

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK HAS A SIMPLE PREMISE. If teachers know, *really* know, their students, they are more able to help them succeed. Every teacher should know something about all their students, but many students come from families whose stories have less in common with the families of their teachers. My hope is that this book will provide insights into the struggles and triumphs of English learners and their families, so you will have a foundation on which to build a personal understanding of each individual English learner (EL) that you're lucky enough to have in your classroom.

ELs typically come from homes or places where English is not the primary language, and they have not yet attained full proficiency in English listening, speaking, reading, or writing, which affects their achievement in school. Although, as a group, ELs are defined by their developing English proficiency, there is as much diversity among ELs as there is between ELs and students who grew up speaking English. In other words, ELs are from all races, ethnicities, socioeconomic levels, educational backgrounds, and family compositions, with the same range of abilities and disabilities that non-EL students possess.¹

If there is one lived experience, however, that most ELs have in common, it is their family's desire for them to have *a better future*. Whether born in the United States or resettled from another corner of the planet, whether the son of a farmworker or the daughter of a doctor, ELs enrolled in US schools represent the hope of promising opportunities for new generations.

The experience of embodying a family's dreams can be burdensome, especially when the traditions of the past collide with priorities of the present, and aspirations about the future distort current expectations. Navigating between home and school is a tough challenge for any child, but even more so for those still learning the language of instruction. Teachers may study theories and methods of teaching students from different backgrounds, but nothing can help us understand multiple facets that underlie each student's performance

more than seeing the full context of the student's life. That's what stories can offer.

WHY STORIES?

The stories in this book are realistic, truthful portrayals of six English learners from preschool to community college, with details that purposefully and concisely present common attributes, issues, and situations that educators of ELs need to understand to support their success at school. Introducing you to EL students from preschool to the first year of college shows how age and grade level affect academic issues, while confirming that other factors, such as the development of oral proficiency, are surprisingly consistent for ELs regardless of age.

Written in the style of creative nonfiction, the book's stories show how various classroom and school considerations, as well as individual and family aspects, affect EL students' achievement, allowing you to dig into the story details for critical analysis. By portraying very specific issues and concerns based on real-life observations and experiences (which knowledge of second language instructional methods and theory can shed light on), the stories in this book are an efficient and compelling means of using literature to address academic topics.

College social sciences and education classes sometimes assign novels written from the perspective of a particular culture, which enable discussions about various characters, events, scenes, and other plot elements related to a course topic, such as the diaspora of a people. While this approach offers interesting insights in an engaging manner, lengthy novels include many aspects of the characters' lives that have little bearing on the content of, for example, a sociology of education course. Reading through many of those pages can feel as if you have to wade through sections to reach the more germane details for class discussion, so these short stories, whose characters, events, plots, and other elements all point toward issues that educators need to know, can be a more efficient way of using literature to teach theoretical and practical concepts. I hope the short stories in this book display immigrant family and EL experiences in a direct, yet contextualized way so that there are ample details to analyze and discuss, but few extraneous tangents. Besides, teachers will probably never know all the details of their students' lived experiences—the full novel of their lives. Short stories, as presented in this book, more closely reflect the types of details that teachers need to know the most.

The story details are a mixture of experiences that I and my students, and my colleagues and their students, have been part of and learned from. For storytelling purposes, some of the details are fictional. In general, except where permission was given to share identifying details, the names and some specifics have

been changed to protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions. However, as can be with texts that blend fact and fiction, it's important to disclose that although most of this happened, all of it is True.²

The stories are told from a third-person perspective, similar to how a qualitative researcher describes a phenomenon they are observing while they participated in it (known as an “emic” perspective). Many times, I have written up the results of qualitative research with “rich, thick description,” and in this book I push that notion further into the realm of storytelling. You, the reader, will be able to peek into the school and home life of the student and their family, as an observer who is an educator, and develop a greater understanding of the context in which the teachers, students, family, and community share lived experiences.

HOW THE BOOK IS STRUCTURED

The six chapters in this book are structured similarly, focusing on the ELs' experience during a school year as well as flashbacks to the immigration story of each character's family. Keeping the time frames constant across chapters highlights the breadth of factors affecting ELs' performance at school. For example, we get a glimpse of how age of arrival in the United States may impact second language acquisition if we look at different ELs' progress over the same time period, as with many different aspects of becoming acclimated to learning in a language that is not spoken at home.

