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Content Knowledge and Bilingual Education— Preparing Students for Learning and Living in America

In addition to the language and cultural barriers, most of our new Chinese immigrant students are not prepared academically for their education in American schools. They are generally at least a year behind the grade they are assigned to when they come to American schools. In China, the children in the cities start their first grade at age six, just as children do in this country, but in the villages, which are economically underdeveloped, children begin formal schooling at the age of seven. Usually they have not attended any day care, kindergarten, or preschool before their first grade. Also, China's compulsory education (grades 1–9) applies only to big cities, not to villages or small towns. According to statistics in the late '80s, an official in Beijing stated, "about 2.7 million children, 6–12 years old, were unable to go to school at the time" because there was a shortage of schools and teachers (Xie 2001). Many families in villages don't even send their children to school at the age of seven. When those village children come to America, they are assigned a grade level according to their age but not according to the previous grade they attended in China. Among our newly arrived immigrant children, many had only three or four years of formal schooling in China before they attended sixth or seventh grade in our school.

The poor preparation for American education among our new Chinese immigrant students is in accordance with recent studies about education in China. A report in the *New York Times* (Sachs 2001) stated that only 9.8 percent of the thirty-three million people in the Fuzhou area complete high school. An American educator who recently visited China reported, "The illiteracy problem is compounded by school dropouts. An official in Beijing mentioned

that about 10,000,000 children leave school each year” (Howard 2001, 4). Most of the new Chinese immigrants in New York’s Chinatown came from villages in the Fuzhou area and belong to this reported group. Worst of all, most of our newly arrived Chinese didn’t grow up with parents around and were brought up by their grandparents, who had never gone to school. Among them, many grew up with no books around in the house and received little help with schoolwork. Also, since they were little, they were told that someday they would join their parents in America. They and their families didn’t see the point of going to school in China; rather, they thought it would be wasteful to study in Chinese since they would have to relearn everything in English when they arrived in America. Therefore, many of them never paid much attention to learning during their primary school years. Many never picked up a book or read anything outside of school in China.

I also found out in my interviews that because of China’s one-child-per-family policy, families with two children are required to pay more for the education of their second child. So many of these families chose not to send one of their children to school. That is often the case for girls. Among our new students, there are always a few girls who had barely any formal schooling and can hardly write their names. When these children come to our school, they are put in sixth grade or higher because of their age, not because of their previous schooling.

With this kind of (or lack of) previous educational background, the recent Chinese immigrant students encounter tremendous difficulties in our school, especially in the subject areas. The ESL program in IS 131 used to be integrated with social study content. It had been a huge challenge for ESL faculty to teach both a new language and at the same time a full middle school social studies curriculum to these new immigrant students. With limited English skills and vocabulary, the students couldn’t go far in their learning of content knowledge. And the ESL teachers were always frantically looking for reading materials with social studies topics written in simple English. The simplified texts, though their language might have been at the level of the learners, could hardly meet the requirements of the middle school curriculum or satisfy the interest of the middle school-aged learners.

This awkward situation had been frustrating the ESL as well as subject area faculty for years. The English teachers complained about the students’ lack of basic knowledge of literature, and the science teachers didn’t know how to explain science concepts to them when they didn’t even understand the concepts or vocabulary in their native tongue. The social studies faculty complained that they didn’t know how to begin to cover the curriculum required for each grade, which was Egyptian civilization for sixth grade, twentieth-century American history for seventh grade, and world history for

eighth. I could feel the faculty's frustration, especially after seeing how hard a science teacher tried to teach a lesson about cloud formation. She tried every strategy she could think of to engage her students, but few of them could understand what she was saying. From my own ESL learning experience, I could sympathize with the students: when the students are bombarded with a new language and new knowledge, they must be totally lost. As an educator, I could also understand the teachers' frustration. Facing this huge challenge, I was just as frustrated as the faculty and as lost as the students. At that point, I doubted myself if I could ever be any help to the school.

