Teaching Social Studies for Newcomer English Language Learners: Toward Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Yoonjung Choi
University of Maine at Farmington

Through this case study the author explores how an exemplary teacher utilized social studies curriculum and pedagogy to engage English language learners (ELLs) in learning in a culturally relevant and meaningful way and discusses practical implications for teaching and learning.

Introduction

Immigrant youth comprise a burgeoning student population. Twenty five percent of all children in the United States are either foreign-born or first-generation immigrants (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Forty one percent of teachers nationwide reported having had English language learners (ELLs) in their classrooms (Cruz & Thornton, 2009). Given the diverse cultural and linguistic texture of students in the United States, how schools should respond to the recurrent changes of the student population and address their complex needs has been one of the most significant issues in today’s educational research and practice.

While immigrant students bring diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds enriching our multicultural society, they reportedly experience multiple challenges in American schools (Lee, 2010). They often face numerous hurdles in learning a new language and making cultural adjustments between their home and school cultures, which become even more complicated by socioeconomic difficulties and cultural struggles often associated with immigrants. These include high levels of poverty, unwelcoming social, political, and educational contexts of reception, and experiences of racism and discrimination (Suarez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009). A majority of school teachers, who are predominantly White, middle-class females, have been poorly prepared to serve their newcomer students’ academic needs and have revealed limited understanding about the multicultural and linguistic backgrounds of immigrant ELL youth (Rong & Preissle, 2009). Systematic teacher education programs and professional development resources that can train quality teachers who will contribute to immigrant ELL students’ academic achievement and engagement seems scant (Cruz & Thornton, 2009). Inadequately trained teachers, and a hostile environment for the ELLs, have contributed to new immigrant students’ academic failure, disengagement from learning, and even resentment toward their teachers and schools (Choi, Lim, & An, 2011).

The newcomer ELL students in social studies classrooms have encountered numerous critical barriers which may hinder their meaningful academic growth (Urietta, 2004). Social studies education, whose ultimate goal is to nurture knowledgeable and engaged citizens, has been criticized for its marginalization of stories of immigrants (Cho & Reich, 2008), inadequate images and prejudices against immigrant groups (Banks, 2007), and a tokenistic approach to diversity and social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Consequently, immigrant students often have viewed social studies, which often silences the histories of non-European regions and reinforces narrowly-defined national citizenship, as meaningless and irrelevant to their lives expressing “History class is stupid.” (Rierson, 2006, p. 288). Studies have shown that the lack of connection between the ELL’s home culture and the social studies curriculum has contributed to academic failure and psychological problems which include low self-esteem and/or identity confusion while their academic issues and concerns have not received much attention in social studies scholarship (Salazar & Franquiz, 2008).

In order to address the call for culturally relevant social studies teaching and learning for newcomer ELL students (Cruz & Thornton, 2009), through this study I explore the research question: How did an exemplary social studies teacher utilize social studies curriculum and pedagogy to encourage immigrant ELLs’ academic engagement in a culturally relevant way? Using culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as a framework, I will provide detailed...
descriptions of the ways in which the successful teacher implemented CRP in his social studies classroom for ELL students by means of his narratives and teaching practices. I will provide insight into how to best conceptualize social studies curriculum and pedagogy for a growing number of newcomers in today’s classrooms.

**Literature Review**

In this study I employ CRP as a theoretical framework focusing on its application to newcomer ELLs in social studies classrooms. Mindful of the struggles of American schools and curriculum that addresses the issues of newcomers, some scholars and practitioners advocate employing CRP using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for more effective teaching (Gay, 2000; Lee, 2010). CRP suggests that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the sociocultural experiences of students, they become more personally meaningful and have a higher interest appeal (Ladson-Billings, 1994). With the influx of culturally diverse ELLs in today’s classrooms, CRP has been acknowledged as a key aspect of educational reform for not only racial minorities, but also immigrant ELLs, because it ultimately uses students’ varied cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds as curricular and pedagogical resources to promote academic success grounded in students’ cultural competency (Irizarry, 2007). Lee (2010) argued that culturally relevant curriculum, characterized by critical thinking, cooperative learning strategies, learner-centered approaches, and interdisciplinary knowledge, should be employed throughout all educational interactions across grade levels and subject matters so that all ELLs have meaningful learning opportunities and academic growth. As more and more students from diverse backgrounds populate today’s classrooms, the efforts mount to identify effective methods to teach these students, the need for CRP for newcomer, ELL students intensifies (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2006).

