
Home Visits: ESL Teacher Candidates Discover Funds of Knowledge

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Abstract

Although research on home visits is extensive, little of it involves pre-service teachers of English as a second language (ESL), who typically lack the resources that in-service teachers of mainstream students have to conduct these visits. Nine pre-service ESL teachers visited student homes and completed a survey about the experience. They reported encountering a number of challenges in completing the assignment and responding to those challenges in different ways. They also reported many benefits of doing the assignment. Finally, they made several recommendations. Results indicate that although challenges must be addressed, ESL teacher educators should consider assigning home visits to their students.

Many aspects of home visits have been studied. Researchers have put such visits in different contexts (Clark & Dorris, 2007; Howe, Simmons, & Walling, 2005; Middleton, 2008), addressed various goals and purposes (Hawkins and Legler, 2004; Middleton, 2008; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), discussed how to conduct such visits (Ginsberg, 2007; Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2005; Middleton, 2008), and commented at length on their benefits (Ginsberg, 2007; Gonzalez & Moll, 1995; Love, 1989; Meyer & Mann, 2006; Middleton, 2008; Waldbart, Meyers, & Meyers, 2006). Although research on home visits is extensive, most of it involves in-service teachers with significant incentives and resources to conduct them. The present study was conducted to see whether, with minimal preparation, ESL teacher candidates could make home visits, learn about their students, and apply their results to teaching.

Home visits are conducted for different reasons. Middleton (2008) sets home visits in the context of school district success, noting that public schools are competing with home, private, and other schools for students. His district's response was to "solidify connections between school and home"; these connections included district-wide home visits by staff. Home visits may target particular populations, as Clark and Dorris (2007) report. Using data from college access programs, Clark and Dorris identify five strategies for increasing Latino parents' participation in their children's education, including conducting home visits. Of course, home visits are not the only way to communicate with parents, as Howe, Simmons, and Walling (2005) point out: in addition to synchronous communication such as home visits and telephone conferences, teachers may use asynchronous communication, including web pages.

Home visits have a variety of goals and purposes. Middleton's (2008) school district's purpose was for teachers to get to know the individual talents and interests of students. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) studied working class, Mexican communities to uncover

“funds of knowledge,” that is, “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well being” (p. 133). Hawkins and Legler (2004) discuss home visits in the context of teacher-researcher collaboration. Their goals were finding out about children and parents, including what parents want for their children and expect from school; discussing learning in kindergarten; addressing parental concerns; and sharing material with parents to foster children’s academic development (p. 342).

Many studies describe how to conduct and implement home visits. Middleton (2008) describes how his school district implemented home visits, including recruiting teachers for a pilot program, conducting professional development activities, and preparing parents for upcoming visits. Teachers document each visit and record important information about each student; these data sheets follow students throughout their academic careers. Ginsberg (2007) discusses preparing for such visits and applying what teachers learn. Preparation includes discussing the value of home visits, seeking funds of knowledge, and identifying questions and practicing note taking. Application includes analyzing findings, creating a funds of knowledge chart, and connecting insights to the classroom.

Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, and Moore (2005) recommend home visits, but not without structured reflection. Their concern is that teachers may come away from such visits, especially to students of poverty, “with a deficit view of students and an attitude that the students cannot learn much. Instead, teachers need to process what they observe with a skilled guide, one who can help them see strengths, discern funds of knowledge, and, if necessary, think more deeply about any . . . assumptions and biases that might be shaping their interpretations” (p. 46). Logan

and Feiler (2006) suggest that teaching assistants (TAs) conduct home visits, concluding that TAs are “exceptionally well positioned” to develop links between home and school.

Research also documents the value of home visits. Several researchers emphasize strengthened parent-school relationships (Love, 1989; Meyer & Mann, 2006; Waldbart, Meyers, and Meyers, 2006), while others stress benefits for students (Ginsberg, 2007). Middleton (2008) reports his school district’s “nine consecutive years of increased assessment scores and reduced achievement gaps. In addition, student discipline incidents have decreased by 50 percent district-wide and enrollment has increased significantly. Payoffs for Gonzalez and Moll’s (1995) research visits were “multifaceted and complex”; they included emergence of teachers as qualitative researchers, increased access to school felt by parents, changed relationships between teachers and the students whose homes they visited, and emergence of curriculum units based on household funds of knowledge.