At a faculty meeting, a social studies teacher reported: "These children have no knowledge of American history. They thought Columbus discovered America two thousand years ago and that the American Civil War took place in 1945. When asked where New York City was, they pointed at where New Mexico was on the map." I was so shocked. It suddenly occurred to me that these children needed not just the content knowledge for their middle school education but also (to me more important) the necessary knowledge to be new Americans. I couldn't imagine myself moving to a new city and having no idea of where it was on the map, or relocating myself to a new country knowing so little of that land. Afterward, I couldn't stop thinking of these youngsters: why don't we teach them something they need for their new lives and about their adopted homeland first, rather than being worried so much about covering the mandated curriculum? They have to know about America first, I thought to myself, which should be their first social studies subject, not those concepts required in the curriculum. Why not let them learn about America in the Chinese language arts class, which all new arrivals have to take?

An "Historic Change" in the Chinese Language Arts Program

The Chinese language arts program existed for years and served one-third of the student population, the majority of whom were newly arrived Chinese immigrant children. When I first visited the Chinese language arts classes, it was like visiting classes in China, where the students studied Chinese language, history, and geography. They also read Chinese classic literature and memorized classic Chinese poems. The students developed their fluency and skills in Chinese reading and writing, and in publishing stories, prose, and poems in the local Chinese newspapers. But it seemed that the Chinese language arts program was very much by itself and the students' studies in CLA had little to do with their other literacy learning at school. Since none of the administrators and few faculty at the school understood written Chinese or could speak Mandarin (standard dialect) Chinese, the faculty of the Chinese

language arts program were mostly left alone. In the CLA department, there were three veteran teachers, fluent in both Chinese and English, who received their graduate degrees in the United States. There was little communication or collaboration among these three teachers, and each instructor had his or her own curriculum and agenda. They each decided what and how to teach according to their interpretation of the requirements of the state bilingual program. Alice didn't like the program being isolated by itself and wanted to include the CLA faculty more into the school community and see how they could contribute more to overall literacy learning for the newly arrived students.

Many parents whose children were not doing well in their English study didn't appreciate the children's good performance in their Chinese learning. One day, a parent came to one of the teachers, waving her son's composition written in Chinese, and cried out: "My child came to the school since last September, now it is March, how come he still can't speak a word of English? How come? What happens?" Many parents didn't want to have their children in the CLA program even though they were doing well there.

At first, when I saw what little impact the students' study in the Chinese language arts class had upon their English learning and how few connections there were between what these students learned in CLA and in other subjects, I agreed to some degree with how these parents felt. I thought of having CLA teachers help build some content knowledge base for these new middle schoolers, but the demand from every department was so overwhelming. Science teachers wanted the CLA faculty to help the students build a basic foundation of knowledge in science in their Chinese class. The faculty of the English department hoped that the CLA teachers could teach students the concepts and different types of literature genres, such as legends, folktales, fables, fairy tales, fiction, and nonfiction. With this literary knowledge built in Chinese, the students would learn easily those concepts and content in English. Social studies faculty wished that the CLA program would take over the entire social studies curriculum for the newly arrived students.

With this demand, the CLA department could be easily converted into a tutoring program, or a learning center like a remedial program for other subjects, and CLA faculty would teach everything for other content areas but have no content of their own. Alice and I thought hard on this and didn't think we should dump all the problems on CLA and rely on one department to shoulder them all. Chinese was the primary language for most of our students, and the CLA program was too valuable to become a subordinate program to other subject areas. After hearing about the reports of our students' lack of knowledge of America, I realized that we should think about what our students needed to know for their new lives in this new country.

By the end of my first year of visits, when we planned for the coming year, I proposed to Alice and Jane that CLA be integrated with social studies, which used to be covered in the ESL class. All newly arrived immigrant children would take two periods a day of CLA/social studies, whose content would be American history, geography, and government, regardless of the social studies curriculum requirement for each grade. Alice asked Jane and me to propose the recommendation to the CLA faculty and work with them closely in the transition. But after this proposal was formally approved by Alice and Jane and ready to go to the faculty, I started to have doubts. I was worried that this thinking was too radical, or maybe too conservative. I didn't know where I would stand among the ESL or bilingual researchers. I thought of what Freeman and Freeman stressed in their books *Between Worlds* (1994) and *ESL/EFL Teaching: Principles for Success* (1998): the importance of children developing their first language literacy and knowing their own heritage. Was I proposing something that was against the principles for successful ESL teaching or that might even devalue the students' home language or culture?

