

# Bringing Translation Skills to Everyday Learning

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## Hold Tight to Dreams

ANDY (SEVENTH GRADE)

Hold tight to dreams  
For if dreams go away,  
Life is a broken heart  
That stops.

Hold tight to dreams  
For when dreams fly away,  
Life goes fast  
Like a tornado.

This poem, an English to English translation of the well-known Langston Hughes poem “Dreams,” was completed by a seventh-grade student, Andy, halfway through the Poetry Inside Out pilot program at our New York City public school. The students had been focusing on translation skills in this part of the program, mainly translating poems from Spanish into English. This work gave a deeper sense of purpose to our use of dictionaries, thesauruses, and our analysis of parts of speech, and allowed our Spanish dominant students like Andy to finally feel like experts in the

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literacy classroom. The students gained confidence in their reading and writing skills and developed strategies for coping when they got stuck on unknown words. But we wanted to take this work to the next level and show students that translation is a part of their everyday lives. We wanted them to understand that the choices we make about word meanings can deeply affect our interpretation of other’s writing.

This was something we as teachers discovered firsthand as part of the PIO training professional we attended, when we tried to make a Spanish translation of Langston Hughes’ seemingly simple “Poem” which starts, “I loved my friend. / He went away from me.” We soon discovered that Hughes’ line “He went away from me” could be translated by one person as, “He left me,” and by another as “He died.” We were fascinated at how much thought went into selecting the right word to convey a particular meaning and wanted to bring this lesson into the classroom. To do so, we showed our students the two very different translations of “Poem” we had written, and then had them apply the translation skills they had learned to translate Langston Hughes’ “Dreams.”

We asked them to translate the poem from English to English, and then defend their choice of words to the class. As the students examined the poem and wrote their own versions of it, they began to recognize how the translation skills they were acquiring could be transferred into other realms of literacy as well, sharpening their skills as writers and as readers. Most importantly, they saw what a difference a word can make!