

The universal language of pictures: A critical tool for advancing student writing

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Pictures offer a universal language for thinking and recording ideas. Creating pictures before writing can provide an engaging and effective alternative pathway into literacy learning for English learners and others who struggle with writing. As educators face the many challenges of trying to meet the diverse needs of students in their multilingual classrooms, treating pictures and words as parallel, complementary, and equal languages for learning can serve to strengthen students' literacy engagement, deepen their thinking, and support language acquisition, thus providing a critical bridge into written language. As second-language experts call for allowing translanguaging—the natural movement between and among languages—and the creation of dual language and multilanguage texts, this article explores why moving to a multimodal, pictures-first approach to teaching writing offers English learners and their teachers an additional layer of scaffolding to support the acquisition of essential literacy skills.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Pictures serve as a universal language. As human beings, our brains are hard-wired to think and record meaning in pictures (Jensen, 2001); evidence dates back to our earliest recorded history (Clottes, 2003; Fein, 1993; Jensen, 2001; Serafini, 2014). Parents and teachers witness daily the natural inclination and ability of young children to make meaning through drawing. It is worth noting that the drawings of children from around the world progress through the very same developmental stages; these stages and patterns mirror those of our earliest ancestors (Fein, 1993), again suggesting that human beings are hard-wired to make meaning through visual representation.

Studies indicate that when teachers allow young children to build on their inherent meaning-making abilities by drawing while they are learning how to write, students transition into written

language more easily. They are also able to create more complex texts (Mackenzie, 2011). This should not be surprising given that, as Caldwell and Moore (1991) note, drawing is a flexible, invented, personal sign system, unconstrained and open to personal interpretation (Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013). In contrast, writing is a closed system determined by cultural context and constrained by rules (Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013). Simply put, one comes naturally; the other must be taught.

Inviting students to record their ideas in pictures first—before writing—enables them to develop and anchor their thoughts on paper visually in a language unconstrained by rules and conventions before tackling the challenge of adopting the rules and conventions necessary to convey their meaning in writing. The universal language of pictures offers a natural bridge into written language for those learning to write in any language. When picture-making, picture-reading, and picture-writing are placed at the heart of literacy learning, English learners and others who experience difficulty writing make significant gains (Frankel, 2011; Olshansky, 2008).

Given students' natural ability to make meaning through visual representation, the universality of pictures as a language for thinking and recording meaning, and the ever-increasing diversity within today's classroom, this article explores the critical role picture-making can play in providing an enticing, alternative pathway into literacy learning for English learners and others who struggle with writing (Fu, 2003; Olshansky, 2008; Ray, 2010).

2 | THE COMPLEX ACT OF WRITING

Consider the challenging task of learning how to write (Cabell, Tortorelli, & Gerde, 2013), whether for English learners or native English speakers. Berninger (2009) is one of many who recognize that learning how to write involves gaining mastery over a number of complex systems (Cabell et al., 2013). Let's unpack the many tasks involved in emergent writers getting a simple sentence down on paper. First they have to think of what they want to write. Staring at a blank piece of lined paper often is not helpful in generating an idea. In order to come up with an idea, students have to recall a scene or an image and hold that image in their mind while trying to compose a simple sentence to describe it. After rehearsing the sentence that describes the mental picture, students will have to repeat that sentence (all the while picturing the image) in order to listen for the first word of that first sentence. Once they identify the first word, they have to repeat the word one or more times in order to listen for the first sound of that first word. Next they have to try to identify the letter or letter blend that makes that sound, match the sound to a mental image of the letter, and then try to draw the letter, all before repeating the entire process over again in order to identify the next letter of the first word. In order not to lose track of their idea, students will have to return to their original mental picture to recall their sentence so they can listen for the second sound of the first word.

Even today, as I revisit this process 60 years after my own early challenges learning how to write, I grow weary, anxious, and overwhelmed. Clearly, learning how to write is no small task, made even more difficult for those grappling with learning a new language.

