

The Story of an Altered Shoe Project

Lisa Gimbel and Jeri Bayer, The Welcome Project, Somerville, MA

As part of an eight-week ESOL class offered to intermediate level English language learners, that focused on health and the community in Somerville, we decided to engage students in a project that would offer them a chance to express themselves creatively and to contemplate their journeys as immigrants. Using shoes as a metaphor for journey, as well as a focus for language development, we invited students to “alter” a pair of discarded shoes by painting and decorating the shoes and then to describe the story reflected in the transformed shoes.



Day One

The project, inclusive of the language and theme components, as well as the hands-on art making, involved three two-hour class meetings (one week). On Day One, we involved the students in a discussion of the various journeys they had taken in their lives, focusing on the verbs and appropriate tenses needed to describe those journeys. We then formed lines (six in all to accommodate six pairs of students) from all of the shoes that we had collected over the previous few weeks by poking around yard sales, soliciting donations from friends, family, and co-workers, and rummaging around in our own closets. One member of each set of partners



stood on the side at the end of one line, and the other member stood at the side at the end of the other line. Each person then took a turn telling his or her partner the story of coming to the United States. The students symbolized each step of the story by taking a step alongside the shoes along their line. Following the activity, we invited everyone to select the pair of shoes that appealed to them most. We also said that if people had old shoes at home that they preferred they could bring them in.

In order to prepare for the next day’s shoe transformation activity, we had to cover the shoes the students had selected with gesso, a white acrylic primer. This is not a difficult task, but it does take time. On Day One, 10 students had been present, so we had to prime 10 pairs, as well as an additional three pairs for students who had not been able to attend Day One but were expected to attend the next class.

Day Two

Before class on Day Two we set up three long tables filled with decorating materials: different colors of paint, a variety of printed papers, old magazines and maps, sequins, ribbons, feathers, ink stamps, buttons, glitter, scissors, and several jars of Mod Podge, an adhesive that dries clear and is ideal for this kind of project.

Language Development Work

At the beginning of class, we gathered students in our usual U-shape seating and focused on the verb “stand.” We distributed the lyrics of the song, “Stand By Me,” listened to and sang along to it, discussed the meaning of the expression, and asked students to consider whom they stand by and who stands by them. We then listed on the board a number of other expressions that use *stand*: *stand by*, *stand in*, *stand out*, *stand up for*, *stand for*, *take a stand*, offering and soliciting examples of each. *With stand up for*, we went around the circle, with each person saying for whom or for what we stand up. The responses were varied, from “my children,” to “human rights,” to “immigrants,” to “unborn babies.”

To segue to the shoes, we asked everyone to continue to think about the journeys they had taken (discussed in the previous class), and their own personalities (what makes them “stand out”). Lenore described what we would be doing with the shoes and showed the pair of “poetry boots” that she had created. We then invited everyone to find the shoes they had selected the previous day (now white with gesso) or, if they had not been present, to choose a pair now from the extras we had prepared. They were then invited to select the materials with which they would like to transform their shoes. We moved the tables that had formed the U into separate worktables so that we could focus on our art in small groups. Lisa, Jeri, Lenore, and Laura facilitated the process and circulated to help with paint and glue issues, although they also participated in decorating shoes.



We had thought that while students worked on their shoes we might engage them in conversation and had printed some questions on index card-sized paper for each table. These questions focused on shoes:

- Remember your favorite shoes. Describe them.
- Describe a time when you got a pair of shoes you really needed or wanted.
- What are shoes that you used to have and really hated?
- Remember shoes that caused you problems. What happened?

- What are the different kinds of shoes you used to have?
- What are the different kinds of shoes you have now?
- Was it easy or difficult to get shoes in your country?
- What do you do with shoes when you get rid of them?



What we found when we tried to initiate conversations based on these questions was that students were too involved in their art making to participate. Conversing in English required a concentration that distracted them from their shoes, and they were clearly engrossed by the form of non-verbal expression that we had offered them.

Twenty minutes before the end of class, we stopped work on the shoes with the promise that there would be more time in the next class meeting to

finish them. We did a quick, initial clean up (leaving the full clean up until after class) and gathered back in a circle with our shoes. We asked each person to describe how he or she was decorating his or her shoes and why. We also asked the students to say one word about how they were feeling about their shoes or their work on their shoes and followed up by asking for a more detailed response to the project thus far.

Student Comments

- "I felt relaxed. This was something different. I could pretend to be a child."
- "I didn't think too much about it. I wanted to keep going, keep playing."
- "I was happy. I love these colors. I feel really good."
- "I'm enjoying too much, very happy. This is for my daughter. She's 10 years old. She likes these kind of shoes with lace. I will offer these shoes to my daughter."
- "I'm happy because I like to paint. I'm thinking of my kids. Now I see I can do this at home with my kids. I am forgetting bad things when I do this. If I cover the table with paper I can clean up after."
- "It is calming to work on the shoes and see everyone else working."
- "I felt inspired by everyone else's ideas."

Final Reflections

Given the topic of the class and the fact that we had three two-hour class sessions a week, the altered shoes project seemed ideal, and we were pleased with the students' responses to it. It proved an excellent vehicle for language teaching, and the opportunity it gave students (and teachers!) to express themselves creatively was clearly appreciated. While involved in the actual alteration process, students were simultaneously focused and relaxed, and they

expressed pleasure in doing something so different from their usual daily activities. We look forward to using the shoes as props to enhance other lessons we are planning for the remaining weeks of the class.

Recommendations

Based on our experience, we would recommend the following to others considering doing an altered shoes project with ABE/ESOL students:

- Gather as wide a variety of materials as possible for design and decoration.
- Gather as wide a variety of shoes as possible, to reflect a variety of personalities or purposes.
- At least one of the facilitators should go through the alteration process *before* asking students to do it, so issues/challenges can be anticipated and suggestions prepared.
- Make sure to cover all the shoes with gesso after students have selected their shoes and before they begin the transformation process. Do not use valuable class time for this process, since it does not require any creativity or self-expression.