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Hanadi Shatara

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

Debbie Sonu

CUNY Hunter College

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Teaching World Communities as Cultural Translation: A Third Grade Unit of Study

Hanadi Shatara and Debbie Sonu

This article bridges scholarship in global education with elementary classroom teaching by presenting a series of lessons that challenge the idea of national culture as fixed and stable. The land we share is most certainly affected by its political borders, but it is also constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations that exist both within and on either side of a border. Yet very often, when teaching about another country, we tend to rely on misappropriated generalizations around food, holidays, and folktales that do not honor how culture moves, changes, and becomes translated by its unique and varied peoples.

As educators, we observe that culture is constantly produced as individuals simultaneously act out traces of the past and intermingle with that which is new and different. Similar to translating a language, “cultural translation” speaks to the ways we take up new cultural phenomena and translate them through our own lenses.¹ For each country, there exists and evolves remarkable diversity in community affiliations, languages, religions, customs, and land-based practices. This can be seen as a radical mixing of unique individuals as they come together, whether through the force of colonial and imperial empire or advancements in technology and travel. What we do not wish to do is to fall into the trap of stereotyping such diversity as one immutable aspect of life, but to instead teach students how culture is made, experienced, and expressed.

We believe that linking research with teaching is one of the strongest ways to design critical inquiry in the social studies. In this work, we begin by unpacking global education and introducing some key concepts. Even though we conceive of these lessons through New York City, we encourage any educator to consider how a global education framework pushes world teaching from one of difference and comparison towards interconnectedness and movement. For these lessons, we wonder how students may gain a more global viewpoint through examining the convergences and dispersals of culture. What questions about other countries emerge when tracing cultural translation as it happened in the past, or as we experience it

now? How do these broader patterns resonate with and within our own local communities? We use the following pathway goals in geography from the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*² to guide our lessons:

D2.Geo.2.K-2. “Use maps, graphs, photographs, and other representations to describe places and the relationships and interactions that shape them”; and D2.Geo.7.K-2. “Explain why and how people, goods, and ideas move from place to place.”

According to the New York City Scope and Sequence for Social Studies in the third grade, teachers are expected to teach case studies of three to six countries, across ten broad essential questions related to geography, cultural exchange, governments, and economic systems.³ Yet instead of teaching the unit as a series of isolated and separate countries—Nigeria, Egypt, China, and Peru—as listed in the Scope and Sequence, we first think about the various themes, the cultural universals that connect all human societies with each other. We challenge the reliance by some geographers and educators that political borders are the only way to define a region’s people and culture. For these reasons, we decide to use the subject of language as a way to trace the lines of global reach and tie seemingly disparate nations together. Other patterns and trends to consider could be in the areas of technology, religion, forms of government, the types and preparation of food, expressions of gender, and racialization.

What is “Critical Global Education”?

Teachers tend to organize their knowledge into “familiar national, civilizational or institutional frames.”⁴ This can be seen in world history curricula, such as textbooks, which either depend on nation-state borders as an organizing framework,⁵ or represent non-Western regions as monolithic and oversimplified.⁶ For many, this approach to understanding the world is uncritically accepted and oftentimes the only available viewpoint. Yet, if relying on borders to define a country is felt to be too reductive and essentializing, global education

frameworks may provide the complexity and nuance teachers need when teaching about the vast and culturally infinite world.

Global education is distinguished from world history by its emphasis on cultural patterns and trends that transcend national boundaries.⁷ As a framework, this allows teachers and students to critically interpret the world with heightened attention to the power and privileges that are reproduced through various social systems and structures, such as language.⁸ Scholars and teachers of global education do this by tracing “inter-connectivities” within its people or “intra-connectivities” across local contexts.⁹ The term “cultural universals” refers to human needs (e.g., for food, shelter, clothing, and education of the young) that all children experience. Social studies lessons can reveal how different cultures answer those needs.¹⁰ Such an approach demonstrates to students that our culture is not just ours, but is intimately tied to a myriad of other cultures that are simultaneously transformed, translated, and in relation. This is different from a stance of universality that says we are all the same. Instead, global education opens up inquiry into how culture is historically bound to people that might otherwise seem unreachable, foreign, and distant.

