

Developing the Multimodal Language and Literacy Skills of Emerging Bilingual Students through Children's Literature

Chang Pu, Yuan Chen, Rebekah Gooding, and Sarah Williams

Our global literacy community consisted of two classroom teachers (Yuan and Rebekah), one school administrator (Sarah), and a teacher educator (Chang) who is interested in literacy development and virtual exchange. Yuan teaches in a Mandarin Chinese dual language program at the International Charter School of Atlanta in the U.S., and Rebekah teaches at ChengDu ISC Experimental School in China. Two classrooms of third-grade students also participated in our literacy practices. Chang and Sarah served as a facilitator or a discussant during group meetings and provided resources and support to the group.

Our literacy community group was teacher-led and adopted a collaborative approach to work as a team. Teachers at both ICSAtlanta and CDES schools used some global literature in their classrooms to enrich reading in the past, but not in a systematic fashion. All members of our community have had cross-cultural learning and teaching experiences (5-10 years), and strongly support bilingual education.

The International Charter School of Atlanta (ICSAtlanta), a state charter school, provides dual language immersion education in French, German, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish and offers International Baccalaureate World School for the Primary Years program. It serves students in the state of Georgia from Kindergarten to 8th grade. ICSAtlanta strives to provide students with educational opportunities to foster international perspectives while meeting Georgia's education standards. The school mission is to prepare students for a successful future by promoting academic excellence through rigorous instruction that includes multilingualism, cultural awareness, respect, and tolerance for others (ICSAtlanta, 2021).

The student body of the third grade Mandarin class at ICSAtlanta is composed of Asian, African American, Latinx, and White students. Fifty percent of them have Asian backgrounds. Aligned with the school's name, the class is very diverse. Almost ninety percent of the students are either first generation or second generation immigrants. The school's culture embraces the international learning community and respect for diversity. Eighty percent of the students started learning Mandarin Chinese in Kindergarten (5 years old). Most of them are able to exchange basic conversations in Mandarin, while some of them are at intermediate levels of Mandarin in listening and speaking according to the American Council on the Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) standards. The main goal for third grade students during our collaboration was to improve their reading and writing skills via the bilingual reading and writing exchange with peers in China.

Cheng Du ISC Experimental School (CDES) is located in Chengdu, China. It is an independent school that is part of the international schools consortium (ISC). CDES's goal is to prepare students to realize their full potential academically, physically, socially, and spiritually to meet the challenges of an ever-increasingly complex multicultural world (CDES China, 2021). It serves students from preschool to secondary grades, offering students an English immersion education across the curriculum and Chinese language arts (in Chinese).

The majority of students from CDES are Chinese, but some students are from South Korea, the Philippines, and the U.S. Students at ICSAtlanta are culturally diverse, including children of immigrants as well as African American students. Students in both schools are emerging bilingual learners and their second language proficiency levels (i.e., English or Chinese) vary, ranging from beginner to intermediate. Both teachers strove to motivate students to use the target language in meaningful ways and develop literacy skills.

The focus of our global literacy community was two-fold: 1) to explore effective pedagogies to help students develop language, critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and global competence through authentic global children's literature; 2) to integrate global children's literature and UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>) into the existing curriculum. Our group meeting activities followed a collaborative inquiry model (Kasl & Yorks, 2002), commonly used in teacher professional development that involves a cyclical process of inquiry, reflection, and action. Meeting activities focused on exploring how to use global children's literature to introduce UNSDGs and connect with students' experiences to help develop global competence and biliteracy skills. We discussed unit designs, unit lesson timelines/class schedules/school calendars, children's literature books, multimodal literacy practices, technology tools we could use to promote learning and interactions, and teaching strategies to implement the unit plans, as well as challenges we met when implementing previous units.

We also summarized and reflected on lessons learned through implementing unit plans in classrooms and proposed new changes. Accordingly, we used our unit plans as a guide to implement activities in respective classrooms. We usually started a unit lesson with the selected children's literature book to lead students to the topic and then used a variety of literacy practices to guide students to explore the topic, tie to learning standards, and develop literacy skills. Most unit lessons integrated English/Chinese language and literacy skills with social studies standards. We selected authentic children's books written by U.S., Chinese, and Chinese American authors when developing four unit-lessons (i.e., The Impact of COVID-19, Markets, Chinese New Year in China and the U.S., and My City). In this report, we focus on the following two inquiries to illustrate our learning.