Although research on home visits is extensive, then, most of it focuses on in-service teachers of mainstream classes. These teachers are required, or choose, to make home visits. They know their students and, often, their students’ families. Mainstream teachers often have the school or district’s support, or mandate to conduct such visits, and they have the resources (time, training, etc.) as well. They often share their students’ (and their students’ families’) language and culture. They have access to students and opportunities to apply what they learn. Pre-service ESL teachers, on the other hand, are usually not required to make such visits. Because they enter the classroom after the school year has begun and leave before it has ended, they may know little about their students and nothing about their families. Their only support comes from their cooperating teacher. Finally, if they want to visit students’ homes, they must be prepared to deal with languages and cultures different from their own. Despite these challenges, pre-service ESL

teachers must “build partnerships with students’ families” (TESOL, 2002). How can ESL student teachers carry out home visits? What challenges will they experience and how will they respond to them? Finally, what benefits will they experience? The present study seeks to address these questions.

Method

Participants

Participants were 17 students in the practicum of an undergraduate TESOL program at a small liberal arts college. The practicum required students to complete 60 hours of ESL teaching and to write several short reports about their teaching. Fourteen students were licensed teachers seeking TESOL endorsement; three were undergraduate TESOL majors. (As students were candidates for the endorsement or major, and to distinguish them from their own students, they are hereafter referred to as candidates.) Two candidates were native speakers of Japanese; the rest were native speakers of English. Most candidates were experienced teachers, that is, they had at least three years of teaching experience; three were inexperienced, that is, they had less than three years of teaching experience. One had no teaching experience at all. Candidates also varied in their TESOL experience: some had a lot, others very little or none. Most were teaching at the elementary level and a few at the middle or high school level. One of the students from Japan was teaching in the college’s intensive English program (IEP). About half the candidates were teaching in their own classroom; the rest were teaching in P-12 classrooms, in an adult literacy program, or in the IEP. The candidates teaching adults or college students were not in a position to visit their students’ homes. For confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonyms.

Materials and Procedures

Candidates were given the choice of writing several short reports about their teaching, which had already been assigned, or doing a home visit assignment, which I outlined. At least half the class seemed enthusiastic about the outline, though they wanted specific questions for their research, so I proceeded with the assignment. With me eliciting questions and a candidate recording them, the class generated a number of observation and research questions. The finished assignment (Appendix A) was given out in the following class. Candidates had approximately seven weeks to finish the assignment, which included a five- to ten-page report. After they had completed their research and presented it to the class, candidates were given a questionnaire about their participation in the project (Appendix B).

The questionnaire was designed to elicit the following information from candidates: whether or not they did the project and why, challenges they encountered completing the project and how they met those challenges, benefits they experienced as a result of doing the project, whether they would recommend the project to others, and changes they recommended be made to the project. The questionnaire was given to candidates after the class had completed the project and participated in presentations about it. In order to get a fuller picture of their experience, I asked candidates about their responses to the questionnaire after I had collected it from them; I took notes on this discussion. With the assistance of another experienced TESOL professional, I analyzed and collated candidate responses to the questionnaire. I also reflected in writing on the assignment to reach data saturation.

Results

Seventeen candidates participated in the study, and nine of them chose to do the project. These candidates gave two principal reasons for doing so: to learn more about the student, the student's family life, and/or the student's culture (five candidates) and for interest or enjoyment (three candidates). (One candidate said that she already does home visits.)

Their enthusiasm notwithstanding, candidates encountered a number of challenges in completing the project. These challenges were of three main types: logistical (eight candidates), affective (seven candidates), and the assignment itself (three candidates). Several candidates cited more than one challenge.

Candidate responses were similar but not identical to these challenges. They fell into three main categories: logistical (nine candidates), affective (four candidates), and academic (one candidate). Candidates did not identify responses for every challenge they faced.

Candidate reported benefits both for themselves (10) and for others (four). Benefits for themselves were of three types: cognitive (learning about the student, family, and culture), affective (increased empathy, respect, and trust for students and their families), and academic/professional (writing). Others who benefited from the assignment were families (three) and administrators (one).

