

EFL Learners Setting Foot on American Land for the First Time

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Abstract

The purpose for conducting this study is to attempt to realize how EFL learners, who went to the U.S. for the first time to tutor American students in Chinese, gained cross-cultural awareness. In addition, it is to examine to what extent they improved their English competency after immersing themselves in the target culture physically. Three college female students who majored in English joined the overseas Chinese teaching program. They went to the U.S. with their teacher and stayed there for a month. Their main task was to teach American students Chinese. In the study, it was found that those EFL learners not only experienced varieties of cultural knowledge and improved their English competency, they also reflected the learning attitudes performed by American students on their own in Taiwan. However, they also encountered certain conflicts because of their language deficiency or personal cultural bias.

Today, it is the technology age. The distance between people from different cultural backgrounds becomes short. In order to help EFL learners gain appropriate foreign language competency and target culture knowledge, based on the problems that occurred in this study, language teachers can increase more cross-cultural issues in their English classes. Also, it will be worthwhile to conduct further research on understanding how far EFL learners may improve their English after returning to Taiwan. Hopefully, the EFL learners may become aware of the linguistic and cultural knowledge on their way of English learning.

Keywords: *cross-cultural awareness, classroom atmosphere, language learning attitude, the speed of conversation*

Introduction

The purpose for this study is to realize how EFL learners gained cross-cultural awareness and adjusted their English competency when they initially went to the U.S. Also, how did they reflect upon the class atmosphere in the U.S. on their traditional learning environment in Taiwan. When the first person, Neil Alden Armstrong, set his foot on the Moon, three Taiwanese students set their feet on American land for their first time in their lives. The main task for them in taking this trip was to do the practicum on Chinese language teaching. That is, they would act as student teachers to work with American students on Chinese language learning. It was their first time to go to an English speaking country. Thus, they had, at a minimum, two impacts on them while situated in the ESL environment physically. One was the entirely different language situation; another involved varied cultural experiences. As EFL learners, English was usually, for them, primarily used in English classes. In addition, although Taiwan has been well developed and somewhat westernized, it still retains many oriental cultural traditions and concepts, such as the collectivism, stress upon social harmony, a de-emphasis upon individuality, and so on. Therefore, the moment when those students arrived in the U.S., their minds and emotions were suddenly cast into two simultaneous worlds. At this moment, how would they integrate their minds and emotions into one so that both could have concerted action? This question will be discussed in the following section.

The author took three female college students to the U.S. to conduct a Chinese language practicum. The duration of the practicum was for one month. Those students were English majors. Their main job to the U.S. was to work with American students on Chinese. Other than teaching tasks, they would travel around and experience American cultures and people by themselves. In this study, the author

proposed three research questions in order to unveil the experiences and efforts the EFL learners made in the target culture. The research questions are as follows.

The Research Questions

- How did Taiwanese students interpret the way of life of Americans?
- What extent did the Taiwanese students improve their English?
- How did the Taiwanese students perceive American students' attitudes on language learning?

Nowadays, the world tends to demonstrate increasing globalization. The distance between people from different cultural backgrounds is becoming smaller. While the frequent contact between peoples is growing, in relation to the target language and cultural awareness should be taken into careful consideration in order to achieve successful cross-cultural communication. In order to provide a clear picture of EFL learners' exposure in the target cultural background, this study will consider three related areas: native and target cultural awareness, the importance of target language learning, and introspection caused by American students' language learning attitudes. Hopefully, this study may encourage EFL teachers to be aware of how to integrate traditional classroom teaching into the practical classroom techniques reality. Through this, students may more adeptly employ English appropriately in their daily life.

