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Poetry as Design in Community-based Adult ESL Classrooms: Meaning-Making with Creative/Aesthetic Texts

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Meaning Making in Community-based Adult Language Learning Contexts

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Though an abundance of academic literature supports the inclusion of aesthetic activities in university and K-12 L2 learning contexts, less attention has been focused on aesthetic approaches in community-based adult ESL contexts. Inspired by a pedagogy of multiliteracies / Design (New London Group, 1996), this paper explores creative meaning making in community-based adult English as a Second Language classrooms, focusing on how Design can illuminate teachers' understanding of what adult ESL learners are doing with language through poetry. I will present collaboratively-produced texts from adults in community-based adult ESL classes, considering how learners employ the Available Designs afforded by poetry and discussions about poetry to engage in the Design and Redesign processes in their ESL classes.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.
(Audre Lorde, 1984, p. 37)

Though an abundance of academic literature supports the inclusion of aesthetic activities in university and K-12 L2 learning contexts, less attention has been focused on aesthetic approaches in community-based adult ESL contexts. When poetic texts are brought in to these contexts, they typically serve to illustrate grammatical themes or vocabulary, rather than *l'art pour l'art*. This absence reflects taken-for-granted pressures for materials designed for adult language learners with immigrant/refugee backgrounds to prioritize basic, instrumental language.

But even when teachers and textbooks don't bring poetry and other creative texts into adult second language classrooms, the learners themselves might. When I facilitated English classes with Hakha Chin refugees in southern Indianapolis, Joshua, an 80-year old pastor and respected community leader, sang a song he had written himself about his journey to the United States. Ana, an advocate for women in her community, shared her love for poetry in Spanish during a beginning-level ESL class I taught in southern Tucson, and requested that we write bilingual poems. For these students, poetry was not a luxury, but a cherished and familiar art form and means of processing their experiences in their native languages. In this Teacher's Forum article, I will argue that poetry is not a luxury for community-based adult language learners, even at the beginning level. In making a case for poetry, I will argue not only that poetry offers adult learners a humanizing and intellectually stimulating means of engaging with language, but also that studying interactions with poetry allows teachers to broaden the ways they understand learners' meaning-making resources.

Specifically, this paper draws upon the theoretical framework of multiliteracies to study creative meaning making in community-based adult English as a Second Language classrooms, focusing on how the theoretical framework of Design can illuminate our understanding of what adult ESL learners are doing with language through poetry. Finally, I will consider how learners employ the Available Designs afforded by poetry and discussions about poetry to engage in the Design and Redesign processes in their ESL classes.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS: MEANING MAKING AND DESIGN

Because my goal in this Teacher's Forum piece is to focus on classroom implications of Poetry as Design, an extensive literature review is beyond the scope of this article. However, I will briefly review how pedagogies of multiliteracies—specifically Design—can frame the analysis of meaning-making. Afterward, using data from my classroom, I argue that participating in a poetic process of Design can give learners access to humanizing pedagogy that includes their voices and expands traditional grammar-centric and survival-based measurements of their learning outcomes.

In a groundbreaking “programmatic manifesto,” the New London Group (1996) aimed to reconceptualize literacy teaching to account for linguistic and cultural differences in students and to prioritize learner agency and critical pedagogy in the process of literacy learning (p. 73). Cope & Kalantzis (2009) call Multiliteracies an “emancipatory” pedagogy, one which “is not about skills and competence; it is aimed at creating a kind of person, an active designer of meaning” (p. 175). Multiliteracies pedagogies center learners and recognize meaning making as an active and transformative process. The New London Group's key construct, Design, holds that “we are both inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning and at the same time active designers of meaning” (p. 65). In this sense, Design (which describes both product and process) involves using available linguistic conventions and resources agentively to make meaning and not just follow language rules.

