



## **Hearing Latino Voices in American Literature as a Way for Students to Understand Their Own Hispanic Identity**

Curriculum Unit 07.01.10  
by Ekaterina Barkhatova

### **Introduction**

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Family language: my family's sounds. The voices of my parents and sisters and brother. Their voices insisting: You belong here. We are family members. Related. Special to one another. Listen!

Richard Rodriguez, "Aria," 1982

We all come from our families, our childhood homes. One way or another, we have become the people who we are today, owing to our previous life in the parents' house. And our voices today take their origin in the remote days when we were just boys and girls. Richard Rodriguez, the Mexican-American writer, points out that a native language spoken by members of a family creates a sense of intimacy and, therefore, belonging. Belonging: what a desired feeling it is! We all want to belong - to the society, family, neighborhood, church community, other professionals, etc. We surely want our children to belong to these communities too. So, we all should speak the language that is functional within those circles of belonging. And the point is that, in order to belong to different communities, we sometimes must learn to use different languages, or to use language in different ways.

Students that I work with are Spanish speakers. Their language is one of the most meaningful indicators of their culture. They simply love speaking it wherever they can. It forms the way their voices sound, even if they speak English. Their Spanish gives them a sense of belonging. But they are learning English, so as to belong to communities outside the home. Rather than force them to give up the language of belonging they know in order to acquire a new one, I want to find ways to build on it and use it as a bridge to the use of English. I strive to teach English in a way that incorporates my students' fluency in Spanish and their background in Latin American culture - rather than ignores or suppresses these dimensions of their experience.

Our voice serves as a vital part of our identity, so we obviously cannot conceal our cultural and family belonging when we have a chance to use voice. As a teacher, I hope to carry this message to my students, and together with them begin an exciting journey into discovering and strengthening their distinctive voices. Family, culture, identity, voice - these important concepts intertwine so closely, that speaking of one of these, we automatically refer to the other three. I want my students to realize that when they speak passionately,

they reveal something about their family and their culture. As writers, they should capitalize on this fact and learn how to make *their* voice an integral part of their writing. Sounding in American society - this multilingual and multicultural world, their unique voices, exhibitives of their culture, will add a peculiar "Latino flavor" to the American "salad bowl."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, I don't want my students to be "embarrassed by (their) ethnicity," as Julia Alvarez, the Dominican American writer, was. She confesses: "the problem was that the American culture [. . .] left us out, and so we felt we had to give up being Dominicans to be Americans. [. . .] For many years, I didn't have a vocabulary or context to write about the issues I had faced or was facing. I didn't know it could be done. I had never seen it done. I had, in fact, been told it couldn't be done." She realized then that she needed "to put together (her) Dominican and American selves." Through observing other bicultural writers, she gradually learned how "to put her Spanish in her English": "I set out to write about my own experience as a Dominican American."<sup>2</sup>

Julia Alvarez also describes the process of discovering voice through childhood memories, the first world that is left behind. She writes in the chapter "Of Maids and Other Muses" from *Something to Declare* that she found her voice when she wrote down in her journal "this beautiful vocabulary of . . .(her) girlhood." The miraculous discovery happened when she could see her "Mami and the aunts with the cook in the kitchen bending their heads over a pot of *habichuelas* , arguing about what flavor was missing." She continues: "the thought of Mami recalled Gladys, and that thought led me through the house, the mahogany furniture that needed dusting, the beds that needed making, the big bin of laundry that needed washing." Thus, her "housekeeping poems" were brought to life, "using the metaphors, details, language of . . .(her) first apprenticeship as a young girl."<sup>3</sup>

Timothy Dwight Elementary school, where I have been working since 2004, is a small inner city school in New Haven, Connecticut. Its student population is constituted by mostly African-American and Hispanic students who originate from Latin American countries: Puerto Rico, Mexico, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Peru, and elsewhere. I am servicing bilingual students for whom English is not a native language and who have been in the district Transitional Bilingual Education Program for more than thirty months (they spend the first thirty months in bilingual classrooms with the support of their native tongue). Thus, every year I have my ESL (English as a Second Language) sessions with about thirty or thirty five children, who are primarily third and fourth graders.

Helping bilingual students to master the English language more effectively and efficiently, I strive to guide them to realize themselves as offspring of their native countries, who should preserve their cultural identity. As I get to know other cultures, I am fascinated by their uniqueness and originality. I believe that children who come from other cultures should learn about them and promote them. However, I observe how little my students are able to share about their cultural differences. This unfortunate situation is partially conditioned by the fact that most of the children were born in the United States, within a different from the country of their parents' origin cultural context. Sometimes, though the only language spoken in the family is Spanish, it becomes difficult to preserve and practice other cultural forms. Some families are unable to promote their native culture in another country, especially when these families are headed by a single parent or grandparents, and the adults are busy coping with various socioeconomic problems.

In mainstream elementary classrooms, lessons about a writer's voice are usually put aside until a better time. There is so much of the curriculum to cover, and so many tests kids have to take, that a teacher often does not have the "luxury" of time, to dwell on one of the central elements of a solid piece of writing: the voice. As a teacher taking students from their mainstream classroom to another room (ELL classroom), I do have an

excellent opportunity to fill in those overlooked but still very significant aspects of the language mastery, such as voice.

Most teachers would perhaps agree that teaching voice is a challenging task. How do you do it? Is it possible to teach voice? What is voice? Though these questions are difficult, we should figure out the answers if we want to receive excellent writing from our students. To be more exact, I would say that our job as teachers is not to teach voice, but to draw out the awareness of the voice that every student has. Some of our students are lucky to be aware of the power that their voices have over readers. It is a true pleasure to hear those voices breaking through the plots of their stories. These students are lucky because of the books that have been read to them. Their favorite authors have influenced them through anger, sadness, humor, and other emotions. Donald Murray tells us, "It is the voice that attracts us to the story and makes us believe or not believe it. Voice is the magic that is hard to describe, but it is the most important element in the story, the music that supports and holds the story together."<sup>4</sup> I could not say it better. Voice is always individual, recognizable, confident. It keeps our eyes glued to a story about sports cars, even though we did not think we cared much about sports cars. It sparkles with the passion that the writer has for the topic and that becomes clear and loud. A few students are lucky - they have their voices; the majority, though, are not.

