



CULTURE IN EFL: USING AN ELF WRITING PROJECT TO FACILITATE CULTURE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR LOW-PROFICIENCY COLLEGE EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract:

This paper aims to present a course design focusing on culture and language learning for low-proficiency EFL classes, and an evaluation of this course. Extensive research has been undertaken discussing cultural content and exploring effective pedagogy to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence in the context of English as lingua franca (ELF). However, few studies have addressed the issue of teaching low-proficiency students. In light of this, this study integrates an ELF writing project to facilitate culture and language learning for 32 low-proficiency college EFL learners, and investigates the effects of this course using a questionnaire survey, students' reflection papers and the teacher's observation and personal notes. The study found positive learning results. As well as these positive results, this study also discusses how the teacher uses students' writings to teach some essential intercultural communication skills to prepare students as ELF users. Some pedagogical suggestions are also made for teachers with low-proficiency students and curriculum designers.

Keywords: culture and language, English as lingua franca, intercultural communicative competence, low-proficiency EFL learners

1. Introduction

As globalization continues, competence in intercultural communication has become an essential in language education. Language learning is not limited to using the correct forms of language; it should include the culturally appropriate use of language in different contexts. Thus, promoting EFL students' intercultural understanding has become the focus of English language curricula (Byram, 2009). The term 'English as a lingua franca' (ELF) has emerged as a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages in this current globalizing world. This implies that it is important to develop the ability to understand cultures, including your

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own, and use this understanding to communicate with people from other cultures successfully (Alptekin, 2002; Byram, 1997; Chlopek, 2008; Krieger, 2005; House, 2012; Yeh, 2009; Young & Sachdev, 2011).

With such understanding and awareness, intercultural approach is encouraged in this paradigm shift to develop intercultural communication competence. Extensive research has been undertaken discussing cultural materials and exploring effective pedagogy to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence in the context of English as lingua franca (ELF). While many studies have found challenges face teachers in putting this into practice (Byram, 2009; Cheng 2012; Chlopek, 2008; Luo, 2017; McKay, 2002; Tsai, 2016), few studies have addressed the issue of teaching low-proficiency students. The challenge of teaching culture to low-proficiency students is one that many other practitioners face (Sercu, 2005).

Many teachers with low-proficiency students spend much teaching time on vocabulary, grammar or drill-type exercises, which emphasize memorization and repetition, and do not promote students' production of the target language in a communicative manner. Indeed, according to an informal questionnaire survey conducted by the author prior to this writing project to better understand the scope of students' previous classroom learning experience, this type of learning experience is commonly shared by most students of the author. This has prompted the author to ponder the question of how to create opportunities to enrich students' learning experience, given their limited command of English.

One way to address this problem is through experiential learning. As Kohonen (2001) states, experiences of language, communication, culture and personal learning processes are essential for foreign language learning. With this purpose, the researcher integrated an on-line available ELF writing project for low-proficiency students with a goal of providing a productive exercise to help students gain hand-on intercultural experience of using English for real communication and to encourage them to use English outside the classroom. Based on the students' reflection papers, a questionnaire survey, and the teachers' field notes and observation, this study addresses the following two questions.

1. What is students' attitude toward this ELF writing project?
2. To what extent do students think this ELF writing project is beneficial to language and culture learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture teaching and learning in the 21 century

In language education, the notion that language and culture are closely related is indisputable. Brown (2001) states whenever you teach a language, you also teach a complex system of cultural values, ways of thinking, customs, and behaviors. Culture influences language and language also reflects culture.

One common way to understand the idea of culture is to see culture from two general categories: "Big C" culture and "Little c" culture (Halverson, 1985).

"Big C" refers to the products of a country, such as music, architecture, literature, and paintings, while small c signifies people's life styles and behaviors, such as daily activities, personal values, customs, lifestyles, attitudes and traditions. Big "C" relates to the products of civilization while small "c" is regarded as a group of people and the ways of their lives. Brooks (1975) called small c and big C "everything vs. the best in human life."

Culture, according to the National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project (2006), has three components: products, practices and perspectives. They are called the three P's of culture. Products are the tangible or intangible creations of a particular culture. Food, clothing, books, and tools are examples of tangibles and songs, dances, rituals, language, a system of education and laws are examples of intangibles. Practices are how people lead their lives and do things. Practices involve the use of products including social norms, ways of communication, conventions related to hierarchy, power, class, status, and gender roles. Perspectives are the underlying values, beliefs, and traditional ideas that underlie the cultural practices and products of a society. They represent a culture's view of the world. These three P's are connected to form a culture.

