

SCHOOL INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS

Hui Wang

Vanderbilt University

Abstract

This essay contends the introduction to a local middle school in Nashville based on online research and interviews. The author focuses more on the student population, school-wide support for English Language Learners, and the learning environment. From the school visit, the author observed the ESL classroom decoration was very creative and attractive, and it also served as a valuable learning resource for English. Besides, story books located in the classroom were related to students' funds of knowledge which could serve to raise students' learning motivations. In addition, during the class observation, the author observed some strengths from the English class and learned great teaching skills from the language teacher — Ms. L (pseudonym), a bilingual teacher who can speak both Spanish and English fluently. On the other hand, based on theories from previous researches and articles, the author also provided some recommendations in order to have students get more benefits in ESL classes.

I visited a Nashville local middle school last month and observed four English classes. Ms. L (pseudonym), the English teacher, showed us around the school before class and introduced background context about the learning environment and students. According to Ms. L, this school has a very diverse student population: over 140 of 780 students are English Language Learners. According to the SchoolDigger.com, the student population demographic is: 37.4% white, 35.7% Hispanic, 19.3% African American and 6.7% Asian population. There is a student-parent handbook on the school website, which contained the detailed school description in both English and Spanish. In addition, the website also has a “Family Portal” in six different languages. With Family Portal, parents can see classes and assignment grades, homework, upcoming due dates, attendance information, discipline incidents and more. It is an effective way for teachers to have regular communication with parents online so that parents can know more about their children’s academic and social wellbeing. Parental involvement in schooling benefits their students’ academic performance, attitudes toward school and homework completion (Carreón et al., 2005).

During the school visit, one attribute of the school that struck me was the decoration of the school and Mrs. L’s classroom. Ms. L told us that this school is “the Zoo School”. According to school website, through an enhanced partnership with the Nashville Zoo and Vanderbilt, the school offers students unparalleled, hands-on learning experiences in zookeeping, zoology and other sciences. We observed many aquariums in the school and the animals included a lizard, blue tree frog and turtle (see Figures 1,2, and 3). Students would watch animals in these aquariums during class breaks, which was a great way for students to talk with others and make friends. According to Verbera, newly immigrated Mexican high school students often had good relationships with host peers who helped them navigate the new school environment and structures (2014). Therefore, these animals in aquariums offer new immigrant students more opportunities and topics to communicate with peers and get involved in the new environment. Along with the decoration of the main building, Ms. L’s ESL classroom decoration is very creative and attractive as well. There were nine handmade national flags on the wall made by children themselves (see Figure 4). The corner of the classroom was designed for reading books and had many colorful pillows on the carpet. There were various books in the classroom, most of the books being teen novels with pictures, and genres ranging from crime to insects (see Figure 5). Half of these books were in English, and half of them were in Spanish. Of all the books found around the room, I found one book particularly interesting — *Undocumented: A Worker’s Fight*. It was a comic book that used vivid pictures and brief words to introduce the hard life of undocumented immigrants (see Figures 6, 7, 8). In this book, Mexican immigrants worked hard to support their families, but were treated unfairly because they were

undocumented. Finally, they stood up and fought for their community. In my perspective, immigrant students may be familiar with and interested in some parts of the book, which may elicit discussions related to their family and community. According to Moll et al., the historically accumulated and culturally developed knowledge about students' household and community are "funds of knowledge" (1992). Teaching and learning with funds of knowledge can help shape curriculums, instructions and design creative activities.

During my classroom observation, I observed four 55-minute Grade 8 English Language Learners (ELL) classes, each taught by Ms. L. The number of students ranged from 3 to 8, and most of them were Hispanic immigrants, who could speak Spanish frequently. Everyone had their own small laptop.

Ms. L initiated the class with meditation, which helped students to calm down and focus on learning. Then she announced that "We will have a field trip to China!" and invited us to give a presentation about our motherland China. Children were very curious about everything about the far-away country and asked me to write down their name in Chinese.

According to Ms. L, although all students were Grade 8, they were divided into different classes based on different English levels. However, the reading materials for the four classes were the same. They did not have any textbooks, and the reading material about an athlete who got injured in a competition contained many compound sentences. I noticed that the novice level students were hesitant and unconfident to read the sentences, while advanced students could raise insightful questions about the article. From my perspective, it was hard for the novice level students to understand the article. According to Ching, if the reading material is far beyond students' current language proficiency, then there would be less pleasure in reading (2002). The employment of the same article to different language proficiency students may not be beneficial to learning. Ms. L also observed the problem and noted that because of Common Core, all Grade 8 students were required to read the same passage but to the reading level required for the grade. Common Core sets a standard on teaching and learning. According to VanTassel-Baska, using the same standardization may contribute to less individual attention for students (2015). Besides, accepting too many standards from each discipline of Common Core could be unrealistic to address in the instructional time available (Kendall, 2011).