Teaching students who come from Latin American countries, I want to help them find their voices through appealing to their cultural background, a subject some of them probably know well. Also, reading Latin American authors will encourage them to identify with the narrators who speak very explicitly about their Latino culture. Both of these factors - their own experiences of their culture's language, food, music, celebrations, etc., and newly acquired knowledge from books about the Latino identity - will enable students to create their unique voices based on cultural belonging.

Ruth Culham insists that "voice is the driving force behind effective writing, so the sooner we introduce it to students, the better."<sup>5</sup> For myself, I can add that the sooner we draw the attention of our students to their cultural roots, the sooner their voices become unquestionably individual. If we want their writing to sound like them, then we must recognize their cultural identity. Let them write about their everyday lives, families, holidays, foods, traditions - everything that constitutes their culture, and we will hear the distinctive voices of Latin American kids.

This unit is designed for fourth grade bilingual students. It may cover a period of six weeks. I will teach the content material in the same sequence as it appears in the description of this unit.

## **Unit Objectives**

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Dealing with the English language in its all main domains - speaking, listening, reading, and writing - is an essential part of my everyday teaching. The unit is based on pieces of American literature, and therefore closely correlates with the Reading Comprehension curriculum. The ultimate goal of the unit is for each student to be able to communicate his or her cultural experience to the audience through pieces of writing portraying his or her own distinctive image. In the process of achieving this big goal students will encounter many intermediate objectives. Constructing them, I considered Bilingual Education and ESL Standards for Pre-K-4 Students and CMT Reading Objectives (see Appendix A.). Students will be able to:

- experiment with expressive forms pertaining to voice (paintings, music, oral presentation of their writing);
- comprehend, process, and evaluate different modes of conversation and informal writing while reading Latin American writers;
- evaluate and interpret cultural information from those sources;
- identify voices of characters portrayed in stories under study;
- share their ideas, experiences and points of view with those from different cultures;
- recognize the value of bilingualism and biculturalism and use these appropriately in their interactions with others;
- extend their cultural awareness through performing and visual arts.

#### Skills Development:

- Students will connect the right voice with a statement, a message, or a person and vice a versa through a number of oral and written exercises;
- Students will depict and describe a piece of music;
- Students will paint self-portraits;
- Students will create their final product - a piece of writing - by adapting their experience to audience, culturally-embedded context, and purpose;
- Students will incorporate their native language in a piece of writing as a component of their voice;
- Students will assess their own and others' writing pieces using the scoring guide for voice;
- Students will present their original pieces of writing about their cultural experiences to the audience - other students, their parents and teachers.

## Strategies

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To begin the unit my students will need to understand what a voice actually is. A traditional strategy for opening a new topic to students requires them to share what they already know about the subject matter, or in other words, demonstrate their background knowledge. I would like to see what my students have to say about voice: What is voice? How do you show your voice? What does it mean to have voice? I will write their answers down on chart paper and hang it in the classroom. Then, drawing on this "background knowledge document" and perhaps some other teacher-guided discussion with my students, I will "publish" the following tips for students working on voice:

- make your writing sound like you
- show that you really care about your idea
- write with energy and enthusiasm
- write with your reader in mind
- take risks; make your writing memorable.

Working on the beginning stages of the unit I have drawn on the hilarious ideas (including the tips given above) offered by Ruth Culham in her recent book "6+1 traits of Writing: the Complete Guide for the Primary Grades." I employ a number of demonstrative exercises that will help them find voice, match voice to purpose, and discover new voices. Here I also see a wonderful chance to intertwine other interdisciplines, such as music and art.

### **Exercises: "Finding Voice"**

#### *"Voice of the Minute"*

This exercise requires making a list of possible "mood voices" - scared, silly, angry, whiny, sad, frustrated, tired, amused, and so on, - each of which I will write one on a big card. Next I will hold up the "amused" card, for example, and ask students to talk to a neighbor using an amused voice for the next minute or two. I also will suggest a certain situation to students for using a particular voice: for instance, "Your dog is lost; use your sad voice to tell about this." Then, after a bell rings, I will pick a different voice card. After several rounds of experimenting with different kinds of voices, I will ask students to discuss what was difficult about using one voice at a time. I hope to lead them to understand that writers switch voices as their ideas for writing develop and purposes for writing change. It is not possible to sustain the same voice for long.

#### *"What Voice is It?"*

The exercise will help students recognize different, emotionally-colored voices after hearing a sentence in this or that voice. I will ask a student to read a sentence - for example, "I can't believe I finally get to visit my

grandmother in Puerto Rico!" - using a voice descriptor, such as "thrilled." The other students will have to come up with this voice or its synonym, such as "happy" or "excited." Then I will ask them to say the same sentence with another descriptor, for example, "gloomy." Next, another student will read a new sentence - such as "My mom didn't let me go to the zoo because of my bad behavior," - guided by a new descriptor, such as "disappointed." We will continue with new sentences, trying different voices, until everyone has had a turn. I think that this exercise really trains students to differentiate the meaning and mood of utterances by means of different sounds of voice and intonation.

