

## **CULTURAL INSTRUCTION IN A JUNIOR COLLEGE EFL READING CLASSROOM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the effectiveness of cultural instruction in a junior college EFL reading classroom located in Taiwan. Cultural materials were developed by an experienced Taiwanese instructor, and cultural instruction was placed at the center of the curriculum. Data included student questionnaires and interviews, interviews with the instructor and the researcher's observation field notes. The results show that the cultural instruction was considered beneficial by the students and that it generated positive effects in various aspects. In addition, the students considered small group activities and presentations helpful in terms of their acquisition of cultural knowledge and increasing their English abilities. Furthermore, the instructor considered the cultural instruction effective and was pleased with the students' learning and performance, but she also voiced concerns regarding culture teaching and learning.

Key Words: cultural instruction, English as a Foreign Language, culture

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

#### **Cultural Instruction**

Over the years educators have maintained that language and culture are interconnected. They also point out that if language learners are to become proficient in their target language, they must be familiar with that language's culture as well (Nault, 2006; Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002; Kramsch, 1998). Highlighting the importance of cultural instruction in language education, scholars also point out that if cultural information is not integrated and taught as a part of communicative competence, complete communication cannot take place (Alptekin, 2002; McKay, 2000; Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1984).

When discussing cultural instruction in language education, one needs

to first define what “culture” is. Culture has been and continues to be defined in many ways. According to Westerhuis (1995), culture can be defined as the customs, values, laws, technology, artifacts and art of a particular time or a group of people. Sysoyev (2001) describes culture as a system of symbols, meanings, and norms passed from one generation to another that distinguishes groups of people bound by certain characteristics such as origin, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class, or political views. Another way of looking at culture is whether it is static or dynamic. In the past, culture was viewed as a static entity in which people who shared the same cultural traits carried on such traits generations after generations without changing. In recent years, culture is viewed as dynamic and variable and constructed through human interaction and communication (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1988; Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1984).

#### **Studies of Cultural Instruction in EFL Classrooms**

For language learners to develop communicative competence, sound cultural instruction is needed as an integral part of their English education. Several research studies have contributed toward integrating cultural instruction into EFL classrooms. For example, Liaw’s study (2006) explored the efficacy of an online learning environment developed to foster Taiwanese students’ intercultural competence via reading articles on topics of their own culture and communicating their responses with native speakers of English (i.e., people from the U.S.). According to the researcher, through such interaction the students demonstrated four types of intercultural competences while using English to communicate with the native speakers: interest in learning about other people’s way of life and introducing one’s own culture to others, the ability to change perspectives, knowledge about one’s own and others’ culture for intercultural communication, and knowledge about the intercultural communication processes. Another example is Al-Jarf’s study (2004) of a cross-cultural online writing project in which three EFL college instructors from the Ukraine, Russia and Saudi Arabia and their students participated. The aim of the project was to develop the learners’ English writing skills as well as their awareness of local and global cultural issues and events. Additional aims were to develop their ability to communicate and interact with students from other cultures. The outcome of this study showed very positive results.

A few studies, although not many, have shown the beneficial effect of cultural instruction on learners' language proficiency. For example, researchers at Taiwan's Ming Chaun University and at the University of Northern Virginia investigated whether a strategies-based approach to teaching English reading to non-native speakers would improve reading comprehension. One of the researchers' goals was to examine whether incorporating culture into teaching would improve reading comprehension for Taiwanese learners. The result showed that the Taiwanese learners made significant advancements in their reading comprehension (Shen, Sung & Raleigh, 2001). Similarly, in Tsou's (2005) study, cultural instruction was implemented in two elementary EFL classrooms for one semester to study the effects of such instruction on foreign language learning. The results showed that when culture lessons were integrated into EFL instruction, the students became more interested in language learning, and their linguistic proficiency significantly improved at the same time.

#### **Concerns and Difficulties in Cultural Instruction**

Although the need to integrate culture and its teaching into language education has been highlighted in various studies, foreign language textbooks and classrooms often times fail to achieve such a goal, as argued by Turkan and Celik (2007). Concerns about and difficulties encountered in cultural instruction are well-documented. To begin with, Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, and Colby (2000) point out that for many teachers, culture teaching and learning is still a relatively new and unfamiliar venture, and the problem is usually "compounded by a lack of concrete examples of how to teach for intercultural competence and by teachers' mistaken belief that they need to be culture experts" (p. 69). Other researchers have also found that although more and more language teachers have started to view language and culture in an integrated way, the lack of their participation in connecting culture to their curriculum design is still prevalent. The most common reasons include: (1) teachers' unfamiliarity with or insecurity in teaching aspects of the target culture, (2) teachers' lack of the necessary training in how to teach culture, (3) teachers' limited foreign experiences, (4) a lack of appropriate instructional methods and materials, and (5) teachers' worry of controversy over teaching values and viewpoints and students' possible negative reactions toward learning new cultural norms (Turkan & Celik, 2007; Paige et al., 2000; Storme & Derakhshani, 2000;

Byram & Morgan, 1994).

