

**Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert:
Borderlands Narratives about Identity and Binationalism**

National Endowment for the Humanities and The University of Texas at El Paso
2019 Summer Institute for Secondary School Teachers (Grades 6th–12th)

**Instructional Lesson Plan Framework with 5E Model
for E-Portfolio with Artifacts and Readings**

1. Title and Author of Lesson Plan

The Dangers of Narrative Simplicity: Crossing Linguistic Borders in the Asylum Seeking Process

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Andrew (Andy) Gorvetzian is from Albuquerque, New Mexico. He is a Spanish teacher at the United World College in Montezuma, New Mexico, where he also leads an experiential education course in activism, advocacy, and solidarity. He hopes to apply lessons learned from the Institute to his annual trips with students to El Paso to study issues of migration and the border, as well as explore story telling in his Spanish classes. Moreover, Andy's participation will complement his research as part of the book he is coauthoring on migrations and identity titled *Surviving the Americas: Resiliencia and Garifuna Culture from Nicaragua to New York*. Andy enjoys hiking, running, and any food with green chile on it.

2. Content or Subject Areas with Keywords

Spanish II or above (For IB: Spanish Ab Initio 2nd year, Spanish B)

Keywords: *narrative/narrativa, political asylum/asilo politico, migration/migración, indigenous groups/grupos indigenas*

3. Grade Levels and Time Required

High school, preferably 11th and 12th grade.

4-5 hours of classroom time plus 1-2 homework assignments

4. Instructional Objectives and Student Learning

Standards for Language Learning from American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

(<https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/publications/standards/World-ReadinessStandardsforLearningLanguages.pdf>)

- Interpersonal Communication: Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions.

- Interpretive Communication: Learners understand, interpret, and analyze what is heard, read, or viewed on a variety of topics.
- Presentational Communication: Learners present information, concepts, and ideas to inform, explain, persuade, and narrate on a variety of topics using appropriate media and adapting to various audiences of listeners, readers, or viewers.
- Acquiring Information and Diverse Perspectives: Learners access and evaluate information and diverse perspectives that are available through the language and its cultures.
- Language Comparison: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.

International Baccalaureate Language Ab Initio Assessment Objectives

(<https://www.ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme/curriculum/language-acquisition/language-ab-initio-sl/>)

- Understand and use language appropriate to a range of interpersonal and/or intercultural contexts and audiences
- Understand, analyze and reflect upon a range of written, audio, visual and audio-visual texts.
- Understand and use language to express and respond to a range of ideas with fluency and accuracy

Learning Outcomes:

- Students will be expected to demonstrate basic translation skills based on simple and some more advanced questions they are asked to translate.
- Students will be expected to demonstrate basic receptive skills as they respond to the questions their peers ask them
- Students will also engage in reflection that engages metacognition skills and higher level thinking as they reflect on the experience of a language learner in a high-pressure setting (for IB, this would link to ToK in asking students about how language informs the stories we tell and decisions we make)
- Students will also learn about translation, as they make decisions about how to translate the language presented on the I-589 form
- Students will gain more understanding the US asylum seeking process

Activities:

- Student interviews
- Student translation
- Student interpretation of basic narratives

Assessment:

- Students will be assessed on the quality and depth of reflection at the various stages of the lessons
- Students will be assessed on the accuracy of their translations
- Students will be assessed on their receptive skills during the interview

5. Guiding Questions

1. How can we achieve a deeper understanding of a migrant's experience through narrative?
2. How does it feel to tell a story in a language that is not your own? What are the limitations?
3. What are the decisions you need to make given your limitations based on language?
4. Why do we tell stories? What is the importance of the context within which we tell stories?
5. How are structural power dynamics at play when considering narrative simplicity/ complexity?

6. Materials and Resources

- A copy of "Migrante: Historias de Resistencia", available through the Hope Border Institute in physical and online versions
(English version available here: <https://www.hopeborder.org/migrant>)
- A copy of Valeria Luiselli's book Niños Perdidos (Spanish), or Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions.
- Copies of I-589, Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal
(Available here: <https://www.uscis.gov/i-589>)
- Article by Eileen Truax about the importance of interpreters for indigenous peoples who have limited spoken Spanish:
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/19/us-must-provide-interpreters-indigenous-migrants-it-could-save-lives/?utm_term=.86d5ea05bf0b
- White board with markers
- Internet/projector

7. Introduction

The asylum seeking process has been a hot topic in public debate, as thousands of migrants have come the United States seeking asylum. The process is long, complicated, and often misunderstood, leading to heated public debates with little agreement over how best to proceed.

