

## Y

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The class I am working with has many newcomers, and many of them are still struggling with comprehending instructions in English. A girl called Y is shy, shuts down easily, and, according to her grade report from China, her academic performance in her home country was far from satisfactory. The first time I worked with her was in a small group. It would have been an easy lesson except for the fact that Y suddenly cried while I was asking a question. I panicked for a second but managed to get my cool back and asked her what was wrong in Chinese. She said, “I just felt like crying.” So, I sent her back, hoping that she could calm down, and I continued the lesson with the rest of the group. Later that day, I went back to check on her. Another girl, F, who witnessed the whole thing in the small group asked me, “Why did Y cry? Why does anyone want to cry at learning?” I did not know how to explain, so I told her that Y was tired and sometimes when people are tired, they cry. As I thought that this burning moment for me was over, another girl, S, who is also an immigrant student, overheard our conversation and said, half seriously and half banteringly, “Being in the U.S. is very tiring.” I was lost for words.

Since that day, I only work with Y one-on-one so that she can learn according to her pace. And much to my delight, Y is even now confident enough to say “go on, test me” in our own small group.

Immigrating to a new country, knowing nothing about the culture and the language, is never a choice that a child gets to make. The school, like many other schools, is on a busy and strict schedule—their day starts at eight and ends at two, with at least five subjects crammed into one day and teachers who are preoccupied with teaching, management, and administrative work. With all that, school can be a sink-or-swim situation for students like Y, especially because so many of their needs are yet unseen. These facts constantly remind me that I need to be in their shoes and stand with them to pass on my influence and grant more choices for their future.

Yingjie Li is an MA candidate in TESOL K-12 at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is currently student-teaching in an NYC public school located in a Chinese community. Yingjie was also an exchange student at Cairo University, Egypt, and an EFL instructor in China, teaching students of various backgrounds.