

ESL M01A: College Composition for ESL

Reading

In this class, we read the novel, [*A Dream Called Home*](#) by Reyna Grade.

Writing

Here is a sample of the kind of writing assignment you can expect in this class. If you can write this type of essay easily, go to the next higher class. Remember, you will have a tutor and teacher working with you.

ESL M01A Writing Prompt:

For this assignment, you will write a **4-page literacy narrative**. This means telling a story of how you learned to read, write, or communicate. You can write about an experience learning English or another language. Because this is a short essay, **I recommend that you focus on a SINGLE event that happened over a brief period of time**. Some sample topics include:

- any early memory about writing or reading that you recall vividly
- someone who taught you to read or write
- a book or other text that has been significant for you in some way
- a reading/writing-related event at school that was interesting, funny, or embarrassing
- a writing or reading task that you found (or still find) difficult or challenging
- a positive language learning experience
- the origins of your current attitudes about reading and/or writing
- learning the "language" of a new skill, hobby, or subject (e.g., learning and using the terminology of a new sport, technology, game, or specialized topic).

Student Model:

World of Immigrant, World of Silence

As an immigrant moving to the United States, it was very difficult to adapt to a new environment. My first feeling after migrating to the United States was that I was living in a new world. I needed to learn everything from the beginning. I was born again after I took off the plane. I felt like I was deaf. I couldn't understand people when they would speak to me, nor could I respond to them easily. My broken English put me in trouble and even caused my feelings to get hurt sometimes. This misery lasted approximately a year. A warm feeling like an immense wave which threw itself to hit the shore, filled my heart to talk and then stuck in my throat because I didn't know how to express my thoughts and feelings in English. I wanted to talk about people, events, problems, but could not say anything. The moment I would attempt to speak, people would stare at me and question what I was trying to communicate. Language is the key to unlocking a giant door to a culture and its

people. If this door does not open, the entire world will begin to resemble an enormous cage. My attempts in opening this door began with three words: yes, no, okay.

English is taught in Iran as a second language beginning in middle school. My grades in school were always high, and I never had any problem with learning and understanding English. I could understand about 60-70% of English movies easily. I was so optimistic when I got on the plane to come to the United States. I never thought it would be my major concern when I got here. The first American that I spoke to, was an African American woman in Dubai at airport security checkpoint. I was so nervous and excited for every new experience that I was going to have. I was observing everything with curiosity. Different people from different cultures were standing in lines, waiting to get on the airplane. At the security section, the officers had the most respect for US-citizens, and they could pass easily from a different line without hesitation. The second-long line was for everybody else without the dark blue awesome passport of the United States, "The Key to The World!" It was my turn. I took off my shoes and put them with my backpack in a basket. Then I followed them with my eyes until they disappeared. I passed the security and at the other side, a young black lady started to talk to me. I couldn't understand even one word of what she was trying to say, but I didn't want to look stupid either; so, I responded, "yes!" She looked at me cautiously and took me to another room while she was holding my possessions. Another security officer followed her inside the room, and they began to talk.

They swabbed a wet paper on my clothes and backpack and tested the paper in a machinery. I was breaking down. I could hear my heart beat. I was pushing my numb fingers into my cold hands. My main concern was how should I talk to them? I never felt devastated like that before. Me, without shoes, cold, scared, standing over there, wasn't the experience I was looking for. They removed everything out of my backpack and threw away my brand-new body lotion that I had just purchased the other day. I took a deep breath and cried, "It's just a lotion!" She looked at me without any sense of sympathy in her face and replied, "Excuse me?" I tried to stay calm and speak my best English. "It's just a lotion, it's brand new, I bought it yesterday," I cried while I was trying to convince her, but she didn't even understand one word of what I shouted. She whispered something else and gave me my backpack. The conversation didn't go anywhere because we didn't understand each other. I put on my shoes, took my backpack and left the room frustrated, while I was trying to not lose my self-confidence. This happened again and again for a whole year. Whenever I wanted to order food, I remembered the security lady's

face and then placing my order was a disaster. The poor guy was doing his best to understand what this alien that just arrived from another planet was trying to say, and most of the time I would get a wrong order. After a while, I figured out a way to expand my compact conversation with people. When they asked a question, I would randomly say yes or no, and if they got surprised of my response, I would change it immediately; or I would just shake my head and say, “okay” which means I completely understand what you’re saying when I didn’t.

The minimum benefit that this strategy had for me was that I could expand my conversation more slightly. I could at least feel that I had some kind of conversation to people. I still couldn’t open the door, but I could pull out the curtains and look outside of my silent world. It was such a great feeling to pretend to understand the dialogues. It helped to build my self-confidence, but I could also easily stick in a trap whenever someone was asking me a question that needed a specific answer, and I needed to explain my opinion or go through details.

I still feel the shame of what happened when I was pregnant, and my husband’s friend was trying to be courteous to me and make a conversation about the baby. She asked a question about the baby’s outfit and waited for my answer. She asked, “Show me his fancy outfits!” “Now I’m stuck! What the heck is the fancy outfit?”, I talked to myself. I squinted my eyes and shook my head slowly to the right and left. She tried to explain what outfit means by playing pantomime; She was looking at her blouse and pulling it to up and down ridiculously. It was clueless. She smiled at me and left the room. I was so squeezed in my heart that I can’t understand such an easy word; I couldn’t handle a two minutes conversation with somebody. I was stressed out every single time I wanted to speak. Talking is supposed to be joyful; obviously not for a bilingual person. “There must be a way,” I was thinking, “There must be a reason why I don’t have any progress in my English.” I thought about how excited I was when I wanted to move here and how everything started right after I talked to the security in the airport. I thought if the first one was somebody else maybe everything would be better than this; maybe I could talk like everybody else and understand everything. Suddenly I noticed the root of my language issues. I was scared. I tied the fear of the security to the speaking English, and my brain froze of this cold feeling right after that. I tried to overcome my fears, so I started to go out more and talk to people whenever I had a chance. I talked to our neighbors, people in the grocery store, bank, doctor’s office. I noticed when I tried to copy American accent, nobody understood. I tried to speak without any accent and surprisingly people understood me much better. I tried to listen to people carefully

when they were speaking together and began to memorize simple conversations. Most of the conversations during the day are repetitive. For instance, I used to go to Starbucks every morning to order coffee and egg bites. After usual greeting, the cashier would ask, "How can I help you?" Then I would say, "I want a coffee with sugar & cream," "what size?" "tall is fine," I would answer. The questions and answers are usually the same, and it's not hard at all to order the food if you prepare yourself for the questions they usually ask. My small world got more enormous every day. Eventually I overcame my fears.

Immigrant world, since day one, is full of words that never stated and conversations that never happened. It's really hard to live among people whose attitudes change as soon as they figure out your English is not perfect. I believe any bilingual who decided to move here, someday had to stand in front of a security guy and tried to be brave and powerful to break the walls and doors to the new culture. My journey started with three simple words; somebody may not even know one word. Bilingual people face different challenges every day in their lives, situations that are very easy for natives. Those raised in the United States with English being their primary language will never know the difficulty they will face standing at the airport security line and waiting their turn, wishing for a smooth welcome to the United States.

I believe that all doors will eventually open someday, but it requires tremendous effort and dedication to learn every single word and learn the rules of the new world. I would not be able to speak if I did not overcome my fears. Rather, I would be trapped in my silent world. The road is still very long, but at the end it is gratifying to experience a world full of familiar words and expressions. I am truly honored to have been given this opportunity and look forward to the challenges that lie ahead.