### **Exercise: "Matching Voice to Purpose"**

*"Send Me a Letter"*

The following exercise has two parts. First, I would prepare a three-column chart listing different types of letters and notes (a thank-you note, a letter of excuse, a letter of complain, a note of invitation, a letter to compliment, a letter of application, etc.) in the first column and the main audiences for each of those types (a relative, a friend, a teacher, a toy company, a local restaurant, an acceptance committee, etc.) in the second one. As a class, we will decide the right voice for each type of letter or note and put it in the third column. We will then discuss why some voices are only appropriate in certain circumstances.

The second part includes the writing of a letter or a note to some person. I will have students think of someone they would like to write to, then allow them write to this person bearing in mind the type of their letter they wish to write. I will encourage students to include accompanying drawings in their letters to make their voices vibrant. They will also prepare the envelopes for their letters and mail them.

### **Exercises: "Discovering New Voices"**

#### **"Choices of Voices"**

This quick exercise may be a lot of fun for students as it allows them to show their dramatic abilities. I will write a simple statement on a board, such as "Take the garbage out, Jose." As a class, we will think of people who might say this sentence, such as a sister, a mother, or a friend. Then I will ask volunteers to say this sentence in the voice of one of those people. A sister's voice may sound bratty, a mother's - firm, demanding, and a friend's - kind, playful. As a conclusion to this activity we will discuss how voices acquire different qualities, depending on who is talking and what the relationship to the one receiving the message is. We will be able to connect this idea to the significance of using the right voice and considering the reading audience in writing.

*"Music with Voice"*

Giving the physical qualities of voice - a matter that one can hear, it makes perfect sense to look for distinctive voices in different pieces of music. I have selected several child-friendly pieces of classical music that tell stories: "Flight of the Bumblebee" (*The Tale of Czar Sultan*) by Rimsky-Korsakov, "The Swan" (*Carnival of the Animals*) by Camille Saint-Saens, and "No. 7 Scene" (*The Nutcracker*) by Peter Tchaikovsky. To conclude this selection of pieces of music, I will also play Mexican children's songs "Di Por Que" and "El Ropavejero" composed by famous Francisco Gabilondo Soler, better known as "Cri-Cri"<sup>7</sup>. I will play a piece and ask students to draw what they hear. What kind of voice and mood does this music have? What kind of story does it tell? Then they will describe their pictures with five to seven sentences, and share their drawings and stories. I assume that our discussions of the stories in musical pieces will produce a lot of original thinking by

my students. Moreover, they will see that music expresses a variety of voices, and we are able to hear them.

### "Self-Portraits with Voice"

The other expressive form that possesses voice so vividly is painting. In this unit particularly, I would like to study self-portraits, because its ultimate focus is on expressing and presenting oneself to the audience. I plan to present four self-portraits created by the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). After viewing and discussing Kahlo's *Self-Portrait* (1937) and *Frida and Diego Rivera* (1931), as well as Picasso's *Self-Portrait with a Palette* (1906) and *Self-Portrait* (1907), students will be asked to create their own self-portraits. Frida Kahlo, who is perhaps the most celebrated female painter of the early twentieth century, explained the fact that more than one third of her paintings are self-portraits with the words: "I am the subject I know the best." It is not accidental that I have chosen these paintings by Frida Kahlo: they are rich with the Mexican cultural context. The second painting shows Frida herself in a national dress and Diego Rivera, her husband and the famous Mexican mural painter, with a palette and paintbrushes. Picasso's self-portraits also eloquently speak about the personality of their creator. We will discuss and characterize these self-portraits. (See lesson plan 1.) The activity of producing self-portraits provides another good opportunity for students to use their voice. I will encourage them, in creating their unique image, to find a connection with the viewer that would show their true voice. The self-portraits will be also an excellent visual support for students during our culminating activity - presentation of their writing to the audience.

Closer to the midpoint of working on the unit, I plan to introduce my students to a student-friendly scoring guide - "My First Scoring Guide for Voice" - that will help them assess their own and their peers' writing. This "Guide" and "The Primary Scoring Guide: Voice" (for teachers; see the Appendix B.) are prepared by Ruth Culham and presented in her book *6+1 Traits of Writing*. In order to get to used to "My First Scoring Guide for Voice" throughout the whole unit, I will refer students to it every time we encounter a piece of writing, even stories by Latin American writers. This extensive use of the "Guide" will familiarize students with the criteria for a piece of writing with a strong voice and, ideally, make them embedded in their writing habits. It will let them know if their writing lacks a clear voice.

### My First Scoring Guide for Voice

#### Strong I've Got It!

- My writing sounds like me.
- The reader will know I care about the topic.
- I have the right amount of energy in this piece.

#### Developing On My Way

- My writing is safe. You only get a glimpse of me.
- I have only some interest in this topic.
- My energy level is uneven in this piece.



## Beginning Just Starting

- I forgot to add what I think and feel in this piece.
- I really don't care at all about this topic.
- I'm bored and it shows.

The further stages of the unit include presentation, either listening or reading, of selected pieces from Latin American authors. The major strategy of teaching, particularly at elementary level, entails modeling of the process and the product a teacher is attempting to receive from his or her students. Therefore I would like to spend enough time for the thorough study and discussion of literature that carries distinctive, noticeable voices of Latin American characters that, in fact, are the same age as my students. Having completed a careful research of literature works for or by youngsters, I am pleased with the authenticity and originality of my selection: "Translating Grandfather's House" by E.J. Vega, *In My Family* by Carmen Lomas Garza, *Petty Crimes* by Gary Soto, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, and *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* by Francisco Jimenez. Most of these books contain many pages that would be extremely difficult to cover in the ELL classroom setting; therefore I intend to present only the most expressive chapters where the character's voice sounds the way it sounds because of some cultural background. Now let me explain why each work is truly special.

