INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION

Teaching Driving Literacies in a Community Language School

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This case study describes the dynamics of a literacy curriculum that was collaboratively designed by a research team at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and teachers and staff at the International Language Institute of Massachusetts (ILI). The curriculum, designed collaboratively over the course of 3 years, aims to teach any interested participant how to get a driver's license in Massachusetts, focusing on the English language literacies necessary for passing the written and road tests. This curriculum case study describes the driving curriculum's context, framework, and design, and then details how the curriculum was experienced by its designers, students, and teachers as a more socially complex set of literacies than expected.

The driving curriculum was requested by a group of ILI students for reasons both pragmatic and political. ILI's students, who were both long-term and newly arrived immigrants and refugees, knew that driving offers access to work, care, and community, especially in rural communities such as the one in which their school was located. They also knew that living in the car-dependent U.S. often means that "people who drive are more likely to find jobs, work more hours, and earn higher wages" (Hendricks, 2014, p. 2). In other words, they knew that physical mobility and social mobility are linked, with driving independence often leading to better job quality or schooling (Kerr et al., 2018).

Beyond these pragmatic motivations, as evident in class conversations and projects (see Figure 1), students also were attending to advocacy by local immigrants' rights' coalitions fighting for the Work & Family Mobility Act, which grants undocumented immigrants access to driver's licenses. And given the political moment, students were likely considering the role of documentation in being more susceptible to deportation as Trump's 2017 Executive Order on immigration made driving without a license a deportable offense (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., 2020).

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic made access to a car unusually important, wherein car use became differently consequential: social protests were conducted as car parades; drive-throughs were created for virus testing and vaccinations; and cars were used as sanctuary for frontline workers or office space for working parents with children at home. Thus, in asking for help in getting their licenses, students were motivated by a truly complex tangle of national status, belonging, safety, and economic support. They anticipated the kaleidoscope of literacy and language knowledge necessary to earn a license in this time and place.

This brief context shows how one literacy phenomenon—learning about driving—can push at the boundaries of what a community literacy curriculum could be. The brief student and teacher insights woven through the rest of this case study show how the curriculum's designers and participants came to understand that literacies as seemingly incidental as those required for driving can be deeply meaningful, leading them to conclude that literacy's embodied and material aspects cannot be ignored in a community literacy curriculum about driving.

Curricular Design

The driving curriculum was designed during an ongoing community literacy partnership between a research team at UMass Amherst and ILI, a non-profit community language school whose mission is to promote intercultural understanding and strong, diverse communities through language instruction and teacher training. Based on conversations between Caroline Gear, the Executive Director of ILI, and Rebecca Lorimer Leonard, a UMass Amherst professor, the partnership carried out several literacy

