47 Renaming the Moon
Learning English in Middle School

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How does language join us together, or thrust us into a terrible loneliness? Can school be a sane place for preteens in culture shock? What is it that allows us the freedom to write? How do we write with exigency? While we are waiting for our common language to cohere, how can we be a community of thinkers?

These are some of the questions I have grappled with this year—my first as one of the humanities teachers for beginning English language learners in a middle school in Berkeley, California. I was asked a week before school began to take on the level one and two seventh and eighth grade class in English and history for a year. There would be 20 students—and eight home languages. I could not resist.

The day before classes began, I was talking to a few colleagues about my unexpected assignment. A teacher who had worked with many of my students last year looked down my student list. “Oh man,...low...low...low...really low—he really struggles...she’s really low, too. Wow....” Already I was made aware of a view I would need to resist: students as problems.

On the contrary, one of the most powerful concepts that make a classroom a place worth being in is “welcome.” We often write this word with an optimistic exclamation point on day one, but fail to make it manifest during the year. Minute by minute, the welcome must be restated, refelt. You are welcome to be confused! You are welcome to try again! You are welcome, just as you are!

I thought a great deal about my new class, and felt an overwhelming urgency about their language acquisition. Still, teaching that honors the students must be a matter of regular invention, and I realized I would need to create the curriculum with clues from the students themselves. On the first day of class, I held up an index card with the word door written on it. I taped it to the door and asked, “What other words do you know that are in this room?” The kids went to town. They knew telephone, window, wall. By the time we ran out of cards, someone had climbed on a stool to make sure the Rousseau poster way up on the wall had a sign that said, “lion.” Shakespeare’s mysterious face was labeled “man.” Above my desk the photo of Malcolm X had two cards that succinctly named both his inner light and intelligence: “smile” and “glasses.”

It was clear from the first day that our most powerful shared language was the language of gestures—our faces and hands. By the second week, I felt I was acting out verbs and nouns like a desperate player of the Commedia dell’arte. Nothing written in any of the workbooks was working well for me: Sheltered English Language Instruction, also known as Improvisational Theater. Handing out strips of paper to each table group one Tuesday, I said, “Write a good sentence describing what you see. Help each other!” I staggered around the room, clutching a tissue box. I grabbed the classroom phone and had a fake conversation with my mom. Voices buzzed; hands shot up. The first strip nailed it: “The teacher is so sick! She is trying to call her mother.” Our classroom hall pass is a
stuffed toy, a monkey. I grabbed him next and gestured with a pair of student scissors. The students consulted each other, wrote, and announced confidently, “Crazy Mr. Monkey is cutting the air.”

On day two this Fall, I happened to be stepping out during a prep to make some photocopies. Aminah came running down the hall to me. She is my only student from Yemen. I heard she was here last year but made “little progress.” This year she is my only student who covers her head. At this moment she was out of breath. When I realized she was near tears, I found myself choking up too. Clearly, the world is too big and strange. We went over her schedule and decided she should be in a computer class, her elective. I, a reluctant driver who has been lost on so many freeways and in so many neighborhoods, walked her to the building where the teacher was expecting her. Ok, deep breath. We smiled at each other—navigational success!

From the beginning, I looked for others to talk with about silent Aminah and all the rest of the kids. Gina, an insightful 20-year-old tutor from UC Berkeley who is a native Spanish speaker from Michoacán, appeared like an angel in September to volunteer in my class. Gina is lovely with the kids, patient, approachable, and practical. When I asked her a few questions about her sense of the students, she said simply, “Well…y’know—they’re traumatized.” Her matter of fact yet dramatic choice of words surprised me, but made me think about the strain of being a preadolescent in an unfamiliar cultural setting. On days when half the class arrived late and without a pencil, Gina’s point was particularly helpful to me.

By October, I encountered another version of “support” for my students. On Tuesdays volunteers came by bus from a wealthy retirement community to work one on one with students learning English. Four of my slightly more advanced students were invited to meet with tutors. This program has been going on for a few years, usually focused on volunteers talking to students about the books they’re reading, and on building vocabulary. This year, the dedicated director of the newcomer program at our school confided in me that she was rethinking how effective some of the tutors were in their interactions with students.

In an orientation meeting, one woman pressed for state reading scores. “It would help to know how far below grade level these students are.” My heart sank. Was this really the most interesting question she could think of? I explained to the tutors that all the students they work with will score “below basic” in standardized grade level tests, but as tutors they would have the opportunity to gain insight into the kinds of literacy skills the students have in their native languages. They would also have the chance to get to know what the kids were curious about, and what they were beginning to understand.

The volunteers assumed that as tutors they had plenty to offer since they were “educated.” I felt there was an essential element of curiosity and imagination missing. After a few weeks, I became frustrated by the lack of enthusiasm the participating students expressed when I sent them off to the library on Tuesdays. Plus, I missed their voices. At about that time, the program was cut back and no longer had places for my four.

Meanwhile, I was searching for a text that would begin to get at U.S. history curriculum, but would also be a good fit for language development. I wanted to read something that mattered. There was comfort in the concreteness of

“Yesterday I called my cousin.
Today I will call my cousin.
Tomorrow I am going to call my cousin.”

But what else?