Literature Review

In addition to going abroad for pursuing higher education, lately, the short-term study abroad program has gained enormous popularity in Taiwan. Many academic institutions will provide opportunities for EFL learners to participate in the program in the target culture so as to enforce students' English competence and cross-cultural awareness. Therefore, other than language learning, cultural understanding has equivalent weight in the process of foreign language learning. Collier (1995) stresses that in the U.S. much misunderstanding occurs "because many policy makers and educators assume that language learning can be isolated from other issues and that the first thing students must do is to learn English" (p. 3). Many researchers claimed that culture plays an integral part in people's communicative behaviors (Lee, 2002; Martini, Behnke, & King, 1992). In Henry's study (2007), she indicates that the experience of teaching in another culture gave preservice teachers more confidence in working with English as Second Language students. Brubaker (2007) also agreed that culture learning should become an "integral and explicit component" of short-term study abroad (p. 118). In his study about studying abroad in Berlin, Wolf (2007) emphasized that studying abroad allowed students to experience "first-hand" German culture (p. 143). Howard (2002) also proved that "Two way immersion allows students to experience the cultural and linguistic diversity of the world firsthand through integrated education settings" (p. 62). While language learners in the target culture, they not only have more opportunities to practice the target language, they also earn more target cultural understanding so that they can better adjust their life there. Tang (2006) claimed that "To be informed and effective performers in another culture, students must also have a solid understanding of the cultural implications of the discourse protocols learned and rehearsed in the classroom (p.97)."

In this study, three EFL students set foot in the U.S. for the first time and had close contact with American students in the classroom. Both Taiwanese and American students not only might have miscommunication, they also might encounter conflicts on the classroom atmosphere because of the varied cultural values on classroom management. Many researchers conducted the investigation about the behaviors performed by Asian and American students in the classroom. For example, Jones (1999) indicated that in U.S. academic culture, students demonstrate critical thinking abilities and problem-solving skills. Assertive oral participation are highly valued and rewarded. Students engage in open, direct, and conversational-like dynamic classroom interactions. In contrast, in their home countries, East Asian students sit quietly in lecture-type classes and take verbatim notes. They are taught course material through lecture methods and attend classes in a formal, well-disciplined atmosphere (Coleman, 1997; Liberman, 1994; Ladd & Ruby, 1999). DorisShih and Cifuentes (2003) also pointed out that "the Taiwanese students disliked conversing with the United States tutors as a large group in a public space because they were afraid to lose face in front of their fellow students and other tutors" (p. 88). Thus, while language learners are immersed in the target cultural background, both instructors

and students face challenges to communicate with one another appropriately. In addition, language teachers have the commitment to integrate the target cultural knowledge into their language classes so as to help students develop their cross-cultural awareness. One Chinese saying, “Know your enemy and know yourself,” can be changed into “Know your target culture and know yourself,” and then, you can conquer a hundred language learning barriers successfully.

Methodology

Research design

This section discusses the research site, the selection of participants, and the time frame of the study.

Research site

The main research site for this study was located in a college in the central Taiwan and two high schools in the southwestern part of the U.S.

Participants

Three female college students were selected to join the program. They were all English majors and in senior class. The basic condition for students to participate in this project was that they had never been to the U.S. before. In addition, they were outstanding on their academic performance. They stayed in the dormitory while they were in the U.S. and went to different high schools to do the practicum.

Time frame

In order to correspond the semester scheduled by the educational system in the U. S. and not to conflict participants' regular class attendance in Taiwan, the research project was conducted for a month during the winter break provided in Taiwan. Once students arrived at the destination, they started their adventures in their daily life.

Data Collection

There were several different sources of data included in this study, such as pre- and post- survey questionnaires, interviewing, participant observation, and written reports.

Pre- and post- survey questionnaires

The pre- and post- survey questionnaires were conducted respectively when students stayed in the U.S. for two days and when they were leaving the U.S. The purpose for conducting the survey questionnaires was to realize how different and similar students' perspectives were on American life at different durations of their stays in the country.

Participant observation

The author escorted the students all the way to the destination, because it was the first time for these students to go to the U.S. While the author was staying in the U.S., she was with students all day long so that they all had closer contact. Therefore, she could do deliberate observation on them and explore EFL learners' first contact with American cultures.

Interviewing

After students completed their practicum and returned back to Taiwan, the author interviewed them one by one in order to earn a better picture about the students' perspectives and experiences with American life.

Written report

There were two kinds of reports that students wrote; one was a reflective journal in which students jotted down what they had experienced while working with American students. They were requested to send their reflective journals to the author via e-mail the moment when they finished each task. The other report was done when students returned back to Taiwan. They had to compose an overall feedback response about their trip to the U.S.

Findings and Discussions

Based on the proposed research questions, this section will illustrate three aspects, cross-cultural awareness, language proficiency, and classroom atmosphere performed in Taiwan and the U.S, to reflect EFL learners' perspectives on their first time trip in the U.S.

