

COMMUNITY LITERACY

Research on Community Literacies and  
Pedagogical Implications for Teachers

Li, Dongxin

Vanderbilt University, Peabody College

## 1. Introduction

By visiting several local places serving different cultural communities, this research will mainly focus on community literacies in Casa Azafrán combined with literacies in some other communities in Nashville to explore how community literacies have been actually utilized to help immigrants and English Language Learners to deal with their language and social problems in America.

Casa Azafrán is a collective community center including nine non-profit resident partners (Figure 1), which aims to provide opportunities and assistance for immigrants and non-native residents, ranging from financial, legal services to cultural and educational activities, especially for Latinos who speak Spanish as their first language. For example, they would help immigrants who do not have social security numbers pay for taxes or buy new houses, give some advice on starting new businesses, and also provide after-class activities for children who speak English as a second language. Each week, they have activities of different themes to provide further help for participants.

**Figure 1. Resident Partners**



**Figure 2. Services provided**



We also visited several international supermarkets, such as K&S World Market, Patel Brothers, Fresh&fresh International Market, etc. In these places we collected a set of literary artifacts of different items reflecting different cultures, which could be utilized in language teaching.

## 2. Collection of community literacies

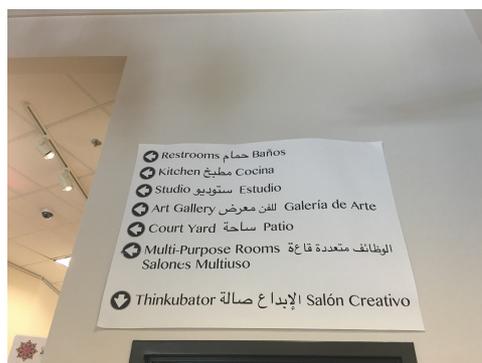
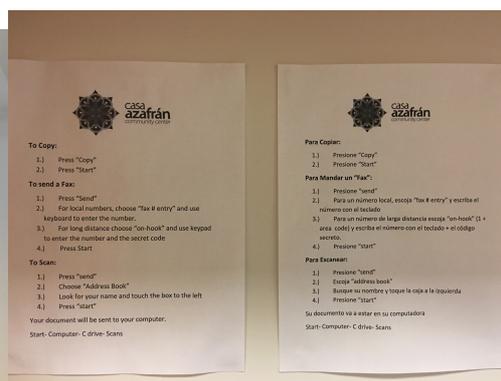
During our visiting, the receptionist of Casa Azafrán introduced that the interior of this center is intentionally arranged. For example, all office rooms have glass walls and doors instead of non-transparent ones, so people can see all employees at any time when they are working. This kind of arrangement has well reflected the theme of openness and transparency in this center. As shown by Figure 3 and Figure 4, decorations in this center also have cultural flavors, which would be culturally responsive for kids. In order to serve people speaking different languages, nearly all signs or instructions are printed or written not only in English but also in Spanish or Arabic (Figure 5 & Figure 6).

**Figure 3 Cultural Decorations**



**Figure 4. Introduction of the Decoration**



**Figure 5 Multilingual Sign****Figure 6 Instruction of printer**

### 3. Pedagogical Implications for Teachers

Community literacies are helpful in language teaching as “the act of embracing and implementing transnational and community literacies is one way for teachers to begin to build productive relationships with students who are English-language learners (ELLs)” (Jeménez, Smith & Teague, 2009, p16). By connecting community literacies we collected in our short field trips to theories and concepts in academic texts, we have summarized pedagogical implications from the following three perspectives.

