Bridging the Gap – Teaching for Social Justice in the Language Classroom through Storytelling of Immigrant Experiences

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Abstract

In the U.S., Anti-Chinese sentiment increased during the pandemic, resulting in a considerable spike in overt violence and hatred directed at Asian American individuals. This has been a wakeup call compelling Chinese language educations to incorporate social justice in their teaching. Teaching for social justice includes incorporating the domains of identity, diversity, justice, and action into what we do as educators, yet it can be challenging to integrate social justice education in the classroom and find the natural connections between these domains and other goals of language teaching (e.g., developing language proficiency and intercultural competence).

This paper reports on how a business Chinese course at Emory University in the U.S. was revamped to forge connections with Chinese immigrants in the local business communities and create safe spaces for conversations about race, immigration, identity, and social justice. Specifically, classroom activities included story circles with Chinese immigrants centered around sharing personal stories. Reflection essays were assigned for students to reflect on their own personal beliefs and cultural values. Furthermore, students worked on a group project throughout the semester that allowed them to hear stories from Chinese immigrants and gain an understanding of how Chinese businesses navigate the social, cultural, political, and economic obstacles in recent years. This project integrates the development of speaking, listening, reading, and writing proficiencies while fostering social justice awareness and action. Participants of this presentation will examine the principles that frame social justice education and identify specific ways to connect the guidelines with their own language classroom.

Keywords: *Social Justice Education, Chinese language pedagogy*

1. Introduction

This paper introduces a semester-long project in my Business Chinese course that incorporated social justice education through storytelling of immigrant experiences. The course was offered in fall semester of 2022 when the Pandemic was still raging worldwide. During that time, Anti-Asian violence increased dramatically across the U.S. Research released by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University has revealed that anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 339% across the United States in 2021 compared to the year before in 2020 (NBC News, Feb. 14, 2022). This reality has generated growing attention to social justice education in world language teaching and research, and it serves as a rally call for language educators to amplify Asian voices in their curriculum and integrate social justice in language education.

According to Nieto (2002), language classrooms provide an ideal context for entering critical dialogue and welcoming the discussion of social justice. He further explains that language teachers should be encouraged to "challenge, confront, and disrupt misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on social and human differences" and to "promote critical thinking and agency for social change" (Nieto, 2010, p. 46).

To integrate our social justice teaching into all parts of our curricular, we need to first identify what it is precisely we're integrating. In this paper, I adopt the social justice standards developed by Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center in the U.S. Their Social Justice Standards: The Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework categorize components of social justice teaching into four distinct domains: *identity*, *diversity*, *justice*, and *activism*. These domains don't constitute individual units or lessons that are "covered" then left behind. Rather, each move in and out of our teaching during various parts of the curricular within the context of daily studies. Below is a description of what each domain aims to achieve (Teaching Tolerance, 2016):

Identity: Ensure students develop positive social identities while at the same time coming to understand their identities are complex and multilayered.

Diversity: Support students to develop a cultural competence that allows them to not only appreciate the many similarities and differences between individuals and social groups but understand the value these offer our society as a whole.

Justice: Teach students to recognize the relationship between individual and systemic acts of bias, injustice, and oppression and the role power and privilege play in shaping how we experience the world.

Activism: Help students identify and dismantle their own role in supporting harmful beliefs and practices, stand up for the rights of others, and reach out to educate others on issues that are important to them.

2. Teaching for Social Justice in the Language Classroom through Storytelling of Immigrant Experiences

2.1 Background

In fall 2022, I taught CHN351 Business Chinese course at Emory University in Atlanta, and I incorporated a semester-long project, "Making Connections: Chinese Communities in Atlanta", that centered around the exploration of the four domains of social justice education, i.e., identity, diversity, justice, and activism.

Metro Atlanta, located in Southeastern U.S., has a significant Chinese population. Chinese Americans in Atlanta have made important contributions to the region's economic and cultural development. However, the raging pandemic and the violence stemmed from Asian Hate have posed tremendous challenges for Chinese businesses and Chinese Americans in general. In 2022, a year after the Atlanta spa shooting that killed eight people, including Chinese business owners and workers, many Chinese Americans still lived in fear and some Chinese businesses closed their doors for safety reasons. Considering this larger context and the social disconnect faced by many, I designed the project to bring social justice issues into the classroom to forge meaningful connections between Chinese language learners and Chinese immigrant communities.

CHN351 is a Chinese language course providing advanced level Chinese language training in business contexts with emphasis on formal styles and business terminology. Upon completing the course, students are expected to reach a higher level of proficiency and achieve the following learning outcomes:

- Speak and write about business-related topics using formal style vocabulary and business terminologies at the advance level;
- Communicate with Chinese speakers/businesses in a linguistically competent and culturally appropriate manner
- Think critically about topics of community, equity, and social justice, be able to empathize with experiences and perspectives of others.