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of studies focusing on the integration of culture teaching and language education in Taiwan. These studies show that although language teachers view integrating cultural materials in the language classroom as important, problems arise during implementation. For example, Yang (2004) investigated elementary school English teachers' opinions about culture teaching and found that most teachers affirmed the importance of culture teaching and even conducted some sort of culture teaching in their classes (mainly confined to festival celebrations). However, the teachers also pointed out some obstacles to culture teaching: the strain of long teaching hours, lack of cultural teaching materials, and their own limited cultural knowledge. Another study by Tsai (2002) investigated junior and senior high school teachers' conceptions and instruction of culture in their teaching of English. The results showed that cultural instruction was generally considered important in language teaching; however, reasons hindering cultural instruction include: teachers' limited cultural knowledge, inadequate cultural components in textbooks, difficulty in obtaining cultural materials and resources, and constraints on instructional time.

Among the above-mentioned problems, the lack of appropriate instructional materials has been addressed in many studies. For example, Paige et al. (2000) in a review of a large number of studies on cultural instruction voiced the criticism that the instructional emphasis has been on knowledge that is primarily about surface-level culture (such as food, clothing and holidays) rather than on deep culture (such as values and beliefs). Tsou (2005) also pointed out that many language teachers still view cultural instruction as teaching about food and festivals. When discussing what culture components should be included in a language curriculum, Savignon and Sysoyev (2005) addressed the long-standing misconception that many teachers have—to consider cultural instruction as the recognition of discrete historical and geographical information, holidays and celebrations, and dietary preferences associated with English speakers. Moreover, cultural instruction is still viewed as an “add-on” to language study, and cultural materials are hardly viewed as the essential part of the EFL curriculum. As presented in many textbooks, cultural information is usually treated as an additional one outside of the regular, main texts, and thus often neglected by teachers.

In summary, the importance of cultural teaching is evident. A sound

cultural instruction should treat culture as dynamic rather than static. Further, cultural materials in language education should go beyond merely presenting surface-level elements of a culture and focus more on deeper-level ones. Finally, placing cultural instruction at the core of language education should be beneficial in promoting learners' communicative competence, and therefore deserves further investigation.

### **Cultural Instruction in an International Context**

According to Kachru's (1985) three concentric circles of English, the term "Inner Circle" refers to nations where English traditionally is the native language, the term "Outer Circle" represents countries where English is a second language, and the term "Expanding Circle" encompasses countries where English is used as a foreign language such as Taiwan.

In Taiwan, the common assumption regarding the purpose of learning English is for learners to communicate and interact with speakers of the Inner Circle, and learners should strive to model themselves culturally and linguistically after those speakers. However, the world of English is getting more complex than is generally recognized. As suggested by scholars, English speakers in the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle are not simply passively mimicking the native speakers of English, rather, they are actively redefining and reshaping the language and transforming it into their own (Nault, 2006; Crystal, 2003). As Crystal (2003) points out, the fact that non-native speakers of English today outnumber native speakers means that "no one owns English." As English continues to spread as an international language, the number of non-native speakers of English will continue to grow. It is safe to say, therefore, that Taiwanese learners of English may use English to interact and communicate more with other non-native speakers of English than with native speakers. This is why McKay (2000) asserts that, as English assumes the role of an international language, the question of "whose culture to teach" has become an important matter.

When discussing cultural materials that can be integrated into language classrooms, Cortazzi and Jin (1999) distinguish three types of information: (1) target culture materials, (2) source culture materials, and (3) international target culture materials. Among the three types of materials, learners who are presented with the target culture only may not find the materials relevant or interesting. Target culture materials that

teach only Western greetings, bodily movement and gestures, ways of thinking and values, etc. fail to consider the real life communication needs of the learners who may need to communicate with other non-native speakers. On the other hand, the teaching of source culture materials in addition to target culture materials is beneficial to language learners. After all, one of the goals of learning a language is to be able to communicate aspects of one's own culture to others. For learners who are not well-informed about their own culture, the teaching of source culture will also provide them the opportunity to learn more about themselves and gain insights into how different cultures interact with each other. Finally, the teaching of international target culture materials will be of great help for learners in cross-cultural, international encounters, particularly in tourism, business, and information exchange situations. As McKay (2000) points out, when English is recognized as an international language, the teaching of international target culture "provides the basis for promoting cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly global village" (p. 10).