3 | CURRENT BEST PRACTICES FOR TEACHING WRITING TO ENGLISH LEARNERS

Research on best practices for writing instruction in multilingual classrooms suggests that teachers follow many of the same best practices recognized for teaching writing to native English speakers, while giving special consideration to providing additional layers of scaffolding for English learners

(Goldenberg, 2013; Olson, Scarcella, & Matuchniak, 2015). Accepted best practices for English learners include providing clear instructions; offering explicit modeling through the use of mentor texts, student samples, and teacher models; providing specific strategies and procedures; designing writing activities that ensure student engagement; and creating opportunities for effective teacher feedback as well as focused, meaningful interaction with peers (Goldenberg, 2013; Olson et al., 2015). Scaffolding reading and writing instruction through the use of graphic organizers and meaningful visuals is also recognized as a best practice for teaching writing to English learners (Olson et al., 2015). Best practices encourage teachers in the multilingual classroom to use culturally responsive curricula and instruction (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005).

It is interesting to note that in all of these best practices recommended for teaching English learners, there is little mention of the role of pictures as a universal language. When the use of visuals is referenced, it is often in the form of *showing* students pictures rather than asking students to create their own. Yet Meltzer and Hamann (2005) stress the importance of student engagement as a vehicle for reducing affective barriers that inhibit learning. Given students' natural inclination to make meaning through pictures, the universality of pictures as a language for communicating ideas, and the immediate engagement that occurs when students are invited to make pictures, this appears to be a curious oversight.

Cummins et al. (2016) have observed another curious phenomenon—that English learners are often asked to leave their prior knowledge, their language, and their culture at the classroom door as well-intentioned teachers try to instruct them in the English language and the curriculum, disassociated from any meaningful context. In contrast, Cummins et al. encourage the use of first languages in the classroom and the development of dual-language, multimodal texts. Welcoming students' home language(s) and prior knowledge in the classroom creates an atmosphere in which students feel accepted, respected, and valued for the skills they bring to the classroom (Cummins et al., 2016; Rowe, 2018). Cummins et al. (2016) note that, when given a choice of languages, English learners will choose to use their stronger language. This allows students to more fully capture their meaning within their first written draft.

Recent best practices go a step further in encouraging translanguaging in the multilingual classroom. Translanguaging allows for the intermixing of languages natural to bilingual or multilingual speakers, reflective of daily practices at home and within the community (Rowe, 2018). Lee and Suarez (2009) note that, when students learn in environments in which translanguaging is welcomed, they are more likely to develop positive identities (Rowe, 2018). Goldenberg (2008) maintains that these students also perform better academically (Rowe, 2018).

In her recent article, "Say It in Your Language: Supporting Translanguaging in Multilingual Classes," Lindsey Rowe (2018) identifies six design principles to aspire to as teachers create learning communities that support language acquisition and literacy learning of bilingual and multilingual students:

- value students' language and culture
- model translanguaging
- create authentic opportunities for multilingual communication
- encourage two-way translation
- compose dual-language or multi-language texts
- invite bilingual and multilingual audiences to celebrate student work

In multilingual classrooms where several languages are spoken, implementing these principles may involve reaching out to family and community members to help with translations. While the idea

of bringing students' home languages into the classroom is an exciting one, it can be overwhelming for teachers who lack knowledge of these languages (Cummins et al., 2016). Yet Cummins and Rowe both maintain the importance of offering bilingual and multilingual students opportunities to participate in meaningful literacy engagements in which they have the opportunity to share their knowledge, their culture, and their identities in the classroom.

4 | RECOGNIZING PICTURES AS A FIRST LANGUAGE

As we reflect on the challenges that bilingual and multilingual students and their teachers face, let's consider how educators might harness the natural ability of English learners to develop and record their ideas in pictures to support the creation of multimodal as well as dual-language or multilanguage texts. If we recognize pictures as our first "written" language, one that offers expression unencumbered by rules and conventions, this may create a space within which to understand how students might benefit from developing and securing their ideas to the page in pictures before struggling to express their ideas in words. Let's look at some of the advantages of making meaning in pictures first.