Just as I was so uncertain of where I stood theoretically at that time, Maureen presented me with Krashen's book *Under Attack* (1996), which she was reading with the faculty study group. That was like receiving water in the desert. Krashen states "one of the major rationales underlying bilingual education: When we give children subject matter knowledge through the first language, we help them adjust more easily to their new situation, and it makes the instruction they get in English more comprehensible. Because we acquire language by understanding it, this speeds their acquisition of English" (6). Reading Krashen, I thought more about our ESL and bilingual programs.

Our ESL program was integrated with social studies. According to research on bilingual education, this model was poorly designed, because among all the subjects, "language arts and social studies require the most abstract use of language" and "will be the least comprehensible for the new second language learners" (Krashen 1991, 12). Our old ESL program integrated two of the most difficult subjects: English language arts and social studies. In the ESL class, our new immigrant students were learning the social studies content required by each grade, which mostly was written in academic English, while developing basic listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities and vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical competence in English. The students' poor performance in ESL/social studies was due to their "exposure to incomprehensible input most of the day" (Krashen 1996, 11). And our old Chinese language arts program functioned as a maintenance program for the children's primary language and culture, which had little connection with the students' other learning and provided students with little help for their transition into the new language and

culture. In other words, CLA stood more as an isolated content subject rather than playing an integral role across the curriculum or supporting the students' overall learning.

I also thought of my own learning as an EFL/ESL student. When I was studying Shakespeare in China, I had tremendous problems understanding either the language or the content of his plays. I wanted to appreciate this world-known playwright and his great works as an English major. So I read those plays in Chinese translation and watched the plays with Chinese subtitles before I read Shakespeare's original works. Though Shakespeare's language still presented difficulties to me, I was less frustrated, as I knew the whole stories and the relationships between the characters in those plays. When I was in class, I could focus my attention on the professor when he explained the puns, the idioms Shakespeare used, and also the differences between modern and Shakespearean English. At that time, without any knowledge of bilingualism, I thought I was cheating, or taking a shortcut in my learning.

After reading Krashen and reflecting upon my own learning experience, I concluded that Chinese immigrant children in Chinatown were a particular type of ESL student. They were surrounded by their primary language and home culture inside and outside of the school every day. Most of them lacked the subject matter knowledge for middle school learning and came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. They needed an effective education that would help further their schooling and, in addition, help their transition into the new language and the new culture. Among many models, Krashen (1999) discussed the "gradual-exit" one, which matched what I proposed. It recommends that subject matter be "taught in the primary language only until the child knows enough English to follow instruction in English. 'Transition' occurs gradually, a few subjects at a time, as they become comprehensible" (77). Cummins (1986) and Krashen (1996) both recommend using the native language to build content knowledge and cultivate cognitive academic language proficiency, which according to the Cummins study, takes five to seven years to develop. I was so happy to find the theoretical ground for my thinking.

But was it wrong to have CLA teach about America but not about China? The words of Freeman and Freeman (1998) rang loud in my ears as they strongly advocated the development of the students' first language and home literacy. I shared my fear with Alice, and she said: "I don't care about what theory says as long as the teaching benefits the children, their well-being, their education, and their success in learning."

I continued to question myself: if we let new immigrant Chinese students learn about America but not about China in CLA, would it take them away from learning their own cultural heritage and identity? This made me look

into our students' living environment in New York once more. Living in Chinatown, our students have enough opportunity to maintain their home culture and language. What they lack is a chance to know the world outside of Chinatown, an opportunity to know others and communicate with English speakers. The education our students receive in the school should help them go beyond what they are immersed in every day and help them connect to and prepare for the larger American life. We need to respect our children's home culture and language, but this respect should help them enter the new culture, further their education, and forge their new identity in this new world rather than simply maintain a unique culture and language.