"Translating Grandfather's House"/ "Traduciendo la casa de mi abuelo"

by E.J. Vega

The student's voice in this poem changes from nostalgic, describing the grandfather's house on his sketch ("Rows of lemon & mango/ Trees frame the courtyard/ of Grandfather's stone/ And clapboard home") to confused, when the teacher doubts the origin of the house ("The house is from/ some Zorro/ Movie I've seen.") The student protests: "Ask my mom,/ She was born there/ Right there on the second floor!" The teacher's reaction baffles the student: "Memories once certain as rivets/ Become confused as awakenings/ In strange places and I question/ The house, the horse, the wrens/ Perched on the slate roof." However, another wave of memories about "The roof Oscar Jartin/ Tumbled from one hot Tuesday/ Installing a new weather vane" makes the author title his drawing proudly, "in big round letters:" "GRANDFATHER'S HOUSE." This persistence finally convinces the teacher that the house in the drawing is the one of the students' grandfather, and she gives him an "A+" for the work and tapes the drawing "to the green blackboard."

Together with my students we will contemplate the title of the poem: Why is it named so? What kind of "translating" is it? Why does the poet have to interpret his memories about the grandfather's house to the teacher? Does the teacher finally relate to the drawing, and correspondingly to the student's experience and culture?

The poem is dynamic with the transforming voice of a school student, and my students can draw a pictogram showing these changes. But it is not only this fact that draws my attention as a reader and a teacher. This poem shines with vivid images, metaphors, and specific details; so readers can't help imagining a picturesque house and events that once happened there. Finally, and most important, the poem carries a strong message



about the Latino heritage, because the child is proud of being a descendent of a Latino grandfather. I hope that this poem will enhance love and warm feelings of my students towards the places of their origin, and they will be willing to write about them with their own voices. "Translating Grandfather's House" is a bilingual poem, so students can also read it in Spanish.

### In My Family/En Mi Familia

by Carmen Lomas Garza

This outstanding picture book reminds me of a holiday time when every moment is marked with a special sense of happiness and joy, when all people around you look happy and carefree, and they wear their best clothes and say warm, cheering words to each other. This book is a great collection of bright reminiscences of the Mexican American artist about her childhood days spent in Texas, near the border with Mexico. Like the poem "Translating Grandfather's House," *In My Family* tells about a person's cultural roots. Carmen Lomas Garza paints very detailed, vivid, color pictures about feeding the horned toads, cleaning *nopalitos* (cactus pads), the whole extended family making *empanadas*, the birthday barbeque, decorating *cascarones* (eggshells) for Easter, the earache treatment, and many other curious and festive occasions when the little Carmen was obviously very engaged and impressed. Each of the thirteen illustrations is accompanied with her explicit description of the picture in English and in Spanish. She writes about herself and other people from her childhood with a voice that welcomes us to those good old days of a Hispanic community with its troubles and celebrations, legends and religious events.

I think that this book with its brilliant pictures and nurturing voice will become a good spring-board for students to begin their discoveries of their true voices. I hope that for most of them this book will appear to be the best example of writing possessing one's authentic voice rooted in a Hispanic culture. It also represents an excellent visual work, where paintings themselves tell gripping stories about the peaceful childhood of a Mexican girl.

### If the Shoe Fits (Petty Crimes)

by Gary Soto

I've chosen this particular story from a collection of ten stories, because, along with a good moral lesson, it is strong with a humiliated voice of an urban kid. I hope that it will be even more powerful for my students when they hear its recorded, energetic narration by Robert Ramirez. The story tells about a typical Mexican American boy who lives through everyday troubles, caused by poverty, of a teenager in a family with six children. Manuel, the main character, does not mind the loud house full of his parents, siblings, and uncles from Mexico, seasonal workers, but he is sick of the "hand-me-down" clothes that he has to wear. The situation seems to become even worse when one day on his way to a long-awaited birthday party it appears that his new shoes become too small and therefore unbearable to wear. On top of this misfortune, he is robbed and bullied by an older boy who lives in the same neighborhood. However, the story ends optimistically when Manuel gives his new shoes to his hard-working, humble uncle who has just arrived from Mexico.

I am sure that my students will identify with Manuel, as this character is so real. His voice will be stirring for them. First, it is frustrated and scared, because of many problems that Manuel has with his shoes and the bullying neighbor. But then it becomes absolutely different - he is satisfied with himself - because he is able to

make another person who experiences even bigger hardships than him, his needy uncle, happy. I see the roots of this generous deed in Manuel's cultural traditions and family upbringing that make his voice sound more hopeful in the end.

### Death Forgiven (The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child)

by Francisco Jimenez

This is a very powerful narrative in twelve chapters concerning a migrant Mexican child's discoveries about himself in relation to his family, his community, and our society. Francisco Jimenez made these episodes so accessible, that, as he himself has put it, one can "hear the child's voice . . . see through his eyes, and . . . feel through his heart." In his semiautobiographical stories, the author writes about his family's journey to the fields of California in the late 1940s, a life of constant moving in a never-ending search for seasonal work picking strawberries, grapes, or cotton, topping carrots and thinning lettuce. The life of a big migrant family in tents and one-room shacks is a story of survival, faith, and hope. One can't help admiring the young boy's longing for an education and desire to have a true home.

I want the stories that students will study to have not only distinctive voices, but a clear cultural context partly explaining why a voice sounds in a certain way. In the chapter "Death Forgiven," the main character's voice experiences a transformation. (See lesson plan 2.) The outcome of the dramatic event - death of *El Perico*, the parrot, - is honestly amazing: the boy, who is the narrator, overwhelmed by a feeling of deep suffering, runs from home, hides himself in the shed, and begins praying for *El Perico* and for his father. The author lets us hear the boy whispering the whole prayer in Spanish. I find this technique to be very effective in creating an authentic voice of a child, the voice filled with fear, despair, and at the same time forgiveness. I think that this wonderful ability to understand and forgive arises from the best cultural traditions and religious faith of the Mexicans. In spite of the fact that the parrot was a favorite pet, the boy forgives his father for his death, because his father did not mean to hurt his child's feelings, but killed the bird impulsively because he was extremely nervous and uncertain about the possibilities of getting more work.

