home and asked questions of their family. Jimena and Yolanda would enjoy telling each other the stories they

had heard at home the night before, sharing in their native Spanish. At times, we used a version of the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to augment their writing and stimulate their creative voice. The students would dictate their story to me or to each other and then read it back. This technique, frequently used in teaching reading, worked well to stimulate their writing skills.

This process was essential in augmenting their writing, as well as involving their family and stimulating memories, and discussion at home. They experienced meaningful engagement with writing while connecting with each other, their families and the material. Their learning solidified. Through this process, the descriptive outline grew into a biography worksheet which helped to broaden the topics and could be used for future writing. (see Appendix 1)

The topics gradually moved from the details of their personal lives and memories to less personal and more general content topics. The first more abstract idea was to think of a story or legend about or related to their native countries; El Salvador and Ecuador. One of the girls couldn't remember a story and so we found one that originated from their country. We repeated our process of writing and rewriting.

From folk tales, we moved to the more complex task of selecting information about each girl's country from the Internet. Each day we searched for facts about each country: its' geography, flags, history, vacation places, songs and recipes. The students printed out the voluminous pages of information that interested them. These we read and discussed; the facts and pertinent details were chosen and highlighted. Any information that a girl wanted to included had

to have personal relevance for her and she had to add some of her own details. She had to make her connection to the information explicit. This was a source of great discussion. The students had a sense of excitement finding, reading and relating to this information about their native countries. This was also a chance to read with a purpose and a lesson in selecting pertinent information. They were becoming experts on their own countries and backgrounds.

Yolanda and Jimena were excited to read about the places and ideas they had heard about or experienced. The printed word was no longer alien information; it was about them. They often took home this information to share with their families, sometimes in English and sometimes in Spanish. This exposure to information in Spanish and English was an important experience, especially for Yolanda who had read very little in Spanish. She was surprised and delighted that she could read and understand as much Spanish as she could. This realization that the Spanish that they knew could be useful in school was another chance for both girls to validate their skills.

#### Correction

To correct or not that was one question I had to face. During this project I encouraged self-correction or peer correction. Our initial springboard, *Got Me A Story To Tell* (1992), had contained some sentences that were in non-standard English. The stories, in that book, at times contained words in the writer's native languages that just didn't translate. I could see how effective a communication tool it was. During our project it was not my intention to create a perfect finished

product, but rather to have the students develop a sense of what needed to be changed even if they did not know how to make the correction. I encouraged them to notice the writing and to be aware of what they intended. The aim was to begin the process of internal monitoring, which would help them in their writing now and in the future. I did not correct their work immediately, as I thought it would halt the flow of the students' words. However, I guided and encouraged the students to correct as much as they were able to on their own. The girls didn't have to be able to make the correction, but they did have to circle words, phrases, sentences that they had questions about or that they knew were not standard English. Sometimes, after our discussion, the girls made the corrections directly on the hard copy, sometimes directly on the computer. This was the start of their internalizing correction and learning to ask for help where and when they needed it. I tried to vary this process. They would sometimes look at each others' work and at other times only look at their own. At the start of this project we did the corrections together. By the end of our six weeks the students were circling their work with regularity and coming into class with questions, eager to talk about their confusions.

The final step of each piece of writing involved the students entering their corrections on the computer. We had discussed these corrections verbally and it was up to the student to understand enough to execute that correction. If the girls didn't understand what to do, they would ask until they understood. This process allowed each student to see the changes in front of them and carry out the correction. The typing reiterated the correction and confirmed it in the students'

minds. The students learned that their meaning had to be understood by others for it to be acceptable. If it wasn't understood, it had to be reworked and questioned until it was clear. In this way the students became part of the process of creating a corrected final copy.

### Layout and Graphics

The next part was working on the layout. I asked the students to bring in photos of themselves and their families, which I scanned into the computer. The students then wrote personal comments about these photos. They had fun writing captions, sharing and talking about the characters in those pictures.

Yolanda and Jimena enhanced their writing by drawing pictures or choosing clip art and inserting them into their stories. The students chose a variety of fonts in order to differentiate the stories. Each student created her own cover and title and pagination. Some of their pages were in color. I then bound their books with spiral binding. The final products were beautifully illustrated and lively books (see Appendix 3).

The students were not the only ones pleased with the final result; their teachers were also. While I was photocopying the student's work in the school, some of their teachers came into the copy room and noticed that I was working on these handsome booklets. They commented on what wonderful books they were and were surprised that their shy, quiet, seemingly non-contributing students could produce so much work. I knew then that I would have to find a



way, in the future, to share this work with their classes and give the ESOL students a tool to participate in their classrooms.

Finally it was our last class before summer vacation and I brought their bound work into class. Yolanda and Jimena's eyes popped out. They were all giggles, looking at their books. They were so proud. They were writers.

## CHAPTER 4

### OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

#### Impact on the Students and their Families

Defining success is difficult. We can evaluate a student's ability based on performance on standardized tests, academic achievement or the ability to function in society at large. (Brisk 1999) I define success as that which provides students with experiences that enrich and develop their personal and academic lives. In every good lesson, there are benefits for all parties involved. The success of this project can really be seen in the effect it had on the students themselves, their siblings, their families and me.