4.1 | Advantages of a pictures-first approach

Within our current educational climate of school days packed with mandated curriculum and pressures created by high-stakes testing, there is little time to offer students opportunities to engage in what has come to be seen as "frivolous" activities such as picture-making. Yet, as noted earlier, for some, pictures can provide a critical bridge into literacy learning, especially for English learners and others who struggle with writing. When students are given opportunities to make pictures first before they write, the very act of creating pictures provides students with concrete tools for thinking and further developing their ideas.

Through engaging with art materials, students often develop elaborate visual representations, reflecting more complex, detailed thinking than if they were simply trying to express that meaning in words alone. The very act of creating pictures serves to *anchor* their thoughts and *also* provides concrete tools for further developing their ideas. Additionally, students are freed from having to simultaneously hold onto a mental image as they struggle to get their ideas down on paper in written form. As they sound out words and compose sentences, they can easily return to the concrete image they created as often as needed. While this is a plus for students writing in any language, for those attempting to learn a new language, it provides critical scaffolding.

Students' visual representations help teachers as well. They provide a doorway into deeper conversation about what a particular student is thinking and attempting to convey in written form. Rather than trying to pull details out of thin air, teachers can refer students back to the concrete image(s) they created to practice close reading of visual text. Through this process, students are often able to elicit more detail and description.

4.2 | Role of pictures in literacy learning

While our current educational system diminishes the value of art as a process because it is not a skill that is tested, the critical link between visual thinking, reading, and writing remains central to literacy learning. To comprehend what we read, we must be able to picture the meaning of those words in our mind (Dinkins, 2007; Wilhelm, 2008). If we simply sound out words without

picturing their meaning, we cannot comprehend what we read. The ability to visualize is critical to reading comprehension (Zorfass & Gray, 2018).

Likewise, an effective writer has learned how to paint pictures in the reader's mind by visualizing what he or she wants to say and then describing that mental image in words (Dinkins, 2007; Wilhelm, 2008). Thus, both reading and writing involve visualization. When we invite students to make pictures before they write, in the very act of picture-making they practice visualization, thus strengthening the skills necessary to becoming strong readers and writers. When students make pictures first and then write, they also experience a powerful phenomenon known as transmediation.

4.3 | Transmediation

The phenomenon of transmediation is rarely discussed within today's educational circles. Transmediation is defined as the act of recasting or translating meaning from one sign system to another (Leland & Harste, 1994; Siegel, 1995, 2006). In the field of semiotics, a sign system is any system used for communicating meaning. Moving beyond our educational system's verbocentric biases, semioticians recognize that human beings communicate not only through oral and written language, but also through the many languages of art, music, dance, and mathematics (Albers, 2007). Leland and Harste (1994) note that moving between and among sign systems enriches thinking and should be seen as a fundamental process in literacy. The experience of transmediation (i.e., making meaning in one sign system and then recasting that meaning into another) has been shown to deepen students' thinking, generate new ideas, and create opportunities for reflective thinking (Siegel, 1995, 2006). It also helps students to make new and deeper connections (Albers, 2007; Leland & Harste, 1994).

When students recast meaning from pictures to words, it can increase their use of descriptive language, thus fostering vocabulary development (Olshansky, 2008). Reading pictures to access detail and description can bring with it discussions about the importance of word choice. Students are encouraged to brainstorm words and phrases that describe what is happening in their picture and then choose those that do the best job capturing that meaning. Through this process, they discover that word choice matters. They also discover that the use of strong verbs can make their picture appear to come alive, providing all the more incentive for paying special attention to word choice.