In a textbook, I found a full-page portrait of Chief Joseph with his “I Will Fight No More Forever” speech, after his effort to lead Nez Percé families to Canada. I found
notes about the characteristics of a speech: “short, clear sentences; simple, clear structure; strong, memorable words”—good.

When class started, I stood on one of the green desk chairs, waved my arm and said, “Listen, my people!”

I asked the class, “Would you talk like that to borrow a pencil?”

“No.” scoffed Yoshi, “For something important!”

First, I asked everyone to look at the portrait. Students began to argue.

“Is he Chinese?”

“No! Indian!”

“What? Indian?!”

“No—Native American.”

I came back into the conversation.

“Right—OK everyone, he is also a chief. What does that mean to you?”

Someone ventured, “Like Bush?”

(Big laugh from the others…)

I asked them, “I mean, who do you think of as a leader?”

“More like Vicente Fox?”

At this point we paused, and talked more about the Nez Perce and historical background. Then I read the speech. I asked everyone to stand up and read the last few lines together. After three tries, we sounded pretty good.

After the recitation I asked, “So—why is Chief Joseph speaking this way?”

As I stood in front of the class at that moment I asked myself, “Just what am I thinking? Where am I going with this after all?” Though I work the long hours of any teacher in an urban middle school, all too often I still feel absurdly unprepared.

Out of my confusion, a sudden inspiration…I noticed the big black and white photo of Dr. King on my door. He is standing next to a set of microphones in front of UC Berkeley’s Sproul Hall, Of course, I thought gratefully, a connection.

We ended up creating a Venn diagram on the board about Martin Luther King and Chief Joseph. As a student I resented the use of these awkward overlapping circles that didn’t quite accommodate my ideas. I’ve learned to teach my students to make the “both” section a generous center for commonalities. Big space for big thoughts.

“Both—had discrimination by White people!”

“One guy—he was talking about blankets and food….”

“The other one was African American—and more from our time.”

“Both—worried about children!”

“Both—human!”

After weeks of disjointed lessons, a mixture of grammar lessons and simple sentences, I was hungry for some shared literature. I found an anthology of folktales which we began to read together. We read about jealous Pablo and Charon, the banished son. We talked about why they were called “folktales.” People just told these stories to each other. As the kids observed, “Nobody really wrote them or made money.”

After three months of working with the Earphone English (books on tape) program, a collaboration with the public library, I sent an update to the librarian who meets with the kids every other week: “Mira is going back to India because of her new baby brother, and Emanuel is going to finish high school in Morelia.” As I typed the news, I felt the loss of these two memorable students. So much of what I feel on a daily basis is frustration and inadequacy. All Fall, every lesson, every transition, every move with this class took so much time. When I was at my worst, I told them “It’s like being in boring stop-and-go traffic.”
By early December I came in excited about a new plan. Come hell or high water, we would write together. We would take baby steps, but with enthusiasm. I had just returned from a workshop about teaching writing. My vision: comfortable, familiar content coupled with academic language and formal organization. My opening question was, “How do you wake up in the morning?” Soon we were acting out an impatient mom shaking her child, and the disruptive buzz of an alarm clock. “Any other ideas?” My wonderful volunteer patted her head and chest. I understood. “Oh, right...some people have the clock inside!” Together we wrote “procedural paragraphs,” starting with “How to Stay in Bed When You Should Get Up.” According to my class, here’s how: First, tell yourself you have lots of time. Next, plan to get up in just five more minutes. Finally, just pull up the blanket and close your eyes.”

On another foggy morning, the copier was broken so I decided we would read the William Carlos Williams poem, “This Is Just to Say,” an extended apology which was included in an anthology we had many copies of. We read it aloud, with each student taking one short line. We talked about whether or not a person who read the poem would be likely to forgive the theft of plums. I asked all the students to write excuses. Some just copied my example. Juan wrote, “I’m sorry I read your diary. I thought it was about me.” Veronica wrote, “I apologize for missing your party. I was very, very dead.”

After asking for some spelling help, Fernando wrote, “I’m sorry I was in a fight and got suspended. I am in love.”

Just before winter break. I was discouraged. Several of my students had been getting in trouble: Jesus was suspended for bringing superglue to school and smearing it on door handles. Aminah and Jasmin were fighting in a miserable tangle of Arabic and Spanish. “She said madre!” Miguel had been referred to counseling for drawing obscene pictures on other kids’ notebooks. Omar was having a hard time listening to his audiotape of Stuart Little. The last lesson before winter break unfolded when I realized the next folktale from China in our anthology was too confusing. Oh, fine. I could at least give the students a dictation with words from the text. Just then I heard Miguel mumble some magic words under his breath, “Oh yeah—the moon speaks Spanish.”

It was time for us to write a poem, and we did, everybody together, with a dying blue pen on the overhead.

**Moon Poem in December, Room 201**

The moon speaks Spanish.

It says
buenas noches!
In Russia, it follows you
down a snowy road.

It speaks
but no one listens,
In India, the moon is round
and white,
It is shining yellow in Thailand,
The moon in Norway wears a hat
and sings
about tomorrow, It is called
The Blue Cheese.
The moon is a rabbit,
a man.
From the sky it
looks at you
with
sleepy eyes.
In Spanish, says your grandmother,
it is telling you good night,
I will come back.