

Celebrating Diversity: Asian American Literature Theme Unit

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Abstract: This paper records the setting and planning of an Asian literature theme unit provided for a multicultural 2nd grade ESL class. The central question is how to design a lesson unit that helps students with the English language academically while scaffolding students with the recognition of diverse cultures. To address this issue, the paper describes the design of the balanced reading unit, including the book choice for different purposes. By analyzing the data collected from the daily teaching and observing journal taken in the classroom, the paper reflects the application process of the unit.

1. Introduction

The paper reviews a literature unit I helped create and conduct in a multicultural 2nd grade ESL class as a student-teacher. The objective of the unit was to integrate the appreciation of different cultures into language learning.

The classroom this unit was designed for was a grade 2 ESL class in Astoria, New York City. There were 21 ELLs out of 24 students. Among the ELLs, 4 were Emergent Bilinguals and 17 were Intermediates. All of the students were 7 to 9 years old.

The majority (17) of the students speak Spanish as their L1, 4 of the students' L1 is Chinese, and 3 students' L1 is Albanian. 15 students were born in the U.S., 5 students had been in the U.S. for more than 6 years, 2 students had been in the U.S. for 3-5 years, and 2 of them had come to the U.S. within a year. All of the students speak mainly L1 at home.

2. Annotated List

According to the Common Core Standard ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.2, students are supposed to "recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral"^[1]. "To meet the standard as well as to raise the awareness and the recognition of everyone's cultural background in the community, teachers in the elementary school designed and applied the literature unit "Celebrating Diversity," which incorporated literature with Hispanic, Latino American, African, and Asian backgrounds.

My focus was on Asian literature. To conduct a balanced reading curriculum, it contained books for different purposes: read-aloud, silent reading, shared reading, and book club.

The books adopted in this unit were: *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*^[2] for read-aloud and shared reading, *Dim Sum for Everyone!*^[3] for silent reading, and *Zen Shorts*^[4] for book club.

For read-aloud and shared reading, my students and I studied *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*^[2] for three reasons. First, it demanded linguistic support from the teacher. The Input Hypothesis indicates that a language learner can make progress when receiving input that is slightly beyond his/her current literacy level^[5], which made the book appropriate for a teaching material with instruction. Second, the Newberry Award-winning book was a great resource for the teacher to model a standardized reading method which contained articulation and fluency as well as critical thinking. Third, the book is a highly attractive fantasy containing a lot of conversations, which helped students keep focusing on the content and was easy to conduct shared reading.

For silent reading, students worked on *Dim Sum for Everyone!*^[3]. The book's language level is relatively low and full of visual supports, which opens a door for the 2nd-graders to practice the language, appreciate the Asian food culture while enjoying interpreting the illusions of the delicious

Dim Sum.

For book club, the students worked on *Zen Shorts* ^[4] in a strategic group of 5. The New York Times bestseller book was fascinating to read even though the moral of the story was not expected for the 2nd-graders to comprehend. The majority of students had demonstrated a high level of attention discussing the book and role-playing the story despite the language level difference within a group, because of the engaging story-telling and rich visual supports of the book.

3. Reflections

The Asian literature unit provided students access to appreciate and recognize the Asian culture while enjoying the literature, allowed teachers to create a unit combining language learning and culture studies and evaluate the teaching procedures.

The most difficult part of the planning was deciding the books: locating books suiting students' language level was fundamental, and decision-makers also had to be cautious about preventing bias, especially linguistic bias and stereotyping ^[6]. Moreover, it was crucial to create a safe environment for students to openly discuss, which required instructors to be aware of balancing class discourse when some of the students showed the tendency to dominate the discussion, or when some were avoiding speaking out due to the lack of confidence in the culture area or language.

In the future literature unit designing, I would add a writing section as a formative assessment. "Writing can be a vehicle for improving reading ^[7]." I would engage students in applying language expressions and discussing gist from reading materials in writing activities such as interactive writing and story retelling.

4. Conclusion

The paper illustrates the design and application of an Asian literature unit for a 2nd grade ESL class. To answer the central question that how to teach the language while raising recognition of diverse cultures, I closely discuss the instruction planning and book choice.

The unit incorporated read-aloud, silent reading, shared reading, and book club, and adopted selected books for different sections. All required specific levels of language and visual supports. Based on the teaching and observation journal, students have shown a strong interest in learning the unit and demonstrated an understanding of the literature in the class discourse.

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