Since the 1700s, European anthropologists have been writing about cultures that are so different from their own that elements of “wonder” and ethnocentrism appear in their supposedly scientific writings. This has produced a dangerous form of exoticism that fetishizes “the other” as an object of mystery and strangeness. Entire countries have been marked in this way, particularly by the hands of colonist who have either attempted to erase differences or to master and own aspects of another culture under their own terms.¹¹ The habit of essentializing and exotifying world communities puts at risk a more authentic understanding of how cultures evolve.¹² Such habits dissociate us from the possibility of understanding how people come to be within their own contexts, reifies a hierarchy of humanness that positions one society as more sophisticated than the other, and belies a relationship of mutual constituency and connection. The “devouring of culture,” or “eating the other” is about the commodification of culture as a thing to be acquired, “a contemporary longing of the ‘primitive’” that does not invite mutual recognition and solidarity.¹³ Students can see themselves as agents of culture who participate, create, and translate, taking up some things, but refusing others. Rather than seeing other countries merely as bounded objects of difference, students can inquire into the historicity that makes a culture seem disparate and strange. Teachers can help students challenge such presuppositions and learn to recognize differences without condemning those differences.

Moreover, while teaching globally can be thought of as diffracting out into the world, it can also be brought inward into the self and the local. The local is already a part of the interconnectivity of the global.¹⁴ How are communities socially constructed, and how do issues of race, class, and gender resonate with those in communities around the world? Instead of

seeing the global as something “out there,” what do students gain from positioning the world in a relation with their own lived experiences and observations? One does not need to travel internationally to study historical tracings, or to observe connectivities. Cultural comparisons can show students the common features of families, histories, school, and home life around the globe.¹⁵ We extend this approach by drawing tracings and lines instead of making comparisons of similarities and difference. In this way, we are able to demonstrate a culture as translated and transformed through time, place, and its people.

Creating a Global Education Unit of Study

In this article, we present three lessons that look at language, not as national identity, but as a global theme that can be traced both around the world and in our local communities. We begin with an exploration of how language converges and appears around us, and then we map how languages have been dispersed around the globe. Each lesson is guided by an essential question and uses a variety of materials such as literature, maps, visual images, and narratives.

Lesson 1: How are Languages Present in Our Own Communities?

This lesson begins by asking students to look at their own local communities as a place where multiple languages converge. The objective of this lesson is for students to explore the languages at the local level and draw conclusions about their communities. Teachers begin by discussing the meaning of “local,” highlighting aspects of the community that are local, including locally owned businesses and familiar landmarks, as well as community members and their languages. Have students think about what languages they speak or hear as they walk to school, participate in discussions in school, or talk with family members at home. Do they know of any other languages in the world besides what they hear in these settings? This topic can be a turn-and-talk or a whole group discussion.

Emphasize to students that there are at least 7,102 living languages in the world, and sometimes we notice a few of them in our own lives. The *Washington Post* provides seven maps and charts that teachers can use to demonstrate the rich diversity of language.¹⁶ Using these resources, teachers can ask additional questions such as: “On which continent are the most languages spoken?” “How many people in the world speak Chinese, English, Arabic, or Spanish?”

Take the students outside for a community or school walk. Take a moment to stop and invite students to use their senses to make observations and describe their surroundings. Listen to what and how people speak, look at different signs and visuals. Jot down observations. Here are some guiding questions to use during discussion:

- What did you see? Close your eyes. What do you hear?
- Did you hear people speaking different languages?



Fig. A. English and Chinese on street signs in Chinatown, New York City (2014)

- Were there people who spoke English differently than you?
- How do different languages appear around us? In street signs, businesses, and newspapers?

If your community is more homogeneous, invite a guest from a multilingual background to come to class and share their experience growing up, the languages they speak and hear, how they use languages in their daily lives, and how that influences who they are. As an assessment, gauge students' observational skills concerning languages. Are students able to draw conclusions about language diversity in their communities?

Lesson 2: How are Languages Present in Communities Around the World?