### The House on Mango Street

by Sandra Cisneros

This well-known novel brings about pure delight by its eloquence, sensitivity, language rich with pictures and music, and the recognizable voice of Esperanza Cordero, a young girl who does not want to belong to her rundown neighborhood on Mango Street. Her strong will not to belong to the low expectations that the society has for her promotes her steady emotional growth as the story progresses. My students will enjoy hearing the voice of the author, Sandra Cisneros, reading the magical pages of her novel.

I have chosen three vignettes that Cisneros begins her book with: "Hairs," "Boys and Girls," and "My Name." Though these stories are short in comparison with other vignettes, they possess stunning metaphors and similes, fantastic choices of descriptive words, and the brightest imagery. We can hear the distinctive voice of a child from a Latino family, in this first person narration. In "Hairs," for example, Esperanza describes the different hair of her family members. She especially dwells on her mother's hair, which is "sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe." (See lesson plan 3.) All the repetitions of key words skillfully placed have a lullaby effect that creates the atmosphere of a cozy safe home. We understand that Esperanza is fortunate to have a loving family.

In "Boys and Girls," Esperanza speaks about the relationships between the siblings in her family - two boys and two girls. The boys are "each other's best friend"; they live in their own universe and never talk to girls outside the house. Nenny, the youngest Esperanza's sister, is too young to be her friend, and, the narrator sighs, ". . .since she comes right after me, she is my responsibility." This is the way it goes in Esperanza's family and community. She dreams of her own real friend, "One I can tell my secrets to." Until then she feels lonely and not free: "I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor."

The vignette "My Name" is perhaps the most eloquent of the three in terms of the cultural background that influences the voice of the heroine. Esperanza explains about the inheritance of her "muddy color" name: "It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine." She points out that both of them were born in the Chinese year of the horse, which is considered to be bad luck, but then she concludes that it is "a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong." Esperanza admires her great-grandmother, "a wild horse of a woman." Her voice acquires some bitterness and sadness, however, when she says, "I don't want to inherit her place by the window." She does not agree to be locked up in a house by a husband, but would strive to become someone she wants to be. It is really important that she draws connections between herself and her ancestors, and her voice shows both pride and disappointment in this regard.

Next she mocks the way her name sounds in English, "as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth." However in Spanish, she continues, "my name is made out of a softer something, like silver." Yet Esperanza is not quite content with her name, she would like to baptize herself under a new name, "a name more like the real me," she clarifies, "Something like Zeze the X will do." This narration fascinates with its honesty and ingenuousness. Esperanza realizes that her culture has some good and some bad influences on her life, and her voice changes dramatically as she speaks of them. We see that she accepts her Latino heritage, but she will try hard to break the traditional vicious circle of her non-ambitious community and achieve something significant in life.

## Hearing Latino Voices in Stories

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After students become familiar with a story through reading or/and listening to it on tape, we will discuss, characterize, and analyze the voice of a main character. We will surely register all of our findings on chart paper, as I prefer doing it after any kind of discussion in my class. (I believe it is beneficial for them to hear two of the stories read by skillful readers, like Robert Ramirez and Sandra Cisneros, whose professional presentation makes voices of main characters stand out even more evidently.) I would like to highlight beforehand the key words and phrases in the text that clearly indicate the voice and its modifications. I think this would provide our discussions with the desired flow and the sense of direction.

I will draw special attention to the use of Spanish words and phrases in most of the stories. How do they impact the voice of a narrator? Are they important to the voice of this or that character? What do they express in a particular situation? In what kinds of narrations and situations are Spanish words used? For example, in *In My Family* by Carmen Lomas Garza, Spanish words mostly mean the names of things and people: *empanadas* - sweet turnovers; *cascarones* - eggshells; a *curandera* - a healer; *la Llorona* - the weeping woman, etc. They bring a sense of authenticity and cultural awareness into the narration. They also educate and excite readers about another language, and in terms of my students, they help them to identify themselves with Latino

culture through language. In *If the Shoe Fits* by Gary Soto, Spanish words are also included in the conversations of the characters, which, first, reflect the way Latin Americans speak, and second, provide the characters' speech with the charm of their cultural belonging: "You want to keep your life *o que*?" Others examples show that subtle shades of meaning can be shown only in another language, in this case Spanish. For instance, why does Gary Soto use the phrase "the biggest *vato* of all *vatitos*" instead of "the biggest bully of all bullies"? After we define how and when Spanish words are used in stories and record these observations on chart paper, I will encourage students to incorporate their Spanish in writing of their own pieces.

After we work with a story, students will have an opportunity to write a piece that is based on the theme of the story. For example, after analyzing the voice in the chapters by Sandra Cisneros, I will have students write about hairs of their family members, or the origins of their names, as Cisneros did. I believe that writing extensively on the topics dealing with their cultural background will assist students to discover and present their own Latino voices.

## Culminating Activity

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By the time of the culminating activity - the oral presentation of one piece of writing - students should have at least four pieces devoted to their own lives, personalities, and cultural experiences. The concluding lessons of the unit presuppose the laborious, time-consuming process of revising, polishing, and editing of one work that students consider their best. Though writing process is not very familiar and established at elementary level, we will go through its key stages, which might be manageable by holding individual conferences with students, and obtain a sound work.

The culminating activity should appear as a well-prepared celebration event where children will exhibit their public presentation skills by reading their stories, display their self-portraits, and wear their favorite national clothes. It would be a true asset to record their performances and compile one collective tape of those presented stories along with their written version. I envision that reading students' pieces out loud will provide them and their peers with a better understanding of the author's voice and furnish the work on the unit with a sense of completion.

