

A STUDY USING LITERATURE AND REFLECTIVE JOURNALS TO CONNECT
CULTURAL IDENTITY TO FUTURE GOALS

by

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*Vision without action is a daydream; action without vision is a nightmare.
~Japanese Proverb*

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

Confucius

I was engaged in the never-ending chore which consumes most of the time of American mothers with teenage children: driving them to some activity. We were commenting on how the young corn plants can look like young rice plants if you see them in a certain light and the car is going fast enough. We make these connections a lot since we moved back here from Japan almost three years ago. The conversation then shifted to what careers my children should prepare for in the future. We talked about what classes they did well in, what they did not do well in or just plain did not like and which career options were definitely out of the picture, education being the number one no-no for both of them. In the rearview mirror I saw them exchange their sibling know-it-all glance.

They grew quiet and then the elephant that had been in the car all along sneezed. “So, what about the fact that you are Japanese and American citizens and that you spent the first 12 and 14 years of your lives living in Japan? Where does that fit into the picture here? You are both bilingual and know a lot about both Japanese and American culture now. Does that make a difference in what you are thinking about for your futures?” I waited for the usual response, “Ah Ma, nobody gives a (expletive) about that here.” But

they did not do that. They looked at each other and actually thought about it. Kohei, my 17-year-old son, said, “Oh yeah, that would be cool to be able to use languages somehow. I am pretty good at them. Why didn’t I think of that before?” With unbelievable poise and grace, I resisted banging my head against the steering wheel. Sofie, my actress girl, bounced up in her seat, “Oh, my gosh, that’s right! Can you imagine me getting a part in a Japanese film? Wouldn’t that be awesome? What would I have to do to for that, study acting?”

I could feel my nails squeezing into my flesh while concentrating on my ever-whitening knuckles bracing for the seemingly inevitable impact. The elephant shriveled like a balloon that someone had deflated and flew out the window. Finally, I was able to talk about this subject with them while the positive connections became apparent to them. How did that happen and why does that take so long to have these discussions with adolescents?

Adolescence: What brave soul among us would actually want to live through that stage of our lives again? The fear and bittersweet memories that time frame conjures up in our minds are most likely enough to send us into hiding or begging someone for the phone number of a really good therapist. Amidst all of the normal angst of a typical American adolescent, throw in being an immigrant child. Suddenly, the English as a Second Language (ESL) students I teach, similarly to my own children, are not only dealing with physical changes and raging hormones but learning a new language, culture, school rules and the social factors that can be absolutely mind-boggling. In addition, some of the students may be recovering from the effects of war, trauma, refugee camps,

international adoption or pending legal status. What once made sense to them no longer does. They may have family members at home who just do not seem to get it and teachers and friends at school who seem to be even more obtuse. The adults who are supposed to help these struggling young people are struggling themselves and are possibly ineffective to be of any help in a new culture. The grief and loss of leaving behind all that is familiar in one country to forge a new life in this country is not something that can be easily discussed. On top of all of that, these students must figure out an answer to the age-old question: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” without a clue as to how to go about that. The skills they thought they had might not apply here. I think it is safe to say that this is not the most enviable situation to be subjected to. This chapter introduces adolescent English language learners, the unique challenges they face, and why these are important as they make plans for their futures.

There is a huge range of skills and experiences amongst our adolescent English language learners (ELLs) in the U.S. Some adolescent ELLs are newcomers (less than five years in the U.S.) with little or no formal education, and some are very literate in their home languages. Others were born in this country but struggle with literacy in both their home language and English. Some of these students have a command of oral communication in English, which hides the fact that they have not yet grasped the academic language they need to succeed in school and at work. Some students have legal status in this country and others do not. A major part of my job is helping them learn English; given all of the data we have regarding the achievement gap, it is imperative that we help these young people to succeed academically with every fiber of our beings

(Rance-Rooney, 2009). The tie that binds them is this: They are all adolescents in our schools who will become adults in our society in a few short years.

Another thread is the underlying premise that ethnic/cultural identity comes under the umbrella of self-identity. Phinney (2008) sums up identity as the complex construct that develops over time, with adolescence being one of those critical periods of development when an individual determines who they are in terms of the groups they belong to and how that fits in with both their immediate and larger social contexts. One of the social contexts for that identity is the cultural/ethnic identity which Deaux (2006) defines as “the critical psychological processes by which people - immigrants in particular - define and situate themselves in social, cultural, and historical contexts” (p.99). For many young people, this is a difficult position to resolve. It seems fairly reasonable that a positive self-identity would include a positive cultural identity, which has been shown to lead to academic success (Phinney, 2008). For academic success, reading, writing well, and thinking critically in the target language, in this case, English, is necessary. To write well on any given topic, an understanding of that subject matter as well as good writing skills are imperative. But, if you don't know the English language or American culture very well, how are you supposed to write in English, let alone succeed in the whole cultural experience? How do you begin to try when everyone else seems to be light years ahead of you? How do you begin to reconcile this as you face the need to set goals about your future?

Role of the Researcher

I am an ESL teacher in a large middle school in the upper Midwest (around 1200 students). The ESL program is quite new and our ELL population is small, but growing. I am supposed to help them improve their English reading, writing, comprehension and speaking skills, but I also play a major role in their adjustment to American life. Many times ESL students have asked me the very same questions my own children ask me. “What am I good at?” “What can I do when I grow up?” Frequently, the conversation continues in a fairly predictable fashion. I question them as to what their interests are, what they think they can do well and then as tactfully as I can, point out the obvious fact that they have multicultural and multilingual skills. That is when they respond to me like my children but without the expletive because we are at school, and I am their teacher. They make comments such as, “Nobody cares about that here.” “What difference does that make?” “So?” The overwhelming theme of “my experience is not valid here” resonates loud and clear. However, their experience is valid, necessary and important to all of us in this world that is growing smaller day by day. But more importantly, the experiences are critical because they are owned by each child, and only that child can make his/her decisions regarding what paths he/she will choose in the future; moreover, their futures will impact all of us. These are the young people who will be making decisions for us and guiding our nation as my generation becomes the age in which we no longer can do that. The tricky part is moving past hearing that life experiences are important to knowing they are valid precisely because the individual is the sole owner of those experiences and because every individual is part of the larger society. My intention

with this project is to use reading and reflective writing to help improve students' English skills and also to help them recognize their own strengths, thus becoming better able to set goals.

Background of the Researcher

As I mentioned above, I teach middle school ESL and have done so for the past three years. I am extremely concerned by the number of ELLs in this country who do not graduate from high school or go on for further education if they do graduate from high school. As a teacher, I want all of my students to excel to the best of their abilities. I do not want them to stop because they did not have the skills and support they need to succeed in school. I also want to encourage them to have positive self-identities, knowing that this is a task that I cannot achieve for them, but maybe I can offer guidance and support along the way.

On a personal note, I moved back to this country in 2006 after teaching English as a foreign language in Japan for 18 years. As a teacher in Japan, I had the opportunity of becoming acquainted with many young people, following their progression through high school to college, or trade school, and on to their careers. These were young people who went through adolescence and experienced their fair share of bumps in the road but were not removed from their home culture. Having that stability helped them in making their future plans.

I moved back to the U.S., and of course, brought my own two children with me. For my children, being biracial, bilingual and adolescents, we continue to have huge

learning curves while making sense of our new life here. My concern as both an educator and a parent to adolescent ELLs, is that I find it imperative that all children be able to draw on the strengths of their heritages to launch them forward into the future. I also believe that all children should be able to embrace their heritage and culture without feeling that they are somehow less because of it. Finally, I believe that as educators, we have a responsibility to help adolescent ELLs who need the extra guidance and support to learn English well and to make transitions to their lives in their new home, to succeed and thrive.

Guiding Questions

After listening to my students and my own children as well as reflecting upon my own linguistic and cultural identities in relationship to my academics and career, the questions I address are these:

- How does exploring cultural identity through literature help ELLs identify future goals?
- To what extent do adolescent ELLs make the connections between linguistic/cultural identities and future goals through reading of literature and writing responses to it?
- How will writing journals in response to literature help ELLs to become more aware of how their own cultural identity has an impact on their decision making processes?

- What improvements do students see in their writing as a result of exploring their own linguistic/cultural identities through a reflective writing process growing out of reading literature?

For the purposes of this study I have chosen to refer to ethnic identity as cultural identity. After a very long discussion with my students, they thought that the term ‘ethnic’ had a connotation of exotic and felt it derogatory to refer to themselves as exotic, like an exotic animal in a zoo. As a result of this conversation, we agreed that cultural identity was a better fit for describing their identities in terms of their ethnicity, culture, language and customs.

Summary

In this chapter I have focused on background to a project in which students will write their own reflective journals drawing upon their own linguistic and cultural heritages as well as those of a character presented in the novel they will read. The goal of this is to help students to improve English skills and to gain a perspective of what is important to them and how this can help them in planning for their futures. Given the fact that these students have a very short time to catch up to their native English-speaking peers, it is important for them to learn English well but it is just as important for them to make wise decisions when using their time in school and planning their academic futures. The connection between positive cultural and self identities is quite clear. Given the time to explore and validate through their own journals may help them to improve their

English writing skills while planning their future goals in line with their own cultural background as well as what is needed to thrive in American society.

Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One I introduced my research by establishing the purpose, significance and need for the study. The context of the study was briefly introduced as were the role, assumptions and biases of the researcher. The background of the researcher was provided. In Chapter Two I provide a review of the literature relevant to adolescent ELLs, cultural/ethnic identity, writing reflective journals and the formulation of personal goals. Chapter Three includes a description of the research design and methodology that guides this study. Chapter Four presents the results of this study. In Chapter Five I reflect on the data collected. I also discuss the limitations of the study, implications for further research and recommendations for helping adolescent ELLs to increase English writing skills while making the connections between their cultural identities and planning for their future goals.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Even as kids reach adolescence, they need more than ever for us to watch over them. Adolescence is not about letting go. It's about hanging on during a very bumpy ride.

Ron Taffel

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which adolescent ELLs can make the connections between their cultural/ethnic identities and planning for their future goals while improving English skills. As I have indicated previously, one of my concerns is that it appears that these students do not make the connections between the relevance of their cultural identities and what they can do in the future. They are also caught in the maze of trying to catch up to their English-speaking peers in an educational system that demands that they meet measures of school accountability for native English-speaking students quickly (Rance-Rooney, 2009). In doing this study, I would like to learn if focusing on the processes of writing reflective journals in response to literature will aid students in making the connection between ethnic identities and goal setting as well as improving their writing skills.

This chapter gives an introduction to adolescent ELLs and what challenges they face. It also reviews some of the literature regarding cultural/ethnic identity and why this is important. Additionally, there is a discussion of what role writing provides for ELLs to increase English skills as well as work on personal goals.

Who are Adolescent ELLs?

To begin a conversation about adolescent ELLs in the United States, it is helpful to have a clearer picture of the diversity among these learners. There is a wide variety among adolescent ELLs that is addressed in Table 2.1 (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002 p. 4). Although this data is eight years old, I still find it relevant for today as well. It is this diversity among the population that makes it difficult to put adolescent ELLs all into one neat group.

Many adolescent ELLs are immigrants, new to our country. However, a recent demographic report found that 57% of adolescent ELLs were born in the U.S. (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007). According to The National Center for Education Statistics, “71% of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scored at the *below basic* level in reading” (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007, p. 40). The report also suggests that the great majority of adolescent ELLs are far from meeting national proficiency standards (Batalova, Fix, & Murray). Rance-Rooney (2009) discusses the fact that many schools are reluctant to enroll large numbers of adolescent ELLs due to the risk of not meeting adequate yearly progress mandated by the accountability measures of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). If not obviously overt, then most likely covert, is the message to our adolescent ELLs that we don’t want you here (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002).