Cross-cultural awareness

Cultural events occur in our lives naturally. They seem so trivial that they sometimes do not seem worth mentioning. However, when they appear in a different way which is generally acknowledged, people may be surprised by their amazing differences. The following aims to unveil the most impressive cultural values that Taiwanese students encountered.

The manners of courtesy and thoughtfulness

Pedestrians taking the right of way on the road, strangers greeting one another on the street, holding doors for the next person, and hugging people to show appreciation or affection rarely happen in Taiwan. However, the three Taiwanese students in the study experienced those unique events quite often in the U.S. As a matter of fact, they followed such customs in order to practice the saying "When in Rome, do as Romans do."

It was the first time for students to go to the U.S. They not only had to switch their language from Chinese into English all the time, they also confronted cultural shock. The most impressive things they'd ever encountered occurred on the first day when they walked on the street. They did not know that pedestrians have the right of way and cars would normally yield the rule. They felt amazed when a car stopped and the driver waved his hand to indicate for them to cross the road. Furthermore, mostly, people would say 'hi' on the street no matter if they were acquaintances or not. They stated in their journals that it was hard for them to greet people, especially strangers, at the beginning. However, they did it actively later. Another situation the students had experienced was that American people would hold the door for the person followed them into a public building. Although they did not do it before, they would like to learn it. One student gave a presentation to introduce customs and traditions about Taiwan for American college students. After she ended her words, one American student gave her a big hug and said 'thank you' to her. In her journal, she reflected that she was touched and thought that Taiwanese students should learn this courtesy. Taiwan used to have a good fame as a state of ceremonies. Compared with the people in Taiwan, American people seemed to them to carry out such common courtesies to a great extent. Such courtesy behaviors are quite different from those in Taiwan and students cannot learn them from the textbooks but only by experiencing the target cultural environment. Interestingly, they also experienced embarrassing events when they were situated in the U.S. What occasioned these events?

The varied usual customs

Price plus tax, the (dis)similar weather, and the concept on Chinese and Taiwanese food were also different cultural experiences that the Taiwanese students had in the U.S.

When purchasing goods in Taiwan, customers pay the exact price listed on the product items. However, when this scene moved from Taiwan to the U.S. and when students were asking to pay extra pennies at the check-out desk, they thought cashier might have made a mistake and attempted to correct it. They did not know that the price listed on the product items will be added tax when the products are checked out. In addition, although students knew the weather was colder in the U.S., one student did not know, like Taiwan, that it would rain in the U.S, too. She was surprised with the raining and got wet in the rain without carrying an umbrella. She kept inquiring, "How comes it will rain in the U.S.?" Generally, students learn the information about the western society from the media, such as movie or magazines, and rarely have insight into the real life of the target culture. Thus, it is common to encounter unexpected or embarrassing situations.

When Taiwanese students shared typical Taiwanese food with American students, such as fried rice, noodles, and steamed bread, they compared different concepts on food with one another. For instance, in order to demonstrate their knowledge on Chinese food, American students would ask about *Dim Sum* which is popular at restaurants in China Town in the U.S. However, Taiwanese students told them that it was not popular in Taiwan. At this point, it seemed that American students were poorly informed that both Taiwanese and Chinese foods are distinctively different. In such situations, if Taiwanese students could share different kinds of food with American students and explain the features between Taiwanese and Chinese food, not only could American students obtain deeper understand-

ing about Taiwanese food culture, Taiwanese students would gain better understanding about their indigenous culture.

Although Taiwanese students might face culture shock on the go, it was worthwhile for them to become introspective about their native cultural values. For example, they found at the very beginning that there were no trash cans in the toilet. What they did was to put a plastic bag next to the toilet so that they could place their used tissues there. Since they were young, they were educated that they could not deposit tissues in the toilet, or, they might cause the toilet to become obstructed. After using the toilet in the U.S., they learned that tissues could be flushed. Interestingly, while the results of this study were being composed, a story which was released on United Daily News also reported the same idea by coincidence. It said that a tour guide reminded the Taiwanese tourists of dumping the used tissues into the toilet once they arrived in Japan. It indicates that the toilet culture can be different cross-culturally. Although students only stayed in the U.S. for one month, they were being immersed in cultural environment every minute. It is helpful for them to build the cross-cultural awareness and broaden their vision about the world. It could be illustrated by a changed tiny manner that those Taiwanese students would hug people instead of waving their hands when they were leaving for Taiwan. To hug people could be a big step for students to make. They gradually learned and accepted this warm and friendly western etiquette which is seldom seen in Taiwan.

