

LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN THE ENGLISH CLASS

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The following PowerPoint presentation was presented at the PRTESOL Northern Chapter conference held at University Gardens High School in Rio Piedras, PR on August 26, 2017.

The full text of the presentation can be found under Presentations at: <http://aliciapousada.weebly.com>

WHAT IS A LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

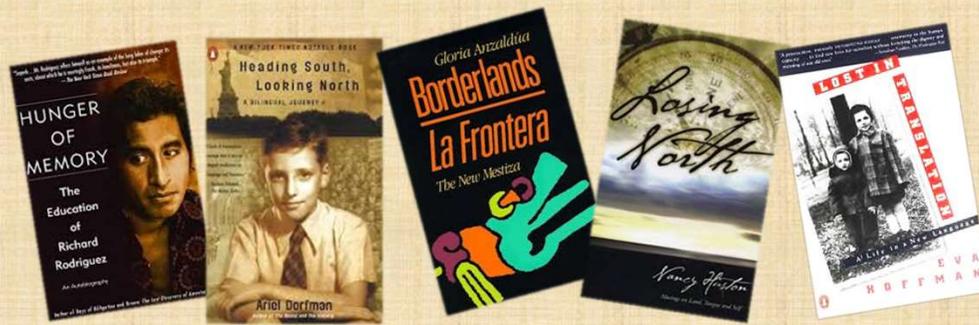
PAUL JOHN EAKIN (1985)

- ❖ A personal narrative in which language is central
- ❖ Typically begins with infancy and proceeds to the time of writing, but may cover just a particular period
- ❖ May be written by a monolingual, but is most commonly produced by a multilingual author whose speech repertoire is complex and fascinating
- ❖ Frequently the result of an encounter with cultural and linguistic contact and forced assimilation

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EXAMPLES OF LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

- Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory* (1982)
- Ariel Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey* (1998)
- Gloria Anzaldúa, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" in *Borderlands* (1987)
- Nancy Huston, *Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue and Self* (2002)
- Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989)



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Excerpt from *Hunger of Memory* (pp. 11-12):

During those years when I was first conscious of hearing, my mother and father addressed me only in Spanish; in Spanish I learned to reply. By contrast, English (*inglés*), rarely heard in the house, was the language I came to associate with *gringos*. I learned my first words of English overhearing my parents speak to strangers. At five years of age, I knew just enough English for my mother to trust me on errands to stores one block away. No more.

I was a listening child, careful to hear the very different sounds of Spanish and English. Wide-eyed with hearing, I'd listen to sounds more than words. First, there were English (*gringo*) sounds. So

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many words were still unknown that when the butcher or the lady at the drugstore said something to me, exotic polysyllabic sounds would bloom in the midst of their sentences. Often, the speech of people in public seemed to me very loud, booming with confidence. The man behind the counter would literally ask, 'What can I do for you?' But by being so firm and so clear, the sound of his voice said that he was a *gringo*; he belonged in public society.

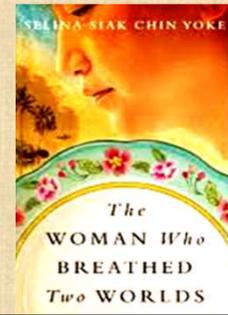
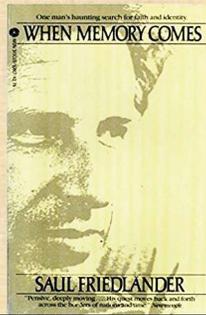
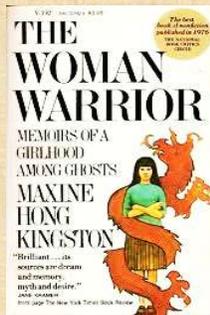


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MEMOIRS WITH LINGUISTIC VALUE

Not directly focused on language but contain detailed information regarding language acquisition and cultural transformation

- Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976)
- Saul Friedlander's *When Memory Comes* (1979)
- Selina Siak Chin Yoke's *The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds* (2016)



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Excerpt from: *The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds* (p. 17):

That night she and Father gathered us children together and informed us matter-of-factly that we would soon be leaving Songkhla. With his Adam's apple bobbing, Father told us there would be a better future for us in Penang, where Cousin-Uncle Lim lived. Father explained where Penang was – 'Far south of here. It's controlled by the British.'

'Oh, white devils?' I asked, adopting the same sneer I had observed among the adults.