Moreover, when students present their work orally for an audience, other components of their voices will become evident, and that, in general, will enhance their voices. For instance, their body language will add more flavor to their overall presentation. Thus, Julia Alvarez in her essay "My English" recalls that when she heard her mother speaking English and could not understand it, she "tried by other means to find out what was going on." Obviously, when a person is experiencing a certain emotion, an expression on his or her face is the same without regard to the language he or she speaks. Alvarez writes: "Whenever she spoke that gibberish English, I translated the general content by watching the Spanish expressions on her face."<sup>8</sup>

## Lesson Plan 1

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**Length of Lesson:** 60 minutes or longer (this lesson may take two sessions)

**Content Objectives:** Students will be able to observe and evaluate four self-portraits by famous painters - Frida Kahlo and Pablo Picasso; students will be able to create self-portraits.

**Language Objectives:** Students will be able to incorporate vocabulary describing voice; students will be able to interpret their partners' self-portraits using sentence starters.

**Materials Needed:** Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait* (1937) and *Frida and Diego Rivera* (1931); Picasso's *Self-Portrait with a Palette* (1906) and *Self-Portrait* (1907); lists of vocabulary words on big posters; an observation chart on a big poster; paper; paints; crayons.

### Sequencing of Activities

Initiation: (5 minutes) Students will be asked to ponder over the question: Why do people paint self-portraits? This question will initiate students' prior knowledge, give them an opportunity to express their opinions, and also will help to set the scene for the lesson.

**Development:** (45 minutes) I will display the four self-portraits for students' observation. After they take their time to examine them, I will present a chart on a big poster, where together with students we will record their responses. Before working on this observation chart, I would like to provide students with two lists of descriptive words and adjectives pertaining to voice and a person's personality (voice: *angry, silly, sad, scared, grateful, personal, convincing, sincere, welcoming, amused, encouraging* ; personality: *honest, serious, funny, nice, kind, sweet, determined, original, optimistic* , etc). These lists have to be written on poster paper and hung on a bulletin board in the classroom during the whole time of working on the unit. They will probably be expanded in the course of our study of the unit. Students will refer to them repeatedly. We will review this vocabulary and identify meanings of unknown words. Then we will discuss and characterize the self-portraits in the following chart (for our mutual convenience, I will number the paintings):

Questions | # 1. Self-Portrait (Kahlo) | # 2. Frida and Diego Rivera (Kahlo) | # 3. Self-Portrait with a Palette (Picasso) | # 4. Self-Portrait (Picasso)

Who is

the person

on the

painting?

What kind

of person

is he or

she?

To what

culture

does he or

she belong?

What did

the painter

intend to

show about

himself or

herself to

the audience?

This activity is based on students' observations and points of view and is meant to arouse students' critical thinking. The next part of the lesson involves painting or drawing self-portraits. Students should be encouraged to make their self-portraits identifiable in terms of the voice they possess. After their works are completed, they will interpret the other student's self-portrait in a pair.

**Closure:** (10 minutes) Students will have a chance to evaluate another person's self-portrait and give it a short characteristic. For this purpose, I will provide them with the following sentence starters: "This self-portrait has . . .voice, because. . .," "I think that the painter is. . .(a kind of person)," "He or she belongs to . . . culture," "I think the painter wanted to show us that he or she is/does . . ." The other student in a pair is welcome to give some support and make corrections if they are needed. Volunteers will present their interpretation of the partner's self-portrait to the whole group.

**Methods of Assessment:** informal - on-going monitoring of comprehension, circulation among pairs of students, "think aloud" for response, peer evaluation of self-portraits.

Note: Students will also exhibit their self-portraits during the culminating activity, when they will present their best piece of writing with voice to the audience.

## Lesson Plan 2

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Length of Lesson: 50 minutes

**Content Objectives:** Students will be able to analyze the changes of the narrator's voice in the story "Death

Forgiven;" students will be able to create a graph or a pictogram reflecting those changes.

**Language Objectives:** Students will be able to define meanings of vocabulary words; students will be able to construct a written response to a CMT-type question.

**Materials Needed:** copies of the chapter "Death Forgiven" from the book *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* by Francisco Jimenez; blackboard or chart paper; students' workbooks.

**Vocabulary Taught:** *to smuggle, undocumented, dilapidated, to perch on (something), attachment, shrieking, wailing, to dart out.*

### Sequencing of Activities

Initiation: (5 minutes) I will ask students if any of them or their relatives or friends has ever experienced a death of a pet. What kinds of feelings have they had? How have they overcome the sad event? What have they understood from it? What kinds of conclusions have they made? This discussion will lead us to reading the chapter about the tragic ending of the main character's parrot.

**Development:** (40 minutes) 1). I will introduce and define the vocabulary words that students will find in the story supplying numerous examples of their use in sentences. 2). Students will have a shared reading situation: I will read the chapter out loud applying a dramatic expression, while students will follow me using their copies of the story. I will stop at places when there is a need to clarify a vocabulary word or check for students' comprehension. This reading piece has to be particularly explicit, because it prepares the success of the whole lesson. As I pointed out earlier in this unit, I will highlight beforehand the words and phrases, which pertain to the narrator's voice. 3). To continue scaffolding of the reading, I will lead students through creating a pictogram or a graph on chart paper that will reflect the changes of the narrator's voice (the narrator is also the main character). First, his voice expresses affection and attachment to the family's parrot *El Perico* as the parrot just began living with them. Then, it becomes worried when at times he was missing his best companion, the neighbors' cat Catarina. Finally, the voice possesses absolute grief and stress when one day the father, highly irritated by the parrot's loud shrieking, put a tragic end to *El Perico*'s life. The graph showing these transformations will eventually drop to the bottom on the scale of feelings. However, at the end of this story the narrator prays for *El Perico* and for his father, which brings out the feelings of forgiveness, understanding, and love. Accordingly, our graph will rise up, and we will finish it almost at the same high point or even higher on the scale of feelings as we have begun it. 4). Students will begin working on the written response to the CMT-type question (strand D2): "Write a paragraph that could have appeared in the journal of a person who experienced death of a pet. Use information from the story to support your answer." While explaining the written assignment, I will stress the fact that our voice constantly changes with the change of circumstances, as we have just figured out from drawing the graph. So, I expect their writing to show this important concept. (The writing of the response may require more time than this lesson has for it, so it should be continued in the next lesson.)

