# *When English Language Learners Write*

## *Connecting Research to Practice, K–8*

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# 6

# *Reflective Writing*

*"Dear people, I'm not a number I'm a person."*

Clara, First Grade Writer

*"How can a snake hold a cupcake on his head. That's silly."*

Phuong, First Grade Writer

A few years ago, while I was sitting in a hospital room outside of Newcastle, England, where my mother was dying from bronco-pneumonia, I discovered a writing function that I had never considered. In the quiet of the night, when I sat by her bedside and was not holding her hand, I wrote. Not to solve problems, not to make lists, not to write articles, chapters, stories, or poetry, but to soothe myself. I knew that she was dying, though none of the medical personnel actually said that (they simply said she was "very poorly"), and I found it very soothing to write about the moment, and my increasingly vivid memories of Mum from when I was just a child to earlier in the year when I had made another visit under more positive circumstances. It was soothing to write in my spiral-bound notebook as I listened to Mum's increasingly shallow breathing. Sometimes I sat quietly with my sister and niece, sometimes I was alone with my mother. When on my own, I felt an urge to talk to Mum, to let her know how much I loved and appreciated her, but decided that it was likely more calming for her if I were quiet. So when I was not holding her hand, I wrote.

## Incorporating Reflective Writing in the Classroom

Written reflection is the opportunity to use writing to think about, clarify, explain, and internalize information, experiences, insights, beliefs, and learning processes. It is an important path on the road to knowledge. As written reflection can be enormously helpful to the academic and affective development of students, it is important that children have opportunities to engage in this kind of writing. This is particularly true

for ELLs, as reflective writing is typically first draft writing and the presence of written mistakes is very normal, but isn't the focus of attention or instruction; instead, the content of the message is paramount.

Reflective writing can also provide teachers with insights into a multitude of important issues, including students' understanding of content (e.g., when they explain magnetism or long division in science and math logs, respectively), their opinions about class activities and class dynamics (e.g., when responding to a questionnaire about the effectiveness of peer conferences in writing workshop), life experiences (e.g., in open-ended journals) and their learning processes (e.g., when writing a letter to readers in which they describe their writing goals, struggles, and accomplishments in the process of writing a published collection of poems, or an essay, nonfiction picture book, or memoir).

### *Different Forms of Written Reflection*

Written reflection comes in many forms and serves many purposes. See Figure 6–1 for an overview of different types of written reflection, and the purposes and features of each one. Written reflection can provide students with opportunities to clarify thinking, identify and solve problems, prepare for learning experiences, record knowledge and learning processes, share knowledge, foster interpersonal communication, and build community. Also, this type of writing can provide teachers with important assessment data. A discussion of some of the most frequently occurring forms of reflective writing follows.

#### *Logs and Journals*

One of the best-known forms is the individual log or journal, in which students reflect on their learning and learning processes, comment on their reactions to events and experiences, and ask questions. For example, students in Angie Barra's newcomer ESOL class responded in writing to books. In Figure 6–2, one of her middle school students succinctly and incisively responded to a humorous Shel Silverstein poem, "Memorizin' Mo," about a person who memorized the dictionary, but wasn't very successful at finding a job or a partner.

Sometimes, teachers introduce reflective writing as a means to address interpersonal conflicts. For example, when students in one of my son's sixth grade classes had arguments, the teacher would ask the students involved to independently write about what had occurred. The students then exchanged entries, read them, and responded to them in writing. Often, the act of writing clarified the genesis of the conflict and enabled students to resolve their differences with minimal intervention from the teacher. In a similar way, second grade teacher, Heather Juhl, introduced her students to a *complaint book*, in which individual class members wrote their names, the situations that were bothering them, and who was involved. Juhl then checked it each day to see if she needed to intervene (see Figure 6–3 for sample entries).