A growing body of research describes what curricular and pedagogical practices are effective for newcomers’ culturally relevant social studies learning and how teachers can encourage their ELL students’ active engagement in social studies classrooms. One of the most significant aspects of its findings is teachers’ in-depth understanding and respect of immigrant students’ funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992); that is, the knowledge students gain from their family and cultural backgrounds, and teachers are obliged to incorporate them into cross-cultural learning (Cho & Reich, 2008). Studies stressed that teachers should create cooperative, respectful, and anti-oppressive learning communities which facilitate understandings of who they are and where they see themselves in the world by bridging the gap between the students’ home culture and social studies curriculum (Almarza, 2001; Salinas, 2006). Cruz and Thornton (2009) demonstrated the inclusion of TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages) strategies, including vocabulary instruction and usage of graphic visuals to organize the social studies contents being taught. These strategies created significant improvements in the immigrant students’ language learning and, subsequently, aided their understanding of the subject content (Salazar & Franquiz, 2008). Although existing literature provides meaningful insights into significant roles for teachers and their efforts to adopt a greater sense of social, cultural, and linguistic consciousness for newcomers in classrooms, there is a lack of empirical research on effective social studies teaching to ELLs and CRP practices. By examining a successful social studies teacher’s specific practices and real examples of CRP for his newcomer ELLs, I am able to provide suggestions for not only theoretically sound but also personally meaningful and culturally responsive social studies curriculum and pedagogy, thus adding a new dimension to the research on teaching social studies for ELLs.

**Methodology**

**Participant and Contexts**

Mr. Joseph Moon (pseudonym) is an eighth year social studies teacher who has been teaching global history at Millennium High School (pseudonym, hereafter MHS) in an urban, multicultural school district in the Northeast. Having been born and raised in the United States, Mr. Moon considered himself a Korean “immigrant” because he understands, “what it is like to be growing up in an immigrant family who are struggling with the life of immigration.” Mr. Moon confessed that he was “pretty much like a ‘C’ student” by saying, “I hated school my entire life because the curriculum never connected to me, . . . School was not a major priority in my life and college was something I did because all my friends were going.” What changed his life was *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), a book by Paulo Freire which critiques educational injustice and inequality and promotes critical pedagogy. Mr. Moon had read this book while a freshman in college in a course titled Foundations of Education. This book gave him the momentum to discover why school was not meaningful to him and to push him to work hard to become a teacher who would create socially just education for the oppressed. He eventually earned a social studies teaching certificate in college and, after four years of teaching, achieved a master’s degree in TESOL.
MHS is an alternative, public school founded in 1993, designed for newcomer ELLs. Its students hail from over 50 different countries and speak 30 languages. Forty three percent of the total student body is Hispanic, and 25% is Asian. MHS students are divided into one year interdisciplinary clusters which are organized around particular themes rather than being grouped according to language, achievement, age, or grade level. MHS adopted project-based assessment approaches based upon problem-solving activities and group projects instead of a state-mandate test which served as a graduation requirement for a majority of students in its school district.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data on Mr. Moon was collected as a part of a larger study on three Korean-American teachers’ social studies curricular and pedagogical decision making. During participant recruiting based on snowball sampling and community nomination (Ladson-Billings, 1994), Mr. Moon was nominated as an exemplary social studies and ESL teacher, who has multilingual abilities, understands newcomers’ cultural diversity, and shows confidence with teaching ELLs as expressed by his previous student teachers and school administrators. Using Mr. Moon’s class as a case study, I investigate in this study his exemplary social studies teaching practices with an eye toward understanding his CRP for ELLs.