As the world's extensive use of English in the globalizing world, English as a lingua franca (ELF) has significantly transformed the sociolinguistic landscape of English (Jenkins, 2015). ELF refers to communication in English between speakers with different first languages. In response to the current sociolinguistic realities of ELF, ELF scholars call upon language teachers and practitioners to revisit their current pedagogical practices and consider implementing appropriate ELF-oriented pedagogical proposals in their local contexts, which would involve exposing students to the diversity of English, sensitizing them to the problems associated with a native-speaker centric view of English, and raising their awareness of the value of the multilingual and intercultural nature of ELF communication (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Masuda, 2012). Language educators and curriculum guides around the world also stress the need for incorporating global cultures into foreign language curricula to accommodate the case for English as a means of international and intercultural communication (Alptekin, 2002; Byram, 1997; Chlopek, 2008; House, 2012; Young & Sachdev, 2011). However, many studies have found that many challenges face teachers in putting this into practice.

2.2 Intercultural communication and language teaching: challenges in EFL

Previous studies display some challenges that could impede the integration of the cultural dimension in EFL teaching (Byram, 2009; Cheng 2012; Chlopek, 2008; Luo, 2017; McKay, 2002; Tsai, 2016). First, according to Tsai (2016), English teaching and learning in Taiwan is still mostly associated with learning grammar and vocabulary

under the influence of the test-driven learning environment. Students do a lot of drill-type exercises instead of being offered opportunities for real communication.

Secondly, scholars have noted that English is often limited to teaching American and British English in the textbooks as they represent Standard English and as the preferred English-speaking cultures (McKay, 2002). In Taiwan, Luo (2017) also found that the internationally-published textbooks overlooked the fundamental ELF element: to promote learners' awareness of ELF. Moreover, the study found that teachers teaching low-proficiency students said that discussion activities are rarely used in class because low-proficiency students are not able to carry out discussions in English due to inadequate English proficiency. Teachers with low-proficiency students spend much teaching time on vocabulary, grammar or drill-type exercises, which emphasize memorization and repetition, and do not promote students' production of the target language in a communicative manner. This has revealed that the level of learners may also be an impediment to implementing ELF approaches in the classroom, which was also the issue addressed by Sercu (2005).

Owing to this challenge many other practitioners face and the fact that many projects promoting intercultural communication are implemented in high or intermediate level EFL classes (Hsu, 2014; Ke, 2011; Liu, 2016; Wu, 2016), the author designed a course that allowed the teacher to change instruction to address low-proficiency students. An on-line available ELF writing project was integrated into the English class with the objective of offering opportunities for real communication and to help low-proficiency students gain experiential intercultural learning experience. The implementation of this course and the assessment of its effects to determine if improvement has occurred are detailed in the following section.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Setting

The participants included 32 college-level non-English majors (19 females, 13 males) in a low level Sophomore English course at a private university in northern Taiwan. Level placement for English courses was arranged based on students' English scores from a TOEIC test. Test takers with scores below 500 were placed in low-proficiency classes. All the participants were students from the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. The sophomore English course offered by the university generally runs for two semesters with an aim to promote international communication. This project was integrated into the first semester of 2017. The class met 2 hours per week. A textbook was assigned and a unified schedule was arranged by the language center.

3.2 Devising a plan: Ready-To-Use ELF Writing Project

Postcrossing (<https://www.postcrossing.com>) is a project allowing anyone to send and receive postcards from all over the world. The idea of *Postcrossing* is that for each postcard you send, you will receive one random postcard back from somewhere in the

world. The project of Postcrossing was integrated into the course for three reasons: First, it is a simple writing task with a focus on writing personal profiles and introducing places in users' own country, which is relevant to the content of the textbook. Second, Postcrossing provides authentic materials for the real use of English. Third, it is a flexible, feasible task allowing opportunities for cross-cultural experience in the situation when the curriculum is fixed.

3.3 Classroom procedures to implement *Postcrossing*

The project was integrated into the course following the four procedures of introduction, preparation, postcrossing and presentation. At the beginning of the course, the purpose of the project was explained and the website of postcrossing, including what postcrossing is and how to use postcrossing, was introduced to the students as reading materials. Next, in order to facilitate the process of registering, the instruction of how to write a personal profile and a post card was given. After registering, students were ready for postcrossing. For the purpose of this project, postcards about Taiwan were required. Two months later, an oral ppt presentation including personal profiles, one card sent and one card received, and additional discoveries about the card received based on students' own interest, was required.