| Types of Written Reflection | Purpose | Features |
|---|---|---|
| *Logs and Journals* | • Provide important assessment data on an individual learner and/or an entire class (What do learners know/understand? What are learners confused about? What do I need to go over again/teach?)<br>• Provide learners with opportunities to clarify their thinking<br>• Provide learners with a record of their learning and learning processes | • Learners report and reflect on issues that they are studying, are interested in, or are dealing with (e.g., the outcome of a science experiment, family language patterns, interpersonal conflicts) *and/or*<br>• Learners focus on their learning processes (e.g., how they selected their independent reading books, which books influenced their published pieces of writing, how they figured out the answer to a math problem)<br>• Learners and/or the teacher may choose the subject and topic. If selected by the teacher, topics should be selected carefully, and written in an open-ended manner (e.g., Describe the steps you went through to research your history inquiry study versus Did your research plan work?)<br>• May be used on an ongoing basis or at the end of a unit of study |
| *Dialogue Journals* | • Foster teacher/learner communication<br>• Provide learners with individualized mentoring<br>• Provide learners with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, knowledge, and learning<br>• Provide teachers with assessment data | • Two or more people correspond in the journal (e.g., student-teacher, student-student)<br>• Content may be entirely open-ended or focused on a particular topic (e.g., What learners are learning in a given subject/class *or* what is being studied on a particular day)<br>• Staggering the handing in of journals can make the response to them more manageable for teachers<br>• Teacher responses should follow the lead of learners (e.g., in content), be substantive (versus "interesting entry"), and model content vocabulary and use of language |

**Figure 6–1.** *Types of Written Reflection (continues)*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Questionnaires and Interviews* | • Assess students' knowledge of content, learning processes, and/or attitudes to a learning event (e.g., reactions to a speaker, feedback on the structure of a writing workshop) | • May be completed at the beginning and end of a unit of study in order to note changes over time<br>• Generally focused on content, processes, and attitudes/motivation<br>• Questionnaires require that learners can write<br>• Questionnaires may be followed up with a class or group discussion and/or a brief individualized interview<br>• Content may be entirely open-ended or focused on a particular subject (e.g., a reading log) |
| *Field Notes* | • Support students in reporting and reflecting on issues that they are studying (e.g., the behavior of animals or language use in the community) | • Learners report and reflect on events that they are studying (e.g., the behavior of an animal, family language patterns, the literacy development of a younger learner)<br>• Similar to the notes that ethnographers and anthropologists keep |
| *Book Reviews* | • Provide students with opportunities to reflect upon books, synthesize their responses to books, and make book recommendations to other readers (i.e., an authentic response to literature) | • In order to distinguish between book reports and book reviews, learners need to be immersed in the book review genre<br>• Learners write concise, substantive reviews, which are then published so other learners can have access to them (e.g., in a class newsletter, on a bulletin board, via the Internet) |
| *Idea Bookmarks* | • Help learner prepare for book discussions | • On strips of paper divided up into boxes for comments, learners write words, quotes, questions, short comments or predictions that strike them as important, such as the following example |

**Figure 6–1** (*continued*). *Types of Written Reflection*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | Idea Bookmark<br>Name: Angelina<br>Title: The Great Gilly H<br>Date: 10/7<br>I bet the next person would find a sticky surprise<br>Pg. 3<br>Right here you can tell that Gilly is a different child<br>Pg. 4<br>Gilly put her left hand on the door knob and the right hand on her hip . . . I think she was telling is Mrs. Trotter to bit it<br>Pg. 8 |
| *Double-Entry Journal* | • Provide learners with opportunities to:<br>  • Connect with a text and its content<br>  • Clarify understanding<br>  • Assess their learning over time<br>• Provide teachers with insights into learners' thinking about and understanding of a topic being studied | • Learners keep a two-column journal/log in a notebook<br>• In the left column, learners write words, phrases and longer quotes from the text that strike them as important, intriguing and/or confusing.<br>• In the right column, learners write thoughts about the responses to the entries in the left column<br>• Teacher can suggest a minimum number of entries (e.g., one per page of text or every two paragraphs with shorter texts). However, it's important to keep it from becoming too prescriptive, and to focus on the importance of quality (i.e., thoughtful) entries |
| *Letters* | • Provide learners with authentic opportunities to reflect upon their experiences and learning *and/or* identify and solve problems | • Learners write to authors and/or experts about compelling issues *or*<br>• Learners write to others (e.g., peers) about problems they have identified and wish to solve *or*<br>• Learners write letters to readers of their pieces of writing, describing their writing goals and accomplishments |

