English Language Learners and the Power of Personal Stories

By Larry Ferlazzo and Katherine Schulten

Josh Haner/The New York Times Students in an English for Speakers of Other Languages classroom at Hylton High School in Dale City, Va.

More than five million children in the United States enter school each year speaking a language other than English. That amount is expected to grow to 25% by the year 2025. It's not surprising, then, that we hear from readers regularly that the more we can offer for this group, the better.

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By LARRY FERLAZZO

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.
–William Butler Yeats

Community organizers talk about the difference between "irritation" and "agitation." We tend to irritate people when we push them to do what we want them to do — when we "fill up the pail," in the words of William Butler Yeats. But we can agitate people when we challenge them to take action on something that they believe is in their self-interest. That's when we can "light a fire."

In my twenty years as a community organizer, my job was to listen to people's stories, then use those stories as a way to light fires.

The process was usually the same: first I encouraged the people I worked with to share their stories publicly and find commonalities with the stories of others, perhaps considering new interpretations along the way. I then challenged them, often collectively, to take action in response to what they frequently discovered were common issues. The final step was always to encourage reflection on the whole process. How could what they learned be applied to future problems?

If this process worked well, participants developed the capacity to speak what I thought of as a new language – the syntax, vocabulary, and grammar of democracy and public life – and gained greater self-confidence with challenges in all aspects of their lives.

When I became a teacher at a large urban high school in Sacramento, where over half the population is English Language Learners, I realized this same process — what I call the Organizing Cycle — worked with my students too.

The key element? Looking at what your students bring to the classroom through the lens of "assets" rather than through the lens of "deficits." The following five steps can help you do just that:

Step 1: Building Relationships Through Finding Commonalities

We know that supportive school relationships are particularly important for English Language Learners. We also know that low-anxiety situations are critical for second-language acquisition.

One simple method for strengthening peer-to-peer relationships is to ask students to speak and write about their lives regularly in small, casual, low-stress ways so that they begin to identify common experiences and desires across cultures and levels.

Times Idea: This fun, interactive graphic shows how thousands of American residents say they spend every minute of a typical day.

Because the numbers are divided by ethnicity, age, education, background and more, students of all levels can develop a similar analysis of their own lives, share them in pairs or small groups, and compare their results with the interactive.

Personal but not *too* personal, this exercise can both help students identify commonalities, and give teachers valuable information about student interests. From here, students might develop posters, graphs or oral presentations that explore how they or their families spend their time and why.

Step 2: Learning New Information Through Connections to Prior Knowledge and Personal History:

"Schema" is the background knowledge we bring to learning a new concept — for example, how what you know or have learned in the past about, say, wizards or the fantasy genre can help you get your bearings when you first read "Harry Potter."

Numerous researchers on the brain and learning, including Renate Nummela Caine and Geoffrey Caine have found that students are able to learn new information better and more efficiently if they are asked to explicitly connect it with something they already know. Many teachers do this already through formal exercises such as K/W/L charts.

With E.L.L.s, however, sometimes we need to go further. Making a place in the classroom for students to tell stories about their lives, families, and cultures that relate to the subject matter you're studying can help them connect deeply to a topic and give them context for understanding it.

In my United States history class for E.L.L.s, for example, students shared their own immigration stories before learning about the stories of other immigrants who have come to the United States in the past. They discovered that immigrant groups across time and cultures have experienced many of the same challenges, including low-paying jobs, lack of health care, inadequate housing, and racial prejudice. They learned about Irish immigrants who faced job discrimination, the Chinese who built the transcontinental railroad in unsafe working conditions for little pay, and Japanese Americans who were herded into internment camps during World War II.

Times Idea: For the immigration story unit, my students used The Times's Immigration Explorer interactive to trace different foreign-born groups as they settled across the United States. They used this as the first step toward answering questions about the groups like:

- Who were they and how and when did they get here?
- What problems did they face?
- How did they respond to those problems?

- How do you think you would have responded to those problems? Why?
- Have you or has your family ever been in a similar situation? What did you do?

Step 3. Developing Student Leadership Abilities Through Self-Efficacy in Literacy

The qualities experts identify as those of a successful language learner share great overlap with the qualities community organizers have identified in good leaders: in both cases they are individuals who are intrinsically motivated, willing to take risks and learn from mistakes, willing to engage with and teach others, and, importantly, have a strong sense of self-efficacy, or self-confidence.

One way to build self-efficacy in your students is by naming and having them practice the skills and strategies of successful learners. If students can monitor their own learning, and know they have an arsenal of internal skills and strategies to call upon, they are more willing to take risks, learn from mistakes, and help others.

Times Idea: Literacy specialists identify many reading strategies that students can practice to build the kind of skills and strategies they need to be independent readers of challenging texts. These include asking questions, predicting, visualizing, making connections to prior knowledge, and evaluating.

Many teachers already teach these skills by having students practice them via writing sticky notes with a prediction or connection they make at a certain point in a text and placing those on the pages themselves.