The asylum process involves filling out an I-589 intake form from the US government, which is designed to establish whether or not a person is eligible for asylum. The questions seek to prove whether or not a person has credible fear of returning home due to potential persecution based on race, religion, membership in a particular social group, nationality, or political opinion. Many times, children must undergo this process alone, so that family members do not influence their answers. Additionally, indigenous migrants, who may or may not speak Spanish, are nonetheless often assigned Spanish interpreters to help fill out the form, which can lead to severe consequences when subtleties are lost in translation.

This lesson plan is intentionally created for a language learning classroom, as the inherent limitations of expression in a language learning setting become a key learning point for students as they explore the process of migrants who seek political asylum. This lesson plan will force students into uncomfortable situations that simulate those of an asylum seeker, provoking an in depth look into language, narrative, and the power that one may or may not have depending on context and language. Through translation, written expression, and oral expression in one-on-one interviews, students will understand the subtleties of the asylum seeking process and understand the vital importance of good translation and the power of language in shaping narratives.

8. Instructional and Lesson Activities (ENGAGE, EXPLORE, EXPLAIN)

Activity 1: Engaging Student's Previous Knowledge through Narrative (60-90 minutes)

Students will be asked to spend the class period using the writing prompt: Tell a story about a time you left home for a new place that you knew nothing about. (Escribe una historia de cuando te fuiste de tu casa para un nuevo destino sobre el cual no sabías nada.) This should be a true story, written in Spanish, containing roughly 150 words. Students may or may not use a dictionary, but it is strongly encouraged that students use the vocabulary that they know.

Students stories should contain the following:

- Describe a moment in which you felt happy (Describe un momento en que te sentías muy feliz)
- Describe a moment in which you felt afraid (Describe un momento en que tenías miedo)
- Talk about someone you met during your journey (Describe a una persona que conociste durante tu viaje.)
- Give other significant details about your journey (Da otros detalles significativos de tu viaje.)

As a homework assignment, students should respond to the following question(s) *in their native language* (See Sec. 11 for further explanation of this component):

- How did it feel to tell this story in Spanish?
- What were the limitations you felt?
- What were the decisions you had to make in order to narrate the story given the knowledge of Spanish that you had?
- Would you tell the story differently in your native language? How so? Feel free to write the same story in your native language to feel the contrast.

The following class period should dedicate some time to discussing student reflections. Have students do pair and share, and then come back and discuss how it felt to be constrained in how you told a story. **(30 minutes)**

Activity 2: The Asylum Process, Narrative Simplicity, and Linguistic Limitations (150 minutes)

Part 1: Using Luiselli's text (preferably in Spanish to practice reading comprehension, though the English text could also be used given the level of Luiselli's writing), talk about the process of applying for asylum. (This article from the book may also be used: <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/08/forty-questions/>)

(30 minutes)

Part 2: After explaining the asylum process, distribute the copies of the Migrantes: Historias de Resistencia y Esperanza graphic comic (the physical copy is bilingual, online version is in English only. Bilingual versions can be purchased on the link in Materials.) Explain to students that they need to read through the graphic novel in pairs. There are multiple narratives that explain why migrants may be seeking asylum. Students must identify the reasons why people seek asylum as explained in the graphic novel. **(30 minutes)**

Part 3: Divide the classroom into two groups. One group will be the interviewees, the other group will be the migrants seeking asylum. Distribute the I-589 form. Working individually, students in Group 1 need to select at least 10 of the first 20 intake questions on the form, and students in Group 2 select at least 10 of the following 20 questions on the form. Students must then translate the questions into Spanish. **(30 minutes)**

Part 4: Students from Group 1 will pair up with students from Group 2, and they will conduct mock interviews with their partner, recording the answers. Students should try to answer with the information they learned in the graphic novel, but may need to invent some more details. After all questions have been asked, the roles switch, and

the interviewee becomes the migrant. You may write “key terms” on a board to simulate a real interview setting (found on page 41 in Luiselli.) (Note: Students are allowed to rephrase questions if students don’t understand the original phrasing, as this happens during real intake interviews.) **(30 minutes)**

Part 5: After this is done, the students will come together and respond to the following writing prompt:

- How did it feel to be the migrant? What were the biggest challenges?
- How did it feel to be the interviewee? What were the biggest challenges?
- Students should also focus on the moments of misunderstanding. What caused the misunderstanding? How did the migrant/interviewee try to overcome it?

