

Employing Community Literacies to Classroom Teaching: Inspirations from Chinese Community Literacies

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Many immigrants coming to the U.S. experience a stage of language shift: the change from the use of other language to the use of another language (de Jong, p. 28). Unfortunately, not all of them have a smooth language transition. “In 2000, Nashville’s foreign-born residents comprised 7% of Nashville’s total population of some 570,000 residents. Roughly one-third of Nashville’s foreign-born residents, especially those who are ages 18-64, were what the U.S. Census termed “linguistically isolated”—they lived in households where no member over the age of 14 spoke English very well.”(Immigrant Community Assessment, p.184).

Though NELBs (non-English language background) encounter language barriers adjusting to the new environment, they are exposed to many forms of written assistance that can help them overcome the difficulties. The Vanderbilt University Chinese Students and Scholars Association (VUCSSA) issues regular bilingual newsletters available to all the Chinese immigrants, scholars and students. This is referred as “community literacies”: the written language practices of people who are involved in activities that span national boundaries (Jimenez, Smith & Teague, 2009). I believe community literacy practices can be helpful for teaching. This paper investigates the Chinese community literacies in Nashville and provides possible ways of incorporating English-language learners’ (ELLs) funds of cultural knowledge into language learning.

Inspirations from Chinese Community Literacies

This study is based on the field trip to Chinese immigrant community in the Greater Nashville Area in the state of Tennessee. “Nashville as one of the U.S interior cities has begun to attract scholarly attention and become a new site for immigration studies.” (Wang, p. 9). More and more Chinese choose Nashville as their working or living place “with its low cost of living, plentiful jobs and safe streets” (Immigrants Thrive). “Middle Tennessee’s Chinese population is estimated to be 10,000 and growing.” (Nashville’s Voices of China). Most of the Chinese residents in Greater Nashville Areas are businessmen, technical workers and scholars working at institutes of higher learning. The Mandarin Chinese they speak, for some people Cantonese, can be an advantage if they seek jobs in bilingual settings, such as the international business.

But Chinese immigrants’ life in Nashville is not always a happy story. “Most of the time I watch Chinese TV programs and read Chinese websites.” says Yu Sun, a 29-year-old Chinese programmer who has been working for a software company in Nashville, Tennessee for more than one year. Even though he worked in Seattle in 2011, now he still finds it difficult to understand English and communicate effectively with Americans. But he explained that he gets many help from the Chinese community and things are getting better now. Like Yu Sun, many other Chinese immigrants are receiving guidance to help them integrate into the new environment in many ways. Some advertisements and Chinese-sponsored newspapers are in Chinese and English. The bilingual postings on the mailing list platform that VUCSSA operates enable newcomers to transit to a new place smoothly.

Community literacy practices that Chinese immigrants get benefit from can be helpful resources for teaching practitioners. They can employ transnational and community literacies in

schools to provide a way for students from a variety of backgrounds to learn more about one another (Jimenez et al., 2009). For instance, the upcoming Chinese Moon Festival is an important time for Chinese family reunion. The VUCSSA is planning a celebration gala for all the Chinese in Nashville. The poster and ticket are in Chinese and English (Figure 3 and 4). This artifact can inspire students to design tickets or invitation letters and invite others to celebrate their unique festivals. During this process, ELLs can practice English writing, be confident of their own culture and get to know other cultures at the same time.

During the field trip to the K&S world market, from some of the artifacts we collected (see Figure 1 and 2), we could notice that the English-Chinese bilingual ads are in traditional Chinese characters that mainly used in the far southern part of China instead of the simplified ones used in North China. These are two sets of writing systems existing in China now. Since most of the Chinese living in Nashville are from southern China, we are more likely to see the artifacts in traditional Chinese. If I have the artifacts on hand, I would probably use them as a lead-in and encourage students to dig out the varieties of character or language in their native culture. If possible, they can introduce the varieties in their culture to the class. Later, I can add that just like every other language, English has its own varieties both in spelling and speaking. That's why some English words have two ways of spelling, like color and colour. This can help students strengthen their cultural identity and capitalize on their prior knowledge to facilitate English study.

"The key was knowing the children's family cultures through ongoing, meaningful involvement in their communities in order that students' real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the official curriculum." (Allen, 2007) During my field trip, I notice that some artifacts contain the Chinese word "龙" (translated as Dragon in English). Some have "龙" for restaurant's name (see Figure 5). We can also see a figure of dragon in Fannie Mae Dees (Dragon) Park located on corner of Blakemore and 24th Avenue in Nashville. Actually, Dragon is the totem in Chinese culture. Through this scenario, if I were the teacher of ELLs in this community, I would probably encourage students to investigate into the totem in their native culture or give a presentation.

Collecting and discussing the artifacts brings in additional benefits because integrating community literacies into the instruction can "help teachers better understand their ELLs and foster meaningful relationships with and among students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds." (Jimenez et al. 2009) ELLs from Japan will find Japanese characters in Chinese-English bilingual artifacts because some Japanese words were introduced from ancient China. This connection in characters may draw Chinese and Japanese learners closer when they find they are linked somehow in their cultures.

Community literacy can be used as an avenue for teachers to become familiar with the local community. Collecting artifacts impels teachers to dwell into another culture's history and values either consciously or unconsciously. There are also plenty of chances that teachers learn directly from students from a specific cultural background.

While drawing on community literacies engages students, it is not always easy to do. Sometimes, people in certain community are unwilling to tell their family history, values and beliefs. When I tried to conduct an interview with a prestigious Chinese priest in one of the many Chinese Baptist churches in Nashville, he politely refused my request. Maybe the topic reminded him of some unhappy memories when he first came here. Or maybe he was not sure if what he felt and learned was representative for the Chinese community. I asked him if any other people

in the church would like to be interviewed, he recommended me to call Yu, the young man mentioned in the very first beginning.

From my experience, if I encounter alike barriers to learning about the local community from certain person, I could always turn to other people for help through his or her social network. If I intend to identify local literacies, most important of all, I should be willing to know and be respectful of a different culture. Online resources and students' background knowledge are always fountains to unravel my puzzles. If I cannot speak or understand students' native language, I can always bring bilingual helpers, either my friends or colleagues. Also, I can get involved in the various community activities to gain hands-on experience. For example, I can help with the community fund-raising campaign or celebrate traditional festivals together with students.

In conclusion, community literacy project acquaints teaching practitioners with diverse cultures that ELLs grow up with. A deep understanding of students' cultural background and religious life will empower me to satisfy students' needs through tailored lesson plans. Once I get to know what's important to students and give them things that interest them, I can enliven my classes by means of varied culture relevant activities to achieve the maximal teaching effect.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Rent Ad in English and Chinese



Figure 2. Painted Ad on the Wall of K&S World Market



Figure 3. Moon Festival Poster



Figure 4. Moon Festival Gala Tickets



Figure 5. Chinese Restaurant Having Dragon in Its Name

