

JOURNEYS INWARD

MARY ELLEN DAKIN, *Column Editor*

The answers on a reading worksheet submitted by the students in his ESOL classes send the author on an exploration of new pathways to lifelong literacy.

Reading (at Heart) with English Learners

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A new immigrant student who recently arrived in the United States walks into an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class. The teacher greets him with a smile, hands him a worksheet with a reading activity, and pairs him with Claudia, an advanced student in the same class. The student tries to immerse himself in the reading but struggles due to the language barrier. When he looks around, he notices that his classmates are frantically answering the questions on the worksheet, not reading. Claudia leans forward and whispers in Spanish, “*No te preocupes por leer. ¡No tenemos tiempo para eso! Simplemente responde las preguntas—busca las palabras clave en la historia y reescribe esa misma oración en la hoja de respuestas.*” (“Don’t worry about reading. We don’t have time for that! Just answer the questions—look for keywords in the story and

rewrite that same sentence on the answer sheet.”)

I was that new immigrant student and that brief event took place in 2005 on my first day of school here in the United States. More than fourteen years have passed since then, but as an ESOL teacher, I continue to see firsthand—now through my students—the consequences of the dominant and thriving mentality at our schools that places greater emphasis on answering the questions than on reading for pleasure. Furthermore, I have come to see that for one of our most vulnerable student populations—English learners (ELs) with emergent literacy skills in their native language and in English—this fast-paced, curriculum driven instruction is not only ineffective, it is harmful.

In 2018, the US Department of Education reported that 10 percent—more than 4,800,000—of all students enrolled in K–12 public schools today are ELs. In addition, scholars Brenda Custodio and Judith B. O’Loughlin estimate that 10 percent to 20 percent of all ELs are considered students with limited or interrupted formal education. However, since

I started teaching at my current high school in 2015, I have seen a consistent increase of ELs arriving in my classroom with no prior formal education. These students have come primarily from three Central American countries—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—but I have also taught ELs with limited or interrupted formal education from Haiti and Liberia. For many of them, sitting down in a classroom, holding a pencil, or reading a book are completely new concepts. But as an ESOL teacher, I am expected to teach them English as quickly as possible to expedite their transition into mainstream classes.

FINDING (AT HEART) NEW PATHWAYS

Early in my teaching career, I found myself at a crossroads, searching for new pathways to literacy. I sought to develop a culture of reading by pairing reading activities with evaluations such as reading journals, written reports, and worksheets my students could use to monitor their reading comprehension. Another activity I included in our reading exercises was asking my ELs to

prepare oral presentations about the information they read. All of these evaluations were guided by the assessment-driven mentality practiced at many K–12 public schools across our nation today. Then one day, after collecting an independent reading activity my students had done for homework, I realized that many of my students had written down similar answers to the questions. The following day, I decided to ask them what they thought about the reading activity, but all I saw were empty faces.

“How did you guys complete the questions,” I asked, “if you didn’t understand the reading?” One student shyly raised his hand and stated, “*Mister, solo copiamos frases de la historia con palabras similares*” (“Mister, we just copy phrases from the story with similar keywords”). In that déjà vu moment, I traveled back in time to 2005 to my first day of school in the United States. That was the moment when I realized that I was placing more value on what my students were producing than on what they were actually learning from the reading exercises. Even more saddening for me, my students were not learning to enjoy reading.

Since then, I have learned that assessment-driven reading routines do not yield any significant learning experiences. Instead, they contribute to reading indifference; as students associate reading with evaluations, motivation to read for pleasure is lost. More importantly, assessment-driven reading is such a difficult task for my ELs with

no prior formal schooling that some would refuse to participate and, instead, engage in disruptive behaviors as an outlet for expressing their frustrations. Determined to put a stop to these ineffective practices, I decided to challenge the curriculum and place more value on developing readers than on training test-takers.