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Father smiled, showing off his even teeth. 'You mustn't call them that, Chye Hoon,' he said.

I couldn't see why. After all, he and Mother had always used the term in the past, but there was a change in Father's tone that night, a deference that had not been there before. He talked enthusiastically about the 'British' and the development they had brought. 'They are opening tin mines and rubber plantations. There are new schools and hospitals and plenty of jobs for men like me who speak English.'

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THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011)

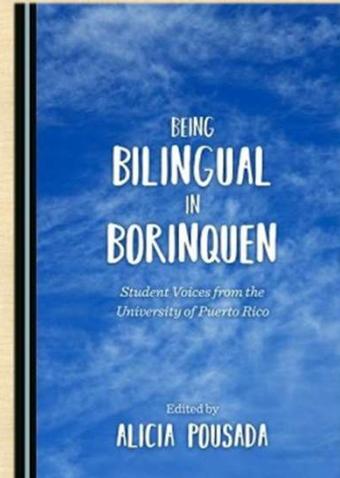
- ❖ Describes and systematically analyzes personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.
- ❖ Based on a principle shared by both autobiography and ethnography—detailed description from an insider's perspective
- ❖ Used as a critical research tool that regards anthropological or sociological research as a politically and socially-conscious act
- ❖ Focuses on both the process and the product of language development

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MY USE OF LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

- ❖ INGL 6466: Studies in Bilingualism
UPR, Rio Piedras
- ❖ Guidelines for linguistic autobiographies
- ❖ *Being Bilingual in Borinquen: Student Voices from the University of Puerto Rico*
(Cambridge Scholars publishing, 2017)

Note: all excerpts that follow are from this book.



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GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. *The languages, dialects, and styles used by your parents, grandparents, and siblings (oral, written, or gestural)*
 - concepts of dialects (regional and social) and styles (formal, casual)
 - words or phrases of regions of Puerto Rico or differences between PR Spanish and other Spanish dialects
 - stylistic variation explained via role playing

empanadilla vs. pastelillo

ficha vs. vellón

olla vs. caldero

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Regional differences in vocabulary

	Spain	Argentina	Mexico	Puerto Rico
apartment	piso	departamento	apartamento	apartamento
bus	autocar microbus	colectivo	camión	guagua
sidewalk	acera	vereda	banqueta	acera
pool	piscina	pileta	alberca	piscina
beans	judías	porotos	frijoles	habichuelas

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Role playing to explore linguistic variation



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2. *Your first language(s) and the context of acquisition—Did you have any language pathologies as a child? (stuttering, lisping, etc.)*

- Speech difficulties (*frenillo, ceceo, or defecto del habla*) explained in neutral manner
- Laughter deflected to clarify that mockery is inappropriate
- Discussion of teasing experiences



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Excerpt from Sharif El Gamal's autobiography:

At about this time, I began developing a stutter, and talking in public was a nightmare. My mouth would fill with air, and I couldn't utter an intelligible sound, much less a string of words. (p. 96)

Given the tensions prevalent in the world on a global scale and the fact that I was half Egyptian, half Puerto Rican and came from an Islamic background, the other children called me "camel jockey," "sand nigger," and would poke fun at my stutter by saying "Sha-Sha-Sha-Sharif" and "El Gamma-ha-ha-ha," and making Porky Pig noises. I retreated further into myself and would speak more with my fists than with words. (p. 97)

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3. *Your second language(s) and their relation to your first language(s)—
Were they acquired simultaneously or sequentially? Were they acquired in
the same context? Who were your adult models?*

- Explain difference between simultaneous and sequential acquisition and give examples from your own linguistic history
- Explain contexts (home, community, classroom, foreign country)
- Possible adult models are parents, grandparents, other relatives, neighbors, teachers, etc.



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Excerpt from Anne Beatty's autobiography:

Growing up in a small, yet uniquely diverse, society like Puerto Rico, I have been exposed to the linguistic richness of a bilingual environment my entire life. I was raised straddling two linguistic and sociocultural worlds. I learned English and Spanish simultaneously at home, a pro-bilingual environment. I had the liberty to choose and would effortlessly switch languages as I pleased, but I could ultimately speak any one of them depending on the interactional context. (p. 105)

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Excerpt from Frieda Hastings' autobiography:

My best friend and next-door neighbor spoke English and Spanish since her parents were American. That gave me an additional opportunity to practice both languages as a child. As a matter of fact, her parents played an important role in helping me improve my English at a fast pace. My friend would share the books her parents gave her, and I came to know Dr. Seuss, Peter Rabbit, and Mother Goose. Later I even learned to play Scrabble in English with her mother. (p. 109)

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Grandparents can be powerful linguistic agents, especially in maintaining ancestral languages.