Given all these benefits, why then aren't more educators talking about this powerful phenomenon? I believe it is because our educational system is so focused on monomodal, verbocentric (word-centered) means of expression that the benefits of engaging students in multimodal expression have been largely ignored. Only those who are actively advocating for multimodal practices are having these conversations. But in a time of both increasing pressure to score "proficient" on state tests and increasing diversity within our classrooms, teachers may benefit from reconsidering conventional verbocentric practices. Even in classrooms where translanguaging occurs, or dual-language texts are being created, students and teachers can still benefit from embracing pictures as an equally valued language for thinking and recording ideas.

4.4 | Medium matters

The experience of transmediation (in this case, making meaning in pictures and then recasting that meaning into words) can be greatly enhanced by giving students access to richer art materials than the standard classroom fare of colored pencils, crayons, and markers. Most students are eager to engage with new art media. Many newcomers have not been exposed to art materials beyond the basics, so the introduction to these new materials can serve to generate excitement. One should not

underestimate the potential of exposure to “real art materials” to bolster students’ eagerness to engage and their self-esteem as artists.

The use of richer art materials can also generate new ideas, especially if the medium has a bit of unpredictability to it as is the case with watercolors. Using real (though reasonably priced) art materials will enhance the quality of the image, sustain engagement, and deepen students’ thinking. This quality “think time”—with art materials in hand—along with the concrete visual record of students’ thoughts can serve to enhance the quality of students’ writing (Olshansky, 2008).

Figure 1 shows two pieces of art and writing created by two first graders.¹ The subject matter is very similar. One first grader uses colored pencils, materials typically available in the classroom; the other uses crayon resist (crayon with watercolor washed over it). Both students made their pictures first, read their pictures, and wrote down words to describe what was happening in their pictures. Note the difference in the quality of both image and text. It’s clear that the first grader who used the crayon resist process was able to create a more dynamic, nuanced picture which, in turn, inspired writing that was far richer. That first grader was also guided through a formal picture-reading/brainstorming process, jotting down descriptive language before selecting the best words to capture the meaning of her painting.

Notice the picture on the right also possesses more aesthetic qualities; it could even be considered “a work of art.”

4.5 | Sign system versus discipline

Over the last quarter century, I have observed that even with a picture-first approach to writing, and even when students are offered quality art materials, students benefit greatly when teachers treat picture-making as part of an artistic discipline or process as opposed to simply a meaning-making activity occurring without guidance. When students are given access to quality art materials *and* are given some basic level of instruction, the quality of their art (and, subsequently, their writing) improves (Olshansky, 2008). For those teachers with little or no art background, fear not. One need not be an artist or an art specialist to be able to share some simple art techniques or understandings about composition, though some basic knowledge (easily acquired in a hands-on workshop) is useful. It can also be helpful for teachers to experience for themselves the dynamic relationship between pictures and words.

5 | ARTISTS/WRITERS WORKSHOP

Over the past 28 years, I have developed and refined an art-and-literature-based approach to literacy learning that has demonstrated its effectiveness in advancing writing skills and fostering reading for a wide range of learners, including English learners (Frankel, 2011). Artists/Writers Workshop, intended to be facilitated within the classroom, builds upon Writer’s Workshop popularized by the late Donald Graves in the 1980s and 1990s (Newkirk & Kittle, 2013).

One of the hallmarks of Graves’s revolutionary approach to teaching writing was that it moved teachers away from the then common practice of teaching writing through the use of worksheets to treating writing as a process. Graves advocated for a process approach to teaching writing, one

¹Permissions for the use of all photographs of students and their work were obtained as part of curriculum development work funded by an Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination Grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement.