All candidates who did the project said that they would recommend it to other teachers. (Two students who did not do the project also recommended it.) Four of those who did the project recommended that no changes be made to the project; five gave other answers.

Eight candidates chose not to do the project. They gave several reasons, four of which predominated: lack of access to ESL student families, having already started the teaching reports, lack of time, and logistics (three candidates each). Two candidates mentioned safety/comfort.

Conditions that would have helped these candidates to do the project followed from their reasons for not doing it: getting the assignment at the beginning of the semester was mentioned by three candidates, access to student families and/or transportation by two.

Although benefits of the project may be seen in candidates' responses to the questionnaire, they may be seen even more in candidates' reports of their research. In these reports, candidates discussed what they discovered about the student, the family, and the community; how they would use their findings to improve instruction; and what they found out about themselves as teachers and/or researchers. Although every candidate who did the assignment reported important findings, for the sake of space the responses of only two candidates are presented here. They give a sense of what others found.

Joan and Pam (like all teacher names, pseudonyms) were two candidates who chose to work together. For their research, they chose two current ESL students of Joan's who were former students of Pam's. As part of the project, Joan and Pam interviewed the mother of the two boys. In their report, they describe several significant results of their research, including awareness of the family situation and of the mother's educational goals. Joan plans to address those goals by "focusing lessons more on reading and writing, and trying to incorporate the knowledge gained from this experience into her classroom." As a result of their interaction, "Joan feels a personal relationship with the family, and [the mother] feels that she now has an advocate. It changed Joan's role from being solely a teacher to being a teacher and friend."

"To improve instruction," Joan and Pam continue, "Joan will incorporate the boys' interests into her classroom teaching as often as possible." One boy's interest in money "could easily" be incorporated into ESL instruction, she remarks. Similarly, the other boy's "enthusiasm for school can be encouraged and nurtured through the small classroom setting ESL provides."

In the home, Joan noticed that the second boy “still has confusion when reading directions in English.” She has focused on reading and writing directions as a result.

In the course of their interview, Joan and Pam learned that the mother often prepares food for social events to earn extra money for the family; one of her specialties is tamales. Joan observed that she could incorporate this fund of knowledge into a lesson. She would use the book *Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto as a read-aloud and as a play, “assigning roles and having the children write out their parts to practice in class and at home.” After the students had performed the play for their classmates, she would invite the mother to teach her students how to make tamales. “This would incorporate [the mother’s] funds of knowledge,” the candidates remarked, “as well as give the children valuable experience in mathematics, following directions, and listening skills.”

Because Pam was not teaching the students whose family she and Joan interviewed, she could not “directly use the findings to improve her instruction,” but she could apply them indirectly. She saw the importance and value of the visit, and she felt a “special bond” with the family. She gained a greater understanding of her own students “and a better understanding of what their family life might be like.” Finally, she saw how she could use family funds of knowledge in her own teaching.

“As teachers,” Joan and Pam found that their knowledge of their students was limited “mostly to their classroom experiences.” They were glad that they were able to learn so much about the students’ family and “would love to gain similar insight” into all their students. Even though “time and circumstances do not allow this for every student,” home visits are “definitely” in their plans for the future. As researchers, Joan and Pam discovered that “many factors influence a child’s development, socially and academically” and that “each child comes to school

with different funds of knowledge.” They plan to “develop a research questionnaire for students and their families (in their native languages where possible) to find out the funds of knowledge for each family” and to “invite parents into the classroom to demonstrate these funds of knowledge.” Joan and Pam enjoyed doing the project and felt that it gave them “valuable ideas for future instruction.” Furthermore, working together allowed them to “share ideas and teaching practices that [they] would not have thought of on [their] own.”

Discussion

This study was conducted to see whether, with minimal preparation, ESL teacher candidates could visit student homes, learn about families and communities, and discover funds of knowledge for their teaching. The results indicate that they can: operating on short notice, and with little training in research methods, most candidates visited student homes and came away with extensive funds of knowledge as well as increased understanding of, and appreciation for, their students and their families. Even students who only listened to the presentations benefited from the assignment: they not only learned about different cultures, families, and students but realized that they might conduct such research themselves.

