



President's Letter

Dear Colleagues,

As I end my term as President, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who has and will continue to work tirelessly to ensure NYS TESOL runs true to its vision and mission. It has been an honor to have this opportunity to work with such dedicated individuals and to serve you and the organization.

I hope you will find our newsletter's topics useful in your work: digital stories in ESL classes, how school administrators can be more creative in helping non-native English speaking parents be more involved in their children's education, the facility of field trips for fostering community and language acquisition, and a Promising Practices column on non-verbal communication in the classroom. I would especially like to acknowledge the time and commitment of the Idiom's editor, Genie Smiddy, for all of the care and time she puts in to make our newsletter such a helpful and meaningful publication for our NYS TESOL community!

NYS TESOL ensures that the voices of our members, non-members and ELLs statewide are heard. We can only continue with the help of such volunteers who spend countless hours warranting that educators and administrators continue receiving professional development that they may not otherwise receive. This is crucial in developing a voice of our own for our ELLs. So, once again I urge everyone to [get involved](#).

Furthermore, I would like to encourage all to attend the NYS TESOL 49th Annual Conference in White Plains! Conference Vice President, Monica Baker and her team have been working tirelessly to prepare for the biggest professional development and networking event for the year for New York TESOL educators. Please visit the annual conference website for more information on keynote speakers and tentative schedule: <https://sites.google.com/nystesol.org/nys-tesol-annual-conference-19>

Finally, I would like to congratulate the board members who are finishing their tenure and I wish Laura Baecher much success as she begins her presidency. I am very confident that she will continue in our collective efforts to meet the mission and vision of NYS TESOL. I look forward to working with her and the rest of the Board in 2019–2020.

I hope to see you in White Plains in November!

Yours in NYS TESOL,

Juliet M. Luther, Ph.D.

President, NYS TESOL Bilingual/ESOL
Educator, NYCDOE/CUNY



Promising Practices – This is an ongoing column featuring advice for effective teaching. Please send article submissions to the column editor, Ann C. Wintergerst, St. John's University at promisingpractices@idiom.nystesol.org

Non-Verbal Communication in the ELL Classroom

By Ann C. Wintergerst

Communication involves not only the spoken word but also the non-verbal aspect, or body language. The anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell (1974) found that over 65% of a conversation is conveyed through nonverbal cues. Since non-verbal communication differs in meaning across cultures, it can cause cultural misunderstandings. This aspect of communication should not be overlooked by teachers in the language classroom.

Definition of Non-Verbal Behavior

Non-verbal behavior has been defined as communication without words (Moore, Hickson, & Stacks, 2014). Such a definition is rather simplistic in that it neglects to include its many complexities. Just as verbal communication is rule-governed, so too is non-verbal behavior. DeCapua and Wintergerst (2016) remind us that non-verbal behavior “must be part of a shared code of understanding among speakers” (p. 163). We are often unaware of the messages that our gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice send to others. However, when communicating with strangers, we become conscious of these behaviors since speakers from other cultures exhibit some non-verbal behaviors that conflict with those in our culture.

Types of Non-Verbal Behavior

Five different types of non-verbal behavior will be considered. These include space (proxemics), body movements (kinesics), gestures, eye contact (oculesics), and touch (haptics).

- 1. Proxemics**, or the use of space, denotes the physical area to which access is allowed or denied to speakers. Personal space can be compared to an imaginary bubble that surrounds a person and the preferred distance from the other person in a communicative situation. Age, gender, social status, and the context of the communication increase or decrease the bubble. Hall (1976) noted that through interpersonal space and distance a speaker manages intimacy. While some cultures prefer greater distance between speakers, others choose to be closer.



Activity: Ask students to introduce themselves to a new classmate. See how they approach this task. Monitor their use of space.

When the activity is completed, tell them about personal space and distance. Share with them that Arabs, Latin Americans, and those from many African cultures stand close to each other and touch each other. In such high-contact cultures, persons from other cultures feel crowded, anxious, and threatened. They see their personal space encroached upon by the closeness of the other person. In contrast, most Asian cultures are low-contact cultures where a person prefers to stand at “an arm’s length” from the other (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013) with hardly any eye contact, touching, and a designated distance between them.