After they write, have a debrief based on their answers. Talk about whether or not you think you would have gained asylum. Highlight what Luiselli describes on page 67: “What I needed to hear, though I didn’t want to hear it, was that they had been doing hard labor, labor that put their safety and integrity in danger; that they were being exploited, abused, punished, threatened with death by gangs.” **(30 minutes)**

9. EXTEND/ELABORATE: Additional Learning and Further Discussion Questions

- Asylum claims depend on revealing details from complex stories, and yet the setting in which these stories are told may not be conducive to sharing those details because of language barriers, nerves, and other experiences that your students may have felt during the interview process. This is particularly true for indigenous migrants or young migrants who may experience the same language limitations that you experienced. **What are some ways to improve the process by which we grant political asylum?**
- “So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language.” (Anzaldúa, *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*.) **Why is language so crucial to identity? Why do you think Anzaldúa believes real pain comes from insulting language?**
- Luiselli writes: “There are things that can only be understood retrospectively, when many years have passed and the story has ended. In the meantime, while the story continues, the only thing to do is to tell it over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself. And it must be told, because before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times, in many different words and from many different angles, by many different minds.” (97). **Do you agree with this assessment of stories and narratives? Are there certain contexts in which a simple story may actually be more effective than a complex one? Give some examples.**
- **What are other ways to tell narratives when words fall short?**

10. EVALUATE: Assessment

- For IB teachers, Paper 1 scoring rubric may be used to evaluate the initial writing sample about the narrative of the journey. Focus on grammar, vocabulary, contribution to effective communication, development of ideas, relevance of ideas to the task at hand, organization and clarity.
- While IB Oral Assessments seek to measure and assess student's receptive skills in oral interactions (i.e., understanding a question asked orally and responding appropriately), this lesson actually uses the moments of lack of comprehension as important teaching points about the asylum process. Thus, assessment can be done in terms of receptive skills, but it should also go hand in hand with a reflection as to what the real life implications of lack of understanding may mean for a migrant seeking asylum.
- For the reflections, it is much more about depth of engagement. Focus more on qualitative feedback, and questions that students could explore more deeply as opposed to grammar.

11. Accommodations and Modifications

- The number of questions that students translate and ask may be higher or lower depending on student's ability
- The readings and discussions may be in Spanish or English or a combination that best suits your class.
- If your classroom has students whose native language/language in which they feel most comfortable writing is not English, allow them to write reflections in that language. This is important in drawing the contrast between self-expression in native language versus a learned language.
- Any writing prompt may be modified. The original narrative from Activity 1 is to help students think about stories of "travel" or migration. The concepts of home and arrival in a strange place are important, and may be able to be explored through a different prompt.
- Written reflections may be done as homework assignment if you cannot allocate the class time.

12. College and Career Readiness (optional)

For students who are interested in translation or interpretation, this may offer them some insight into the more nuanced ethics of the job (An example of a translator's code of ethics can be found here: https://multi-languages.com/translations-shtml/translators_ethics-shtml/)

13. Additional Resources

Ematus, Sophie. *Orenda: Niños migrantes viajando a través de Mexico*. Personal blog. Accessed July 23, 2019.

<https://sophieematus.wixsite.com/orenda/inicio/?fbclid=IwAR0Jt1JGiyeDOxXtLFhK PgS-4ErsGmH3Xst68LNaKxsYcVYqEWkCKCFX8Pg>

- Personal blog from an activist working with young migrants passing through Mexico, explores other ways to tell stories of minors and young children through art and poetry.

Roig-Franzia, Manuel. "Migrants risk it all seeking asylum. The answer in court is almost always 'no.'" *Washington Post*, July 24, 2019, accessed July 24, 2019.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/migrants-risk-it-all-seeking-asylum-the-answer-in-court-is-almost-always-no/2019/07/23/9c161b2e-a3f7-11e9-b732-41a79c2551bf_story.html?utm_term=.f080afa4e311

Schmidt, Susan (2017.) "They need to give us a voice": Lessons from listening to unaccompanied Central American and Mexican Children on Helping Children like themselves." *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5(1).