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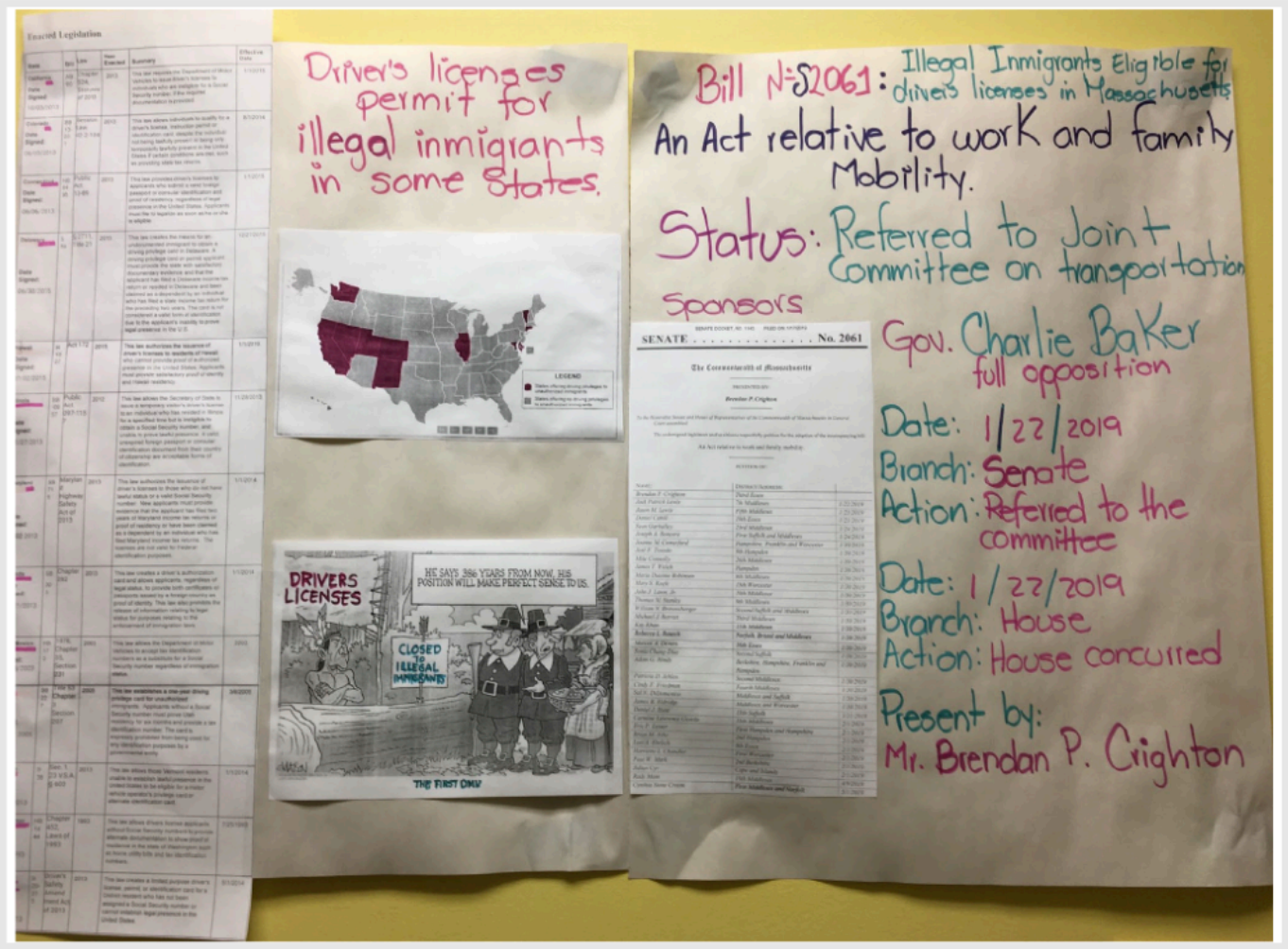
Figure 1
An ILI Student Poster Project on the Work & Family Mobility Act, Displayed in a School Hallway



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

projects including the driving curriculum. The ILI students who requested the driving curriculum were enrolled in the Intensive English Program (IEP), which offers advanced English instruction to international students and scholars, and the Free Evening English Program (FEEP), which offers beginning to intermediate English courses for community immigrants and refugees. Thus, while ILI's students come from all over the world (see Figure 2), most come to learn or improve their Englishes, including those that support everyday activities such as driving.

The curriculum was collaboratively written and revised over the course of 3 years by 5 ILI staff members and 10 UMass undergraduate and graduate students working with Professor Lorimer Leonard in a community-engaged course on literacy studies and language diversity. In the course, students explored the differential access to power generated by literacy, the privilege that gathers around certain forms of multilingualism but not others, and the ways literate injustice has created the need for "service" to community organizations in the first place (Lorimer Leonard et al., 2020). As university students read, wrote, and discussed literacy research and theory, they met regularly with the community school's staff and teachers, brainstorming together what a driving curriculum should include and why.

Insights and reflections from four of the curriculum designers and ILI students show how such conversations on literacy theory and practice altered what designers understood a literacy curriculum needed to include. For example, Daniel (all participant names are pseudonyms), an undergraduate curriculum designer, noted that in discussion the group began to realize

Figure 2
A Community Map Showing the Origins and Destinations of ILI Students, Displayed in a School Meeting Area

Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

the many "unspoken norms of driving and things that we take as common sense…because of cultural differences." He explained:

> If they're learning English in these classrooms, they'll probably be able to read signs and understand what they mean… [but] we talked about also interacting with the police…that kind of literacy of knowing how to read the police officer. …I think it's a literacy of cultural norms that really came out for me in that too, that those things have to be explained explicitly to someone who doesn't know them, otherwise they're not gonna know them. It's not common sense.