Drawing upon meaning-making frameworks like social semiotics (van Lier, 2004), the New London Group (1996) proposed a “metalanguage of multiliteracies” (p. 73) based on three elements of Design: Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned” (p. 74). Available designs include resources such as grammars, genre, styles, dialects, and voices. Designing involves the process of remaking meaning with these resources and involves activities such as speaking, reading, listening, or writing. As described by Kress & Selander (2012), Re-design is the ways in which “products, artefacts or processes can be used in a new way, related to new situations and new problems or demands” (p. 266). In other words, Re-design involves transforming information or resources into new representations. Instead of a teacher determining the need for a product and then crafting conditions for that product to be created, the interactional nature of design centers *students*, recognizing both their agency and the “non-canonical forms of representation, whether in modes or in genres, through which learners give expression to and materialise their meanings as interpretations” (p. 268). The outcome of The New London Group's *Re-designed* is not only new meaning, but transformed relationships between engaged learners. In this way, literacy pedagogy moves beyond the focus on language or even language in context, and into facilitating critical inquiry and an agentive stance. Furthermore, as Kress & Selander argue, the design and re-design process redistributes the power of meaning making. (For more theoretical background related to multiliteracies, see Kern, 2000; Leander & Boldt, 2012; Kress, 2008; Kress & Bezemer, 2008; Halliday, 1971; Martin, 2016.)

Ultimately, honoring student resources, creativity, and meaning-making is one of the main goals of Design pedagogies. (Allen, 2018). In the case of writing, teachers can also recognize the meaning-making processes in which learners engage, including choice of genre and multimodal features such as font size and style, color, layout, movement, etc.) (Kress & Selander, 2012, p. 268). When teachers acknowledge the resources used by a learner to select, interpret, and transform resources, the teacher-student relationship changes (Kress & Selander, 2012, p. 267). In addition to Design approaches to writing (Allen, 2018), teachers can also approach Design and re-design through literature (Lopez-Sanchez, 2009, p. 33) and drama (Ntelioglou, 2011). Though poetry specifically affords particular meaning-making potential—ranging from oral fluency (Reppert, 2004) and academic literacy (Iida, 2011, 2017) to peace education (Hess, 1999), self-reflection (Hanauer & Disney, 2014, p. 14), and critical literacies (Keneman, 2017)—poetry as Design remains underexplored in current literature. Furthermore, there is a paucity of literature that explores how students and teachers employ Design approaches in beginning-level community-based adult ESL classes (for an exception, see Maxim, 2006). The following section addresses these gaps by exploring how adults engage in meaning-making by interacting with and producing aesthetic texts in beginning-level ESL classes. I will provide poetic examples created by students in my own classroom, focusing on meanings learners create through Available Designs. I will consider *What does the Design process look like in community-based adult ESL classes?*

INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT

Inspired by the frameworks of multimodal semiotic analysis (Kress) and multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), I present creative texts—specifically poetry and expressive writing—produced collaboratively by learners in community-based adult second language classes to explore approaches to Design. Community-based second language classes are typically language courses offered free-of-charge to participants who are often immigrants and refugees. Courses are non-credit bearing, commonly taught by volunteer instructors, and tend to be offered in community settings such as schools, churches, libraries, or community centers. Following Kress and Selander (2012), the manuscript will explore “means for making meaning beyond those which have traditionally been acknowledged” (p. 266) in these language learning contexts. This means that, rather than focus on grammar and survival themes, I invite readers to consider creative ways learners draw upon all the meaning making resources available to them.

PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT

Classes took place in a beginning-level adult English as a Second Language classroom in Tucson, AZ, from January 2016-December 2018. I volunteer-taught the classes, which met at a public library and a family resource center at a local public school (where I am currently employed full-time as a high school teacher). Participants, all adult women from Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Iraq, and Sudan, voluntarily attended the class free-of-charge. Most were mothers, and the school system provided childcare for babies and toddlers as well as transportation to and from classes. In each of the six semesters, I explained the project and invited students’ consent for me to use their classroom artifacts. I also received IRB approval from my institution and approval from the sites where I taught.

Drawing upon a multiliteracies framework from the perspective of a teacher, I explore adult second language learners' meaning-making in student-produced poetic texts. Following the belief that meaning-making is collaborative, I also describe the processes and contexts in which students produced aesthetic texts through the lens of Design. The texts illustrate key features of meaning-making theories and pedagogies, such as interaction in the Design process, multimodality, and the movement from Available Designs to Design and Re-Design. From these processes, I share a list of suggestions for approaching and evaluating the process of poetry as Design in community-based adult ESL contexts.

