

IVESTIGATE SCHOOLS

Experience Paper of Investigating School

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I. Introduction

The program I investigating is the Belmont International English courses in Belmont United Methodist Church. Belmont International English is one of the Belmont ESL programs serving moderately advanced to advanced adult English language learners (ELLs). English classes for beginners and intermediate ELLs are also provided, and students of the International English program could transfer to lower level classes if they find contents are too difficult for them. Usually, classes meet on each week's Tuesday and Thursday from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm. Mr. Jones, the director of Belmont ESL program and also teacher of International English program, tells me that he always plays some classic music before classes in order to keep students from anxiety. Snacks and free coffee are also available to all students. As for contents of classes, Oral communication has been put in the first place in classes, with which grammar, literature, and American civilization are also involved in teaching process. Teaching materials would be uploaded through Internet in advance so that all students have easy access to teaching texts and literary works for free. Mr. Jones not only makes use of paper handouts containing articles and practices used in class, but also leverages videos to assist students have deeper understanding and comprehension of specific chapter of masterpiece. To make students feel relaxed, Mr. Jones may ask a student to lead others in some setting-up exercises during the break. Another important part of the class is group discussions led by some Native American volunteers. Everyone at the same table will share or present a

specific article or news they found interesting to other group members, and discuss concerning topics as well. Apart from teaching English, Mr. Jones would also provide students with source of information regarding their daily life. In terms of the student population, there are always no more than 30 students in each day's class. Students are from different countries including China, Japan, Korea, Afghanistan, Peru, Turkey, Italy, Iran, etc. Women account for approximately 75% of the amount of students in class, while men merely hold about 25%. Most students are learning English for better adaption to life in America. For example, in my interviews with two Japanese women, both of them come to Nashville because their husbands are working here. A Chinese woman also tells me that she plans to apply for a doctoral degree but her TOEFL score is unsatisfactory. As many students in this program are middle-aged adults with clear purpose of learning English, pedagogies used in such classes are to some extent different from those used toward children and teenagers.

II. How ELLs are served in classroom

Before we discuss how ELLs are served in this program, one of the most important things we have to figure out is the motivation of these learners. To be more specific, it is essential for the teacher to know what aspects they are eager to get improved, and then we can readily find out the correlation between students' goals and teacher's pedagogy. I interviewed some students during my class observations. As mentioned before, some of them come to America because their spouses have jobs in America. Some students want

to live a better life or earn their children a better life, like a mother from Peru who has two children, and she hopes her children can obtain better education in the US. Additionally, a few students have their own academic pursuits like apply for an extra master degree or doctoral degree. Therefore, for majority of students in this program, bilingualism achieved by these students tend to be referred to circumstantial bilingualism rather than elective bilingualism in that learning English is not a choice but a necessity for survival and entering the mainstream American society (De Jong, 2011, P29). It is obvious that the communicative competence should be put in the first place, which is also consistent with Mr. Jones teaching philosophy, because without proficient communicative skill people will encounter problems nearly everywhere, let alone seeking a job or pursuing further education. During my visits, Mr. Jones has mentioned more than once that he would like to give students opportunities to talk as many as possible, and he also contains that pronunciation is much more important than grammar, because it might not hinder other people from understanding the meaning of one's utterances with a few grammatical mistakes, but it would be hard to be understood with poor pronunciation. So he makes name sticks to ensure that he will call every student stand up to answer questions. Group discussions are universal in classes as well. For instance, they would work out the correct answer of grammatical exercises together by discussing which word or what kind of form of the word is appropriate to fill the blank. Once, students were given some cartoons with implied meaning of each one (see Appendix). Then they were

asked to discuss the connotation of each cartoon. This way of teaching is pretty inspiring since students can not only get opportunity to talk in English, but also could have the access to American culture and then fill up the gap between English proficiency and cultural immersion.

As students participate in this program actively not passively, a question has recurred to me that whether the principle of promoting additive bi/multilingualism is supposed to be advocated in such classes (De Jong, 2011)? One thing is clear that students in this program are quite proficient in their own native languages, and they have urgent desires to learn improve their English in this program. Mr. Jones also told me that this program is more likely to be monolingual rather than advocating multilingualism. Except for basic communicative skills, immersion of American culture is also beneficial for these people to assimilate into American society as fast as possible. Therefore, students are asked to read masterpieces like *The Call of the Wild* and *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and Mr. Jones will lead discussions on the understanding of them. As De Jong pointed that a formal bilingual education program may not necessarily support all settings, especially those with multilingual populations (2011). The International English program is such a setting with multilingual populations. Therefore, implementation of bi/multilingual education may not be the best way to support students' development of bilingual repertoires in this program. Because teacher may encounter a big problem that whatever bi/multilingual pedagogy they take could not best satisfy students with so

various languages spoken and so different cultural backgrounds.

Since many different researchers explored the importance of social identity and how to affirm it (De Jong, 2011; Norton, 1995; Cummins, et. al, 2015), it is also worth making an inquiry on how the teacher helps students affirm and leverage their social identities to achieve their goals in learning English. De Jong definition of affirming identity is to validate students' cultural experiences in classroom practices and to create spaces for diverse student voices (De Jong, 2011, p184). From this perspective, the International English program makes some efforts in allowing different voices of students with different cultural background, especially in group discussions that require each student do a presentation to others. In Norton's research, immigrant women play different roles at the same time like they may be daughters to their parents, mothers to their children, and also employees to their employers (1995). In the International English program, the amount of female students is larger than males, and they are learning English for different motivation as well. Some women are playing roles of wives and trying to adapt to new life here. Some women are mothers of children and they want to help their children live a better life. There are also female students who are going to pursue further education. Different motivations they have, but their ultimate goals are, to some extent alike, to achieve better English language proficiency.

III. Recommendations to local school

The first recommendation I would give to the International English program in BMC is that teaching contents should be more practical to meet students' needs. In my interviews with two Japanese women, they all expressed their longing for learning more daily expressions in English. Grammatical exercises involved in classes are helpful but not effective enough. Reading masterpieces like *The Call of the Wild* and *To Kill a Mocking Bird* would improve their reading skills, but the contents maybe too abstruse for some learners. Thus, using reading materials like articles selected from *New York Times*, *The Washington Post* would be more related to current issues and also improve their understanding of English language.

Second, culturally responsive pedagogy could be made good use of in such classroom because cultural elements are so plentiful with students from various cultural backgrounds. One thing is clear based on above statement is that these students aim to improve their communicative competence. However, it is inevitable for students to talk about distinct culture and traditions with others. Hence, the involvement of such cultural sharing will not only arouse students' motivation, but also show respect to different culture. For example, when talking about festivals like Halloween, Thanksgiving's day, and Christmas, students from other countries can talk about some different festivals celebrated in their own country.

Last but not least, use of written words for reflection and analysis could also be helpful. It is a crucial component of classroom-based social research (CBSR), which has been came up with by Norton. She also pointed out that ‘writing can build bridges not only across geographic space but across historical time’ (Norton, 1995, p26). Students in this program also lack of writing practices both in and after classes. Therefore, containing more writing tasks will assist them to acquire more comprehensive English language competence as well.

References

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Appendix



Figure.1 Handout of cartoons used in class