

## Building Community Literacies into the Classroom

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“¡Despierta! Llama a tu país de una manera diferente. / Wake up! Call your country in a different way.” I saw this on a two-sided flyer with one side in Spanish and the other in English in a computer repair store at Harding’s Place (see Figure 1). If I hadn’t read and discussed in our class about what great benefits community and transnational literacies can bring to the classroom, I wouldn’t have known that this flyer could be used as a significant resource for teaching in an ELL class.

According to Jiménez, Smith & Teague (2009), “including transnational and community literacies can help students learn about diversity in their communities and help English-language learners become more fully engaged in their literacy and content learning”. To gain a further understanding of transnational and community literacies, I, together with other three group members (Yang, Elizabeth and Laura) chose the Hispanic community in Nashville and investigated into this community. The main purpose of this paper is to present basic demographic information about Hispanic community in Nashville, discuss methods on how to help teachers build community literacies into the classroom, barriers I encountered to learning about the local community, and introduce further activities that can help teachers become more familiar with their local community.

Hispanics have become the fastest growing minority group in the United States. In Nashville, which experienced dramatic economic restructuring before Great Recession along with other cities like Atlanta and Charlotte, the Hispanic population grew by 424 percent between 1990 and 2000, and 78 percent between 2000 and 2007 (Nagle, Gustafson & Burd, 2012; Economic). Significant drivers of this trend include the “reorganization of a few key industries, a preference among some immigrants toward small-town living, and concurrent economic factors that were pushing immigrants away from traditional gateway states” (Nagle, Gustafson & Burd, 2012). Due to the limited education that many Hispanic immigrants in the community have received, Hispanic workers are restricted to only a few specific industries and occupations, many of which are seasonal, constraining their productivity in the workforce and their ability to acquire new skills (Nagle, Gustafson & Burd, 2012). Thus, Hispanic children are more likely to come from homes in poverty.

Social networks of Latinos in Nashville include Nashville Area Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (NAHCC), Hispanic Nashville, FUTURO and Conexión Américas, all of which serve the Hispanic population in terms of business, education, job opportunity and life development.

Bilingualism is one of the linguistic strengths of Hispanic community. However, many Hispanic children live in high linguistic isolation. According to Nagle, Gustafson & Burd (2012), “among children ages 5-9, 36 percent live in families in which there is nobody over the age of 13 who speaks English well. This rises to 44 percent among children age 0-4”.

During our field trip, we went along Nolensville Pike where there is a huge Hispanic community. We first drove to an international supermarket called K&S International with the whole class, collected and photographed some transnational and community literacies that came in a variety of types. Afterwards our group went to a computer repair store called CC Multiservicios located at 419 Harding Place and had conversations with the owner, Billy. Billy moved from Cuba to the United States 24 years ago with his wife, who now works on legal

issues for immigration. They have a three-year-old son who goes to an “English-only” school (personal communication, August 31, 2013).

As I observed the texts I collected, I found out that in K&S, most of the texts on the items are bilingual, and a large part of them are in Spanish. In CC Multiservicios, most of the texts are only in Spanish, including Billy’s name card (see Figure 2). I only saw English on the package of some imported electronic products like flash disks, USB adapter etc. And a flyer about making phone calls to customers’ home country was printed in both English and Spanish (see Figure 1). All these texts have different purposes or aim at different groups of Latinos. For example, we saw information about international money express and transfer to Mexico (see Figure 3), making international phone calls to Latin America (see Figure 4), computer repair and even some concerts of singers from Latin America (see Figure 5). Jiménez, Smith & Teague (2009) proposed that “by identifying, studying, and incorporating these texts, both teachers and students can learn more about the economic connections that bind ELLs and their families to their countries of origin and how these connections are maintained using written language”. Thus, ELL teachers, from my point of view, can do such field trips to their local community and collect artifacts or take photos of community literacies. Then teachers can bring these texts into the classroom and conduct some classroom activities with ELL students. According to Jiménez, Smith & Teague (2009), teachers can ask students to sort the samples into different categories (e.g. religion, business, education), and then instruct students in reading the texts and developing a general idea in each domain. In this way, both teachers and students become more familiar with students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as students’ social, economic and political lived realities (Jiménez, Smith & Teague, 2009).