Teaching and Learning in the New Chinese Language Arts Program

Before Jane and I formally proposed the changes to the CLA faculty, I shared my thoughts with individual CLA teachers while visiting their classrooms and during my debriefings with them. They generally agreed to the idea for three main reasons. First, they wanted to play an important role in the students' overall learning, so both parents and students would see the importance and necessity of their learning in CLA. Second, they wanted to be included more in the school community professionally, to share, to plan, to learn, and to work together with other faculty. Third, integrating social studies into the CLA class meant reducing by 50 percent the number of students they had to teach and doubling the instruction time for the students they would have. In the old program, the students took an hour each day of CLA. For the faculty, the teaching load was five hours a day, which meant they would teach five different classes every day, and at least 150 students (30 students minimum in each class). In the new program, the students would take both CLA and social studies with the same teacher, for at least two hours back-to-back every day (students would be required to take eleven hours a week in CLA/social studies). This integration would benefit the students as well as the teachers.

But they had only the summer to design a brand-new curriculum and prepare themselves to teach a subject they had never before taught and were not trained to teach. At the meeting, Jane expressed full support from the school in terms of providing a book budget, time for preparation, and cross-department assistance. The three teachers all felt good and excited. The trust and attention given by the school administrators made them also feel important and valued.

The first challenge the CLA faculty faced was finding books about American history and geography written in Chinese. There were a few textbooks available, but none were very interesting. One teacher took a trip to

China and found a few books on American historical figures written in the narrative genre. Some worked with the faculty in the social studies department, searching for reading materials. They also spent days in local libraries, bookstores, and on the Internet, where they found much written in English yet little written in Chinese. So they translated picture books on the Civil War and stories of slavery into Chinese. With a limited amount of resources, they began the new program in the fall.

In the new program, the CLA faculty, from the very start, worked as a team to design the curriculum with help from the social studies faculty. They shared books they had found through different channels. They also shared their translated work and expanded their teaching territory by reaching out to ESL faculty for teaching strategies and frequently consulting social studies faculty for help with the content. While teaching new content and trying new approaches, they were educating themselves not only about the social studies subject matter but also about ESL instruction.

The teamwork didn't take autonomy away from our CLA faculty. Even though they all taught the same content, American history and geography, they each approached instruction in their own way, with a self-chosen focus. With a brief survey of American history, the sixth-grade teacher, Jian Zhou, chose three aspects of history as his focus: the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the American government. With this focus, three presidents were studied: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Bill Clinton. He selected chapters from the books he purchased from China and used picture books he translated from English into Chinese. He often started his class by simply telling historical stories, which captivated all his students' attention and curiosity. When he paused for questions, many hands were raised, and confidence appeared on the students' faces. In the old program, Jian had his students sit in rows, all facing to the front, like they did in the schools in China. Now he had six groups of desks in which students faced one another. They worked in groups, asking questions, discussing the learned materials, and collaborating on the projects. Jian was amazed that his thirty-six students could work so well in groups, even with new students coming in throughout the year. On the walls both inside and outside of his classroom were his students' works, written in both Chinese and English (see Figures 2-1 through 2-3).

The seventh-grade teacher, Shirley Yang, started her new year with a focus on New York City. She believed that her newly arrived immigrant students should know the city they now called home. First of all, she had her students think about what they would like to know about New York, and then she took them to the local public library. They all obtained library cards and started their own research on New York based on their group-chosen inquiry topics. Through research and group presentations, they learned about the history, the



Figure 2-1 Poster of Study on American Government

宪法的其中一个原则：
Federalism - one Principle in the

联邦制
constituting
联邦制



联邦政府
Federal Government

联邦政府里柯林顿, 行政部门的领导
The President of the U.S.A. Bill Clinton.



州政府
State Government

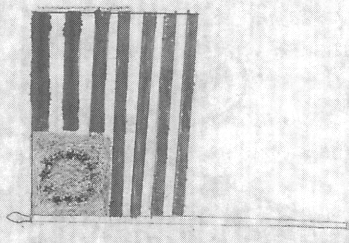
州政府的领导人是
柏德基州长
The Governor of NY
State George Pataki



地方政府
Local Government

地方政府的领导人是
朱利安尼市长
The Mayor of New York
City Rudy Giuliani.