**Figure 6–1** (*continued*). *Types of Written Reflection*

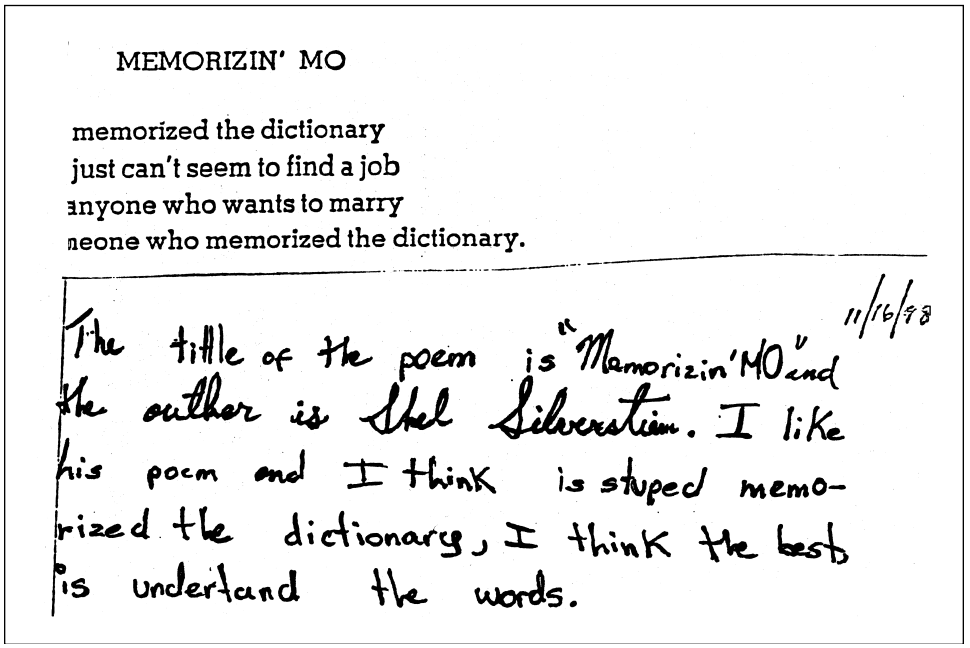
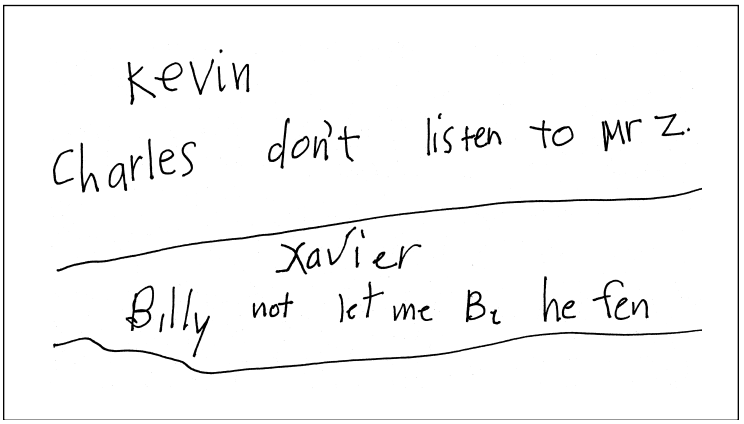



**Figure 6–2.** *Literature Journals: A Response to "Memorizin' Mo"*

*Dialogue Journals*

When journals involve a written response, for example, from either another student or a teacher, they become dialogue journals. Dialogue journals can be open-ended (i.e., including any topics that students select, including personal experiences) or can be geared to a particular area of the curriculum, such as math or reading.

**Teacher-Student Dialogue Journals** Sometimes, when teachers respond to their students' dialogue journal entries, their comments are very cursory (e.g., "Interesting," or "Nice entry"). However, in order to develop a true correspondence and mentor learners, we need to invest ourselves and make substantive and personally meaningful comments, as Chinese English bilingual teacher, Siu-Mui Woo, did when responding to Phuong, one of her first grade students. Phuong had reflected upon a book that her teacher had read to the class, *Oh, A-Hunting We Will Go* (Langstaff 1974), and her entry consisted of a question about the plausibility of the snake being able to put a cupcake on its head, as well as an evaluative statement (see Figure 6–4). Woo responded by acknowledging the child's insights and then offered an inference about the author's intention ("It is silly but funny. I think the author intends to make this a silly book so people can laugh.").



