

Investigation into the connection between community literacy and ELL teaching

--based on field trip and interview

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Last week during our field trip to collect community literacy and artifacts for ELL teachers' research for future classroom teaching, a young Chinese shop assistant in her twenties at K&S World Market told me "I barely understand English and is still learning it with the help of community. However, I could manage my life well now, like shopping and socializing etc." This one snippet of the conversation between us made me ponders over a couple of questions, as a future ELL teacher, what are those community help refers to specifically? How those community resources help her, how could I apply them in my future class? Bearing these questions in mind, I can't help thinking about conducting a thorough and detailed investigation on finding out how the community literacy be helpful for ELL teachers and their possible applications for my future classroom teaching and students' learning the new literacy.

Based on the data provided by Tennessee Newspaper (Chinese Edition, see figure 1), there are over 3.000 Chinese living in Nashville including about 625 students and scholars studying at Vanderbilt University (Annual Report provided by ISSS office of Vanderbilt University, see figure 2). The Chinese community that I will focus on is mainly composed of faculties, students and visiting scholars at Vanderbilt University. Speaking of their economic backgrounds, one of the visiting scholars named Cao Hailong told me that the average salary for faculty members here is about 50,000-70,000 dollars, which fall into the category of middle class defined by Wikipedia (see figure 3). While most Chinese students are financially supported by their parents back in China, except PHD students, they have scholarship and stipend. I have interviewed 16 master students and 4 Phd students, they all told me they are from middle class, maybe some students are not. But I do not have time to interview everyone, the conversations I had with them informed me that all of them are from middle-class.

The major social networks for such a large community include two social groups and one students' organization. The Belmont United Methodist Church and Chinese Baptist church, the people in charge of these two churches will have campus fellowship to gather Chinese students and scholars around to preach the Christian belief, teach English and culture, do Bible studies and offer free supper on weekend, students will get together to meet new friends and communicate with each other. The students I have talked to told me this kind of activity is meaningful and fun for them, they can learn English, religion and culture which familiarize them with the new culture. I think this is the community help the young lady in K&S World Market refer to. Another major social network group is the Chinese students and scholars' Association of Vanderbilt University run by Chinese students themselves. This organization is supported financially by Vanderbilt University and sometimes will receive donations from Chinese immigrants' community. They have been playing a more and more important role in the Chinese students' academic and daily lives, every year they will organize volunteers in the organization to pick up new Chinese students from the Nashville airport for free and offer them orientation to

help them adapt to new environment faster, like the registration form for pick-up service (see figure 4). They hold parties as well as various kinds of activities to get Chinese students together to have chance to know each other and have fun, for instance, the email Chinese students Barbecue (see attachment 1), the advertising flyer for the upcoming mid-autumn festival (see attachment 1), meanwhile, they have their own newsletter to keep the students and scholars posted about the activities and news update about the community and Nashville. This social network will be a precious resource for ELL teachers. They can resort to when they try to get to know the Chinese students' community. This organization could also provide various kinds of community literacy and background information for students.

The Chinese community in Vanderbilt shares the same language, which is mandarin Chinese; albeit many have their own dialects, since speaking mandarin to each other and make themselves understood. As for the cultural backgrounds, the most majority of Chinese students hail from mainland China, so the shared language and cultural background made the community more communicative and cohesive, one time, a female Chinese Vanderbilt students was lost somewhere, the whole Chinese was searching for her, in addition, the whole community basically share the same goal which is the pursuit of different degree and improvement of academic studies and research capabilities, hence the students' quest for the more effective and creative teaching methods from ELL teachers seem more meaningful and pressing.

Given aforementioned situations plus allegedly most ELL teachers will have no or vague idea of the ELL students with different cultures and backgrounds, the transnational community literacy can assist teachers familiarize with the ELLs' cultural and linguistic background to facilitate teaching and communication with students (Jimenez, Smith &Teague, 2009). The incorporation of transnational literacy could help students as well as teachers learn about diverse compositions of their community. Therefore, as ELL teachers, it is of considerable importance to pay a visit to the Chinese community to be familiar with the culture, customs, foods and festivals on regular basis; like collect some bilingual community products, take part in the celebratory events of traditional Chinese festivals or learn to cook some Chinese food, it not only enriches the teachers knowledge about Chinese culture and language, it also make ELL students feel comfortable and confident in class if teachers could talked about the Chinese culture and festivals with American students or students with other backgrounds, praise and admire the richness and greatness of the Chinese culture. It would definitely make Chinese students feel being recognized and it can also strengthen students-teachers' relationship, in turn, this productive relationship could make Chinese students more willing and eager to learn and blend in. This is what some prominent education experts (Jimenez, Smith &Teague, 2009) have been proposed that 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).