2.2 Three Phases of the Project

The project supports and aligns with the learning outcomes of the course. It aims to develop students' listening, reading, speaking, and writing proficiencies through conducting interviews, interpreting and presenting immigrant stories, as well as drafting essays. It provides opportunities for students to investigate immigrant experiences through the lens of social justice.

The project consists of the following three phases.

Phase One: Preparation and Story Circles

This phase took place during the first month of the semester. The Director of Emory University's Community Building and Social Change Fellows Program and the Program's Student Fellows were invited to our class to have a conversation about the challenges and opportunities in our immigrant communities as well as to share resources for properly engaging with immigrant communities through academic coursework. Student Fellows introduced their 10-week hands-on summer field experience, site visits, small group meetings, and public presentations.

Story Circles is one of the initiatives of Emory University's Interdisciplinary and Scholarship Fellowship Program. A story circle experience begins with a designated speaker sharing stories about a particular topic. The audience then divides into smaller groups to tell their own stories related to the topic. Discussion is led by a facilitator and structured in a way that encourages full and authentic participation in both listening and telling personal stories. This framework of story circles provided structures for the listening, telling, and interpreting immigrant stories in our class.

Phase Two: Explore Atlanta Chinatown and Chinese Immigrant Stories

Chinatowns around the world are designed as specific enclave areas for Chinese and other Asian cultures, creating a sense of home and community for immigrants. During the second month of the course, students in the Business Chinese course researched the businesses, history and design of Atlanta Chinatown through in-class group presentations. A class visit to Atlanta Chinatown took place in mid-October with the following tasks: 1) visit a restaurant, the bookstore, the gift store, and the bakery, 2) interact with business owners, customers, community members and listen to their stories, and 3) explore ideas for Phase Three of the project.

Following the site visit, we held discussions in Chinese about this experience. Students saw firsthand the challenges Chinese immigrants faced when operating their small businesses and heard their stories of coming to America, confronting barriers, and gaining their footing through hard work.

Next, two Chinese business owners, who are immigrants from Taiwan, were invited to our class to tell their stories in Chinese. Their stories stories centered around the themes of perseverance, survival, thriving, and how their sense of identity has evolved over time. After listening to their stories, students and the guests engaged in a conversation to reflect on the challenges faced by Chinese immigrants and brainstormed ideas to bring about positive changes to immigrant communities in Atlanta. The story circle was a deeply meaningful and impactful experience for the students. Many of them were second generation immigrants from China or Taiwan. During their formative years, they not only witnessed their parents' struggles and successes in their adopted country, but also navigated the complex issues of race, identity, social justice firsthand. The story circle was an opportunity for them to share their own and their family stories in a safe space.

Phase Two served the purpose of connecting students with Chinese immigrant and finding share humanity and experiences. This prepared them for their work in Phase Three of the project.

Phase Three: Group Project on Immigrant Stories

Taking place in the last month of the semester, the group project integrated the development of speaking, listening, reading, and writing proficiencies while aiming to foster social justice awareness and action. Each group visited a business owned by Chinese immigrant(s) and conducted a semi-structured interview to gather stories about how Chinese immigrants navigated the issues of race, identity, and justice during the Pandemic. The project includes the following components:

- A 1,500-character essay collaboratively written by group members,
- A video digital story that incorporates texts, images, and narration in Chinese to retell the immigrant stories,
- A 20-min oral presentation in class that summarizes the findings of the project,
- A 1-page reflection in Chinese focusing on what they have learned and what actions they plan to take to bring about positive changes in the immigrant communities, and
- A self and peer evaluation.

Serving as a capstone of the teaching and learning of social justice through storytelling of immigrant experiences, this project provides an opportunity for students to develop meaningful networks and connections with local Chinese business communities. They also developed an understanding of how Chinese businesses and Chinese communities navigated the social, cultural, political, and economic obstacles in recent years.

3. Discussion: Why Storytelling

Below I will briefly introduce two stories and attempt to answer the question of why using stories to teach and learn about social justice issues.

3.1 Two Stories

One group interviewed Benjamin, who is a second-generation immigrant from Taiwan and the co-founder of a financial planning company in Atlanta. Benjamin's parents immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan in late 1970s and opened a Chinese restaurant in Georgia. In 1985, his young father died in a tragic plane crash while skydiving. Without life insurance or proper financial planning, Benjamin 's father left behind a single mother, two young children, a struggling restaurant, and a heap of debt.

Determined to survive in the face of tragedy, Benjamin's mother quitted the restaurant business a few days after her husband's passing to start a financial planning practice so that what happened to her would not happen to anyone else in her community. For over 30 years, Benjamin's mother has been using her family's story to convey the importance of financial planning.