Sources of data include observation, interviews, and artifacts. Observation of his 9th grade global history class took place 25 times during his 70-minute class period over six months to examine Mr. Moon’s teaching practices. Field notes were taken by the researcher and used for data analysis. Three formal 1-hour interviews in addition to frequent informal conversation with Mr. Moon were conducted to explore his perceptions about social studies teaching and learning. Artifacts such as handouts, quizzes, and homework were collected. Using qualitative data analysis phases suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2006), I developed a list of 47 codes and categorized them in five main themes: (a) teacher’s personal, social, and cultural background; (b) school context; (c) overall teaching experiences and beliefs; (d) social studies curriculum: perceptions and practices; and, (e) social studies pedagogy: perceptions and practices, based upon recurrent ideas and notable concepts after multiple readings and reflection of data. Line-by-line inductive coding (Miles & Huberman, 1987) was used to ascribe the codes to data. Constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) was used to identify and develop patterns and themes in data.

Findings

Promoting Global/Multicultural Citizenship
Aims of Social Studies Education

Having worked with newcomer students for eight years, Mr. Moon stated that current official social studies curriculum is “definitely too Eurocentric” and marginalizes “so called Third World” countries from which most of his students emigrated. Referring to a large influx of newcomers from Asia and Latin America enrolling in MHS, Mr. Moon expressed his frustration with the official curriculum which “never mentions Korea, simply touches upon China, and does not teach much about Latin America.” Like many critical pedagogues engaged in social studies scholarship, Mr. Moon criticized traditional social studies which highlights narrowly defined national citizenship without consideration of globalization and cultural diversity in the United States and added “It is not going to work” in his classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Subedi, 2010).

After rigorous discussions and long-term collaborations with his colleagues, Mr. Moon streamlined the official curriculum and shifted its approach to global, multicultural citizenship in order to better address the needs of his newcomer students and build strong connections between their home culture and school curriculum. Throughout the first semester of his global history course, Mr. Moon placed a great deal of emphasis on Ancient Sumer, Mesoamerica, Egypt, and China instead of Greece and Rome when teaching ancient civilizations. For example, he taught a month-long unit on China addressing the dynamic geographical characteristics of China and surrounding regions, and he led group projects in topographical map making. The class also studied myths of the Great Wall and Shi Huangdi, teachings of Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and controversial issues of contemporary China including the independence of Tibet. Eight years of teaching ELLs had taught Mr. Moon that many of his ELL students distrust and attach little significance to school curriculum when their culture is misrepresented and Eurocentric worldviews are reinforced (Choi et al., 2011; Salinas, 2006). For these reasons, he designed his curriculum to present the stories and cultures of his students extensively. He explained his rationale for the curriculum reconstruction as follows:

We are burdened that we have to teach certain things that don’t really need to be there. So we’ve been talking about skill sets that we are building. Let’s pick specific topics that are important with specific skills, and if they come across, whatever history comes upon later on, they know what to do to find answers themselves.

The Official Journal of the National Association for Multicultural Education
As the quote shows, Mr. Moon’s curriculum reform was assisted by his collaborative colleagues with whom he was able to discuss his vision of CRP. His curricular vision was also supported by school administrators who spoke highly of his capabilities of teaching global, multicultural citizenship premises. Mr. Moon understood that MHS’ waiver from the state-mandate test also gave him leeway to reorganize the global history curriculum and emphasize global, multicultural perspectives within his class.

Mr. Moon’s new curricular approach seemed to have great emotional appeal to his students, while enhancing their academic achievement. When Mr. Moon introduced a newly enriched ancient history, describing religious beliefs, and showing cultural artifacts of the Middle East, his Muslim students vocally expressed their deep appreciation by saying, “Thank you for the respect, Mr. Moon.” Enthusiastically, they took leading roles in discussions and activities by providing extensive descriptions about what different groups of Muslims believe, how they practice Islam, and what Islam means to them.

