

Ways to Maintain ELLs' Cultural Diversity in Education - Taking Three New York Elementary Schools as Examples

Xiaotian Wang

Abstract—English as a second language (ESL) education refers to teaching non-native English speakers English as a second language. The number of English language learners (ELLs) is increasing in the United States in recent decades because of globalization, including immigrants, international students, merchants, refugees, etc. One of ELLs' main characters is their various cultural backgrounds. Teaching and maintaining a diverse class within a safe learning environment can benefit students both now and in the future. In this case, understanding ELLs' diverse cultures and knowing how to maintain ELLs' cultural diversity is a significant consideration in American ESL education nowadays. This study reviews the cultural diversity in American ESL education by analyzing three New York elementary schools. The author summarizes some critical ways to maintain ELLs' cultural diversity from four aspects: (1) the background of American ESL education and cultural diversity; (2) cultural diversity in school; (3) cultural diversity in family; (4) cultural diversity in communities. Finally, the study indicates the significance of connections among schools, families, and communities and identifies some difficulties when maintaining cultural diversity in education.

Index Terms—ESL education, cultural diversity, schools, families, community.

I. INTRODUCTION

English as a second language (ESL) education is one of the critical concepts of teaching English language learners (ELLs), a large group in American education, including immigrants, refugees, or language interested persons from all around the world (e.g., Mexico, Columbia, Haiti, etc.). Some learners are in good English proficiency, while some may know a little bit about English or do not learn it at all before coming to America. Their various cultural backgrounds contribute to the cultural diversity in American society and education. This study focuses on the ways to maintain ELLs' cultural diversity in New York elementary schools, from three aspects: schools, families, and communities. The study tries to find some practical ways to meet ELLs' needs with various cultures and provide some reflections to support ESL education development. More detailed information is demonstrated in the following sections.

II. THE BACKGROUND OF AMERICAN ESL EDUCATION AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

A. The Background of American ESL Education

English is one of the most crucial languages for people who

want to live in the U.S. For example, immigrants can get an excellent job through English, and international corporations use English as a lingua Franca to do business. According to Breiseth, ELL students have become an essential part of American public schools. The number of ELL students has increased dramatically in recent decades in the United States, which accounted for 10% of students in public schools from 2012 to 2013 [1]. As the fastest growing of student group in America, the American National Education Association found that more than 4.6 million ELL students were enrolled in public schools during the 2015-2016 school year. Based on this continuing rising trend, the National Education Association estimates that ELLs' number will account for 25 percent in public schools in 2025 [2].

B. Basic Information on Cultural Diversity in Education

Since the American education system will absorb more ELLs in the future based on existing data, McIntyre, Rosebery, and González argue that students in the United States will become more ethnically and culturally diverse [3]. To be more specific, for those who are newcomers in America, their cultural identity is composed of their native cultures and American culture. Even ELLs born in the United States will retain some of their own national cultures due to their race, native language, religions, etc. [4]. As shown in Figure 1, based on the American Civil Rights Data Collection and the U.S. Department of Education, there were over 4.8 million ELLs in America during the 2013-2014 school year, which covered seven different races/ethnicities, including Hispanic, Asian, White, Black, American Indian, two or more races, and pacific islanders [5].

The diversity of race causes different languages spoken by ELLs except English. In the United States, there are more than 150 languages. The most common language spoken by ELLs in states is different. Spanish accounts for 70% in most states [1]. While other ELLs speak Chinese, Arabic, Nepali in New York, Michigan, and North Dakota. Plus, most ELLs have their religions, native festivals, or traditional food different from American, or even constructed American culture. All these factors lead to cultural diversity in society, especially in education. Rosado points out that society needs to recognize and respect other social and cultural communities by supporting the existence of different cultural groups, provide them with an inclusive cultural environment, and encourage them to contribute to society [6]. To reach these goals, the schools need to meet ELLs' needs and fully considered cultural diversity, which requires to respect and understand ELLs' cultures first.