Ms. L is a bilingual teacher who can speak both Spanish and English fluently. During the classroom observation, I found that she never spoke any Spanish to the students, even in the basic level class. When Ms. L introduced new vocabulary, she used other common English words and pictures to explain the meaning. Sometimes, she invited students to explain the expressions and sentences in English. Depending on

different English level classes, Ms. L shifted her focuses on vocabulary learning and asking questions about the passage. She encouraged students to spend more time in reading certain paragraphs and finding critical questions. There was no translation practice. According to Goodwin & Jiménez, applying EL's native language knowledge supports students' development of metalinguistic awareness, which plays a positive role in English reading comprehension (2016). Children utilize the knowledge and skills acquired from their first language to guide and support their new dynamic bilingual development (Lewis et al., 2012). From my perspective, translanguaging is essential for English reading comprehension. Thus, applying "acts of translation" to teaching can facilitate language learning. According to García & Kleifgen, the teacher could give the key points of the lesson in Spanish in order to make sure the message is comprehensible to the emergent bilinguals (2010). In addition, the learning materials that teachers distribute could be annotated in Spanish or contain translations (García & Kleifgen, 2010).

Translation is a useful cognitive and linguistic resource for reading and comprehending English materials (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2016). Bilingual teachers will immediately understand students' work, and facilitate them to explain their ideas, which is a practical way to foster metalinguistic awareness (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2016). To foster this multilingual awareness, translation practice can be included in many classroom activities. The following activity is one that could be applied using translation practice. First, teachers introduce new strategies to translate such as paraphrase (we can paraphrase "destroy" by "not fix"). For antonyms such as "laugh" and "cry", teachers can provide examples and non-examples of both words. For abstract words, such as "atmosphere", teachers can provide the direct translation of the words to help them. Second, the teacher could divide students into small groups to translate certain paragraphs into Spanish. Group discussion after translation is necessary for students to compare and evaluate each other's works, which may provide them with newfound understanding. During discussion, metalinguistic comments may come up when students talk about the hardest areas to translate. For advanced students, the teacher can ask them to translate the Spanish scripts back to English, paying attention to the difference between the original reading and their own translation. The reason for this last recommendation is that sometimes ELLs can understand and retell the English reading in mother languages, but they cannot express or write in correct language order or by proper words in English. That is a great way to employ metalinguistic awareness to improve ELLs reading comprehension and writing skills.

Apart from classroom teaching and learning, Ms. L told us that teachers in this school had regular teaching seminars in which all teachers sat together and discussed the problems they met in teaching and gave suggestions to each other. Teachers always

work in groups and communities. Working with other professionals efficiently improves teaching skills, because colleagues know craft knowledge. According to Leinhardt, craft knowledge encompasses the wealth of teaching information that expert teachers have about their own practice (1990). Grimmett & MacKinnon stated that craft knowledge, also called “wisdom of practice”, consists of pedagogical content and pedagogical learner knowledge, which is practical information in enhancing learner-focused teaching (1992). Teachers’ personal craft knowledge will exert a significant influence on the way they respond to a new curriculum. Craft knowledge may also contribute to resolving the dichotomy between teaching theories and practice (Driel et al, 1997). In my opinion, the teacher seminar offers more opportunities for teachers to share their craft knowledge. Since students see different teachers for different subject areas, the problems experienced in one setting can be carried over into the next, such as distraction and talking too much about unrelated information. Experienced teachers may have more effective solutions to these problems. Their craft knowledge may help new teachers to improve teaching skills, curriculum design and classroom management (Driel et al, 1997).

There are many kinds of learning resources, a multi-cultural classroom, and skilled English teachers in this local middle school. I observed that although there were many international and immigrant students, there was no language center at the school. Ms. L noted that sometimes students brought their writing to her classroom for grammar correction. However, Ms. L has 6 classes every day, and due to her schedule restraints, she does not have all the additional time needed to provide students help outside of regular class time. According to Gay, caring is important in working effectively with students (2018). Culturally responsive caring is an essential part of the educational process (Gay, 2018). Ms. L has worked to build strong and close relationships with her students. She treats all students as her own children and gives strong support and encouragement to everyone. However, the impact of cultural caring could be increased further in the school setting by establishing a professional language center to help meet the needs of ELL students. The Vanderbilt University English Language Center is designed to meet the needs of graduate and professional students on campus and could serve as a model for this local middle school. With this type of support, ELLs have access to help in academic writing and oral practice, which will lead them to be more confident in writing assignments and presentations. The thorough culturally responsive caring in the whole school setting could contribute to improvement of students’ satisfaction, academic performance, and social lives.