Table 2.1

Characteristics of ELLs

Type of Learner	Characteristics
Newly arrived with adequate schooling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent arrival (less than five years in U.S.) • Adequate schooling in native country • Soon catches up academically • May still score low on standardized tests given in English
Newly arrived with limited formal schooling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent arrival (less than five years in U.S.) • Interrupted or limited schooling in native country • Limited native-language literacy • Below grade level in math • Poor academic achievement
Long-term English learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seven or more years in U.S. • Below grade level in reading and writing • False perception of achievement • Adequate grades but low test scores • ESL or bilingual instruction, but no consistent program

(Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002, p. 4)

Long-term English learners pose an especially puzzling situation. Because they have been in the U.S. for many years, many times born in this country and their oral

English is very fluent, their low test scores are frustrating to both students and educators. These students at times maintain a false perception of academic achievement. They generally have lower level reading skills but receive B's and C's in their classes because they show up and turn in the required work. Hence, these students may have a perception that they are doing well in academics when they actually are not achieving at the same levels as their native English-speaking peers. This puts these students into the vulnerable position of being unable to pass the high stakes tests needed for graduation or the ability to pursue post-secondary education necessary to gain better paying employment.

As alarming as these statistics are, this does not mean that we have many students in our school systems that are incapable of learning; rather, these statistics are more indicative of the fact, that as Zwiars (2008) states, "Brilliant students have been marginalized and unrecognized (and 'left behind') because of their diverse languages, learning styles, and ways of thinking" (p. 17). To address these discrepancies in teaching our ever-increasing diverse population, Gay (2000) has made five assertions that need to be considered when attempting to improve student achievement.

1. Culture counts
2. Conventional reform is inadequate
3. Intention without action is insufficient
4. Strength and vitality of cultural diversity is positive
5. Test scores and grades are symptoms, not causes, of achievement problems (pp. 8 – 17).

To summarize: Students enter U.S. school systems interpreting their worlds through a myriad of cultural and linguistic contexts which are as important and meaningful as are academic skill levels but are often not recognized. We as educators must foster the growth of education in every child, being attentive to their needs and using their cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset and not a deficit. In other words, we must help them make use of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds to achieve academic success and help them plan for the future.

Culture and Identity

In the introduction to his book *Race, Culture, and Education*, Banks (2006) states: “A major tenet of my work for more than three decades is that the life experiences and values – as well as the historical and cultural context – influence the questions, findings, and interpretations of social scientists and educators” (p. 1). I would argue that this is true for all of us: Our life experiences, values and historical and cultural contexts influence who we become and the decisions we make. Adolescent ELLs may need direction and support to be able to understand how these factors work in their own lives and how they can work constructively rather than destructively (Gay, 2000).

Phinney (2008) reminds us that identity formation is complex, dynamic and develops over time and that its formation takes place during crucial adolescent years. A helpful working definition of identity by Norton (2000, cited in Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009), refers to identity as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person

understands possibilities for the future” (p.4). When discussing anything connected with immigration, including the varying situations of adolescent ELLs, it is helpful to keep in mind that ethnic identity is a key component that cannot be overlooked (Deaux, 2006). Adolescent ELLs are in the position of having to negotiate their identity between their home cultures and that of the American school culture. Frequently the two work together but often the differing cultures can collide, leaving adolescent ELLs struggling to make sense of who they are and where they fit into the bigger picture. Are all ELL students aware of these cultural connections to their behavior? The research seems to indicate that they are not. Phinney and Ong (2007) state: “The achievement of a secure ethnic identity derives from experience, but experience is not sufficient to produce it. Because one’s ethnic identity is constructed over time, the actions and choices of individuals are essential to the process” (p. 271).

To further understand ethnic identity it is helpful to look to Banks’ (1997) definition: “Members of an ethnic group have a shared sense of peoplehood, culture, identity, and shared languages and dialects” (p. 13). Banks continues explaining that an individual is ethnic to the degree that he or she shares those values, cultural traits and identification with a specific ethnic group. He further elucidates the process of how identification with a particular ethnic group varies a great deal throughout the times and circumstances of an individual’s life. A pivotal time frame of ethnic/cultural identity formation is during adolescence (Banks, 1997, 2006, Gay, 2000, Phinney & Ong, 2007). Exposure to the wider world during adolescence leads to an increased awareness of differences among groups, group stereotypes and questions about power and privilege

which can lead to uncertainties of identity development (Phinney, 2008). Researchers agree that much more needs to be done to learn about the role of ethnic identity formation in adolescents, particularly leading up to adulthood (Harklau, 2000, Phinney & Ong, 2007). Research also indicates that adolescence is indeed a pivotal time for the forming of ethnic identity; however, much more research is needed to fully understand how this identity process is formed in the lives of immigrant youth (Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot & Shin, 2006, Vo-Jutabha, Dinh, McHale, & Valsiner, 2009).

Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot and Shin's (2006) ecological model study examined 650 adolescents and the factors which influenced ethnic identity because a healthy ethnic identity is important to the all around well-being of an adolescent, including their academic performance and coping skills. They found that there is a positive relationship between familial ethnic socialization, that is the amount of time families spend socializing within their ethnic groups, and ethnic identity achievement. The authors quickly noted that much more research needs to be done to understand the role of schools on ethnic identity formation in adolescents.

Harklau (2000) did an ethnographic case study which followed 3 ESL students from high school to community college to learn more about the representations of ELLs across educational settings. In this study she learned that the prevailing representation, the perception the teachers had of the ELL students, was positive in light of the fact that these students had to overcome so much to 'make it' in this society. On the other hand, the prevailing impression on the part of educators was to stereotype immigrant students and to view students' bilingualism as a deficit in English to the point of questioning their

cognitive abilities. This seems to be the uncomfortable juxtaposition that ELL adolescents find themselves in, having to carry the burden of learning a new language, adjusting to new circumstances, negotiating between linguistic and cultural communities as well as striving to be viewed in a positive light by their educators (Miller, 2003).

According to Gay (2000), school success for students of minority groups, whether that minority status has to do with skin color, language or culture, cannot be brought forth if they or their teachers have negative perceptions of their life experiences. Instead, Gay calls for reforming instruction so that it promotes positive beliefs regarding the cultural heritages and academic possibilities for these students. Ajayi (2006) builds upon Gay's claims with a study of 209 middle school ESL students in Los Angeles who spoke diverse Spanish varieties as their native languages. The study used a 31-question Likert scale survey as well as a two-page biographical written essay to ascertain how each student saw his or her own identity; and learner perceptions, that is their own perceptions of how they learned and how they saw the learning cultures in their schools as well as what they thought their possibilities in the U.S. were. The study showed that students wanted to learn English and preserve their own heritages, expected the school system to respect a multicultural approach and that students viewed their own multilingualism as an asset. Ajayi also confirms the sad fact that when these ESL students' cultures and languages were viewed as deficits by teachers and other students, it had a detrimental impact on how ESL students formed their own attitudes towards language learning and ultimately the decisions they made. Ajayi asserts that a learner's identity directly affects how much he or she feels safe and accepted in a classroom environment, which directly

affects how much that child can learn. “The task of the school therefore is to make learning reflect the multiplicity and difference inherent in English language learners’ subjectivities – needs, interests, motivation and preferences they bring to the classroom” (Ajayi, 2006, p. 479). These studies used writing as one of the means of gaining more insight into students’ understandings of their ethnic identity. Next, I explore what the current research indicates regarding ESL students and writing.

Writing

Jacobs (2008) highlights the difficulties that adolescent ELLs have in writing. She discusses what most ESL teachers have seen, that even though the students’ reading abilities improve, writing remains an exasperating experience where students produce work which has limited content, is disorganized, and has many errors in grammar. Freeman, Freeman, and Mercuri (2002) discuss the special difficulties that face the long-term English learners who have conversational fluency in English but still lack the academic English language proficiency they need to compete with their native English-speaking peers. These students may receive passing grades in school but still are unable to pass high school exit exams. Cummins (2000) reminds us that native speakers come to school knowing the core grammar and the sociolinguistic rules for using the language in school contexts. An English language learner, be they a newcomer or a long-term English language learner in American schools, does not know the core grammar and sociolinguistic rules and is thus forevermore playing a game of catch-up to their native

English speaking peers. Cummins (2000) states: “Knowing the conventions of different genres of writing and developing the ability to use these forms of expression effectively are essential for academic success” (p.59). Academic success is imperative for a student planning goals related to future work or requiring post-secondary education. Writing is one of those components needed for academic success.

The *Writing to Read* (Graham and Hebert, 2010) report is a large statistical review by Steve Graham and Michael Hebert for the Alliance for Excellent Education to identify writing practices which have been found to increase native English-speaking students’ reading skills and comprehension. The authors strove to answer three questions:

1. Does writing about material students read enhance their reading comprehension?
2. Does teaching writing strengthen students’ reading skills?
3. Does increasing how much students write improve how well they read? (p. 4).

Through their analysis they found that writing in response to literature did improve reading skills for native English-speaking students but they were quick to note that there is very little research done involving ELLs.

Miller (2007) is a researcher who did work with non-native English-speaking students and carried out an ethnographic study of ten recently arrived high school ESL students in Australia. For the study, journals were written in English over a three-month period. These journals helped her gain insights into the students’ English language development in classroom and social situations as well as helping her to gain a better understanding of their identity work. Miller listed 11 advantages for students who write reflective journals and three key points for teacher learning as a result of students’ writing

reflective journals. She suggests that journal-writing gives students the opportunity to interact with text in a manner that maximizes both individual student investment in learning and meaning-focused interaction between teachers and students. She argues that it is precisely the investment and meaningfulness which is frequently missing in everyday school curriculum now. Through this study, Miller demonstrates that the reflective journal-writing process taps into the affect in learning which then results in more intensive engagement in learning and connection to higher level thinking which is needed for more advanced literacy.

In their qualitative analysis of 46 Vietnamese adolescents, Vo-Jutabha, Dinh, McHale, and Valsiner observed identity exploration within and outside an ethnic enclave (2009). The participants, who ranged in ages from 15 to 18, were asked to keep journals during a one-month period about an identity topic that was important to them. There were four main domains: (1) career/grades/college, (2) relationships, (3) religion and (4) sexuality. Of all of the respondents, over 50% chose to write about the career/grades/college domain. Clearly, their futures and what they would do with them as well as how their ethnicity played a part in those decisions were on their minds. Writing in the journals was a means of not only clarifying issues for the respondents but also allowed the researchers to gain insight into the developmental dynamics of how immigrant youth explore and form their identities.

How then can adolescent ELLs be connected to the positive aspects of their ethnic/cultural identities through writing? Researchers suggest writing stories can help students make meaning of their identities and lives (Freeman et al., 2002; Haneda, 2006;

Igoa, 1995; Skinner & Hagood, 2008) but teachers may lead adolescents toward a variety of writing practices to explore possible identities (Haneda, 2006). Writing can be used as a tool to record moments from the past and present in order to connect them to the possibilities of the future. It is also a tool to learn language and to communicate to others, or to oneself, the events that are unfolding during the thinking process. Through the writing process, adolescents can learn to express what they see, think, feel or are wondering about. For adolescent ELLs who do not have the confidence in their writing skills or the security of their own identity, having a teacher pay attention to the writing process by listening to their histories and helping them negotiate ideological boundaries can be very helpful (Fernsten, 2008). In addition, writing about what they know (personal entries in a journal) can further increase their ease in writing in English and thus become a powerful tool that can produce positive and successful experiences with writing which will then encourage learners to write more (Diaz-Rico, 2008; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). Diaz-Rico (2008) asserts that “students must learn to write essays that bring forth their own personal values, experience, knowledge, and questions” (p. 192).