This lesson continues the previous idea that different languages can be found in one local community, but expands it by tracing language dispersal from its native source to multiple points around the world. The objective is for students to make inferences and historical connections about the movement of language by analyzing visuals and images. Teachers can choose to begin by having students look at an example of a street sign (**Figure A**). Teachers can ask students: what can you infer about this community by looking at this street sign?

Open the first half of this lesson by sharing **Figure A**, which shows a sign from Chinatown, a neighborhood in New York City that is home to approximately 100,000 people. Chinatown can claim the highest concentration of people of Chinese ancestry in the Western Hemisphere. As far back as the 1850s, Chinese traders, sailors, and laborers arrived in the United States, mostly on the west coast. As discrimination and lessening yield from gold mines made life more difficult, Chinese began moving eastward. They stayed together in a tight community to stave off racism and violence and to seek greater opportunities. Using **Figure A**, guide students into thinking about how visuals



Fig. B. English and Chinese on a bus sign in Chinatown, New York City (2005)

can represent the growing diversity of language and how such language has come to be in a particular place. Teachers can ask: “What do you see here?” “How many languages are on the sign?” “What do you think this sign is used for?” “Where do you think this sign is from?” “Why would there be more than one language on a street sign?” After students have offered ideas, share with them some history as to why Chinese people may have come to live in a place like New York City.

Figures B through E are additional examples of signs from different areas of the world, showing writing in various languages. After gathering in groups of three or four, students can analyze and make inferences about a photo, noting their initial thoughts on paper, (perhaps in the first of two columns on a handout). The teachers can then distribute a description of the image (see figure captions) and ask students to write about the historical context of the sign in the photo (in the second column of a handout). A guiding question for this portion of the lesson could be, “How did these languages, shown on these signs, come to be present in this community?” Students can present their findings to the class, referring to their writings for guidance. While students speak, the teacher can indicate a language's location of origin by placing a pin on a world map. Student writings and presentations can be used to assess their comprehension of the concepts in the lesson.

In the second half of this lesson, examine how language may begin in one location, but expand outward to other parts of the world. The objective is for students to use maps to make inferences about how languages spread across the Earth over time. This activity serves as a segue into the final, third lesson that presents historical examples of how language is sometimes forced upon others.

Present to students a world map showing where the Spanish language is spoken (**Figure F**). Supplemented by an atlas, ask the students to compare both resources to answer:

- Which countries have Spanish as their official language?



Fig. C. Hebrew, Arabic, and English (top to bottom) on a street sign in Jerusalem (2019)

- In which countries or areas are there many Spanish speakers?
- Why would there be Spanish speakers in France, Morocco? In Peru and Mexico?
- Which Spanish speaking country is farthest away from Spain?
- How do you think the Spanish language spread to North America, South America, and Asia?
- Can languages spread peacefully, or is a new language always imposed by force? Can you cite an example of each situation?

It may be important for students to know that after Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean, an obsessive fervor to acquire new territories swept through Spain and Portugal. To calm the feud between these rival nations, the pope, who was of Spanish origin, attempted to divide the entire non-Christian world into two halves, with lands west of Cape Verde (the Americas) belonging to Spain, and those to the east (Africa and Asia) belonging to Portugal. For over three centuries, the Spanish Empire would spread across the Caribbean Islands, half of South America (except Brazil, which was claimed by Portugal), most of Central America, and much of North America, for the main purpose of searching for riches and resources, like silver, gold, and spices. Because there were so many Indigenous people with their own distinctive languages, native dialects greatly influenced the Spanish that we hear today, particularly in countries such as Mexico and Peru.

As subsequent lessons cover the migration of the French and English languages across the globe, students can repeat the queries above in paired discussions, then sharing their



Fig. D Arabic and Neo-Tifinagh (used by Berbers, the indigenous people of North Africa) on a “Stop” graphic from Nador, Morocco (2003).

answers with the whole class. Throughout discussions, teachers can reinforce the fact that colonizers usually enforced the dominance of their language by establishing laws for its strict use in business and in institutions such as government, schools, armies, and courts. The language of the colonizer, however, was also sometimes used and transformed by native peoples in ways that answered their own social needs—sometimes with intentions of resistance or revolution. This activity sets students up for the next lesson, which uses a read aloud about a residential school in Canada, and discusses the attempt to eradicate Indigenous languages here and around the globe.