Speaking of the transnational community literacy, Multilingualism or bilingualism, defined as the ability to engage in multiple languages and cultural norms become pronounced, and is tied first and foremost to acknowledging and respecting the multilingual realities of a child's life (Dejong, 2009). After teachers have familiarized ourselves with the Chinese community and its culture, established a fruitful and interactive relations with students, I have found that one of the effective ways to engage ELL learners to new literacy is to figure out an efficacious approach to expose Chinese ELL students to the bilingual community literacy cautiously and respectfully, on

one hand, to make them feel comfortable and less intimidated when they try to learn the new literacy, on the other, allow them adopting their own strategies to learn the new literacy at their own pace. For instance, I would let ELL students to sort out the community literacy (see figure 5) I collected and compile them into a bilingual or trilingual travel guide or pamphlet, incorporating various kinds of practical and useful information for shopping, paying bills, English studies, church-going etc, then teachers could let students distribute these tour guides to ELL classmates and their own community whose English ability are still limited and are adjusting to the new community, I think this bilingual travel guide could help ELL students even their family or friends learn English and adapt to the new community with the help of their own language, and help them familiarize with the new culture and life style in the community, at the same time finding their English language are also being used for real purpose which will give them more motivation to do that.

Just as Moll, Neff & Gonzalez (1992) mentioned that teachers could leverage their greater understanding of the knowledge and skills found in their students' homes and communities to improve the learning process in the classroom (Moll, Neff & Gonzalez 1992). It made a lot of sense to me, since ELL teachers could pay a visit to Chinese students' families or participate in their family gatherings or even become friends with family members so that the teachers could have a better understanding of the students cultural and language background, then teachers could incorporate the culturally-relevant information into the classroom teaching and made the engagement to new literacy interesting and relatable to the children. Besides that, Townsend and Fu's (1998) research on a Chinese boy's joyful initiation into American literacy, have identified three dimensions which are crucial for ELLs' achievement of new literacy: freedom, purpose and support, which teachers should be aware of these important points when teaching in ELL class, make sure to give students freedom of time, decision, learning pace to initiate with the new literacy, meanwhile, keep the language real to daily life usage and offer support when students in need of respect and recognition. These valid opinions of the researchers are all very effective and important methods for us to learn from.

From the literature and classroom investigation, I know that community literacy could be of tremendous help for teachers to promote culturally-relevant learning environment, however, during my investigation, I have encountered many barriers and obstacles, they were asking the wrong questions, looking like an FBI agent investigating crimes, and sometimes got distracted easily and not really focusing on the interviewees' community and the real purpose of my field trip, knowing about how to avoid barriers can better help teacher do a community literacy investigation. In the future community investigation, I would keep three things in mind, first, be respectful and aware of the cultural difference, ask permission before I take photos or conduct an interview. Second, prepare the questions before the interview and be focused on the field trip purpose, last but not least, do my homework on my field trip and figure out the specific community that I will be doing research on, meanwhile, seek help from the government or parties concerned for obtaining information for exploring the effective teaching methods.

In conclusion, being conscious of ELL students could become more engaged in language, literacy and content learning (Jimenez, Smith & Teague, 2009), through the filed a trip, it really broaden my views on how to be an effective ELL teachers. It's integral for ELL teachers to use the community literacy as a medium for me to be familiar with the ELL students' culture and community, apply it as an effective tool for future ELL class. Meanwhile, being respectful and

modest to their family and try to involve their parents in our teaching and students' learning, make the teaching as an interactive and communicative learning process, not just for students and their families, but also for ELL teachers' professional skills and research capabilities.

Reference

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Appendix

Figure 1

http://www.tncnnews.com/cnorg/2012/0921/article_1839.htm

Figure 2

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/issw/wp-content/uploads/AnnualReport.pdf>

(page 3 and 4)

Figure 3

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_middle_class

Figure 4

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1zzPDOLOjWAW4g4bWATngYul4Un_zVo-VERSuW3pUQ-A/viewform

Figure 5





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