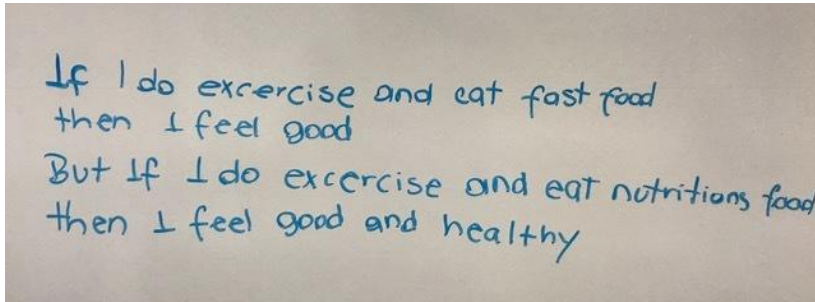
ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN STUDENT POEMS

In this section, I analyze elements of Design in student-produced poetry, drawing upon three examples from my classroom. Because the Design elements are not just inherent in the texts themselves, but part of the process of how they were created and received, I will also describe Design elements in students' process of collaboratively creating and responding to poetry.

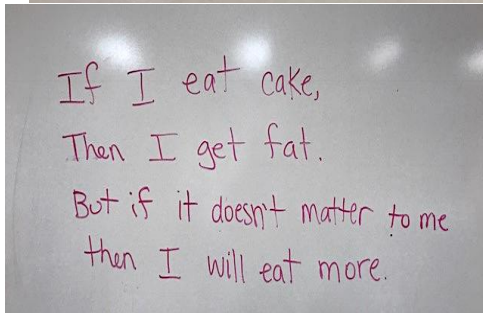
If/then poems

if someone
does not want me
it is not the end of the world.
but
if I do not want me.
the world is nothing but endings.
--Nayyirah Waheed (2013)

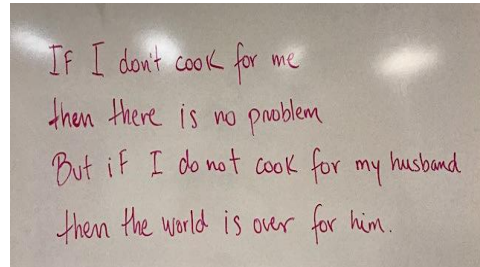
In this activity, students engaged in Design and Re-design after reading a poem by Nayyirah Waheed (2013). During class, we first read the poem together and discussed our initial reactions. Then, students wrote their own poems in a similar structure. Though we had not explicitly studied if/then clauses, the poem invited us to address this grammar point. In this sense, the poem activity offered an Available Design: the lexicogrammatical if/then clause and the conjunction "but," as well as students' understanding of the semantic contrast this clause allows them to set up. Waheed's poem exemplifies this semantic contrast by echoing the language in the first clause ("does not want me" and "end of the world") in the second clause ("do not want me" and "the world is nothing but endings"). This repetition situates two similar phrases within the if/then clause in order to emphasize the contrast between the subjects: "someone" (in clause one) and "I" (in clause two). This contrast is the crux of Waheed's poem: the agency of the "I" has more impact than that of the "someone" to the speaker of the poem. Through the if/then clause, the writer is able to enact this meaning grammatically.



If I do exercise and eat fast food
then I feel good
But if I do exercise and eat nutritious food
then I feel good and healthy



If I eat cake,
Then I get fat.
But if it doesn't matter to me
then I will eat more.



If I don't cook for me
then there is no problem
But if I do not cook for my husband
then the world is over for him.