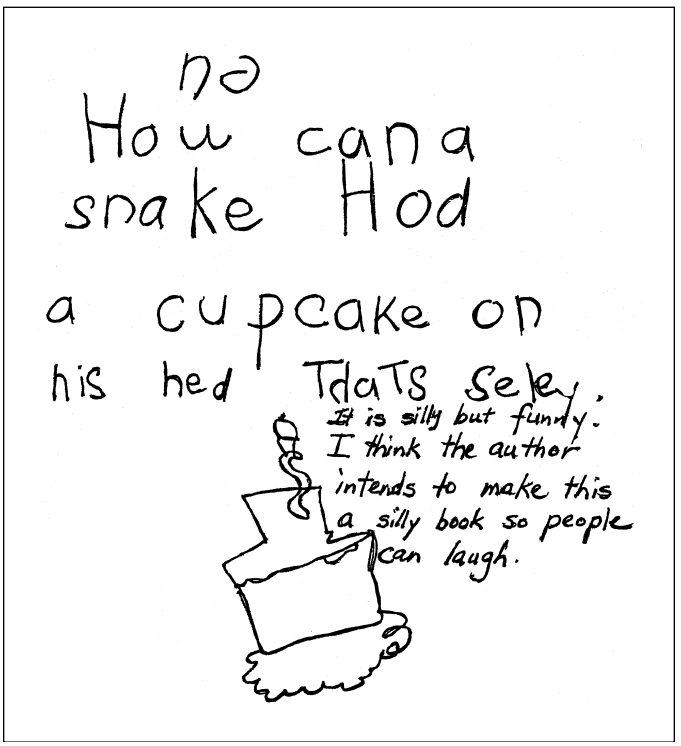

Kevin:

Charles don't listen to Mr. Z.

Xavier:

Billy not let me be his friend.

**Figure 6–3.** *Reflective Writing: "Complaint Book" Entries*




How can a

snake hold

a cupcake on

his head That's silly.

**Figure 6–4.** *Dialogue Journal Entry: Snake and Cupcake Entry*

When I visited this class, I also responded to some of the children's dialogue journals, and it was clear to me that they were accustomed to having substantive written, book-based conversations with their teacher. For example, as Figure 6–5 shows, May wrote about the play, *Rumpelstiltskin*, which she had seen with her class and had enjoyed; however, she was critical of one aspect of the play, the baby not being real. I was intrigued by May's comment and wondered how she knew the baby was a doll, and so I asked her about this in my written response. I moved over to read another child's journal entry, and after a few minutes, May sought me out to share her journal response, in which she explained that the lack of any movement had alerted her to the fact that the baby wasn't real.

This type of reflective writing allowed all of the children to share their responses to literature with their teacher, something that would have been difficult to accomplish if left to the oral mode only. It also provided the teacher with insights into the children's engagement with books, as well as their language development and cognitive processes.

**Student to Student Dialogue Journals** Although teacher-student dialogue journals are most common, student to student journals can also be very effective. For example, fifth/sixth grade teacher, Gail Whang, introduced her immigrant students in a year-round school to corresponding with peers about books, which they did on the

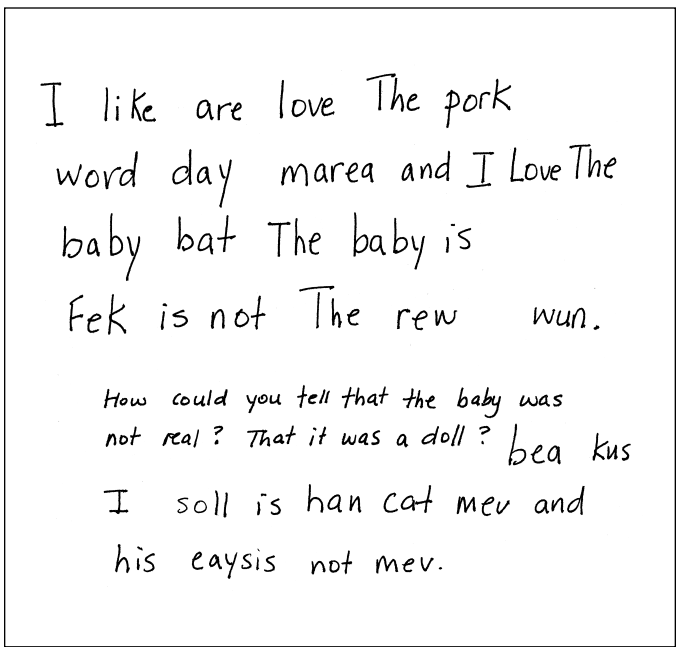



**Figure 6–5.** *Dialogue Journal Entry: Rumpelstiltskin*

computer. In the following series of entries written just before a four-week break, Billy and Nan discuss the books they have read, make text-to-self connections, comment on the experience of corresponding across genders, and commiserate over a shared family experience, being made to help out at home (which they referred to as being used by their parents):

DEAR NAN:

MANIAC MAGEE IS A VERY GOOD BOOK. I KNOW YOUR READING IT SO YOU MUST KNOW SOME THING ABOUT IT. I LIKED IT BECAUSE IT REMINDED ME ALOT OF THINGS LIKE WHEN MAGEES AUNT AND UNCLE WAS ARGUEING. THAT'S WHAT MY AUNT UNCLE WAS DOING TO BECAUSE OF MY LITTLE BROTHER. ANY WAY DID YOU LIKE IT? IF YOU DID CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT YOU LIKE ABOUT THE BOOK TOO? IT AMAZED ME WHAN MAGEE RAN AWAY FROM HIS AUNT AND UNCLE BECAUSE I WAS GOING TO RUN AWAY FROM HOME TOO!