Other similar realizations, occurring as university and community designers read and talked together, led to a curriculum that teaches driving literacies not only as metaphorical but also as experienced in the body, in motion. Scholars of mobility agree that driving is a multilayered phenomenon that requires complex social, material, and embodied literacies (Sheller & Urry, 2000). For example, driving requires an "extraordinarily disciplined 'driving body'" because drivers' "eyes, ears, hands, and feet, [are] trained to respond instantaneously and consistently" (Urry, 2006, p. 24). Drivers build "bodily competencies" (Kerr et al., 2018, p. 26) through forms of civility like turn-taking, often managed with headlight flashing or hand waves; incivility is enacted through tail-gating or rude gestures sometimes proudly expressed (e.g., as the "Masshole"). Driving literacies thus also demand "the capacity to read" cultural codes of politeness (Featherstone, 2004, p. 12), revealing how "kinaesthetically intertwined" are "motion and emotion, movement and feeling, autos and motives" (Sheller, 2004, p. 226–227). Because driving is "tied to patterns of gender expression, racial and ethnic distinction…national identity and transnational processes" (Sheller, 2004, p. 236), judgments of driving norms and resulting behavior are highly gendered (Murray, 2008), racialized (Purifoye, 2020), and culturally negotiable (Redshaw & Nicol, 2010). Decoding such

norms requires literacies far beyond the memorization of car parts and speed limits.

Therefore, the group's curricular approach to driving literacies was shaped by a theoretical framework that integrates sociomaterial and mobile approaches to literacy with research on driving. This approach coheres with ethnographic or action-research studies of literacy in immigrant communities that often address driving in some way: Immigrants in the United States describe the "textual vulnerability of driving" without documentation (Vieira, 2016, p. 131); ESL students discuss the pressures of unwarranted traffic tickets (Auerbach et al., 2013); a custodian-college writing collaborative drives their autobiographies around town—printed and wrapped on a minivan—when the student newspaper won't print their writing (Marko et al., 2015). Such studies show in vivid detail how the practice of driving inserts itself into immigrants' literate experiences, with repercussions for literacy users' papers, status, or bodies.

Thus, a sociomaterial approach to literacy illuminates the connections between literacy's social situatedness (in relationships, value systems, cultural practice) and literacy's material (bodies, tools, artifacts, environments) (Hamilton, 2016; Rowsell & Pahl, 2011; Vieira, 2016). This means that literacy users experience agency not only by using paper, screen, license, or car, but that those materials themselves are "endowed with energy and agency" that shape what users can do with them (Micciche, 2014, p. 497). For example, driver's licenses empower drivers, but institutions grant primary power to the card, not the driver. A sociomaterial relationship between literate material, literacy user, and literacy-regulating institution shows how literacy builds complex agencies among things, people, and possibilities. In order to not overpromise the freedom of a license, a curriculum that teaches driving literacies must include, not ignore, these complexities.

Therefore, over 3 years of meetings, writing, and rewriting, the curriculum was designed through a careful accounting of the social, material, and embodied aspects of driving as a literacy. The collaborative team together wrote and revised curricular content to both recognize the social conditions students might encounter on the road and to help students negotiate those conditions with a curriculum based in storytelling and relationship building.

The Experience of a Driving Curriculum

The driving curriculum is now fully designed and available online, with 10 lessons sequenced as individually paced tutor–learner sessions. Specific lessons include the following: Inside the Car, Road Signs, Fines, IDs and Documentation, At the RMV, and Road Test, as well as two lessons that focus on the written permit test. Each lesson follows a universal framework—Goals, Eliciting Prior Knowledge, Vocabulary, Interactive Activity, Reflection, and Questions—and includes visuals drawn from the RMV website and photographs taken at RMV offices. Each lesson builds on prior knowledge, culminating in a lesson that features critical reflection on the entire curriculum.

The arc of the curriculum is, as the first lesson states, "ultimately guided by [students'] questions and what [they] want to do." The stated goal of the first activity is "to begin to build a relationship between tutor and learner…to form connections, to get to know each other." Designers believed that early relationship building could mediate the sometimes heightened emotions around learning to drive, as well as create learning conditions that elicit stories and memories that help extend learner's driving knowledge from existing experiential knowledge.