3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis

To assess the effects of this project, three sources of data were collected: (a) reflection papers; (b) a questionnaire examining students' perceptions of the project; (c) the teacher's observation and personal notes. The teacher as a researcher took notes throughout the implementation of the project, which were used as the basis for personal reflections. At the end of the course, all the students completed a reflection paper in English intended to offer students with the opportunity to reflect on their own learning process and product as well as a questionnaire regarding their perceptions of this project. The questionnaire included 15 questions categorized into four themes: general feelings about the project, perceptions of language learning, perceptions of culture learning and perceptions of motivation and learning ability. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was performed to analyze the data collected from the teacher's notes and students' reflection papers. All the feedback, answers or comments were read thoroughly and repeatedly to code important texts related to language and culture learning. After this, the coded excerpts were categorized and given themes.

4. Findings

Five themes were generated: (a) general attitude toward the project; (b) Self-perceive culture learning; (c) Self-perceived language learning; (d) Self-perceived learning ability, motivation, and confidence; (e) Raising the awareness of ELF in intercultural communication

4.1 General attitude toward the project

Question 1 in the questionnaire dealt with students' general feeling about the project. As shown in Table 1, the mean score and standard deviation were 4.2 and 0.79 respectively, indicating an overall positive attitude toward this writing project. Among the 32 reflection papers, all students showed their attitude toward this project using a variety of positive words, such as interesting, good, meaningful, exciting and so on. The positive attitude also revealed in reflection papers. For example, S4 wrote, "Postcrossing is much more interesting than the other type of homework. It is a nice experience to me. We can share anything to strangers is really amazing." Another evidence was found in S16.

"I think it is a very interesting homework. It's very meaningful and I think I will recommend this to my friends." I feel very interesting and exciting, but also feel that I am just a small sand in the world. To see the world through the postcards, around the world through postcards, this is another special way of tourism (Reflection, 01/10/2017)

Table 1: General feeling about the project

Questions	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. In general, I think this writing project is interesting.	4.2	0.79
2. I have learned my own culture through the project.	3.8	0.71
3. I gain more understanding toward other cultures through this project.	4.1	0.73
4. I know more about the differences between other cultures and my own culture through this project.	4.0	0.8
5. I gain more interest in other cultures through this project.	4.4	0.62
6. This project has helped me enhance my overall English proficiency.	4.2	0.74
7. This project has helped me enhance my reading skills	4.1	0.69
8. This project has helped me enhance my writing skills.	4.3	0.70
9. This project has helped me enhance my speaking skills.	3.8	0.91
10. This project has helped me enhance my listening skill.	3.5	0.67
11. This project offers opportunities for real communication.	4.2	0.78
12. This project has helped me enhance my learning ability.	4.2	0.79
13. I gain more confidence through this project.	4.0	0.86
14. This project motivates me to learn English.	4.1	0.73
15. I would like to continue postcrossing.	3.8	1.04

4.2 Self-perceived culture learning

Question 2, 3, 4, 5 dealt with perceptions of culture learning. The mean scores and standard deviations are shown in Table 1. As revealed in the table, the results showed students positively thought that this writing project could be effective in culture learning. The mean scores ranged from 3.8 to 4.4. Students strongly agreed that their interest in other cultures had been aroused. The data from the reflection papers also provided evidence for such finding.

Many students expressed that this project provided opportunities to introduce their own country (Taiwan), and learn many names of countries, locations, famous places or buildings and some aspects of cultures in countries they have never been to.

Students used Google Maps to facilitate introducing the unknown places where their postcards came from in presentations. Some representative excerpts regarding culture learning were identified as follows.