- 2. Kinesics** refers to body movements. Gestures are the most observable body movement since these are used intuitively and routinely. When Italians communicate in daily conversation, they talk with their hands to a large extent.

Activity: Ask students to role play introducing themselves to a new principal, a new teacher, or a new classmate. See how they approach this task when one male and one female, two females, or two males participate. Monitor their body movements.

When the activity is completed, tell them that when greeting someone formally, bowing occurs primarily in Asian cultures such as Korea and Japan, while handshaking is the practice found in Western cultures. In China, the Middle East, Africa, and South America, handshakes tend to be lighter and last longer than in Western countries. In Islamic countries, men never shake the hands of women outside of the family.

- 3. Gestures** have different meanings in different cultures. The thumbs-up gesture conveys a positive meaning in Canada and in the United States, but that same gesture is extremely obscene in Iran. The hitchhiking gesture in North America is offensive in Australia and New Zealand. Nodding the head up and down to convey agreement or *yes* in Canada and in the United States communicates disagreement or *no* in the Greek culture. Germans count to three with the thumb, index finger, and middle finger, whereas Americans, British, and Canadians use the index, middle, and ring fingers. While Americans and Canadians use the index finger and thumb in a circle to mean *okay*, in Brazil this gesture insults a person.

Activity: Ask students to google gestures that lead to cultural misunderstandings by searching keywords such as intercultural non-verbal miscommunication or body



language. Assign each group a different continent - Asia, Australia, Africa, Europe, North America, South America - representing different cultural groups. Have each group present gestures that lead to cultural misunderstandings.

When the activity is completed, tell them that Wing (2010) found bilingual speakers to use more gestures than monolingual speakers.

- 4. Oculesics** pertains to eye behavior or eye movement. When communicating with someone from another culture, one must consider not only the person with whom eye contact is made but also the length of the eye contact and the context in which eye contact shows respect. China, Japan, and other Asian cultures, or low-contact cultures, avoid eye contact in communication. North Americans and Northern Europeans, or moderate-contact cultures, engage in more eye contact but not as much as Latin Americans or those from Mediterranean cultures, or high-contact cultures (Samovar, et al., 2014).

Activity: Ask students to talk with a person from another culture about the weather. Have them first make eye contact while talking and then look down, avoiding eye contact completely. Ask the person how this felt when eye contact changed.

When the activity is completed, tell them that Bolivians, Chileans and Peruvians demand eye contact. In Arab countries, in Greece, and in Spain, eye contact among men is so intense that it is comparable to staring at someone, suggesting domination and forcefulness of the delivered message. This kind of staring can have sexual implications if shown between men and women or in same sex contexts where there is an attraction.

- 5. Haptics** refers to touch behavior or touching. Touching can show affection, support, and even dominance. Gender and relationship with a person are keys to interpreting touching.

Activity: Ask students to change their usual non-verbal behavior during a group discussion on a topic. Give each student a different behavior unknown to the others: tap your finger when wanting to say something; touch the person repeatedly with whom you are speaking; elbow the person when you want to speak, or lean into the person with whom you are speaking. After the discussion, ask how each felt about the non-verbal behavior assigned, whether it was difficult to communicate, and what was learned.



When the activity is completed, tell them that Latin Americans touch members of the same sex much more frequently than do Asians. Southern Europeans touch much more than northern Europeans. North American women tend to touch more than men. To touch one's head in Thailand is insulting because the head houses the soul. Using the left hand to pass something or to greet someone is unacceptable for Muslims and some African cultures where the left hand is considered unclean. Koreans hand things to a person with both hands as a form of politeness.

Conclusion

Communication suffers when cross-cultural non-verbal behavior is misinterpreted and also misunderstood. Interpreting the behavior of others based on one's own frame of reference leads to cross-cultural communication problems. DeCapua and Wintergerst (2016) caution that "Culture influences and directs those experiences and is, therefore, a major contributor to how speakers send, receive, and respond to non-verbal symbols" (p. 175). Successful cross-cultural interaction occurs when students can interpret nonverbal cues correctly. Wintergerst and McVeigh (2011) suggest that teachers help their students understand the basic concepts of nonverbal communication by making them aware of these in their daily lives and across cultures using in-class demonstrations and discussion of varied nonverbal behaviors.

