



The impact of short-term overseas internship upon three Taiwanese students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of short-term internship abroad upon three Taiwanese students. The researcher conducted a qualitative research study involving three Taiwanese female students who were English majors and came from a private college located in the central Taiwan. With their escorting teacher, three students stayed in the U.S. for a month and worked with 18 tenth-grade American students 50 minutes daily on intensive Chinese tutoring. Although three interns were English majors and had studied English for years, they still had oral communication problems at the very beginning. While involved in working with American students in the classroom and visiting places, their English comprehension and competency constantly made progress. They not only somewhat learned language teaching skills, they also improved their English competency. In addition, they appeared to gain new cross-cultural recognition. In conclusion, the overseas internship participation can provide EFL students genuine experiences in target language practice and broaden their global visions.

Key words: overseas internship, Chinese teaching, cross-cultural awareness

Introduction

The program of practical training outside the school has been applied by specific departments of colleges and vocational high schools for years in Taiwan. In the program, students will integrate their study at school to compliment a period of practical experience. The purpose of this is to incorporate a period of time in industrial settings to give students opportunities to obtain valuable work experience and make useful contacts for their future employment. This kind of obtaining practical work experiences before graduating from colleges has been broadened by another implementation, i.e., extending the internship from domestic to foreign countries. Chen (2008) reflected in her study that Taiwanese students obtained precious experiences on teaching language skills and learning American students' classroom attitudes while conducting overseas internship programs.

One main difference in conducting internship programs between domestic and foreign countries is that students involved in foreign countries will experience both language and cross-cultural awareness. Thus, the advantages of conducting an overseas internship is that students can obtain different cultural experiences and enhance their foreign language skills from the perspective of being embedded in the target culture itself. In this, students will face greater challenges, yet may also reap greater gains. Such programs are especially beneficial for those students who major in English pedagogy. Increasingly, not only is it necessary to have English competency, successful English teachers also need to know the appropriate cultural knowledge in order to impart appropriate cross cultural communication skills. Thus, English major students especially can gain immeasurably through contact with cultures related to their language learning. In this respect, becoming involved in overseas internship programs before entering the job market is a very good opportunity for them to gain both practice and experience.

The concept of English major students gaining ready employment as English teachers has been taken for granted for a long time. Therefore, the particular value of this study is that students of English as a Foreign Language (for whom English is an L2) are in fact immersed in an English-speaking environment where they are teaching Chinese (i.e. their L1). The impact of the internship is the



relative focus on experiences beyond the language classroom as opposed to experiences within the language classroom. Therefore, this internship study is actually providing students with a broader cross cultural experience.

Hopefully, this research project can give language teachers inspiration on how to plan an appropriate language class and what kind of cultural knowledge is required to be included.

Literature review

Many studies discuss the internship experience in teaching fields conducted by pre-service teachers. For instance, in their study, Rock and Levin (2002) found that the teacher candidates had become more thoughtful and reflective as a result of their field experience. The experience also provided them with an opportunity to get a clear grasp of theories of teaching and learning gained from the classroom. Malone, Jones, and Stallings (2002) examined 108 undergraduate pre-service teachers and found that the field experience helped those pre-service teachers understand the subject they tutored. In addition, it also helped them develop empathy and gain more tolerance as well as patience. Furthermore, twenty eight teacher candidates who enrolled in the undergraduate elementary teacher education program participated in their study, Singh and Stoloff (2006) found that majority of their teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that the field experience has made a considerable impact on their beliefs about teaching and learning and that it has been a vital component of their teacher preparation.