"This is a great opportunity for me to write to people in other countries. I can learn the culture of others from postcards to other areas. This is an unprecedented experience. What a special and interesting In this process, I can see a lot of Russian-related culture. Such as eating, dressing, living, and habits. This is usually not take the initiative to explore. Is a great activity I think. (Reflection, 01/10/201, S13)

"It's very interested to tell people from different country about the custom of our country, because they would be very Surprised and happy to know that. (Reflection, 01/10/2017, S20)

As for the self-explored cultures, the mostly mentioned content focused on products or practices such as famous local food, festivals, landmarks or tourist attractions. However, a few presentations revealed some aspects of small c rather than big C. Two students mentioned the cultural differences by the use of comparison. Take S12 for example. S12 received a card from New Orleans saying *"Winter comes, the weather gets colder and colder. Hurry up and make a snow man or have a snowball fight..."* S12 complained that the writing indicated that the sender has no idea that Taiwan is a subtropical place. When talking more about New Orleans, S12 made a comparison of typhoon and hurricane in Taiwan and New Orleans respectively.

Another interesting example was Joulupukki in Finland. S28 received a card from Turku, Finland saying *"the most famous Finn is Santa Claus (we call him joulupukki)."* The name "Joulupukki" literally means "Christmas goat" or "Yule Goat" in Finnish. To understand joulupukki more, S28 shared the origins and description of joulupukki, connected to Thor in Norse Mythology, explaining the popularity of yule goats as Christmas decorations.

4.3 Self-perceived language learning

Questions 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 dealt with attitude toward language learning. The mean scores and standard deviations are shown in Table 1. The mean score of 4.2 for Question 6 showed that students in general agreed that this project helped enhance overall English proficiency. The mean scores for Questions 7, 8, and 11 exceeded the value of 4, indicating students strongly agreed that this project was beneficial to improve reading and writing and provided experiential opportunities for real communication. The mean scores for speaking and listening were 3.8 and 3.5 respectively, indicating a relatively moderate agreement. This could be possibly explained that although the teacher adopted an integrative approach (Yan, 2007; Zohrabi, 2011) allowing opportunities for speaking and listening, the time allotted to the presentation was limited due to the size of class and the unified syllabus schedule of the school. Thus, students spent more time

on writing and reading postcards. Additionally, students seemed enjoy more the excitement of writing and waiting for the postcards to arrive. This was expressed frequently either in the reflection papers or in the presentations. The teacher's observation also helped explain this. Making a presentation in front of the public is still a challenge for most low-proficiency students. As a result, a lack of fluency in speaking could cause the listeners' difficulty in understanding the presentations.

Expressions regarding language learning were also identified in 21 reflection papers. For example, S29 wrote, *"Its not a easy work, I never use English to write postcard. It's good to try and it also can help me practice my terrible English writing."* S23 stated *"...Through the project, I realize English is not only for test. It is a wonderful tool to communicate around the world."* Another excerpt was expressed by S7 saying *"Although this is just another English homework, it makes me use English to talk or write about my life, not write English as an answer to a question."*

4.4 Self-perceived learning ability, confidence, and motivation

Question 12 and 13 dealt with learning ability and confidence with mean scores of 4.2 and 4.0 respectively. Some students mentioned that they learnt how to write the address in English, and how to send a postcard to foreign countries. This was also observed by the teacher when students came often to ask how to write the address in English. Students also expressed that confidence was gained through this experiential activity. Take S25 as an example to mirror such confidence. S25 wrote *"I never thought that I can change postcards with foreigners. This experience is very amazing to me."*

The mean score of 4.1 for Question 14 indicated this course was effective in enhancing students' motivation to learn English. Question 15 showed that quite a few students would like to continue postcrossing, which was also mentioned in the presentations. S21 wrote. *"This is a great experience in my school life. Maybe I will keep sending postcard to another person. It's very interesting!"*

4.5 Raising the awareness of ELF in intercultural communication

Another interesting issue was this project allowed the teacher to use students' written English production to promote some aspects of ELF in intercultural encounters. For example, in the personal profile S9 wrote *"my hometown was Wanli"*. S9 did not explain in which part of Taiwan Wanli was located, assuming the place is known as by many Taiwanese people without the awareness of the lack of a common cultural foundation. Using this example, the author was able to identify in class the problem caused in the intercultural communication and stress the importance of taking the perspective of others in ELF communication. As Ke (2017) declared, our national identity stands out over our other identities in self-introduction. The different styles of self-introduction point to an important feature of identity: our identities are shaped by social interactions in particular environment. The example of Wanli made the notion easy to be understood for students. Another example is formality. S15 greeted friends by writing *"Yo friends I am Phis"* in his profile. According to his profile, he was a fan of a band. It

was assumed that he imitated the lyric he listened to in writing his introduction. This greeting would be considered inappropriate in the situation of meeting new friends for the first time. This provided a chance to raise students' sensitivity of style, formality and register.