In Taiwan, the goal of learning English is commonly assumed to acquire the ability to communicate with speakers of the Inner Circle and often only the "target culture" of mainstream Western, WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture is presented when teachers integrate cultural instruction into their teaching. For example, Hsiang (2006) analyzed the cultural load of two sets of high school English textbooks published by local publishers and used the most among high school English teachers in Taiwan based on their content, activities, and learning outcomes. The results showed that the "foreign cultures" mentioned in both sets of textbooks focused mostly on American and British cultures and that most of the cultural content in both sets presented "facts-only" information rather than cultural practices, perspectives and awareness.

Cultural materials included in English language textbooks are also under criticism. For example, researchers have documented the lack of complexity in cultural information presented in textbooks and maintain that many textbooks are written from a mono-cultural perspective (Renner, 1993; Ueber & Grosse, 1991). In addition, Renner points out that the information offered in such textbooks is not enough to offer a balanced study of the diversity of cultures in which English is spoken. Such materials only present a certain, narrow way of looking at the world and also discard the multiple realities which make up culture. Hough (1997) further points out that many EFL textbooks used in Asia include lessons on Western greetings and ways of behaving, interaction, etc., which are

inappropriate for Asian language learners when they interact with other non-native speakers. This is why Paige et al. (2000) suggest that many language teachers nowadays move away from relying solely on textbooks to teach culture and explore the use of other cultural materials.

In summary, as English has become an international language, it is obvious that teaching for linguistic competence cannot be disconnected from teaching for intercultural competence. In this regard, EFL teachers should rethink the goals of language education to better meet their students' needs. They should also select teaching materials and design curriculum that are inclusive and global in scope. This means that present-day English teachers in Taiwan will need to be more culturally aware, and that they will have to design curriculum with an international focus.

## **THE STUDY**

### **Rationale for the Design of the Research**

In light of the above, it is important for Taiwanese students to become intercultural beings while learning English, especially for junior college students who are in a process of constructing their world view during this period. As a result, a sensible cultural curriculum which incorporates not only cultural elements of the target language but also elements of the students' own culture and international target culture is essential. Further, such a curriculum should place "cultural instruction" at the core of its language education. This study presents an account of the efforts of Ms. Lin (pseudo name), a junior college English instructor, in developing cultural lessons and utilizing them as the instructional materials in her reading class. The hope is to prepare her students to be culture learners and eventually become intercultural beings.

### **Research Questions**

The research focus of this study is to explore the effectiveness of cultural instruction that incorporates target culture materials, source culture materials, and international target culture materials in an EFL reading classroom. More specifically, the study aims to understand:

1. What are the effects of the cultural instruction on the students?

2. What are the instructor's thoughts on the cultural instruction?

**Instructional Materials**

A few years previously, Ms. Lin, an experienced English instructor of a junior college had registered in a graduate course that the researcher offered in a Master's program. Concerned about her students' lack of cultural knowledge and world views, Ms. Lin has long been looking for ways to incorporate cultural elements into her teaching. In this study, Ms. Lin has designed a series of textbook-like cultural materials called "Cultural Capsules" (i.e., "CCs"; see Appendix A for sample of text) to fulfill her goal.

The development of the CCs was guided by Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) framework of integrating diverse cultural materials into language classrooms, which include not only target culture materials but also source culture and international target culture materials. Other scholars' work also inspired the design of the instructional materials. For example, Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) suggest that when teaching culture, teachers should encourage learners to critically compare and contrast various cultures and their own culture, and through such a process they are given the opportunity to see how their culture interacts with other cultures. In this regard, Ms. Lin carefully designed the CCs so that the students were encouraged to reflect on their own culture in relation to the cultures they read about in the text. The students were then asked to report back to the class in the last two sessions of each cultural theme lecture. The text could therefore provide a context for students to compare and contrast elements of their own culture with other cultures, and help them understand their own culture better (See Instructional Method section for details). In addition, when discussing ways to help learners make a connection between their own culture and cultures of other non-native speakers', McKay (2002) suggests that teachers use this opportunity to exemplify how English today is used internationally by including phonological, grammatical or lexical variations in the materials. Following this suggestion, when writing the text, Ms. Lin made sure such variations were included. For example, in Theme 2 "Staple Food," Ms. Lin listed several variations of the word "rice" coined by people from different countries to exemplify how different perceptions and world views influenced the coinage of words. Another example can be seen in Theme 8 "Teenagers' Sub-Culture" where new English words were taught to show students how



they are constantly being created, changed, and used by young people around the world.

