Beginning ESL Students as Independent Researchers  
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Introduction  
The ESL students I teach are ninth grade students, newly arrived in the USA. Most are eager and exited to learn English. Some, however, come with interrupted education. These students were initially excited to learn English but their enthusiasm waned when it appeared that the curriculum did not truly address their concerns. My struggle was how to help students become the center of their own learning. My thesis statement for my action research is: How can I bring ESL students’ concerns into my curriculum? How can I encourage beginning language students to become independent researchers of their own experience?

Background  
Learning languages is my passion. I have dabbled in Russian, Chinese, Swedish, Bahasa Indonesian, Filipino, French and Japanese. While I love studying languages, I can’t say that I’m fluent in any (other than English). But my current struggle to learn German and Spanish helps me understand some of what my students feel in the classroom.

I came to teaching in a roundabout way. After college I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines. It was there that I discovered my love of languages. Many people say to me, “Oh, you’re one of those people who learns languages easily!” But this wasn’t always the case. In high school, after four years I could barely speak a word of Spanish. In the Philippines language came alive! Learning Filipino had a purpose. “Talon?” I asked my host brother. “What is ‘talon’?” He bent over and scooped up a handful of silt from the rice field and plopped it in my hand. As the rich black mud oozed through my fingers “Talon”, he said. The Philippines has about 300 distinct languages and it is common for Filipinos to speak 2 or 3 as well as English. I left the Philippines able to converse in two Filipino languages, Ilokano and Kankana-ey.

After a stint of teaching English in Japan, I returned to the US for graduate school. Three years working behind a desk on K Street was enough for me to realize that I missed the dynamic and multilingual environment that I discovered in the Philippines. It was then I decided to become an ESL teacher with DC Public Schools.

Context  
For the action research presented here, I will be discussing my Beginning ESL class. This is a ninth grade class of 15 students. The students’ ages range from 15 to 19. Most are from El Salvador. I also have students from Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. Of the 15 students, 13 have had interrupted education. Three students lack basic literacy skills. Finding appropriate materials has been
a challenge. There is a lack of ESL materials for secondary students. Most materials developed assume basic skills.

Originally the class was 28 students. This was much too large for language learning, so the class was divided into two groups. Ms. Hashem took a large group who had strong literacy skills in Spanish. I took students with lower level skills as well as any students who arrived mid-year. Dividing the class like this presented problems. The students in my class viewed themselves as sort of ESL rogues. After the split, several of my students would consistently arrive late to class. One day an argument broke out in Spanish when Jasmin said that Albi was like Pocahontas, indio. The situation came to a head when students prepared to present their telenovelas in English to Ms. Hashem’s class. My students explained they didn’t want to present to Ms. Hashem’s class because Ms. Hashem’s class said that they were stupid. I realized at this point it was not enough to assure students that they were not stupid. I had to address this problem within my curriculum.

“My Community”

Ximena Briceno is Outreach Coordinator for the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC). Ximena and I worked together last year and our project was quite successful. I called Ximena and explained the problem that I saw in my class. Ximena and I met and decided to give the class a questionnaire to see what they were interested in. Using information from the questionnaire, Ximena and I decided on a project in which students would conduct an interview with a immigrant in their neighborhoods and explore issues in their own communities as a way to connect their experiences of coming to a new place.

LAYC provided each student with a camera to photograph their interviewee and important places in the community. Students were also asked to have the interviewee sign a waiver so that we can publish our findings. LAYC also provided colorful maps of each student’s neighborhood to be included in the final booklet.

The Tour

Our project began with a tour of Community Heights around the high school. The tour was conducted in Spanish by Maria Martinez, an assistant of Ximena’s, and a former Bell graduate. The focus of Maria’s talk was gentrification and the effects on the Latino community in Columbia Heights. The students were fascinated and it was a great hook to inspire the students to now conduct a tour of their own. Through the student questionnaire I learned that most of my students did not live near the high school. This could be due to the fact that rents have increased with the recent gentrification of Columbia Heights. Students explored their neighborhoods and collected information on what shops and services were in their communities and more importantly what people thought about the problems of gentrification and displacement in their communities.
Constructivism

Perhaps the first constructivist philosopher, Giambatista Vico stated in a treatise in 1710 that "one only knows something if one can explain it" (Yager, 1991). Immanuel Kant further elaborated this idea by asserting that human beings are not passive recipients of information. Learners actively take knowledge, connect it to previously assimilated knowledge and make it theirs by constructing their own interpretation (Cheek, 1992).

In their book, “Student Researchers: Creating Classrooms That Matter” Steinberg and Kincheloe argue that students must play a central role in creating and implementing their own education. Steinberg and Kincheloe define “students as researchers” as those who “possess a vision of ‘what could be,’ and a set of skills to uncover ‘what actually is’” (Steinberg, 2001). In this way students are not merely recipients of knowledge but critique mainstream ideas and explore power relations that might effect them and their communities. Students “discover the strength and power of their own inquiry in contrast to the knowledge given to them by the mainstream institutions” (Steinberg, 2001). I do not claim that all of my students were empowered to a level where they were questioning mainstream notions in society but I believe “Our Community” project sewed the seeds for students to feel more comfortable in a classroom setting where student concerns were central to the curriculum.

Areas for Improvement

If I were to engage students in a project like this again, I would allow more time for analyzing and organizing the information they collected in class. Some students took different approaches in their interviews and were able to tap into a variety of socio-economic issues in their neighborhoods such as drug abuse, truancy and adolescent pregnancy.

Other students interviewed family members. In his paper, “Students as researchers: Agency and the breaching of inequities in urban science education.” Ken Tobin reports on family involvement in class projects as a means to engage parents in their children’s education. He showed that interview projects like the one I conducted are an opportunity for students to share what they are learning with parents. If more time were allotted for sharing in small groups, other students might have been able to incorporate some of these good ideas and practices into their projects.

I would also allow students to make their final presentations to the class in Spanish. During the tour students hung on every word of our guide as she described in Spanish how a family was evicted from their apartment. I think students would have enjoyed the opportunity to share in their native language and in more detail what they learned about their communities.

In their paper “The Practical Aspects of Working with Students as Researchers,” Loman and Olitsky explore how students as researchers gives students a voice. I observed this with several students but most clearly with two, Jose and Jimer. These two students completed only 2 years of schooling in El Salvador. They suffer low self-esteem and often sat in class with their heads on the table. I feel their self-esteem was bolstered when they became the experts
on issues of their own communities and were proud to present their photographs and findings in front of the class.

**Conclusion**
Perhaps the most important aspect of my experience was listening to the students. There was a problem in the classroom that needed to be resolved. Ultimately the student questionnaire provided me with information about what the students were interested in learning. It was not easy for me to relinquish control but it paid off immensely. The students were motivated and I easily found ways to incorporate ESL standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening into the project as well.

In the future I will look for additional projects with Ximena and the LAYC and other teachers or agencies. I learned that I enjoy collaborating with others and feel comfortable having other professionals in my classroom working with my kids.

Admittedly it was not easy to give up control and allow student ideas and concerns to become the centerpiece of my ESL class. From my action research, however, I was able to see how enthusiastic my students were about ‘school work’. They used skills in English and in Spanish. They gathered information, recorded data and reported their findings about their own experiences.

**References**