5. Discussion and pedagogical suggestions

In light of student feedback from the questionnaires and reflections, the author concluded that this ELF writing project was effective in addressing the issues concerned. The project provided experiential ELF communication opportunities for introducing themselves and places in Taiwan to foreigners. It also allowed chances for real use of the target language and made students interested in other cultures. Most importantly, these low-achieving students gained some cross-cultural experience and confidence through this writing project. Students were inspired to believe that people with a minimum of basic English can communicate well in intercultural communication. It was hoped that this writing project could increase their learning motivation with interest and help them better understand the role of English in the globalized world.

Using the contents of students' productive tasks, the teacher was able to highlight some aspects of ELF in intercultural encounters. Students also had opportunities to develop intercultural communication strategies, which were essential for successful intercultural communication. For example, many students used technology, Google maps, to present the locations of countries introduced. Using a map to tell people about their own country or other countries is more effective than without a map. The experience of reading a variety of postcards from different places around the world is also different from the way of reading textbooks. It is possible and likely to encounter misspelled, misplaced or misused words made by nonnative speakers. In such cases, students have to guess the correct word(s) or the meaning from the context. In intercultural communication, to accommodate the different ways of using English is to accept the nonstandard usages instead of demanding them to use the more standard usages (Kaur, 2009). It is important to understand that since ELF speakers have different English learning experiences in addition to different cultural backgrounds and first languages, they sometimes use English in a unique way.

Moreover, the process of sending and receiving cards encouraged them to take more responsibility for their learning. To receive postcards, students needed to manage their own time to send postcards first. If they had not done this, they wouldn't have had any card from foreign countries to share. During the process, it was also observed that students showed enthusiasm by asking questions, asking for help with identifying hand-written sentences and updating what they had received every week. This writing project kept students actively engaged, creating an atmosphere different from a traditional mode of learning passively, waiting to be told what to do, and being

unwilling to answer the questions in public for fear of losing face if they make a mistake.

Despite the small scope of the research and limited time available, low-proficiency students had a real taste of ELF-oriented written communication, using English to communicate with non-native speakers in a culturally homogeneous classroom. Based on the findings, some pedagogical suggestions for teachers are provided. First, it is recommended that teachers use projects to incorporate culture into foreign language instruction. Project-based instruction (PBI), or project-based learning is a student-centered approach emphasizing the importance of creating an end-product in language classrooms (Fried-Booth, 2002). As Stoller (2006) proposed, PBI encourages students' ownership, integrates skills, attends to both language and content learning and requires students to take some responsibility for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information.

Second, due to the concern of English proficiency, teachers with low-achieving students may specify or give directions in L1 to ensure students know how to carry out projects. Along with L1, using visual aids to show guidelines or to present examples is helpful and can reduce students' anxiety. Limited English should not be a barrier for intercultural communication (IC). According to Nerriere and Hon (2009), 1500 basic English words, Globish, can lead to successful IC. Basic words which carry direct meanings are more effective in IC, especially in ELF situations. The key is whether students have or can use them properly in real situations.

Third, it is crucial to help students become skilled at the core language proficiencies required before carrying out the project. Despite the fact that many sentences still contain errors, the tolerance of mistakes was allowed if those sentences were intelligible in ELF communication. Immediate correction is not suggested during the presentations for the reason of limiting students' frustration. Instead, a lecture regarding common errors in sentences documented by the teacher could be given at a later time. In this way, a well-planned experiential project can empower low-achieving students and help them feel that they can indeed do it.

Lastly, it was also important to call teachers' or curriculum designers' attention to the issue of time. A more flexible curriculum might be desirable, which would allow teachers to change the instruction and to assess the effects while the goal of English teaching is shifting from the communicative approach to intercultural approach in this globalized world.

6. Conclusion

This research was designed to serve as a practical and helpful example of using an experiential project to promote culture and language learning in a low-proficiency class and to raise students' awareness of ELF. Despite some limitations in the design, the results have shown that this writing project is effective and beneficial and its main goal has been achieved. It is believed that more efforts are desirable to contribute effective

ways to teach language and culture in this globalizing world. Teachers cannot neglect the trend of ELF, as it is crucial to prepare students to function as ELF users. Future research could investigate how different ELF-oriented instructional activities might be integrated into EFL classrooms to empower students' intercultural communication competence.

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