Inquiry on the Impact of COVID-19 on Our Community

We chose to focus on the impact of COVID-19 on our community amid the pandemic. Students were still trying to understand what the virus was, how it affected their community, and how they would prepare for going back to school. This focus also relates to UNSDG 3 Good Health and Well-Being. We felt the topic was familiar to students and they would be able to make connections. We chose *Kelly Goes Back to School* written by Lauren Block and Adam Block (2020) for CDES students so they would understand how the pandemic affected students in the U.S. Students at ICSAtlanta read *A Different Spring Festival* (不一样的春节) written by Gao Jing (2020) so they read about how the pandemic affected children and their families in China.



Students at both schools engaged in discussions prompted by the global thinking routine “The 3 Ys”: 1) Why might this topic matter to me? 2) Why might it matter to people around me? and 3) Why might it matter to the world? (Boix Mansilla, et. al, 2017). Reading about the pandemic and being engaged in discussions regarding its impact on communities in the country where they and their peers live helped students understand how we were closely connected and how we shared similar feelings such as anxiety, fear, and uncertainty during this challenging time. Additionally, students brainstormed ways to address the crisis locally and globally, preventing the spread of the virus, and identified people who were critical community helpers as shown in Padlet posts or posters (presented via Flipgrid). Students used their linguistic repertoire as well as drawings and clip art/pictures to make meaning and illustrate their ideas and interacted with their peers on their posts (Figure 1). Most students wrote a statement in the target language and then used a variety of illustrations to provide details and elaborations of the statement. The multiple modes in meaning making were made easier by using web-based technologies such as Padlet and Flipgrid. In addition, for students who chose to take lessons remotely at home due to the pandemic, it was a meaningful journey for them to express their feelings and connect to the rest of the world via technology.

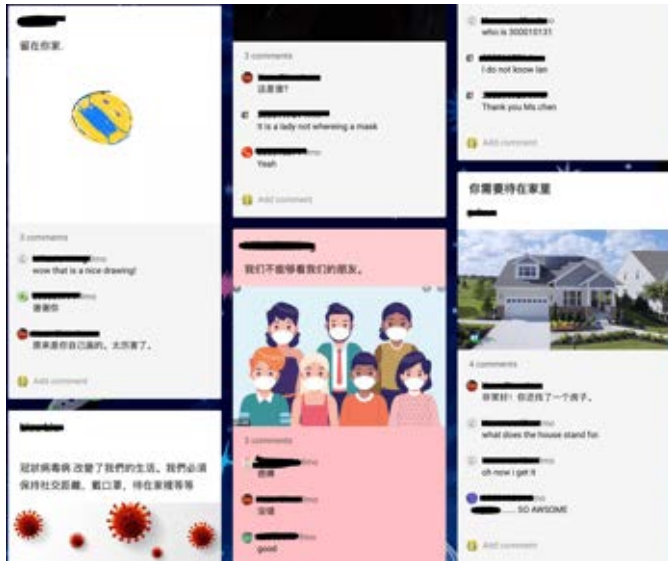


Figure 1a. Student Work Samples (Padlet Posts and Posters).

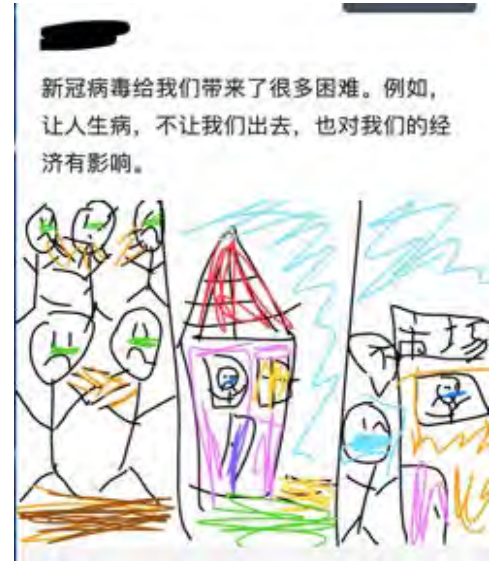


Figure 1b. Student Work Samples (Padlet Posts and Posters).

