“Realizing Transitions: 
Common Core, College, Career”

Selected Proceedings of the 2013 
Michigan Teachers of English to 
Speakers of Other Languages 
Conference 

October 4 & 5, 2013

Editors 
Marian Woyciehowicz Gonsior 
Alyce Howarth 

Eastern Michigan University - Digital Commons Liaison 
James Perren

2014 
The Selected Proceedings of the 2013 MITESOL Conference
Getting Reinvigorated:  
Using Curricular Changes to Renew Your ESL Teaching Practice

Catherine H. Reischl  
The University of Michigan

Abstract

This keynote address discusses the impact of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) on the teaching of English language learners (ELLs) and offers images of the possible as we look at ways that this initiative might re-shape the roles of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and reinvigorate our teaching practices. The address describes an ESL project-based, multi-genre, informational writing unit, designed by Ann Arbor Public Schools ESL teachers, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor professors, and teaching interns, taught in a summer program for third-through eighth-grade ELLs. It offers a practical example of how to draw on the CCSS to design purposeful instruction that frames ELLs as people who are, at their core, learners of content who are also adding a new language. The author cautions about the political and practical challenges of the CCSS, but urges teachers to examine the content and possibilities in the standards themselves.

I’m delighted to have this opportunity to speak with MITESOL members and friends today. I first got to know many of you more than 25 years ago — at a time when we hadn’t sent an e-mail yet, when we were still pretty excited about using a microwave, and when our skin fit a little better. The field of ESL has transitioned in many ways during these 25 years — and when Jeanine Clever called about the MITESOL conference and asked me to talk about the transition to the Common Core, this seemed like a timely conversation for us to have together. For many years, as a faculty member in the School of Education at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, I’ve been teaching beginning teacher education students — we call them “interns” — in our Master of Arts with Elementary Certification program, a program where students can earn both their elementary teacher certification and the ESL endorsement in a 14 month, intensive, field-based program. My work focuses on creating contexts where beginning teachers learn to teach literacy and English as a second language to kindergarten through eighth-grade students.

Drawing on this work, I’d like to talk with you today about the transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that this state and most other states are undertaking in this country, and what I think this could mean for teachers of English language learners (ELLs). Specifically, what possibilities do Common Core Standards open up for us as teachers? I’ll do this by sharing my ideas, the ideas of a few tried and true educators whose work has heavily influenced my own, and also by sharing images and stories of practices that ESL teachers and U of M faculty have been designing and teaching in a summer ESL program for fourth- through eighth-grade ESL students in Ann Arbor. We’ll focus on teaching informational writing as a particularly rich context of instruction for ELLs that can be well supported by the CCSS. A recent TESOL report,
summarizing the thinking of 30 ESL teachers, administrators, education experts and researchers in Maryland and the District of Columbia and published in 2013, examined the role of ESL teachers in implementing the Common Core. The report emphasizes that in order for ELLs to meet the rigorous standards of the CCSS, all teachers, both teachers of content and teachers of language, will need to routinely identify and teach to academic language and content that will make it possible for ELLs’ success. Further, ESL teachers will need to serve as resources for our classroom colleagues, particularly in regard to content area literacy and the CCSS language standards, as we learn together how to do this ambitious, language-rich work. As the report states, we will need to play out the roles of experts, advocates, and consultants as we collaboratively revise the curriculum. It sounds like a lot of work—but work that has the potential to reinvigorate our own teaching as well.

To get started, I’d like to share a few lines of poetry with you from a poem written by one of my favorite writers, Marge Piercy, who is a Detroit native who, long ago, was the first in her family to graduate from a university and, coincidentally, that university was the University of Michigan. I share these lines of this poem with you because, as I talk with you about my own beliefs and practices about teaching, I’d first like to honor you and the challenging work you do as teachers of English language learners. Marge Piercy, while not a teacher, seems to know what the work of ESL teaching is all about. Her poem “To be of Use” (found posted on many Internet sites) ends with the poignant lines: “The pitcher cries for water to carry—and a person for work that is real” (Piercy, 1982).

What struck you as you heard those words, and as you think about the work you do as an ESL teacher? Marge Piercy’s “To Be of Use” poem captures both the pain and the purpose in hard work. We all have our contexts where we frame how hard we work in adversarial ways—when we’re talking with a district administrator about how our caseloads are too high, for one. However, I’d be willing to bet that one of the things you like the best about your job is that you are a person who consistently chooses to work hard, who cries out for “work that is real” as Piercy puts it, and who delights in the real growth you see in students that results from this hard work.