The following Fall revealed that the book had had an impact beyond the initial pride that the girls felt. When I met with Yolanda and Jimena that new semester, I asked them if they had shown their book to their families. Each of them talked about the excitement that their families felt seeing the book they had produced. As we talked and I interviewed them, the impact of the book on the students, their siblings and their families became apparent. (see appendix 3 for complete transcription of student interviews)

First, the book provided the students with a way to become part of the academic conversation. I asked one of the girls, Yolanda, to share her book with her sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) class. She did that and was able to move more into the culture of the classroom. They asked her questions about her country and her life there. They became aware that she had had

experiences that they had not had, and she was appreciated for her expertise. This raised her self- esteem as well as increasing her sense of being able to contribute to the academic experience. As she said, “I felt the kids were interested in other countries and in mine. It made me proud that I had something to tell them.”

This sense of pride these girls experienced extended to others in their families as well. Jimena shared her book with her brother’s kindergarten class. Here, too, questions were asked and both Jimena and her younger brother, Jose, became experts. The kindergarteners all had questions for Jimena and Jose. This was a great introduction for Jose since he was shy and had a limited English vocabulary. He did, however, know the content of Jimena’s book and so could point and say a few words in English. Jimena’s sister, who was in the second grade, had read her sister’s book and wanted to make a book of her own. Yolanda’s older siblings, who were in high school, were similarly impressed. They were amazed that their little sister could have produced such a finished product. They became inspired and wanted to write their own stories in the future.

The act of producing a book had lasting effects on the literacy development of these girls and their siblings. It had similar effects on their parents. The girls reported that the book was passed around to members of their families. Their parents showed the book to friends and relatives. The parents felt that their lives and words were honored in their children’s work. While doing this, they were able to express pride in the accomplishments of their daughters. As

one said, "When I showed my parents, they were happy cause it showed I could do things on my own... like other kids." (Appendix 2)

They also were able to share their experiences with others and to value them in a new way. The book became a tool for developing language skills during the next year. I often referred back to the work they had produced and to the effort that had gone into it. When I reminded them of how we had reworked the writing, the students would smile and get interested in editing the writing before them. The skills that we began building during this project remained with them. They noticed their mistakes and talked about how to find a more correct way to put their ideas into written form. The acts of reading and selecting pertinent information provided skills for these students to use to help them participate and contribute their ideas in our class as well as in their mainstream classes.

In many ways, the stories the students told became their true language teachers. The desire to communicate their special knowledge led to a rapid increase in the vocabulary needed to express these ideas. As Jimena said, "This project helped me with speaking 'cause I was remembering and talking/writing about things I already knew and just had to learn the words, but I knew the words... Even now I know what I want to say but it's hard 'cause I don't know the words." The concepts that the students brought with them provided scaffolding for the new vocabulary and language structures.

Perhaps the social situation of this project also contributed to its success. Yolanda commented that one of the reasons she liked this project was that she

especially liked being with her friend Jimena. Her comment reinforces the idea that learning cannot occur in isolation. The need for this interpersonal sharing is intensified by the rural setting of this school. These ESOL students spend most of their learning time surrounded by native speakers and feeling isolated. As Vygotsky (1977) has observed cognitive development is embedded in the context of social relationships. Thus the supportive interactions between people become the vehicles for learning and intellectual growth. By doing this, language affinities are created as well as an atmosphere of classroom comfort.

There were important results for the parents of these students as well. The parents had contributed to the book by telling stories about their lives and the lives of relatives, by finding and selecting photos, and filling in gaps in their histories. Now they could see their words and their children's in print. The stories they had told children appeared on the page. They had been able to participate in their children's education. I could feel the effect of their pride ripple out. They felt slightly more included in the educational process. The parents of these ESOL students often feel marginalized. Not only is their English often not fluent, but they feel out of place in a system that they didn't come out of and don't understand. Just as the students often don't feel "like other kids" the parents see themselves as other, isolated and in an unsuccessful group. Perhaps the students, at first, could not do things in the school on their own, not knowing the language and not understanding what was being asked of them. They developed coping skills that caused them to tune out and not participate. Their parents were also isolated from other parents and from the pride felt in the accomplishments of

their children. This project revealed the isolation that the students and their parents felt. It served as a way to relieve some of this isolation and help their children become part of the school community. After the completion of this project one of the parents actually came in to talk with me. This act, which would be commonplace for many other parents, I count as one of the greatest signs of the success of this project

### The Teacher's Point of View

In this section I will discuss some of the elements that made the project work. This project combined reading, writing, listening and speaking skills and also used visual, aural and academic skills. Some of the important features of this project were the use of technology for reading, researching, word processing and creating a finished print product as well as scaffolding self correction and classroom procedure that would lay the groundwork for future writing. On the more intangible side, many aspects enhanced the meaning of the project: namely the building of self-esteem, creating a classroom atmosphere of trust and comfort, having topics of relevancy that built on the appreciation of these students' backgrounds, activated prior knowledge, and most importantly created a bridge to literacy and the print world.

*The Starting Point.* Having a relevant starting point was invaluable. Starting with a reading gives the student a place to begin. The reading can be used as a model for writing. In the case of this project we used the topics discussed in our

book to stimulate the students own stories. In other projects, the model can be used for language development. Depending on the student's language proficiency, a word, a sentence, or a paragraph taken from the text can serve as the model. Materials can be chosen that accommodate students' different abilities and affinities thus allowing the teacher to differentiate the task for the student. The more advanced students could begin with a reading on an appropriate level, whereas a student who has more limited language skills could use a picture-based book and substitute words or sentences. Those who have difficulties with print could use oral interviews or drawings to begin with. The text is a trigger, a starting point, that jogs the memory or association and acts as a point of departure for the student. This is especially true for students who are English Language Learners, who spend their days in an English only school program and are isolated from their memories and connections to their culture and backgrounds. By transferring the model the student can connect to their own story and ideas more easily.

