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"When It Rains a Puddle Is Made": Fostering Academic Literacy in English Learners through Poetry and Translation

In this article, a team of university-based researchers and ESL teachers describes how English learners in a high school responded to Poetry Inside Out—a poetry- and translation-based literacy curriculum.

Recent national assessments reveal persistent opportunity gaps between English language learners and their English-dominant peers (Wright 10–12). To address this critical situation, school districts with high numbers of English learners have made a commitment to academic language and literacy development, which are also the foci of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and English Language Development (ELD) standards. Academic language and literacy refer to more than linguistic capacities and word-knowledge. They also include specific higher-order thinking practices such as reasoning, interpreting texts, and weighing different options for meaning.

The CCSS and ELD standards present a need *and* an opportunity for teachers of English learners to implement innovative, intellectually rigorous, and language-rich curricula. We propose that *Poetry Inside Out* (PIO) is one example of such curricula (Rutherford). Developed by the Center for the Art of Translation in 2000, PIO is a poetry- and translation-based literacy "practice" (including, but broader than, a packaged curriculum) where students translate world-class poems from their original language (e.g., Spanish, Chinese, etc.) into English. Eventually students use the translated poems as a springboard for writing poems in the language of their choice. Although PIO has been used in elementary and high school classrooms and with monolingual English as well as bilingual and multilingual students, this article focuses on the implementation of PIO with English language learners.

In this article, we—two university-based researchers and two English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers—share what students and teachers learned from Poetry Inside Out. Our purpose is to describe PIO and illustrate the ways in which English learners responded to the curriculum. We also discuss the possibilities for and questions about using poetry in the service of academic language and literacy acquisition. Despite the body of work on poetry in the classroom (see Fisher; Jago; Jocson; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade), we believe that more research and resources need to illuminate the relationship between poetry and English learners' literacy and language development.

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What Is Poetry Inside Out?

In PIO, students work with a poem page and a "translator's glossary" (see Figure 1 for a sample poem page and translator's glossary). The poem page contains not only the poem but also a short biography of the poet. Before students engage in the work of translation, they read aloud the biography of the poet, written in English, and the poem in its original language. If the original language uses an alternate orthography, students rely on a transliterated version to help them "read" the poem aloud.

The translator's glossary offers a definition and possible synonyms for every word or linguistic particle that makes up the poem. Take as an example the character/word 蔵 from a Japanese haiku by Mizuta Masahide. The translator's glossary contains not only the definition in English (building where things are stored) and possible synonyms (storehouse, storage room, warehouse, barn) but also the pronunciation guide (kura, n.) for students who cannot read kanji or kana. Using the translator's glossary, pairs of students work on what is known as a "phrase by phrase" translation. Then a group of four students comes together, with their "phrase by phrase" translations in hand, to generate a "make it flow" translation. It is here, when the group is working to make their translation "flow," that we have seen students grappling not only with the meaning of the poem but also with issues surrounding fidelity in translation (i.e., What words can we add to make the poem sound better?). We have also seen students use bilingual dictionaries so that they can better understand the nuances of word choice (e.g., *barn*, *storehouse*, and *warehouse*). Once all groups have generated a "make it flow" translation, there is a public reading of each group's translation followed by a whole-class discussion that usually focuses on the meaning of the poem, and the differences and similarities across the translations. Within this participation structure, students not only justify their group's translations but also listen intently to the translations of others.

Several principled commitments guide PIO. First, PIO is guided by the idea that translation is not simply a matter of substituting one language for another. It is an act of creation, as the translator must make sense of and also rearrange and transform the original language. Second, PIO reflects sociocultural and critical perspectives on language, which foregrounds children and youth as linguistic and cultural beings who use language to participate in, and speak to, their worlds. Lastly, PIO believes that intellectually rigorous work can also bring out students' playfulness and engage their imagination. PIO is designed to create a playful and safe space where students can take risks and delve into facets of language such as word meaning, grammar/syntactic structures, metaphoric language, and nuances of rhythm or rhyme. Before we illustrate how PIO took hold in two different classrooms, we describe who we are and how we worked together.