In addition, Mr. Moon’s curriculum provided a safe, open forum for his students to discuss their world views and critique the official knowledge. During a unit on ancient Mesoamerican civilization, Mr. Moon’s Hispanic immigrant students revealed their frustrations about European colonization by asking the following question: “You know what, when I see the Aztecs and the Incas, Spanish always take gold. My question is why always Spain came and they took something good? Why? Why Spanish? How they always come? How did Spain start?”

Mr. Moon, using the question as a catalyst for an in-depth discussion about European imperialism and modern Latin American history, transformed his students’ frustrations into meaningful educational opportunities. The students were able to deepen their critical understanding of global history by actively exchanging their thoughts on European colonialism and expanding their discussion into diverse global agendas, such as global conflicts, peace, and interconnectedness.

Creating a Collaborative Learning Community Based on High Expectations and Care for Students

Reflecting upon his earlier academic struggles and finding a path to his passion for education, Mr. Moon firmly believed that all newcomer students can achieve academic success if their opportunities to find a relevance of their lives to school curriculum are supported by caring teachers (Freire, 1970). Pang (2009) demonstrated that teachers’ high expectations and caring-centered pedagogy for culturally and linguistically diverse youth led to the students’ academic success. Similarly, Mr. Moon strove to understand his students’ sociocultural contexts, while he provided a role model who cared for and motivated them. The following quote demonstrates his in-depth understanding of and care for his students:

Thirty percent of our ninth graders do repeat. A lot of them have not gone to school, or their formal schooling had been interrupted by many reasons. . . . But, real issues are more than language. I have one Chinese student, second time repeater. Although he is much more proficient in language than others, he did nothing in my class. I understand why because he hates to live in America. He doesn’t like all the situations like family issues here, really upset. But once he participated, I was trying my best to encourage him and give positive reinforcement. Then he did give me his homework, the first homework he gave me . . . I think he has potential to grow and mature.

In order to improve students’ motivation and create a culture of academics in the classroom, Mr. Moon has created a learning community where his students feel comfortable in constructing a collaborative knowledge with others. Building a learning community which offers a climate of mutual respect helps students build positive relationships and develop group problem-solving skills; this was a significant aspect of Mr. Moon’s curriculum and pedagogy which he infused with culturally relevant pedagogy and global/multicultural perspectives (Banks, 2007; Marri, 2009). Mr. Moon often included collaborative group works, such as reading groups of Hindu myths and discussing the Caste System. During the group projects, no student was left out although each exhibited a different level of participation. When students had a small group discussion about their WebQuest-based research project on Buddhism, each group member took turns and did his/her presentation with support from other group members. Many students waited patiently when their peers murmured and held their comments until their classmates had finished their presentations. After each presentation, most students gave positive comments, (i.e., “Good job, Man” or “You did so well!”) and cheered each other. Mr. Moon stated that, “Students having a wide variance regarding language proficiency and cultural background can provide positive influences on each other,” and that “Having heterogeneous, authentic conversations and motivation to work each other hard, the whole class can be high functioning.” Influenced by Freire and social justice education, Mr. Moon anticipated elevation of the whole group, by keeping everyone engaged and creating an energized classroom throughout cooperative learning community (Freire, 1970).
Developing Cultural Critical Consciousness and Competence

Instead of teaching world civilization by taking the chronological or regional approach, Mr. Moon placed religion at the center of his curriculum and designed a semester-long World Religion curriculum in order to help students critically understand the diverse social, cultural, political, and historical development of human beings. He believed that, “Perspectives coming from different religions are closely connected to various historical perspectives that people have now,” and that students should fully understand others’ beliefs and respect each other’s perspectives. Throughout the semester, students studied Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and compared their own religious beliefs, world-views, rituals, and culture to others’. In order to prepare for his teaching the new curriculum, Mr. Moon studied the diverse teachings and cultures of different religions by visiting a local Hindu temple, reading the Koran, and by listening to stories from his orthodox Jewish colleague. As Subedi (2006) proposed, Mr. Moon educated himself in order to teach religion in an open way and to have meaningful conversations with his students. He displayed religious symbols in the classroom and kept various religious books including the Torah, a Christian Bible (English and Spanish), teachings of the Dalai Lama, and a Koran in his classroom.