References

- Birdwhistell, R. (1974). The language of the body: The natural environment of words. In A. Silverstein (Ed.), *Human communication: Theoretical explorations* (pp. 203-220). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- DeCapua, A., & Wintergerst, A.C. (2016). *Crossing cultures in the language classroom* (2nd ed.). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. [Chapter 4 Non-Verbal Communication was the source of some content appearing in this article].
- Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Knapp, M., Hall, J., & Horgan, T. (2013). *Nonverbal communication in human communication* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Moore, N. J., Hickson, M., & Stacks, D. (2014). *Nonverbal communication: Studies and applications* (6th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.



Samovar, L., Porter, R., McDaniel, E., & Roy, C. (Eds.). (2014). *Intercultural communication: A reader* (14th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Wing, C. S. (2010). Cross-cultural transfer in gesture frequency in Chinese-English bilinguals. *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 25(10), 1335-1353.

Wintergerst, A. C., & McVeigh, J. (2011). *Tips for teaching culture: Practical approaches to intercultural communication*. White Plains, NY: Pearson.

Ann C. Wintergerst is Professor of TESOL in the Department of Languages & Literatures at St. John's University. She is co-author of three culture books, numerous articles, and a frequent presenter at TESOL, NYS TESOL, and NYSABE. She can be reached at winterga@stjohns.edu.



The Mechanics of Digital Storytelling

By Dinara Yeung Gilmanova

As one of the corollaries of rapid globalization, the United States is getting increasingly technologized, challenging and even marginalizing its most vulnerable populations, specifically adult English as a second language (ESL) learners striving to realize their academic and professional aspirations. Therefore, adult ESL teachers should act as intermediaries for ESL learners in their acquisition of digital literacy and integrate technology into language instruction in an accessible way. One way of successfully facilitating this connection is by creating digital stories.

I had the opportunity to share my idea on how digital storytelling could be a potent tool for teaching academic ESL and fostering *academic skills* (i.e. critical thinking, writing skills, problem-solving skills, researching, etc.) at the Sixth Annual Hunter Adult TESOL Teacher Support Group (HATTSG) Professional Development Mini-Conference dedicated to the topic of “Building Communities through Digital Literacy.” At the workshop, I demonstrated how digital storytelling could be scaffolded to support students in creating their own digital stories, using relevant worksheets and models that facilitate successful execution of the task.

The advantages of digital storytelling for language learners include more than just fostering academic skills, however. With digital storytelling, students also develop imperative 21st century skills such as retrieving, storing, and manipulating information from the Internet and interpreting and using visuals to communicate ideas. Moreover, using digital storytelling yields a host of linguistic benefits as students finesse their oral skills, pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm when they narrate their own stories. Their vocabulary and grammar improve because they write their own narratives. Finally, students hone their reading and listening comprehension abilities as they analyze, synthesize and evaluate information from various sources.

As it can be seen, digital storytelling practices multiple skills and integrating it into ESL instruction enables ESL teachers to incorporate the visual, auditory, and tactile learning modalities and, therefore, better accommodate a wide range of learners. However, creating a digital story is a complex process that involves a multipronged approach, and each stage of the approach must be carefully explained, scaffolded, and supervised by a teacher.

The Dramatic Arc



An effective digital story has a coherent and cohesive structure so that the audience can follow it easily. It is crucial that a storyteller compose a narrative in stages as in the dramatic arc with an introduction that teases the audience, a body that has rising action, which builds anticipation, a climax that reveals the most intense, pivotal moment, falling action that renews the audience's hope in a happy ending, and a resolution that leaves trouble behind and invites the audience to reflect on the story.

To help students follow this structure, they are given an appropriate scaffold, such as a template (see Appendix A: The Dramatic Arc), that will guide them in developing their storyline. Being able to convey information clearly and logically both in speaking and writing is a crucial skill that will enable students to perform effectively in college.

Visuals

Any digital story should be accompanied by vivid illustrations in order to maintain the audience's attention and facilitate effective narration and comprehension of a story. Selecting appropriate images to enhance the comprehensibility of information is a key skill of the 21st century. Hence, by scouring the Internet for images and experimenting with different graphic materials in their digital stories, students develop *visual literacy* (i.e., the ability to interpret data in the form of images), which is a precursor to the academic skill of conveying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information using visual aids.