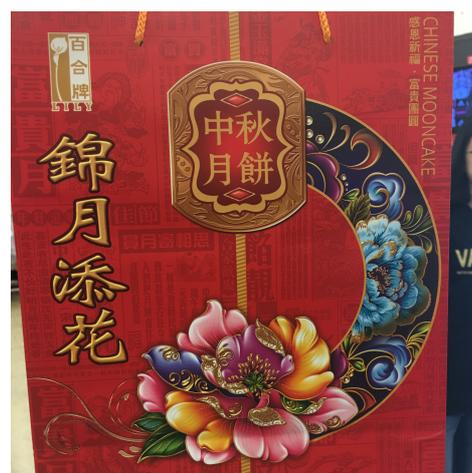
First, teachers can make use of their funds of knowledge as well in order to connect families to communities. Funds of knowledge refers to knowledge and skills accumulated for household and individual well-being (Moll, et. al, 1992). Therefore, people’s funds of knowledge can be developed by and sometimes have some overlaps with community literacies. For example, lots of families of immigrants may seek help from partners in Casa Azafrán to deal with social or living problems encountered, like paying taxes, buying new houses and starting new businesses. Funds of knowledge could also be accumulated in these social interactions. For example, in our short

visiting to an Indian supermarket called Patel Brothers, there are some religious products on the shelves. In K&S World Market, we also found mooncakes sold for the celebration of Mid-autumn Day in China. Teachers can make use of these community literacies by allowing students from India or China to introduce their specific culture behind these products. To be specific, students from India may introduce how these religious products are used in their rituals. Chinese students can tell other students the process of making mooncakes and the origin of this custom. These sharing activities will require their funds of knowledge while also transmitting their own community literacies at the same time.

**Figure 7 Religious products**



**Figure 8 Mooncakes**



Second, family literacies and out-of-school activities can be combined with community literacies as well. Since a cultural community often consists of families

sharing similar cultural backgrounds, sharing the same religion, or speaking the same language, the development of community literacies is not without the help of family literacies including family culture, value and experience. For instance, as shown in Figure 9, Casa Azafrán has a story-telling workshop which provides immigrants opportunities to share their own stories. Teachers can participate in this kind of workshop in order to know more about their students' experience. The same form of activity can also be used in classrooms. Students are encouraged to tell their family stories instead of their own stories, which will not only help teachers know more about students' family history but also will give students opportunities to explore more knowledge about their families and ancestors.

**Figure 9 Workshops in Casa Azafrán**



Last but not least, since most people live in specific communities, community literacies will have impact on the development of the identity of a person. Especially for children, their identities are developed through their interactions with adults and

---

peers (De Jong, 2011). As a result, the involvement of community literacies in language teaching will help students of different cultural backgrounds have a sense of belonging and strengthen recognitions of their own identities. While some students actively choose to learn a second language (circumstantial bilingualism) (Valdés & Figueroa, 1996), for a number of students, learning a foreign language is a necessity for survival rather than a choice (elective bilingualism) (De Mejia, 2002). Hence, it is even more important for teachers to pay attention to those who learn a second language due to survival reasons. Including community literacies in classes not only can arouse their interest but also help them make more progress in using a second language to communicate with others in their daily life, which will be beneficial for them to adapt to their new life in a brand new environment.

### **Conclusion**

In this research, we have introduced different communities we have visited and reviewed typical community literacy we collected. Based on Jeménez's research on transnational and community literacy, we identified pedagogical implications of community literacy teaching from three perspectives. First, community literacy can be connected with families' funds of knowledge. Students' funds of knowledge can be accumulated while involving community literacy in their language studies. Second, family literacy can be combined with community literacy as well, in that communities often consist of bounds of families. Finally, students' development of identity and starting point of learning a second language should be valued. The involvement of literacies of their own community will assist them to build up their confidence and

interest in learning a foreign language.

## References

- Casaazafran.org. *About Casa Azafrán*. Retrieved from: <http://www.casaazafran.org/aboutcasa-azafran/>
- De Jong, E. J. (2011). *Foundations for Multilingualism in Education*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing.
- De Mejia, A. M. (2002). *Power, prestige, and bilingualism: International perspectives on elite bilingual education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Jeménez, R. T., Smith, P. H., & Teague, B. L. (2009). Transnational and community literacies for teachers. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 53(1), 16-26.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Stewart, M. A. (2014). Social networking, workplace, and entertainment literacies: the out-of-school literate lives of newcomer adolescent immigrants. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 53(4), 347-371
- Valdés, G., & Figueroa, R. A. (1996). *Bilingualism and testing: A special case of bias*. Norwood: Ablex.