But, how can ESL teachers, who are already working so hard—who are “harnessed to the ox cart” and “harvesting in the fields,” take on new mandates as complicated as the Common Core Standards? My suggestion is that we reframe this question and ask, “What can the Common Core do for us and for our students, as we go about our work as educators? How can this long, wordy, controversial document serve as a tool to help us to improve the quality of our teaching and, therefore, our students’ learning? How can we ‘own’ the implementation of these standards and create instruction that empowers our students to be both skilled users of English and excellent learners of academic content?”

The Common Core Standards describe what all children need to do at various points in their development to be “college and career-ready.” It would be possible for us to talk a long time about whether this should be our primary goal in educating students—that’s not my topic for today. Also, the Common Core Standards are organized by grade

---

1 During the keynote presentation, audience members read the poem in its entirety and discussed it at their tables. The full text can be found at http://www.northnode.org/poem.htm.
level, and I have some big arguments with that, given that teachers know that children simply don’t fit into neat descriptions of say, what a third grader looks like, especially children who are learning to speak English, who may have interrupted schooling or may have experienced unusual trauma. Therefore, the grade level designations in the CCSS are an issue, especially when they are linked to standardized assessments. Further, we are all wary of how use of these standards shapes high-stakes assessment practices, particularly in a time when teacher evaluation is being increasingly linked to students’ scores on standardized tests. These are all serious issues about the CCSS and we must be vigilant in participating in ongoing critical conversations about the implementation of these new standards.

But, I also see the Common Core Standards as a potential resource that may serve us very well as we go about the work of teaching English learners and this is where I will focus my remarks today. I ask you to consider with me the kind of learner and the kind of learning that the standards describe and how we can potentially use the standards as a tool for reinvigorating our teaching practices and providing high-quality instruction to all students. I’m talking about standards such as the following sixth-grade Social Studies Writing Standard:

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.8**

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).

In 2014 and beyond, we expect all students, and especially our ELLs, to rely on a range of sources, especially up-to-date digital sources, to respond to academic and personal questions. We want our students to be held and to hold themselves to high standards as they use these sources. However, I look at this standard and I see challenges. I see complex, embedded language structures and specialized knowledge about language that all students—and their teachers—will need to be able to perceive and use as they seek out sources. ESL professionals (this is where we come in) know how to surface the language complexities of content and processes that go on in school. Now, our colleagues, as they take up the CCSS, will need to learn to do this too. We will need to link arms with our classroom colleagues and work our way through this together.

Kenji Hakuta, a Stanford linguist who is one of those academics who is remarkably good at bridging the theory versus practice gap, offers many resources for understanding the relationship between ELLs and the CCS on a web resource called Understanding Language at [http://ell.stanford.edu](http://ell.stanford.edu). The Understanding Language site is a goldmine for teachers who are taking on the key challenges of the Common Core. Kenji Hakuta looks at English language learners and sees thinkers—he sees children who bring rich resources to the table. These students are not only acquiring English; they have the ability to think and communicate in several languages, they have personal histories that often include challenging life experiences, and they have cultural knowledge that spans multiple contexts. And they are curious and eager to expand and grow what they know, given accessible instruction and contexts. Hakuta (2012) makes the case that ELLs are just the kind of students who need the kind of complex, demanding academic work that the Common Core requires of all learners. However, he also acknowledges that in order
for ESL teachers to support this work, they may need to teach in fundamentally new ways. He claims the following:

- With support, ELLs can participate in academic discourse that is focused on rich and exciting academic content
- ESL is necessary but not sufficient; ELLs learn language best when they engage with content
- Focusing on both text and discourse gives ELLs opportunities for extended engagement with complex ideas. (Hakuta, 2012)

Each of Hakuta’s points carries with it redefinitions of the roles of ESL teachers, roles that some of us have been exploring through the use of SIOP practices and through exploration of the WIDA standards over the past few years. We can’t just “English” students. We must get them engaged in listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing in ways that promote both academic and linguistic growth. We must also expand our own knowledge about the specific discourse practices of the subject matter areas of science, social studies and math and teach our students to seek out ways to understand these nuanced ways of using language within the disciplines.