Storyboard

To streamline the process of translating a conventional verbal story into a digital one, the narrative and accompanying visuals should be first arranged on a storyboard (see Appendix B: Storyboard Template) to allow a storyteller to confirm that the content of a story is clearly conveyed as well as give the teacher a chance to provide feedback on the accuracy of the language used and the quality of the narrative.

The storyboard template that I used for my workshop had been created on PowerPoint. Hence, as a disclaimer, it should be noted that the following description of a storyboard template is intended for PowerPoint only; however, with minor adjustments, it could be used with other applications. The template itself can be printed out or distributed to students electronically. The storyboard template consists of three boxes: the main image frame, the slide script box for the text that will appear on the actual slide, and the slide features box for sound, transition and



animation effects, and delay and duration details, all of which can be chosen from the PowerPoint toolbar.

After having filled out the dramatic arc template and selected appropriate images for a story, the process of assembling information on the storyboard is an absolute “cakewalk” because all that is left for a student to do is to copy and paste, if done electronically, or cut and attach manually, if on paper, all of the images and excerpts from the narrative in the dramatic arc grid. It is important to note that students should not copy the entire paragraphs from the dramatic arc but only the introductory sentences; otherwise, an overload of text may distract the audience from listening.

Project Types and Topics for a Digital Story

In general, digital storytelling can happen at any point in a course. For example, it could be a midpoint or final group/individual project; the latter would allow students to develop a digital story throughout the entire semester. The topics for a digital story can be either assigned by a teacher or chosen by students from the list of topics, compiled by the teacher, that are relevant to the course material. For instance, the topic that I chose for my model of a digital story was the Ice Bucket Challenge. In the digital story, I described to whom the idea of the Ice Bucket Challenge was credited, how posting the videos of people taking the challenge began, and what the challenge outcomes were. The purpose of my digital story was to educate the audience about the whole point of the Ice Bucket Challenge and, of course, bring awareness to the disease. Therefore, students or teachers could choose essentially any topic for a digital story. For example, they could select one of the trending topics on social media, such as the one I chose; students could tell about their native culture to contribute to raising cross-cultural awareness of their peers; they could choose one of the pressing political, social, economic, or environmental topics and share their perspective on the status quo in their host or home country.

Conclusion

ESL teachers must strive to facilitate the convergence of technology with language instruction not only because it combines the visual, auditory, and tactile learning modalities and meets the needs of a wide range of learners, but also because it can help foster the skills our students must acquire to “thrive in increasingly media-varied environments” (Riesland, 2005 in Robin, 2008. p. 222). And, digital storytelling is one of the most viable avenues for actualizing that convergence.



References

Robin, B. R. (2008). Digital storytelling: A powerful technology tool for the 21st century classroom. *Theory into Practice*, 47(3), 220-228. Retrieved March 4, 2019, from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40071546>

Other sources consulted (not cited herein)

The Learning Portal: College Libraries Ontario
<https://tlp-lpa.ca/digital-skills/digital-storytelling>

Dinara Yeung Gilmanova is an alumna of Hunter College-School of Education. She currently teaches general ESL and TOEFL at Campus Education-Manhattan Branch. Dinara advocates for integration of technology into ESL instruction and maintains that digital storytelling is a powerful tool for developing study skills and preparing learners for the highly technologized world. She can be reached at DinaraYeungGilmanova26@myhunter.cuny.edu

Appendices

Appendix A: The Dramatic Arc

Story Element	Your Narrative	Prompts/Directions
Introduction & Dramatic Question Setting the scene and asking an intriguing or hypothetical question to capture your listener's attention.		Begin with: <i>"Imagine you're/being ..."</i> <i>"Picture this/yourself ..."</i> Finish with: <i>"Would you believe if I said that ...?"</i> <i>"Why do you think that is?"</i>