Research Project

Lori and Jesse teach in a school in an urban region of the Northeast. The school (grades 7–12) serves 438 students. For 71 percent of these students, English is not their first language; 40 percent are classified as English learners, and 89 percent are low-income. The teachers teach middle school and high school students with varying degrees of English language proficiency, ranging from newcomers who arrived in this country with "zero English" (Valdés 4) to students who are "developing" (Level 3) and "expanding" (Level 4)—according to levels of language proficiency set forth by WIDA standards. Both teachers teach sheltered English immersion (SEI) English and ESL classes.

In January of 2014, Lori and Jesse attended a workshop on PIO, facilitated by Marty Rutherford from the Center for the Art of Translation. Shortly after, they began implementing PIO in their classrooms. Jie, a university-based researcher, had been observing the teachers since October 2013. In January 2014, she and Sarah invited the two teachers to be part of a collaborative research project that would document PIO and the development of English learners. The teachers were introduced to teacher research and the methodological tools and concepts that would enable them to study their practice and their students' learning. Together we developed two goals for our research: (1) document and reflect on the implementation of PIO with English learners, noting issues or questions that emerge for the teachers, and (2) document and reflect on the kinds of student learning fostered by PIO. As part of the documentation and reflection process, the teachers

FIGURE 1. Sample Poem Page and Glossary

平手 政秀
Mizuta Masahide
Japan (1657–1723)

Language: Japanese

蔵焼けて
kura yakete

障るものなき
sawaru mono naki

月見哉
tsu kimi kana

Born at Zeze in Oomi, Mizuta Masahide is variously described as having been a samurai, a merchant, and later a physician. Due to a lack of consistent information about his early life, there is much to question about the truth of his youth and origins. However, it is clear that from an early age Masahide was deeply interested in and practiced *waka*, a form found in classical Japanese literature, and he studied with the great haiku master Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694). Time would make the haiku on this poem page Masahide's most famous haiku. Coincidently, or not, this was Bashō's favorite. (Photo: h.koppdelaney/Foter/CC BY-ND)

TRANSLATOR'S GLOSSARY

Word	Rōmaji	Definition	Possible Synonyms
蔵	kura (n.)	Building where things are stored	Storehouse, storage room, warehouse, barn
焼 けて	yakete (v.)	Destroy something by fire	Has burned down, burnt, was in flames
障 る	sawaru (trans. v.)	To get in the way of, prevent clear passage	Hinders, hampers, obstructs, conceals, prevents
ものなき	mono naki	Not anything	Nothing, not a thing, there is nothing that
月見哉	tsukimi kana (n. & v.)	Range of vision for seeing the only natural satellite of earth	Moon-view, viewing the moon, moon watching, beholding the moon, moon-beholding

and university-based researchers audio-recorded different groups of students over four months. The teachers also collected the students' written work, including translations and students' poems. The university-based researchers observed both teachers twice a week and took field notes. Using a semi-structured protocol, Jie and Lori interviewed ten students about their experiences with PIO.

The data collection and analysis were carried out by teachers and university-based researchers.

All members identified focal audiotapes, which were transcribed and analyzed using discourse analysis and a descriptive review protocol based on the work of Patricia Carini and the Prospect Center. Descriptive review of focal transcripts allowed us to first *describe* what we saw in the data and then generate low- and high-inference claims about the work students were doing in PIO. Discourse analysis focused on the students' language strategies and reasoning practices, and on teachers' talk moves that facilitate or, in some cases, limit student discussion (Michaels and O'Connor).

PIO in Practice

Documenting heterogeneous groups of students with PIO, Rutherford discovered how students recognized the nuances of translations, debated word choice and grammar, and adopted powerful identities as poets and translators. However, it is less clear how English learners respond to and what they take away from translating poetry. We focus our discussion on data collected from two classrooms: an eleventh-grade SEI English class and a mixed-age ESL class with middle school and high school students.