Lesson 3: How do Languages Disperse? How do Languages Affect People’s Lives and Cultures?

This lesson continues the themes from the previous lesson on the dispersal of languages and the impact of colonialism in much of the world. By using literature and literacy strategies, the objective in Lesson 3 is for students to study how colonialism has impacted two communities’ use of their native languages. The children’s book, *I Am Not A Number* by Jenny Kay Dupuis and Kathy Kacer, is a story of how a language and culture was imposed upon a group of native people in what is now Canada.¹⁷ This story traces the experiences of Irene, Dupuis’s grandmother, who was forced to attend a Canadian residential school. Beginning in the 19th century, about 150,000 youthful members of First Nations (including Inuit and Métis) were removed from their families and communities and sent to boarding schools, which were initiated by the Canadian government, but run by religious organizations such as the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and United churches. The Canadian government’s intent was to erase the culture of the Indigenous populations and aggressively assimilate them into the culture of white (primarily English speaking) Canada. Strategies included restricting the use of home



Fig. E. English and Hindi appear on the obverse of Indian rupee banknotes. On the reverse is a panel which displays the denomination of the note in 15 of the 22 official languages of India. The 15 are Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Marathi, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu.

languages, changing children’s given names, and forcing them to wear western attire. There were nearly 130 such schools throughout Canada, and hundreds of residential schools in the United States.

While reading the story to students, pause to discuss these guiding questions: “What happened to Irene?” “Why was it so important that Irene not speak her home language?” “To whom was that important?” “What were the ways that this prohibition was enforced by adults?” “Do you see suppression of cultures happening today?” “How do cultures change?” “Who does it benefit when a culture is suppressed?”

Relay to students that the effort to eradicate Indigenous languages is a global phenomenon that occurs in diverse places such as southern Mexico, northern India, and western China. For example, compare the story of Irene in Canada to the experiences of native language speakers in Peru, comparing passages from *I Am Not A Number* with a *Newsela* article, “Many Native Languages in Peru are in Danger of Disappearing.”¹⁸ Once the center of the Inca Empire, Peru is inhabited today by about 4 million people. There are 47 Indigenous languages, with three quarters of Peruvians speaking Quechua, a language with Incan origins. While Spanish is the colonial language as well as the official language of Peru today, language activists there are fighting to preserve their ancestral roots by promoting bilingual education programs and representation in the media. As students read, they can circle the different Indigenous languages (discussed in the text of the article), draw a box around the dominant language in Peru, underline passages that reveal how Indigenous languages are endangered, and highlight passages telling how Peruvians are preserving their Native languages. Discussion questions could include: “Where are native languages suppressed in



Fig. F. Spanish is spoken, to some degree, in many places. (Source: Fobos92/Wikipedia)

other parts of the world?” “What is the work of a language activist?” “Why does their struggle matter?”

Students can be assessed in a number of ways, including with an “exit ticket”¹⁹ or piece of summative writing, or by creating a concept map of all they have learned about the consolidation and dispersal of language and culture around the world.

Conclusion

These three lessons provide an alternative lens into teaching and discussing world cultures in the elementary classroom. By tracing the theme of language through images, maps, and narratives, students will be able to learn about connections both local and global. The examples of cultural translation in these lessons allows for multiple perspectives and critical thinking about social structures and constructions such as colonialism, imperialism, access to natural resources, and social adaptation. The theme of language is just one way of introducing global education to students. Through this approach, social studies teaching in elementary classrooms can disrupt the centering of nation-states (i.e., the narrowing of cultural expression and choices) and instead, build decolonizing mindsets to prepare students for their interconnected and ever-changing local community and world.

Notes

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- “Exit ticket.” Before students leave at the end of the lesson, they hand you a slip of paper filled out with an answer to a question, or a response to what they’ve just learned.

HANADI SHATARA is a Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse. Her work on this article was done while she was a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City

DEBBIE SONU is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at Hunter College, City University of New York, in New York City