<p>Rising Action Building suspense and slowly leading the listener to the answer.</p>		<p>Provide context or background information. Introduce main characters and other key details in your story.</p>
<p>Climax Getting to the pivotal moment—revealing the answer.</p>		<p>Tell the most interesting part, in which everything changes/might change. Begin with: <i>“However, ...”</i> <i>“... but that wasn’t the case because ...”</i> <i>“... but that’s not what happened.”</i></p> <p>Include details such as names, dates, locations.</p>
<p>Falling Action Slowly wrapping up your story and adding final (important) details.</p>		<p>Discuss the consequences of the event/action described earlier in the story; what happened in the end.</p>
<p>Resolution Revealing the significance of your story and identifying future plans.</p>		<p>Discuss or summarize the highlights of your story:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What lesson(s) you want your listeners to learn from your story. • How what they learned from your story can help your listeners change/improve the quality of their lives/work.



Appendix B: Storyboard Template

Slide image frame	
Slide text	
Slide features	<p><i>Transition:</i> <i>Sound:</i> <i>Animation:</i> <i>Delay:</i> <i>Duration:</i></p>



Culture Corner— This is an ongoing column highlighting issues and insights on advocacy, social justice and inclusion within the TESOL community. Please send article submissions to the column editor, Genie Smiddy at editors@idiom.nystesol.org

Field Trips: The Benefits of Informal Conversations

By Roberta Rossi Baum

The following dialogue is an exchange between a small class of my students and me on a field trip to The Museum of City of New York: *New York at its Core* exhibit.

Student A: *Roberta, were you there on September 11th?*

Me: *Yes, I was living in Brooklyn at the time. Where were you?*

Student A: *I was in Riyadh and very little - about 9 or 10. It was nighttime when the Towers fell. My family went to a Community Center to watch the news. Everybody was crying.*

Me: *How about you two, do you remember where you were on September 11th?*

Student B: *I was in Singapore, working for a news station – we were shocked!*

Student C: *I was so little, and don't remember anything – I only remember reading about it in history class.*

Me: *Let me tell you a story that I've never forgotten. A family with small children loses their father that day. As you can imagine they are devastated. That night, the mother calls the father's cell phone so the children could listen to their father's voice and leave a message. The mother continues her husband's cell phone service for a year. Every night her children call their father to hear his voice and say I love you.*

When I was done with the story, I look up and notice there was not a dry eye among us.



I am an ESL instructor transitioning to the academic classroom after teaching in a community-based setting for eight years – I’m looking for a bridge to academic life. By pure accident, I found it through the workshop *Night at the Museum*, where educators from different museums demonstrated how trips to museums became opportunities for conversation and critical thinking for ESOL students’ of any level. This workshop inspired me to incorporate field trips into my courses’ curricula to challenge my students’ language skills and thought. But even though this was my original purpose, two other unexpected benefits evolved from our field trips that added to but went beyond increasing their language use and learning. My students were able to practice informal conversations in a more relaxed environment. The field trips allowed for a team spirit and general sense of well-being which was created by a developing student-teacher rapport and emerging friendships.

The impact of informal conversations

Some of my students only use English in class. They maintain a lifestyle which permits them to navigate New York while ‘living at home’ in their native language. At a minimum, these trips forced students to use English outside the classroom. More proficient students are challenged to rephrase their speech so less proficient students can understand them. Those less proficient students are then stretched and pulled up willingly to use more English in their communication. Brown (2014) reminds us of Long’s Interaction Hypothesis, where more proficient speakers will modify their speech (slow down or give paraphrases) to language learners (p. 296). This modification is an important step in language learning thus making an informal conversation a powerful tool. Lee (2016) theorizes how “many studies on informal interaction between native English speakers and ESL / EFL speakers have shown that these interactions improve ESL and EFL students’ conversational skills, oral proficiency, and self-confidence in their oral English language” (p. 16). My student, Ali, is a great example of how conversing with people can improve your language skills. He has a warm and sparkling personality. Ali is a charming conversationalist and understands the power of speaking. As soon as we set out for a field trip, Ali begins, “*Teacher, can I ask you...*” Nothing is taboo for discussion, cultural differences to restaurant recommendations. Ali never hesitates to ask questions and or talk with people. That is why he speaks so well.