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According to Obiakor, nowadays American schools serve more diverse students than the past two decades. Various cultures bring different races, social classes, and native languages to school [7]. The challenge of how to promote students' educational experience by remaining and taking advantage of their native cultures is one of the central topics in education. In school life, the process of exploring their cultural identity will promote their growth, and the comparison between ELLs' cultures and American culture will make ELLs and native students learn from each other. In daily life, the cultural diversity taught in the class can encourage students to consider problems from different aspects because different cultures have different thinking ways. Compared with other students who grow up in a one-culture-only environment, those students immersing in a culturally diverse environment from childhood may have more experience in respecting others' cultures, which can reduce racisms and discrimination to a large extent. Maintaining and teaching cultural diversity in class provide several benefits for students both now and in the future [8]. Hence, maintaining cultural diversity is of great importance in education. The following sections will provide some ways to teach and maintain cultural diversity in classes.

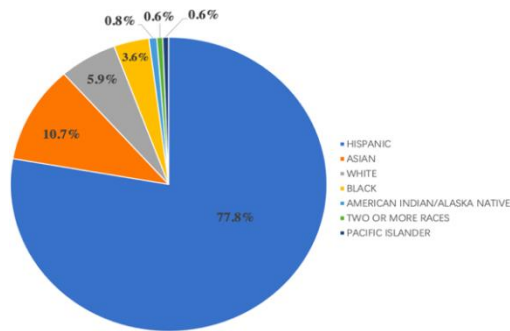


Fig. 1. The race and ethnicity of ELLs during the 2013-2014 school year.

III. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS

A. PS 230, Brooklyn

PS 230 is an elementary school located in Brooklyn. ELLs in this school are from Bulgaria, Spain, Russia, Uruguay, etc. The central belief of PS 230 is to respect individual needs and cultural differences and aim to continue students' learning journey with appreciation and respect for diversity through the cultural exchange experiences at PS 230 [9]. Below are some ways that PS 230 takes to maintain cultural diversity in school.

1) Abandoning English-only language policy

English-only Policy resulted from the English-only movement, which aimed to assign English as the only nation's official English and advocate people only use English in America. Rodriguez claims that if one wants to learn English well and engages in American life, they have to abandon their native cultures [10]. He supports English-only policy without any bilingualism. However, Hornberger points out that many national professional organizations stood out to oppose the English-only policy in the 1980s because of the increasing number of immigrants [11]. Several American states do not stipulate English as the official language to meet

the social need, which means there is no English-only policy in these states, such as New York, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, etc. Most ELLs have their native language, or their parents speak the native language because of their various cultural backgrounds. In this case, PS 230 does not have an English-only language policy and they have bilingual and monolingual courses, because they believe that students' native languages are parts of their cultural identity.

The school argues that students can hold their native language and inherit their traditional cultures in American schools, which opposes Rodriguez's points since language diversity is a kind of cultural diversity. And ELLs can transfer their abilities in their native language to English, which can promote ELLs' learning to a large extent [12]. But ELLs still have to speak English in school. To improve ELLs' English proficiency, the teacher encourages students to use more English in class and also allows them to use their native language when they do not know how to ask for help in English. Under no English-only Policy, ELLs can transmit their native language and English, and ELLs can feel respectful from this school.

2) Understanding students' needs and creating a safe learning environment

With various cultures, ELLs come to America, a different nation from their homeland. Many of them have encountered several difficulties. Oberg argues that since ELLs lost all their familiar signs and native social environment when they come to the new country, they will experience culture shock [13]. ELLs may feel depressed or confused if they compare themselves with the natives. Igoa points out that most ELLs have to experience the Silent Stage, which refers to unwillingness to speak and share with others [14]. PS 230 takes meeting students' needs as a priority. According to Hirsch et al., ELLs' teacher needs to connect the literacy to their background information and combine the students' existing cultural backgrounds with American culture [15], including asking students to discuss their native cultures and use different cultural icons to narrow cultural gaps. To help ELLs come over the blocks of cultural shock and silent stage, the teacher creates a safe and comfortable environment that encourages students to share their experiences freely and guides them to compare the American culture and their native cultures. In one of the Grade 2 classes, talking about experience this week is a routine. Most students like to share their culture shock experience. Chinese students shared the experience that they were surprised why Americans like to drink water with ice. One of the methods to come over culture shock is to learn and understand it. Through such activity, learners can exchange information, and the instructor can figure out their questions and then explain them. By understanding students' needs and creating a safe learning environment, ELLs can be familiar with American culture and less anxious towards the different cultures.