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4. Any additional language varieties (can include dialects, styles)?–
Context of acquisition? Problems in acquisition? Benefits of previous
languages in learning new ones?

- Give examples using languages or dialects that students are likely to have heard in Puerto Rico or on TV (e.g., Chinese, French, Dominican Spanish, U.S. Southern English, Black English, British English, etc.).
- Discuss why these languages were easy or difficult to learn.
- Can knowing Spanish help to learn French or Italian?

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The faces of the many dialects that PR children are exposed to in film and TV.

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Excerpt from Michelle Rodriguez's essay:

Additionally, during my adolescent years I was exposed to Turkish and Italian through two close friends. Anytime I visited their homes, especially at dinner time, their parents would speak the family's native tongue. I was thus exposed to the Standard Turkish of Istanbul and Sicilian Italian. At times I was able to understand the Italian spoken around me due to its similarities to Spanish as a Romance language, but the Turkish was just a pretty melody I was unable to decipher. (pp. 71-72)

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5. *Literacy—In which languages? What was the context of acquisition? Which language(s) are most developed in literate form?*



- Literacy may be a new term and should be explained as reading and writing.
- Mention that not everybody in Puerto Rico knows how to read and write well enough to handle the demands of modern society
- Underscore the importance for them to develop their reading and writing to the highest level possible

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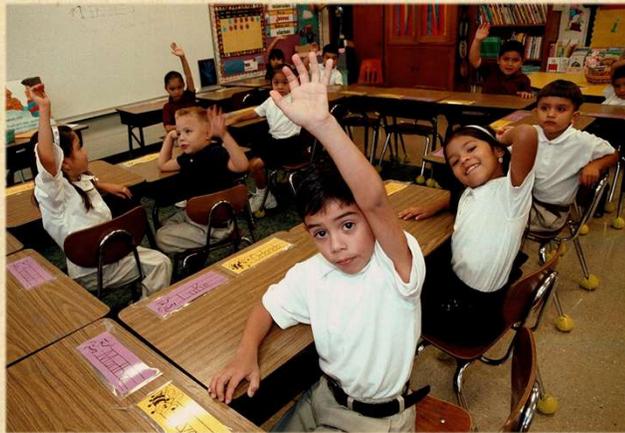
Excerpt from Dayraliz Carrillo's autobiography:

I'm definitely more literate in English than in Spanish. I can't read a Spanish novel without feeling alienated and confused by the variety of sophisticated sounding words. Even in college, I always performed best in my English courses. I also prefer writing in English to writing in Spanish, and when I do write in Spanish in contexts such as social media, I end up code-switching throughout the entire post. (p. 27)

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6. *Education—What kinds of school(s) did you attend? What was their role in your language acquisition?*

- Private or public?
- Parochial or lay?
- Monolingual or bilingual?
- Urban, suburban, rural?



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Excerpt from Janice Rivera's autobiography:

One day, my mother announced that she and my father were reconciling and asked us how we felt about moving to Puerto Rico. We had only visited on vacation, and my initial reaction was "No way!" My first issue was the language. I told my parents that I didn't know Spanish and that it would be difficult for me. My father convinced me by telling me I'd be placed in a bilingual school, but once we moved, I went to a regular Spanish-speaking private school, and everything in my life changed completely. (p. 91)

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7. Language usage patterns at different stages of your life—In which domains do you use each variety? Which is used most frequently? Which variety do you feel is your dominant one?

- ❖ Need to explain domains (home, community, school, church, government, etc.)
- ❖ Explain language dominance
 - Spanish-dominant
 - English-dominant
 - Balanced bilingualism



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LANGUAGE SKILLS USAGE BY SOCIAL DOMAIN

(scale of 1-5; 1 refers to very infrequent use, and 5 refers to extremely frequent use;
0 indicates no use at all)

Domain	Speaking		Writing		Understanding		Reading	
	Sp	Eng	Sp	Eng	Sp	Eng	Sp	Eng
Home	5	0	4	2	5	4	5	3
Community	5	3	5	3	5	4	5	4
Church	4	0	3	0	5	1	5	1
School	4	3	4	3	5	4	5	4
Government agencies	3	0	0	0	5	1	5	1