It’s not always easy to open up

These were ELLs, from diverse backgrounds who I had moved from the comfort of the classroom. It was all a little awkward. It was apparent that different cultures have different attitudes about sharing one’s feelings. For example, the United States is considered a low context



culture where people do not hesitate to express themselves freely - no context is necessary to understand the message. On the other hand, a high context culture like, Taiwan, speaking one's mind may not be looked upon positively (Webb & Barrett, 2014, pp. 12 – 13). On our trips, getting students to open up from these divergent cultural differences can be challenging. I am reminded of Fang, a traditional Chinese student and a good example of high context culture. Fang was a well-traveled, young man who oddly asked many logistical questions about the field trips. For instance, “*When exactly will we depart for trip?*” “*How long is the subway ride?*” “*How long will we be outside?*” “*Is it a long walk to the museum?*” “*At what time will we return to class?*” I sensed Fang was uncomfortable about the trip but could not outwardly express those feelings, so instead was inquisitive about the pitfalls of the trip rather than voice his displeasure. Nonetheless, I answered all of Fang's questions without the appearance of judgement. In an effort to bridge the gap between these divergent cultural differences, I over-compensate by providing meticulous details and clear agendas to my students always with the caveat that I do not intend to offend. Fang and other students appreciate this and interpret it as a “caring” mother figure, which is just fine by me. Fang survived the field trip that day and maybe grew to trust me a little bit more.

Why it is important to spend time outside of class

Spending time outside of class not only increases exposure to English it also increases student-teacher rapport and creates friendships. I would classify these rapport-building informal conversations as out-of-class communication (OCC) as defined by Nadler and Nadler (2001) in Dobransky and Frymier's (2004) article on teacher-student relationships (pp.213-214). Dobransky and Frymier (2004) hypothesized that students who engage in OCC discussions with their instructors will have a more interpersonal teacher-student relationship that would ultimately have a positive effect on learning. (pp. 214 – 16). On field trips, I connected with my students in ways that weren't possible in the classroom. I really got to know and develop a more interpersonal relationship with them. The good student-teacher rapport spilled over and encouraged students to build friendships that also encouraged better study habits. I remember two students, Fan and Jasmin, an unlikely pair who forged a bond. After one particular field trip, several students and I grabbed a bite to eat. Fan and Jasmin were part of that group. We spent the afternoon talking and laughing. It was lovely. After that trip, Fan and Jasmin spent more and more time together. They even did their own excursions on the weekends. Their English was bound to progress; it was the only language they had in common. Jasmin who was older and more proficient became a mentor to Fan resulting in Fan's work improving; her presentations were more organized and delivered with clarity and confidence. For Jasmin, she received



language practice but the greater benefit she found was companionship. She missed her family, especially caring for her younger siblings, and Fan filled that void in a minor sense for Jasmin. Fan and Jasmin “found” each other on the field trip and discovered in each other, a study partner and a companion to explore the city.

In conclusion, if schedules, planning and budgets permit, I would highly recommend excursions outside the classroom. New York City offers endless options. A field trip is a perfect way to engage your students with the city and the English language. If you’re lucky, conversations could take you on a lovely path of interactions with students on a deeper level. Lee (2016) elaborated on how “creating a non-threatening and non-judgmental atmosphere for informal English conversations... plays an important role in helping them speak English freely and confidently, and also ... lowers anxiety levels about making utterance errors or mistakes” (p. 24). However, even more so, the deeper connections we made with each other adds to if not goes beyond language learning as is evident from the dialogue in the beginning of this article that took place at the Museum of the City of New York. The relationships I forged with my students through these field trips are priceless. I hope the sentiment is mutual.

References

- Brown, H.D. (2014) *Principles of language learning and teaching*. White Plains, NY: Pearson.
- Dobransky, N. and Frymier, A. B. (Summer 2004). Developing teacher-student relationships through out of class communications. *Communication Quarterly*, 52 (3), pp. 211-223.
- Lee, E. J. (2016) International and American students’ perceptions of informal English conversations. *Journal of International Students*, 6 (1) pp. 14 – 34.
- Webb, N. G. and Barrett, L. O. (2014). Instructor-student rapport Taiwan ESL classrooms. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal*, 2 (2), pp. 9 – 23.