One way to do it with online materials, such as the accessible New York Times Upfront Magazine for students, is to use the Bounce application. Bounce users can create notes and share them.

Another way students can be self-confident co-creaters of their learning and not just passive consumers is through inductive learning.

Teaching inductively generally means providing students with a number of examples from which they can create a pattern and form a concept or rule. Teaching deductively is first providing the rule or concept and then having students practice applying it.

The Picture Word Inductive Model is one example of an inductive learning process where students first brainstorm twenty words related to a picture, then put those words into categories and add new ones that fit those categories. Next they complete

a "cloze" (or fill-in-the-blank) activity with sentences about the picture which are then put into categories of their own. They convert those sentence categories into paragraphs, and, finally, arrange the paragraphs into essays.

Times Idea: The New York Times has countless suitable images for any thematic unit that can be used in this kind of lesson. The Lens blog might be particularly useful, as might the photos chosen for the daily 6 Q's About the News activity on The Learning Network. The Learning Network also offers additional ideas for using photos to enhance writing skills.

Step 4: Learning By Doing, or Moving From Stories to Action

Remember my history class example, in which my students first told their own immigration stories, then found commonalities with other groups in immigration history?

After learning how other groups had responded to some common challenges, including by becoming legal U.S. citizens and then by becoming "active" citizens by organizing collectively to solve their problems, my class applied some of these strategies to their own present-day situation.

By using the problem-based learning strategy (in which students are challenged to work in groups and identify a solution to a real-life problem), my students organized a school assembly where they and their families could met with job-training providers. They also successfully pushed for programs that were more accessible to local neighborhood residents, including having these programs provided closer to the school.

Times Idea: The Times is full of stories that illustrate Margaret Mead's adage "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has." Students might skim the paper and be on the lookout for such stories to collect for a scrapbook, or they might use such stories as jumping-off points for finding and interviewing people doing similar work in their own communities.

Whether it's a story about a sports team for refugee children a program to train dogs to help veterans or people who design inventions that solve problems for the world's poor, there are many inspiring stories of individuals and groups "changing the world" in The Times every day.

Step 5: Reflection, or How Seeing Stories in a New Light Prepares Students for

the Future

When studying how Native Americans in California were treated during the Spanish conquest, I asked students, "If you were a Native American, how do you think you would have reacted?" Many immediately responded that they were sure they would have violently fought against the Spaniards.

Then I asked them, "Have you or your families ever been in a similar situation and, if so, what did you do?"

Once students heard what had happened to some of their classmates from other countries who had actually tried heroic armed resistance against an overwhelming foe, they realized it might not be as simple as they'd thought. Suddenly they weren't quite as disdainful of the choice many Native Americans made to live under the Spaniards instead of being killed.

Community organizers call this a "judgment" — a conclusion reached after talking with others — as opposed to an "opinion," which is a feeling based only on one's own thoughts.

This then led to students sharing instances in their lives when they were sure they were right and others were wrong, whether with friends, family or teachers. All confessed that they had never thought at the time about the reasons their friends, parents or teachers might have had for their actions.

The point of this classroom story is not, of course, to promote that the idea that slavery is good. Instead, it is to illustrate that reflection can deepen learning about the past, present, and future.

There is abundant research showing the importance of reflection in the education process. Robert J. Marzano calls it "the final step in a comprehensive approach to actively processing information."

One way to encourage students to reflect is just by asking them to respond to simple questions such as:

- What is the most important thing you learned today? Why do you think it's important?
- What could you have done differently today to learn more, or to help others learn more?

- What are two things you could tell your parents or guardians that you learned in class today? Why would you choose those two things?

You can have students reflect daily if you save two or three minutes at the end of each class session and hand them an "Exit Slip" with one or more of these questions on it. They can briefly fill them out, and hand them to you as they leave class.

Times Idea: Use students' own writing to create "word clouds," that show the frequency of word use in a document. Because the words used most often will be larger in the cloud than those used less often, it is a visually immediate way for them to reflect on why some words are used regularly and others less so. You might even upload an entire classes' collection of essays to see what a class-wide word cloud would show. Wordle is a popular free tool that can be used.

Next, students can move on to looking at Word Cloud examples that use text from The New York Times. For instance, they can use one like this one which shows the words most used in speeches at the 2008 Democratic and Republican conventions. Or they can take a long article like this one about how gadgets are distracting us and put it into Wordle themselves to see how the "main idea" of an article might emerge with this kind of analysis.

Years ago, a member of one our community groups was describing the contrast between two organizers she had worked with. She had learned a lot of information from one, she said, but she had learned how to think from the other. Keeping the elements of the Organizing Cycle in mind is just one way we teachers might have a better chance of doing the same.

Larry Ferlazzo has written two books, English Language Learners: Teaching Strategies That Work and Building Parent Engagement In Schools, which was co-authored by Lorie Hammond.