

Teaching Siran

Exchanging Words and Worlds in a Sixth-Grade Classroom

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MY ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD STUDENT Siran turned to me recently during a conversation about Shel Silverstein’s poetry and said, in her native Chinese, “English is so wasteful!” I had just been thinking the opposite, that rhyme is a lovely expression of compression and economy.

“Why?” I asked.

She pointed to a “k” at the beginning of the word “know,” and scrunched her face up in frustration. “If you can’t hear it, then why bother including it in the word?”

Siran is a sixth-grader at Nettelhorst Elementary, a public school on the north side of Chicago. Siran and I both moved here in September, she from Yunnan, China, and I from New York City. We found each other through the school’s volunteer initiative, one that partners parents with students. I spent my twenties in China, and speak reasonable Chinese.

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Siran had arrived in the US a month before we met, speaking almost no English. So the third week of school one of the school’s coordinators set us up on a blind date—tutor and student—in Siran’s sixth grade classroom.

Siran has several qualities that were obvious immediately: she is the scrappiest, most cheerful, brave and imaginative eleven-year-old I’ve ever met. She’s also resourceful. I learned in our first twenty minutes of conversation that during the three weeks she’d been in American school, in what must have felt like endless hours of classes she couldn’t follow, she had spent her time making a graphic novel about an eleven year old ninja who moves from Japan to Chicago, and alternately destroys villains and waits for snow. Siran loves Japanese culture and comics, and when we met in September, had never seen snow. Her protagonist ninja was multi-lingual, handily equipped with powers to combat both bad guys and culture shock. But Siran herself wasn’t able yet to speak to her classmates, so the first day I appeared, her sixth grade teacher, Laura Holmes, asked if I would mind translating, and then gathered everyone around Siran.

“Does anyone have any questions you’d like to ask Siran?”

The class went wild. They had hundreds of questions they’d been saving since the first day of school: “When is your birthday; how do you say ‘hello’ in

Chinese; do you have pets; what's your favorite color; show us your hometown on the globe; who do you live with; what do people in China eat? Think? Drive? Do? Where did you learn to draw? What is that thing you're always working on?"

Siran described China to them: warm, a river near her house, parents, cousins, animals, every kind of food you can imagine, only some of it spicy. Sports, the same ones as here. Her favorite TV shows were Japanese, and in Chicago, she lived with her aunt, who was an engineer. Her grandparents were also visiting, and the reason her Grandpa stood outside every day at 11:20 in the cold? He wanted to make sure her home-made lunch was hot when she ate it. Would she teach them to write some Chinese characters? Of course! Her favorite things: cats, of which she had seen many, and snow, which she had never seen. There was a collective gasp.

Ms. Holmes asked Siran if she had any questions.

"Is there any chance it will snow in September? And if not, October? November?"

I watched the class describe snow, and sledding, ice skating, snowmen, Christmas. They were thrilled and so was she; everyone got to be an expert, Siran on her own life, world, language and culture, and the sixth-graders on holidays, weather, America. They all felt like teachers, lucky to have each other there. This beautiful exchange wasn't a coincidence, of course; it was the result of Laura Holmes' thoughtful teaching. She spent a decade traveling the world, during which time she taught English in Japan. She understands, intellectually and viscerally, what it means to move around the world and live outside of one's own linguistic, time, and comfort zones. And how to teach kids like Siran.

The word "globalization" appears everywhere these days, but the stories tend not to be about what it

means for kids like Siran and her classmates. Or their teachers. They're about jobs, inexpensive TVs, expensive energy. Maybe China realized earlier than America did that globalization is about people talking, learning languages, sending their children to study in each other's countries and read each other's books. Because when reforms began, long before ships full of sneakers and trinkets sailed overseas, planes were already packed with people working on rebuilding a thirty-year gap in contact, friendship, conversation.

Once the class had gone back to its tasks and Siran and I were alone, she told me, with tremendous urgency, "There's one more question I need to know in English."

"Which one?" I asked.

"What sports do you like?"

"You want to know how to say 'what sports do you like' in English?"

"Right, and how to answer. It's very important for me. And also, 'I like baseball and swimming.'"

We worked on those for hours, until she had each line perfectly formed and memorized.

In the four months we worked together, Siran taught me the global language of sixth grade, corrected my pronunciation of the Chinese word for "week" ("You don't have to be so exaggerated in your new pronunciation," she told me gently, after I got it right and apparently gloated.). She showed me how to play Zingo, a silent Bingo game featuring words like "bunny," "owl," "hat," and "dog." Together, we made a giant picture of Siran, which she labeled carefully in both languages and then clothed in elaborate tissue-paper outfits. When we hung the paper Siran in the hallway, it seemed lonely, so she made a paper dog to accompany it.