For his first lesson on world religion, Mr. Moon conducted a “Student Religion Survey” and asked students to read other students’ answers about their religious beliefs and worldviews. While discussing the diverse religious practices and perspectives of students in MHS, Mr. Moon asked students to be very respectful when they talked about religion by saying, “When we talk about someone’s religion, it is like talking about their mama. It is a very sensitive and important topic for our lives. Although you have different opinions, that does not mean that you can say they are stupid.” Despite their limited English skills, his students candidly expressed their opinions, questions and, sometimes, frustrations with different religious beliefs. These comments led to a discussion of why they needed to study religion even though it can be a very controversial topic. As a result of the discussion, the students concluded that understanding one’s own religion and respecting others’ beliefs are the most significant components of what they need to adhere to while studying religion.

Some of the religious discussions created conflict. When he taught a lesson on the Dalai Lama, one Chinese student argued that Mr. Moon should not discuss a person who is against China and has been known to perpetrate the deaths of many people. Mr. Moon admitted that it was natural for young students to experience a hard time understanding different values and world-views which are significantly different from theirs. He was skilled in discussing the issue with his students and transforming their conflicts into educational moments by saying:

The purpose of this [study] is not to change your belief or to convert you. . . . What we are going to focus on is how the world is affected by religion. Religions have done a lot of good things and important things in the world, the most beautiful architecture, the most beautiful statues . . . and it does cause a lot of pain as well.

Mr. Moon’s vision to help ELL students develop a cross-cultural competency and create cultural tolerance through the World Religion curriculum resonated with the ideas of cultural critical consciousness, social justice, and equity which serve as critical dimensions of CRP (Dallavis, 2011; Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

Embedding Literacy Strategies in Social Studies and Interdisciplinary Pedagogy

Perin et al. (2009) suggested that social studies teachers should imbibe literacy strategies in a way that enables their students to read, write, and become critical thinkers about the specific topics they are learning and to make literacy instruction inseparable from content-area instruction. After his first two years of teaching, Mr. Moon felt he needed to hone his knowledge and skills for teaching ELLs due to the ever-increasing cultural as well as linguistic diversity among students in MHS. Consequently, he pursued a master’s degree in TESOL and this academic (as well as practical) background of TESOL helped him integrate English literacy strategies into his global history curriculum and to practice interdisciplinary pedagogy.

Mr. Moon’s interpretation of effective literacy-driven social studies included student-centered learning, interdisciplinary pedagogies, and differentiated instructions supported by multiple types of visual texts and technology (Cruz & Thornton, 2009). He was skillful in employing TESOL strategies while teaching global history contents and developing ELL students’ literacy skills through group activities and discussions. Teaching Hindu myths, Mr. Moon taught new vocabularies using a word wall and he created reading groups based on the students’ English proficiency level. These strategies helped students support each other in reading and understanding the myths that were being taught in class. Mr. Moon asked his students to draw a comic strip summarizing stories they had read for homework, and he organized a group storytelling activity so that all students had a chance to talk and build comprehensive understanding about the stories. Valuing bilingualism, Mr. Moon allowed students to communicate in their native language when they
worked in small groups. This strategy was effective in encouraging his students to verbally express their thoughts and share their understanding about the content. This also supported their collaborative learning and content knowledge development (Salazar & Franquiz, 2008).