In a way, this book is an anthology of short stories about the lives of ELs at school and at home. By this, I mean that the main characters' individual stories do not intersect. However, the first three chapters take place at Settler Elementary, in Aurora, Illinois, presenting a shared setting to depict similarities and contrasts in different types of EL students and their needs. The last three chapters occur in different places, Chevron Middle School in Orlando, Florida; Alcove High School in Tyler, Texas; and Robles Community College in Los Angeles, California.

The stories' six protagonists span the ages of four to nineteen. Three of the six speak Spanish at home and the other three speak Tshiluba, Vietnamese, and Arabic, while some of them also speak indigenous, minority, or colonial languages as well.

You will meet the following ELs in chapters 1–6:

Chapter 1: Rafael, a boy in preschool, whose family is from Cuba

Chapter 2: Dibenesha, a girl in kindergarten, whose family is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Chapter 3: Josué, a boy in third grade, whose family is from Mexico

Chapter 4: Anh, a girl in sixth grade, whose family is from Vietnam

Chapter 5: Dani, a young man in eleventh grade, whose family is from Iraq

Chapter 6: Loredana, a young woman in the first year of college, whose family is from Venezuela

Each story begins with the student's first day at school, followed by a flashback to their family's journey to the community where the school is located. The story then recounts key events during the fall and spring semesters and ends along with the school year. After every story, an epilogue provides additional details about characters and events as well as practical and theoretical information that shed light on narrative elements. Discussion questions are also provided for individual reflection or book study groups and classes. Endnotes provide links to relevant research and resources for further consideration. My colleagues and I maintain a website, <https://englishlearnerachievement.com>, that includes resources for this book and links to the websites included in each chapter's endnotes, so you can access them without retyping the URLs.

As you read the stories, themes will become apparent within each and across all. I suggest that you jot down the themes you identify in the margins or at the end of a chapter so you can compare them to those highlighted in the conclusion. The conclusion discusses the book's key themes and links them, propelling you to apply what you've learned and to continue learning more.

A WORD ABOUT LANGUAGE

The stories include a number of dialogues, which are represented, for the most part, in English. As you read the dialogues, please note that when the characters are at home, with their family and community, they are written in English but understood to be spoken in the characters' native language. Dialogues at school, with classmates and teachers, are written and spoken in English, except in dual language classes or with bilingual teachers or other bilingual educators. In these cases, the dialogues either use Spanish words and sentences or signal that all or part of the dialogue is spoken in Spanish, for example, by indicating [*in Spanish*]. The English used by ELs in dialogues at school, with classmates and teachers, represents typical sentence structure of the EL student's level of English proficiency at a given moment, and it changes incrementally across time during the school year of focus for the protagonist of each story.

PRINCIPLES BEHIND THIS BODY OF WORK

English Learners at Home and at School is the fourth volume in a series of books my coauthors and I wrote that focus on English learner education, published by Harvard Education Press. All four books reflect a set of principles that motivate our work. My colleagues and I, collectively referred to as the English Learner Achievement Network (ELAN), strongly believe that:

1. Every teacher needs specific knowledge and skills for working with ELs.³
2. Every EL and their teacher need support from an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)/English Language Development (ELD) specialist, who has a greater depth and breadth of knowledge and skills for working with English learners.⁴
3. Every dual language or bilingual program model that serves ELs must include items 1 and 2. In other words, the English-medium instruction in every type of dual language or bilingual program model that includes ELs must be provided by teachers and other professionals with varying levels of preparation and expertise in working with EL students.

Our work began with *Preparing Every Teacher to Reach English Learners: A Practical Guide for Teacher Educators*, which lays out a model for incorporating a focus on English learners throughout university- and district-based teacher education programs.⁵

Our second book, *Educating English Learners: What Every Classroom Teacher Needs to Know*, uses case studies of four ELs to present the knowledge that teachers need to develop to meet the needs of the ELs in their classrooms.⁶ This includes second language acquisition theory, second language instructional methods and curriculum, assessment for second language learners, and sociocultural aspects of second language learning and teaching.

In *Show, Tell, Build: Twenty Key Instructional Tools and Techniques for Educating English Learners*, we describe and share examples of instructional practices that are especially beneficial for ELs and show how they work for them at different English proficiency and grade levels.⁷

Our website, <https://englishlearnerachievement.com>, provides resources for each chapter in every book, and also offers resources for dual language teachers and programs. I encourage you to visit the website for lots of free resources and materials to help you reach your ELs.