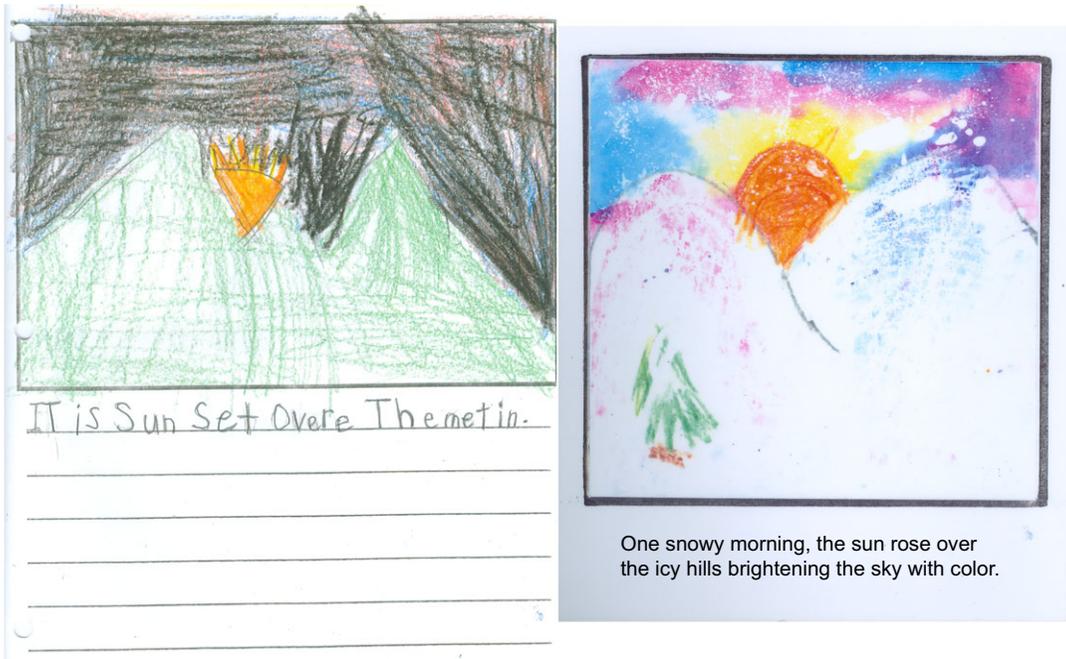


FIGURE 1 Comparison of first-grade art and writing. Picture on the left was created using colored pencils; picture on the right using a crayon resist process. Note how a richer art process produces richer language

that parallels the writing process of professional writers and recognizes the five stages of writing: pre-writing, rehearsal, drafting, revision, and preparation for publication. Graves encouraged pencil sketching as a prewriting activity (Newkirk & Kittle, 2013).

Artists/Writers Workshop builds upon this process approach to teaching writing. However, it treats words and pictures as parallel, complementary, and *equal* languages for learning. It attempts to shift the paradigm away from our current predominantly verbocentric, monomodal approach to teaching writing to a multimodal one in order to level the playing field for a wider range of learners. Maureen McLaughlin (2013), past president of the International Reading Association, reminds us, “When we use multimodal text, we broaden the spectrum of student learning.... By tapping into multiple modalities, we also encourage students to use their strengths as they learn” (pp. 20–21).

As the name implies, Artists/Writers Workshop privileges the art process, ensuring that art-making occurs before writing. Moving from image-making to image-reading transitions students seamlessly from the pre-writing to the oral rehearsal stage of the writing process. As students orally rehearse what they want to write, they can easily revise or embellish their sentences before they begin the hard work of writing words down on paper.

The oral rehearsal process also allows teachers and/or classmates to share pertinent vocabulary as they observe English learners searching for the words to describe what is happening in their picture or picture sequence. Like Writer's Workshop, students revise and edit their writing (as well as have the option to fine-tune their art) as they prepare their work for publication.

5.1 | Use of mentor texts

But Artists/Writers Workshop goes well beyond simply an emphasis on art-making as a visual thinking strategy. Each Artists/Writers Workshop begins by sharing a piece of literature, in this

case a quality picture book. Not only can students stare at the pictures while they listen to the text in order to enhance their understanding, but also they can practice close reading of both image and text. When students read the pictures for meaning, they practice drawing inferences. When they discuss how they arrived at that meaning, they practice citing evidence. Close reading, drawing inferences, and citing evidence are all skills that appear in our English Language Arts Core Reading Standards. Though the drafters likely intended students to practice these skills while focusing solely on written text, they can be applied to “visual text” as well.