*Descriptive Outline.* The simple action of creating a descriptive outline was one of the key factors in the success of this project. It helped the students look back on their work and pushed them forward when they get stuck with their writing. Using this schema spurs on the stalled out writer. The list was not an outline in the traditional sense. It was not meant to provide a sequence but rather provide possibilities. For these students, and many adolescent writers, one of their biggest problems is not knowing what to write about. They often feel they have

nothing to say or how to develop their ideas. The making of the list directs the student to really look at the text and think about what happened in the reading and thus provides the student with a recognition of the development of the selection. In this way their reading comprehension increases as well as helping their writing. (See Appendix 1) The Biography Checklist, which developed subsequently, allowed students to independently review their written work and compare it to the model. This hopefully would lay the groundwork for future writing. This process is what more skilled writers do automatically and what I hoped began for these students.

*The Time Factor.* Another factor that helped the project work was the duration of the project; it lasted for six intensive weeks. This relatively short time kept the excitement and momentum of the project going. The intensive, concentrated time held the attention of the students.

The intensity of the project also had an effect on me and my response to the students' work. I saw how receptive students were to talking about the process of writing if their work was returned promptly. This understanding of the importance of timeliness has remained useful to me in these subsequent years.

*Classroom Atmosphere.* Another underappreciated factor is the importance of the atmosphere in the classroom. There has been much written on the impact of emotions on learning and language acquisition. Krashen (1982) and Swain (1993) among other researchers discuss how important a supportive classroom



environment is for student learning. This comfort in the classroom also leads to developing self-esteem and success educationally. (Nicolini 1994, 6) Motivation and self-esteem are necessary for students to learn effectively, these are possible when anxiety is lessened and does not interfere with learning. Also, when students have authentic reasons for communication and learning, their language production improves. When there is an atmosphere that allows students to discuss ideas as well as to make mistakes, a feeling of trust is created in the classroom and this allows students to tell their stories as well as to accept corrections more easily.

*Power of Print.* I was amazed at the effect of the power of the printed product. Seeing their handsome finished product gave the students a way into the literate world. Creating this booklet, that was bound and had pictures and colors became a tangible example of success. These students produced an interesting text that was based on their backgrounds, countries and family. This same family that was so different from their classmates' and usually excluded in school was now being cherished and appreciated. Making a book just like the ones they were surrounded by in school was a way for the students to enter into that world of print.

Using computers was an effective tool to help students cope with their academic shortcomings. Often ESOL students do not have access to computers at home. Thus the effect of providing the students with an opportunity to get

better acquainted with this electronic tool, that today plays such an important role in schools was immeasurable.

The Internet allowed them to reconnect with places they had known but perhaps had dismissed as irrelevant to their present lives and gave the students a new appreciation for what belonged to them. That experience of seeing something that they had taken for granted, which they may have thought had no place in this rural school environment, affirmed that they each possessed something valuable. The road to their backgrounds reaffirmed and honored their pasts.

The printing and typing of the students' work validated their abilities and work. The students' words were copied on the computer and then printed. This allowed us, as a group and individually, to work on the copy. Seeing their own words typed neatly allowed the students to view their words more objectively and made their words parts of the print world.

Students have to use textbooks in their school life but, never or rarely, do they see their words in that same form. Putting their words into the form of a book allowed the student to see their writing as something valuable. It also allowed the students to see those textbooks as something accessible and not "other" or foreign and hard to relate to. It helped the students identify themselves with academically successful students who that could easily negotiate the print world, students they had previously not been able to identify with.

*Reading.* This internet project combined all language learning skills. Both of these students were reluctant readers; however, during the course of this project they enthusiastically read texts more difficult than they were used to. The students already knew something about the content that they were reading about and thus it was easier to understand the words. Anderson (1999) states that reading comprehension does not rest solely in the printed word but in what the student can bring to the content. Language becomes a needed vehicle to convey a sought after meaning. Familiar content acts as a teacher of language. These concepts became clearly evident as I watched these students avidly read and understand material that related to their lives.

Paolo Freire believes that reading is a political act. Through reading, a person can gain power and participate more fully in the things needed to engage with society. (Brown 1975) It is our job as teachers to help students become literate. Engaging our students in the material at hand allows them to consider what has happened in picture, word or concept and thus think about the world around them. As Freire holds, literacy happens when the material is relevant to the lives of the students. People learn to read when the words have relevance and meaning in their lives. These concepts were at work in this project. Reading about other children's journeys in and to America caused the students to reflect on their own lives. Reading about familiar places and wanting to know more about their native land helped them make sense of the words on the page and improved their reading..

Freire's (1970) literacy program was based on the belief that people can learn to read when words that are used are familiar and meaningful. He believed that if non-readers learned reading and writing through their own words and opinions, then they would learn that their perceptions of reality were valid to others and feel their own power. In this project, the writing of this book encouraged my students to analyze and become aware of their heritage, enabling them to transform their situations and to begin to negotiate the academic world.