Because informational text lends itself better to collaboration than stories, this is the only book of the series of four that has a single author. However, it

represents the generous sharing of experiences, reading of drafts, and finding of obscure facts that my family, friends, colleagues, and students offered for the sole purpose of helping me write the best representation I could of the students we all know, admire, and love.

There's a reason that stories have been used to teach for millennia. Even if readers' lives are different from characters' lives, in the retelling of their experiences, we somehow feel what they are feeling. Stories, and the foundational ideas that underlie them, live within us all, no matter our origins or affiliations. With the lens of these collective, foundational ideas, we might perceive each chapter as a hero's journey or, more simply, as a fish-out-of-water tale. As my coauthors and I paraphrased communication scholars in *Educating English Learners*, the one thing of which a fish is unaware is the water. In the aquarium called the classroom, the medium we all are immersed in is *communication* (verbal and nonverbal), which both shapes and is shaped by culture. The stories of our six EL students are meant to help deepen and sharpen understanding of the role of communication and culture in ELs' academic achievement and to ignite enthusiasm for learning how to support their success.

LITERARY RESPONSES TO THE READINGS

After you read each story, here are some activities to engage with its content:⁸

1. Write a poem that expresses the character's journey and experiences.
2. Make a collage of images that tell key aspects of the story.
3. Complete a story map for the chapter.
4. Write a physical description for each of the main characters, filling in the details from your own acquaintances and experiences that they remind you of. By shading in those elements, you make the stories your own. You will notice that the EL students' physical characteristics are not described. This is simply so you can see your own students in them.
5. Write what happens during the summer or the next academic year.
6. Rewrite a scene with a different outcome and explain why that outcome was possible. If there's dialogue in the scene, rewrite it as well.
7. Write interview questions for the teachers and other educators in the story. Imagine yourself meeting with them for the interview. How would you expect them to respond? What might they say that would surprise you?
8. Each EL student's chapter is simply titled—"Rafael's Story," "Dibenasha's Story," and so on. Create a subtitle for each chapter that describes what

you think the story is about. For example, possible subtitles for *The Wizard of Oz* might be *The Journey Home* or *Journey to a Strange Land*.

EDUCATOR RESPONSES TO THE READINGS

While reading each story, *ask* the following:

What do you know *from the story* that enables you to make inferences about the EL student’s performance and progress at school (academic or otherwise)? What do you know *from your own experience* that enables you to make inferences about the EL student’s performance and progress at school? Consider the following suggestions to address these questions.

1. Make a three-column table for story details. In the first column, list the main details from the story; in the second, list other information about each detail that you’d like to know (e.g., the student responded well to an intervention mentioned in the story, but were other types of interventions used as well? What are the most commonly used interventions for this particular need?); and in the third column, either look up that information (if it’s accessible) or suggest what it might be (see table I-1).
2. List other unmentioned story elements (e.g., what happened before a particular story event or scene, or who are other family members or friends in the student’s life) that you would like to know and why (see table I-2).
3. How would any of these missing story details or elements enable you to make decisions that foster the EL student’s performance and progress?
 - ◆ Note the missing story details or elements and the corresponding decisions that need to be made.
 - ◆ If you were the teacher, where could you look for the missing information?
 - ◆ What could you do if the information can’t be found?
4. Have you had a similar student or experience? What did you do that was similar or different from the teacher(s) in the story?

STORY DETAIL	MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE DETAIL THAT I’D LIKE TO KNOW	WHAT I FOUND (F) OR INVENTED (I)

TABLE I-1 Story details

UNMENTIONED STORY ELEMENTS	WHY I WANT TO KNOW

TABLE I-2 Unmentioned story elements

After reading each story, *do* the following:

Refer to the *epilogue* section at the end of the chapter for more information about selected missing story details and elements as well as a concise summary of current scholarship and resources for more in-depth study.

1. Compare your notes from questions one through four to the details provided in the epilogue.
 - ◆ What were you able to conclude correctly based on your prior knowledge?
 - ◆ What incorrect conclusions did you make based on your prior knowledge?
 - ◆ What details did you miss altogether?
 - ◆ For which issues will you consult additional resources?
2. Reflect on how you will use what you learned from this chapter and its additional resources in your own classroom.