将政府分成三个层次, 国家的是联邦政府, 州的是州政府, 地方的是地方政府, 宪法尊重各州的权力, 调和各州的利益, 宪法特别说明那些事情由联邦政府做主, 那些事情各州做主, 不能违背联邦宪法.



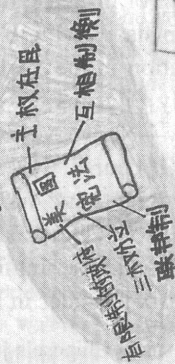
美国最早的国旗

The early Stars and Stripes

Figure 2-2 Poster of Study on Federalism

三权分立

三权分立就是在宪法里面的其中一条法律,也就是第三条。三权分立就是美国政府分成三个部门,第一个部门就是行政,第二个是立法,第三个是司法。这三个部门各有各的工作。立法就是制定法律,立法最大的是国会。行政就是执行法律,行政最大的是总统,总统统帅没有立法和司法这三个部门的力量是平等的,但是他们的总统法,立法又管不了司法,例如行政最大的总统他们的力量是平等的,但是他们可以互相的使政府的权力不集中在一起,分散可以滥用权力。



This is congress, people are make the law at the congress. 这是国会,人们就是在这里建造法律。

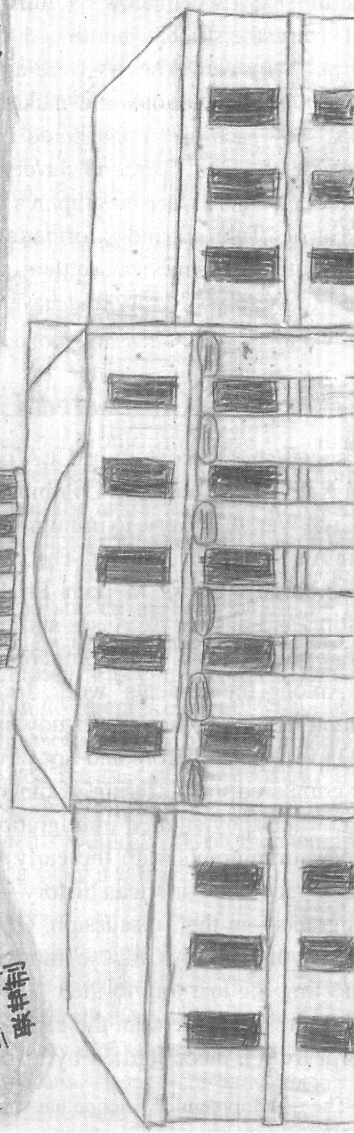


Figure 2-3 Poster of Study on the Constitution

population, and the different ethnic groups in New York City, the city's boroughs, the traffic system, and the history of Chinatown in New York. And they wanted to know more: Why do rich people live in Manhattan and poor people in the Bronx? Why do Chinese people choose Chinatown and Queens to settle in? Why is Chinatown so dirty? Even when they studied the Civil War and slavery, the students continued to ask what New York was like during that time and why New Yorkers were against slavery. Shirley's students loved to give group presentations and make books. In addition to making their own books, they each also contributed a page to the big class books about New York City, the Civil War, and slavery. Among the book collection authored by the students, there were biographies of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Harriet Tubman and information books on the Civil War, the American Pilgrims, the first American settlers, and the history of Chinatown. These books stayed in the class library and have become reading material for subsequent students.

Connected Learning in CLA

The social studies content in CLA covers a wide range of American history: from Native Americans, to Columbus' discovery, to the Revolutionary War, to the Civil War, to slavery, to immigrants, to Western expansion, to World War II, to the American government. The students read textbooks, fiction, nonfiction, and children's books in both English and Chinese. In addition to doing question-and-answer exercises and memorizing facts, they discuss events, do inquiry projects, and write compare-and-contrast essays to connect their learning. Among the students' work, I am most impressed with their connected learning in CLA. When they study one topic, they compare and contrast what they have learned before and now. For instance, during their study of slavery, they compared the suffering of the slaves with that of the Native Americans. Later, when they studied immigration in the 1920s, they not only compared the new immigrants with the early Pilgrims but also connected all the suppressed people in American history—Native Americans, black slaves, and new immigrants—in their discussion. Of course, they naturally contrasted the experiences of the early Chinese immigrants and their own experiences. Through connecting the learning to their personal experience, they realized they were much more fortunate than the early Chinese immigrants. The following is an excerpt from a piece written by a sixth grader in English:

The development of science has made Chinese's journey to the U.S. easier. When early Chinese immigrants came, the only transportation was ship because at that time airplane was not invented. Then they were on the boat they had a difficult time. They did not have fresh foods to eat. They didn't have

enough space to [too] so they had to squeeze to each other. When my parents and me came to America, we came by an airplane. At the airplane we enjoyed fresh foods and plenty of space. We even had different TV programs to watch.

The change of American government's immigration policies greatly affect immigrant's life. When the early Chinese immigrants came to America, the American government treated them as second-class citizens. At that time if a Chinese immigrant was beat up by an American, the government rarely published [punished] the person who did the beating. Now the government treats all immigrants just like Americans. People with different cultural backgrounds respect each other in this great nation.

I was glad to see many students display a positive look at the American nation and their own experiences through this contrast.

The students loved to compare wars, and they were fascinated by the wars that took place in American history, each one of which made the country different. After they studied the Civil War, they compared it with the Revolutionary War and found the similarities and differences in the causes, results, and consequences. Usually the teacher would first have the students do this compare and contrast exercise in groups before they drafted their essays. In their discussion, they talked about the wars and also the leaders, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. In a group, one student raised an interesting question during the discussion: "If George Washington were the president during the Revolutionary War and started the war, would he have been killed like Abraham Lincoln after the war?" His question was brushed away by his peers, saying, "That was impossible because America was not even a country that time, how could Washington be a president?" Though the boy didn't say more, I was amazed by this boy's question. His question implied if a president starts a war, does he run the risk of being killed? I was impressed by this boy's thinking and the connection he was able to make.

After the discussion in class, the students would work on their comparison essays. Following is an excerpt from a typical comparison essay on this topic:

The cause of the American Revolutionary was that the British government was asking for too much taxes. The colonists couldn't pay it. The cause of the Civil War was because of slavery. In the North there were no slaves because they had lot of factories and stores. They didn't need slaves and they thought that having slaves was no good because slaves were human being also. But the South didn't think that way. There were a lot of plantations in the South, but not much stores and factories. The people in the South needed slaves to work for them. So the North and the South were arguing about slavery. Later the South decided to leave the Union. Then the Civil War Began.

The student ended her essay as follows:

The results of the two wars were the same because during American Revolutionary War the American won the war. In the Civil War the South leave the Union. At the end of the war the North won the war. So in the both wars Americans had won the war.

In this two wars there were a lot of people died. And a lot of people lost their family members. I think that is very sad. War cause people lose their home and family. I hate wars.

Sometimes a student or two would do their comparison essays differently than the others, and usually their writing turned out to be more interesting. Instead of comparing the Civil War with the Revolutionary War, a student decided to write a different piece as a report of his study of the Civil War that concludes:

It is not good that brother fight against brothers because it makes a family no safety and peace. No safety and peace can make a family very unhappy and poor. It is a good thing that after the Civil War the American people understand this and they never fight against each other again. This is why the United States is the most powerful country in the world today and so many people want to come to this country.

China is a big country. Chinese people are smart. But China is not a very rich and powerful country in the world. Why? My father told me that there are too many civil wars in Chinese history. Fighting kills people and damages economy. I think this a reason why China is not strong like America. I hope people in China understand this and be friendly to each other. I will write letters to my friends in China. I will tell them brothers in a family should not fight against each other. People in a country should not fight against each other. No fighting a family will be safe and happy. No fighting a country will be strong and powerful.

This piece demonstrated not only his newly learned knowledge about the American Civil War but also his new perspective gained toward China. Through the comparison of the two countries, this student realized what had made America a country which people from all over the world come to join and why China lags so economically as compared with many other countries in the world.