In actual writing of the cultural materials, Ms. Lin started constructing the text in the beginning of summer 2009. The main sources of the text were from books, textbooks, and online information. The online information was mostly from government websites or official websites of international institutions and organizations such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and World Civilizations (an online learning resource at Washington State University; web address: [wsu.edu/~dee/](http://wsu.edu/~dee/)). The information was later revised and abridged in order to suit the students' level of linguistic proficiency. Other materials from sources such as Wikipedia and several college ESL/EFL classes' websites also served as resources. Sources of citations were listed at the end of each article so that the students could look up the original articles if needed. In the text, websites that may be of help for students were also listed for reference. These include Taiwan Panorama (a bilingual on-line magazine website which includes writings on various aspects of Taiwan and its people, including cultures, lifestyles, society, economy, and so on; web address: <http://www.taiwan-panorama.com/en/index.php>). Other than printed materials, PowerPoint slideshows, music, photos, and film clips were used in class to facilitate culture learning. Table 1 shows the ten themes covered in the CCs. The themes are listed in order of teaching:

Table 1. Cultural Themes and Sub-Themes in the "Cultural Capsules"

Themes		Sub-Themes
1	Fortune-Telling	Psychics (TC)*, I Ching (SC), Tarot (IC)
2	Staple Food	Wheat (TC), Rice (SC/IC), Potatoes (IC), Pulses (IC)
3	Educational System	U.S. (TC), Japan (IC), Taiwan (SC), Netherlands (IC)
4	Religion	Islam (IC), Buddhism (SC), Christianity (TC), Hinduism (IC)
5	Ceremonial Traditions	Seijin No Hi (IC), Quinceañera (IC), Sweet Sixteen (TC)

Table 1. Cultural Themes and Sub-Themes in the “Cultural Capsules” (continued)

	Themes	Sub-Themes
6	Clothing Fashion	Middle East (IC), Korea (IC), Italy (IC), China (SC)
7	Sports	Football (IC), American Football (TC), Rugby (IC)
8	Teenagers’ Sub-Culture	Rave (TC), Cosplay (IC), Hip-Hop (TC), “Otaku” (IC)
9	Gender Equality	Arab World (IC), North America (TC), Asia (SC), Europe (TC/IC)
10	Ethnic Minorities/ Indigenous People	Maori, Native Americans, Namaqua

\* Capital letters in parentheses indicate whether the materials are target culture (TC), source culture (SC) or international culture (IC).

### Participants

The participants of this study were 47 freshmen (with an average age of 16) enrolled in a five-year junior college in northern Taiwan. The students majored in International Trade and had an average English proficiency of low-intermediate to intermediate level. Their rankings were based on their scores in the junior college entrance exam. As freshmen, the students were required to take a one-year course named “English” twice a week, two sessions (50 minutes each session) per time. At Ms. Lin’s school, the course was traditionally regarded as an English reading class where textbooks of individual teacher’s choice were used as the sole reading materials. According to Ms. Lin, the students were business majors and thus showed more enthusiasm in learning English than students outside the Department of Business.

### Instructional Method

The CCs were taught from February to June 2010, in the second semester of the “English” course. In the first semester, Ms. Lin had used

a traditional textbook for the same class, and the students “had not been enthusiastic at all” about the materials, said Ms. Lin. After the CCs were developed, they were placed at the core of this English class. Each of the ten themes was designed for the instructional length of one-and-a-half weeks (i.e., six sessions), about 300 minutes in total. Prior to the introduction of each theme, Ms. Lin handed out the reading materials to the students, and the students were asked to study the text as well as complete the worksheet included in the CCs before coming to the class. During the class, reading instruction took four sessions (approximately 200 minutes). Reading skills such as skimming and scanning, finding topic sentences, etc. were taught, and the text, which was entirely written in English, was explained. In the last two sessions for each theme (approximately 100 minutes), the students were divided into groups of four or five to work on their worksheets, particularly the last three questions. A person was designated from each group to stand in front of the class to provide a 3-minute English presentation. Since the last three questions of each theme were designed for the students to connect what they learn in class to their own culture, the presenter had to treat his/her classmates as foreign friends while presenting and try to explain his/her own culture to the audience. Interaction among the presenter and the audience was encouraged and the entire discussion was carried out approximately 60% in English and 40% in Mandarin (i.e., the students’ native language) instead of 100% in English due to the students’ limited abilities in English. At the end of each theme, the students as a group had to turn in the worksheet to be graded by Ms. Lin. Table 2 shows the grading system of this course.