Learners engage in meaning-making (Design) around this “if/then, but if/then” structure in their own poems, whose content they choose. The top text includes very similar language in each of its clauses: “if I do exercise and eat fast food I feel good, but if I do exercise and eat nutritious food, then I feel good and healthy.” The two clauses are distinguished by the words “fast food” (in the first clause) and “nutritious food” (in the second), and the student uses this minor distinction of word choice within the “if/then, but if/then” structure to point out that both food options make her feel good, but nutritious food makes her feel good *and* healthy. Thus, she adds a new conjunction—and—to the lexicogrammatical structure in the mentor text. The above student texts each fulfill the ideational function of language by expressing unique content within this similar grammatical structure, using overlapping Available Designs to create unique Design.

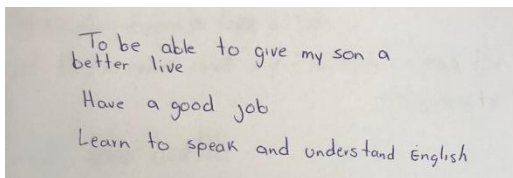
Along with addressing the ideational function, the students fulfill the interpersonal metafunction of language in the Design process by stepping into the speech event, expressing their attitudes, voices, commentaries, and humor. They create humor by playing with readers’ expectations of the grammatical clause and repetition within it. For example, a reader of the poem on the bottom left may have expected the first line of the “if” clause to repeat in the second, reading along the lines of, “If I eat cake, I will get fat, but if I eat healthily, I will not get fat.” The mentor text sets up this expectation by paralleling the vocabulary, repeating “world” and “ending” in each clause. However, the author plays with this expectation; instead paralleling the content “if I eat cake,” in the first line of the second “if” clause, she moves this parallel content to the second line, writing, “but if it doesn’t matter to me, then I will eat more.” This student creates humor and adds her voice precisely because she understands and then plays with the expected structure of the clause, changing the condition away from what the speaker of the poem does (eat or not eat cake) to the speaker’s attitude (but if it doesn’t matter to me). In this way, the poem exemplifies second language writing as “beautiful, aesthetically pleasing, innovative and designed to surprise” (Hanauer, 2014, p. 12). This is an act of engaging with the interpersonal function because the author creates humor by shaping the way the listener interacts with the lexicogrammatical aspects of the poem. In addition, the author subtly challenges expectations that one’s decision to eat cake (or not) should hinge on one’s caring about the

relationship between eating the cake and becoming fat. The speaker chooses to reject this expectation, thus Redesigning the expected meaning and cultural expectation.

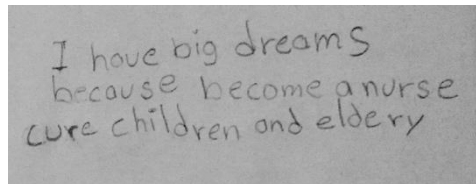
The author of the bottom right poem also plays with the interpersonal function, informing the reader that what is “no problem” for her is “the end of the world” for her spousal unit. The language “end of the world” echoes the content of the mentor text. In this way, the author engages in Design and Re-design. She starts with the Available Design of the mentor text, which provides a grammatical structure and some vocabulary as a form of initial scaffolding. From there, she moves into an act of Design by adding her own voice and content to the piece. In doing so, the author engages in Re-Design. In this poem, she is far from simply positioning herself as a learner of the if/then clause or the conjunction, “but.” By engaging in this Re-Design process, learners are not just practicing grammatical structures, but exercising their human agency as they make meaning. The poems presented above were written on a white board in students’ own handwriting. The act of performing the poems contributed to the Design process, as learners were able to laugh and commiserate as they shared their texts.

Haiku Dreaming

As part of the opening class after a holiday break, we began by discussing dreams. As part of our pre-writing, students brainstormed and discussed their dreams. Then, they wrote some of them down in small groups.