*Editing.* The process of noticing differences between their writing and standard English allows students to be successful. Widdowson in "The Ownership of English" (1940) says the exclusivity of standardized English keeps English learners in a separate isolated and inferior position. Those who do not adhere to standardized rules and regulations are marginalized and not allowed to pass through the gate to the educated community. It is through creating opportunities for our students to identify with the published English group that we allow them to see themselves as successful students and able to navigate and participate in this academic world. To get students engaged is what enables them to make the language their own and own the language. Similar thinking encouraged me to do minimal correction during the project.

On the other hand, according to the National Literacy Panel (NLP) which conducted reviews to find effective approaches to help English learners succeed

in school, and Claude Goldenberg (2008), reporting on the latest research conducted by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence ( CREDE) agree that effective English language development requires explicit correction and teaching of features of English (such as syntax, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) as well as meaningful opportunities to use English. (Goldenberg 2008) At the time I conducted this project it was my thinking that too much correction would halt the flow of writing for my students. These students were voluntarily staying after school time, and I wanted to reinforce the “I can” philosophy as opposed to the “I can’t.” After these intervening years, I feel that a balance needs to be struck between free writing and controlled corrected writing and that doing much more explicit correction would be beneficial for students. In the future I will try to use more explanation of grammar points as they come up, and to seize the moments for grammar lessons as they appear. The pendulum swings back and forth between too much and too little correction. A delicate balance needs to be struck between correcting every word thus halting the flow of words and not seizing opportunities presented in student work as a basis for instruction.

*The Ideas from the Students.* Perhaps the most important reason for the success of the project was that the initial idea came from the students. The teachable moment appeared, and we followed it. My letting go of control of the classroom allowed the students to control the direction of the project. The students decided what they were going to write about; not only were they

invested in the outcome but they knew what to write about. The students were ready to let their own memories become their teacher. Relating language learning to what has meaning in students' lives, teaching those things that are known so that the words are learned but the content is known, activates prior knowledge so that language is used as a meaningful tool. When prior knowledge is brought into the classroom, comprehension increases. In this instance, the students knew what they were reading about. They were able to fill in the blanks, learning missing vocabulary and noticing sentence structure. Activating prior knowledge and cherishing students' backgrounds made those memories their language teacher. The concepts were there and learning the words was easy.

Although I always had believed that these moments existed, I was not confident that a moment would present itself to me while teaching or that I would be able to take advantage of it when it did appear. But it did and I did. If one is alert and follows students' comments, reactions and interests invariably a teachable moment appears. This project made me believe in the teachable moment.

*Sources, Sites and Extensions of the Autobiographical Idea.* In this project I used a printed source, *Got Me A Story To Tell* (Yee and Kokin 1992), as the starting point. However, there are myriad resources that can be used to inspire and expand ideas based on the autobiographical theme. I will mention only a few that introduce some unusual mediums. For a non-print resource, I would suggest looking into the National Public Radio program, Story Corps, an excellent site for

listening to aural stories and one of the largest oral history projects of its kind. This site, which also includes versions in Spanish, has been in operation since 2003 and has over 35,000 stories so far. Its mission is to “honor and celebrate one another’s lives through listening.” There is a newly published collection of these stories, *Listening Is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the Story Corps Project* ( 2007).

For students who have difficulty with text, there are many other aids that can be used as starting points: photos, drawings, comics, enactments, puppets, songs, interviews, videos, and recordings. *Authors in the Classroom* (2004) is an excellent resource for reading and expanding autobiographical ideas. There are wonderful suggestions in that book for projects that involve parents and co-authored projects based on familiar poems, articles, stories as well as discussions of the creative literacy process that include ideas for community and parent participation.

Many picture books contain stories covering a wide range of ethnic, and cultural settings. A number of these explore contemporary situations and emotional dilemmas. I include here a sample of books that I have used which incorporate children’s cultural backgrounds: *Children Around the World* (2001) , *Children Just like Me*( 1995), *Just Like Me Stories and Self-Portraits by Fourteen Artists* (1997), *Honoring Our Ancestors* (1999), *People* (1980), *It’s Back To School We Go: First Day Stories From Around the World* (2003), *Throw Your Tooth On the Roof* (1998), *When Sophie Gets Angry --- Really, Really Angry*

(1999). All these books reflect children's experiences around the world and have been useful in stimulating students to write their stories.

Some useful websites intended for children wishing to investigate geographical situations and information about their native countries are [www.kidsgeo.com](http://www.kidsgeo.com), [kids.national geographic.com](http://kids.nationalgeographic.com), [www.geographic.org/geography/The \\_World.html](http://www.geographic.org/geography/The_World.html), [kids.yahoo.com/directory/Around-the- World/countries](http://kids.yahoo.com/directory/Around-the-World/countries), and <http://www.geographia.com>.

Poems, legends and folk-tales in the students' native languages are also readily available at [www.wordswithoutborders.org](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org); The site, [www.international.poetryinternationalweb.org](http://www.internationalpoetryinternationalweb.org), can be used in the students' languages. Interviews, photos, costumes, artifacts are all ways of talking about and including students' backgrounds and stories.

The resources are now limitless. The important point is finding, or better yet having the students find, topics that echo their interests.

In "Affirming Identity in Multilingual Classrooms," Cummins (2005) discusses having students write identity texts, which can be dual language products. They can be created in written, spoken, visual, musical, dramatic or multimodal combinations. These allow students to contribute, express and create in their own language and interest level. These stories can be written in whatever language the student feels comfortable in and then translated by a class or family member.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### Interpretations: The Meaning of Personal Narrative for ESOL Students

When I began this project, I did not realize to what extent personal narrative answered and supported the needs of ESOL students. The extensive reading I did in the preparation of this paper substantiates the value of using this form to aid language acquisition and acquire academic skills. As I read, I found support for my approaches and reasons for my students' successes.