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Since the beginning of the 2018–19 school year, I have modified my methods and am now focusing on teaching reading for pleasure, no assessments attached! Every day, we start our English class with a fifteen-minute independent reading routine. We have furnished our classroom with pillows, beanbags, and comfortable folding chairs that we only use during reading time. Students are free to sit wherever they prefer during our reading routine, the purpose of which is for them to fully immerse in the reading material. After the independent reading routine, we do a Socratic-style open discussion activity where we discuss topics related to the reading. We form a circle and pass around an English dictionary in a clockwise direction and only

the person holding the dictionary has the opportunity to speak, or pass it along if he or she chooses to not speak. Sometimes, students will share information about what they have read, how they enjoyed the visuals in the book, or how to use the dictionary effectively when they are reading to prevent, as one student stated, “*perder mucho tiempo traduciendo las palabras*” (“wasting too much time translating the words”).

In this new practice of reading for pleasure, my students choose any book they like—from our school library, from what is available in our classroom, or from their personal collection—as long as the book is in English or is bilingual (written in their native language and English). For my ELs with no prior schooling, wordless books are excellent reading resources during the first months. Although there is a limited selection of age-appropriate wordless books, I give my students age-appropriate reading resources filled with visuals such as *National Geographic* magazines. Usually, I ask my ELs with limited or interrupted formal education to look at wordless books and, on each page, select one or two images that they want to learn how to write. After the fifteen-minute reading routine, I write the words down for the items they chose in English and in their native language and encourage them to practice writing or tracing the words, depending on their literacy level.

When using traditional, text-driven books, my ELs with

emergent literacy skills will sometimes choose a word or two per page instead of a visual and practice writing those words in their notebooks. After the reading routine, we find the meaning of the words in their native language. In general, I have found wordless books to be highly motivating for my ELs with limited or interrupted formal education. Similarly, traditional text-driven books used as wordless resources have also proved stimulating for them. In addition, the combination of wordless and word-filled books helps students learn to connect visuals with text, a literacy skill they need to develop to be successful readers in our media-driven culture.

Recently, a new immigrant student arrived at our school with no prior schooling, unable to read or write his name. Knowing he is a student in my newcomer ESOL class, his Spanish teacher stopped by one day to talk. “Selvin [student names are pseudonyms] is now writing full sentences in my class,” she said, “and when we have extra time, I see him opening his personal book and reading.” She smiled as she continued, “I asked him today if he likes to read and he told me that he does, and that he really likes reading in Mr. Pentón’s class.”

READING (AT HEART) FOR PLEASURE

For the longest time, reading had been a “lonely, boring, and disconnected” activity for my students (Jeter 98). In my practice of reading for pleasure, I am attempting to change this and make our classroom what Gage Jeter calls “a community of practice.” Reading independently does not have to be lonely; reading in silence does not have to be boring; reading at different levels does not have to make anyone feel disconnected. In our classroom, we are now reading for pleasure and coming together to share what makes reading exciting for each of us, what we can learn from the experience of reading, and what we can do to remain engaged with our texts.

As an avid reader and a literacy educator, it is my hope that in practicing reading for pleasure I am planting a seed for my ELs to continue interacting with texts during and after high school. In addition, it is also my hope that in sharing my story I am also planting a seed for other English and ESOL educators to reflect on how they can nurture a learning environment that celebrates reading as a pathway toward greater understanding of ourselves, our world(s),

and others. I have journeyed many miles through the years to arrive at a place in my teaching where I can say to my students:

La lectura es la actividad más beneficiosa, más culta, más personal, y más creativa que podemos hacer en nuestras vidas. La lectura nos hace expandir nuestros horizontes y nos ayuda a desarrollar nuestras propias ideas. El placer de la lectura es adictivo, pero sólo se puede encontrar cuando leemos fielmente por placer.

Reading is the most beneficial, most cultured, most personal, and most creative activity we can do in our lives. Reading makes us expand our horizons and helps us develop our own ideas. The pleasure of reading is addictive, but it can only be found when we faithfully read for pleasure. [EJ](#)

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