



## THE NEW AMERICANS



## You Have to Live in Somebody Else's Country to Understand

**Subject:** Language Arts

**Overview:** Alienation of newcomers is common, but it is not always recognized nor understood. It is challenging for immigrants to become accustomed to a new place and adjust to the novelty of everything around them, from language to social mores. Others need to make them feel welcome by applying empathy and compassion, and imagining themselves in the shoes of the new arrival.

**Standards:** This lesson addresses the following national content standards established at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>

### Objectives

Students will:

- Reflect on personal emotions associated with being an outsider
- Recognize newly-arrived Americans' feelings and experiences
- Empathize with new immigrants who encounter alienation and isolation living in a new land
- Analyze a poem about immigration

### Materials

- Chalk and chalkboard, or chart paper and markers
- The poem "You Have to Live in Somebody Else's Country to Understand"
- Homework assignment



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WELCOME  
TO THE UNITED STATES  
A PLACE WHERE  
EVERYONE BELONGS

## Procedure

*Preparation:* Invite an adult or student literate in a second language who will read the poem in his or her language to the class. Most students should not be familiar with the language. If there are several who do speak the language, it will offer interesting contrast to the majority's interaction with the reading.

1. Tell the class that a guest speaker has volunteered to read them the poem "You Have to Live in Somebody Else's Country to Understand," written in 1984 by Noy Chou, a ninth-grade student from a high school in suburban Boston who was born in Cambodia. Have the reader introduce him or herself in the second language. Expect students to express discomfort, surprise, confusion, etc.
2. Request that students close their eyes as they listen to the poem to remain free of distractions. Remind them to listen without talking. Invite the guest to read.
3. After the poem is read, instruct the guest to give students these instructions in the second language: "Please take out a piece of paper and complete this journal assignment in five minutes. Describe a time when you felt like an outsider, or when someone made judged you without knowing you and/or being aware of your circumstances."
4. Repeat the instructions in English, indicating that this is for the benefit of those who are non-native speakers of the guest's second language.
5. Ask students to describe their reactions during the first reading of the poem. Cluster student responses as they speak. Sample discussion questions include:
  - How did you feel when they did not understand the language?
  - What did you want to do when the reader begin to recite in a language with which you were unfamiliar?
  - Were you able to pick up on any aspect of the poem—cadence, emotion—despite not knowing the language?
  - For those who might have understood the language, how did the poem make you feel?
  - What was your thought about classmates who could not understand the poem? How might you have helped them?
  - How might the teacher and the reader have helped you to understand the poem?



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6. Have students review the clustered responses. Ask them to consider more broadly how the feelings they experienced relate to those of new immigrants. Based on this activity, what are some of the issues immigrants face when they arrive somewhere new? S/he might be feeling like an outsider?

If the guest has remained, students can engage in discussion with him or her about personal immigrant experiences, if the speaker is a foreign-born American.

7. Hand out copies of the poem in English. Have either the guest or you read it aloud or have students read it. Have students analyze and discuss the poem. Ask them to review it again to select phrases, lines, or passages that strike them. Ask students to write a corresponding personal experience that reflects the essence of the selected sections. Allow five to ten minutes for this activity. Invite students to share their thoughts.

8. Have students relate their experiences to those of immigrants. Some discussion questions include:

- What groups and individuals are treated like outsiders in America?
- What are the possible results or consequences when people feel like outsiders in their surroundings?
- What did you learn from this experience and the poem that might help you to better understand the feelings of outsiders in the future?
- How might you act differently toward someone when you recognize that s/he might be feeling like an outsider?

9. **Optional:** Distribute and explain the homework assignment.



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## Related Resources

### **Meet The New Americans**

Follow a diverse group of immigrants and refugees as they leave their home and families behind and learn what it means to be new Americans in the 21st century.

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/newamericans.html>

### **Mai's America**

A young Vietnamese girl leaves cosmopolitan Hanoi for a high school exchange program in rural Mississippi.

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2002/maisamerica/index.html>

### **Well-Founded Fear**

An interactive Web site that places the user inside the U.S. office of Immigration and Naturalization Services.

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov1999/wellfoundedfear/home.html>

### **Life 360: The Immigrant Experience**

View a slide show about Ellis Island, highlighted with facts and historical photographs.

<http://www.pbs.org/opb/life360/locations/immigrant/immigrant.htm>

### **The City/La Ciudad**

Presents four vignettes depicting the struggles of Latin American immigrants in New York City.

<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/thecity/index.html>

### **Taxi Dreams: Meet the Cabbies**

Follows the stories of five immigrants trying to make a living in New York City driving taxis.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/taxidreams/meet/index.html>

### **Becoming American: The Chinese Experience in America**

Bill Moyer's special explores this dramatic portion of America's history and confronts myths about the Chinese in America.

<http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/index.html>

### **Author**

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WELCOME  
TO THE UNITED STATES**“You Have to Live in Somebody Else’s Country to Understand”****by Noy Chou**

What is it like to be an outsider?

What is it like to sit in the class where everyone has blond hair and you have black hair?

What is it like when the teacher says, “Whoever wasn’t born here raise your hand.”

And you are the only one.

Then, when you raise your hand, everybody looks at you and makes fun of you.

You have to live in somebody else’s country to understand.

What is it like when the teacher treats you like you’ve been here all your life?

What is it like when the teacher speaks too fast and you are the only one who can’t understand what he or she is saying, and you try to tell him or her to slow down.

Then when you do, everybody says, “If you don’t understand, go to a lower class or get lost.”

You have to live in somebody else’s country to understand.

What is it like when you are an opposite?

When you wear the clothes of your country and they think you are crazy to wear these clothes and you think they are pretty.

You have to live in somebody else’s country to understand.

What is it like when you are always a loser.

What is it like when somebody bothers you when you do nothing to them?

You tell them to stop but they tell you that they didn’t do anything to you.

Then, when they keep doing it until you can’t stand it any longer, you go up to the teacher and tell him or her to tell them to stop bothering you.

They say that they didn’t do anything to bother you.

Then the teacher asks the person sitting next to you.

He says, “Yes, she didn’t do anything to her” and you have no witness to turn to.

So the teacher thinks you are a liar.

You have to live in somebody else’s country to understand.

What is it like when you try to talk and you don’t pronounce the words right?

They don’t understand you.

They laugh at you but you don’t know that they are laughing at you, and you start to laugh with them.

They say, “Are you crazy, laughing at yourself? Go get lost, girl.”

You have to live in somebody else’s country without a language to understand.

What is it like when you walk in the street and everybody turns around to look at you and you don’t know that they are looking at you.

Then, when you find out, you want to hide your face but you don’t know where to hide because they are everywhere.

You have to live in somebody else’s country to feel it.

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