Then we read *Clifford the Big Red Dog*, and Siran reminded me what I once knew but had forgotten: in

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China, people don't have big dogs, only lap dogs. When we read Mo Willem's *Knuffle Bunny* trilogy, which Siran loved more than any other books we've read together, she copied all the words down, made her own illustrations, and was so delighted by the character Trixie's pronunciation of "K-nuffle" in the second book that she could barely contain herself.

"Trixie thinks you should hear the K, too! Just like I do."

In Chinese, "K" is never silent; it asserts itself. And Siran apparently made this known to her teachers and classmates, too—reminding all of us what we get when our schools are made more global. We find common ground in books, talking about language at a level so granular each letter counts. And numbers are also ambassadors. When Siran and I studied time "in English," she had an epiphany.

"All you have to do is add 'o'clock,'" she shrieked, "just like Chinese!" And then she threw her arms around my neck—finally, something that made clear sense even in English: numbers.

When we made cranberry bread the week before Thanksgiving with her devoted and wildly creative ELL teacher, Laura April, Siran danced through the kitchen gleefully, cracking extra eggs into the batter, and halving the flour.

"What are you doing?" I asked in English.

"It's too dry!" she told me first in Chinese and then in English, and when I said we were using a recipe, she looked at me blankly.

"I don't know that word," she said. I said it in Chinese, and she kept up her blank stare. "Too much flour," she repeated, "too dry!"

When we were done, as Siran and I walked out of the kitchen, she told me she thought that Ms. April was speaking Chinese to her.

"Just now, you mean?" I asked.

"All the time!" she said. "I think Ms. April speaks Chinese now."

I wouldn't have been surprised if Laura April had in fact learned Chinese in honor of Siran. But when I asked her, she laughed. "I think she's just getting used

to the way I speak English."

"Maybe English is just becoming more familiar," we suggested to Siran.

"The more familiar it is, the more it's Chinese," she told us. "I can hear whole Chinese phrases in Ms. April's sentences. Even though they're English!"

So we came up with words that overlap—English words that seem to contain Chinese sounds them. We did this mostly through rhyme, and it was a thrilling lesson since we'd spent so much time agonizing over the places where the languages never intersect: "th's," "sl's "r's" "l's," the list goes on. We came up with rhymes that happen in English and are easy to pronounce, since they share sounds with Chinese words. We were hoping Siran could write an English poem of her own and read it out loud correctly. Here's what she came up with:

In Chicago

SIRAN ZHAO

I so like Chicago.

Do cats like to eat fish?

Are you going to play in the snow?

I so like white Chicago.

Where do I like to go?

What do I like to do?

I so like animals.

I so like to go to the zoo.

Siran transliterated the English words, some into *pinyin* (romanized Chinese) and others into her own brand of phonetics so that the poem looked like this:

Eye so lai-ke Zhi-za-ge.

Doo ka-te-ze lai-ke tu yi-te fa-shi?

Ah-r yu gou-ying tu pu-lei yin th-ah si-noh?

Once each word was a satisfying hybrid of English and Chinese, we made a video of Siran reading this poem. After six takes that ended with her in hysterics, we got a perfect reading and sent it all over the world: to Siran's aunt in a lab downtown, to her teachers

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upstairs at Nettelhorst, to her parents in Yunnan and mine in Michigan. I told Siran it would have a wider audience than most published poems ever see.

Later that week, Siran told me, casually, that she would return to China on January 1st. I was surprised and glad to hear she was going home for a visit.

“No,” she said, “This was the visit. This time in America, in Chicago.”

Her parents had always intended for Siran to have a six-month stay; we just hadn’t realized it. She was going home, a little broader in her outlook, language, geography. And weighed down with presents and stories for her family and friends in China.

My dozens of Mondays with Siran have often made me think of the poet Anne Carson’s book *Autobiography of Red*. In it, her tiny protagonist, Geryon, a monster with red wings, comes alive by learning and making language. Like Siran, Geryon is an artist, trying to make sense of the world as he records it. And he does it by taking words apart and examining them for meaning, sound, sense. When Geryon asks his mother about the meaning of the word “each,” she explains that he and his brother each have their own room. For a safe and lovely moment, Geryon is able to “clothe himself” in this “strong word,” but then his grandmother moves in with them. When Geryon loses his bedroom, “each” loses its meaning and floats away. I like to think about the words Siran is taking home with her: *America, Chicago, lake, zoo, snow*, and how she’ll translate them back into her life there.