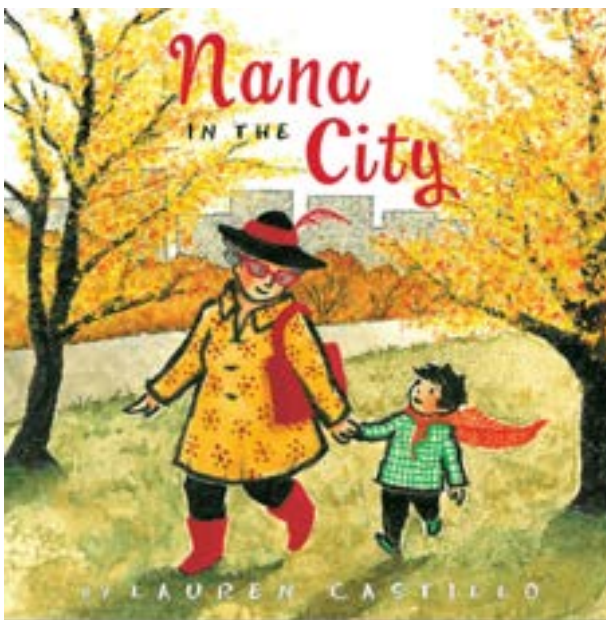


Figure 1c. Student Work Samples (Padlet Posts and Posters).

Teachers faced great challenges to complete the unit lesson due to irregular student attendance affected by the pandemic and the need to move back and forth between remote teaching and face-to-face instruction. However, both teachers felt students were captivated by learning about their peers' experiences and sharing their prior knowledge, as well as learning about the topic through four language skills. Rebekah reflected at our meeting that although the children had different experiences and perspectives such as the normalcy vs. abnormality of mask wearing in China and the U.S., the unit lesson provided teachers with the opportunity to unite children with others globally and see how we all were connected.

Inquiry on My City

In this unit, students at both schools read *Nana in the City* written by Lauren Castillo (2014). Students at CDES read the original English version, and students at ICSAtlanta read the translated Chinese version. We chose this topic because students at both schools live in cities and are familiar with the urban scenes shown in the book. We also wanted to connect the topic to UNSDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities.



In addition to discussing plots and characters in the book (e.g., Why did the boy not like living in the city at the beginning of the story?), students described their cities and created their city book to share with peers via Book Creator (<https://bookcreator.com/>). Some students were able to record and include their book read-aloud along with creating their books. The students at ICSAtlanta made connections to their own grandparents/families in the cities. They also discussed the cities that they would like to visit as part of language and social studies lessons. Additionally, students at ICSAtlanta used Flipgrid to share about visits of their grandparents or family members, enabling us to learn about their family histories and even some immigration stories.



Figure 2a. Student Work Samples: My City



Figure 2b. Student Work Samples: My City.



Figure 2c. Student Work Samples: My City.

In our planning meeting, we discussed how we could connect the topic of my city to UNSDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities by exploring challenges people might face when living in cities. We discussed how we could use the issues that appeared in *Nana in the City* and photos of crowded cities, traffic jams, waste management, and an unequal access to housing to discuss problems of urbanization and brainstorm possible solutions that students could act on in their communities. We also selected the thinking routine's See-Feel-Think-Wonder (Re-imagining Migration, 2019) to guide students to observe the photos and develop awareness and critical thinking skills around the topic of urbanization. The students at ICSAtlanta also recalled their learning from a previous social studies lesson on Georgia habitat and environmental protections to come up with solutions to improve their community. Unfortunately, due to constant quarantines as well as lesson delivery format and schedule changes affected by the pandemic, we were unable to complete the urbanization inquiry part of the lesson.

Lessons We Have Learned

We learned that students in both countries were able to engage with global children’s literature if they could find easy connections with the books. In particular, students showed strong interest in learning about their peers from another country and their connections to the books, and interacting with them. Rebekah stated at the meeting that topics such as the COVID made it very easy to become personal. Yuan reflected, “Reading books with different topics has brought to students a brighter world that is connected to the current situations such as the COVID pandemic, environmental protection, city life, cultural perspectives and holidays in two cultures.” Sarah also commented that the collaborations included concrete plans to learn about global issues through children’s literature and to expose students to different perspectives than those commonly found in their community. Because we value multiple modes of communication and literacy practices and gave students freedom to make choices in how they wanted to share their ideas, students became less anxious when using the target language.