Hakuta (2012) goes on to describe the kinds of teaching and learning contexts that make it possible for ELLs to display this kind of linguistic and academic growth. To begin to meet the CCSS, we must create contexts where ELLs:
- Engage in productive oral and written group work with peers
- Engage in effective oral and written interactions with teachers
- Explain and demonstrate their knowledge using complex language and other communicative strategies in different settings and
- Extract and construct meaning from complex text (Hakuta, 2012)

All of this sounds quite challenging. I imagine you’re thinking of the many students you encounter every day who sound good in English, but don’t do well academically, who have a range of configurations of the kinds of language proficiencies that long ago, Jim Cummins (1979) termed Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) versus Cognitive Academic Learning Proficiencies (CALP). In our work at University of Michigan, we’ve had the same worries. During the past several summers, a group of Ann Arbor ESL teachers, interns who are earning their ESL endorsement through our Master of Arts with Elementary Certification program, and several of my U of M colleagues and I have been working to design curriculum and teach ELLs in ways that recognize that ESL instruction is necessary but not sufficient to ensure the academic growth of ELLs and to engage early adolescent English Learners in complex language use and meaningful content instruction that meets the demands of the Common Core in the process.

I’d like to recognize my Ann Arbor colleagues, Candida Justyna, Sai Sajadi, and Barb Kalisewicz, who are Ann Arbor Public Schools ESL teachers and my collaborator Dr. Debi Khasnabis, who is a Clinical Assistant Professor at the School of Education.
We’ve worked together to design and teach in a summer program for 75 fourth- through eighth-grade ELLs from four elementary schools and one middle school. This is part of the Mitchell Scarlett Teaching and Learning Collaborative, a partnership between the U of M School of Education and Ann Arbor Public Schools, and I am the coordinator of this partnership. We’re drawing on the work of our U of M colleague, Dr. Nell Duke, who has conducted research and created curricula centered on project-based integrated reading and writing instruction that focuses on content-based reading and writing. Drawing on our experiences with SIOP methods and WIDA standards, we’ve amplified this approach to serve ELLs by designing classroom instruction to focus on both language and content goals that are specifically linked to CCSS.

Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, and Martin’s (2013) research and practical guides for teachers on how children learn to read and write across genres emphasize the need to place meaningful tasks, real audiences, and purposeful activity at the heart of reading and writing instruction. CCSS Writing Anchor Standard #4 clearly states a parallel orientation to reading and writing: “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience” (Common Core State Standards, 2012, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4).” Yet, as Duke points out, in school, “task” is typically the “assignment;” the “purpose” is typically to get a grade or to do what one is told, and the audience is typically the teacher or other students. ELLs, many of whom come from school settings that are far more traditional than the typical American classroom, may be especially oriented to reading and writing to “comply” rather than to achieve meaningful ends. In our summer program we took up this challenge and designed a five-week informational reading and writing unit with biology learning at its core that engaged students in meaningful tasks, provided them with specific audiences, and included writing that was for a specific purpose.

**Rescued Raptors Brochures Unit**

In the Rescued Raptors Brochures Unit, students took weekly trips to a local nature center that housed approximately 15 rescued raptors that had been injured in various ways and were now cared for on-site. Our initial visit to the center included an oral presentation that served as an introduction to each bird by handlers who were skilled at working with students. We videotaped these presentations for later re-viewing by ELLs, who benefitted from multiple opportunities to review new vocabulary and conceptual information. Each bird had a poignant tale: the owl that had been raised as a household pet, but mistreated; the eagle that had fallen from its nest during a storm and then imprinted on humans who raised it and now thought of itself as a person; and many other stories. Specific information about the habits of each bird was equally engaging to the students. For example, the whole group was thrilled to learn that the vulture’s strategy for cooling off on a hot day was to “pee” on its legs! The fourth- through eighth-graders were drawn to the stories, the facts, and the plights of these animals. Having learned broadly about the birds, each student chose a bird to focus on and spent 40 minutes sketching this bird, labeling its parts, and generating questions they wished to learn more about.

The education director of the site, with whom we had planned prior to the visit, talked with the group about the need to have easily accessible information about the birds for visitors’ reference and encouraged them to create brochures that would serve this purpose. Teachers worked with the students to plan for a family event, where they would
introduce their extended family members to the nature center and teach them specific information about “their” bird, using a brochure that they would create as part of the summer program. We also discussed how these brochures could become part of the collection of materials that would be available to visitors to the nature center. The core elements were established: the task was to create a brochure that would be used for real audiences — their family members and others — for the purpose of sharing the information that they were learning about the rescued raptors.