5.2 | Equal attention to written and visual texts

Peggy Albers (2007, p. xiii) uses the term *visual text* to highlight the parallels that exist between what is conveyed in pictures and what is conveyed in words when teachers use quality picture books as mentor texts. Just as we encourage students to read like a writer, we can also encourage them to see like an artist. This means that beyond interpreting the meaning of the picture(s) in picture books, students learn how to analyze key visual elements in picture book illustrations. For example, just as students might be asked to analyze how writers establish a sense of setting in their lead sentences, they might also be asked to analyze how artists convey setting information in their lead pictures. Once students understand that a “setting picture” often contains information about the time of day, the weather, the season, and the place, they can embed that information in their own setting pictures. When it comes time to establish the setting in their writing, they need only read their setting picture to elicit the information that they have already recorded in their visual text.

When teachers use picture books as mentor texts to study both visual and written texts, the complementary and parallel nature of pictures and words becomes apparent. This awareness can be enhanced by the use of specially designed brainstorming sheets that guide students in the process of reading their pictures to elicit descriptive language (Figure 2).

5.3 | Four steps of Artists/Writers Workshop

Within Artists/Writers Workshop, the study of quality picture books is embedded into every lesson. The workshop model follows four basic steps: (1) literature share followed by discussion; (2)



Name Ubaldo Lead Sentences: Setting/Character page 1

Weather	Season	Time of Day	Snow	Character
showy icy SOFTLY	winter	Twilight	fully softly.	Polar Bear
			<u>Where?</u> in the sky.	

One Snowy winter Twilight snow was falling softly in the sky
Thomp Thomp Thomp who is there !!

FIGURE 2 Second-grade English learner fills out Lead Sentence Brainstorming Sheet, reading his picture to access setting details prior to drafting his lead sentences. Note the inclusion of an auditory hook to make the reader want to turn the page

modeling an art or writing process; (3) work session, in which students apply the skills and concepts they have learned; and (4) group share, in which students share and discuss their visual and written texts (Figure 3). Embedded into every lesson are many of the best practices recommended for English learners, including modeling through the use of mentor texts, student samples, and teacher models; offering explicit instruction; providing clear strategies and procedures; and creating opportunities for focused, meaningful interaction among teachers and peers.

Artists/Writers Workshop is facilitated in two complementary strands: an art strand, which focuses on the language of pictures; and a writing strand, which focuses on the language of words. As the name implies, the art strand always precedes the writing strand. Having their own image in front of them enables students to access the words (in any language) to describe what is happening in their pictures. This multimodal approach also ensures students benefit from the experience of transmediation while providing concrete steppingstones for those wishing to write in one or more languages.

5.4 | Translanguaging: Dual-language and multimodal texts

In multilingual classrooms, where pictures are treated as a valued tool for developing and recording ideas, English learners are able to more easily navigate the waters between and among languages. Anchored by their visual representations, students are able to move back and forth between image and text, experiencing the benefits of multimodal thinking. Additionally, because pictures offer a universal language, in classrooms where translanguaging is encouraged students are invited to recast their meaning in any language or mix of languages. In this way, they can more easily capture the meaning of their visual images using the full range of words they know. They can also more easily create dual-language or multilanguage texts, once again anchored by their own visual representations.

Artists/Writers Celebrations are often held as a culminating event once students' books have been published. This is a time when family and community members gather to honor and celebrate students' literary and artistic accomplishments. For family members who are themselves English learners, meaning made in both image and text helps parents better understand the content of their child's work. When students' published work also includes their home language(s), this sends a powerful message to families that their language and their culture are welcomed in the school.

Given the universality of pictures as a language, it is easy to see how adopting Artists/Writers Workshop in multilingual classrooms offers opportunities for teachers to embrace the six design principles outlined earlier by Rowe (2018) while adding yet an additional layer of scaffolding to support English learners.