According to Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000) effective learning takes place when teachers awaken students' background knowledge, integrate factual knowledge through conceptual frameworks, and support students in taking active control over the learning process. My instincts in developing this project were borne out by this influential book on brain-based learning. I didn't begin the project with these principles in mind; however, on reflection, I see that they were present throughout the study. What started out as a project to acquaint students with technology grew into a much more meaningful project. I used authentic and relevant reading material which valued students' heritages, giving them an opportunity to utilize their background knowledge and engage in critical thinking, leading to an increased sense of self-esteem. Following the students' lead and allowing them to actively direct the activities created a successful outcome to the project and, hopefully, greater possibilities of academic success in the future.

Experience is the best teacher. As Wu (2000) writes, autobiographical writing is important to ESOL students, not only because it is meaningful but because it allows these students to understand some of the “cultural jewels “ that lie within their heritage and memories. Remembering encourages students to unearth their future as well as cope with their new environment. By looking back, they can create what lies ahead. A Canadian research project makes two extremely important points: first, English language learners’ cultural knowledge and language abilities in their home language are important resources in enabling academic engagement; second, “English language learners will engage academically to the extent that instruction affirms their identity and enables them to invest their identities in learning.” (Early 2002, 4)

Developing literacy and language is tied to how students view themselves. Expressing their identity allows students to communicate and contribute new and relevant information that in turn promotes their communication skills and allows them to negotiate meaning in writing, reading and speaking.

Teachers can’t teach self-esteem, can’t inject a self-concept ‘serum.’ But through success in writing, students’ self-esteem naturally increases. School assignments which revolve around students’ lives take on relevance. Writing their own stories can make students know that they are a part of their own education. ( Nicolini 1994, 6)

It is especially important to give ESOL students assignments that make use of their experiences and prior knowledge. ESOL students are challenged in particular ways. They characteristically don’t take part in their mainstream classrooms. They often feel alienated from the culture in the classroom. The things that they are acquainted with or value are frequently not represented in the

curriculum. The type of language essential for school success is not often used outside the classroom.

ESOL students often have difficulty with academic language although their communicative skills are “near fluent. “ According to Cummins (1979), this is typical of English language learners. Academic language proficiency Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency( CALP), lags behind social language, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills ( BICS). BICS is acquired at a much quicker rate than the more abstract, academic grade appropriate language (CALP). Classroom teachers, unaware of this difference, often cannot understand why a child who appears to understand everyday language finds difficulty with content language. Here is where an ESOL teacher can have an impact. By having her LEP students write about their own lives, she engages the knowledge these students already have, thus lessening the gap between their BICS and CALP.

There are many other obstacles that immigrant children face. Learning a new language often entails leaving behind a portion of their identity. This creates not only a conflict within the student but also within the family. The parents want their children to be part of this new language and culture, but they recognize on some level that by doing this, their children will be cut off from them and from life at home as the conversations they have at home do not use the same vocabulary or include the same topics that the children need to use to succeed at school. However, when their lessons at school include the backgrounds and native languages of the students, there is less of a tug of war between the cultures.

As Cummins (2005) points out, we need not leave that first language at the school door but rather build on and celebrate it. When children are invested in their work, the pre-existing knowledge that is encoded in their first language will carry over and inform the second language. There is a transference, not a replacement or exclusion of that language. This reinforces their self-esteem and allows that prior knowledge to inform and be expressed in the new learning.

Personal narratives function as ways of connecting students' backgrounds, memories, stories, and culture to their present world. Activating students' prior knowledge, valuing their existing experience and building on these in autobiographical exploration are tools that help build academic skills and strengthen students' cognitive and academic development. Learning happens from the interaction between learners and the world around them. This is why autobiographies are meaningful and important. As Pavlenko (2002) states, "stories keep our cultures alive, and ... the ability to tell stories leads to the ability to link different aspects of one's identity." (73) It is through these stories, these personal narratives, that students reaffirm who they are and what contributions they can make.

Students do know what they are talking about; and if we see our job as not simply to impart knowledge but to draw out what is already there, then writing ...can make our students know that they are a part of their own education. ( Ferguson 1990, 271)

Educators should be asking what experience of learning children bring when they begin school and how educators can build on that experience in preparing for the next stage of children's education." (Piper 2003, 254 )

Jim Cummins, in his article "This Place Nurtures My Spirit" (1996), discusses three schools and their different models for creating successful

students. These schools supported identity in different ways, but all provided a place for culturally diverse students to become partners with educators, thus empowering these students to fully express their identity. This honoring of language, culture and background is an advantage and not the disadvantage that some think. As he points out,

Students whose schooling experiences reflect collaborative relations to power participate confidently in instruction as a result of the fact that their sense of identity is being affirmed and extended in their interactions with educators. They also know that their voices will be heard and respected within the classroom. Schooling amplifies rather than silences their power of self expression. (6)

This article presents concrete proof that schools which embraced the students' identities and included parents as resources were environments that promoted success. Incorporating students' cultures and languages had a great impact on the students' academic achievement. The positive interactions between students and educators affected students' academic careers and ultimately encouraged them to be citizens with productive lives. (Cummins 1996)

This sums up the intrinsic value of autobiographical writing which treasures language, takes advantage of experience, affirms identity, builds students' self-esteem. The concrete language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) that are fostered through the students' personal narratives enable students to enter the world of academic success.