In addition to investigating the effects of internships conducted in the native culture, many research projects extended the internship program to overseas and obtained sound results for students involved in the projects. Studies that focused on discussing the overseas internship on teaching pointed out that student teachers who conducted the internship abroad indeed saw positive performance improvement. For example, Pinar and Grumet (1976) and Mahan (1992) had documented the positive impact of cross-cultural experiences on pre-service teachers. Also, in an evaluation of pre-service teachers' cross-cultural learning experiences, Young (1993) noted that overseas internship experiences raised students' consciousnesses regarding global dynamics. And in conducting the internship program, Stachowski and Visconti (1997) reported that students encountered a greater number of unexpected challenges when interning overseas than their counterparts who conducted the internship in the U.S did. Similar to their findings, Merryfield (2000) noted that in the overseas internship experience, student teachers simultaneously confronted novelty on two fronts: inexperienced teaching and culture. In short, they underwent an entirely new venue of challenges that were more compounded than what students would experience if they completed their experiences in the U.S. Similarly, in their study, Clement and Outlaw (2002) suggested that the overseas internship experience was more than a teaching experience for the students. It was also a learning process on multiple-levels. Students could be expected to learn about teaching, culture, and about themselves. Davis and Mello (2003) discussed ways in which overseas teaching might affect students on personal and professional levels. Their results included increasing students' creativity, curiosity, communication skills, information, and flexibility. Students also were reported to experience a positive sentiment of the overseas internship experience setting them apart from their peers. Also of note is the study conducted by Firmin, MacKay, and Firmin (2007) involving 13 undergraduate students who completed their student-teaching in overseas contexts. In their findings, the researchers indicated three intrinsic factors that had the greatest impact on students' overseas internships: cultural differences, fitting in, and social support. The studies illustrated above include many facets that occur in the process of interning overseas. Unlike those studies applying fixed measurements to examine students internship experiences, in this study, the researcher conducted a full escort task with her students in the entire overseas internship so that she could gain a clearer and more accurate and insightful impression of the overseas internship program through her own immediate review and analysis. In addition, to date, few studies have explored what language problems student teachers who were situated in the foreign countries experienced when they worked with the students from the different language and cultural backgrounds. In general, student teachers conduct their internship in their own mother tongue, thus oral communication is not a problem when they are abroad. In this study, the researcher attempted to realize what EFL students would learn through the worthwhile experiences of physically immersing themselves in the different linguistic and cultural environment and proposed three questions in the following:



Research questions

1. What happened in the Mandarin Chinese class and what teaching skills did Taiwanese students obtain?
2. What cross-cultural experiences did the Taiwanese students encounter and to what extent did they learn cultural awareness?
3. How did Taiwanese students reinforce their English competency and to what extent did their English competency improve?

Methodology

The purpose for conducting this study attempts to examine the impact of three Taiwanese EFL learners immersing in the target culture. According to Cresswell (2007), qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Thus, the researcher adopted qualitative approaches to reveal those EFL learners' linguistic and intercultural experiences.

Research design

Research site and customized teaching materials

This study was conducted at a Christian academy that was affiliated with a Christian university located in the Southwestern United States. It is a private school and includes K-12 programs. In this site, three Taiwanese students worked with 18 tenth grade American students from Monday to Friday. The teaching materials employed in the class were created by three students. Under the instruction of the teacher/researcher, they designed and manufactured customized teaching materials before they conducted the overseas internship. The contents of the text focused on functional language learning, such as greetings, appropriate title usage, numbers, and pronunciation practice.

Participants

Three selected female students were enrolled in English program in a private technological university located in central Taiwan. The basic requirements for the students to join the project were that they had to possess the quality of responsibility, independence, and easy going characteristics. In addition, they had to pass the oral exam held by the program so that they might have sufficient competency to handle their daily life conversation in the U.S. Among them, two seniors had already taken the internship required for the English program in local children's English learning schools for one semester. Another junior student had worked at a private children's language school as a part-time worker for one year when she joined the project. It was their first time to go to the United States. Furthermore, it was their first time to face American students and teach them Chinese. In order to reinforce English ability, they attended an extra class with a native English speaking teacher a semester before they went to the U.S. While they were staying in the U.S., their temporary living place was arranged in the university's dormitory.