Artists/Writers Workshop

- Literature Share/Discussion
- Modeling
- Work Session
- Group Share

FIGURE 3 These four steps of Artists/Writers Workshop are followed whether facilitating the art strand or the writing strand

5.5 | Two evidence-based approaches

Within the framework of Artists/Writers Workshop, I have developed and refined two art-and-literature-based approaches to literacy learning that have been proven effective for a wide range of learners (Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy [CAABL], 2018): Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art and Image-Making Within The Writing Process (Olshansky 2010a, 2015a). The first of these approaches uses simple crayon resist art techniques and quality picture books as mentor texts to study the art and craft of creating picture books. Most students are comfortable with using crayons, and when simple watercolor wash is added, the result is quite pleasing (Figures 4 and 5). Additionally, while crayon lends itself to controlled representational images (thus avoiding the frustration of not being “in control” of the medium), watercolor wash (a less controlled medium), allows for “happy accidents” and “learning experiences.” These terms often find their way into conversations during the Group Share.

Following the four-step Artists/Writers Workshop format, the Picturing Writing process addresses all five strands of the English Language Arts Core Standards (reading, writing, listening, speaking, and language) while being easily integrated into the science and social studies curriculum. Students create their own quality books (visual and written texts) on topics tied to their grade-level curriculum. Their published books become favorite classroom reading material (Figure 6). Picturing Writing has been proven effective in teaching writing and strengthening reading through multiple independent research studies (CAABL, 2018).

Image-Making Within The Writing Process, validated by the U.S. Department of Education as an innovative and effective approach to literacy learning (Olshansky, 2005, 2007), uses collage



FIGURE 4 Depika uses crayon resist to paint her snow-covered mountains for her study of land forms



FIGURE 5 Jorge proudly shares the crayon resist cheetah painting he created as part of his research-based story on cheetahs



FIGURE 6 Second graders Gani and Ubaldo enjoy reading the research-based animal story Gani created about beavers. Ubaldo awaits his turn to share

made from hand-painted papers to literally construct meaning (Figure 7). The advantage of using collage as a medium is that students are able to rehearse, draft, and revise their stories by manipulating cut and torn shapes on the page before beginning to write.

Like Picturing Writing, the art always precedes the writing. But within the Image-Making process, students create hand-painted papers—rich in color and texture—that themselves stimulate thinking and trigger new ideas. Collage as a medium offers students extended think time as they manipulate cut and torn shapes on the page; it also offers endless opportunities to revise their work before gluing. Like Picturing Writing, the Image-Making process can be easily integrated into the science and social studies curriculum.

One particularly dynamic unit involves the study of immigration (Olshansky, 2015a). English learners and native English speakers are given the opportunity to reconstruct their own journey to this country or the journey of a family member or an ancestor. Students construct a sequence of collage images made from their own portfolios of hand-painted papers, orally rehearse their stories, and then write to their sequence of collage images. By the time students are ready to rehearse their stories orally, they have already devoted a great deal of time and thought to them while they composed each collage image, shape by shape. They then practice reading their pictures to draw out detail and description (Figure 8). Excited by the opportunity to record their family story in both pictures and words, English learners take great care in developing their picture sequence and are then highly motivated to write their story (Figure 9). When handed their published books, students experience tremendous pride and sense of accomplishment (Figure 10).

Aligned with Cummins et al.'s notion of creating “identity texts” (2016, p. 5), this project allows students to become deeply invested in telling their family story using multiple modalities. Their excitement upon seeing their published stories is clear.

Anurag, a fifth grader, speaks for many of his classmates when he explains, “When I saw my first book, yeh, I am so excited. Then I am so happy, yeh. I make my *own* story, yeh, me.”