## Reflections: Things that Stay with Me

When I reflect on the journey of this project, I am amazed that a simple idea gave shape to such a profound occurrence. Parents, students and myself were able to connect to each other, to school, to our backgrounds through reading, writing and discussing our stories. This web linked us to our stories and rippled out into the world of print. The process of creating these books lessened the awkwardness and the feeling of being “other” for these students and gave them a way into the school environment.

In the intervening years, the situations have changed but the crucial elements of the project remain present in my classroom. The setting, time allotted, and intensity may differ, but the stories that emerge start the spark that leads to our language activities. I often use texts, recordings, drawings as starting points, to inspire and get students going. We often list what happened in the text as a way of figuring out what happened in the text and where it’s possible to go in our writing.

Because my classes often have one to two students, I use several techniques to reduce the sense of isolation these students face. I have started to write along with my students during almost every assignment. This gives the students another viewpoint and connects us with each other. In this way, I become a member of the class. At times, I ask students to discuss these assignments with someone at home. Since the parents of Yolanda and Jimena responded so positively to the project, I try to invite the parents of all my students into the classroom by creating assignments in which the students ask for

something -- a story, a picture, a word, an object --that can be included into the class discussion. This gets the conversation going between students and parents, and between parents and the school. At other times, a student in one district might ask questions or write to a student in another district. All these techniques are my ways of creating a community of learners and strengthening their social environment.

We frequently make tangible print products. Sometimes small books, sometimes typed up sentences, poems, and paragraphs on computers. These printed works help students appreciate their work. We share these, when possible with the mainstream class or display them in our hallway. I find that working on a particular topic focuses the student on the project's goal and keeps students enthusiastically working on the result. The finished products are a source of inspiration and pride for themselves and others.

This project took place between the two summers of my stay at SIT. I had taught English in Asia for many years and in the United States prior to beginning my graduate studies. Many of the discussions and readings at SIT pointed me in the direction of student-directed learning. I certainly believed in the theory but was unsure how I would enact it in my teaching. However, in spite of intellectually supporting this idea, I remained the director of the activities, the one who had to carry the weight of the class. It was through my readings, discussions and exploration at SIT that I developed techniques to implement this philosophy. I found ways to let go, to truly transfer the reins to the students. I started to realize and react to the teachable moment that appeared in my

classes. I became aware that there is not one moment, but many; it is necessary to recognize these and to consult with my students when the direction of our studies have need for a change.

I have found the teachable moment again and again. Amazingly one will appear, something we were talking about, a book that the student was interested in, related topics for writing from my students' interests and lives. For example, one project appeared when both young boys lived on farms and talked about their fathers' work. We then did a search about farm life and tractors. We were able to find many picture books and even though their language levels were limited we could talk and point and draw and write words and sentences based on the print work we found. This honored their families, language and heritage and we were able to build on this father farm theme again and again. This semester one of my students was attracted to a story book that maps out a child's world, *Penny's World*, (2000) this then became an entry into a unit on maps and led into each child's native country.

From the start and development of this project until now I have come to rely on being presented with teachable moments, to invite the backgrounds and knowledge of each student in our class. We incorporate each others' families, lives, culture as our texts; celebrating, honoring and questioning, supporting our meanings and choices. These personal narratives are our tools to learn language and explore our world. What began for me as an abstract intellectual idea of student directed learning has become a reality. Following the students lead allows me to let go and transfer the reins to students. The teachable moments



that I still wait for and don't believe will happen again seem to each semester miraculously appear.

As I embarked, long ago, putting this journey down on paper, I didn't realize that I too was writing my personal narrative. This is another example of how we all have stories and those stories help us make sense of our lives. As I examine this project, I once again realize the power of the narrative and how externalizing the stories within gives a fresh understanding to those stories. I was taught by my experience as my students are taught by theirs.

Our educational journey is full of surprises, for both the student and teacher. I commend the readers to the surprises that yet await them and their students.

## APPENDIX 1

### DESCRIPTIVE OUTLINE

(compiled from *Got Me a Story To Tell*)

**Introduction: self:** name, age, physical description, religion,  
languages I speak, personality  
**where** i come from, live, native country, US  
**when** birthdate, come to US,  
**who:** self, family, live with, parents, siblings, friends,

**Story: what, when, who, where, why , how:**

**Present:** activities, good at, stories, school, home, parents ,  
friends, experiences, week-ends, fights, jokes,  
things that make me laugh, games, music, clothes, holidays

**Past :** memories, smells, sounds, food, places, people, holidays,  
journey to the U.S, differences, things I miss,  
words in my native language that describe and name stuff

**Future:** plans, what I'd like to do

## BIOGRAPHY WORKSHEET/STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION

(You do not have to cover each topic.)

Check what you have completed. Look for what you want to write about next.

I introduced myself

Name.....

Age.....

I told what I look like.....

I told what I am like.....

I told about what I like to do.....

I told about my family      Who I live with.....

One special person.....

What is his/her job.....

What do they do .....

I told about something that happened to me:

When I came to the US.....

Where I came from.....

What did it look like.....

My first day at school.....

I told about something I remembered about my country:

A smell, sound, sight, taste, food, song, poem, object

I told about something that happened in my new life in my new life:

some piece of special clothing.....

about a friend .....

about a place.....

something I do here.....

my house.....  
 about my school.....  
 an object I bought .....  
 an object I brought .....  
 an experience.....  
 a holiday.....  
 a story.....