Table 2. Grading System for the “Cultural Capsules”

Activities	Percentage (%)
1 Group discussion, worksheet, and presentation	40
2 Mid-term assessment of reading comprehension	20
3 Final assessment of reading comprehension	25
4 Quizzes on vocabulary	15

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to answer the research questions of this study, four types of

data were collected: (1) questionnaire responses: each of the participants was asked to fill out an anonymous questionnaire toward the end of the semester. The questionnaire consisted of questions with responses based on a 4-point Likert scale (1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 4 indicates “strongly agree”) designed to find out the effects of cultural instruction on the students and their attitude toward such instruction (see Appendix B for questionnaire questions). The purpose of administering the questionnaire was to gain a general understanding of the first research question posed in this study. The results from the questionnaires also served as a foundation for further investigation during interviews. (2) student interviews: ten students were randomly selected by the researcher to be the interviewees. Based on the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to get more in-depth information for the study. Each student was interviewed once for approximately 30 minutes a couple of weeks or so after the questionnaires were administered. To ensure anonymity, the interviewees’ real names were replaced by numerical representations. All of the interviews with the participants were audiotaped and transcribed. (3) instructor’s interviews: to answer the second research question of this study, Ms. Lin was interviewed by the researcher approximately once a week for five to ten minutes after the class. The interviews were intended to understand Ms. Lin’s thoughts on her teaching and her students’ cultural learning, as well as clarify pedagogical questions generated during classroom observations. (4) classroom observation: in order to gain a better understanding of the culture teaching and learning taking place in this study, the researcher conducted observations in Ms. Lin’s classroom approximately once a week throughout the semester.

The questionnaire data were analyzed using statistical measures while the interview data and observation field notes were analyzed using two data analysis methods, inductive data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and constant comparative data analysis (Patton, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to develop codes and categories which grew out of the data.

The data collected in the study, including the responses to the questionnaires, interviews, and observation field notes, were all in the students’, the instructor’s, and the researcher’s native language—Chinese/Mandarin. For the purpose of the study, the materials

collected were translated into English.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Results from Quantitative Data**

To answer the first research question of the study (i.e., What are the effects of the cultural instruction on the students?), questionnaires were administered to the students. Table 3 shows the results of the questionnaires. The responses to Questions 1~6 show the effects that the participants considered the cultural instruction to have had on them, those to Question 7 show whether or not they thought that the instruction had helped improve their English reading proficiency, and those to Questions 8~9 show their attitude toward such instruction:

Table 3. Results of the Questionnaire

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1	3.15
2	3.29
3	3.24
4	3.17
5	3.46
6	3.61
7	3.68
8	3.56
9	3.73

Regarding the effects of the cultural instruction on the participants, the results were positive with the means of all six questions above 2.50 on average. Among the positive effects, the participants agreed most strongly that the CCs had helped them in terms of holding a more positive viewpoint toward other people's culture (Question 6, mean=3.61) and in generating interest in learning about other people's culture (Question 5, mean=3.46). They also agreed that the CCs had enabled them to have a better understanding of other people's culture (Question 2, mean=3.29) and their own culture (Question 3, mean=3.24). In addition,

the participants considered that the cultural instruction could be helpful for future communication with foreigners (Question 4, mean=3.17) and that the cultural themes introduced in the CCs had broadened their world view (Question 1, mean=3.15).

A possible explanation for the relatively low number for the responses to Question 1 could be that the expression “world view” may appear somewhat abstract to students who had just gotten out of junior high school and were in their mid-teen years. It is also possible that the one-semester’s worth of materials covered in the CCs were not sufficient enough for the participants to consider broaden their world view. As to Question 4, the question itself was phrased in the future tense, therefore it may have been hard for the participants to speculate on their behavior in the future. Also, since most of the participants had not had any previous contact with foreigners, it may have been difficult for them to imagine such a type of encounter.

As to Question 7, the students agreed strongly that the cultural instruction had helped to increase their ability to read in English (mean=3.68). The reason why there was a question only on reading out of the four language skills was that the class under study was treated as a “reading” class. Later in the qualitative section, the participants also pointed out that the instruction had been helpful to their listening and speaking proficiency.

Regarding their attitude toward the cultural instruction, the participants liked receiving the instruction (Question 9, mean=3.73) and thought that the materials covered in the CCs met their needs in a class for freshman English (Question 8, mean=3.56). A more detailed account of the positive attitude of the participants is also presented in the report below on the results for the qualitative data.

#### **Findings from Qualitative Data**

The qualitative data presented below attempt to answer both of the research questions--(1) What are the effects of the cultural instruction on the students? And (2) What are the instructor’s thoughts on the cultural instruction?

*Student interviews*

The students' interview data revealed three major themes. The first theme centered on the positive attitude of the students toward the CCs. Compared with the textbook materials in previous semester, the interviewees considered the content of the CCs better and used words such as "interesting," "informative," and "thought-provoking" to describe how they felt about the CCs.

When asked what they thought about each cultural theme, the interviewees thought that some themes were more interesting and appealing, such as clothing/fashion and fortune telling, while others were more "serious", and thus a bit uninteresting, such as ethnic minorities/indigenous people and religion. One interviewee reported that "serious" topics such as religion and educational system "almost put me to sleep." (SI7, 7/7/2010) However, some students also pointed out that the serious topics gave them the opportunity to learn things that they normally wouldn't have the chance to learn about.