The students were always encouraged to make comparisons between America and China. Since the CLA teachers had knowledge of both countries, they could help and join them in the discussion. During their study of American history at different periods, they compared America's colonial time with China's

imperial period; they linked America's slavery system with China's feudal system; they contrasted democratic government with communist society; and they were also puzzled about why World War II books didn't mention Japan's invasion of China, which lasted eight years. Through these comparisons and contrasts between what the students are learning and what they know about China, the students gain not only a good understanding of America but also a different level of understanding of China.

They also like to link America's past to its present. After the teacher gave a brief talk on the wars America fought outside of its land, the students, in groups of six or seven, continued their comparison and contrast of American's role in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the current war in Afghanistan. I joined a group and was amazed by the discussion (conducted in Chinese). A boy started first:

Except the current war in Afghanistan, the Americans fought all the other wars to help others. For instance, they joined World War II to help Europeans, fought the Korean War to help the South Koreans, and in the Vietnam War, they helped the south regime in Vietnam, and then helped Kuwait fight against Iraq in the Gulf War. Only in this Afghanistan war, it is for America's own revenge after the September 11 terrorist attack.

Several students agreed with him and one added his words:

Americans love to help others, that is to keep them to be the superpower in the world. Now, we are suffering, and look what the Arabs did to us in New York.

A girl joined the discussion softly:

I think the Americans fought all the wars for themselves. In World War II, they joined the war only after the Pearl Harbor attack. They fought the Korean and Vietnam Wars to prevent Communism from gaining power in the world. That is also for their own ideas. Then they fought the Gulf War for the oil supply.

Another girl added:

In China, we call America the imperialist, because they go to other countries to fight . . .

A boy cut in:

You can't say that about World War II and the war in Afghanistan now. They are the wars for justice, to fight against German Nazis and to fight the Muslim terrorists.

Another student joined in:

My great uncle died in the Korean War. My grandpa told me that he was killed by Americans.

A girl said:

But my great-aunt told me Americans helped us fight against Japanese during World War II. Japanese killed a lot of Chinese in China.

Another girl tried to pull the group back to discuss the Vietnam War:

How about the Vietnam War—the American people were against this war themselves.

A boy followed:

But nobody is against our war in Afghanistan. We hate those terrorists and want to kill them all. They kill so many here in our city. And it is hard to find jobs now.

Another student joined his discussion:

Yeah, the first time, America was invaded like this and suffered by the outsiders' attack on its own land. Of course, we have to fight back.

I was impressed with their knowledge, the connections they made from one war to another, and also their confidence in expressing their opinions. Though they didn't discuss the Vietnam War that much, they certainly knew a lot about wars and why the Americans fought those wars. From their family stories, they also knew in what war China was the enemy to Americans, and in what war Chinese and Americans were friends. It is interesting to notice how they shifted their positions when they talked about different wars. When they talked about the current war in Afghanistan, they felt more personally connected and referred it to as "our war" and identified themselves as Americans by saying "We have to fight back." By living so close to the World Trade Center, they were all deeply affected by the September 11 attack. Before then, it seems that they had never felt so American.

During election time, they voiced their opinions about Republican and Democratic Parties regarding who supported immigrants, social service, and labor unions. They pay great attention to the AIDS epidemic in Africa, terrorist bombings, fighting in the Mideast, and other global current events. Reading, writing, and talking about historical and current events have prepared these students to function as literate citizens in this new world and enabled them to foster their new identities as Chinese Americans. Through the development of this kind of thinking ability and broad interest and knowledge

in their first language, our students are preparing in our new CLA program not only for their education in America but also for their present and future lives in this democratic world.

The Result of the Reform in the Chinese Language Arts Program

We started this CLA reform during the second year of my visits. In the past four years, the CLA faculty has worked more collaboratively with the ESL faculty, planning the same units on American slavery, immigrants, and Native Americans. The teachers in the ESL and social studies departments have all expressed that our newly arrived Chinese immigrant children are much better prepared in many ways since they have been in the new CLA program: they have a better knowledge base, they learn English faster, and they are more comfortable with expressing themselves in English. Also, they experience a smoother transition to mainstream classes. The CLA program has become an essential part of our overall school curriculum, and its faculty plays a central role in the students' learning.