WELL I HAVE NOTHING ELSE TO SAY SO HOPE YOUR RESPONSE TO ME QUICKLY?!.....

SINCERELY BILLY

DEAR BILLY,

THANKS FOR YOUR LETTER.

I DID LIKE THE BOOK ALOT. IT MADE ME THINK OF THE TIMES I WANTED TO RUN AWAY FROM HOME. I THOUGHT IT WAS GROSS HOW MANIAC ATE WHAT THE ANIMAL ATE. HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT MANIAC?

HAVE YOU EVER FELT YOU HAD TO RUN AWAY, BUT WAS SCARED? I DID. IT WAS WHEN I WAS STILL 9 OR 10 YEARS OLD. MY MOM KEPT ON USING ME. I WANTED TO GO OUT AND PLAY AND SHE STILL WOULD USE ME. I DID'NT LIKE IT ONE BIT.

THAT'S ALL I HAVE TO WRITE FOR NOW.

THANKS,

NAN

DEAR NAN,

THANKS FOR WRITING BACK SO QUICKLY! I THOUGHT MANIAC MAGEE WAS DUMP (DUMB) TO RUN AWAY FROM HOME, BUT IT WAS RIGHT DOUGH (THOUGH). THERE WAS ONE TIME I WAS GOING TO RUN AWAY FROM HOM BECAUSE MY PRARENTS WAS USEING ME TOO!

I WONDER WHAT BOOK YOUR READING NEXT. I WANT TO KNOW BECAUSE I MIGHT GET THE SAME BOOK AS YOU. AND IT WILL BE BORING IF WE RESPOND BACK TOGETHER IN THE SAME BOOK LIKE WE DID ON MANIAC MAGEE. AT FRIST I THOUGHT IT WILL BE DESAISTER BEING PARTNERS WITH YOU. BUT IT IS VERY FUN NOW THAT WE ARE

RESPONDING TO EACH OTHER A FEW TIMES. I KIND OF LIKE WORKING WITH YOU.
SINCERELY BILLY

DEAR BILLY,
I KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN. I THOUGHT THAT WRITING TO A BOY WOULD BE A TOTAL DISASTER. BUT I GUESS WE WERE BOTH WRONG. BUT I GUESS I STILL FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE WRITING AND RESPODING TO A BOY. WHEN I FIRST HEARD OF THE IDEA, I THOUGHT MRS. WHANG WAS GOING TO LET THE BOYS WRITE TO BOYS.
RIGHT NOW I AM READING FREEDOM TRAIN. IT IS GOOD SO FAR.

*Questionnaires and Interviews*

Teachers with whom I have worked often find questionnaires to be very helpful in assessing students' learning and knowledge about, for example, writing. At the end of the school year, fourth grade teacher, Sonny Kim, used a variation of a questionnaire when he asked his students to evaluate their writing, select the two pieces of writing that they thought were best, and explain their thinking. He asked his students to respond to the following questions:

1. Why did you select this piece?
2. What do you see as the strengths in this piece?
3. If you could work on this further, what would you do?
4. What have you learned to do as a writer?
5. What should next year's teacher know about you as a writer?

Students began going through their folders, glancing at their stapled drafts and final copies. After a while, I moved around the classroom, checking in with individual students, asking them why they had selected these particular pieces.

The most common reasons students gave for selecting pieces were grounded in the effort they put into the writing, themes interesting them, and/or topics being personally meaningful. For example, Felicity selected a poem she had written, "My Dream 2000," because she "wanted everyone to know I cared about the world. Everyone should have peace. Way back, whites and blacks didn't like each other." Cameron selected her biography about the San Francisco Bay Area Indians, the Miwoks, because of the effort involved. She said, "I had to do a lot of work (research). I did my best effort. I really worked hard on it. I took some time out from DEAR time to write it." These written reflections allowed the children to process a year's worth of writing and evaluate its relative worth; it also provided Kim with valuable insights into his students' writing processes.