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/233150241700500104>

- This source offers further reading on unaccompanied children, and their lack of voice in literature and other sources in which they can tell their own stories.

PBS Story about children seeking asylum:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_iB9qkwBTs&feature=youtu.be

Vargas, Luis Fernando (2018.) "Tell me Who I am". National Public Radio: Radio Ambulante. <http://radioambulante.org/en/audio-en/tell-me-who-i-am>

- This is a good source for looking at how issues of migration, human trafficking, and child separation manifest in psychological as well as linguistic challenges (note the protagonist's particular spoken Spanish)

Yescas, Carlos (2010.) *Hidden in Plain Sight: Indigenous Migrants, Their Movements, and Their Challenges*. Migration Policy Institute: Migration Information Source.

http://www.bollettinoadapt.it/old/files/document/6389MPI_IMMIGRAZIONE.pdf

- This offers some background reading on the invisibilization of indigenous migrants, and points out some of the particular characteristics of indigenous migrants.

14. References (or Works Cited)

Anzaldúa, Gloria. (1987.) *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press.

Korgen Odell, Jeffrey, and Pyle, Kevin. (2017). *Migrant: Stories of Hope and Resistance*. Hope Border Institute and Kino Border Initiative. Available at: <https://www.hopeborder.org/migrant>

Luiselli, Valeria (2017). *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press.

Ibid (2017). "Forty Questions," *Harper's Magazine online*, August 2017, accessed July 26, 2019. <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/08/forty-questions/>

Rodriguez, José Antonio (2016). *A House Built on Ashes*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Traux, Eileen. "The US must provide interpreters for indigenous migrants. It could save lives." *Washington Post*, December 19th, 2018. Date accessed July 23, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/19/us-must-provide-interpreters-indigenous-migrants-it-could-save-lives/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.5fbcadde5d13

15. Reflection

"So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language." (Anzaldúa, *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*.)

Anzaldúa's quote above served as inspiration for this lesson, in addition to the harrowing narrative presented in Valeria Luiselli's book *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (or *Niños Perdidos* in Spanish) of the intake process for unaccompanied minor children who migrate to the United States in search of political asylum. Luiselli writes about stories of trauma that do not have a neat narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and an end. This broken narrative, in and of itself a reflection of a child's often traumatic migration story, enters another realm of violence when they go through the intake process, and children sit with interpreters who go through 40 intake questions, which, as Luiselli writes, "are too filthy and tattered to allow any clarity, any attention to detail. Stories too often become generalized, distorted, appear out of focus." (Luiselli, 11.) José Antonio Rodriguez also talks about the inadequacy of immigration forms, when he writes in his memoir *A House Built on Ashes*, "...I didn't get it, the question didn't really apply for people living along the border...it's like the people who drafted the form didn't even consider the people living there." (Rodriguez, 11.)

The institute challenged us to focus on complicating the narrative of the borderlands. But I want these lessons to invert that idea, and explore what happens when bureaucratic processes and linguistic challenges force people to tell much

simpler narratives as they seek asylum, often with precarious consequences. This is a particular challenge for indigenous migrants with limited Spanish speaking skills who are nonetheless given Spanish interpreters as they go through the asylum intake process.

As Truax discusses in her article, this high-stakes intake process poses even higher risk for indigenous migrants, many of whom speak one or multiple indigenous languages, and sometimes speak little or very basic Spanish. Given the lack of translators who speak indigenous languages such as Mayan, Zapotec, Mixtec, Triqui, Chatino, Mixe, Raramuri or Purepecha, indigenous migrants must face the daunting task of the intake interview with a translator who only speaks Spanish, forcing the migrant to answer the questions that determine their future in a language in which they face significant linguistic obstacles. The wrong answers to questions given in a language that is not your own could mean deportation back to extremely uncertain circumstances.

As such, this lesson hopes to use the unique environment of a language learning classroom to put students into a simulation of that experience that an indigenous or young migrant may face, as they use their skills in Spanish to recreate an intake process in which a Spanish “interpreter” helps a “migrant” fill out the I-589 intake form. It is the hope that through this activity, students develop an empathic understanding of the vital importance of telling stories in our own languages, and the severity of consequences when that ability is limited or taken away by larger or ineffective power structures.