Roberta Rossi Baum has an MA from Hunter College in Adult TESOL and is a Language Educator at St. John’s University. She taught adult ESL at the Arab-American Family Support Center, community-based center for several years in Brooklyn where she lives with her family. She can be reached at baumr1@stjohns.edu.



Schools Should Better Integrate Immigrant Parents

By Özge Yol

Fleeing their once home now a warzone, leaving their belongings, relatives, and friends, Djaffar's parents managed to make their journey to New York from Pakistan—like some of the other 81 million immigrants in the USA (Migration Policy Institute). With the hope of diminishing the inevitable effects of this forced move, the first thing his parents did was to enroll Djaffar in school. Joining 4 million immigrant children in New York, Djaffar started the 6th grade without any English, but with a big smile on his face. Djaffar's parents were glad their child was in school, assuming that he was learning English and other subjects while also making friends. However, this contentment did not last long. When Djaffar's mother attended the first teacher-parent-conference, she realized what she had imagined was totally different from what was really happening at school. Djaffar was in some sort of trouble—she was able to sense it—but it was quite difficult for her to grasp what was really going on and what she could do for her child. She had difficulty communicating with the teachers despite her low intermediate English, and she was frustrated to be regarded as a “not-caring,” ignorant mother. She realized that she knew little about the education system or school structure, let alone understood what the teacher told them about Djaffar at school and his overall progress.

Like Djaffar's mother, many immigrant parents face barriers to school participation due to a lack of language proficiency, cultural differences, discrimination, limited school and teacher support, low socioeconomic status, limited access to transportation [especially in the suburbs], and an unpredictable full-time work schedule to name just some (Turney & Kao, 2009). Because of these barriers, immigrant parents feel unwelcome and ignored by schools, and become frustrated with the thick walls within school structure (Chavkin, 1989). Inviting parents to school meetings or providing online access to their children's grades are not enough; schools should better integrate immigrant parents into the school's culture and their children's education.

Parental involvement is crucial in students' achievement and adaptation to schooling. Involved parents become role models to their children in the sense that they show how ‘we value education and so should you’ (Domina, 2005). There is no doubt that active parent participation boosts children's self-confidence, motivation, and feeling comfortable in school (Turney & Kao, 2009). It also speeds up children's adaptation to American education and increases achievement (Chavkin, 1989). Some research shows that active parental involvement helps improve student



attendance, increases literacy levels, decreases the drop-out rate, and builds positive communication between parents and children (Swap, 1987; Tang, Dearing, & Weiss, 2012).

Parental involvement also benefits the parents. They form communities with other parents, teachers, or administrators and benefit from the social support and community ties that bring out the additional sources and diverse perspectives. Community activities such as going to political, religious, or social meetings generally result in positive returns for the individuals (Bourdieu, 1997). For instance, strong social support alleviates problems related to psychological and overall well-being of the immigrant families, who are separated from their extended family networks (Thompson, Flood, Goodwin, 2006). Parents with strong social ties are likely to present positive behaviors and become more involved and engage in supportive parenting behaviors even when they are experiencing adversity (Taylor et. al., 2015).

To involve immigrant parents, multicultural education advocates Sleeter and Grant (2009) strongly recommend that schools should maintain a strong relationship with the home and community, and parents and community members must be more than spectators simply attending graduation ceremonies, open houses, or sporting events. For this, schools and teachers should be aware of the barriers that immigrant parents face, and act to demolish these barriers.

Limited English proficiency prevents most immigrant parents from communicating with confidence and building effective relationships with teachers, even though they think positively of American schools and teachers. To mitigate the barrier to information about their children, schools can provide services like interpreters, translating school letters, or using e-mails to contact these parents (Hernandez & Leung, 2004). Major support for developing parents' understanding and experience of the school system can be provided through educational programs that focus on cultural adaptation, the American school system, and educational policy (Berger, 2000). For instance, *family literacy projects*, evening or weekend classes that aim to develop literacy and language skills of parents through the content related to issues pertaining to immigrants' lives and their children education, can help immigrant parents become knowledgeable on school relevant important issues while improving their language skills (Sohn & Wang, 2006).