Questionnaires can also provide important insights into students' reactions to particular aspects of school. For example, Whang and I discovered through a ques-

tionnaire that asked questions such as, "What did you like best about literature study circles?" and "What did you like least about literature study circles?" that her fifth/sixth grade students did not like having to write regularly in reading journals, and they overwhelmingly advised us to drop the daily literature journal. (When we had time to respond, they liked the journals and were engaged, but when there was no response, they saw it as busy work, and were much less happy.) As a consequence of this feedback, Whang altered the expectations—the students prepared for the discussions with idea bookmarks, and instead of writing regularly in the reading journals, they wrote a single entry for each book finished, so that they would have a record of their reading.

Interviews can supplement questionnaires in valuable ways. For example, after children have written responses to questionnaire prompts, I read them and, if I am confused or have additional questions, I briefly interview students to clarify their messages and gain additional information and insights into their thinking.

### *Idea Bookmarks*

Idea bookmarks serve a similar purpose to double-entry journals, which are most frequently found in secondary English classes, in that they invite succinct responses to literature. Whang's students used Idea Bookmarks extensively in preparation for literature study circles (Samway and Whang 1996); in fact, one student, Angelina, designed double-entry bookmarks as she found this tool to be particularly helpful to her (see Figure 6–6). On these bookmarks, students commented on parts of the book that had resonated with them, expressed opinions, identified terms that confused them, raised questions, made predictions, and made text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. Some students referred often to their bookmarks in the literature study circle discussions, as if to jog their memories, whereas other students, including Angelina, rarely read them when discussing the book. It was as if the writing had prepared her for the discussions and she no longer needed them as a visual prompt.

### *Letters*

In schools, children are frequently taught how to write letters, but it often resembles an exercise, rather than an authentic opportunity to communicate one's thoughts and feelings to others. In Jennifer Jones-Martinez's bilingual primary classroom one semester, most of the students had been very unhappy about the high-stakes, standardized reading test that they had just taken. After the class had expressed their concerns, Jones-Martinez suggested that they write to the test designers, which some of the children did, including Clara (see Figure 6–7). In her letter, Clara's voice is palpable as she berates the test designers (*pepol*/people) for how the test doesn't tell them much about her or what she has been learning in school. Through letters, these students had an opportunity to reflect on their test-taking experiences and convey to the test designers their reservations about a system that they essentially considered an invalid