In accordance with its goals, the curriculum treats driving literacies not just as vocabulary items to be learned but also as social practices upon which drivers should critically reflect. In other words, the curriculum teaches English language literacies related to driving, and includes opportunities to critically consider the ways that driving situations and literacies can intersect to marginalize people. As the introduction to the first lesson explains:

> The goal of the curriculum is to provide the English language and driving knowledge tools to succeed. The tutors, however, are not associated with the RMV and may not always agree with these rules. We can succeed in earning driving licenses and still be critical of the ways that driving in the U.S. …might negatively impact or be more difficult for certain populations in the U.S. like immigrants, black or brown people, or those in earlier stages of learning English.

In its current early stage of implementation, the curriculum's sociomaterial approach to driving is indeed shaping the literacies that students and tutors call on to understand driving and the literacies they build together during the lessons. Student and tutor insights, gathered during research interviews in an IRB-approved study of the curriculum, show how social and material needs motivate and substantiate driving literacies. For example, one cluster of insights from ILI students Araceli and Benicia, and their shared graduate student tutor Victoria, shows how they are negotiating what Victoria calls literacy's "layers" together.

Araceli, a student from Colombia who has been in the United States for 3 years, explains that she needs a

license for practical and meaningful ends: "I am an immigrant, I came here, I am working on my papers. …In order to look for a job, I need a driver's license because I have been looking and almost all jobs, one of the requirements are a driver's license." Similarly, Benicia, a student from Guatemala who has been in the United States for 10 years, wanted to "get a license out of it so that she could have more ability to drive herself" rather than rely on her husband who has long had a Massachusetts license. Benicia's tutor Victoria explains that Benicia "works a lot and takes care of her son…but then she also wants the license because that changes her labor situation." In these ways, Araceli, Benicia, and Victoria all describe the curriculum as helping alter economic, family, or national status through the small literate act of getting a license.

In reflecting on the driving curriculum, Araceli and Benicia also shared stories primarily focused on endangered bodies, treating driving as an inescapably embodied act. When asked about their memories of driving, both students discuss being nearly hit or run off the road: when asked about her current experiences, Benicia shares a story about a car not stopping for her son in a parking lot; Araceli shares the deeply tragic story of her brother passing away in Colombia "because of a bad driver." In fact, Araceli's heartbreaking memories directly inform her current motivations for earning a license in the United States:

> My brother died because of a truck driver didn't want to pay to spend the night in a place…but he didn't put the parking signals or anything, he didn't put any lights, and my brother was riding his bike and he just hit the truck. …My brother is not going to come back. I am building my new life in the U.S., and to get along and to get forward with that, I need a driver's license…I will be a better driver than the person.

This small narrative excerpt reveals the emotional shape of a student's prior driving knowledge, and the ways such knowledge informs current investments in literacy learning. It also shows the extent to which a physical experience and literacy learning are linked.

Elaborating on the physicality of literacy learning, Victoria explains how the curriculum helps students navigate what she calls "different layers of literacy":

> It's part of what makes this curriculum and the tutoring of it more complex than it seems on the surface, because it's not just that you're helping them understand what a "no right on red" symbol means, you know? You're also helping them understand there's these words that mean something, but there's also this physical driving action that relates to those words, and what it can mean for you and your body.

Victoria identifies literacy's "layers" as the decoding of symbols, the physical movement required, and the social context that mediates both. Teaching the driving curriculum revealed to her how "all those layers are happening in a very lived way with the learner" even as they were "always negotiating…that balancing act of understanding the rules but also critiquing the social aspect of it." As Victoria notes, in this curriculum, learners do not simply memorize driving rules, they discuss them "in a very lived way," as the content of a family story or as a topic open to social critique.

Conclusion

As they move through the driving curriculum's lessons together, students and tutors certainly discuss functional aspects of English language driving literacies: Benicia points to work zone speed limits as a memorable topic; Araceli describes learning English synonyms while grappling with the jargon-heavy test preparation booklet. But participants in the driving curriculum also learn the social nature of literacy *because* they have to imagine it on the road. Discussing where to place one's hands during a traffic stop unavoidably addresses racial inequity; practicing how to precisely adjust mirrors at the start of a road test highlights the absurdity of bureaucratic routines. In short, learning about driving makes it impossible to ignore how powerfully literacy regulates the bodies that seek it.

Conflict of Interest

None

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