Upon returning to the school, ELLs worked in pairs and drew on video records of bird-handler presentations, their own observations, and Internet sources to write informative/explanatory individual brochures about the bird of prey they had studied at the nature center. Teachers taught daily mini-lessons that focused on supporting their further exploration of the raptors, including lessons on how to read difficult content online (including use of Google translate), how to revisit videos of handler presentations and take useable notes, and how to keep records of sources of information.

Most significantly, teachers used several key brochures from other contexts, such as veterinary offices and the Humane Society, to serve as “mentor texts” as students began to gather content and examine genre and structures for their brochures. Guided by teachers, ELLs noticed and named the multiple genres of writing that were included in typical brochures, including narrative, informational and autobiographical writing and extensive use of graphics to extend the meaning of written texts. They worked with these “real world” texts, to do a form of writing that happens outside of school for real purposes. Depending on grade level, teachers provided students with brochure templates constructed in a simple graphics program, Pages, that offered more or less guidance in regard to the content and structure of the brochure. Each brochure included narrative writing (telling the story of the bird’s rescue), informational writing and graphics (offering facts about the bird), and autobiographical writing about the author.

In subsequent weekly visits to the science center, students prepared and asked questions that had arisen as they studied their bird, initiating complex and purposeful language interactions with the handlers. They took notes on their findings and revised their brochures. Building on additional science instruction they were involved in during the summer program, ELLs focused on animals and their adaptation to their environments, took digital photos of the birds in their enclosures and learned more about flight by participating in demonstrations of hawks’ flying and hunting abilities. They had multiple opportunities to learn new information, confirm this new information through direct interactions with peers and adults and through online and print resources, and then to write about their learning in the brochure format.

We designed several weekend homework assignments where students interacted with family members about the topic of birds, intending to infuse this unit with culturally responsive pedagogies. For example, ELLs linked their current learning about raptors with their own cultural histories as they asked family members about birds they remembered from their own childhoods in their home countries. Their family members told them of parrots living in backyards, of the importance of the eagle on the Mexican flag, of owls and hawks native to their countries and many other stories. Parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, learned about what was happening in the summer program and shared their stories, often in their home languages, and ELLs came back to school and told these stories to their peers. Interestingly, many students included elements of their
family bird stories in the short autobiographical piece they included on the final page of their brochures.

This unit was built on multiple Common Core standards and integrated listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing, all in the service of creating a product—a brochure—that would serve as a vehicle for sharing what one had learned on the family night at the science center. Again, this work was aligned with CCSS, also drawing on the Speaking and Listening standards, which named the importance of being able to communicate what one is learning in a range of forms, including speaking. The following standard aptly frames this work: “Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace” (Common Core State Standards, 2012, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.4). Through multiple mini-lessons and supported writing sessions where students revised and edited their work, students refined a final brochure. They practiced dialogues that they could have with visitors to the birds, planning to stand just outside “their” bird’s enclosure and welcome anyone who looked interested. ELLs imagined what they might say and created scenarios, rehearsed them, and practiced in a simulated science center, cheerfully practicing such phrases such as, “Hi! Would you like to learn about the peregrine falcon?” In addition, students practiced reading sections of their brochures aloud or paraphrasing the information as they read to a therapy dog that was trained to listen as children read aloud. Even the “coolest” eighth graders carefully explained the stories and information about their rescued raptor as this dog avidly listened.

Students presented their work at the science center to a crowd of more than 135 family members, who, while eating ice cream cones, walked among the bird enclosures and talked with the students in English and in their home languages. Much to their surprise, the visitors positioned the students as experts. As they shared key information and offered copies of their brochures, visitors peppered them with questions. Often these were questions that the students found they could answer, or at the very least, they could wonder about together with the visitors. ELLs experienced the pleasure of truly having learned about a topic that interested them and sharing what they had learned through oral and written modes. On the last day of the program, students presented a final time to faculty and staff at the School of Education who were strangers to them, standing in front of flat screens that displayed images of their birds in our technology center at the university. Once again, they were thrilled to be the experts and to see the kind of interest that they generated among strangers by having carefully framed their brochure and speaking points and communicated these clearly. We impressed upon each student that they had now done a presentation at the University of Michigan—something we encouraged them to include in a college application essay to U of M Ann Arbor when they applied a few years down the road.