Since the CLA became integrated with social studies, we have had fewer students and parents complain about their placement in the bilingual program or their learning in CLA classes. The students feel they need the knowledge they learn in CLA class to prepare for their future education and lives in this new world. Some of the students, who come with pretty good English skills, take CLA only for their first year in America. Those students used to complain the most, as they felt they wasted time learning something that had little to do with the new world or with their current or future learning in other classes. They resented having to take the class just because they were newcomers to the country. Now they constantly come back to their CLA teachers for questions related to ESL and other subject classes taught in English. Parents can see the importance of the class and love to hear their children tell them about America, which is knowledge they also need for citizenship. At my last meeting with the faculty, Jian, one of the CLA teachers, commented on the reform we made in the Chinese language arts program as an "historic change" that had made a significant difference in helping students gain the content knowledge they needed for their American education and for their transition to their new lives in the new country.

More Challenges

Since we implemented the change in the CLA program, we have continued to make the program better. In addition to working with individual teachers year-round, Pam and I sit down with the whole group and ask in what way

we should make our program better by the end of each year. First, we are making the whole content study more cohesive from grade to grade; each grade reserves certain historical periods as its focus to avoid overlapping content. Second, the CLA teachers are working more closely with the ESL teachers in planning the theme studies. This way, the students will learn the same topic in both CLA and ESL classes, and both classes will reinforce the learning and have joint assignments and projects. This collaboration benefits the students a great deal and takes much planning time by the faculty at the grade level. Third, the CLA teachers work closely with the staff developers to search for ways to find a balance between helping students with limited Chinese literacy build content knowledge and helping them develop their first language proficiency and literacy. All this improvement requires the faculty to work collaboratively within the department and across the departments and constantly adjust their teaching to meet the students' needs.

The most challenging problem that continues to face the CLA faculty is how to reach the students whose first language literacy is very limited. Like any other class, a CLA class has students with a wide range of levels. The literacy gap between students at the advanced level and students with limited reading and writing skills can be five to seven years. Because of its heavy content requirement, the CLA course leaves little space to help the students who have limited Chinese reading and writing skills. Usually about 15 percent of the students have very limited literacy skills. These students have limited vocabulary, are unable to express themselves in writing, and don't know how to use punctuation. With this limited proficiency in their first language, they usually have the most problems in their English learning as well. When I read the Chinese writing written by these students, I could tell that they were barely at the first-grade level in Chinese, but they are now sixth graders in America. Usually these students come from families that can give them little help and support for their schoolwork. Though the students can understand their CLA teachers, they have a hard time keeping up with the reading and writing. Their work shows minimum progress throughout the year.

In the CLA/social studies program, the students develop their first language literacy through frequent reading and writing in Chinese in the context of learning about America, but teachers usually don't have time to teach the basic skills of the Chinese language or literacy conventions. For a majority of the students, this is fine, but for the group at the low end, this presents a problem. Striking a balance between teaching the content knowledge and helping students develop their basic Chinese language skills, especially for the students with limited Chinese reading and writing skills, remains a big challenge in our CLA/social studies teaching.

Throughout this chapter, I may sound as if there has not been any teacher's resistance to the changes we made in the CLA department. That is certainly false. One of the CLA teachers preferred the textbook to trade books and had her students do more worksheets than writing. For three years, Pam and I worked closely with her. She made some changes in her teaching, such as increasing opportunities for group discussion and letting students write more. But her lectures were mostly textbook-bound. Compared with other classes, her students were much less engaged in their learning.

We kept pushing her to improve, and finally she broke down. She asked to go back to teaching only Chinese language arts, not integrated with American studies. She stated that Pam and I showed disrespect for the Chinese heritage and that we were denying the importance of the students learning their own Chinese culture and language. She also claimed that she had to prepare her students for the Chinese test that is required by the state. She showed me three sets of the Chinese tests and asked me how she could prepare her students for those tests while having to teach American history. Alice, Pam, and I expressed to her that good teaching should put students' interest and benefit first, not the test. Eventually this teacher started including more trade books and having students do more writing rather than worksheets in her teaching. We assume she may need to have her own pace for change. Perhaps Pam and I should be more patient and trustful.