According to Igoa, over half of ELLs are confused about their cultural identity because of their cultural backgrounds. There are two crucial phrases in ELLs' identity: assimilation and acculturation. Assimilation refers to the person giving up their native cultures and becoming a part of the mainstream culture; acculturation, on the other hand, allows the person to become a part of the culture without discarding their native

traditions and values [14]. From this perspective, there are two cultural identity types for ELLs, including new cultural identity and combined cultural identity. There is no rubric to judge which one is right. For PS 230, the teacher holds an equal view on learners' native cultures and American culture, which can keep the cultural diversity in class. They encourage students to learn and understand American culture that narrow the cultural gaps and give them a chance to show their own cultures to increase their cultural confidence.

3) Connecting curriculum and ELL's lives

Hirsch et al. argues that the ELLs' teacher needs to connect the literacy to their background information and combine the student's existing cultural backgrounds with American culture, including asking students to discuss their native cultures and use different cultural icons to narrow the cultural gap [15]. The school can maintain cultural diversity when ELLs know the school considers their culture elements. On the one hand, Swinney and Velasco argue that one effective way to teach is to connect new knowledge with students' prior knowledge or trigger background knowledge [16]. For ELLs, their native cultures are previous knowledge. Hence, connecting the content with ELLs' cultural backgrounds is crucial to hold cultural diversity in the class. Teachers in PS 230 use different cultural characters to tell stories and often organize various cultural exchange activities, such as sharing their national holiday costumes and food by inviting ELLs' parents and posting students' cultural works on the wall to learn various cultures.

On the other hand, PS 230 does a pre-assessment for every ELL before they enroll in school by asking ELLs some fundamental questions (e.g., name, age, nationality, native language) and conducting a quiz including listening, speaking, reading, and writing to assign them into the appropriate grade to help ELLs adapt to school life. But it is still a little bit difficult for some ELLs to speak out and share in class. It might be because of Silent Stage or they do not understand teacher's instruction. PS 230's teachers provide solutions to solve this problem. For example, when students learn how to greet in Grade 1, the teacher asks ELLs to teach all the class how to say "hello" in their native language and assign this as a class routine to say "hello" in every morning meeting. Through these activities, ELLs know that the school considers their cultures and value their cultures.

IV. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN FAMILIES

A. PS 1, the Bergen

P.S.1 The Bergen, is an elementary school with grades from pre-kindergarten to grade 5. Many ELLs from Mixco, Columbia, Chinese, and Morocco lived in America for less than one year, and ELLs account for 33% of all students. The school offers a range of programs for children learning English, including monolingual (English) classes for native students and advanced ELLs and bilingual classes for English limited students [17]. PS 1 The Bergen values every culture and tries to keep cultural diversity by encouraging students' parents to engage in students learning and strengthen the bond between school and family. The following section demonstrated efforts that PS1 does to keep the cultural

diversity in families.

1) Providing language support

Students are not only members of the school but also an essential part of their family. To maintain the cultural diversity of ELLs, the ELLs' family must be preserved first. Schools hope that ELLs' parents can better participate in students' school life, because family engagement can produce excellent results for students, families, schools, and communities [18]. However, Beatriz and Morillo-Campbell argue that there are many barriers when many parents want to be involved in children's schools, including limited English proficiency, little education experience, differences in cultural background, etc. [19]. PS1 The Bergen shares some ways to solve these problems to improve parental engagement and maintain the ELLs' cultural diversity in families. First of all, parents should know the school respects and value their cultures. PS1 The Bergen holds parents' meeting once a week and provides translators for no-English parents to help parents communicate with the teacher. And there are different language version materials for students and parents, including emails and hard copy materials. They can choose the language that they are most familiar with to help them understand the materials. With language support, ELLs' parents are more willing to communicate with the school.

2) Designing diverse cultural activities

Besides, PS1 also designs various activities to invite ELLs' parents to join and show their unique cultures. Activities focus on listening and speaking in their native languages because some of the ELLs' parents are literacy limited. For example, the teacher invites parents to join students' Field Trip when visiting museums and libraries. Since these places include different cultures, the teacher can design cultural activities like Find Your Cultural Icons and ask students and parents to work together. In this case, ELLs and parents in class can share various cultures during this activity. Storytelling in parents' native language is another activity that PS1 The Bergen uses to ask ELLs' parents to come to class and tell a story in their native languages. ELLs can also prepare a short performance for the story with their parents or bring some items that appear in the story. Connecting the school and ELLs' families is a crucial way to build a diverse school, motivate parental engagement, and improve ELLs' learning.

V. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN COMMUNITY

A. PS124 Yung Wing Elementary School, Manhattan

The PS 124 Yung Wing Elementary School locating in Manhattan, serves over 700 students from pre-kindergarten to grade 5. ELLs are the majority of the student groups, which accounts for over 90% of all students. Most of them are Asian because PS 124 is near Chinatown. The rest of the students are Hispanic and White mostly [20]. The school's community consists of families from the immediate neighborhood and those from elsewhere in Manhattan. The school is surrounded by libraries, museums, churches, Chinese stories, Italian stories, etc.

B. Taking Advantage of Communities Resources

A community is a group of people who share something in common, including the place, diverse cultures, believed

religions, and shared resources [20]. School is a part of the community where students share educational resources. PS124, with different races, makes contributions to the diverse community. Promoting the community's engagement is a critical way to improve students' learning and maintain ELLs' cultural diversity [18]. On the one hand, the school should connect the teaching to the community. For example, grade 1 of PS124 has a program named "A Better School Community," which asks students to do a social study to talk about your community. Students can introduce any topics they are interested in, including community religion, food, festivals, things they want to change through a short interview, video clip, or questionnaire. Students can share their work with others; in this case, students know more about the community they live in from different aspects.

On the other hand, Ferlazzo argues that the community can positively effect students and benefit the families and communities itself [18]. For ELLs' parents who do not understand English, it is hard for them to help children's learning. There are many after-school institutions in PS 124's community (e.g., CPC Chinese Cultural Program, ADZ Tutoring, IC Learning Center) that support ELLs in finishing homework, practicing English, and sharing the experience. Every student has a chance to voluntarily participate in after-schools where some culture-related troubles (e.g., bully) can be better solved when talking with tutors, which can help ELLs feel safe and have a sense of belongings. In Brooklyn, one community organization called Center for Family Life is designed for ELLs' parents who have elementary English proficiency. They can take English classes without any tuition fee to improve their oral English, making them able to communicate with children's teachers and take a daily conversation in an English environment. ELLs and their parents hold movie nights, talent show performances, traditional food sharing parties to thank the community for providing this chance for them. ELLs' families are satisfied to live there because they can get new knowledge and share their own cultures. Every culture is respected here and is a crucial element of the diverse community.

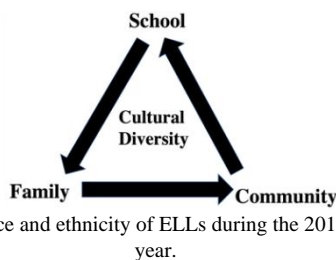


Fig. 2. The race and ethnicity of ELLs during the 2013-2014 school year.

To maintain ELLs' cultural diversity, they need the efforts of schools, families, and communities, as shown in Fig. 2. Schools can design appropriate language policies and combine curriculum with ELLs' cultural backgrounds to improve their cultural confidence and provide their parents' language support to promoting parental engagement. Knowing how to use community's cultural resources (e.g., libraries, museums, churches, parks) is a method to maintain cultural diversity by connecting schools and communities. A more diverse and respectful community will be built when ELLs and their parents improve their ability and share different cultures with the community's help. However, some

problems occur to schools, families, and communities, including (1) how to shorten ELLs' Silent Stage and motivate them to share their cultures? (2) how to train teachers across-culture ability to understand ELL's needs? (3) how to help ELLs' parents whose culture is the minority culture in the community?

VI. CONCLUSION

This study reviewed and summarized ways to maintain cultural diversity in education by taking three elementary schools in New York as examples. ELLs worldwide become an essential group in American education because of the increasing number of immigrants. Due to their various races, languages, traditions and other factors, cultural diversity is the representative feature of ELLs. ELLs and American native students can benefit from learning cultural diversity in the class, including promoting their growth, considering questions from different aspects, and reducing discrimination. Maintaining ELL's cultural diversity and taking advantage of cultural diversity need the cooperation of schools, families, and communities. In the future, figuring out how to improve the engagement of schools, families, and communities is the key point to maintain cultural diversity of ELLs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Ms. Wang is interested in language education and international education. She has obtained TESOL certificates and TEALL certificates (Teaching English to Adults with Limited Literacy). Her research "A Review of the Development and Current Situations of General Education in China" was accepted by the 2020 International Conference on Education Reform, Economics and Business, and Social Sciences (EREBSS 2020), published by IEEE Press and submitted to EI, CPCI for indexing.