Unlike typical text-dependent social studies, Mr. Moon’s class included visual resources and graphic organizers, which included maps, video clips, cultural artifacts, and graphs, making the social studies content, as well as English language learning, more comprehensible, drawing student attention and participation to a higher level (Salinas, 2006). He provided opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills by charging them with observing and analyzing multiple types of texts. He frequently utilized technology-based teaching resources, such as PowerPoint presentations or web-based materials equipped with SmartBoard. Mr. Moon used YouTube video clips of the Dalai Lama’s speech and the Tibet–China conflict in his lessons on Tibet and these became powerful sources for increasing student motivation and generating heated discussions about the issues.

Implications and Conclusion

The results of the investigation into Mr. Moon’s transformative curriculum interpretations and pedagogical practices, which capitalizes on newcomers’ linguistic and cultural diversity to enrich social studies curriculum, instead of ignoring them as distractions, provides opportunities for educators to rethink how CRP can foster meaningful learning opportunities for newcomer ELLs. Mr. Moon successfully implemented CRP for his ELLs by emphasizing global/multicultural perspectives, creating collaborative learning communities based upon high expectations for his students; he encouraged critical thinking skills and a multicultural perspective with cultural competency, and he incorporated literacy strategies within his global history curriculum. A snapshot of his innovative curriculum reconstruction provides a new insight into how social studies curriculum can be woven together with CRP in real classroom settings and reconceptualized to promote ELL students’ engagement in learning in today’s ever-shrinking global society.

Mr. Moon’s teaching practices provide solid tools for practicing teachers who are struggling to teach social studies to ELLs and who want to enrich their strategy for teaching these students. Mr. Moon’s practices which enabled his ELLs’ active engagement in learning can be replicated in other classrooms. Student academic engagement and achievements were evidenced and observed by their active participation in learning, critical thinking/analysis skills development, and cooperative knowledge construction, instead of test scores, and these show Mr. Moon’s CRP practices as meaningful and justifiable. Moreover, his CRP-based social studies teaching promoted critical perspectives in order to educate newcomer students to tolerate diverse cultural perspectives and utilize them as steppingstones to broaden their worldviews (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Teacher educators may want to share the strategies from this study with preservice teachers to help them understand why social studies infused with CRP is important for newcomers and rethink how personally meaningful, culturally conscious, and academically solid social studies can be educated for ELLs.

It is important to note that while Mr. Moon himself was born and brought up in the United States, his family were Korean immigrants and his background in academic, cultural, and linguistic struggles in childhood provided a significant impetus for his advocacy for immigrant ELLs and for an in-depth understanding of their sociocultural standings and academic needs (Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Meanwhile, his family’s immigrant background is not the only factor that made him a successful teacher in CRP for newcomers (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As the findings suggest, Mr. Moon made consistent endeavors to learn about his ELLs’ diverse culture, language, and religion, and actively incorporated their knowledge and experiences into his lessons, thereby establishing cultural connections with his students (Salazar & Franquiz, 2008). In addition, his educational visions and practices were largely influenced by his teacher education, particularly Freirean principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), which he used as a platform for his curricular and pedagogical decisions, and his TESOL training which enabled him to develop validating pedagogies for ELLs (Cruz & Thornton, 2009). Discussions with supportive colleagues and administrators about his vision of CRP was another critical component that enabled Mr. Moon to implement a global/multicultural citizenship-oriented curriculum. That is, what is important for CRP-based social studies education for ELLs are teachers’ cultural understanding and positive expectations for their ELLs, employing culturally resonating and personally meaningful curricula and pedagogies, and supportive colleagues and administrators, not the ethnic match between teachers and students (Lee, 2010; Quiocho & Rios, 2000). These findings strongly suggest that teacher educators and administrators need to consider how to provide meaningful support for teachers of ELLs, so that they can confidently and creatively approach CRP for the ever-increasing newcomer students in American schools. A concerted effort should also be made by teachers, practitioners, and scholars to provide meaningful, equitable, and culturally relevant learning opportunities for newcomer ELLs so that they can function as knowledgeable and engaged citizens in this diverse global society.
References


Rierson, S. L. (2006). “I was born here but I’m not an American:” Understanding the United States history curriculum through the eyes of Latino students. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.