As to the worksheet, all of the interviewees thought that the questions had helped them locate the important information in the text and served as a good tool for their reading comprehension check. Five interviewees also thought that the last three cross-culture-related questions prompted them to actively seek answers, including asking friends and family members and making online searches. Some interviewees also reported that the questions helped them see the commonalities underlying all cultures, as shown in the following excerpt:

[Discussing Theme 1—Fortune-Telling] I learned that fortune-telling is all about reading the stars in the sky and making sense of the unknown. Despite differences in time and places, the wisdom of the Eastern and Western ancestors is the same. (SI3, 7/1/2010)

Other than the content of the CCs, the interviewees also considered the group activities "exciting" and "useful." The students thought it was exciting because they got to discuss and debate cultural topics with their peers, and it was also interesting to see their peers giving English presentations and answering the audience's questions up on the stage. In terms of "useful," the students thought that they got to see different

viewpoints and interpretation concerning an issue through interacting with their peers, and also that they could practice their speaking and listening skills in preparing for their English presentation and in trying to make sense of their peers' presentations.

The second theme that came out of the data was the favorable effects of the cultural instruction on the interviewees. When asked about the effect of the instruction, besides the ones listed on the questionnaire questions 1~6 (the questions were originally constructed based on the literature reviewed), the students pointed out other beneficial effects that they had gained from the CCs. Among them, two interviewees mentioned future career and one mentioned personal growth.

Perhaps the best example to show the positive effect of the CCs on the students was interviewee SI6's culture learning of Theme 5 (see Appendix A for text). She reported being intrigued by the differences in the celebrations taking place in Japan, Mexico and the U.S. Because of such curiosity and interest, as well as the requirement in the worksheet assignment, SI6 searched for more information on this topic. She found an article on the Taiwan Panorama website describing the coming-of-age rite at Kailung Temple in Tainan (a city in southern Taiwan). In Chinese legend, the seventh day of seventh lunar month is the date for the Oxherd and the Weaving Maiden to meet each other on the bridge of magpies, making it the Chinese Lover's Day (similar to the Valentine's Day in the West). However, SI6 discovered that it was also the date that Kailung Temple held a coming-of-age rite for 16-year-olds to symbolize their farewell to their childhood years. Through comparing this Taiwanese ceremony with the ones in the text, SI6 learned that there were many commonalities among them, the most important one being the "universal love, care, and expectations the parents have for their youngsters," said SI6 (7/5/2010). Further, in order to experience the excitement of the ceremony, she and a few of her classmates decided to travel to Tainan later that year to observe the coming-of-age rite.

SI6's account demonstrates some of the abilities of a language learner with intercultural competence. She not only showed her openness and willingness to learn about other cultures but also had the ability to search for new information, compare and contrast it, interpret and relate to such information, and acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices.



The last theme generated from students' interview data was the increase in their English ability, especially in reading, listening and speaking. According to the interviewees, the teaching of the reading techniques helped them read more efficiently, and studying the English text enlarged their vocabulary. They also reported that such an increase in their language ability has in turn increased their motivation and improve attitudes toward English learning. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the English presentations also helped increase their listening and speaking proficiency, especially given that the learning occurred in such a natural, fun way. The above echoes what Paige et al. (2000) have asserted in the "background of the study" section above.

On the other hand, some interviewees also thought that the English texts were "very difficult" and "full of unfamiliar words." Two of them even complained that the difficulties in reading some of the text had lessened their interest in reading about and studying culture. In addition, it is important to note that when asked whether the interaction which had taken place during the English presentations would be of any help to their future communication with other English speakers (i.e., foreigners), seven reported "maybe" or "not sure," and one reported "no." The reasons for such responses included "It is different interacting with my classmates and with a 'real' foreigner" (SI4, 7/1/2010) and "Thinking about conversing with a foreign makes me nervous." (SI9, 7/12/2010)

#### ***Instructor interview***

Ms. Lin's interview data revealed two prominent themes. The first was her thoughts on the performance of her students, in which she considered the cultural instruction to have been beneficial her students. The other was her reflection on and criticism of her own teaching.