Not surprisingly, most of the candidates who did the assignment wanted to learn more about the student, family, and/or culture, but a few did it for interest or enjoyment. This result suggests additional motivation that ESL teacher educators can use to assign home visits: they can be enjoyable as well as educational.

Confirming earlier research (Ginsberg, 2007; Middleton, 2008), candidates reported a variety of challenges in completing the project. This result suggests that ESL teacher educators must prepare candidates not only for logistical aspects of making home visits (communicating

with the family, scheduling visits, etc.) but also for the affective side, including feeling safe and welcome. Logistical problems often require logistical responses, but affective issues may be resolved that way as well. Being flexible (cited by eight candidates); involving others, including students, parents, and school personnel (five candidates); and communicating with others (four candidates) are important strategies. Once they have assigned home visits, teacher educators can help candidates to troubleshoot problems and provide them with past reports as models.

In their report, Ronnie and Kathy discuss what they learned about themselves, about the visit that they made, and about home visits in general. In so doing, they address issues important to all candidates: communication, time, and safety. They conclude by addressing relationships:

Through all our efforts, we have begun relationships that can have benefits for our students, and we have further developed our own personal and professional relationships to build communication with each other, our students' families and with school staff members, which has created for us a greater feeling of community.

As Ronnie and Kathy indicate, home visits benefit all stakeholders in a child's education.

Although the benefits of the project are clear, so are the challenges. Teacher candidates must have access to ESL student families and time to conduct their research. They should be allowed, even encouraged, to collaborate with fellow candidates. Translators must be found for those who need them. The assignment should be given early in the term so that candidates may obtain necessary permissions, arrange visits, and write up the results of their research. Reports of past research should be made available so that candidates may see the benefits of the project. Although risks should be discussed and challenges addressed, the benefits of such research should be emphasized.

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Appendix A

Assignment

TSL 497, Practicum

“Funds of Knowledge” Research Project

Write a five to ten page paper in which you cite the research we read in TSL 498, Seminar (Moll *et al.*, 1992), and answer the following questions:

- Why did you investigate this student?
- What did you find out about the student, her or his family, and her or his community? What “funds of knowledge” and/or other useful information did you discover?
- How can or will you use your findings to improve instruction? What learning modules have you developed or could you develop as a result of carrying out this research?
- What did you find out about yourself as a teacher and/or researcher?

Papers will be graded on the information they present and the way in which they express that information. Papers are due Monday, November 24, at the latest; they may be turned in earlier. Class presentations on dates chosen for country presentations are optional.

Observation and Research Questions

Observation

1. What is the mode of transportation?
2. What are parent schedules like?
3. Evidence of literacy in the home/computer literacy
4. Family dynamics/interaction in the home
5. Socioeconomics
6. Number of people living in the home

Research Questions

1. Getting family history
 - a. Why are they here? Will they return to native country?
 - b. How long have you been here? (bring map of the country and have family locate their country on map)
 - c. Gather sense of community
 - d. Gather recreational information from the family (funds of knowledge)
 - e. Level of education (parental, students) – parental literacy
 - f. Goals for children and their education
 - i. “What do you want your child to learn this year?”
 - ii. Who are the models for literacy in the home (if any) – Do you have access to the public library?
 - g. What is the after school routine
 - i. Where do you do your homework?
 - ii. Where do you go after school?
2. Gathering information about students
 - a. What can I do to help your child?
 - b. How can I make your child’s ESL experience more successful?
 - c. School history
 - i. Literacy in their native country (parents and students)
 - ii. School procedures in native countries
 - iii. Teacher interaction/discipline in their native countries

Reflections on the experience

Appendix B

Post-Research Questionnaire

Name (optional):

TSL 497, Practicum; "Funds of Knowledge" Research Project

1. Did you do this project? If so, please skip to question #2. If not, please explain (a) why you did not do it, (b) what conditions would have helped you to do it, and (c) what you learned by listening to the presentations.

a.

b.

c.

2. Why did you decide to do this project?

3. What challenges did you encounter in completing this project and how did you meet them?

Challenges	Responses
a. b. c. (Continue on back if necessary.)	a. b. c.

4. What benefits did you experience as a result of doing this project?

5. Would you recommend this project to other teachers? If so, why; if not, why not?

6. What changes would you recommend be made to the project?