Both Rebekah and Yuan reflected on how students responded to using children’s literature in social studies or science, and how the cross-curricular approach also benefited students’ literacy development. Rebekah described that the My City unit made it easy to introduce key words and concepts from the social studies standards for communities by connecting them to the book *Nana in the City*, and to introduce some higher-level vocabulary such as industrialization. In their COVID unit, Rebekah was able to connect to the scientific method. The class discussed vaccination and vaccines in the book and why we could not have them available sooner. Students in both classrooms were encouraged to go beyond the surface meaning or the scope of the selected books. Students at ICSAtlanta applied the knowledge that they learned from the COVID-19 books series to daily hygiene to preventing spreading the virus.

Technology implementation was another asset or skill that teachers felt that they and their students gained through this journey. Technology enabled collaborations between and among students and teachers in both schools. Sarah commented that the COVID might accelerate technological development in teaching and collaboration as many schools in the world moved to online teaching, which might make such collaborations easier. It also supported students in using digital multimodal semiotic resources in both languages to convey meanings easily. Yuan shared how exciting it was for students to be able to communicate with their Chinese peers in either Chinese or English even though communication was asynchronous due to time zone differences.

We also learned that learning different technology applications and preparing students to use such technologies was time consuming. Yuan reflected that she learned to introduce technology tools one at a time and guide students to apply it at their own pace. Trouble-shooting technological issues (e.g., how to let students access each other’s digital production) was the most challenging activity with which our literacy community members were involved during the collaboration. We realized that responding to technical issues in a timely manner and using technologies (e.g., Zoom calls) to view the problems from the user-end view and then creating digital tutorials accordingly was beneficial in overcoming this challenge. Although it usually takes substantial efforts in planning, preparing,

and coordinating projects, and in troubleshooting technical issues, virtual exchange projects are sustainable and low-cost and encourage collaborations across physical borders and spaces.

While students were engaged in unit lessons, we also recognized the importance of differentiated instruction. Students in both classrooms have a wide range of proficiency levels in either English or Chinese or both. Differentiated instruction was constantly integrated either in the process of learning about the topic through the selected books or in the final products they produced. Both Rebekah and Yuan reflected that authentic children’s literature, such as *Nana in the City* or 奶奶的红披风, were not tailored in language use to accommodate second language learners’ proficiency levels so they needed to provide additional language supports to help students understand the books, especially in the areas of vocabulary and sentence structures. Although students were encouraged to use different meaning-making modes when participating in the literacy practices, some were not able to provide their response to the lessons in the target language. Additional scaffolding and modeling (e.g., providing word banks of key words) were needed to ensure that all students met the learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Throughout this professional development journey, we learned important lessons regarding integrating authentic global children’s literature in language immersion programs and establishing virtual exchange programs, even though our initial plan was challenged by the pandemic. Evidence from our collaboration indicated that virtual exchange projects can facilitate students’ explorations of global issues from children’s literature and mirrored in their local communities through diverse perspectives. In addition, we were able to explore ways to motivate students to use their second language in meaningful ways and develop their biliteracy skills by connecting lessons back to the community and their experiences, even though the second language was not prevalently used in their local community. We were encouraged to hear that our school administrators also valued our collaborations across national borders and spaces, welcoming similar opportunities and partnerships in the future. As Sarah put it, “We want to continue to enrich students’ lives and help them to continue to grow more and become global citizens.”

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Chang Pu is an Associate Professor of Teacher Education (ESOL) at Berry College, whose teaching and research interests center on TESOL, bilingual education, and teacher education.

Yuan Chen is the language and Mandarin lead teacher at the International Charter School of Atlanta and has taught Mandarin in an immersion setting for 6 years. Before she entered the immersion teaching, she had taught elementary school, Chinese language as second language, and English as a second language in the U.S. and China from elementary to high school.

Sarah Williams is the Academic Principal for Chengdu ISC Experimental School, China. Sarah is from Atlanta, Georgia, US and taught in Atlanta before moving to Grahamstown, South Africa. She earned Masters of Education from Rhodes University and coordinated an afterschool enrichment program at a local non-government organization before working in China.

Rebekah Gooding is a third-grade teacher at Chengdu ISC Experimental School.



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