In 1998, Benjamin was admitted to Emory University's Goizueta Business School to pursue his BBA degree. In 2006, he added to his education by pursuing an MBA at Georgia State University. Soon after in 2010, Benjamin and his mother co-founded GenFi, a new financial planning company.

During the pandemic, GenFi saw an opportunity for growth. The company had already stopped renting physical office space before the Pandemic and it moved all services online at the start of the Pandemic, which allowed it to expand its services outside of Georgia and form more out-of-state partnerships with other companies. Its revenue increased by 15-20% in 2019 and 20-21% in 2020, with 2021 being their most profitable year.

Joyce's story, however, was different. Joyce immigrated from China nearly 30 years ago. She did various jobs, mostly in Chinese restaurants, and over the years she became quite skilled at making Chinese noodle dishes. In 2019, she purchased the New Lanzhou Ramen Noodle House from her former boss. For Joyce, opening her own noodle restaurant was a natural step, like "a lightly loaded cart traveling on a familiar road". She told the students, ""I hope Chinese people will feel authentic and happy when they come here to eat the noodles I make!"

Less than a year later the Pandemic hit, she had no choice but to close the restaurant from March to July 2020. When it was reopened, she only operated take out. Sales dropped by more than 80% amid the political narrative that blamed the Chinese people for the spread of the pandemic. At the time of the interview in fall 2022, Joyce's business has recovered a great deal, but it was still below the pre-Pandemic level.

3.2 Why Immigrant Stories?

Storytelling is a powerful narrative tool to create connection and discovering shared humanity among people who may seem to have little in common and allow people to understand each other and cooperate. When immigrants tell their stories, which are often woven by the threads of others in their communities, they create narratives about home, place, identity, survival, thriving, longing, and belonging. In essence, their stories shed light on how cultures and societies interact and shape human experiences.

The project in CHN351 course centered around stories of Chinese immigrants. Students benefited in multiple ways.

First, the stories highlighted historical and contemporary injustices Chinese immigrants faced and amplified marginalized voices, allowing students to make connections to broader patterns of systemic inequality that affects marginalized communities. When researching history of Chinatowns in the U.S., they learned the survival stories of Chinese immigrants in the period of Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-1943). The stories from their own interviews highlighted how contemporary polities during the pandemic affected the Chinese immigrant communities in complex ways. Chinese immigrant stories intersect with issues of race, class, gender, and immigration status. By focusing on these intersections, students can explore how various forms of oppression (such as racism and economic exclusion) work together to shape the injustices faced by immigrant communities.

Second, the stories fostered empathy and connection. Immigrant stories provided a human face to abstract social justice concepts. By hearing the struggles and triumphs of individuals, students developed a deeper emotion connection to issues such as racism, xenophobia, and cultural resilience. Many students also related the stories to their own family's experiences and their own struggles with their identity and belonging. The emotional connection to the people and their stories allows students to become more empathetic and more motivated to learn.

Third, storytelling can promote critical thinking, inspire hope, and build resilience. Immigrant stories often present challenges, conflicts, and resolutions that encourage students to consider different perspectives and think critically about the narrative and its meaning. Additionally, many Chinese immigrant stories are about overcoming hardship, whether it's through labor struggles, family survival, or finding success in an unfamiliar land. These stories of resilience can inspire students to think about how marginalized communities continue to fight for justice and equality, giving them examples of perseverance and hope.

Fourth, Chinese immigrant stories can challenge stereotypes about the "model minority" myth, which presents Asian Americans, particularly Chinese Americans, as uniformly successful and upwardly mobile. This myth overshadows the complexities of their struggles and the diversity of experiences within the community. By sharing immigrant stories, students were able to discern the nuances and diversity in immigrant experiences, and this helps students critically assess common stereotypes, deepening their understanding of social justice.

Finally, storytelling facilitates language learning and cultural awareness in a meaningful and authentic way. This project immersed students in the natural linguistic and cultural environment, offering a holistic learning experience. Both in the classroom and during interviews, students listened to stories, interacted with native speakers to exchange ideas, clarify meanings, and discuss issues. To complete the project, they re-listened to the stories and re-told them in videos and written essays. Through authentic language input and the speaking and writing practice, students become more comfortable with producing language at an advanced level.

In short, Chinese immigrant stories can create a richer, more inclusive learning environment that tackles complex social justice issues. It allows students to critically engage with history, question stereotypes, and develop empathy, ultimately fostering a more socially aware and active generation. When reflecting one Benjamin's stories, one student wrote, "Just as the Chinese people are complex and diverse, so are the various impacts of the epidemic on businesses and communities. Benjamin's story is one example of how we are observing the aftermath of the pandemic, but there are still countless small businesses that are struggling or failing. We have all seen, and even experienced, the epidemic spreading in various businesses and communities. Countless Chinese people suffered losses, some lost their businesses, some suffered violence, and some were infected. Ultimately, however, the overall trend is for everyone to persevere and keep going."

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