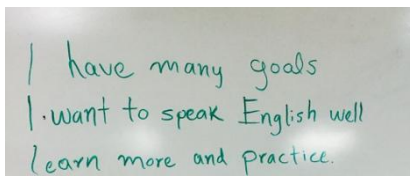


To be able to give my son a better live
Have a good job
Learn to speak and understand English

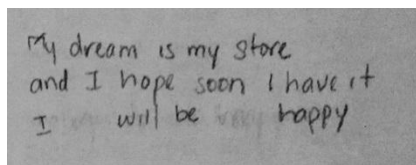


I have big dreams
because become a nurse
cure children and elderly

After that, we played with transforming these dreams into the form of a haiku. According to Iida (2008), Haiku was established by Shiki Masaoka in the late 19th century to emphasize individual creativity as a modern art (p. 173). Haikus are a short poetic form. Its three lines—with exactly five, seven, and five syllables, respectively—invite attention to the rhythm and syllables of language. We looked at sample haikus together and discussed their form and meaning. After exploring the sample haikus, students revisited their life and language goals, this time focusing on juggling content and form, to produce the following poems:



I have many goals
I want to speak English well
Learn more and practice.



My dream is my store
and I hope soon I have it
I will be very happy

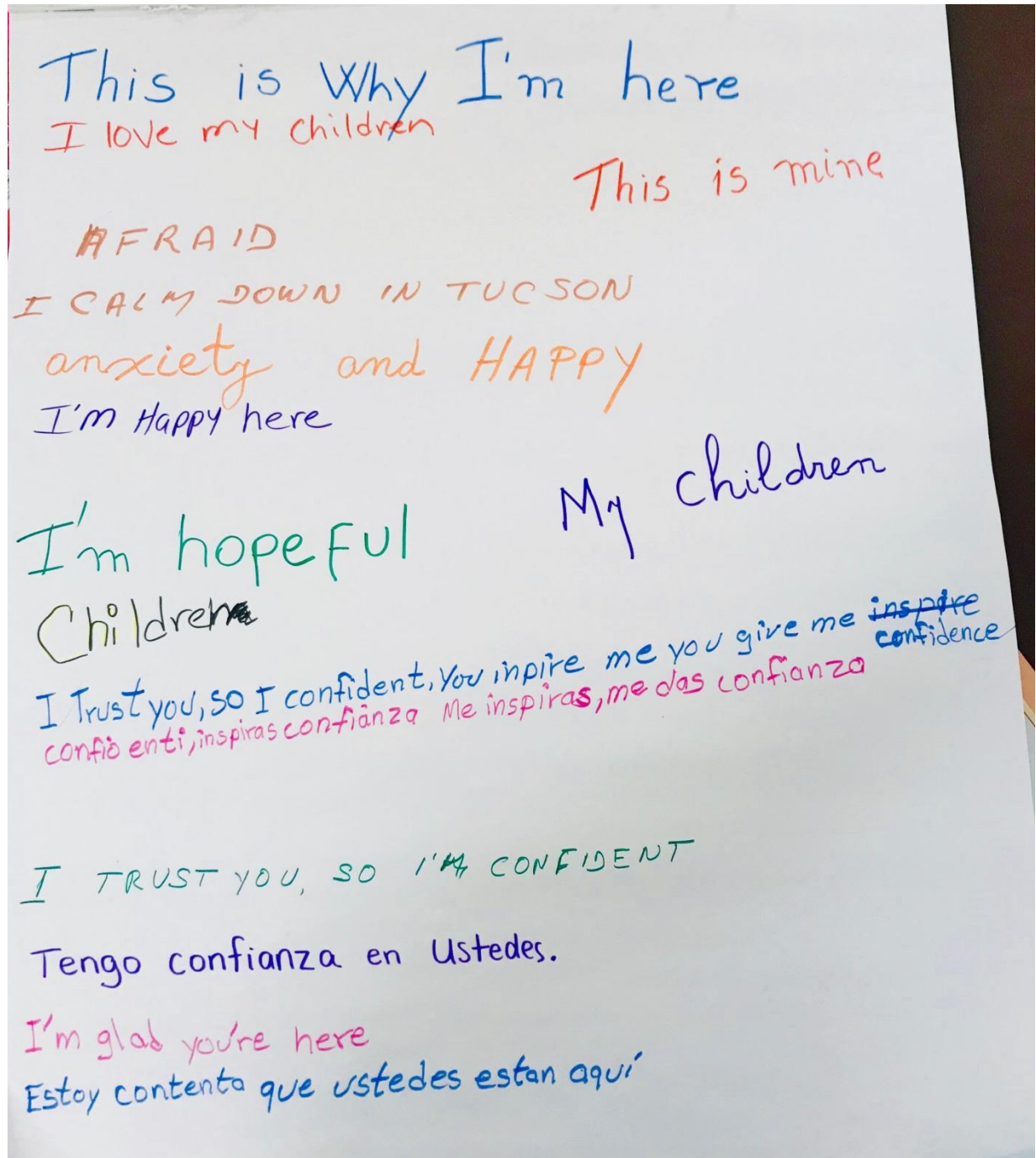
While students wrote their original sentences in free form, they revised with attention to the syllabic constraints of a haiku. As a group, for example, we revised the nurse haiku to read: “I have a big dream / to become a nurse and cure / patients young and old.” This revision helped students see how we were transitioning from content (their dreams) to content constrained by form of a haiku. By making minor revisions, we could maintain the poem’s content (the student’s dream of becoming a nurse) in the form of a haiku.