**Closure:** (5 minutes) Students will share their written responses with their partners.

**Methods of Assessment:** informal - monitoring comprehension, peer evaluation of written responses, teacher's written feedback on students' written responses; formal - assessment of written responses on the CMT assessment scale: 0, 1, or 2.



## Lesson Plan 3

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**Length of Lesson:** 45 minutes

**Content Objectives:** Students will be able to become familiar with the stylistic devices *metaphor* and *simile* and identify them in the text; students will be able to apply the stylistic devices *metaphor* and *simile* to their own writing.

**Language Objectives:** Students will be able to recognize descriptions of the hair of Esperanza's family members in the vignette; students will be able to describe the hair of their family members in a piece of writing.

**Materials Needed:** copies of the vignette "Hairs" from the book *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros; chart paper or blackboard; students' workbooks.

### Sequencing of Activities

Initiation: (5 minutes) I will begin the lesson with describing my hair: "My hair is long and so glossy that when the sun shines on it, it dazzles with a soft shimmer. It is black like the night's darkness. The blackness of the night becomes even darker when I put a scarlet flower in it." Then, I will describe some student's hair in the similar manner. After that, I will put students in pairs and ask them to describe their partner's hair. Volunteers may present their oral descriptions to the whole group.

Development: (35 minutes) 1). From describing students' hair I will proceed to teaching the terms *metaphor* and *simile*. I will use the description of my hair written on chart paper to underline these stylistic devices. The definitions of *metaphor* and *simile* should also be written on poster paper and displayed for students. 2). I will distribute copies of the vignette to students. They will follow the narration of the vignette with the voice of Sandra Cisneros whose reading recorded on a cassette. I will let them listen to the vignette one or two more times. Cisneros's voice as Esperanza, the main heroine, on tape is extremely expressive, so I am sure students will enjoy listening to it. 3). Together with students we will create a chart describing the hair of all members of Esperanza's family. I will record our findings from the vignette on the blackboard or chart paper, and students will write those in their workbooks. The chart will look like this:

(table available in print form)

We will identify Cisneros's metaphors and similes in the chart. 4). Students will create a writing piece describing the hair of their family members. The chart that we have constructed together will support them in writing it. The work on this written assignment may be extended to the following lesson. Also, students may write a response to a CMT-type question (strand D1): "A simile is a comparison of unlike things using *as* or *like*". Choose a simile from the story and explain why the author used that simile."

**Closure:** (5 minutes) Students will share their pieces of writing with their partners.

**Methods of Assessment:** informal - monitoring comprehension; peer evaluation of writing pieces; teacher's assessment of students' writing using The Primary Scoring Guide for Voice (see Appendix B.); teacher's written comments on students' pieces of writing.

Note: I will conduct a similar lesson when students will be introduced to the other vignette, "My Name," from the same novel by Sandra Cisneros. Together with students we will create a web graphic organizer where in the center we will have "Esperanza's Name" and in the bubbles around it we will provide all words and phrases that describe her name. Some of these descriptions are metaphors and similes, so students will have an opportunity to apply their knowledge of those. As I have said above in this unit, this vignette possesses especially obvious culturally-embedded evidence. For instance, in the beginning of the vignette Esperanza tells us what her name means in English and in Spanish. And in the end she describes how it sounds in English and in Spanish. So, when students will be creating their pieces of writing telling about their names, I will encourage them to apply Cisneros's ideas and write what their names mean and how they sound in English and in Spanish.

## **Annotated Teacher Bibliography:**

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Alvarez, Alfred. "Finding a Voice." *The Writer's Voice*. London: W. W. Norton, 2005. The author analyzes how the writer's voice impacts readers by referring to the writers and poets of the world classical literature.

Alvarez, Julia. "My English," "The First Muse," "Of Maids and Other Muses," "So Much Depends," "Dona Aida, With Your Permission." *Something to Declare*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1998. These gripping essays portray Alvarez's acquisition of English and influences she experienced on her long way to find her true Latin American voice.

Alvarez, Julia. "On Finding a Latino Voice." *The Washington Post Book World* 14 May 1995:1. Alvarez shares that she was embarrassed by her ethnicity for a long time until she discovered a way "to put together her Dominican and American selves."

Anzaldua, Gloria. "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." *Borderlands: La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. 75-86. Anzaldua details about her rich experience of many identities and languages that she has and speaks as a Mexican-American.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983. Part four, "The Author's Many Voices," of the opening chapter, "Telling and Showing," refers to authors of the world literature to describe the various voices in a fictional text.

Culham, Ruth. "Chapter 5: Sparking Voice." *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades*. New York: Scholastic, 2005. This is a solid resource on teaching writing for primary teachers; it contains nine engaging, easy-to-read chapters on seven key traits of writing: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation.

ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc., 1997. Standards and goals are illustrated by vignettes for all grade levels.

*Fourth Generation CMT Objectives*. New Haven Public Schools Reading Department. Draft 1/14/05. The objectives are accompanied by a few examples of the type of stems created to measure each content strand.