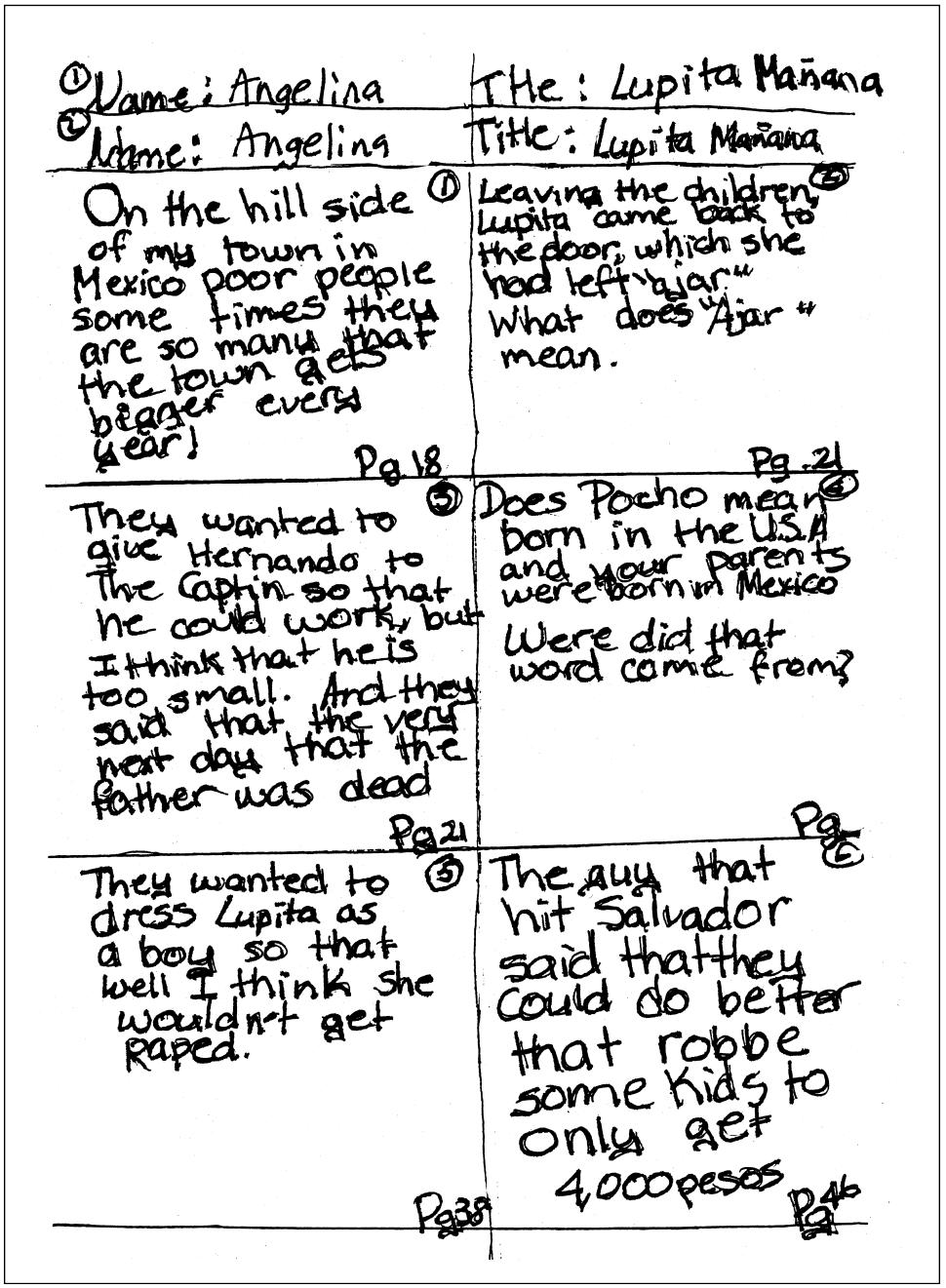
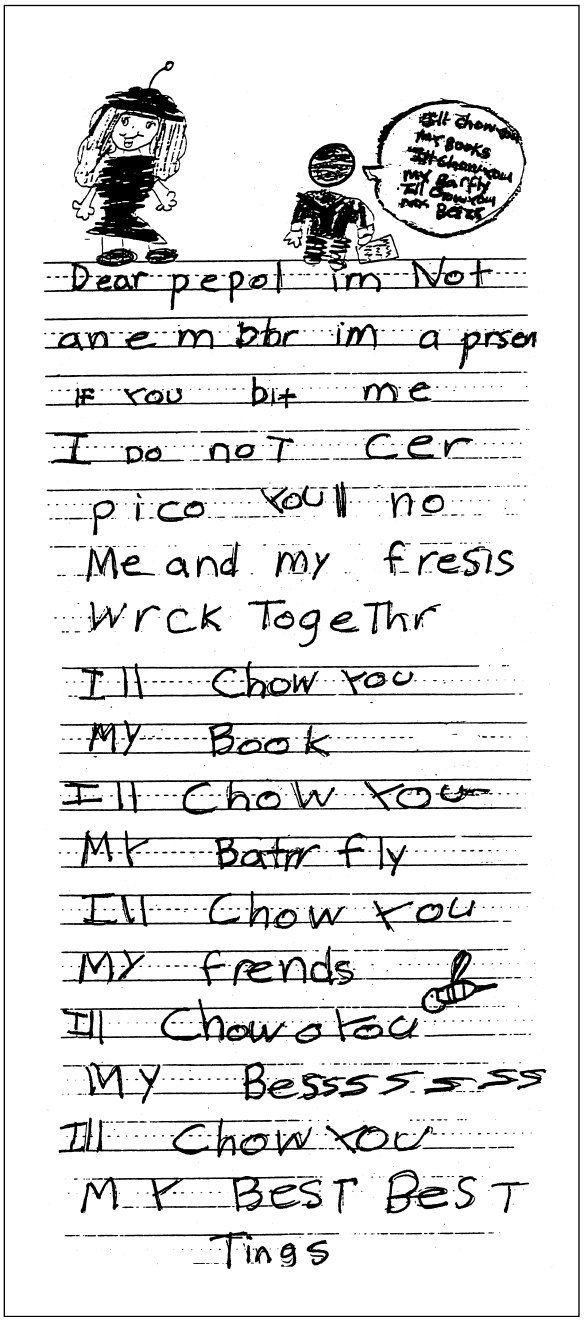



**Figure 6–6.** *Reflective Writing: Angelina's Idea Bookmarks*




Dear people, I'm not
a number I'm a person.
If you invite me
I do not care
because you'll know
me and my friends
work together.
I'll show you
my book.
I'll show you
my butterfly.
I'll show you
my friends.
I'll show you
my bees.
I'll show you
my best best
things.