References

- Carreón, G. P., Drake, C., & Barton, A. C. (2005). The Importance of Presence: Immigrant Parents' School Engagement Experiences. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42(3), 465–498.
- Ching, Y. L. (2002). Extensive reading and language learning: A diary study of a beginning learner of Japanese. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14(1), 66–81.
- Croft Middle. (n.d.) Retrieved November 10, 2018 from <https://www.schooldigger.com/go/TN/schools/0318001695/school.aspx>
- Driel, J. H. van, Verloop, N., & Werven, H. I. van. (1997). Teachers' craft knowledge and curriculum innovation in higher engineering education. *Higher Education*, 34(1), 105–122.
- Family Portal. (n.d.) Retrieved November 10, 2018 from <https://schools.mnps.org/croft-design-center-middle-prep/#>
- Garcia, O., & Kleifgen, J. A. (2018). *Educating emergent bilinguals : policies, programs, and practices for english learners*.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: theory, research, and practice*.
- Goodwin, A., & Jiménez, R. (2016). TRANSLATE: New Strategic Approaches for English Learners. *Reading Teacher*, 69(6), 621–625.
- Grimmett, P., & MacKinnon, A. (1992). Craft Knowledge and the Education of Teachers. *Review of Research in Education*, 18, 385–456.
- Kendall, J. (2011). Understanding Common Core State Standards. ASCD. 1703 North Beauregard Street, Alexandria, VA 22311-1714.
- Leinhardt, G. (1990). Capturing Craft Knowledge in Teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 19(2), 18–25.
- Lewis, G., Jones, B., & Baker, C. (2012). Translanguaging: Developing its conceptualisation and contextualisation. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 18(7), 655–670.
- Moll, L., 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.
- VanTassel-Baska, J. (2015). Arguments for and against the Common Core State Standards. *Gifted Child Today*, 38(1), 60–62.
- Verbera, G. (2014). The first year: Understanding newcomer adolescents' academic transition. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 76(2).