Time frame

The formal overseas internship on Chinese teaching was conducted for one month. During this period of time, three Taiwanese students worked with American students alternately for fifty minutes daily from Monday through Friday. Other than the regular contact hours, they had to prepare the course, design the in-class activities, and make the teaching aids before entering the classroom. In addition, they would experience the western cultures and language.

Data collection

There were several different data sources included in this study. With each data set relates to the others, the researcher was in an attempt to build up a picture of the experiences the three interns encountered in the U.S.



Pre- and post- survey questionnaires

In order to realize three EFL students' perspectives about experiencing the language and intercultural communication, both the three interns and the American students were requested to do two kinds of survey questionnaires respectively. Before attending the first meeting with American students, the three interns did the pre survey questionnaire and the post survey was done when the program was completed. The questions in the pre survey included three main aspects: the feelings of immersing in the foreign country, the competency of conversing with people in English, and pre concept about American culture. In addition to repeating the same questions in the post survey, two more questions were added. One was the most impressive experiences they had while teaching and another was the experiences of working with American students. The questionnaires were in English and were sent to the participants via e-mail. The language they preferred to use in the questionnaires was Chinese. They all answered all the questions in detail and sent them back to the researcher via e-mail. Likewise, American students were asked to complete two questionnaires as well. At the first meeting, they were given a paper-based survey to do. There were four questions: the experience of learning foreign language, the concept about Taiwan and its language, the interest in learning Chinese, and the way of solving in-class questions. When the class was approaching the end, a post survey was given to American students. At this point, two main questions were presented: the most preferred things to learn and the comprehension of the three interns' instruction. Students were cooperative in providing their opinions of the lessons.

In the Chinese class, the medium of instruction was English. In addition to demonstrating the pronunciation, Taiwanese students needed to explain all lessons about Chinese language in English. In the post survey questionnaire, all American students pointed out that they liked learning Chinese and hoped the Chinese program could last longer. In particular, they preferred learning spoken to written language (the ratio was 16 to 2). Although Taiwanese students felt uncertain and doubtful on their English competency in the classroom, all American students indicated that they could comprehend those student teachers well. Thus, it shows that Taiwanese students not only conducted a successful Chinese class; most importantly, they had no problems in oral communication.

In addition to conduct the pre and post survey questionnaires, the three interns were interviewed by the researcher while the internship was in progress and at the end.

Interviews

The on-going and ending interviews were processed during and after the research and were carried out in Chinese. The three interns alternately were interviewed by the researcher in her room at the dormitory. At the on-going interview, the prompts the researcher raised were yes-no questions mostly to warm up the atmosphere. For instance, "Are you enjoying working with American students?" "Before and after working with American students, do you have different concepts in your mind?" And "Do you feel your English is better now?" When the three interns were gradually getting used to staying in the target environment, at the second interview, the researcher used the strategy of wh-questions to form her questions. The interview prompts were such as, "What were the advantages and disadvantages when the teacher was being with you?" "Which do you think is better: work in group or individually?" And "How do you feel the overall experiences of working with American students on Chinese?"

Three interns' journal logs

Three interns were requested to submit written reports whenever they completed each Chinese class. There were 45 entries in total. The contents discussed involved the topics they taught, problems they had, and the methods of problem resolution. In addition, they were required to hand in three "cultural experiencing" written reports weekly. There were 30 entries in total. The contents included any special events they might have experienced and their feelings about them. All written reports were sent to the researcher through e-mail.

By means of gathering many kinds of data sources throughout the study, the researcher could triangulate her findings to validate the research outcome. Creswell (2008) claimed that researchers need to triangulate among different sources of data to enhance accuracy of their study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also indicated that the findings will be found "to be more credible if the inquirer is able to demonstrate a prolonged period of engagement, to provide evidence of persistent observation, and to



triangulate, by using different sources, different methods, and sometimes multiple investigators, the data that are collected" (p. 307).