**Figure 6–7.** *Clara's Letter to Test Designer*

measure of their knowledge (e.g., Clara knew about bees and butterflies, which the class had been studying) and interpersonal skills (she was able to work collaboratively with her peers and make friends). Regrettably, the test designers did not respond to the letters that the children wrote.

## The Role of Reflective Writing in Language and Literacy Development

Reflective writing can serve many purposes, including affective, pragmatic, intellectual, and academic. It is known to improve writing fluency, stimulate cognitive growth, reinforce learning, and foster problem-solving skills. In the 1980s and 1990s, reflective writing became increasingly popular with teachers as they heard about the power of journaling on learners, and how it can support learning about language and literacy processes, about concepts in a particular subject, about oneself and others, and about the world at large (e.g., Atwell 1985, 1987; D'Arcy 1987; Hall and Robinson 1994; Kooy and Wells 1996; Parsons 1994; Peyton and Reed 1990; Samway and Taylor 1993a, 1993b; Staton 1980, 1985, 1987; Taylor 1990; Wollman-Bonilla 1989, 1991).

Toby Fulwiler's 1987 edited volume, *The Journal Book*, captures the broad scope and potential of journals, dialogue journals, learning logs, and other forms of reflective writing across the grades, for primary-aged children to adults, and across a wide range of content areas, from literacy and literature to history, music, mathematics, physics, sociology, geography, and the arts. Although journaling is typically found in mainstream K–12 and university classrooms, teachers have also used journals to build relationships with parents (e.g., Finnegan 1997), to enhance the learning of students with special needs (e.g., Staton 1985), and in university teacher preparation programs (e.g., Gannon 2001).

## Journals as a Record of Experiences

Journals can provide a record of experiences, which the writer and others have access to later when reflecting upon an experience. For example, when Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Jennifer Reynolds, Lisa Dorner, and María Meza (2003) investigated the interpreting work that Spanish/English bilingual children did for their immigrant families, journals generated important data. In the journals, the children recorded their experiences as the interpreters or language brokers of written texts for their families. The children translated a range of genres, including letters, forms, advertisements, labels, news, and reference materials; sometimes the texts that the children translated were very convoluted and full of bureaucratic language, and the children and their family members co-constructed the texts' meanings. Through the journals that the children wrote in, the researchers gained insights into the collaborative nature of the translating that the children did and how they felt about it (e.g., although they sometimes found the task tedious, they felt a great

sense of accomplishment that they could help family members). The researchers comment that, when translating, the children had and were viewed by others as having considerable expertise, not an experience they typically encountered in school.

## Reflective Writing Supporting ELLs

Reflective writing has been found to be very beneficial to ELLs, both those living in countries where English is not the dominant language and those living in English-speaking countries.

### *Reading Response Journals in an English as a Foreign Language Setting*

Emma Rous (1993) used reading response journals when she worked with thirteen- and fourteen-year-old English as a foreign language (EFL) students one summer in Estonia. She took suitcases of paperback novels and picture books and, after giving a brief book talk on each book, invited students to select books to read for about an hour at home each day; the students also wrote journal entries on what they had read. Rous found that the students who responded best were those who had been able to personally connect with the content of the books. Sometimes, this was because the books addressed topics about which they were relatively unfamiliar, such as Hiroshima. Other students identified with the plight of oppressed people, such as Native Americans. Still other students connected with a book that reminded them of a personal experience. For example, Kaidi had longed for a puppy and read *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls 1974). She loved the book, and wrote: "Billy is infected with puppy love . . . I like this book because I have had also such disease. When I read this book, I live with Billy and remember my stories, when I was ten years old." Through the books and the reading response journals, these EFL students were able to develop their fluency in English.

### *Role of the Teacher in Dialogue Journals with ELLs*

In a study investigating the role of the interactive strategies employed by a sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Reed, on the participation of her ELL students in dialogue journals, Joy Kreeft Peyton and Mulugetta Seyoum (1989) found that the teacher assumed a supportive and co-participant role in her interactions. For example, she was more likely to respond to topics initiated by the students, rather than initiating her own. Also, rather than responding with cheerleading types of comments (e.g., "interesting entry") or with questions intended to elicit more writing, the teacher contributed substantive, on-target information and opinions. Also, the teacher's questions were authentic and grounded in the students' comments, as the following excerpt from an interaction with Claudia illustrates (320, 322).