I told about what might happen in the future : a

place to live .....

something I hope to do.....

I need help with.....

I will check spelling,..... tense agreement....., vocabulary.....,  
 capitalization....., sentences.....

I will circle anything I'm not sure of :

I used details.....

I used adjectives.....

I asked other people about missing information.....

I want to work on ..... for next time????

I have these ideas..... for next time??

## APPENDIX 2

### STUDENT INTERVIEWS

**Jimena Garcia** (dictated to Ms. Block)

#### **What do you remember about the project?**

I remember that you (Ms. Block) told us to stay after and work on a project. You told us to write about the first day we came here and what kind of clothes we brought with us...after that we hand wrote the stuff and then we gave it to you and we fixed the mistakes together. Then after that we started typing it. We brought pictures and put it on the computer. We looked for what kind of food, map, places and tell about our family. We talked about school and differences and what we learned. What happened when it rained .talked about weather... We printed pictures from the internet...We put a cover and bound it.

#### **How did you feel?**

I felt excited. I knew other people would read it and other people would like it. The year after I was in sixth grade and I went to the Kindergarten and explained about where I lived....they asked lots of questions.

I felt the kids were interested in other countries and in mine...it made me proud that I had something to tell them.

#### **How did this project help you?**

It helped me read....to learn what I didn't know.  
It helped with learning words and spelling...  
What did you like about this project?  
I liked that it was every day...I got used to it  
I liked that I gave you something and you returned it quickly.... the same day

#### **What were the results of this project?**

I had a better understanding of spoken English having intensive(more) time helped put it together,.  
When I showed my parents they were happy cause it showed I could do things on my own....like other kids.  
This project helped me with speaking cause I was remembering and talking/writing about things I already knew and just had to learn the words but I knew the words...  
Even now I know what I want to say but it's hard cause I don't know the words...don't know how to say it...  
It also helped to use the computer...typing it up made it clearer

**Yolanda Romero** (Written on her own)

**Prompted: What do you remember about the project?**

**What did you learn? What improved? What did you like?**

My English improved by thinking about my report and then talking to Ms. Block

Now I can do a lot of things that I couldn't do before...like doing reports in my English class.

My reading improved by going to a special class. I go to a reading class to help me read better. My writing improved by Mrs. Block helping me write better.

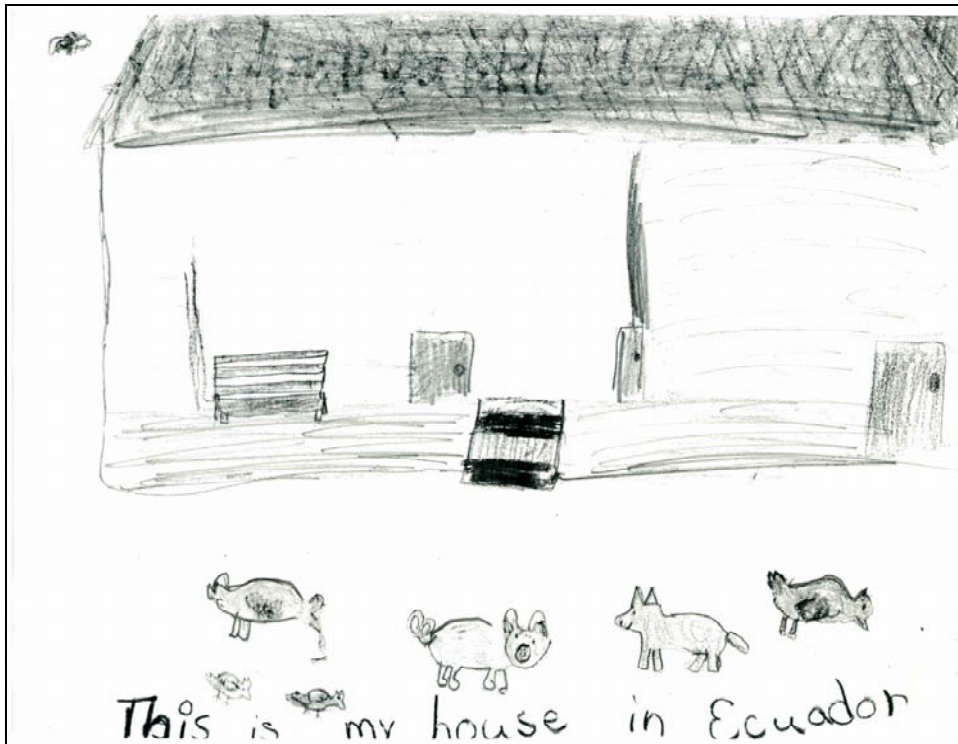
I liked doing this report because I was with my friend Jessica

## APPENDIX 3

### STUDENT WORK

#### *1. HOMES*

My name is Yuri Romero. I live in Catskill N.Y.. I'm from Ecuador. Most of my family is in Ecuador, but I have some over here too. In Ecuador I had a big house. It was very pretty. We were very rich. When my Mom was in the United States she always sent us a lot of money, but now we get one dollar when we are being good. Now our house is very big and pretty. Since I came to America I have moved 3 times. The first home I had was in Manhattan. The 2nd was in the Bronx. The 3rd was in Catskill. When I came to Catskill I lived in A small house. My stepfather knew that the house was too little for our family so we moved to a different house on the same street.