FIGURE 7 Anurag uses the Image-Making process to fashion a collage that depicts his first day in the United States

Priyanka adds, “In Nepal we didn’t do like ah, we don’t have color to do like that. We don’t have paper, and we don’t glue like that. I didn’t think in America, I do like that, make that book” (Olshansky, 2010b). Aliyah and Ameer explain why making their books was important to them



FIGURE 8 Ayat points to each image in the collage sequence she created as she practices telling the story of why her family came to the United States



FIGURE 9 Karasira writes to the collage image she created that depicts how she felt about leaving her country

beyond the experience of personal pride and sense of accomplishment. Aliyah shares, “I feel proud, proud of myself because I got to make all of the things I wanted to tell everyone because people wants to know how I lived in Burundi.” Ameer adds, “I do it for the people. They need to see how I am in Iraq. My country, you know, it's not good” (Olshansky, 2015b).

While the experience of creating and sharing their books has had a profound impact on these students and the greater school community, their immigration stories also become family keepsakes. For newcomers, their published books offer a poignant firsthand account, in pictures and words, of their family's journey to this country, one that will be treasured for generations to come. One need only fast forward 20 or 30 years to imagine these students, now parents themselves, sharing with their own children the collage story they created soon after arriving in this country.

6 | FINAL THOUGHTS

Whether creating family immigration stories, research-based animal stories, or poetry tied to the content areas, these highly scaffolded, pictures-first approaches to teaching writing engage English learners in authentic literacy practices in ways that words alone cannot. They offer students an enticing entry into the writing process as well as critical steppingstones. As we welcome the many languages of our learners and allow students to move between and among languages, let's not forget to encourage our students to use their very first language, the universal language of pictures, to deepen their thinking and secure their ideas to the page before they write.

As Marjorie Siegel reminds us (2006), embracing multimodalities and multiliteracies by offering our students the opportunity to make meaning through alternate (nonverbal) means should be considered a matter of social justice. For English learners and those whose strengths do not lie in

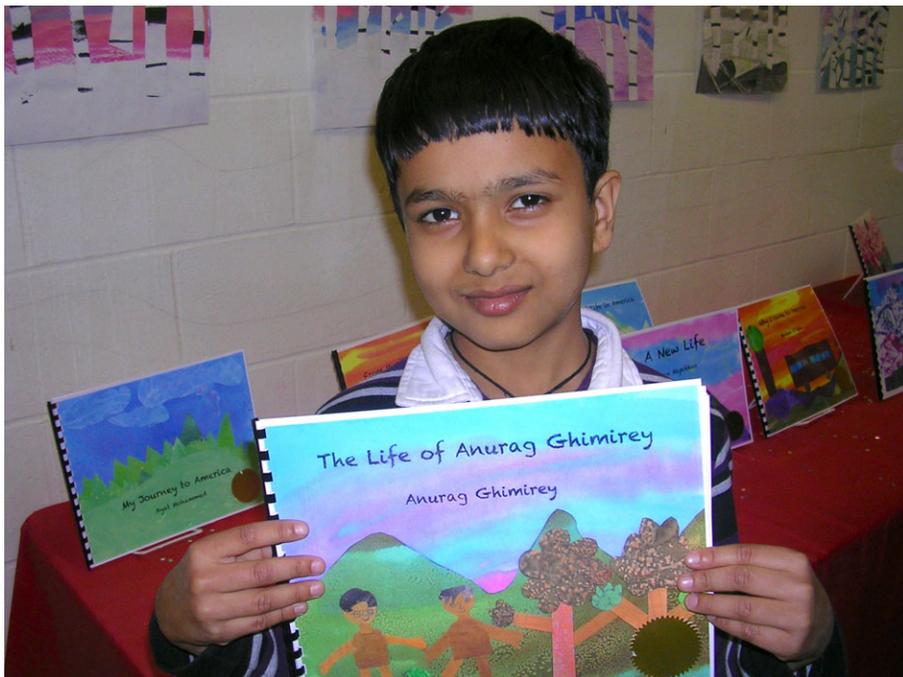


FIGURE 10 Anurag proudly holds his published book

the verbal arena, meeting students halfway by affording them use of the language of pictures can serve to level the playing field and ensure that all learners find their way into becoming engaged, literate human beings.

7 | THE AUTHOR

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