Sometimes I conjure up—with dread—an America where Siran can’t go to public school—whether she’s here for a six-month or sixty-year stay. A place where resources are too limited to give her time, Zingo, poetry, brightly colored tissue paper, teachers and parents to help her with English and help her classmates imagine China. In some neighborhoods,

America is already that place; the attack on bilingual education and push for English-only means small scholars like Siran will languish in a place where

they never get to feel ownership of the words they’re hearing all around them. That millions of new Americans will be adrift without teachers like the two Laura’s, or ways to express and share with America their brilliance and the stories of their lives and worlds.

As soon as she had gotten to know Siran, Laura April paired her with Jose, a troubled twelve-year-old who was struggling with academics and English, and who, in his frustration, had begun acting out. Laura asked him to tutor Siran in English; in exchange, one day, Siran taught Jose how to write the Chinese character for “love.” When we saw him in the ELL room several days later, he was bubbling over.

“Excuse me!” he said to me, “But you can speak Chinese, right? Will you please tell Siran I wrote a huge love character in red at home and hung it on my wall?”

I started to say this in Chinese and Siran waved me away proudly, dismissively. “I understood that,” she said, and grinned at Jose.

It occurred to me while I was living in China—and struggling constantly with vocabulary and grammar—that cultures are contained in their languages—and the best possibility for bringing a sense of community to our globalizing world is to exchange words. Finding the divergences and overlaps lets us understand the origins of each other’s ways of seeing (and speaking about) the world. Language is contextual and syllabic for all of us, but it’s especially so for new students of any language. Words can gain and lose their meanings easily, and there’s a kind of danger in grammar and meaning, one that also makes fresh-learned language particularly beautiful and expressive. Hopefully America will be able to embrace children who arrive from other places, both in our schools and languages.

Sometimes, Siran goes under water—I can see her desperate to speak quickly, familiarly, effortlessly, and to be understood. And, having spent much of my own life abroad, stunned by culture shock, I have surges of profound empathy. I remember the debilitation and inspiration of spending my days in Chinese. When I first arrived in China, at twenty-one, I could hardly speak, hear, or read, and I felt like I was forgetting who I was. In the years that followed, precisely because I lived abroad, I became a new version of myself—one who spoke some of each language, and a lot of the hybrid that grows out of knowing someone else's expressions and frameworks. Chinese are generous with time, praise, and conversation. Any foreigner who speaks even a shred of Chinese is a friend, encouraged to say and hear more. The interface between my Chinese friends and me took place most often in the elastic span between our languages and I began to rely on Chinese phrases to express what I thought and observed. I also honed my English into a more precise and useful tool, toward talking about a world that was wider than I'd imagined before zooming around it and living on the other side of the globe.

Siran at eleven is courageous, resilient. As soon as she's gone under, she quickly she returns to the surface, often squeezing her eyes shut as if she's gathering her strength (what my three-year-old calls "getting your brave on"), and then tackling the improbable idioms again. Like the Japanese ninja of her graphic novel, she takes on the "th's," the "l's," the "r's."

"Why does your name have to be 'Rachel?'" she asked me once, the tragic English "R" phoneme making it almost unpronounceable. She calls me "Laoshi" or teacher, instead.

When she encountered a new ELL student recently, he asked her (amazingly, thrillingly, coincidentally)

When I first arrived in China, at 21, I could hardly speak, hear, or read, and I felt like I was forgetting who I was. In the years that followed . . . I became a new version of myself.

"What sports do you like?" and she froze in the headlights of his gaze. "What sports do you like!" I repeated, nudging her. "You know this one."

"What sports do you like?" She parroted, and then, squeezing her eyes shut, she said, "I so like baseball —"

"Me too!" He interrupted.

"—and swimming." She finished, and waited for his response.

For Christmas, Siran wrote a book for my children, called *Foreign Girl in Chicago, Foreign Girls in Yuxi*. Yuxi is Siran's home town, and the book charts the courses of two parallel stories: Siran's actual life in Chicago, and an imaginary trip by my two little girls

to Siran's home in the south of China. In Chicago, Siran makes friends, watches TV with her aunt (hilariously, the page is covered with "ha ha ha ha ha's.") She visits the zoo and goes swimming. On their dream trip to Yuxi, for which Siran sometimes correctly uses future tense, Dalin and Light will swim in the river, hold hands with Siran, and "sightsee everything." They will learn to

speak Chinese to Siran's parents and the children of the village, eat with chopsticks, and describe to everyone their lives in Chicago. On the final page, the two worlds merge and wherever the three girls are, it snows. They tip their heads back and devour the world hungrily, together.

Right before Siran returned to China on New Years Day, it snowed for real for the first time this season. When I asked what she thought of the snow, she said, "It's Chicago!"

She didn't explain what she meant, but I know: oddly familiar and lovely even though it's strange and cold and new. Like a language. 🍷