Data analysis

Due to the authentic linguistic and intercultural experiences presented in the data collected, the researcher used Constant Comparative Method (CCM) which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Emerson et al.'s (1995) open coding and focused coding approaches to analyze the data. The analysis was based on the questions presented above to examine and interpret the findings. The data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously in order that the researcher could define and clarify specific patterns to investigate.

Findings and Discussion

The study started on the day that students arrived in America. They stayed in the U.S. for a month to carry out their internships as Chinese teachers. By analyzing the data collected from many sources, three aspects, teaching skills practice, cross-cultural awareness fostering, and English competency reinforcing, are elaborated upon, so as to fully analyze the research questions proposed earlier.

Proposed questions to explore

What happened in the Mandarin Chinese class and what teaching skills did Taiwanese students obtain?

The first time teaching Chinese was very exciting and difficult to the three interns. Four phenomena emerged as follows.

Affective emotions transcend task accomplishment initially: It was their first time to face American students and teach them Chinese. They all felt nervous, scared, and shy before the American students. One student even burst into tears the moment the first meeting was dismissed. All indicated that they could not make eye contact with their students. They were so scared that they wished to quit the internship and return back to Taiwan immediately. The teacher encouraged them that they could have better performance and constantly provided support and immediate assistance during the process. Also, they told one another that they could better their unsatisfactory teaching skills after each teaching practice. Thus, the crisis of feeling such fears was resolved slowly and they all gained better control their affective emotions gradually.

Certain pronunciation problems occurred repeatedly: Participants could not pronounce certain Chinese phonemes accurately, such as curl sounds. Some American students inquired if there were no curl sounds in Mandarin Chinese when they heard certain words pronounced by the interns. The teacher/researcher would help interns correct their inaccurate pronunciation after class. Probably, the interns' pronunciation was influenced by their native language, the Taiwanese dialect, (the popular language used in Taiwan,) which does not have curl sounds. In order to convey clear instruction to beginning language learners, instructors would be well advised to be alert to the subtleties that are so often involved with regional pronunciations and cultivate their knowledge of a specific language with an awareness of accurate pronunciation.

From inexperienced to experienced teaching: Although three interns only engaged in the internship for one month, they learned many practical teaching skills. For example, they would design different kinds of games to conduct their class so that their students would not get bored. When they found distracted students who were chatting, napping, or playing on their cell phones, they would ask them to answer questions. They indicated that being teachers was not an easy job. Not only did they need professional knowledge, they also had to have the personal skills necessary to show patience to work with their students. They stated that they felt happy and had the sense of accomplishment when American students learned what they taught them. However, they also indicated that they had to learn the skill of classroom management because only toward the end of the program were they able to gain control over the noise that American students tended to make in the classroom. A similar situation also occurred in Lin's (2003) study, that is, the skill of classroom management was one of the difficulties that student interns experienced during the period of the teaching practicum.



After a one-month period of teaching Chinese in practice, the interns believed that they could do the job even better if they had a second chance to serve an overseas internship.

What cross-cultural experiences did the Taiwanese students encounter and to what extent did they learn cultural awareness?

Impressive cross-cultural experiences: The common topics that the students reflected upon consistently in their journals and conversation were food, traffic, American people, and the cost of living. The food served in the cafeteria the day they had was quite different from the one they used to have in Taiwan. Thus, they declined to have meals in the cafeteria on campus. They always went to Chinese restaurants to have Chinese food. However, they complained about the food and wrote, "We don't like Chinese food here because it is so greasy and too much for us to finish it." Sometimes, they would rather have instant noodles, which they brought from Taiwan. Although they were not fond of enjoying American food, they liked American people with their friendly, passionate, and helpful characteristics, especially the car drivers on the streets. They were very impressed by the traffic rule that pedestrians had the right of way and how drivers always showed courtesy to the pedestrians. In addition, when they were walking on the street, people always said 'hello' to them. They felt Americans were very friendly, polite, and sincere. One student stated in her journal, "We have learned this friendly manner. When we are walking on the street, we will say hello to people no matter we know them or not." Another student appreciated the good service given by salespersons while shopping. She indicated, "Whenever I need help and say 'excuse me,' the salesperson will give me immediate help with patience and will not follow me. She is very respectful and I feel relaxed shopping." Although most Americans made a good impression on the Taiwanese students, three interns could not get used to the culture of giving tips. One student reported, "When we had food at the restaurant, not only did we need to pay the tax but also the tips. At this point, I think it is good to live in Taiwan. The living cost is less expensive."