Students need to develop strong literacy skills to carry them into the future (Graham & Hebert; 2010). To become a better writer, reading is essential and to become a better reader, developing a love of reading is crucial, according to Jacobs (2001), who found in her classroom research that students who wrote reflective journals in response to literature that was of high interest and multicultural relevance developed an enjoyment of reading. Through this discovery of an enjoyment in reading, students were then able to

write more critically and analyze literature through both an academic and personal lens. Jacobs (2008) argues that this kind of critical literacy is more necessary than basic skills to develop and succeed in both academics and the work place.

Decision Making

Coming to decisions about life choices is difficult for all of us but for adolescent ELLs, these decisions can be overwhelming. Adolescence is a crucial time for the formulation of goals; therefore, as educators, part of our responsibility is to help students to identify and process goals to promote achievement (Carroll, Durkin, Hattie, & Houghton, 1997). Banks (2006) discusses the importance of teaching students “how to relate the concepts and generalizations which they derive to their values and thus to make decisions” (p.21). Carroll et al. (1997) did a study to compare group differences in the goal orientations of delinquent, at-risk, and not-at-risk adolescents in Australia. Approximately equal numbers of 230 students divided into three groups were surveyed regarding their goals and the importance attached to them. These researchers found that all of the adolescents in the survey thought it was important to present themselves in a certain manner and to have a set social identity among a group of friends. They also found that the not-at-risk youth held the goals associated with knowledge and education important for maintaining an academic image. The at-risk and delinquent youth attached more importance to goals associated with maintaining their social image, which could include law-breaking activities, being free from adult control, and independence. The concern is that adolescents who do not make plans and goals to promote their future

success in school, work and society, run the risk of living life on the fringes and not being engaged in meaningful work (Carroll et al., 1997). Although the study does not include how many ELLs were involved, I think it is pertinent to pay attention to the importance of working with adolescent ELLs to assist them in planning goals for their futures focusing on the positive steps they can take to ensure that they are not at risk.

Because adolescent ELLs are centered on acquiring the academic language they need to succeed in school and also on working through a myriad of identity issues, thinking about life beyond school may be a luxury that they haven't been able to explore. Furthermore, for undocumented students, dreaming of a higher education may feel more like a cruel joke than an opportunity to embark upon (Jewell, 2009). Ajayi (2006) points out that it is critical for educators to understand how ELLs' identities are connected to how committed they will be to education, their personal goals and how much they can learn, and to undertake means to strengthen their educational work in order to help them see realistic ways to set goals.

The Research Gap

Researchers agree that adolescence is a crucial time period for identity formation as well as learning academics and making goals for the future (Carroll et al., 1997; Phinney, 2008). Overall, more research is needed to better understand the factors that adolescent ELLs must consider when negotiating their identities between home, school and the larger communities (Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot & Shin, 2006). It is safe to say that we understand that adolescent ELLs need more help in planning for their futures than

they are currently receiving (Ajayi, 2006). Writing reflective journals on books they have read can help with both identity formation and experiencing success with writing. What I have not found sufficient research on is how students can connect their cultural identities through reading and writing to the formulating of future goals. This is the gap that I would like to explore in this research study.

Research Questions

From the research it has become clear to me that adolescent ELLs need a variety of creative instructional practices to meet their learning needs (Gay, 2000; Banks, 2006; Zwiers, 2008). As a result of this, I have investigated the following questions:

- How does exploring cultural identity through literature help ELLs identify future goals?
- To what extent do adolescent ELLs make the connections between linguistic/cultural identities and future goals through reading of literature and writing responses to it?
- How will writing journals in response to literature help ELLs to become more aware of how their own cultural identity has an impact on their decision making processes?
- What improvements do students see in their writing as a result of exploring their own linguistic/cultural identities through a reflective writing process growing out of reading literature?

Summary

This chapter has covered several different topics related to adolescent ELLs. First, there was an introduction to adolescent ELLs and recent data regarding their achievement levels in U.S. schools. Secondly, there was a discussion regarding ethnic/cultural identity and the important role that plays in the lives of adolescent ELLs. Thirdly, there was a discussion on writing and how the writing of reflective journals may be a tool in aiding students with negotiating their own identities as well as improving English writing skills. Fourthly, there was a discussion regarding decision making and the important decisions that adolescent ELLs must face. Finally, I introduced the gap in the research, how I address that gap, and my research questions. In the next chapter, I outline the methodology that I used to conduct my research study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after another.

Walter Elliott

As indicated in the previous chapters, adolescent ELLs pursue a seemingly endless game of playing catch-up to their native English-speaking peers academically while trying to negotiate their own identities. For many students, this experience may be one that is rarely articulated or even consciously thought about and for many, there is no effort to set goals. For these reasons I am studying the following questions:

- How does exploring cultural identity through literature help ELLs identify future goals?
- To what extent do adolescent ELLs make the connections between linguistic/cultural identities and future goals through reading of literature and writing responses to it?
- How will writing journals in response to literature help ELLs to become more aware of how their own cultural identity has an impact on their decision making processes?
- What improvements do students see in their writing as a result of exploring their own linguistic/cultural identities through a reflective writing process growing out of reading literature?

This study is a qualitative study. I analyze data which is qualitative in nature including pre-study and post-study surveys, open-ended questionnaires and reflective student journal entries. The data taken from the students' reflective writing processes generated patterns and themes that I further investigated.

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter describes the methodologies used in this study. First, I discuss the qualitative study research design. Then I discuss the participants of the study and the data that was collected. I present the procedures of this study and finally I discuss the ethical considerations involved in this study.

Research Paradigm

I used a qualitative methods research model for the purposes of this study. Qualitative data involves data collection that is open-ended and non-numerical and that generates theory. Grounded theory is based upon inductive reasoning. The researcher enters into the data collection without a preconceived hypothesis that will be tested, as in controlled studies. Rather, theories are generated as patterns emerge; thus the researcher gains insight through what the data reflects (Merriam 2009). This data is then sorted and coded into units of meaning for more cohesive analysis. Based on Merriam, this qualitative study is designed to reflect how the students interpret their experiences and how they construct their worlds and their future goals. Because I teach living breathing human students, it is important to me to understand their thinking processes as fully as

possible as they read and work through the writing exercises to better determine their future goals. If indeed students do perceive increased confidence as a result of these writing activities and positive connections to their cultural identities, this may also be reflected in improved writing skills. Improved writing skills should in turn result in increased confidence and self-perception. The goal of the study is to determine if there is a relationship between reading, writing and the formulation of future goals. My plan was to help students through this reading and writing process. The data I gathered from their journals gave me the indicators to know if we had met these goals. I knew when I read the student journals and when the students and I engaged in a written dialogue about their journals whether the students were able to make the connections between reading and writing about literature, their own identities and the formulation of goals.

Data Collection

Participants

The participants of this study were 12 adolescent ELL students in the direct instruction ESL classes which I taught; native English speakers were not in this class. These classes focused on learning the academic content of the English language through careful attention to the four modalities of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The students attended all other content classes with their native English-speaking peers. The participants ranged in age from 11 to 15 years of age and are in grades six to eight. Four of the students were new to the U.S. and have formal education, three were new to this country with little or no formal education and five were long-term English learners, born

in the U.S. Some students lived with their parents, some with other family members and some students were adopted by American parents. Most students were from a lower socioeconomic class but others are not. Native languages spoken by the students in the study were: Hmong, Lakota-Sioux, Oromo, Russian and Spanish. I chose these two direct instruction ESL classes because I saw these students on a daily basis, allowing us to have time for quality in-depth classroom research.

Location/Setting

The study took place in a large, approximately 1200 student, suburban middle school in the upper Midwest. The school is over 90% Caucasian with the vast majority being monolingual English speakers of Standard American English. The ELL population is small in proportion to the entire student body but it is growing each year.

Data Collection Technique 1

I collected qualitative data from pre-study and post-study open-ended questions (see appendices A & B). These questions were designed to elicit responses from students to indicate if there was a change in their interpretation of their cultural identities and their future goals as a result of the study. Open-ended questions are more difficult to analyze than quantitative questions but give more in-depth answers to what the respondent is thinking (McKay, 2006). The pre-study survey was designed to ascertain how aware the students were of how their identities shape their decision making as well as to determine their confidence in their academic writing. The post-study survey was designed to revisit some of the pre-study survey questions as well as to determine if their connections to their identities and their self-confidence levels changed as a result of their reading of a

specific novel and making their own personal connections to a character in the novel through journal writing exercises.

Data Collection Technique 2

I also collected and analyzed qualitative data from reflective student journal-writing. The data I collected and analyzed from the students indicated areas I had not considered. I discuss these two areas in chapter 5.

The students read a novel that focuses on a character's identity, goals and the determination that character has to achieve those goals. The high beginner/intermediate class (five students) read *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, published in 2000. *Esperanza Rising* is a historical fiction novel that tells the tale of a thirteen-year-old Mexican girl, Esperanza, who is the daughter of a rich land owner in central Mexico during the 1930's. Through a tragic turn of events, Esperanza's father is killed, and Esperanza and her mother must flee Mexico and lead their new lives as migrant workers in California during the Great Depression. Esperanza has to make the huge shift from living a pampered lifestyle as a child in Mexico to one of being a hard-working young woman in the United States who must support her family. She also has to learn a new culture, language and new way of living and also become responsible for herself and others. Her mother becomes ill and Esperanza must work to take care of her and to save money to send for her grandmother to come up from Mexico. Esperanza has friends who are with her on her journey, but she often feels alone and very afraid with her new-found responsibilities. In the end, Esperanza is able to achieve her goals and resolve the issues of who she is and how she got to where she is. Because the book is set during the time of

the Great Depression and the students were unfamiliar with that aspect of American history, we did a pre-study of that history and the factors that led up to it. This provided an excellent opportunity to weave in social studies content along with language acquisition.

The intermediate/advanced class (seven students) read *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan, published in 2005. *The Lightning Thief* is an action-packed fantasy book about a 12-year-old boy named Percy Jackson. Percy has dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and has been expelled from several schools. When we meet Percy, he is in the process of being expelled again when he discovers the true reasons for the strange events in his life. He is actually a “half-blood” which means one parent is mortal and the other parent is a Greek god. Percy discovers that he is the son of a very caring mortal mother and a father who is the all-powerful Greek god of the sea, Poseidon. Percy learns what his true identity means; he is really not dyslexic but that ancient Greek is his first language, that his ADHD is a sign of his demi-god status, that he is alert and ready to fight whenever needed, and that he can survive and thrive very well underwater. Percy is set on a quest to retrieve Zeus’s thunderbolt before the gods declare all-out war which would mean World War III for humanity. He meets and fights many monsters along the way and must reconcile who he is in relationship to his newly understood identity of being a demi-god. The book weaves in many classical Greek myths as each new monster and challenge that Percy must face is introduced. With help from his friends, Percy is able to stop World War III from happening and to reconcile his feelings about being someone who must operate in two worlds. To help students have a

better understanding of Greek mythology, we did a pre-study of the Greek gods and the myths which are incorporated in the book so that students would understand their historical and literary references as we read through *The Lightning Thief*. We also did several vocabulary studies of words with Greek roots and paid attention to those as we read the book.

I chose these two books because the main characters in both of these novels face difficulties reconciling their cultural identities with their goals in life. In the end, the characters are able to make those reconciliations and achieve their goals through determination and the acknowledgement of the importance their identity plays in their decision-making processes. We did pre-reading activities for both books and had class discussions regarding what we read throughout the study of the books.

I chose to use journal writing to help increase English writing skills, for a primary goal should always be to help students learn. Furthermore, Miller (2007) explains, journals allow teachers to monitor important aspects of literacy without concentrating on writing for a grade or writing about unfamiliar topics. Journals can provide a link between the ELL student's personal language and more complex forms of literacy. Miller (2007) suggests that journal-writing gives students the opportunity to interact with text in a manner that maximizes both individual student investment in learning and meaning-focused interaction between teachers and students. She argues that it is precisely the investment and meaningfulness which is frequently missing in everyday school curriculum now.

Coles (1989) states: “We all remember in our own lives times when a book has become for us a signpost, a continuing presence in our lives. Novels lend themselves to such purposes; their plots offer a psychological or moral journey, with impasses and breakthroughs with decisions made and destinations achieved” (p. 68). My study indicated whether students were able to make the personal connections between a character in a novel and their own identity, cultural experiences and goals; I analyzed whether there was change after I read their journals.

For some chapters, I asked students to write reflective journal entries after reading the novels by asking questions that reflect upon the challenges the character faces in the novel as well as applying the broader question to the students’ lives (see appendices C and D). For other chapters, I asked the students to identify quotes and relate those quotes to their own lives. Because I wanted the students to read for enjoyment as well as reflection, the questions were large in nature, requesting that they reflect on both the novel and how it could have meaning to their lives. I spent less time on breaking the book down and studying it in a prescriptive manner; rather, I concentrated on reading it in large chunks and as a whole so that students were able to see how the characters achieve their goals and how students can make applications to their own lives. I was able to interact with the students by asking clarifying questions in the student journals in order to ask them to respond on a deeper level or explain the initial question when it appeared that they didn’t understand it or had trouble with their reactions in English.

Li (2007) emphasizes that it is important for ESL students to understand that how they construct their second language writing is affected by their first language and

culture. Moreover, teachers can help students to realize this is not to be seen as negative, but rather as an asset that they can build upon through identifying with the positive aspects of the characters in the novel.

Procedure

The study took place over a 3-month span from the beginning of February, 2010 to the end of April, 2010. The pre-study survey was given to students on the first day of the study during their direct instruction ESL class. The journal writing exercises took place weekly over the three-month period. After the last journal writing exercise, the post-study survey was given to the students and collected in class.

Data Analysis

The pre- and post-study surveys had open-ended questions. This information was analyzed and compared by looking for themes that emerged from the responses. These themes then created categories which were organized and analyzed. Selected excerpts from student journals were analyzed by again looking for themes that emerged. These themes were again categorized and coded; the data from the two methods were compared and contrasted.

Verification of Data

I ensured the internal validity of the results by triangulating the research. There was qualitative data from open-ended questionnaires and writing samples from student

journals as well as questions I asked them in response to my reading of their journals. By combining the findings from all of these methods, I was able to insure internal validity.

The next chapter gives an extensive overview of the results of this study.

Ethics

This study employed the following safeguards to protect the informant's rights:

1. Students and their parents were informed of the research study and given the option of participation or declining participation.
2. Students were informed of both the learning objectives and the research objectives from the beginning of the study.
3. Students' anonymity was protected by removing their names from any information and using pseudonyms that students chose instead of student names.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the qualitative methods that I used to answer the research questions of how I can help adolescent ELLs to make the connections between linguistic/cultural identities and future goals as well as improve reading and writing in English. My aim was to analyze qualitative data to both ensure validity and reliability and to provide full answers to my research questions. In the next chapter I will present the results of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another.

John Dewey

Introduction of Data

This study took place in a large, suburban middle school in the upper Midwest in two direct instruction ESL classes. I chose these two classes because I see these students on a daily basis, allowing us to have time for quality in-depth classroom research. I collected qualitative data from pre-study and post-study open-ended questions (see appendices A & B). These questions were designed to elicit responses from students to indicate if there was a change in their understanding of their cultural identities and their future goals as a result of the study. During the bulk of the study, I collected and analyzed qualitative data from reflective student journal writing which was written in response to reading a novel that focused on a character's identity, goals and the determination that character has to achieve those goals (see appendices C & D). The high beginner/intermediate class (five students) read *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan. The intermediate/advanced class (seven students) read *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan. Through the collection of these data, I sought to find the answer to the following questions.

- How does exploring cultural identity through literature help ELLs identify future goals?

- To what extent do adolescent ELLs make the connections between linguistic/cultural identities and future goals through reading of literature and writing responses to it.
- How will writing journals in response to literature help ELLs to become more aware of how their own cultural identity has an impact on their decision making processes?
- What improvements do students see in their writing as a result of exploring their own linguistic/cultural identities through a reflective writing process growing out of reading literature?

The journal and pre- and post-study data used here are from 12 ESL middle school students in two different direct instruction classes. Data sources used for this study are pre- and post-study survey data, journal entries in response to the literature they read and answers to clarifying questions that I asked. The participants, their pseudonyms, their home languages and the texts they read are shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Pseudonyms and Characteristics of Students and Text Read

Name	Age	Home Language	Text Read
Thao (M)	15	Hmong	<i>Lightning Thief</i>
Rome (M)	12	Lakota-Sioux	<i>Esperanza Rising</i>
Jalane (F)	14	Oromo/Amharic	<i>Esperanza Rising</i>
Vladek (M)	13	Russian	<i>Esperanza Rising</i>
Nadia (F)	14	Russian	<i>Esperanza Rising</i>
Alex (M)	11	Spanish	<i>Lightning Thief</i>
Anabel (F)	12	Spanish	<i>Lightning Thief</i>
Jaime (M)	12	Spanish	<i>Esperanza Rising</i>
Mauricio (M)	14	Spanish	<i>Lightning Thief</i>
Pilar (F)	13	Spanish	<i>Lightning Thief</i>
Ruby (F)	13	Spanish	<i>Lightning Thief</i>
Vanessa (F)	12	Spanish	<i>Lightning Thief</i>

I asked clarifying questions when it appeared that the student didn't understand the question or if I did not understand the student's response. If a student was headed in a direction that I thought he or she could explore more, I encouraged him or her to write more about those ideas as well. I also responded to their writing and answered questions they asked me while they were writing.

Prior to beginning the study, I asked the students to respond in their journals to the following question: Do you like writing in journals? Why or Why not? Of the twelve students, six expressed that they did like writing in journals because they could express their feelings, write about what was happening in their lives and work on their English writing skills. Four expressed that they did not like writing in journals but later stated that it probably was good for them and they could see the benefit in journal-writing. Two stated that they did not like writing in journals because they felt they lacked the skills needed to write.

Before beginning the pre-study survey, I explained the questions to the students and asked that they write in their best English. That meant writing with standard conventions and in complete sentences. For all of the students, the writing on the post-study survey was much more complete with much more thoughtful and detailed answers than were seen on the pre-study writing. All students were able to write down some goals they had for their futures for both the pre-and post study survey; however, some of the pre-study goals were not very attainable or focused, but on the post-study survey, students were able to realize this and make more appropriate or perhaps realistic goals. I present the data below in response to the research questions that I posed.

How Does Exploring Cultural Identity Through Literature Help ELLs Identify Future Goals?

Pre- and post study surveys: In the study I asked the students ‘What goals do you have for your future?’ on both the pre- and post-study surveys (Appendices A & B). Students were initially confused by the question so I explained that I wanted them to write down goals in relationship to future employment or careers they were interested in. A recurring theme that emerged was a shift from a vague, at times completely unattainable goal to one of a thoughtful and detailed response of what they were interested in pursuing for the future and why. Students were able to consistently write responses on the post-study survey with more clarity, depth and concrete detail than on the pre-study survey. I highlight a few of the students’ responses that demonstrate this well in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Student Responses to Future Goal Possibilities

Student name	Pre-study response	Post-study response
Ruby	I want to be a millionar [sic] ¹ have lots of money and own lots of land	I have a dream of being an very important person in my community
Thao	The future goal I have is finishing high school and going to collage	The goal I have for my future is to become a professor. I want to become a professor because I could learn even though I'm the teacher.
Jalane	I want to be a photagripher and/or chief. [chef]	My goals for the future to learn more things at school. I would love to stay in (this town) to finish high school. I want to etend a college and graguate and get my dream jod. But it will take me a verey long time to get my dream job. I will have to work veary hard. My dream job is to becom a chelf or a phtagripher.

¹ I have included the answers throughout as the students wrote them.

Throughout Ruby's journal writings she made it clear that she is very proud of her Mexican heritage and she would like to work more to help members of the Latino community. Thao moved from a position of finishing high school and going to college to one of knowing what kind of work he would like to pursue, primarily to become a math teacher, but in the post-study survey he further specifies that he would like to be a professor. Jalane does not like writing and resisted the idea of thinking or speaking about her future, let alone writing about it. Due to the unstable situation of her family (her mother and some siblings are still in Eastern Africa) Jalane told me that the idea of writing about what she was going to do with her life was at times daunting and overwhelming. When other students were finished with their journal-writing, Jalane would still be sitting and looking out the window, sometimes with tears in her eyes. When I asked her how I could help, she would tell me that she didn't want to think about the future. This study gave me the opportunity to discuss many scenarios and possibilities for her future.

The pre- and post-study surveys asked, 'How do you plan to achieve these goals?' Again, a theme of moving from an unclear position of how to attain their goals to a more specific means of how to achieve their goals and what their future goals are, emerged. All students were able to move from a more general answer of "study hard" or "I don't know" to more concrete steps of action they would need to take to pursue their goals. Eleven of the twelve students included going to college as one of the means of achieving their future goals on the post-study survey. I provide some examples of this shift in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Student Responses to Method of Achieving Goals

Student	Pre-study response	Post-study response
Alex	I don't know right now	I plane to achieve these goals by working hard in school.
Vladek	My plan to achieve these goals are to get good grades and get a scholarship to a cholage. Then I can play my sport.	The plan to achieve my goals are to go to college and play hockey for the college. For the back up I will be taking every math class to achieve it to be a math techer. The things I have to do to goals are work in school hard and get A or B.
Nadia	Learning math more and englesh and go to colig. For scoocer I what to praktes how to play bater.	I plan to achieve these goals by going to college and studing reely hard. And if I want to be a fotagrefer I can ask if my aunt can hallp my with how to use the camera. If I want to learning more about English I will have to red a lot of good books and practes ritting.

Alex stated that he did not like writing and did not want to do journal-writing activities. Any increase in writing was a sign of improvement for him. On several of his pre-study questions he wrote, "I don't know" for his response. When questioned further

he would say that he really didn't know what to write so it is a positive step that he wants to do well in school and writes that in a complete sentence.

Vladek wants to become either a professional soccer or hockey player and did not see the need for adding academics to his course of action at all. As a class, we discussed the concept of the 'back-up plan' for when things don't work out as we had originally intended. Vladek does well in math and has expressed interest in the possibility of studying math more or becoming a math teacher in the future.

Nadia is another student who initially said she just wanted to play sports. Throughout the course of the study she frequently wrote in her journal about how it is important for her to do some kind of work where she could be creative and how she likes to take pictures. She discussed these ideas with her family and discovered that she had an aunt who was a photographer. She still has many English language acquisition hurdles to cross but it is evident that there is some improvement in her sentence structure and spelling from her pre-study response to her post-study response. She begins the post-study response with a capital letter, uses final punctuation and spells "want" correctly instead of using "what" for both want and what, and her answers are more detailed.

Journal prompt 4 for *Esperanza Rising* also relates to my first research question. I asked students to choose a quote from the book and tell me why it is important to the story and what it means to the student. As mentioned above, Jalane is a young woman who initially resisted writing. I found her response to this journal writing prompt provided great insight to the answer to my initial research question; 'How does exploring

cultural identity through literature help ELLs identify future goals?' Jalane chose this quote from *Esperanza Rising* (51):

Look at the zigzag of the blanket. Mountains and valley and your problems loom big around you. But soon, you will be at the top of a mountain again. After you have lived many mountains and valleys, we will be together.

In response, Jalane wrote:

This quote is important to the story because Abuelita is telling Esperanza that starting a new life is going to be very hard. That they will be challenged in so many ways. And before they get to the end they will face many problems and they would have to fight them together but they would have to work really hard. This quote tells me that I will have to work hard to achieve my goals. Sometimes I will have a hard time getting something or understanding some words a teacher might say. But that doesn't mean I should call myself stupid and get angry and give up. It means I should ask for help when I need help.

At times Jalane can be very critical of herself and express that she is "stupid" if she does not immediately understand something, and then she will shut down for the remainder of the class. In this writing she connected with the words of wisdom of Esperanza's grandmother and was able to apply them in terms of her own life and goals.

Student responses about the goals they have set for themselves moved from broad and vague to more detailed and focused. Their means of achieving these goals also

became clearer with more evidence of a thoughtful plan to achieve them. Jalane's response showed me that she identified with the character in the literature and was able to use what she had read to prompt her to think and write about the goals she has for her life.

To What Extent Do Adolescent ELLs Make the Connections Between Linguistic/Cultural Identities and Future Goals Through Reading of Literature and Writing Responses to It?

The responses to questions on the pre- and post-study questions can provide some insight to answer my second research question.

How does your cultural identity help you achieve your goals? This was a question that the students struggled with initially. We discussed cultural identity and what that term means in relationship to their lives. Through the pre- and post-study survey several categories became evident. These categories demonstrated the theme that students view their bilingualism and multi-culturalism as an asset. There was a shift in the pre-study survey to the post-study survey that demonstrated students understood their cultural identity to provide several different means of helping them to achieve their goals. I list these categories in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Categories of Positive Attributes of Cultural Identity

Pre-study categories	Post-study categories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingualism is an asset • It doesn't matter or I don't know • It gives me my ambition and determination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingualism is an asset • Multicultural perspective helps me to be a better problem solver and more creative. • Bilingualism allows me to help more people. • My culture gives me a sense of pride. • My culture makes me want to give back to the community.

The answers to both the pre- and post-study surveys were all from a stance that views bilingualism and multiculturalism as an asset and not a deficit. The categories in the post-study responses increased and there were no “I don't know” or “It doesn't matter” responses. The students saw that being bilingual put them in a position to learn more and to provide alternate ways of problem-solving, which places them as both agents of change and agents of help in their home language communities as well as the dominant culture community. Another theme that emerged through their journal writing and is echoed here on the post-study responses was the desire to give back to the community, to

be someone who can be in a position to help and change in both the English-speaking and non-English-speaking communities. On a humorous note Jalane stated:

“My cultural language helps me at school. When I get mad at some one at school I could just write some thing on a peas of paper insted of yelling at the kid because I don’t wanta get expeld.”

I analyzed that to be in the category of viewing bilingualism is an asset.

How does your cultural identity hurt you? The shift in categories from “I don’t know” and “It doesn’t matter” to being more concrete and specific are worthy to be noted.

When putting these responses into categories, most students did not have a clear idea of how their cultural identity could hurt them. Only two students responded on the pre-study survey that racial discrimination and stereotyping was a negative aspect of their cultural identity. None of them stated anything about anti-immigrant feelings or feeling that no one cared about what languages they could speak on the pre-study survey. On the post-study survey, 9 of the 12 students listed racial discrimination and stereotyping as a way in which their cultural identity can hurt them. I list the categories in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Categories of Negative Attributes of Cultural Identity

Pre-study categories	Post-study categories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not know the mainstream culture's rules of engagement. • I don't know • It does not matter • Language barrier, difficult to learn English • Racial discrimination and stereotyping. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racial discrimination and stereotyping. • Anti-immigrant feelings • Sense of ambivalence, no one cares where I'm from or what language I can speak. • Language barrier, difficult to learn English. • Do not know the mainstream culture's rules of engagement.

Student responses for the pre-study survey were less clear but moved to a more clear stance on the post-study survey. On the post-study survey, 9 out of the 12 students stated that racial discrimination, stereotyping and anti-immigrant sentiment affect them negatively. Again, the theme of more clarity and specificity emerged on the post-study survey.

To better understand the categories, I list some of the direct student responses in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6

Student Responses to Negative Attributes of Cultural Identity

Student pseudonym	Student response
Vanessa	When people talk bad about Mexicans
Pilar	Sometimes there is some people that are not good that are Mexican. Some people could think that we are all like that then they doent tak us serious
Alex	Not everybody realy respects people that come from a different country
Mauricio	Sometimes you just get ignored for being Mexican or Hispanic
Thao	My cultural identity hurt me because discrimination of my race and seeing that my people can't even afford to finish school.
Vladek	It only hurts me is by talking with someone in English that will and I need to learn it. Then somethings I get lift out and I get mad.

With these responses it can be seen that students are aware of the negative aspects of being a member of their ethnic or linguistic group. It is also apparent that this alienation and judgment based upon the cultural or linguistic group they are associated with is painful for the students. In the post-study survey, it appears that students view the negative aspects as societal views, rather than their own deficiencies, although they are the ones who have to endure the situation. The weight of trying to be a good example to

others, being an ambassador of good behavior of your ethnic group, so to speak, seems like a heavy burden for a middle school child to bear.

What do you wish your teachers knew about you to better help you achieve your goals? All students showed an active participation in their learning. This did not change so much between the two surveys, but more items were written in the post-survey than the pre-survey and those items were more detailed in the post-study survey. An overwhelming theme expressed here is that the students want to do well in school, want to be challenged and reminded that they can achieve their goals. They also want teachers to understand their home cultures and realize that they do not understand everything about American culture. It also is evident that students would like more teacher input and teacher assistance. Table 4.7 shows some of the student responses.

Table 4.7

Student Responses to Teacher Input

Student pseudonym	Student response
Jalane	I want my social studies to understand that I don't know anything about American history social teacher has to explain more to me.
Vladek	I wish my teachers knew about me that can help me are I am from a different country...by helping me out little bet more, I need to stay after school if I need help, ask questions.
Thao	I wish all my teachers could know what culture I'm from and that I'm not Chinese or Korean.
Anabel	I would like it for them to tell me that I can achieve my goals.
Ruby	That I understand better if I'm not in a pressure and that Im a very fast lerner.
Rome	That I need to write in my assessment book and see if I have homework.

Circle and/or add the subjects that you think are important for you, then tell me why.

With the exception of Rome and Jaime, all students shifted from a position of needing to know fewer subjects on the pre-study to choosing a need for more subjects on the post-study with more detailed explanations as to why those subjects were needed to help them achieve their future goals. The responses to this question again show a shift in adding more thought and detail to their responses. Alex and Vanessa provide good examples of this shift. Their responses appear in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8

Student Responses to Subjects Needed for Goals

Student	Pre-study subject and rationale	Post-study subject and rationale
Alex	<u>Math</u> , because I have to give people the exact change.	<u>Math</u> because if I want to be a cashier I have to learn the money I have to give people. <u>English</u> because I also have to speak English to people <u>Health</u> because it will help me keep a good self asteam when I am told something I don't like.
Vanessa	<u>English</u> because I have to learn how to say words correct. <u>Art</u> because I could imagine things better.	<u>Math</u> because estimate how much the medicine would cost. <u>English</u> because I would need to know how to spell good. <u>Science</u> because to know how medicine works. <u>Social</u> because to speak up when I talk.

Alex moved from wanting to work at a restaurant to saying that he wants to be a chef or a cashier, probably because his father runs a restaurant, but I think it is a sign of growth that he recognizes the need to learn more than just math for his future. I found it especially revealing when he wrote about learning more about self-esteem in health class to help him when he was told to do something that he didn't like. Alex did not like it when I would return his journal to him because I wanted him to write more. This was a constant source of frustration for him, but he did learn and grow throughout the study and was able to write in longer segments.

Vanessa stated that she would like to be a pediatrician, and like Alex, sees the need to excel in more than just the two subjects she had originally selected. Vanessa is a shy student who struggles with giving speeches in her classes. Apparently, she thinks that social studies would give her more opportunities to speak in class and give her more confidence in her public speaking skills.

How confident do you feel about achieving your future goals? The final data for this research question come from the pre-test question 7 and post-test question 9. Students were asked to circle a numerical value indicating their confidence levels. Of the 12 students, five ascribed the same numerical value in both pre- and post-study surveys, 4 chose a lesser value and 3 chose a higher value. The lowest level of self-confidence was 60% and the highest was 100%. This indicates that students have a fairly high confidence level that they will be able to achieve the goals they set out to accomplish. Those who shifted down in their confidence levels moved from a position of 100% to that of 80%, perhaps indicating some realistic skepticism.

How Will Writing Journals in Response to Literature Help ELLs to Become More Aware of How Their Own Cultural Identity Has an Impact on Their Decision-Making Processes?

To illustrate this response, it is helpful to look at some individual students from the whole study to follow the process from the beginning of the study to the end. I chose the responses of these three students because overall, they became more articulate in their written responses, allowing me to see their progression of thought.

Thao: Thao is a 15 year old Hmong boy who was born in the United States; his primary language is Hmong. He is the oldest son in his family and has great responsibilities in his family for taking care of the younger siblings and carrying on the family traditions. Thao fits the typical example of a long-term English language learner who was born in this country and has only experienced academics in American schools but is not fully literate in either of the two languages that he speaks. At the beginning of the study he said that he didn't like writing in journals but admitted that journal writing is challenging for him and tests his skill in writing. Thao has a difficult time expressing himself verbally. He tends to use the word 'like' repeatedly, as do many native English-speaking adolescents, stumbles and becomes frustrated when he cannot come up with the word he is looking for. At times his writing reflects that. I found the growth in his journal especially insightful and the concerns he has for his future very relevant to this study.

After reading chapter one of *The Lightning Thief*, the writing prompt was: "On page 1, Percy says, 'Being a half-blood is dangerous. It's scary.' What do you think he

means by this? Have you ever felt that your cultural heritage makes life difficult for you? If so, how?" Thao's response was:

I think he means that anything can happen to you if you have two different types of blood line. Yes, I think my heritage makes it difficult because it push me to do bad things cause other people in my family might do whats bad. I mean that its bad cause in my culture everyone hasn't finish school or drop out and that's bad cause it pushes me it to that derection.

Thao told me that many of his adult family members had not finished high school and some were involved with gangs. He did not want to be a part of that lifestyle but at times felt pressure to head in that direction. He did have one uncle who was still in high school and encouraged Thao to do well in his studies so that he could complete high school and go on to college. In another journal entry Thao wrote:

even though I work hard I still get to the bottom.

This sentiment was echoed by several other students as well, the feeling that although they work hard in school, they do not do as well as they would like to.

In response to the journal prompt of "Does learning about your culture and where you come from help you to understand who you are?", Thao wrote:

It helps me know who I am and what culture I come from and it tells me hey you are the one who could repesents us.

It is encouraging to see here that Thao is shifting to a position of thinking that he could be a leader in his community. He discusses the same thing later in his journal when he writes:

Something I would want to be remembered for was being the first one to go through 6 or 8 years of collage. I also want to be remembered for being a professor and do good and nothing else...what I want people to remeber for is being respectful.

It is clear to see that it is important for Thao at this point in his life to further his education, be a leader in his community and maintain the virtue of being respectful which is very important in his culture.

In chapter 9 of *The Lightning Thief*, Percy Jackson, the main character, receives his quest. Percy is ambivalent about his abilities to accomplish what he has been sent to do. In response to the writing prompt connecting how Percy feels about his future goals with how the student feels about his/her future goals, Thao writes:

How I feel about my future goals is going to be hard to reach. But its going to take sometime and effort to get to my future goals. I feel scared like Percy about what I have to do. I also feel happy because everyday I know that I have a better chance of get to my goals I plan for myself. I really don't know how to feel yet because I still have lots to learn and understand to really reach my goals.

Thao is able here to connect his thoughts and experiences with those of the main character in the novel.

Thao deepens and personalizes his connections with the book and the characters in response to the answer that he wrote for journal entry 21B. The question was: "On page 352, Percy's mom says, 'If my life is going to mean anything, I have to live it

myself...I have to...find the courage on my own.’ Do you agree with her? Why or why not?’” Part of Thao’s response is:

I agree with Percy’s mom because we have to live our lives and have any meaning to our lives. If Percy’s mom could tell people that lesson I think people would change and think about how they can change there lives and understand how to find there own way to there futures. I agree with Percy’s mom because she tells a good lesson and I wish people could see this quote and see what they think and will do. I hope I could take this quote and see how this will change me.

In light of the circumstances that Thao has to deal with, it is admirable that he wants to keep this quote close to his heart. Thao’s identification with the characters and the struggles they face echo the same thoughts he is experiencing about making decisions for his own life.

In Thao’s final journal entry about what he hopes to accomplish in the future, he writes:

I would help people out and teach them because I had felt like I was stupid before getting into things and learn from people and mistakes form my past. I hope I could accomplish my goals and finish it with people I like. I think these goals are able to reach.

It is important to note that Thao openly expresses how he felt when he was struggling academically. Thao made tremendous gains in 8th grade compared to the 6th and 7th grades; he had gone from being a primarily C and D student to now an A and B student.

He also made huge gains in his standardized reading scores. He was still below grade level but getting much closer to catching up to his native English-speaking peers than he had ever been before. He repeatedly expressed through his journal writings that he would like to be the first one in his family to graduate from college. From his improved work in school and the dreams that he has, at the moment, he is setting himself up to be successful in that endeavor.

Mauricio: Mauricio is a young man from Mexico who also identified closely with Percy Jackson and was able to draw connections to his life from the book. Mauricio lived a very transient life before his family settled in the community where he now lives, but Mauricio understands that there will most likely be more moves in his life. It is unclear what his formal education was like in Mexico because the family was moving a great deal and Mauricio lived with many different relatives. When asked about how he feels about his future goals, Mauricio wrote:

The way that I feel about my life in the future is that, I kind of feel like percy I don't know what is going to happen wis my future and I am not very sure of wat I want to be for sure I have some Ideas and things I want to be but I don't Realy know wat I want to do or be.

In the beginning of the study Mauricio had expressed interest in being a professional soccer player. After reading part of the book and reflecting upon what kind of work he would like to do if he had to choose right now based upon the skills he has Mauricio wrote:

If I had to decide on a career I would probably do an immigration lawyer because I would like to help and defend the immigrant, cause when you help you get helped.

In another entry he wrote that being Mexican helped him to achieve his goals because:

When you look back at Mexico you see that many people are poor, and that makes me want to improve what we are and what people look at us like

Mauricio became very interested in learning more about what a lawyer does and what education he would need to become a lawyer. He repeatedly wrote in his journal entries about how he would like to become a leader in the Hispanic community and to be one who can help. He actively sought out his social studies teacher to ask him many questions about law. Mauricio talked to the school counselor to seek out more information about careers in law and universities in the area that have law programs. He has become much more focused and is working to gain information on how to reach his goal. He approaches each subject he studies with a mind set of 'how will this help me when I become an immigration lawyer?'

Ruby: Ruby is also from Mexico, and like Mauricio, her family has moved a great deal and has not given much information about her formal education in Mexico or if she had any. She is a very diligent and hard-working young lady who can be very quiet and completely overlooked by her teachers because she is so quiet. This year she began to gain more confidence in her English language and academic skills and was making a concentrated effort to make more native-English speaking friends. She was placed in a

higher level math class and also made large gains on her standardized reading test scores. In regards to connecting her cultural identity with her decision-making, Ruby commented that the book was teaching her very important lessons.

Knowing about your culture so you know how to be normal. It would define you more. Your culture is very important. You should never ever ever ever ever ever be ashamed of your culture.

When answering the prompt about if she thinks her dreams are hopeless, she responded:

no there is a lot of hope in my dreams. I think I will be someone important in life. I will succeed. Because I am powerfull and brave. I hope that my dream comes true. I hope to be professional cook, arketecture or a nurse. See hisakuni I never let myself down.

As an educator, it is exciting to see the enthusiasm she has both for her own culture and her goals for blending that culture into the mainstream and achieving her goals, as well as her efforts to convince me.

All of the students in the study indicated a drive to be someone who is able to achieve their goals. They were able to connect to the character in the book as well as apply the lessons that the character has been learning to the lessons that they are learning in their own lives. The optimism is contagious; however, the obstacles these young people face are very real and tangible.

What Improvements Do Students See in Their Writing as a Result of Exploring Their own Linguistic/Cultural Identities Through a Reflective Writing Process Growing out of Reading Literature?

Data from question 8 on the pre-study survey and question 10 on the post-study survey is helpful to answer research question 4.

In question 8, I asked students to choose one, two or three of the following areas that they would like to improve upon in their English writing skills: (1) writing in complete sentences, (2) using correct verb tenses, (3) using good word choices, (4) spelling, (5) capitalization and, (6) punctuation. I then copied the choices they had circled onto an index card and taped that card to the inside cover of the binder where each of the students kept the journal entries. When students would write a journal entry, they would get their binders and then see the language areas they should pay close attention to while they were writing. I reminded them to go back and re-read their entries after they had written them, specifically looking for areas they had said they would like to improve more upon. When students finished writing an entry, I would read it and check primarily for the areas they wanted to improve upon and make suggestions as to how they could correct or improve upon those areas. For spelling errors I asked that they practiced re-writing the word until they felt confident that they could spell it correctly. If there was a glaring issue that wasn't part of the student's choice, I would point that out or discuss it with the student. An example would be confusing word order, lack of tense markers or a misspelled word that impeded reader comprehension. I would also ask clarifying questions if I felt I couldn't understand what they were trying to communicate or if it

appeared that they didn't understand the journal prompt or if their written response clearly indicated that they did not understand what we had read. I did not correct every language, grammar or spelling error in their journals; instead I focused only on those areas that the student had indicated he or she wanted to improve in. Students would then re-read the journal entries after I had read them and made suggestions or asked questions. Students would answer the questions, make the corrections and then finish with that particular entry and put the entry into their binder.

When we completed reading the book and writing the journal entries, I asked the students to go back to the beginning and re-read their journals so that they could answer question 10 on the post-study survey. Question 10 asked: "Go back in your journal entries and find three areas where you have shown improvement in your writing. Please tell me what they are." Re-reading provided quite a bit of laughter as well as thoughtful reflections as students reminisced and compared each other's responses in the journals. All 7 students in the intermediate class, *The Lightning Thief*, were able to find concrete evidence of how their writing had improved. I show Thao, Anabel and Alex's responses because their responses show clearly the kinds of changes in writing that students were able to identify themselves.

Thao wanted to improve on using good word choices, he wrote:

Chapter 20 (journal entry number) because I learn its "would have" instead of "would of." I've also learn its might have instead of might of. I learn from my writing on chapter 16 that I always have to use my verb endings when talking about the past.

Unfortunately, for this particular entry, he did not remember to use his verb endings, something he really does struggle with. However, there is more awareness now that he needs to concentrate on this, which may propel him into using verb endings more consistently when he is reminded about them in the future.

Anabel wanted to improve upon writing complete sentences, using correct verb tenses and using good word choices. She wrote:

On 22B I said, I accomplish my goal instead of saying I get my goal I used good word choices there.

“Accomplish” is a more appropriate and sophisticated word choice in this situation than “get”, so that is evidence of an improvement in using better word choices. It is important that she was able to recognize that and find it.

Alex wanted to improve upon using correct verb tenses and spelling. He also was one of the students who did not like writing and did not want to do any journal-writing activities. He frequently wrote one-word answers or phrases in response to questions with no depth or thought put into them. I would then ask him a deeper clarifying question and have him re-write or add to his original entry. He did not like doing this and was very clear about letting me know that he did not like writing. However, he wrote this response on his post-study survey:

Chapter 16 I also made improvement on everything and I did not get any corrections, but I also think that in every single one I have made improvement because my responses to the questions and your questions are better than I ever have done.

Alex chose to work on verb tenses and spelling, but his bigger issue was to be able to write a response of some depth and meaning that made sense according to the prompt that was given.

Students who read the book *Esperanza Rising* are at an earlier stage of English language acquisition. All of them expressed the view that they improved on their English writing but weren't as able as the other class to find the concrete examples of that improvement. I chose Nadia and Jaime to demonstrate their responses.

Nadia wanted to improve writing in complete sentences, spelling and punctuation.

I now who to spel said, and poor and tell and talk. I gat bater at writing smaller.

Nadia was clearly able to identify some of the words that she did get better at spelling. Her penmanship did improve over the course of the study and it is interesting to note that she paid attention to that aspect of her writing.

Jaime wanted to work on using correct verb tenses and punctuation. Throughout the journal-writing study, we realized that he had a great deal of confusion regarding what letters need to be capitalized and what letters do not. After reading through his journal he wrote,

I AM better At capitalization AND PunctuAtion, Wrighting.

Again, he needs more work on this aspect of his writing, but he did notice some improvement from earlier writings, and he is aware of writing problem areas.

Conclusion

This study appears to have prompted students to think more about their future goals and consider what kinds of education and work they would like to pursue. As a result it appears that they have been better able to more concretely identify the steps they would need to take to achieve their goals, both in writing English and for their future lives. It also appears that students were able to identify the goals that the characters in the literature have and then apply that same goal formulation to their lives.

Students indicated that bilingualism and multiculturalism are assets for their lives and they do not view their cultural identities as a deficit. They acknowledge the difficulties that their cultural identities can impose at the same time they more thoroughly recognize the negative sentiment that some in the mainstream culture have towards immigrants. Students indicate very high levels of confidence in their abilities to accomplish their goals. They also seemed able to identify the positive and negative aspects the character in the literature faced regarding cultural identity and achieving his or her goals and then relate that to their own lives.

Through the use of case studies, I showed one student's reflective writing about the character. It appears that students were able to identify with the strengths, weaknesses and confusion that the character in the book faced. Students were able to write about that confusion and the decisions that were made and then write about their own life and the goals that they would like to accomplish in the future. Like the characters in the book, the students expressed doubts about their abilities to achieve their

goals but still maintained a very optimistic view of being able to achieve the goals they have set for themselves.

In this chapter I presented the results of my data collection. The data collected was done in the form of pre- and post study surveys, reflective journal-writing entries and the responses to clarifying questions from those entries. In chapter five I will discuss my major findings, their implications, and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.

C.S. Lewis

In this study I attempted to answer the questions:

- How does exploring cultural identity through literature help ELLs identify future goals?
- To what extent do adolescent ELLs make the connections between linguistic/cultural identities and future goals through reading of literature and writing responses to it?
- How will writing journals in response to literature help ELLs to become more aware of how their own cultural identity has an impact on their decision making processes?
- What improvements do students see in their writing as a result of exploring their own linguistic/cultural identities through a reflective writing process growing out of reading literature?

In this chapter I will discuss my major findings, the limitations of the study, teaching suggestions, the implications for teachers, suggestions for further research and how this study will be used and how I will communicate the results of this study.

Major Findings

Exploring cultural identity through literature may help ELLs identify future goals by giving them an opportunity to think about those goals and explore them in a safe atmosphere. Adolescent ELLs are undoubtedly thinking about their futures but are not always given the opportunity to discuss their fears or concerns about those plans (Vo-Jutabha, Dinh, McHale, & Valsiner, 2009). It was clear in the pre- and post-studies that students had been thinking about something they were interested in for their futures but needed to pay more attention to what they need to do to achieve the goals they have for themselves. After reading the novels and identifying with the characters and the decisions they had to face, students were better able to write in a more articulate manner regarding what they would like to pursue in their futures.

These adolescent ELLs were able to make the connections between linguistic/cultural identities and future goals through the reading of literature and the writing of responses to it. When I hear my own children or ESL students speak, they can at times have a very negative view of what they believe their own abilities are. I was pleasantly surprised to read the very positive comments students wrote about their own cultural identities. As in Ajayi's (2006) study, students indicated that being bicultural and bilingual was an asset. On the flip side, they understand that mainstream culture may not always share the same views. Through the journal writing process in response to the literature that students read, they were able to identify with the character and see the similar patterns in their own lives. This was a helpful means to broach this subject of cultural identity and what that means to a student's future plans.

Writing journals in response to literature helped ELLs to become more aware of how their own cultural identity has an impact on their decision making processes in a number of ways. Initially, students acknowledged that being bilingual and multicultural is an asset and not a deficit. They viewed their being able to speak two, or more, languages and understanding more than one culture as an opportunity for them to be agents of change in both their own communities and the mainstream community. Secondly, students repeatedly expressed an interest in helping out others, of wanting to give back to those who needed help in response to the help that they had received from others. They felt excited about being able to be in the position of being a change agent because of the skills they have due to their bilingualism and multiculturalism. Finally, students consistently expressed that their being bilingual allowed them to be more creative thinkers and problem solvers. They felt they had greater access to larger amounts of knowledge because they had these reserves from both their family heritage and the mainstream culture's heritage.

On the opposite side of the coin there was the development of a greater understanding of the negative impacts that their cultural identity can place upon them. I cannot account entirely for the shift in responses from the pre-study to the post-study regarding the negative aspects of their cultural identity. It may be that students did not entirely understand the question in the pre-study survey or they didn't feel comfortable writing about the issue at that time. It may be that because the characters in the books dealt with discrimination and alienation due to their identities that students felt safer to express their feelings of the same sentiments or were able to recognize the discrimination

for what it was. It must be extremely difficult to understand that they are treated differently not because of their behavior or a misdeed on their part but simply because they belong to an ethnic or linguistic minority that at times is deemed unacceptable by the mainstream culture. It is evident that the issues they face are not issues that the majority of their mainstream native English-speaking peers must struggle with. It is a valid area to explore further and discuss with students and staff.

Students were able to see improvements in their writing as a result of paying attention to problem areas that they identified. Students seemed to be able to understand that they need more than just a few subjects to succeed and they need to do well in school, with the vast majority of them wanting to go on to post-secondary school. They were able to focus on the classes that would be especially helpful for them as they consider their future careers. Students are very confident in their abilities to achieve their goals but they do express hesitancy, as well as wanting more support and interaction with their teachers. Some students shifted down in their levels of self-confidence in being able to achieve their goals in the future. I did not have them write a response about why they chose those numbers so I am unclear as to why they made the shifts that they did.

Their writing revealed that they were able to think creatively by exploring what was happening with the characters in the book. They were able to imagine what it would be like to be the son of a Greek god or the wealthy daughter of a Mexican rancher who was fleeing her country to save her life. They were able to internalize the feelings of the characters and assume the role of that character and how they would feel or respond if they were that character. An area that seemed to have developed more thoroughly as a

result of this study was their critical thinking skills. They were able to analyze the situation from the literature's perspective and, through that lens, look at their own life and consider how to analyze their situation and formulate goals that are appropriate for their own situations.

All students expressed the belief that their writing had improved over the course of this study. The students who read *The Lightning Thief* were able to find concrete examples of those areas where their writing had improved. The students who read *Esperanza Rising* were not all able to find those examples but still expressed the belief that their writing had improved. Given the fact that some of these students really did not like writing, nor did they want to write, I think it is important to note that they felt that their writing skills had improved and that they identified their own problem areas. Because of their longer and more detailed responses to the prompts over time, I agree that their writing has improved but I find it more intriguing to learn that they have more confidence that their writing skills have improved.

Writing in response to literature that is multicultural and has relevance to these students promoted more interest for them to become better readers. Half of the students continued to read books by both Riordon and Muñoz for their April and May book reports. This got students talking about books in terms of academic literary language. I heard questions such as: "What was the plot of the story?" "What is the setting?" "Are the characters believable?" This is noteworthy because these conversations took place with language learners who discussed books in a second language much as native

speakers might do, language learners who never thought they would read the first book, let alone tackle another book by the same author entirely on their own.

There were two areas that surprised me which I had not fully considered before embarking upon the study. The first is that students were very aware of and excited by their position to be an agent of change in both their cultural communities and the larger community. There was a repeated theme among their writings of wanting to use this position in the best possible way to help out others as they had been helped themselves. I had hoped they would be aware of this possibility, but I had not anticipated the high level of understanding of how they view their potential roles.

The second area that surprised me was the depth of reflection students used as they wrote in their journals, their critical thinking skills. It is usually assumed that verbal discourse provides an easier mode of communication than written discourse does for language learners. In the case of this study, students wrote about situations they were working through in a manner in which they most likely would never have discussed with me. Even if I would have orally asked those reflective questions in response to reading the book directly to the students, the responses probably would have been in the form of a shrug, "it's OK", or "I don't know." Through the process of reading the novel, reflecting upon the character and then writing in response to the prompt, students were able to work through their own life situations in a very thoughtful and deliberate manner. This shows me that it is very important to allow students to utilize multiple modes of communication to learn language. Even though language learners may balk at the idea of having to write

more when it is already difficult for them, this mode of communication is beneficial for them to become better writers and these students recognized this.

Limitations

A book study takes time, and writing takes time. We began our book study in early February and ended it in mid-April of 2010. When reading a book together as a class, it is helpful to have all class members present so that everyone is always together. In the height of flu season, that isn't always possible so there were some challenging days making sure we could read and write when everyone was present. Another challenge was working around the standardized testing schedule. There were two large, state mandated tests that the students had to take which caused us to miss our scheduled reading and writing time. The gap between reading intervals was at times frustrating and it took some back-pedaling to catch up to where we were and to keep up the momentum that we had been at before we had to take state tests.

The final fly in the ointment was when *The Lightning Thief*, which had been made into a movie, was released in the middle of our book study. We hotly debated whether we should all go to see the movie as a class, which meant they thought I should foot the bill for it since it is my research project. I, of course, suggested we try to wait and see it after we were done reading the book, but everyone knew it would no longer be playing by the time we were finished. Over the weekend we were debating the issue, half of the class went to see the movie. They then told us it was nothing like the book anyway so we could all just forget it. Unfortunately, the students who had seen the movie just couldn't

help but blurt out in class what was going to happen even though the movie is very different from the book. My advice to other teachers is to make sure the book you have chosen is not scheduled to come out as a major motion film when you are in the midst of reading that book for a class book study.

Another limitation is that it was a short time when considering students and their long-term goals for their futures. It would be helpful to do a longer study to follow up on student growth and career planning over time. This study was not long enough to give the students the ongoing support they need to plan for their futures.

Teaching Suggestions

Reflection is a necessary and fundamental point of all teaching. The best lesson plans can result in complete chaos given the right or wrong situations, depending upon which way you look at it. As I have had the time to reflect on what was beneficial and what was not beneficial, I came up with a few kernels that may be helpful to someone who would like to embark upon a project such as this. First, I will continue to look for literature that is challenging, discusses diversity and its challenges in an honest light as well as incorporating another academic content theme that can be learned along with the story of the novel. *The Lightning Thief* was a gold mine of information in helping students to understand Greek mythology, Greek word roots in English as well as a basic understanding of ‘Western Civilization.’ *Esperanza Rising* helped us to learn about the Great Depression, which is crucial to any basic understanding of 20th century American history.

Secondly, when I do this same book study in the future, I will not use as many of the scripted questions (Appendices C and D); rather, I will ask students to identify more of the key points in the novels that impact them or that they found intriguing. Some scripted questions are valid and necessary, but I found that I had too many of them and that students were very capable of finding the information and key points that resonated with them. Out of all of the responses to the ‘find a quote’ reflective journal-writing activities, none of the students chose the same quote as another student. This showed me that students read the novel and were thinking about how they individually interpreted that novel and were not concerned about what the right answer should be or what someone else had written about.

My final teaching suggestion is to have a variety of music to choose from for when students are writing in their journals. If I played the music they liked, they would settle in and write, quietly, completely immersed in what they were doing. When I played no music or made the mistake of choosing music that wasn’t really what they were interested in, writing became more of a challenge and they were not as focused or reflective in their journal entries. I look forward to incorporating a book study like this again and encourage anyone who would like to try to do so. I also know that I will be introduced to new genres of music.

Implications

It is important to note that just because an adolescent ELL may not be able to fully communicate in English or meet grade-level academic standards on high-stakes

standardized tests; it does not mean these students are not concerned about their futures or should not be planning for them. On the contrary, this study showed just how much students are thinking about their futures and the fears they have when planning for them. Adolescent ELLs have a lot of hope for their futures and desire that their teachers learn more about them and take their needs more into consideration. As educators, it is essential that we spend more time getting to know these students and engage them in the conversations about what their plans are for their futures. Students may not seek us out for help but this study illustrates that they are open for us to enter their world more fully. We cannot assume that these students have families who are equipped to navigate the American post-secondary education system. Adolescent ELLs need more help and support from their teachers for that. Adolescent ELLs also need more guidance to be able to make choices about their futures so that they can set goals that they can realistically meet. A journal entry from Jalane helps to explain this point:

I don't like to talk about the future because it makes me worry about things that will happen to me. Things like if my mom and my two sisters are going to come to America to live with me and my dad. This like if am going to finish college and get a job.

As a result of the trauma this child faced before coming to this country and the uncertainties she faces in her life here, the thought of planning for her future is a looming black hole which she would rather not enter. Through the course of this study, she was able to break down some of her fears and identify some of the kinds of work she would like to study in the future and what she needs to do to achieve them. But the conversation

would not have begun had I not pursued it and it is uncertain that she will continue to have support from teachers in the future.

It is exciting to learn that these students view their bilingualism and multiculturalism affirmatively. It is key that we educators adopt that same understanding and not view them as a deficit because of their developing English skills. These students see themselves as agents of help and change within the community; we need to encourage them to continue in that direction. As Thao indicated in his journal entries, the pull to not continue school is great. Again, I would not know that information and would not have gotten to know him better had I not initiated the conversation through the process of writing reflective journals. In light of the high drop-out rates of children of color and linguistically diverse children and the persistent achievement gap, it is critical that we educators reach out to these students so that we can be agents of change in their lives, allowing them the opportunities to tap into their unique abilities to achieve their academic goals. Color-blind ideology, the assumption that race or ethnicity doesn't matter, that many predominantly white schools adopt, may only make it more difficult for ethnically and linguistically diverse students to understand their cultural identities as a source of strength that is to be utilized and not hidden (Lewis, 2001).

Reading high-interest literature with characters that students can relate to is a motivating factor. The books, although initially daunting to the students, when read as a whole, were much more interesting than the students expected and students indicated that they enjoyed reading the books in entirety. Writing in reflective journals can help students to better understand the literature, understand themselves and improve their

writing skills. It is also an excellent means for me to become better acquainted with the students and learn what is happening in their lives as well as focusing on individual students and their writing needs. Instruction can be much more personalized when commenting on individual student work.

Further Research

This study provided me a unique opportunity to better understand my students and gain a small amount of information about their decision-making processes, how they see themselves and how they plan goals for their futures. Much more research needs to be done to have a better grasp of understanding how cultural identity is formed in immigrant youth and what that means for them in terms of decision-making. More research is also needed to provide educators the tools to better teach adolescent ELLs so that they are able to improve academics and set the goals they need for their lives. There also is a need for more research on how reading and writing about what they read impacts reading comprehension for linguistically diverse youth. Along with that, it would be interesting to further explore how reading multicultural literature aids ESL students to become better readers and writers and how relating literature to their own lives increases their critical thinking skills in English.

Communicating and Using Results

As a result of what I have learned in this study, I will share this information with the staff that I work with. Because I am just one teacher of many that my ESL students

meet each day, other teachers, especially mainstream content teachers, must be aware of the needs of these students to promote growth in all of their academics. I will also share what I have learned from this study with my students so that they are better equipped to begin that process of making more concrete plans for their futures. I will share the results of my study with the area ESL teachers' network which gathers ESL teachers from the area to problem-solve and discuss ways in which we can improve educational opportunities for ELLs in our area.

On a final note, I will continue to share what I have learned and continue to learn about this topic with my own two children. We carry on with our conversations about how they can be agents of change and ambassadors of creative problem-solving due to their unique cultural identities. More importantly, I will work on resisting my urge to preach and will listen more so that they can hear from their own voices, just how valuable they are.

APPENDIX A

PRE-STUDY OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Appendix A

Pre-Study Open-Ended Questions: Double entry journal format

Teacher question	Student response
1. What goals do you have for your future?	
(room for a clarifying question and student response)	
2. How do you plan to achieve these goals?	
3. How does your cultural identity help you achieve your goals?	
4. How does your cultural identity hurt you?	
5. What do you wish your teachers knew about you to better help you achieve your goals?	

6. Circle and/or add the subjects that you think are important for you, then tell me why.

To accomplish my future goals I need to do well in:

math because

social studies because

English because

science because

art because

_____ because

_____ because

_____ because

7. How confident do you feel about achieving your future goals? (circle one)

100%	80%	60%	40%	20%	0%
no problem	probably	maybe	not so sure	a little	none

8. Circle the areas in English writing that you would like to improve on the most.

writing in complete sentences

spelling

using correct verb tenses

capitalization

using good word choices

punctuation

APPENDIX B

POST-STUDY OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Appendix B

Post-Study Open-Ended Questions: Double entry journal format

Teacher question	Student response
1. What goals do you have for your future?	
(room for a clarifying question and student response)	
2. How do you plan to achieve these goals?	
3. How does your cultural identity help you achieve your goals?	
4. How does your cultural identity hurt you?	
5. What do you wish your teachers knew about you to better help you achieve your goals?	
6. How are you like Esperanza/Percy?	
7. How are you different from Esperanza/Percy?	

8. Circle and/or add the subjects that you think are important for you, then tell me why.

To accomplish my future goals I need to do well in:

math because

social studies because

English because

science because

art because

_____ because

_____ because

_____ because

9. How confident do you feel about achieving your future goals? (circle one)

100%	80%	60%	40%	20%	0%
no problem	probably	maybe	not so sure	a little	none

10. Before we began reading the book, you said you wanted to improve

_____ in your English writing. Go back in your journal entries and find three areas where you have shown improvement in your writing. Please tell me what they are.

APPENDIX C

ESPERANZA RISING WRITING PROMPTS

Appendix C:

Double Entry Journal Questions and student and teacher responses

Esperanza Rising by Pam Munoz Ryan

Journal entry quote and question and teacher responses	Student responses
Aguascalientes, Mexico, pp. 1 – 3 Esperanza shares a special moment with her father when she is six years old – what is it?	
Do you have a special memory?	
Las Uvas – Grapes pp 4 – 22 On page 15 Abuelita tells Esperanza, “Do not be afraid to start over.” Why do you think she says this to Esperanza?	
Do you think this is wise advice for your life? Why or why not?	
Las Papayas pp. 23 – 38 On page 37, Miguel says, “You were right, Esperanza. In Mexico we stand on different sides of the river.” What does he mean by that?	
Have you ever felt like Miguel? If so, describe what that was like.	
Los Higos – figs pp. 39-57 Choose a quote from this chapter that you think is important. Tell me why it is important to the story. What does it mean to you?	
Las Guayabas – guavas pp. 58 – 80	

<p>On page 75, Miguel tells Esperanza, “I hear that in the United States you do not need unapalanca (a lever or a connection) that even the poorest man can become rich if he works hard enough.” Do you agree with Miguel? Why or why not?</p>	
<p>Los Melons – cantaloupes pp. 81 – 99 What are the challenges Esperanza has to face?</p>	
<p>What are the challenges you have to face?</p>	
<p>Las Cebollas – onions pp 100 – 120 In this chapter Esperanza must learn how to sweep – something everyone else already knows how to do. Have you learned something difficult that other people thought was easy? What was it? Who taught you?</p>	
<p>Las Almendras – almonds pp 121 – 138 In this chapter we learn that Alfonso and Miguel brought the roses from Mexico to California with them. Why is this important to Esperanza and her mother?</p>	
<p>Is there something that is important to you from your culture? What is it? Why is it important for you?</p>	
<p>On page 136, Mama says, “Esperanza, do you know that I am so proud of you? For all that you are learning.” What is Esperanza is learning? Be specific!</p>	
<p>What are you are learning now? Why is this important in your life?</p>	

<p>Las Ciruelas – Plums pp 139 – 157 Choose a quote from this chapter that you think is important. Tell me why it is important to the story. What does it mean to you?</p>	
<p>Las Papas – potatoes pp 158 – 178 What is Esperanza’s new goal? What does she have to do to achieve it?</p>	
<p>What is your goal in the future? What do you have to do to accomplish that goal?</p>	
<p>On pages 173 and 174, Esperanza tells Isabel about the traditions that were celebrated in Mexico for Christmas. What traditional holidays does your family celebrate? Are those traditions important? Why or why not?</p>	
<p>Los Esparragos – asparagus pp 199 – 213 Why doesn’t Esperanza join the strikers? Why did she make that decision?</p>	
<p>In your life, what stops you from achieving your goals? What helps you achieve your goals?</p>	
<p>Los Duraznos – peaches pp 214 – 233 On page 224, Esperanza says, “I have lost everything. Every single thing and all the things I was meant to be.” Have you ever felt like Esperanza?</p>	
<p>Imagine that you are Esperanza’s grandmother. Write a letter to Esperanza. What do you think</p>	

Esperanza needs to hear? What do you think her grandmother would write to her?	
Las Uvas – grapes pp. 234 – 253 How does Esperanza feel as her family comes together? What are her new goals?	
How do you feel when you have achieved a very important goal?	
What keeps Esperanza going through difficult times?	
What keeps you going through difficult times?	
Imagine yourself in the future. What are you doing? What goals have you accomplished? Who is with you encouraging you?	

APPENDIX D

THE LIGHTNING THIEF WRITING PROMPTS

Appendix D
 Double Entry Journal Questions and student and teacher responses
 The Lightning Thief by Rick Riordan

Journal entry quote and question and teacher responses	Student responses
Pre-reading writing: Imagine that you have been given one magical power of your choice. What is your magical power? What power does it have? Why did you choose this magical power? ²	
Chapter 1 On page 1, Percy says, “Being a half-blood is dangerous. It’s scary.” What do you think he means by this?	
Have you ever felt that your cultural heritage makes life difficult for you? If so, how?	
Chapter 2 On page 21, Mr. Brunner tells Percy that he won’t be coming back to Yancy Academy. Why is Percy disappointed by that?	
Has there been a teacher or adult that you have wanted to do well for? What made you respect that person’s opinion?	
Chapter 3 On page 29, Percy says about his mother, “She’s the best person in the world, which just proves my theory that the best people have the rottenest luck.” Do you agree with him? Do you know of a situation like that? On the other hand, do you think that good things happen to bad people? Explain. ²	
In Chapter 3, Percy’s mom is very proud of Percy and says that his father would be proud of Percy too. Why doesn’t Percy believe they should be proud of him?	

What is your family proud of you for? What should they be proud of you for?	
Chapter 4 Find a quote or scene in this chapter that you find interesting and tell me why you think it is important.	
Chapter 5 On page 68 Chiron asks Percy, “Can you imagine that for a moment, never dying? Never fading? Existing, just as you are, for all time?” Would you like to be immortal? Why or why not? What are some of the things you would do if you were immortal?	
Chapter 6 On page 84 Percy meets the kids in his cabin at half-blood camp and says: “They were staring at me, sizing me up. I know this routine. I’d gone through it at enough schools.” Have you ever been the new kid at school? How did you feel? How did you make new friends? ²	
On page 88, Annabeth explains why Percy does not have ADHD. How does understanding where Percy “comes from” help him?	
Does learning about your culture and where you come from help you to understand who you are?	
Chapter 7 Why does it bother Percy to be “undetermined?” What difference do you think it will make for Percy to know who his father is?	
Chapter 8 Percy tries many different things at camp but isn’t really good at any of them. What kind of attitude does he have?	

Based upon the skills you have right now – if you had to decide on a career today – what would it be and why? ²	
Chapter 9 What is Percy’s quest? How does he feel about it? How do you feel about your future goals?	
Chapter 10 Find a quote or scene in this chapter that you find interesting and tell me why you think it is important.	
Chapter 11 In this chapter, what gets Percy distracted?	
What are some things that distract you from your goals?	
Chapter 12 On page 190, Percy thinks that Grover’s dream is hopeless, why?	
Do you ever think your dreams are hopeless? If so, why?	
Chapters 13 & 14 Find a quote or scene in these chapters that you find interesting and tell me why you think it is important.	
Chapter 15 On page 229, Annabeth says, “Even strength has to bow to wisdom sometimes.” What do you think she means by this? ²	
What wisdom do you need to accomplish your goals?	

Chapter 16 How does Percy understand that the Lotus Casino is a trap?	
How does he escape?	
What are some traps you could fall in to?	
How could you escape?	
Chapter 17 In <i>The Lightning Thief</i> , there is a time limit for Percy to achieve his goals and stop World War III before the summer solstice. How do you think this time limit helps him?	
How do you think this time limit hurts him?	
In your life, what time limits do you have for achieving your goals?	
How do those time limits help you?	
How do those time limits hurt you?	
Chapter 18 Find a quote or scene in this chapter that you find interesting and tell my why you think it is important.	
Chapter 19 On page 302, Percy says, “So few people did good in their lives. It was depressing.” Do you agree with him? Why or why not?	
What is one thing you would like to be remembered for?	
Chapter 20 Find a quote or scene in this chapter that you find interesting and tell my why you think it is important.	

Chapter 21 In this chapter, Percy finally meets his father, Poseidon. Why does Percy say that he is glad that his father is distant?	
How does understanding who Poseidon is help Percy to understand himself better?	
What are some of the pieces of your culture that help you to better understand who you are?	
On page 352, Percy's mom says, "If my life is going to mean anything, I have to live it myself...I have to...find the courage on my own. Do you agree with her? Why or why not?"	
Chapter 22 <i>The Lightning Thief</i> is a fiction book about Greek mythology, monsters and quests. On page 361, Percy remembers what Annabeth had said, "The real world is where the monsters are. That's where you learn whether you're any good or not." Do you agree with that statement? Explain why or why not.	
What new adventures do you think Percy will have?	
Imagine that you have accomplished a big goal that you are working for. What do you think you will do after that?	

² These questions were adapted from Rick Riordan's Teacher's Guide for *The Lightning Thief*, 2005.

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