Such projects can also be beneficial for the teachers as they might also lack information on the immigrant students' home life and culture if they do not have access to the immigrant families. When teachers teach immigrant parents in such literacy projects, they can build trusting relationships with immigrant parents—which can expand teachers' experience and understanding



of the parents' perspectives and culture. Cultural activities where immigrant parents are invited to represent themselves and to bring their perspectives can foster this trust relationship. In this way, immigrant parents can feel valued and accepted as an important part of the school and education system rather than feeling devalued and left out. On the other hand, teachers become more aware of family perspectives and cultures (Sohn & Wang, 2006)—which eventually benefits the school and immigrant students.

Adding to a lack of comfort with or knowledge of the education system is the fact that most immigrant parents' work hours and transportation issues can be a serious barrier to attending school meetings or activities. Wanting to establish a new life in the U.S. requires these parents to work hours that are inflexible and not always amenable to the schedules of meetings, fairs, and other activities that their children's schools provide. Also, parents who do not work still have difficulty participating in school activities because they do not have access to transportation if they live in areas where cars are the only way to get around. To overcome such problems, schools should be more in touch with families and should be flexible to accommodate to the needs of the parents such as offering home-visits or providing transportation to the meetings or activities.

From a school's perspective, some argue that they are already offering substantial services to parents, and it is immigrant parents' responsibility to play an active role in their children's education. In this regard, schools expect a standard family who is aware of the school system and understand how as parents they complement that of the teachers. However, most of the time, this is not the case as many parents do not know how to work with the school personnel or feel too embarrassed to go to the meetings as they do not want to show their ignorance of the school system (Valdes, 1996).

It is important to remember that both school and home environment have a strong influence on the development and education of children, so parents and schools should work together to establish a "mutual support" in the immigrant child's educational development. It is important that schools provide services to the immigrant parents. What is more important is to help immigrant parents become comfortable with the linguistic and cultural differences. In this way, we can be hopeful about the education of the immigrant children at schools. Believe me, Djaffar's parents—like many other immigrant parents—would be more willing to be involved in his child's schooling and success!



References

- Berger, E. H. (2000). *Parents as partners in education: Families and schools working together*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bourdieu, P. (1997). The forms of capital. In A. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown, A. Stuart Wells (Eds.), *Education: culture, economy, society* (pp. 46–58). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chavkin, N. F. (1989). *Debunking the myth about minority parents and the school*. *Educational Horizons*, 67, 199-123.
- Domina, T. (2005). Leveling the home advantage: Assessing the effectiveness of parental involvement in elementary school. *Sociology of Education*, 78, 233-249.
- Hernandez, S., & Leung, B. P. (2004). Using the Internet to boost parent-teacher relationships. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 40(3), 136-138.
- Migration Policy Institute, *State Immigration Data Profiles*, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/566e64334.html> [accessed March 2018]
- Sleeter, C. E., & Grant, C. A. (2009). *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class, and gender*. The USA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Sohn, S. & Wang, X. (2006). Immigrant parents' involvement in American schools: Perspectives from Korean mothers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(2), 125-132.
- Swap, S. M. (1987). *Enhancing parent involvement in schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Taylor, Z.E., Conger, R.D., Robins, R.W., & Widaman, K.F. (2015). Parenting practices and perceived social support: Longitudinal relations with the social competence of Mexican-origin children. *J Lat Psychol*, 3(4), 193–208.
- Tang, S., Dearing, E., Weiss, HB. (2012). Spanish-speaking Mexican American families' involvement in school-based activities and their children's literacy: The implications of



having teachers who speak Spanish and English. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(2), 177–187.

Thompson, R.A., Flood, M.F., & Goodwin, R. (2006). Social support and developmental psychopathology. In D. Cicchetti & D. J. Cohen (Eds.). *Developmental psychopathology: Risk, disorder, and adaptation*, (pp. 1–37). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Turney, K., & Kao, G. (2009). Barriers to school involvement: Are Immigrant Parents Disadvantaged? *The Journal of Educational Research*, 102(4), 257-271.

Valdes, G. (1996). *Con respeto bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools: An ethnographic portrait*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Özge Yol is currently a doctoral candidate at the program of Educational Theory and Practice of Binghamton University. She holds a master's degree in TESL from Northern Arizona University. Her research interests include multicultural education, second language writing, and teacher education.