Appendix

Figure1



Figure2

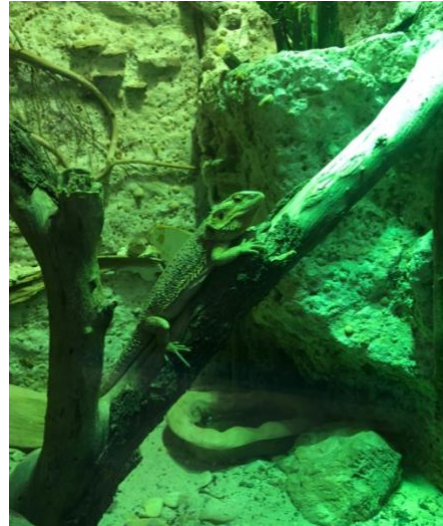


Figure3

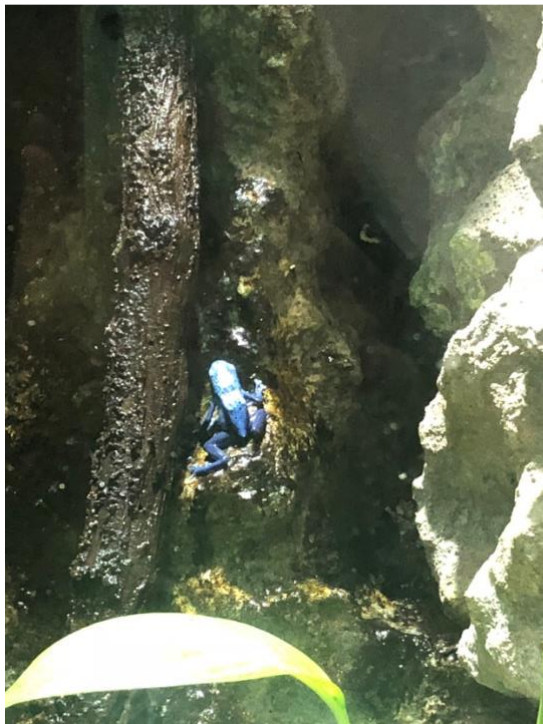


Figure4



Figure 5



Figure 6

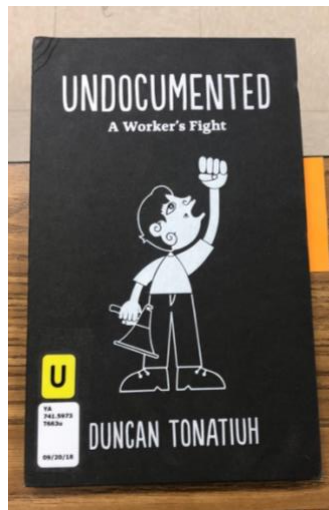
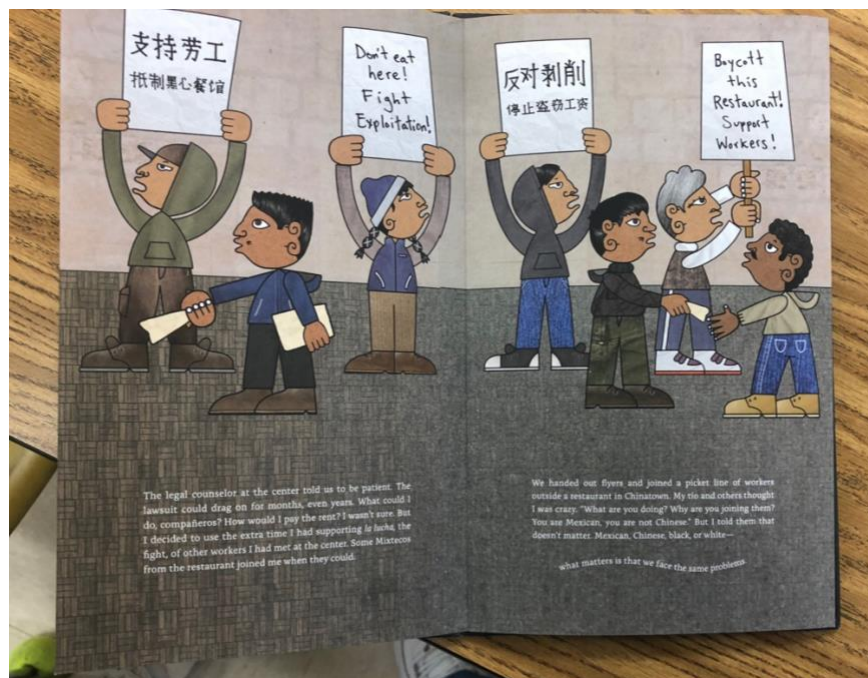


Figure 7



Figure 8



References

- Carreón, G. P., Drake, C., & Barton, A. C. (2005). The Importance of Presence: Immigrant Parents' School Engagement Experiences. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42(3), 465–498.
- Ching, Y. L. (2002). Extensive reading and language learning: A diary study of a beginning learner of Japanese. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14(1), 66-81.
- Croft Middle. (n.d.) Retrieved November 10, 2018 from
<https://www.schooldigger.com/go/TN/schools/0318001695/school.aspx>
- Driel, J. H. van, Verloop, N., & Werven, H. I. van. (1997). Teachers' craft knowledge and curriculum innovation in higher engineering education. *Higher Education*, 34(1), 105–122.
- Family Portal. (n.d.) Retrieved November 10, 2018 from
<https://schools.mnps.org/croft-design-center-middle-prep/#>
- Garcia, O., & Kleifgen, J. A. (2018). *Educating emergent bilinguals : policies, programs, and practices for english learners*.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: theory, research, and practice*.
- Goodwin, A., & Jiménez, R. (2016). TRANSLATE: New Strategic Approaches for English Learners. *Reading Teacher*, 69(6), 621–625.
- Grimmett, P., & MacKinnon, A. (1992). Craft Knowledge and the Education of Teachers. *Review of Research in Education*, 18, 385-456.
- Kendall, J. (2011). *Understanding Common Core State Standards*. ASCD. 1703 North Beauregard Street, Alexandria, VA 22311-1714.

- Leinhardt, G. (1990). Capturing Craft Knowledge in Teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 19(2), 18-25.
- Lewis, G., Jones, B., & Baker, C. (2012). Translanguaging: Developing its conceptualisation and contextualisation. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 18(7), 655-670.
- Moll, L., 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.
- VanTassel-Baska, J. (2015). Arguments for and against the Common Core State Standards. *Gifted Child Today*, 38(1), 60–62.
- Verbera, G. (2014). The first year: Understanding newcomer adolescents' academic transition. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 76(2).