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Excerpt from Javier Martinez's essay:

Thanks to English, I have always had job opportunities. I had no problems getting a teaching job when I graduated from UPR, and now I am part of the full-time English faculty of Inter American University. I even finished my doctoral degree in the Teaching of English as a Second Language. Nevertheless, I don't consider myself a balanced bilingual. I still have more control over Spanish and consider speaking in English my weakest point. The curious thing is that when I am with my students in the classroom, my English flows almost naturally. I feel more comfortable speaking English in a classroom than in a social interaction. (p. 37)

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8. Self-rating of language competence in each variety you know
(speaking, listening, reading, writing, norms of appropriate usage)

Grid for recording language competence
(Grosjean, 2010, Fig. 2.1)

Daily			Lb		La
Language use					
		Lc			
Never	Ld				
	Low				High
	Language fluency				

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9. Code-switching and loanwords—Do you use them? How do you feel about them?

❖ Explain what code-switching is:

- Intrasentential CS: *Yo quiero que me des ONE OF THOSE THINGIES color anaranjado.* (I want you to give me one of those orange-colored thingies.)
- Intersentential CS: *SHE REALLY ENJOYS COOKING. Tú sabes, le gusta preparar comida criolla.* (She really enjoys cooking. You know, she likes to prepare typical Puerto Rican dishes.)



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11. Attitudes of others in society toward your language usage

- ❖ Ask students if anyone has ever made fun of the way they talk (the words they use, the pronunciation, how high or low class they sound, etc.)
- ❖ Discuss with the students what happens when English is used in public in Puerto Rico or when Spanish is used in public in the U.S.
- ❖ Have them consider the way different types of musicians speak in Puerto Rico (*salseros, reguetoneros, roqueros*, etc.)

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Excerpt from Jenny Lozano's essay:

I do not speak often with my friends from my undergrad and MA years, but if I do, I use more standard Spanish than casual Puerto Rican Spanish because they are not as close to me anymore. They seem to be bothered if I use English with them. They accuse me of being pretentious and claim that I am not in the U. S. anymore, and I have to speak in Spanish. I understand. Once upon a time, I had the same attitude. (p. 43)

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12. Benefits or disadvantages of being multilingual

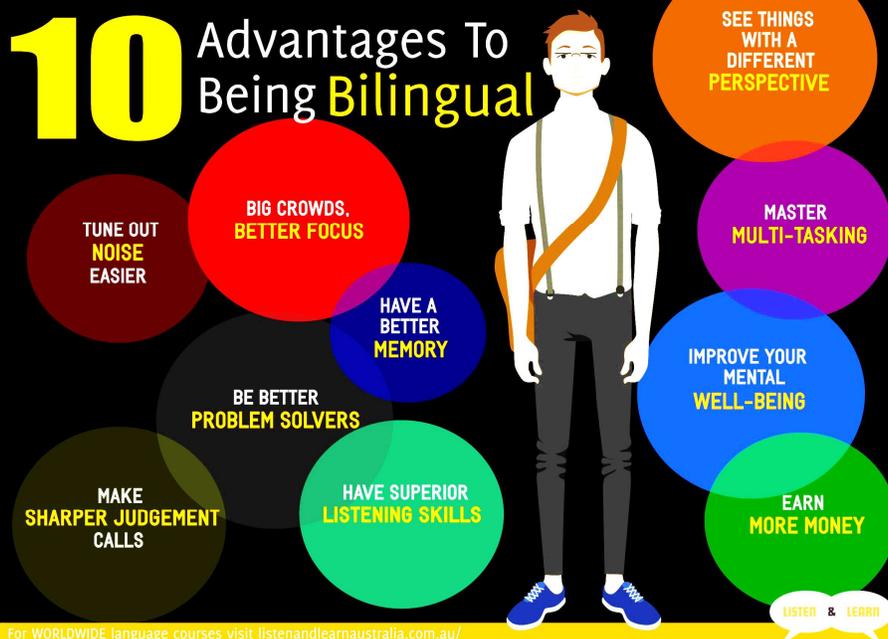
- ❖ Ask students what benefits they think knowing more than one language will bring them.
- ❖ How have they benefited already?
- ❖ Are there times when knowing another language is a problem?
- ❖ Have they ever pretended to not know a language to avoid being asked to do something?