Lori's Classroom

Before PIO, I was discouraged by my eleventh-grade SEI English class. Students did not seem engaged in the lessons. Although they were friendly and accepting of each other, they did not listen to or build on each other during group or whole-class conversations. After attending a workshop on PIO, I decided that it would be worth a try with this incredibly diverse group of twelve youth whose home languages include Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, French, and Twi. Some, like Maryam, had been in the country for less than six months, while others had been in the country for three to four years.

The first poem we translated was a Japanese haiku. We reviewed the poet's biography, delving into who the poet is, and what is important to him and to us for the purposes of translating his work. Once everyone got over the laughter of trying to "read" the Romaji, they became serious translators. I heard students justifying their word choice to classmates. Oliver shared, "The reason I chose barn is, it's more specific . . . like the countryside of a place." A group of students debated whether to use "burned down" or "in flames" since "burned down" meant that the fire was finished, while "in flames" indicated that it was in progress. Prior to PIO, students were reluctant to articulate, both orally and in writing, their ideas and the reasons for them. On the first two days of PIO, I heard not only talk and lots of it but also evidence of reasoning and collaboration. I was encouraged.

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As we continued using PIO, I could see a shift in my students (and they noticed it, too). To show the kinds of intellectual and linguistic work my English learners were doing, I share how they moved through the process of translating one poem: DÚ CHÀNG by Huang Xiang. First we had read Huang Xiang's biography. Maryam puzzled over a line in the biography that read, "He was arrested for his pro-Democracy activities and sentenced to three years of labor." She asked, "If he's a supporter for the democracy, why did he went to the jail?" Jo, a Vietnamese student who is generally reluctant to address the whole class, explained that China is a communist country that "really really hate the people . . . who said bad about that party." Maryam, who had missed what Jo said, asked for clarification.

> **Jo**: Communists had origin from the Russia, and the communists . . . they just only want for the government. The leader, they always say good about the people, that everything the leader give for the people, but, but, the truth, they just eat for themselves. They just make for themselves. And the people have to work hard every year and they didn't get anything.
>
> **Lori**: So is Jo saying that communism is the same or different from democracy?
>
> **Students**: Different.
>
> **Oliver**: Can I ask you [Jo] a question? It's like, many countries from Asia, based on the communism. My main point for this question is, most of the countries in Asia are involved in communism? I know Vietnam, one part of Vietnam, but you know?
>
> **Jo**: North Korea, China, my country, and some many other countries.

> **Oliver**: So you mean like, they're almost, a good percentage of Asia is involved in communism?
>
> **Jo**: Um, sorry. I don't get it?

In discussing the meaning of exile and the consequences of defying one's government, students drew on current and past events, such as the case of Edward Snowden and Cuban immigrants. They also shared their home countries' stance toward free speech. In the 20 minutes it took to discuss a four-sentence-long biography, students gained greater understanding of exile, democracy, treason, and communism. They also pushed each other to restate, clarify, and elaborate—as seen in the exchange between Oliver and Jo.

Working on their "phrase by phrase" and "make it flow" translations, students debated whether the first line should be translated into "I am who" or "Who am I?" Steve reasoned that it should be "Who am I?" to reflect the poet questioning himself, while William claimed that the poet already knows who he is and he is himself because he is alone. In defending their translations, students not only relied on the translator's glossary but also referred to the author's purpose—that is, whether the poet's purpose was to define or question himself. In the interview, Aaron shared, "You have to find the right words to like fit the poem . . . make it connect to the author's purpose." Students understood that they have to first construct the poem's meaning, which serves as a context or frame of reference for the translation.