Ms. Lin was greatly pleased with the positive attitude of the students toward the cultural instruction and their active participation in the class activities. She felt that in general the students worked hard at the CCs. In addition, the students were more willing to voluntarily discuss things with her after the class in this semester compared with the previous semester, when the students were more passive, "They seemed more eager to learn and participate... and they were memorizing more vocabulary and were a lot more willing to speak in English." (TI12, 6/24/2010)

In addition to her students' applause-worthy performances, Ms. Lin has also gained from processes of developing and teaching cultural materials. Talking about her biggest gain in teaching the course, she stated: "I also learned tremendously—from the materials that I teach, from the feedback and questions from the students, and from the more information that I am inspired to learn after teaching this course." (TI14, 6/29/2010)

Despite the above, Ms. Lin also voiced several concerns. First of all, she thought that the development of the cultural curriculum had been a difficult and laborious task. Various challenging aspects pointed out by Ms. Lin included "time consumed in searching for cultural materials," "difficulty in revising and editing material on cultural themes," and the "lacking of existing, concrete examples for reference." Another difficult task for Ms. Lin was the teaching of the materials. She thought that even though the content was developed several months before the semester started, the teaching was still challenging. Among all of the challenging factors, "teaching brand new materials" and "lack of confidence in teaching culture" were Ms. Lin's biggest problems.

Ms. Lin's self-doubt and lack of confidence have been well-documented in the literature, as mentioned in the previous section. As she has never stayed in a foreign country for more than four months, her insecurity seems understandable. However, it is also important for teachers who make the effort to incorporate cultural instruction into their language teaching to understand the practical impossibility of them becoming experts on all pertinent cultures (Paige et al., 2000).

Finally, an interesting topic came up in Ms. Lin's interviews—her learning about Taiwanese cultures. It is interesting because scholars have suggested that learning about other cultures usually results in the enhancement of the understanding of the learners of their own culture. In this study, it is evident that the students not only gained the cultural knowledge but that Ms. Lin did, too. For example, one of the assignment questions for Theme 5 on Traditional Ceremonies asked the students whether they knew of any coming-of-age ceremonies in Taiwan. Although Ms. Lin knew that some Taiwanese aboriginal tribes hold various ceremonies for their youngsters, she didn't know that some local temples also hold ceremonies for young people who turn 16 or 18. When the students reported that some Confucius temples held an "eight-row

dance” to celebrate young people’s coming-of-age, “I realized that I’ve learned something from my students, and I still have a lot to learn about my own culture,” said Ms. Lin. (TI6, 4/20/2010)

*Classroom observation*

To a large extent, the data from the researcher’s observation field notes confirmed those gathered from questionnaires and interviews, in that frequent interaction took place among Ms. Lin and the students, and that the students participated actively in small group as well as presentation activities. In addition to the above, however, a few interesting issues surfaced during the observation that deserved further attention. First, during group discussions, some students sometimes held seemingly stereotypical images about people who were different from them, although such remarks may have been made out of pure ignorance rather than vicious prejudice. For example, when discussing world religion (Theme 4) a student made the following comment, “If Muslims in the Middle East could convert to our Buddhism, the world would be a much better, peaceful place” (OF4-2, 4/8/2010). Also, when discussing indigenous people (Theme 10) another student stated “I think South African aborigines and the Maoris are like our ‘mountain people.’ They must like getting drunk and dancing and singing” (OF11-12, 6/15/2010). These comments showed that the students unknowingly imposed their own value system on those of others and thus made inappropriate generalizations.

Another issue was the students’ occasional judgments on other cultures as inferior or superior. Although Ms. Lin more than once encouraged the students to view other cultures as merely “different” rather than good or bad, comments such as the following showed the students’ convenient polarizing frame of mind toward aspects of their own culture and those of others: “[Mexican girls celebrate their coming-of-age at the age of fifteen.] Fifteen years old and they are already considered adults. No wonder people say that Mexican and South American women are ‘easy’” (Theme 5) (OF5-7, 4/20/2010); “The U.S. sure has a better educational system. I think not only that; they are better than us in every aspect... They’re just better” (Theme 3) (OF3-9, 3/25/2010). Such a narrow point-of-view may well lead to their complete rejection or embrace of other cultures.

Finally, the frequent use of strong, negative English words such as “stupid” and “ugly” were recorded during students’ oral presentation and discussion, including: “I don’t know why Black people like hip-hop music; it’s so stupid!” and “The Middle Eastern women are ugly because their black robes are ugly.” The comments above initially led the researcher to consider that the students have a negative attitude toward people of other cultures; however, after seeing Ms. Lin in an exchange with the students on the issue, the researcher realized that such word choices were very likely due to the students’ limited English vocabulary. In other words, the students selected to use the words “stupid” and “ugly” because they are simple and easy to memorize. For example, the real meanings behind the above comments were “I don’t understand hip-hop music because I’m not familiar with its vocal style. Therefore I can’t appreciate it” and “I can’t imagine wearing a hijab in public all the time. It is sad that the Middle Eastern women can’t show their beauty with such modest styles of dress.” In this regard, further investigation into how the linguistic proficiency of foreign language learners affects and limits their conveyance of meaning is needed.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study have shown that the cultural instruction generated several positive effects and was considered beneficial by the students. In addition, the instructor was pleased with the students’ learning and performance, but she also voiced concerns regarding culture teaching and learning. Overall, the findings suggest that Ms. Lin’s development of the cultural curriculum was a worthwhile effort, and the incorporation of target, source, and international target culture materials was beneficial for students’ culture learning, as suggested by Cortazzi and Jin (1999). Since the cultural materials in this study were developed fairly recently and only used in Ms. Lin’s classes, more studies need to be done to better improve the materials and to see the effectiveness of such instruction in different EFL classrooms.