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LISTEN UP LANGUAGE LEARNERS:

10 Advantages To Being Bilingual



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Excerpt from Anyeliz Pagan's autobiography:

All in all, I would have to say that being bilingual has brought its share of benefits; however, there is a certain responsibility that comes along with being the most developed bilingual in your family. I have always been in charge of helping my siblings in their English development. I read their assigned books, edited their essays, and helped them with homework. Furthermore, I have had to deal with every customer service call, serve as interpreter whenever we traveled to the United States, and translate the résumés of practically every member of my family. Although tiresome, these experiences have helped shape me as a bilingual and have given me standing in my family. I am the family translator and editor. (p. 127)

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13. Employment—How has your job influenced you linguistically? Did being multilingual allow you to pursue certain job opportunities (including military service)? [This question is not usually applicable to students below college age and can be omitted.]



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Excerpt from Marlene Aponte's autobiography:

In 1991, I became the first Hispanic Assistant General Counsel for the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). My proficiency in Spanish landed me a job as an attorney evaluating inmate claims. Because of the large Hispanic inmate population, the BOP was looking for a lawyer who could handle the claims in Spanish and interview witnesses who did not speak English. With this job, I had the opportunity to travel all throughout the United States and even negotiate the acquisition of the plot of land where the Metropolitan Detention Center in Guaynabo is located today. (p. 120)

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14. Travel--How have your travel experiences influenced you linguistically?
Again, this may be more applicable to older students, but you may be surprised about the places your students have gone already.

- ❖ Discuss how travel can:
 - Give a reason to learn other languages
 - Provide an opportunity for practicing other languages
 - Make one open to new experiences and ways of expressing oneself
 - Lead to new friendships with people who speak other languages



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Excerpt from Jonatan Cruz's autobiography:

I've visited various countries and many states in the U.S. in which I've had to communicate in English. When you meet tourists on a train, bus, or eight-hour flight, they often know English because they are from an English-speaking country or they are bilingual in English and their mother tongue. Speaking English while travelling is vital in order to understand travel instructions. As soon as I start packing my luggage before a trip, my brain switches to "bilingual language mode" for survival reasons. (p. 47)

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15. Personal relationships—Have your personal relationships affected your language usage over the years?

- Family
- Friends
- Romantic partners
- Teacher-student
- Boss-employee



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16. If you have children, what varieties do you use with your children? What are your linguistic aspirations for them?
 This should be adjusted to read: *If you have children someday, what types of language would you use with them? What languages would you like them to learn? What school will you send them to?*



- Spanish only?
- English only?
- Spanish & English?
- Some other language?

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Excerpt from Roberto Olmeda's essay:

As a bilingual, I have resolved that she will acquire Spanish and English simultaneously. My wife, a receptive bilingual whose first language is Spanish, is responsible for providing the Spanish input. I've already started to speak to the baby in English so that she may become familiarized with the phonology. I don't want her to perceive English as "foreign" when she hears it outside of our home. Our goal is for her to distinguish the two languages pragmatically by age two. Since she is our first child, I foresee that the process may not run as smoothly as we would wish. (p. 62)

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16. Any other pertinent information regarding your linguistic development



- ❖ Mention the special issues of the Deaf and sign language
- ❖ Encourage the students to share anecdotes regarding sign language they've observed or times when they reacted to sign language.

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Excerpt from Kevin Kelly's essay:

When he was about seven months old, I read an article about baby sign language, and I researched the concept a bit. I attended a workshop where they taught me how to teach a baby sign language through repetition, the rationale being that babies can communicate through simplified hand signs before they have fully developed vocal apparatuses. My son learned several signs quickly, which reduced his crying because he could tell me when he wanted milk or food, eliminating guesswork. He stopped signing once he said his first words. (p. 137)

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HOW CAN LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES HELP IN THE ENGLISH CLASS?

- ❖ Allows you to get to know them more profoundly
- ❖ Excellent diagnostic tool for assessing students' needs and backgrounds
- ❖ Deepens students' metalinguistic awareness by opening discussions about formal properties of language, the relationship between language and society, language and identity, etc.
- ❖ Strengthens research and writing skills in English

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CONCLUSION

- ❖ Now you have an idea of how to use a linguistic autobiography in your class.
- ❖ The technique is flexible and can be adjusted to the age and proficiency level of your students.
- ❖ It can be shared publically or maintained as a private communication between the teacher and student.
- ❖ Let me know if you decide to try this activity with your group and how it went. Contact me at: prof.alicia.pousada@gmail.com

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