Students also talked to each other. It was not uncommon to hear students saying, "What did you get for this part?" "Let's talk about that," or "Why did you put that?" In describing what she learned from PIO, Maryam said in the interview, "In general, I learned how to sit with people, know how to talk with them, and . . . say what I feel and not to be shy." Steve described the group work as a "stage where you give, and someone gives to you back. So it's really interesting how I'm trying to figure out all this stuff and people are helping me figure out."

The public sharing of the translations not only prompted students to defend their translations and interpretations of the poem but also surfaced their preconceptions about translation. Below is an exchange that occurred after the groups shared their translations. Steve noticed that Aaron's group had a translation that was strikingly different from the others. Aaron's group used words not found in the glossary and added repeating lines. Steve accused Aaron's group of "breaking the law."

> **Steve:** That's what I am saying. 'Cause you guys stole, stole 'em. Stole the words.
>
> **Aaron**: Stole what words? We used our own words to like make the author's poem have a purpose. So any words you use to make the same purpose is—
>
> **Steve**: [Interrupting] So if we take words from the outside, ours is going to look like more better than yours.

Students discussed what makes one translation better than another and what creative license translators can take with a poem. Steve eventually developed a theory that a translator can add "small words" such as prepositions and articles. According to Steve, nouns and verbs could alter the meaning of the poem, but "small words" did not.

As I plan for next year, I have several goals for PIO. A few of my students did not "buy into" PIO as readily as the others. They deferred to the more vocal and English-capable members of their group. Next year I need to help establish a translator identity for all my students and inquire with them about the value of translation, which, according to students, is "hard work." I also want to build more opportunities for students to write to reflect. In its current configuration, students, after the "make it flow" translation, write down what words were challenging to translate and why, how the poem made them feel, and what they think the poet is trying to communicate. I plan to incorporate more writing in which students can reflect on the meaning of the poem, their responses, and their choices as translators.

Jesse's Classroom

I began using PIO in the middle of the school year. At that point I had a class of seven middle schoolers (EPL 2–3) and two high schoolers (EPL 1) who had recently immigrated to the United States. Every few weeks, I would gain another level-one Spanish speaker. By May, I had eight level-one high school students and seven middle school students. All of the newcomers spoke Spanish.

The first poem we translated was a haiku by Masahide. I paired the newcomers with a middle

school Spanish speaker, hoping that the more fluent English speakers could help the newcomers navigate the English. The results were mixed. In my middle school students, I saw glimpses of the linguistic work that PIO promotes. I saw students walk together to the computers to use Google Translate or Google Images to convince their partners of their word choices. They identified subtle differences in the meanings of words and even the multiple meanings of a single word. However, for the newcomers there was little conversation and they mostly substituted English words for the poet's words. I was expecting them to translate from one foreign language to another language still foreign to them.

With this realization, and as more newcomers enrolled in my class, I began to make modifications to PIO. I changed the students' groups many times. We only translated Spanish poems. I added a Spanish language version of the poet's biography. I chose five important words to preteach, hoping that would facilitate access to the poem. None of these steps were fully successful. I shared my frustrations with the research team. I wondered whether my newcomers possessed the requisite capacities and knowledge to engage with PIO. I also wondered how the changing dynamics of my classroom—with students joining and leaving throughout the year—was working against a culture where students could take risks with English, and with each other.

For the last poem of the year, we decided that students would translate the poem *into* Spanish, their native language. I modified the translator's glossary (see Figure 2 for the modified translator's glossary). I grouped the newcomers together and asked them to work on the "phrase by phrase" and "make it flow" translations of a haiku by Matsuo Bashō. With my limited Spanish, I could tell that they were mostly discussing the poem. I emailed a recording of the group's work to be transcribed and translated.

Abby: Hello, Hector! Puddle or pond?

Nancy: Antique pond.

Hector: Pond.

Abby: Pond. No!

Maria: Puddle is a very little thing because it says "small body of water." A small thing.

Abby: That's why I put down puddle.

Maria: A pond. Don't you know what a pond is?

Hector: What is a pond?

Abby: Look, a lake is like a river, a big thing, where the water doesn't come in or out, that's a lake.

