

## Using Native Languages to Learn English

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Can teachers engage English language learners while using their native language? Absolutely. In many English literacy classrooms, there are a large variety of native languages present; it is almost impossible for a teacher to know every language represented in the classroom. Using the problem-posing method described in this article, any classroom teacher—even one who doesn't know all her students' native languages—can conduct a meaningful English literacy lesson that uses each student's native language.

### The Problem-Posing Method

This classroom English literacy lesson, using Paulo Freire's problem-posing method, was compiled with the help of 7th grade English language learners and their teacher. The school cited is in a large Midwestern city and in a neighborhood that is home to many recent immigrants. In this particular class, the majority of students were native speakers of Spanish, a few Hmong speakers, one speaker of Burmese, and one speaker of Somali. The problem-posing method used to frame this lesson combines listening, dialogue, and action in flexible ways to promote English literacy.

**Listening: Hearing the Story.** In this part of the literacy lesson, the teacher introduces social and historical information related to the topic or theme of study. Then the teacher suggests prereading or individual reflective journaling activities to reacquaint students with their own past experiences. To start this lesson, the teacher uses an example from her own life as the social and historical text to get her students thinking about describing an event from their past. She shows the class a photo of herself when she was seven years old and tells the story of her own immigrant family's move from Minnesota to California when her dad had lost his job with the railroad. Her dad went first, and then her mother, with her four young children, followed on an economy flight that left at midnight and arrived in California at dawn. “I still remember how impressed I was by the sight of the toy city below . . . and how happy my dad was to see us,” the teacher explains.

**Dialogue: Telling the Story.** After telling her story, the teacher shows a four-part drawing on butcher paper that visually tells her story. She asks students to suggest sentences, using the past tense they've been working on, to explain each picture. During this part of the lesson, students talk with each other in small and large groups about their reflective writings or prereading assignments given by the teacher. This generates the language they will use to tell their own stories during the next phase of the assignment.

**Action: Your Story Assignment.** The teacher gives students a lesson guide instructing them to

- Write a story about your childhood in the past tense and in your first language.

- Divide it into four parts.
- Draw four pictures that show the four parts of your story.
- Tell your story in English to three other students and one teacher.
- Rewrite your story in English.
- Rewrite your story in the present tense.
- Hand everything in to your teacher.

In this part of the lesson, students create compositions in their native language. Then, using English, they explain (not translate directly) what they wrote. After this oral language interaction, they tackle the task of rewriting the assignment in English.

The problem-posing method of using listening, dialogue, and action combines reflective thinking, information gathering, collaborative decision making, and personal learning choices to teach English to language learners. It provides an arena where students learn English while using their home languages, cultural stories, and traditions. Students shine as they show their knowledge and make personal connections to learning academic English.

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