Meter, in fact, is only one important piece of haiku poetry. In addition to haiku and linguistic conventions, Iida (2008) recommends an evaluation rubric which includes personal voice (equal balance of human mind and nature), audience awareness (providing readers with multiple interpretations), and natural flowing organization (p. 178). Through the textual affordance of the haiku form, students get to simultaneously enact the ideational function and the interpersonal functions of language, drawing upon the Available Designs of the structure but including their own meanings. Articulating their goals is an expression of the ideational function, while using the first person to state them in the form of a haiku conveys the interpersonal function. In few words, learners evoke the interpersonal function to describe their attitudes, sharing that they have “big dreams” and “many goals” (poem 1). The speaker of poem 2 shares her hope and that she will be “happy.” (In fact, as her writing indicates, she had originally written “very happy,” but took out the qualifier to keep the syllable count consistent with a traditional haiku; in this way, she is balancing her interpersonal attitudes with the constraints of the textual form.) In framing their language goals within a poetic structure, students Redesign their roles, establishing themselves as strategic and skilled creators of poetry.

This is Why I’m Here

The act of Design does not have to start with a published poetic text. Students can engage in Design by using the Available Designs of their conversations and experiences, Redesigning the outcomes collaboratively. This activity is an example of collaborative or collective poetry, in which students “work from a shared pattern in order to join their voices in a collective rhythm” (Winfield, 2007). According to Winfield, students can start by making a list on a given theme, and then create a poem by reading their work aloud. In doing so, they build community, discover shared connections, and create a collective text.

This activity started when students started sharing their stories and asking each other, “Why are you here?” One of the newer students, a Mexican woman in her sixties, shared a story of fleeing from extortion and fear. As she and her classmates discussed her story, I wrote the words and phrases they shared on the board as they spoke. When she ended the extended story, she said, “This is why I am here.” In response to the story, the other students quickly jumped in to offer words of support and encouragement, telling her that she had a safe community here, and that they were glad she was here. I continued to write down words and phrases from our conversation as they spoke, such as “I trust you, so I’m confident.” Some of the words in Spanish didn’t have one obvious English equivalent, such as the word “confianza,” which can mean trust/familiarity, confidence (security), so we discussed a few options. At the end of the conversation, as students were copying down the words and phrases from the board, I asked them if they wanted to work together to reframe the discussion in the form of a poem. They collaborated to rearrange the phrases from their stories into a poetic form, moving from why they came (love for their children, fear for their lives), to what they found in Tucson (hope, happiness, and community), to appreciation for each other. The product emerged from their responses to the question they posed, “Why are you here?”, and they displayed it not only for an audience of their peers, but for other students who used the classroom throughout the week. This was the result.