Maria: A pond is . . . is . . .

Abby: Where water is blocked. That's what it says. [In Spanish the word for pond is synonymous with "blocked still water."]

Maria: More or less, but a puddle is smaller than a pond.

Hector: It depends.

Abby: Yes.

Maria: Because remember when it rains a puddle is made.

Abby: A little puddle is made.

Maria: A puddle of water.

Abby: But it dries, you see.

Maria: And a pond does not. The pond has accumulated water.

Abby: Mhm. I understand.

Maria: Remember that if you don't take out the water from the pond, it remains full.

From the translated transcript, I was able to hear what these kids sounded like when they spoke fluently. They argued with not only reason but also humor and grace. They played with word meaning and used their expertise in their respective countries as evidence for why they chose to translate the way they did. Maria, one of my newest students who also had a learning disability, stood her ground against two girls. The poem and PIO had created the space for these students to work together in a group and begin to wrestle with the language. They were working collaboratively and creating meaning together.

Next school year, I hope to introduce PIO earlier and use it throughout the year, gradually taking away the scaffolds as students' English proficiency increases. I plan to start with an activity similar to the one I concluded last year with, but add another step where students eventually translate into English. I am still left with questions. When is an appropriate stage during a student's acquisition of English to introduce PIO? How can I better scaffold PIO and use it as a tool for deeper interaction with the English language?

PIO allowed me to learn about my newcomers, whose resources, insights, and humor are often

FIGURE 2. Modified Translator's Glossary

芭蕉

Matsuo Bashō
(Japan, 1644–1694)

LANGUAGE: JAPANESE

古池や
Furu ike ya

蛙飛び込む
kawazu tobikomu

水の音
mizu no oto

Bashō nació en Japón en 1644. Él comenzó a aprender la poesía cuando era un niño. Él hizo el dinero como profesor. Renunció a la vida social, urbana de la comunidad literaria—Él prefirió viajar por todo el país para obtener inspiración para su escritura. Viajó sola donde otras personas no salieron en el Japón medieval. Fue a lugares que la gente pensó que era muy peligroso, y al principio Bashō espera que simplemente morir en medio de la nada o ser asesinado por los delincuentes. Al continuar su viaje, conoció a muchos amigos y llegó a disfrutar de los nuevos lugares y las estaciones. Bashō fue uno de los primeros (algunos dicen que el primero) para escribir haiku—poemas, que se componen de sólo diecisiete sílabas.

Bashō está internacionalmente apreciado como uno de los más grandes poetas de todos los tiempos.

TRANSLATOR'S GLOSSARY

Word	Rōmaji	Definition	Possible Synonyms
古	Furu: (adj.)	Vivío durante mucho tiempo	Viejo, Antiquo, Anciano
池	Ike: (n.)	Pequeño Cuerpo de agua	Laguna, Estanque, Charca
や	Ya (interj.)	Expresando sopresa	¡Cuidado!, ¡Caray!, ¡Ay!, !Dios!, ¡Diablo!
蛙	Kawazu (n.)	Un animal pequeño palmípedas que vive en el aguga	Rana, Sapo Verde, Coqui
飛び込む	Tobikomu (v.)	Moverse rápidamente por debajo de	Sumerge, Vuela dentro, Salta
水	Mizu (n.)	Líquido de la lluvia	Agua
の	No	Símbolo que muestra la propiedad o pertenecientes a	De, Su
音	Oto (n.)	Sonida de salpicaduras de agua	Plaf, Pish (crear un sonida de agua de su propia)

FIGURE 3. Example Poem Page and Glossary

Pablo
PERU, (1996)

lenguaje: SPANISH

LA SAPIENCIA

La experiencia no te hace más sabio pero te hace más inteligente, porque el inteligente aprende de sus errores y el sabio de los errores ajenos.