Cross-cultural awareness building: Staying in the dormitory, teaching Chinese, and taking adventurous tours were the three major activities the Taiwanese students engaged in during their daily lives when they were in the U.S. Because of the short-term stay, the students did not have sufficient time to make close acquaintances with American people. However, when they were offering Chinese lessons, they learned various cultural responses presented by American students in the classroom. For instance, they were amazed by American students' learning attitudes. In contrast to the quiet and emotionless atmosphere that characterizes classrooms in Taiwan, American students were very active and enthusiastic in the classroom, asking and answering many questions. The American students were also very expressive and spoke out about their thinking and the subjects they preferred to explore. One student stated in her journal, "Today, the class seemed out of control. Students kept asking questions." Another student in her post survey questionnaire indicated, "Their learning attitudes are very serious and they work very hard (certainly, fewer students are not attentive to their studies). I hope my classmates including me can have this kind of learning attitudes." In addition to the enthusiastic learning attitudes, American students would show their feelings directly. For example, one Taiwanese student was sick and took two days off. When she appeared in the classroom again, many American students paid their concerns to her directly. She was touched and remarked, "they were very kind of asking me about my sickness when I entered the classroom. I appreciated that we could establish good relationship in two weeks." However, the Taiwanese students were surprised that American students did not know about Taiwanese food and festivals. One student reflected in her journal and wrote, "We talked about food today. American students are fond of Mexican food, but we don't like it. In addition, they have no ideas about festivals in Taiwan, such as Dragon Boat festival and Moon festival. I didn't know what extent the cultures will be different in countries until today." They also found that some American students had stereotypes of Chinese culture, such as marriage management. Thus, one student indicated in her logs, "I used to suppose Americans are more open-minded and globalized than people from other countries. However, I was surprised that their knowledge about other cultures seems still in the very beginning stage. They should learn more about other countries." She indicated that she would collect more information about Chinese cultures to share with Americans if she had a second chance to visit the U.S. When the interns saw that many American people were very eager to enjoy the parade held in Chinatown to celebrate Chinese New Year, they were very touched and stated that people in Taiwan should pay more concerns to their own practices of the Chinese New Year celebration. Through such contact with people and events in the target culture, the Taiwanese students became aware of reflecting more carefully upon their own traditional cultures and forming greater cross-cultural awareness.



How did Taiwanese students reinforce their English competency and to what extent did their English competency improve?

Finding the opportunity to practice English: Although they could not answer all questions proposed by American students, the three interns urgently hoped that American students would ask as many questions they liked in order to furnish them with more opportunities to practise English. In addition, the participants met an American who was very friendly and patient to international people. Therefore, they would often have tea with him and have English conversation practice. When they felt cold in their room because the heater did not work and complained to their teacher, the teacher taught them the key words "quilt," "blanket" and "heater" and encouraged them to ask the resident assistant in the dormitory for help. After staying in the U.S. for only a few days, in other words, they learned how they could create opportunities to speak English, so that English became more and more ubiquitous in their daily lives.

Listening comprehension reinforcement: The three interns kept quiet much of the time when they were with their teacher on social occasions: Though they seldom spoke, they remained alert to the processes of constantly absorbing English conversation. