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### Prisoners Teaching ESL: A Learning Community among “Language Partners”

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# Prisoners Teaching ESL: A Learning Community among “Language Partners”

► Andrea Olinger, Hugh Bishop, Jose R. Cabrales, Rebecca Ginsburg, Joseph L. Mapp, Orlando Mayorga, Erick Nava, Élfego Núñez, Otilio Rosas, Andre D. Slater, LuAnn Sorenson, Jim Sosnowski, and Agustin Torres

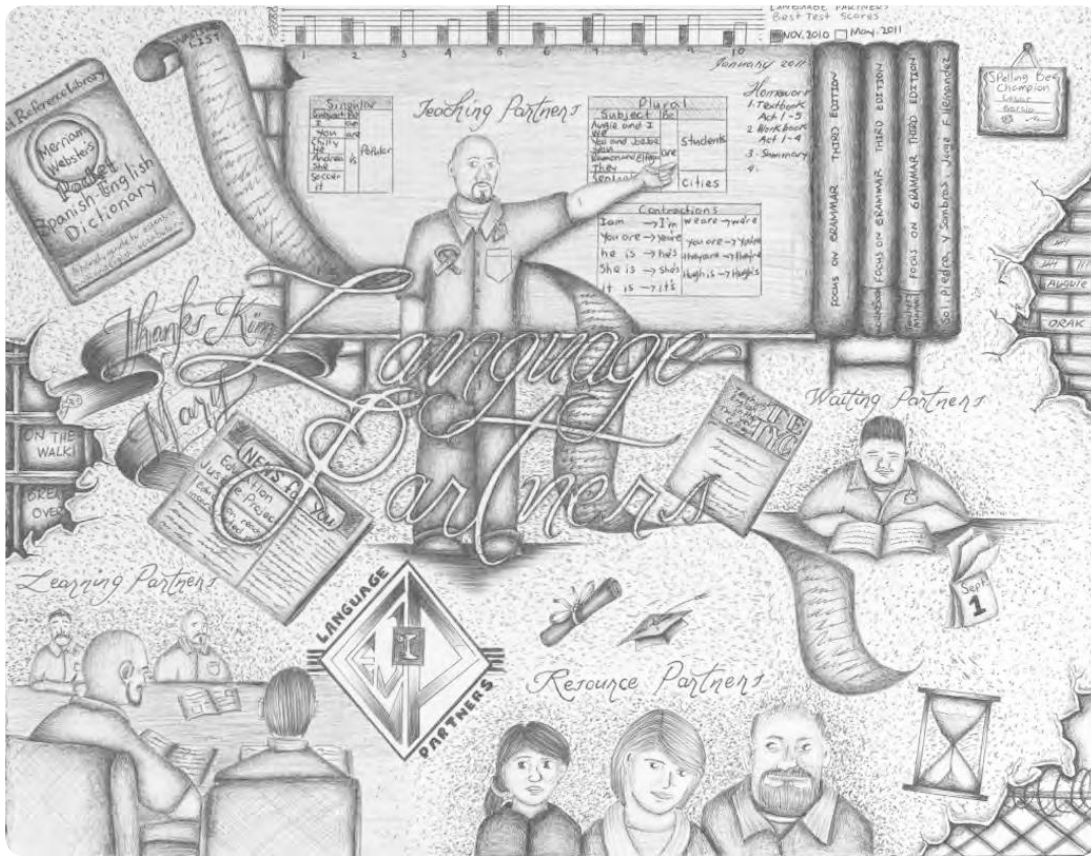
## New Voices

A program in which prisoners teach ESL classes, supported by volunteer teacher-trainers, is a learning community with immense and sometimes unforeseen value.

The illustration by ESL teachers Agustin Torres and Erick Nava (Figure 1) presents a classroom that is both typical and atypical of a classroom at a community college or intensive English program. A teacher stands at the chalkboard surrounded by characteristic classroom resources—a dictionary, newspaper, textbooks, and teacher’s manual—and a chart documenting scores on a literacy test. Several students sit around a table, one looking bemused, one distracted, and another happily engaged with reading material. In the background, however, gaping holes in the walls reveal barbed wire, bricks of a cell wall, and barred windows. The teacher and students wear button-down collared shirts hung with clipped-on ID tags; the three individuals at the bottom don’t. A waiting list of students curls from the upper left to the lower right, nearly touching an hourglass. Its sands have just begun to fall.

These images derive from Language Partners, an ESL program offered at the Danville Correctional Center, a medium-security men’s prison in central Illinois. Danville Correctional Center houses a significant number of Spanish-speaking men from Mexico with limited English proficiency. Before the introduction of Language Partners in January 2011, the prison hadn’t offered an ESL class in over five years due to budget cuts, making it difficult for these men to enter ABE and pre-GED classes.

Seeing this need, Jose R. Cabrales, an incarcerated college student participating in the Education Justice Project (EJP) through the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (UIUC),<sup>1</sup> developed a proposal for a tutoring program in which EJP students would help interested prisoners improve their English skills. In summer 2010, Language Partners launched training in TESL and tutoring for a group of students. By that fall, potential learners were tested and selected, and



**FIGURE 1.** Language Partners. Illustration by Agustin Torres and Erick Nava.

instruction began in January 2011 to a group of men who had tested at low and high beginning levels of ESL proficiency. Those students have continued with the program to the present.

The foundation for Language Partners originates with peer tutoring programs in US prisons, which began in the mid-1990s (Steurer). The benefits of these programs include the building of trust between tutor and tutee (Franklin) and tutors' ability to use their experiences in prison to help tutees better adjust to the classroom (Cordero and Pousada). More broadly, these opportunities not only provide tutors and tutees with new skills but also lend a sense of purpose to their time in prison and help them shift from "passive recipient to a contributor to society" (Edgar, Jacobson, & Biggar 6).

From its conception, however, Language Partners has aspired to be more than a one-on-one tutoring program. This learning community consists of incarcerated learners, incarcerated teachers, and volunteer teacher-trainers. The eight incarcerated teachers, EJP students at Danville Correctional Center, are responsible for the entire class of learners during twice-weekly, three-hour class periods. They perform the normal functions of teachers: creating lesson plans, designing activities, adapting readings, assigning and marking homework and tests, recycling material, motivating students, and so on. The teachers are supported by ten volunteer teacher-trainers

who are members of the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign community—instructors at the Intensive English Institute and graduate students and professors in various departments. The volunteer teacher-trainers provide summer training and ongoing professional development for the teachers. They give feedback on lesson plans and instruction, run workshops, search for materials to which the teachers do not have access, and teach the occasional lesson.

These collaborations have made Language Partners a transformative learning experience, one that is, in fact, quite similar to that of a community college. With its joint mission of teacher training and ESL instruction, the program provides valuable job skills, such as advanced English proficiency for the learners and teaching skills for the teachers. It also goes without saying that the learners and teachers are perhaps the epitome of the nontraditional student (or the traditional community college student)—someone who is poor and a minority and is navigating various hardships and transitions in life. In addition, all of the teachers have taken courses or earned degrees at community colleges (many while in prison), and some of them are teaching assistants in the Spanish class offered through Danville Area Community College.

We have found, in this environment, that the teaching of ESL by prisoners has value that far exceeds individual learners' gains in English. In an assemblage of short essays by teachers and volunteer teacher-trainers, we explore this very discovery. We discuss reasons for teachers (and learners) to participate in the program, and we illustrate the remarkably collaborative nature of the teaching and learning. We then reveal the unexpected benefits of Language Partners, namely, its effect on relationships with family members and on perceived stereotypes of prisoners. We conclude by reflecting on the program's challenges and accomplishments and consider implications for its wider adoption.

### **Inspiration and Motivation for Language Partners**

Language Partners has become the site of individual teachers' transformations and has allowed teachers to "give a little back while in prison." Teachers and learners make a difference in others' lives and in their own: the program offers not only a sense of personal responsibility and fulfillment but also greater hope for job prospects upon release.

#### **The Meaning of Sacrifice: Orlando Mayorga, Teacher**

There are people who do not, and may never come to, understand the meaning of sacrifice. Language Partners has provided an avenue for incarcerated individuals to slowly understand it.

Those on the outside looking in may think, Well, they should sacrifice. They're criminals! Though many choose to continue in the cycle that brought them to prison, the learners and teachers have all chosen in some way to sacrifice certain privileges for the sake of becoming better people. Instead of spending time playing cards or dominoes the learners and teachers are in their cells doing homework or

coming up with lesson plans or activities for class. We forgo recreation time on the yard or in the gym and access to the phone to call loved ones. These sacrifices may seem simple, but to better understand their value, one must first know about the strict, monotonous schedules we must abide by on a day-to-day basis.

If one doesn't have an assignment (job) or attend class, one can be locked in the cell for 21 hours a day. The remaining hours can be spent in the dayroom (2 hours and 45 minutes/day)—where we are given access to the phone, showers, or the common area where we can play cards, dominoes, or socialize—or in the gym or yard (1 hour/day).

For the learners the language barrier keeps the majority from obtaining an assignment, so they are able to partake in dayroom and gym/yard activities, but not always. One learner skips dayroom to study his workbook. At times he wants to go to the yard, but because he has no access to a shower afterwards, he chooses to stay in his cell so as not to show up to class smelling bad. Ask "Chato" if he minds and he will respond, "No, because all this will help me do good when I go home." This response is again and again repeated among the learners.

As for the teachers, all have morning assignments and/or are enrolled in night classes through Danville Area Community College (DACC) and through the Education Justice Project. These morning assignments include jobs as maintenance men, teacher's assistants, print shop specialists, and officers'/staff commissary specialists. Our jobs keep us from taking part in dayroom and recreational activities during the day.

Erick Nava, who works as a maintenance man and volunteers in the DACC Spanish class, never has time for gym/yard activities. (His body shows it!) And Jose R. Cabrales tirelessly plans activities instead of socializing. His volunteer work goes beyond the classroom, teaching non-English speakers who are not in the program during dayroom time.

I once heard a commentator on TV say that those in prison either become better criminals or better people. Simple sacrifice is teaching us how to be better people. For us who have contributed very little to the world, Language Partners has given us the opportunity to give a little back while in prison. And though our sacrifices may seem simple, they are allowing us to learn the meaning of that word.

### **English Barriers in Prison, and Reasons to Fight Them: Élfego Núñez, Teacher**

Latinos in prison that lack the ability to understand and/or speak English face many obstacles. For example, I know of an instance where a non-English speaker visited the prison health care unit and left misdiagnosed and with medicine for which he had no symptoms, all because he was not provided a translator.

I have also witnessed men face embarrassment and humiliation because their lack of English has put them in undesirable situations. One instance in particular puts this in perspective. Early in my incarceration, I saw an employee use all sorts of expletives toward someone who did not speak English because he walked to the wrong location. Because this person couldn't explain himself he ended up in segregation for several days. I have regularly witnessed times when someone is

asked a question he has no clue how to answer. This person is quickly rebuked and scorned. As a result, this functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy, making him feel even more discouraged about his ability to communicate and learn English.

To gain a better perspective on why Language Partners was created, I asked myself a question that potential critics might ask: “Why are we teaching English to people who are (a) mostly here illegally and (b) in prison?” My response: many people in some way or another contributed their time and effort for *me* to have an education in prison. I received my GED in prison and have taken many courses through two community colleges in prison. I am now taking upper-level college courses through the Education Justice Project; and I am working on my CAAP (Certified Associate Addiction Professional) certification through Danville Area Community College. If those people had taken that stance, I would not be here right now advocating for individuals who want to better themselves.

The learners are participating not just for their own interests, however, but also for their families’ well being. In Latino culture the family unit holds precedence over the individual. If you ask many of the learners what motivates them to learn English, the most popular answer is their family. By learning English, they get a chance to improve themselves for the sake of their family.

### **Fresh Beginnings: Erick Nava, Teacher**

My name is Erick. I’m a 31-year-old Latino. My parents brought me to the U.S. when I was only months old. I have lived here ever since and the culture has become my own. My immigration status was stable until I became incarcerated. As a result, I will be deported to Michoacan once my time here is complete. Considering that I am going to be sent to a country that I am hardly accustomed to, visions of a future for me in Mexico seemed bleak.

The only hope I saw was education, and even this didn’t seem to be enough. So far I had received an AA and an AS. But I couldn’t see how English Lit or Art Appreciation would help me in a place where agriculture is the main source of income as is the case in the town where I was born, Maravatío. If I continued my education in Mexico, I would have to worry about how I would pay for it and I would have to move to a major city. After being in prison for 15 years and being, for the most part, financially taken care of by my family, taking care of myself is vital.

Then I heard about Language Partners. In the beginning, I participated to help people that needed a way to communicate with family and the world they lived in. I went through the training with the mentality that I was getting ready to help men right now. The training introduced us to second language acquisition theory and pedagogy. But more important, the training also required that we interact with each other, teachers and volunteer teacher-trainers. This helped me come out of my shell because I had been horrified to speak in front of groups of people. And, after a few months of teaching, something strange happened. I realized how great it felt to actually help and teach someone. A sense of pride would fill me when guys would grasp grammatical concepts that they had spent weeks struggling with. I’d never felt that before.

Then I started thinking that I could do this when I got *out*. Not just do it but make a career out of it. Especially in Mexico, where there is a high demand for English as a second language. Suddenly, I had something that I really wanted to and could do. I would have a career and I would be able to help people learn a second language that could potentially change their lives.

The most surprising thing that has happened, funny even, was that I have mixed feelings about my upcoming outdate. I only have about two years left on my sentence but I feel that that is not enough time for me to learn everything I need to know. Of course I want to be released so I can be reunited with my family; everyone here is waiting for that. It's just that it feels like I'm not ready to go yet because I have so much more to learn. As crazy as all this sounds, it feels right. Language Partners has prepared me for the future that months ago didn't seem too promising. For this alone, I am proud to be a part of Language Partners and grateful to all who made it possible.

### **The Program in Action: Learning through Collaboration**

Through the opportunity to take on high levels of responsibility and to be trusted, “active citizenship” helps prisoners acquire important skills, give back while in prison, and make amends (Edgar, Jacobson, and Biggar). The teachers' confidence and sense of self-worth have grown in Language Partners' deeply collaborative teaching and learning environment. In class, one can witness the easy collegiality between teachers as they work together to consider learners' needs and plan lessons.

### **Life Experience Inspiring ESL Creativity: Andre D. Slater, Teacher**

Life experience is probably the greatest medium from which a lesson can be drawn. Whether in learning environments or in life in general, connections between life experience and schooling should always be made. This sentiment is inspired by my participation in Spanish courses through Danville Area Community College taught by Lee Ragsdale (who also happens to be a Language Partners volunteer teacher-trainer). For example, Lee would have us write compositions about our childhood experiences. Connecting what we learned to our life was a helpful learning tool—and a method I took with me when I became a Language Partners teacher.

When I joined, the program was roughly eight to nine months under way. Initially, I spent a three-week period observing classes as well as planning meetings, where teachers and volunteer teacher-trainers would collaborate on lessons, schedule who would teach in the coming weeks, and discuss classroom issues. At these meetings there is always a diversity of questions asked and suggestions offered. This welcoming environment made me feel confident that I would be well prepared for my first lesson.

Using comic illustrations I'd drawn (see Figure 2), I eventually came to teach my first lesson on the imperative. This lesson followed Otilio Rosas's lesson, which had introduced the imperative. I based the illustrations on students' everyday experiences, including those at Danville Correctional Center. For example, illustra-



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**CAN YOU FIND THE IMPERATIVE VERB?**

Instructions: Read the comics in each box. Find the imperative verbs being used by the characters talking. Write the imperative verbs you find below, in the blank boxes on the second page.

(1) \_\_\_\_\_

(2) \_\_\_\_\_

(3) \_\_\_\_\_

(4) \_\_\_\_\_

(5) \_\_\_\_\_

(6) \_\_\_\_\_

(7) \_\_\_\_\_

**Part 2: Mark which Imperative Use applies to each comic box. Look at the choices on the board. Mark letter A, B, C, D, or E. There may be more than one imperative use that applies.**

Box # 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Box # 5. \_\_\_\_\_

Box # 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Box # 6. \_\_\_\_\_

Box # 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Box # 7. \_\_\_\_\_

Box # 4. \_\_\_\_\_

FIGURE 2. Imperative verb activity created by Andre D. Slater. On page 2, part 2, the letters A-E refer to different uses of imperatives as noted in the textbook (e.g., polite request, order).

tion #1 reflects a common occurrence between an officer and an inmate when the latter is deemed to have violated a rule, even if he hadn't. Illustration #2 reflects an exchange between a parent and a rebellious child. Illustration #3 was constructed differently; it lacks an imperative. This was to test if students could detect when it is not being used.

The drawing that I had the most fun with was #7. It stemmed from a classroom occurrence I'd occasionally witnessed. I'd notice how during break time, students would playfully tease teacher Erick Nava over a soccer tournament they had won against him and his team here. This was clearly a memorable, gleeful moment for them.

A few days before presenting, I discussed my plan with a few teachers (including Otilio) and volunteer teacher-trainers in the back of the classroom as another teacher was up front. At this brainstorming session, suggestions ranged from whether the comic bubbles should be left blank, allowing students to create their own dialogues with the imperative, to how we could incite more interaction between students. Also born during this session was the idea of Otilio helping the learners create a recipe book as an extension of the imperative lesson. (Currently, this project is under way.)

The students enjoyed the activity, noticing that I had captured occurrences they could relate to. When class ended, some of them shook my hand and said they had fun doing the activity. Most referenced the illustration about beating Erick in soccer and how the drawing "looked just like him!" This would probably account for the laughter when we focused on illustration #7. I am grateful that my artistry can serve as a creative tool to teach ESL. I plan to continue striving to become a better teacher, while constantly seeking the positive influence of my colleagues and keeping the lessons connected, in some way, to the lives of the students.

### **Ten Teacher-Trainers, Eight Teachers-in-Training, One Class: LuAnn Sorenson, Volunteer Teacher-Trainer**

When Language Partners started, nearly all of the teachers were beginning teachers. Their teacher training was limited to the models of teaching they had observed as students and the short course in TESL they had taken the previous summer. Therefore, they had good reason to be nervous when stepping out in front of the learners to teach their first lessons. Adding to that nervousness, however, was the large group of observers in the back of the room: seven fellow teachers and two or three volunteer teacher-trainers. The pressure from the gaze of so many eyes had to have been enormous for them initially. Yet under these microscope conditions, the teachers have steadily progressed in acquiring language teaching skills.

When I look back at the observation notes I took during early sessions, I see a lot of critical comments on all that these men had to learn about language teaching. As time went on, however, I started noting successes and pleasant surprises at how the teachers were delivering good instruction through trial, error, and feedback. Nevertheless, one aspect of teaching that can't be taught is how to deal with the

unexpected (and for a beginning or even novice teacher, there's so much in each class that is unexpected). Yet how a teacher-in-training responds to the unexpected can be a measure of growth and future success as a teacher. Since it was exciting for me when I observed moments of grace in dealing with the unanticipated, I felt compelled to record them.

On this particular evening, the teacher had carefully planned the grammar lesson on prepositions of place. Just after an introductory part that included teaching the use of “on the” before a “floor” (e.g., “on the first floor”), the teacher experienced what all language teachers experience—delayed uptake of what was just taught.

**Teacher:** OK, where are we?

**Learner 1:** 2nd floor

**Teacher:** Where?

**Learner 2:** Top floor

**Teacher:** **ON** the 2nd floor

Rather than reprimand the learners for having missed the point of the lesson, the teacher smiled and moved on to another preposition.

Later, in setting up a game that he wanted them to play, the teacher impressively recycled previous learning on nouns. However, skipping one small step led to an odd outcome:

**Teacher:** Why is *team* a noun?

**Learner 1:** Because it's a thing!

**Teacher:** Good! Give me a proper noun for a team name.

**Learner 2:** Winner!

**Learner 3:** Table!

Jumping over the step of drawing a contrast between common nouns and proper nouns resulted in team names that were just common nouns, Team Winner and Team Table. It was a small glitch, but he made the best choice to just roll with it. Team Table ended up winning even with its common-noun name.

A good teacher makes mental notes of the glitches that happen during class and later reflects on what could have been done differently. I believe that is what the teachers do when they return to their cells. I can be assured of this because I've witnessed their progress, in small steps, over time. Working with ten teacher trainers, eight teachers-in-training, and one class in fishbowl conditions, these men, who started as teachers in name only, have tried, retried, rethought, refined, and are ultimately re-imagining the art of teaching ESL in a prison setting.

## Partners toward a Common Goal: Jose R. Cabrales, Teacher

One of the pleasant surprises of Language Partners is how committed the teachers are to the program. I knew before the program started that they would be perfect, but they surpassed everyone's expectations.

The teachers are in a sense like a family. I get to see most of them outside the classroom, usually in the housing unit or in the cafeteria, and the conversation invariably goes back to Language Partners. We talk about the next class, whether the person who's teaching it has everything ready, if he needs help, what handouts we are going to distribute, and what possible activities we can do afterwards to reinforce the lesson.

However, as with any family, we also have differences of opinion. For instance, not long ago we had a debate about testing. Some of us wanted to test more often, but others thought that the current number and frequency of tests were sufficient. Obviously, every teacher has his opinion, but we are flexible, always keeping in mind what's best for the learners. One can see the determination the teachers have to see the learners succeed. They all have jobs, college classes, and other responsibilities, but they are there, week after week, with their smiles and contagious enthusiasm that reaches both the learners and volunteer teacher-trainers.

When preparing or teaching a lesson, this is important. To know that you can count on such an outstanding group of teachers who are there for the same reasons makes all the difference. You are more confident knowing that they're behind you all the way. They will praise your efforts, but will also give you constructive criticism, and, since we are friends, nothing is held back. At the beginning of the program, for instance, after I had taught a lesson or two, a few teachers jokingly commented that when delivering my lessons I could be bossy. For example, when someone wasn't paying attention, I would call him out and tell him to pay attention. I'm glad they told me. Having grown up with—and hating—those kinds of teachers myself, I wouldn't want to become one of them. Now, if I see someone not paying attention, I just ask him a question to bring him back on track.

I am and I can see that the other teachers are comfortable with each other, sharing the same goal of helping the learners as best as we can. It is to me an honor to be part of this group of professional, dedicated educators.

## Unexpected Benefits: New Roles and Perspectives

New teaching skills are perhaps some of the more easily foreseen results of participation in Language Partners. What we did not expect, however, was that participation would encourage teachers and volunteer teacher-trainers to create new identities and develop more expansive outlooks. These benefits include revisiting and revising relationships with parents, overcoming racial prejudice and segregation, and shattering stereotypes about prisoners.

## **A Teachable Moment: Agustin Torres, Teacher**

This spring I taught a unit on the simple present form of verbs along with the third person singular.

It was not an easy unit. It took me hours of preparation along with plenty of help from the teacher's manual, as well as from fellow instructors and volunteer teacher-trainers. This lesson was particularly difficult during the planning stages because I had to make sure the students understood the concept of third person. Then I had to make sure they grasped this concept before I could move on to the main focus of the unit.

The lesson went well. At first the students struggled with my explanations, but once they got over the hump of the "persons" they began to follow along fairly easily.

The following week after having taught the lesson, I received a visit from my parents. During the visit, I couldn't help but share with them how well the lesson had gone, and how proud I was of the students for having learned it so quickly.

Both of my parents were born in Mexico and immigrated to the U.S. in their early twenties. As I explained to my parents what the unit was about, my mother commented that she has trouble knowing when to use an "s" with a verb— third person singular. My father expressed that he had the same problem.

A few days before I had taught a class full of students this lesson. What was stopping me from teaching my parents the same lesson? Other than not having a chalkboard or books, I had all the necessary tools to teach them— i.e., knowledge of the subject, teaching experience, and perhaps two willing participants.

I asked my parents if they would want to sit through a lesson, and they immediately answered "of course."

I asked my dad to get some paper and pencils from the shelves in the visiting room where they keep coloring books and crayons for kids. I then proceeded to go over the lesson with them as I had done with the students in class.

For the next hour, they ceased being my parents, and became my students. I implemented every possible teaching technique I'd learned: from having them speak only English during the lesson to making sure I gave them plenty of wait time when I elicited answers from them. I even gave them some small information-gap exercises for them to do together. By the end of the lesson they had a good grasp of the concepts.

My parents thanked me for the lesson and jokingly mentioned that they were looking forward to the next visit because they would be learning more English.

## **Our Privilege: Otilio Rosas, Teacher**

I admire my mother for all that she did for my brothers and sisters and myself. She maintained our home, sent us off to school, paid the bills; and she did all of that without speaking any English.

My father was at work since early morning and didn't come home until after 4:00 p.m., so all of the major responsibility fell into my mother's lap. She is a

resilient woman and she moved our family ahead any way she could. One of those ways was to utilize her children as tools whenever necessary.

As my brother and my sisters were at school and my dad was working, my younger sister and me would accompany my mother on every mission. My mom pushed my sister's stroller as I walked beside them, making our way uptown to the pharmacy, local grocery store, utilities offices and the knick-knack and novelty store called Uptown Variety.

At every stop, my mom would give me her instructions in Spanish and I would translate them into English.

I never minded doing this because it just seemed like the natural thing to do. I never questioned my mom's inability to speak English, I never thought less of her. However, at times I did notice a look of frustration or contempt on some people's faces as they waited on my mom to finish giving me instructions.

Translating for my mother gave me a sense of pride and importance in our household. I was a crucial cog in the machinery that made our home run smoothly. Although I stopped translating regularly once I got busier with school, I cherish those memories because they made our mother-and-son bond that much closer.

As I find myself in Language Partners, many of the learners' difficulties—filling out applications, for example—remind me of the hardships that my mother endured when I was a child. Being a teacher rekindles those memories of my mother; I assist these men in a loving manner.

Many of the teachers have gone through similar situations, and are also bound to this program through an obligation that runs far deeper than the program itself. The age of the learners varies from 22 to 64; the older ones remind us of our uncles while the younger ones remind us of our cousins and friends. Just a year ago, most of these guys were strangers. Now, though, we feel a loyalty towards them that is profound. We feel proud when they learn something new. They are not just students anymore; they are friends and family. That's why the program will prosper. This bond will not allow us to let them down. More important, I believe some of them feel the same way and don't want to let us down. They know we care, so they, too, will demand more.

### **Unexpected Experiences: Joseph L. Mapp, Teacher**

From the start I could have never imagined becoming an ESL tutor for a program like Language Partners. When I decided to learn Spanish, I did not start out with some noble or altruistic cause to cross the racial divide and bring Blacks/Latinos closer together. I only wanted to understand what was being said when Latinos spoke in Spanish. I developed a real friendship with two Latinos who would tell me about how other Latinos would say disparaging remarks about our friendship in particular and Blacks in general. So from this I developed a cynical attitude and thought that when Latinos who were conversing in English would switch to Spanish, it was to talk about us.

As I took on my challenge to learn Spanish I was surprised to receive so much help from Latinos. I began to study in the classroom and other Latino students

would assist me. A Latino friend introduced me to his Mexican grandfather and cousin on a visit and encouraged me to speak Spanish with them. That was real significant because inmates tend to shelter our families from one another.

Coming from a predominately African American community, I didn't have a lot of contact with Latinos. Thanks to this program I am afforded the opportunity to interact with and learn about Hispanic cultures. Through Language Partners' guest speaker series, I've learned about the Mexican Revolution, quite unlike the glossed-over account in high school. I now realize that we share similar backgrounds and struggles, and even some of the same aspirations, such as the fact that both races fought for better economic stability and human rights. We all have the same dream of providing a better life for our families.

At Danville Correctional Center, I have the unique opportunity of making a meaningful impact on their lives by helping them learn ESL. However, truth be told, this program is helping me as much as, if not more than, it is helping them. One way that this program helps me is by allowing me to learn a more practical skill—teaching ESL—that not only makes me more marketable for future employment, but lets me help others in the process. I don't want the last impact I've had on others' lives to be what I have been convicted of, so thanks to Language Partners I am able to change lives for the better.

### **Shattering Stereotypes: Hugh Bishop, Volunteer Teacher-Trainer**

Initially, I had the usual stereotype of prisons, because like many people I had had no contact with the correctional system. My ideas in this area had been nurtured by various media accounts of prisons as violent places filled with incorrigible, manipulative inmates. Anyone in prison was implicitly assumed to have these attributes.

My anxiety was not assuaged at my first orientation. Stern warnings were issued from old hands about fraternization (no hugging), the myriad pitfalls in interacting with inmates, the plethora and severity of everyday rules and restrictions (no cell phones, no halter-tops—well, as a middle-aged male I wasn't actually going to wear one). Overall, the orientation did little to dispel my preconceptions. As we entered the prison for our first Language Partners session, I felt “the shades of the prison house” closing about me.

But the reality was unlike anything I had expected. Unbelievably, what I found were self-aware, altruistic human beings with a thirst for education in an environment where mutual respect prevailed. This is so different from views on the outside that I could imagine a traditional, splenetic response: “You are a typical liberal do-gooder, out of touch with the hard realities of life. These inmates are conning you. They are putting on a show. They know how to play you.”

My response, however, would be the exact opposite. If I have been conned, then around 18 people all deserve Oscars. You cannot spend three hours at a time, once or twice a week, month after month in a classroom without getting some sense of participants' motivations and the group dynamic, especially if some of the time you are observing and in that role as little regarded as a fly on the wall.

Over forty years, I have taught diverse groups of students in Africa, Asia, America, and Europe. I have seen few compared to our Language Partners classes that have illustrated so well a harmonious learning community operating on social constructivist principles. And, by the way, by objective measures too, there has been a significant improvement in our learners' performance.

I make no wider claims for the project, but I can say that in this place, at this time, with these students, this classroom represents an example of what seems to me to be education at its best with those considered to be society's worst. My stereotype of inmates was totally shattered. I realize that a human being does not stop being a human being on being incarcerated. As Shakespeare says in *The Merchant of Venice*, "If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" By expecting and encouraging the best rather than the worst, we are helping create conditions for real transformation and correction, and I think the learning community represented by Language Partners is doing just that.

## Conclusion

From one perspective, the first year of Language Partners has been humble. As of December 2011, we are still determining how to graduate our first group of learners and take on new cohorts. We've begun looking for a new textbook that's not grammar-based. And we're torn between whether to focus on literacy skills—as preparation for ABE, pre-GED, and GED courses and beyond—or to emphasize oral communication, which will help the men get jobs upon release.

Considered more globally, however, the Language Partner program's accomplishments are many. We are setting learners on the path toward functional English fluency and offering teachers and learners a way to give back in prison, help their families, and improve their job prospects. We are providing teachers and volunteer teacher-trainers with valuable teamwork and leadership experience resulting in other unanticipated benefits—transformed relationships with family members and prisoners—that are nourishing us all as human beings, not just as teachers, learners, or volunteer teacher-trainers.

Language Partners is establishing a model of prisoner-taught ESL wherein prisoners have meaningful and important responsibilities *and* a support network so they can best fulfill them. The interactions between teachers and volunteer teacher-trainers have engendered an unusual atmosphere of collaboration and trust that empowers all involved. The gains are uniquely reciprocal: volunteer teacher-trainers—novices in a prison classroom—have learned to become resources, not experts; teachers—attuned to learners' needs but newer to TESL—are developing expertise in the field. Perhaps the greatest unexpected benefit is that Language Partners has inspired our hope that it may one day be embraced by prison-university partnerships nationwide. ◀



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## Note

1. Since 2008, the Education Justice Project (EJP) has offered a range of academic programs at Danville Correctional Center: for-credit, upper-division college courses; tutoring; guest lecturers; not-for-credit reading groups; extracurricular writing, science, and math workshops; a sustainable garden project; and Language Partners. About 100 men participate out of a prison population of about 1,800. To be eligible, a student needs sixty hours of lower-division coursework.

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If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching or if you’d like to see NCTE take a stand on a position you support, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE’s Annual Convention.

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