By creating a collaborative text after a discussion, the learners engage in what Cope & Kalantzis (2009) call applying creatively, by “making the world anew with fresh and creative forms of action and perception” and “express[ing] or affect[ing] the world in a new way, or that transfers their previous knowledge into a new setting” (p. 186). They rewrote their discussion in the form of a poem, choosing the final words of their classmate’s story as the first words in the poem, then adding a variety of reasons that they were here in Tucson and in the classroom. The final lines address the classroom community, and the last line bookends the first, stating in English and Spanish “I’m glad you are here.” The first and last lines, “This is why I’m here”

and “I’m glad you’re here,” respectively, are multivocal and could have been written by a single speaker or by multiple voices. As the students wrote, they talked about the meaning of the word *confianza* in Spanish, which they could translate to “trust” or “confidence,” giving the sentence “tengo confianza en Ustedes” a multi-layered meaning which they emphasized by keeping both possibilities in the English translation, rather than choosing a single word.

This activity, which moved from the oral modality of an informal discussion, to the written modality of a poem written in multiple languages in the unique handwriting of multiple authors and in many colors, allowed students to engage in the Design process. The Available Designs for their poem came from many sources, from the languages they know to the discussion they had just shared to their willingness to open up to the markers available to them. Through the Design process, they remake the discussion into a poem, framing it deliberately as they write. Through this process, they Re-Design the content, taking a story that started with fear and flight and emphasizing being “here” in a supportive community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND ASSESSING POETRY AS DESIGN

Through the poetry-writing process, I found that learners engaged in Design in two main ways:

1. They recreated or reacted to a discussion they have had (whether spontaneously or prompted by the teacher) in a new genre (in this case, a poem) using several Available Designs at their disposal, such as the languages they speak, structures they know, and creativity. This occurred when they wrote haikus in response to a discussion on their learning goals (prompted by the teacher) and also when they engaged in a discussion about “this is why I’m here” (prompted by classmates).
2. Learners recreated (Design) a poem based on a “mentor” text or other poem, as they did when they reacted to the Waheed and other poems. In these examples, the poems offered them Available Designs. In the activities, they played with keeping some elements of the original poems while switching up others. For example, the students rewriting the Waheed poem all chose to conserve the if/then clauses and change the content, while other students played with the structure while maintaining the theme.

It is important to note that students were not just shown a text and then expected to write poetry. In each activity, they engaged in a pre-writing process which included discussion, connection to shared or individual experiences, group reading, attention to content, and finally, attention to the constraints of poetic form.

The following questions may guide approaching and assessing Design activities. Teachers and learners can celebrate the presence of some of these features of agentive Design, in which students draw upon multiliteracies, their social context, and multimodalities to make meaning. These questions can guide educators to celebrate the multiple ways students are making meaning in ways not highlighted in traditional assessment measurements like vocabulary or grammar exams.

Available Designs (Poetry reminds us that we can play with Available Designs)

- Did learners draw upon multiple social resources to make the meaning, including prior knowledge/experiences, their peers, online resources, experiences in their current and other communities, their family or friends, and their instructor?

- Did learners make meaning that drew upon existing multilingual knowledge? For example, did they create multilingually or coin a new idiom in English inspired by an idiom in another language?

Design

- Did learners use humor or elements of surprise or use language in an unexpected or novel way?
- Did learners share something that the teacher and other students wouldn't have otherwise known?
- Did it take the contributions of more than one learner to make the meaning?
- Did the meaning and product change through a process of revision and/or dialogue?
- Did learners apply meaning in multiple modes, genres, or forms?
- Did they incorporate literary devices or grammatical structures in novel ways?

Redesign

- Did learners offer commentaries on something in nature or the world?
- Did the learners contribute to a discussion about a social justice issue, or add a new perspective?
- Did the learners learn something about themselves?

CONCLUSIONS

I have used theories of meaning-making—particularly Design—to analyze poetry produced collaboratively by community-based adult ESL learners. The poetry demonstrates that creative activities allow them to engage with language in complex ways, as they take Available Designs of linguistic resources, grammar, structures, content, and class discussions, and create new meanings from them. The examples presented in this manuscript show that the participants are not only making meaning using familiar language, but subverting and expanding meanings offered by the texts in order to introduce their own voices or reinterpretations, thus engaging in Redesign. Future research could consider how approaches and questions related to Design, rather than traditional grammar-centric measures of language proficiency—could inform assessment of adult learners' meaning-making in community-based language learning settings.

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