Biography
Pablo was born in Ayacucho, Peru on 1996. He is a very smart person who enjoys leaning in school. He was living in his country but now resides in the USA. He wants to be a great psychologist, and maybe a businessman. He likes many sports but his favorite is soccer, but now his focus on going to college. He speak solvent Spanish because it is his first language, and he is learning English now.

He likes music also, playing percussion instruments. He has a plan for the future to have a business administrated for him and his family.

TRANSLATOR'S GLOSSARY

Word	Definition	Possible Synonyms
Aprende	Acquire knowledge of something	learn, acquire, pick up
De	Is use like a connector between words	of
Demas	other people not including yourself	others, the rest
El	Use to represent a male person	he, the
Errores	Something that was not performed correctly.	fault, mistake, miss, fallacy
Experiencia	Teaching that comes with practice, knowledge experienced more than once	skill, experience
Hace	Cause or result, Create something or give existence	do, make, cause
inteligente	much knowledge, with opportunities to learn more	smart, intelligent, clever, able
La	Definite article in the feminine gender	the, she
los	Plural article	the, them
Mas	Superior than other	more, most, plus
No	Negative word	don't, not
Pero	doubt, questioning	But
Porque	A way to explain why	Because
Propios	that belongs to someone	own, proper, individual
Sabio	much skill for all, rather than intelligent	wise, erudite
Sus	is used to talk about things from someone else	their, its, your
Te	A way to talk about other people	you, thee, yourself
Y		and

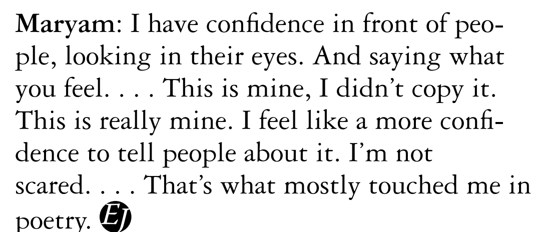
> **PIO allowed me to learn about my newcomers, whose resources, insights, and humor are often hidden.**

hidden. I also came to the realization that although English proficiency is an important goal for all my students, it is not a prerequisite for literate engagement (Au 130). The next day, I projected the transcript onto the whiteboard and asked my students to take turns reading each line aloud. My purpose was to affirm the students' translation and signal to them that I understood the work they did with the poem and each other. I asked the students how many of them were seen as one of the brightest kids in their home countries, but now felt like their teachers and classmates saw them as much less. All but one of the 15 students raised their hands.

Conclusion

Documenting what happened when English learners were positioned as readers, writers, and translators of poetry, we noted the affordances of both poetry and translation. In its complexity and openness, poetry offers multiple points of entry for meaning, connection, and imagination. In PIO, the poet's biography served a dual function. It became a frame of reference from which to construct the poem's meaning, and it also reminded students that poetry is a human text—written by individuals who speak and write in their home languages, struggle against oppression, and find meaning in their worlds. Translating poetry, English learners not only exercised but also revealed to us their reasoning and linguistic capacities. In translation, students created their original versions—a hybrid of the poet's words and their own words.

In both classrooms, we also noted how "silent" English learners, leaning on the voices of master poets, began to trust in and use their own voices. As we noted earlier, students created their own poem pages—complete with original poems, self-portraits, biographies, and translator's glossary—for publication and public presentation (see Figure 3 for an example of a poem page and glossary). When we consider instructional practices for English learners, we often prioritize, for good reasons, language acquisition and development. Studying PIO has helped us to think about not only language acquisition and development but also the importance of cultivating the academic and poetic "voices" that our students already have, but are hesitant to use in the classroom. Regardless of English language proficiency, English learners have voices full of insight and analysis, as well as humor and grace. Therefore, it seems fitting that we end with a student's comment about her own voice.



> **Maryam**: I have confidence in front of people, looking in their eyes. And saying what you feel. . . . This is mine, I didn't copy it. This is really mine. I feel like a more confidence to tell people about it. I'm not scared. . . . That's what mostly touched me in poetry.

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