2.  
*FAMILY*

My family is fun to go out. They are very funny and they like to party. My Uncle Pancho likes to dance. He knows how to dance all the dances of Ecuador. Now I have a new uncle. His name is Orlin. He is like Uncle Pancho but he likes to study. My cousin gets me crazy. I just have 9 here, but in Ecuador I have like 29 on my Mom's side but I have more on my father's side. My brother Eduardo and Boris, that's his nickname, are very nice and friendly when people are around but when the people leave they are like cats. They bother Karina, that's my sister and me. Well that's how they have fun. My sister Karina, is a girl that likes to talk about boys. She spends her time talking to her friends. She wants to be 18 years old, even though she's only 13. Eduardo wants to be the boss of the house. Boris is 1 1/2 years old so I don't know what he'll be like. I am 11 years old and I want to stay 11 years old forever.

3.

*Ecuador Family*  
*My Grandfather*

In Ecuador I have too many people in my family. I don't know all their names. but I know some of them and how there house looks like. My grandfather is very rich. he has a lot of land. I don't know how big it is. But if you measure from our Elementary school down to the point, the Hudson River, that's how big it is. I think it's about three miles.

When I lived in Ecuador my grandfather was strong. He could cut down and carry a tree all by himself. He came to visit us two months ago. The last time I saw him he had become weak.

My family said that my grandfather is going to divide his land and give it to his sons and daughters. This makes me very happy. Because if my Mom gets land then I can go to Ecuador for the summer and have my own house.

One day my aunt told my uncle that there was a new tunnel. My Aunt works in a gold mine. My uncle said that he was going to go to the new tunnel. So, the next morning my uncle and two workers went to work. When they found the tunnel they went inside.

A worker saw a rock that had gold in it. He began to dig it out.

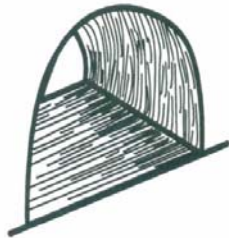
He dug where he had found the rock . He took out the rocks and put them in a basket. Three (3) minutes later the tunnel began to shake.

**1 2 3**

My uncle said, " Salgan te aqui !", which means

" Get Out of Here ! "

The rocks started to fall down. One of the rocks fell down on a worker. My uncle went to get him out. A big rock fell down on the two of them. The other worker was almost out of there when a rock fell on his legs. He never walked again. The sad part is that my uncle and the other worker died. I miss him.



## Life in El Salvador

The clothes we wore were shorts , T-shirts or skirts. Some people only had old clothes. The food we ate was eggs and pig meat. It tasted good. We also ate candy. The candy is from Central America. It is different from here.

The holidays have fire works. There are special days. We remember the dead people on Memorial Day. We go to the cemetery. Another holiday is Mother's Day, Father's Day and the Day of the Child. It is a super special day in Central America. The parents or grandparents go to school and the children dance and sing for them.

The songs are Spanish Music. They are salsa or meringue or cumbia.

In Central America we tell about scary stories in the night. After we hear the scary stories we fall sleep more quicker. In Central America I was scared me two times in the night. It was so scary. I will tell you that scary story right now.

The story started when my mother was in the USA.....

One night I was sleeping with my little brother. He was only seven years old when this happened. I heard knocking at the door, three times. I thought it was my brother but it couldn't be cause he was next to me. I touched my brother because he was still sleeping. The next day I told the children in my old school in Central America about the night that scared me. The second day I heard the same scary noise outside. I asked my grandmother but she said my brother was sleeping with her and she told me it was not possible.....and she told me why and I told her nothings and I went to sleep again. A few days later I went outside to go to the bathroom. It was 12:00 PM in the night. When something made me look backward when I saw a white ghost and I pull my pants up and I locked the door of my house. Then I told my cousins. There were two girls and I asked them if I can sleep with them. She said me yes. She told me to bring my pillow and my quilt and I slept with her. The next day I told my grandmother and she told me it wasn't true....but it was true.

I remember in Central America all my family were poor people. The other people didn't have money to buy food or clothes or homes to live in. I remember when I came here it was so weird because I saw lots of snow. The people spoke English and didn't I understand English. I felt so different than other people. That was my first day of school in Saugerties. The other children made fun of me before but now, the American People are my friends. In the apartment where I lived for three years, on my first day in school a girl scratched my arm and I was crying. Another child told the teacher and she didn't say anything to her. When I came home I told my mother what she did to me and my mother was so angry. She told me

don't be her friend .I miss my house in Central America a lot. I lived there for ten years with my grandparents, my brother Wilian my cousins, aunts and uncles. In Central America I went to school until third grade and the school was so different from this school in the USA. I miss my old house, family and friends. I miss my old country El Salvador. I love my country and I will love it forever. I won't forget all my people in Central America. I love that I was born in there. Eventhough, it is poor, I will still love it for ever. I miss my county and I will miss it for the rest of my life.

When I came to America I brought jeans and a shirt because I was so skinny. I went to Guatemala to get my visa to come to America.



## Rain



The rain in El Salvador is cool. It rains very hard in June and July. It is so beautiful when the water comes down.

Sometimes it is scary because it floods.

The people have to move to a different house when it floods.

The rain sounds like someone snapping their fingers. The lightening can be scary and the wind is cold. You can see the trees bending down sideways. You can hear a sound

zoooooooooooooooooom.



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