Language adjustment

Although students only stayed in the U.S. for a month, as a whole, they not only experienced quite different cultures and people, they also made great progress on their English. This section will discuss students' English performance from four different aspects.

The speed of conversation

Before going to the U.S., students had worked with a native English teacher on many courses at school and were competent with English performance. Theoretically, they should have had no problems in communicating with people in English. However, they claimed that native English speakers spoke too fast so that they could not catch up with them. One student stated in her journal that she became disoriented because she could not comprehend their quick English. It implied that the native English teachers who worked with students in Taiwan might speak too slowly. Therefore, they were used to listening and speaking in a slow English and could not comprehend the quick rhythm. At this point, is it helpful for EFL learners to keep learning "abnormal" speed in speaking English when they are learning English for years?

Less fluent speaking ability

In addition to facing the problems in speedy conversation, because of their less fluent speaking ability, the students had unhappy experiences when interacting with American people. Although they felt excited to be in the U.S., they also felt upset sometimes when they met people who were rude to them. For example, when their language could not be understood at the cafeteria, the service people seemed to look down on them. The same thing occurred with bus drivers. One student said that she met a clerk who had no patience to listen to her in the post office. However, she was brave to keep asking many questions. Although they encountered unhappy situations related to language deficiency, the students thought that most American people were very friendly and polite, especially, when they worked with American students on Chinese. Many American students were full of patience to explain things to them till they gave up and said "Never mind", when Taiwanese students still couldn't get it. Immersing in the target culture physically is helpful greatly on language improvement. But the prerequisite is that both sides need to have more interaction with one another.

Enjoy staying with people from similar cultural backgrounds

Theoretically, EFL learners should make great strides on their English performance in the target culture because they have numerous opportunities to talk to people in English. Interestingly, when students were asked whom they talked with the most frequently, they admitted they would like to be with Asian people. It was hard for them to explain the reason. The author also found that they would not talk to American students actively in the cafeteria or in the dormitory. They might be shy or were not ready to talk to American students in the whole English environment. When they met Asian students on campus, they found people who had the same situation as them. Thus, they felt more comfortable to be with them. Especially, when they found those Asian students were from mainland China, they even invited one another to go to a tour together. At this point, it suggested an inquiry: when different ethnic people go to other cultures, will they gravitate to their own people naturally? If this occurs, it

may not be related to the language problems but cultural identification. People from similar cultural backgrounds may find it easier to communicate with one another. However, the author attempted to interpret the reasons why her students preferred to be with Asian students more than Americans. She thought that students were not shy but had less proficiency in English. For example, in the cafeteria, she would create the opportunities and encourage those students to talk to American students, but they rejected doing these activities.

The specific benefits EFL learners earned in the target culture

The main purpose for students to participate in this project was to teach American students Chinese. They would reflect American students' Chinese performance on their own English learning. They discovered that language learners would make similar grammatical mistakes in the process of foreign language learning. Thus, they might become more aware of the language learning tips than before. In addition, they also learned some literary terms while enforcing their cultural knowledge. For example, when they were told that they were going to attend a 'field trip' with a group of high school students, they could not understand what it was about. Instead of 'field trip', they misheard 'feel trip' so that they attempted to figure out what the 'feel trip' was about and could not really get it. Also, they learned 'pot luck' by carrying food to a party. Therefore, learning by practicing is helpful for EFL learners to comprehend the target language they are working on.

All the factors illustrated above demonstrate what students experienced when they communicated with people in the U.S. Certainly, it is a positive effect for EFL learners to be immersed physically in English speaking countries. The moment when students returned back to Taiwan, they became more confident on their language performance and were full of hope for their future careers related to employing English language. However, the problems they had in oral communication continue to exist. It is worthwhile for teachers to think of a way to address and attempt to resolve such issues.

Classroom atmosphere between Taiwan and the U.S.

The main purpose for students to go to the U.S. was to teach American students Chinese. The range of educational level for the American students was from 9th to 12th grades. It was a very unique and exciting experience for Taiwanese students to enter to American high school classrooms in the U.S. They were all impressed with American students' learning attitudes. According to their reflective journals and interviewing, the classroom atmosphere of the similarities and differences between Taiwan and the U.S. was described respectively in the following.