When I was looking at the two-sided flyer of making international phone calls in both English and Spanish (see Figure 1), a recommended activity – translation in Jimenez, Smith, Teague’s article came into my mind. This flyer is a good example of bilingual texts because not only is the English translation accurate and informative, but it also sounds appropriate. However, other texts we collected, as mentioned, are only in Spanish. Teachers can launch a translation project in the classroom by dividing students into cooperative groups and assigning each group a translation task (Jiménez, Smith & Teague, 2009). In this group translation activity, students are asked not only to pay attention to the accurate meaning, but also to consider whether an idiomatic expression in Spanish is also idiomatic in English, and if not, they have to think of other alternatives to replace this expression to make the translation both accurate and “sounds best” (Jiménez, Smith & Teague, 2009). Sometimes students can also turn to family members for assistance. As Billy mentioned, he and his wife speak Spanish at home, but his cousin speaks English (personal communication, August 31, 2013). Since families serve as “resources for their children, both on individual projects and in whole-class learning” (Allen, 2007), whenever Billy’s son confronts difficulties in the translation project, he can ask his uncle for help since he is a good resource of the English language and can be beneficial to Billy’s son’s individual learning, as well as contribute to learning of the whole class. In the translation process, linguistic and cultural issues such as consideration of word choice, idiomatic expressions, cultural values involved in the interpretation and presentation of ideas arise, increasing students’ abilities to appreciate language diversity and their metalinguistic understandings of two or more languages (Jiménez, Smith & Teague, 2009).

Since “young people growing up in immigrant families are likely to be familiar with and already engaging at certain levels with some of the literacies and practices” (Jiménez, Smith & Teague, 2009), the grouping can be based on students’ prior knowledge and their family funds of

knowledge. From the interview with Billy, we knew that his family's occupation mainly focuses on computer and technical services and legal issues (personal communication, August 31, 2013). Teachers can put children who come from families of the same or similar occupation into the same group. For example, Billy's son can be arranged in a group where the children's family is occupied either in technical field or in legal field. The classroom can make great use of family funds of knowledge in this way. "All families have important experiences, skills, and bodies of knowledge – 'funds of knowledge'... They are also resources for their children that the teacher can tap into" (Allen, 2007). In Billy's son's class, he can introduce technical terms both in English and Spanish and bring some knowledge about computers to the class under the help of his family.

In the process of learning about the Hispanic community in Nashville, I encountered some barriers and obstacles. Even though Billy has been living in the United States for 24 years, it is still a problem for him to communicate fully in English (personal communication, August 31, 2013). As we interviewed him, he could only understand some of the questions we asked and answered with short English sentences. Since the rest of our group members have, if any, very limited knowledge of Spanish, most of the time our group needed Laura as our English-Spanish interpreter who asked Billy our questions in Spanish and translated his answers into English. Having someone interpret the conversations is a solution, which, however, cannot always convey accurate and direct messages. Another good way is that teachers can try to learn the language most people speak in their local community. Apart from language and communicative barriers, which questions we should ask and which not can also be a headache. We didn't know what kind of people we would be interviewing, so when it was time for us to ask questions, we doubted if the questions we asked were representative enough. Therefore, preparation work is important. It would have been better if we had done some research about the community in advance, selected people we would like to interview, and tailored the questions we are going to ask.

In order to become more familiar with their local communities, teachers can have informal two-way conversations by visiting students' households on a regular basis. Writing E-mails or letters are also necessary methods. Teachers can also have a "tell me about your child" session with the parents to know more about each child in different aspects in their families (Allen, 2007). Moreover, teachers can initiate a "Family Stories" project, making students share their family stories with the class, having the class know more about each family's heritage and help students create family keepsakes with their families (Allen, 2007). For example, our interviewee Billy said when he first came to the United States, he found everything so different from that in Cuba and it was hard to get his message across (personal communication, August 31, 2013). In Billy's son's classroom, the teacher can ask him to tell the immigration stories of his family and create time lines and family trees by interviewing his family member (Allen, 2007). In this way, not only the teacher, but also the whole class becomes more familiar with the household of each student, and students can learn about each other.

## References

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Figure 2

**CC MULTISERVICIOS**

- REPARACION, INSTALACION, VENTAS DE PC'S Y ACCESORIOS, DISEÑO WEB SITE... CARTAS, APOSTILLES, TRADUCCIONES, IMPUESTOS, W-7, PLACAS, RENOVACION TPS, SALES TAX, LICENCIA DE NEGOCIO, SS4 Y MUCHO MAS...

Billy y Yolanda Castro le atienden:  
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Figure 3

**ENVÍOS A MÉXICO - SENDS TO MEXICO**

**1202 Servicio 10 minutos**  
 10-Minute Service

**1 Reciba en Cualquier Lugar**  
 Available at Any of These Locations

**Lugar de Recibo**  
 Receive Locations

WAL-MART	BODEGA AURRERA	BODEGA AURRERA
Superama	Suburbia	GIGANTE
Coppel	Bodega GIGANTE	Super G
bonsefi	Balsas	BANORTE
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