Supporting ELLs language and academic development

There were many aspects of this unit that promoted both language and academic development among the fourth- through eighth-grade ELLs who participated in this unit.

1.) ELLs had continuous opportunities for meaningful talk with peers and adults throughout the unit. This was often the kind of higher order explanatory talk that is required in academically rich settings. 2.) ELLs had numerous opportunities to record and revisit information through drawing, photos, video, writing handwritten notes and
keeping records on the computer. Knowing that learners need multiple encounters with new concepts and vocabulary, this offered students repeated encounters with new language and information. 3.) Mentor texts offered examples of sentence structures, vocabulary, and genre features and assured students that brochure writing was a form of writing that actually occurs outside of school. 4.) ELLs had multiple opportunities to use their home languages to support their research and writing and in some cases, included their home languages in the brochures. 5.) ELLs had multiple opportunities to link to their own cultural backgrounds through family homework and writing choices, as described above. When asked why they had chosen the bird they had chosen, students regularly linked their choice to something from their personal or family histories. 6.) ELLs had opportunities for multiple rehearsals of oral presentations with feedback from peers and teachers, using their written document to support their interactions. 7.) Finally, students’ use of the graphics program (Pages) added opportunities to use visuals to add meaning and reinforced this as a strategy they could use in subsequent work in school. Using technology to create a product with a purpose and doing this with peers with whom they had to negotiate, explain, and argue as they wrote together, increased students’ ability to use the computer as a tool to accomplish their own ends. While this unit has been recently successfully taught to another group of students who have English as their home language, it was particularly well-suited to the needs of multilingual students who are curious and smart and thoughtful — and who also need a lot of practice using academic language in all of its forms.

Final thoughts

One of the very best things about teaching is that, even though the structures around us are highly regulated, in the end, what those one to one, one to six, or one to twenty-five interactions with students look and sound like on a daily basis is up to us, the teachers. In teaching, we have quite a bit of agency. If you do great teaching, it’s because you decided to do great teaching. And to do this, you’ve got to work with all the tools you can muster. As we designed curriculum for our summer program, the Common Core standards, in their succinct but broad statements of what high-quality learning would include, offered us tools to frame our work to ourselves and to others. We’ve shared the Rescued Raptors unit with our classroom colleagues who teach these ELLs, emphasizing the links to the CCSS and the moves we made to explicitly teach both the content and uses of language that ELLs needed to fully participate in this unit. Sharing this instruction has opened up rich conversations about practice with classroom teachers where we have named the specific practices that support ELLs, named the ways that these practices also support English-speaking students, and named how this work meets the standards in the Common Core. Significantly, these conversations have also offered classroom teachers images of our shared ELLs, actively engaged in learning both language and content. Such conversations have invigorated our work and focused our attention, together, on ambitious, rigorous teaching.

Have you really investigated the Common Core Standards? Download the free application for your phone and start with the English Language Arts standards. These are not the Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs). They are far broader and, I believe, offer space for creative development of curriculum. Pay special attention to the Speaking and Listening and Language standards. These standards are our bread and
butter as ESL teachers and here, in a document that addresses standards for all students, there is finally a recognition that language is central to learning. You may be the person in your school that knows the most about the content listed in these Language standards and your colleagues may need you to interpret! Become a resource for your classroom colleagues and let the standards create a bridge between your work and theirs.

Consider project-based instruction that teaches both language and academic content. Do this small scale to start out and adapt such practices to the constraints of your teaching situation. Give your students real purposes and authentic audiences, and engage in reading and writing that can be found in the world outside of school. Try using the Core to tell the story of your work. Build an overarching narrative to your everyday teaching that links your work to broader goals for students. Keep having great ideas for teaching and invite others into your work. Support the work of classroom colleagues by amplifying what they are doing. Of course, stay wary — there will always be politics and misuses of standards and assessment tools and we’ve got to be vigilant about this.

But, try using the Common Core Standards as a tool to do good teaching, to tell the story of this work and to connect to other teachers who are supporting ELLs’ growth. This is one way to reinvigorate your teaching of ESL, to link your teaching to both language and academic goals for our ELL students, “to be of use” as Marge Piercy put it in the poem we read today, “and to continue to do work that is real.”

Author Note

Catherine H. Reischl is a Clinical Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Catherine H. Reischl at this email address: creischl@umich.edu
References