Rodriguez, Richard. "Bilingualism, Con: Outdated and Unrealistic." *The New York Times* 10 November 1985: 12.63. Rodriguez expresses his strong opposition to bilingual education stressing that it is not as much an ethnic issue as a social one.

Rodriguez, Richard. "Aria." *Hunger for Memory: the Education of Richard Rodriguez: an Autobiography*. Boston, Mass.: D.R. Godine, 1982. This chapter describes the process of English language acquisition by Rodriguez as a child and the consequences it has

caused. He insists that Spanish, which is also his native tongue, is a private language for Latin American kids and it should not be used in the English classroom.

## Annotated Student Bibliography

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Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1991. Sandra Cisneros's greatly admired novel of a young girl growing up in the Latino section of Chicago. It is told in a series of vignettes stunning for their eloquence and sincerity.

Jimenez, Francisco. *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999. Honest and powerful account of a family's journey to the fields of California seen through the eyes of a boy who longs for education and the right to call one place home.

Lomas Garza, Carmen. *In My Family/En Mi Familia*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1996. The author, who is an artist, describes, in bilingual text and bright-colored illustrations, her experiences growing up in a Hispanic community in Texas.

Soto, Gary. *Petty Crimes*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998. A collection of short stories about Mexican American youth growing up in California's Central Valley.

Vega, E.J. "Translating Grandfather's House." *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up Latino in the United States*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1994. This bilingual poem, as well as other poems in this collection, reflects on the experience of a Latin American youngster.

## Websites

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London, Scott. "A view from the Melting Pot: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez." <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/rodriguez.html>. This interview was conducted about ten years ago. It discloses Rodriguez's vision of bilingual education and diversity.

[http://www.culturalsavvy.com/understanding\\_american\\_culture.htm](http://www.culturalsavvy.com/understanding_american_culture.htm). This website provides an explicit description of many components of the American culture.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco\\_Gabilondo\\_Soler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco_Gabilondo_Soler). Biographical data about the well-known Mexican children's composer and entertainer Francisco Gabilondo Soler.

## Appendix A: Implementing District Standards

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### Bilingual Education and ESL Standards for Grades PK-4

Developing the unit where students learn to hear culturally colored Latino voices and create their own voice reflective of their national identity, I capitalize on the two national goals developed by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) that are shared by New Haven Public Schools Bilingual and ESL Programs: **effective communication** and **achievement in a variety of cultural contexts** .

In Content Standard 1.0 "Students will use English and their native language for effective communication," I particularly distinguish two performance standards: 1.1 "Students will use English and their native language to participate in social interactions" (sub points d, f) and 1.2 "Students will use spoken and written English as well as their native language for personal expression and enjoyment" (sub points a, d).

In Content Standard 3.0 "Students will use English and their native language in a variety of cultural contexts," I also find two performance standards that correlate with the goal and objectives of my unit: 3.1 "Students will vary language, register and genre according to audience, purpose and setting" (sub points c, f, h) and 3.2 "Students will vary non-verbal communication according to audience, purpose and setting" (sub point d).

I would also like to involve New Haven's unique goal - **achievement in more than one language** . Though I realize that my students won't probably use their native language to an extensive degree, such as expression in a written form, I would still encourage them to apply their knowledge of Spanish to some, even minimum, extent. Recent research has shown that competent speakers of more than one language usually demonstrate superior cognitive abilities in many areas. In this sense, I feel that arousing motivation for sustaining a native language and acquiring another one simultaneously becomes a necessary component of today's teaching of bilingual students. Besides, if language is an integral part of one's culture, then a person able to maintain his or her mother tongue living and functioning in a different culture becomes a representative of his or her native culture and an outstanding participant in society.

### CMT Reading Objectives

I have striven for this unit for English language learners to be a substantial addition to the core curriculum for the fourth grade. It studies literature by Latin American writers; therefore the Connecticut Mastery Test's reading objectives (CMT, 4th generation) are integrated in the objectives of this unit. Thus, the following content objectives appear to be mostly correlative: B. Developing Interpretation: The reader will construct an interpretation and/or explanation of the text and connect the text to outside knowledge (strand B3); C. Making Reader/Text Connections: The reader will connect or associate the text with life outside the text (strand C1); and D. Examining the Content and Structure: The reader will elaborate on the text and make judgment about the text's quality and themes (strands D1 and D2).

## Appendix B:

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The Primary Scoring Guide (For Teachers)9

Voice

(table available in print form)

## Notes

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1. America has traditionally been referred to as a "melting pot," welcoming people from many different countries, races, and religions. Today the trend is toward multiculturalism, not assimilation. The old "melting pot" metaphor is giving way to new metaphors such as "salad bowl" and "mosaic", mixtures of various ingredients that keep their individual characteristics. Immigrant populations within the United States are not being blended together in one "pot", but rather they are transforming American Society into a truly multicultural mosaic. ([http://www.culturalsavvy.com/understanding\\_american\\_culture.htm](http://www.culturalsavvy.com/understanding_american_culture.htm))
2. Alvarez, Julia. "On Finding a Latino Voice." *The Washington Post Book World* 14 May 1995:1.
3. Alvarez, Julia. "Of Maids and Other Muses." *Something to Declare*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1998.
4. Ruth Culham refers to Donald Murray in her book *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades* . New York: Scholastic, 2005.
5. Culham, Ruth. "Chapter 5: Sparking Voice." *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades* . New York: Scholastic, 2005.
6. The same source as above.
7. Francisco Gabilondo Soler was a Mexican composer of children's songs. He wrote more than 200 songs and recorded about 116 of them - all of which still enjoy great affection and popularity throughout the whole of Latin America. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco\\_Gabilondo\\_Soler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco_Gabilondo_Soler))
8. Alvarez, Julia. "My English." *Something to Declare*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1998.
9. I will use this "Guide for Voice" to assess most, if not all, pieces of writing by my students.

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