Despite the above, several concerns and issues have surfaced in this study and are worth discussion. First, this study has placed cultural instruction at the center of English education, and the findings suggest that it is possible for learners not only to acquire cultural knowledge but also to improve their English ability. It provides evidence that the learners’ four

skills, especially the reading, speaking and listening skills, can still be practiced in content-based instruction, therefore cultural instruction such as the one described in this study is beneficial for EFL classrooms. However, the study also reveals that the students' interaction and linguistic gain during the class activities may not automatically transfer to their future communication with other English speakers. In this regard, scholars have suggested that culture learning is a process which involves three skills/aspects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Byram, 2000; Paige et al., 2000); it seems that the students in this study have acquired the first two aspects but not the last. Therefore, cultural instruction which is designed to help equip learners with all three aspects of the learning, particularly the behavioral aspect, will be helpful.

Second, a rather unexpected finding in this study was the students' fondness for small group activities. This activity was originally designed to compensate for the large number of the students in an English reading class. It turned out that such activities not only added to the interaction among the students but also motivated them to learn culturally and linguistically. EFL studies have long suggested that language instruction which emphasizes interpersonal communication is more effective than instructional methods concentrating on having students learn linguistic rules. The link between the communicative approach to foreign language instruction and cooperative learning in small groups is also supported (Bejarano, 1987). Therefore a closer look at how group activities affect EFL students' culture learning will be helpful.

Third, the success of this cultural instruction was mainly due to the instructor's use of her time and effort. Ms. Lin had begun the process of constructing the curriculum and designing the materials eight months prior to the actual teaching. Despite all the hard work and the encouraging performance of the students, she still felt rather insecure with her teaching. Storme and Derakhshani (2000) noted that foreign language teachers have long struggled with the question of how to integrate language and culture within classrooms, and the concerns voiced by Ms. Lin were also well-documented in the literature mentioned earlier (Turkan & Celik, 2007). It seems natural for Ms. Lin to feel anxious, considering that it was her first effort, and there were not too many accessible resources for her to reference. In addition, previous studies also suggested that EFL teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about the nature of culture and cultural diversity may have a great impact on their instructional and methodological choices (Paige et al., 2000). Therefore further

investigation into how EFL instructors' self-efficacy and beliefs affect their culture teaching is needed.

Finally, the assessment of culture learning is an important issue in this study that deserves further attention. Normally, when placing culture learning at the core of language education, it seems only natural that the testing should match what has been taught and learned in class. However, Ms. Lin made a deliberate choice of *not* testing the students' culture learning in her class. The first reason was that since the class was an English reading class, the assessment of the course was required by the school to be reading-related. Second, to Ms. Lin, culture is as difficult to teach as it is to assess, because culture learning objectives are illusive and hard to measure. For example, can the testing of her students' factual knowledge in culture truly represent their culture learning? Also, how can the development of open-mindedness be evaluated via paper and pencil instruments? Further, should students' grades be based on their self-reported evaluation such as the presence of positive attitudes and the elimination of prejudice toward other cultures? In short, how can learners' intercultural competence be precisely and systematically evaluated and graded? Problems in assessing cultural proficiency have been addressed in previous studies (Byram & Morgan, 1994; Paige et al., 2000; Storme & Derakhshani, 2000); however, effective ways of assessment have not been proposed. Further research in this area is needed.

In conclusion, the current study has shown that the cultural instruction was considered beneficial by the students and generated positive effects in various aspects. In addition, the students considered the way the class was structured, especially the small group activities and presentations, as favorable to them. They not only learned from the text but also from their peers in both cultural knowledge and English skills. Further, the instructor was satisfied with the students' performance with respect to their participation in class and the increase in their linguistic proficiency. On the other hand, she also deemed that her instruction had plenty of room for improvement. As Byram (2000) suggests, when facing the great diversity of race, language, and culture in today's world, it is inevitable that English teachers will be required to make efforts in developing their students' intercultural competence. Studies focusing on the effectiveness of cultural instruction, especially using self-designed cultural materials or placing the instruction at the center of the language education, will be of help for both EFL teachers and students.

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