Similarities

Taiwanese students found that some learning attitudes appeared in the classrooms of the U.S. also occurred in Taiwan. To them, the stereotype of American students should be more outgoing and open minded to talk to people. However, they discovered that certain behaviors, such as being shy, chatting, and not asking questions, correspond with many students in Taiwan. While working with American students, Taiwanese students were surprised that some students were very shy and dared not ask questions in public. At this moment, the Taiwanese students would go to help those students actively. The Taiwanese students agreed that when students would not ask questions, then, the class would become very boring. They stated that it was quite similar to students in Taiwan. In addition, some American students like to talk with one another and did not pay attention to what their teacher said. Certain students even could not stop talking and would be requested to change their seats. Thus, it can be concluded that certain language learning attitudes in school are universal.

Although Taiwanese students pointed out several classroom events might occur in both Taiwan and the U.S. simultaneously, they were more impressed on the different situations that appeared in the U.S.

Differences

Although some American students were shy and quiet and would not ask questions, most students were more active than students in Taiwan. While learning Chinese, they would practice it repeatedly in public and would not be afraid of making mistakes. They liked to share their learning experiences with one another. Many students would ask questions enthusiastically. The most impressive behavior was that American students were very punctual to their class. Almost all students would attend to the class on time. It was hard for students to keep this discipline in Taiwan. However, American students might be out of control in class when they were having their holidays. On Valentine's Day, Taiwanese students found that many American students would bring flowers and candies to their classmates. The

class would become very noisy and students seemed very excited to chat with one another. On this special day, it was hard for the teacher to discipline the class.

It was a very precious opportunity for Taiwanese students to learn about the real situations that occurred in the classroom in the U.S. By participant observing, they sensed how to conduct an ideal classroom. They would reflect certain quality learning attitudes on themselves and their peers in Taiwan, such as punctuality in going to the classroom, not being afraid of making mistakes when learning a new language, and asking questions enthusiastically.

Conclusion

Three students were full of anticipation and worries to go to the U.S. and returned back Taiwan with lots of great memories. It is helpful for EFL learners to experience the target culture physically. They not only can improve their English proficiency, they also enforce their target cultural knowledge. The three students claimed that the motivation of articulation and the courage of staying in the foreign countries were two powerful strengths for EFL learners to possess while they were in the U.S. Although they stayed in the U.S. for a month, they thought that it was too short to promote their English ability. However, they had made great strides in their learning lives.

English education has been advocated for decades. In particular, the government has been provided a quantity of money on elevating college students' English competency annually. By observing three students' experiences on their first trip in the U.S., it is worthwhile to further explore the concepts of classroom English teaching so as to build more a sound language learning environment. As mentioned previously, the three students had difficulties in understanding the speedy conversation made by American students. Therefore, it is necessary to request the native English teachers to offer the normal speed English teaching while they are working with students in Taiwan. Also, one common state presented by EFL learners is that they attempt to avoid making mistakes in front of their classmates. In contrast to Taiwanese students' misgivings, American students seemed less afraid to make mistakes on language learning in public. That is one important feature the three students gained, in discovering the enthusiastic learning attitudes made by American students. While learners are afraid of making mistakes, they may reduce the frequency of such hesitancy. If not, teachers will find it difficult to discover and pinpoint their deficiencies in English performance and thus cannot provide an appropriate assistance. At this point, teachers can build a supportive classroom atmosphere to help students get rid of their barriers. Although the mass media has been developed well currently, the cultural miscommunication still exists. Thus, English teachers may need to integrate the cultural knowledge into the language class whenever necessary. They should attempt to change and influence students subtly so that they can obtain the essence of language learning. For example, manners and courtesy and the concept of punctuation are three significant components possessed by western college students and that are worth adapting from the western countries. Teachers can convey related cultural issues to students by means of language teaching. Hopefully, students can gradually fit in the international stage with appropriate language and cultural communication.

This project successfully assisted EFL learners to make their American dream come true. They are interested in enforcing their language and experiencing the different cultures and people. Thus, this first step definitely is a stepping stone for them to broaden their minds and vision to explore the world in their larger life.

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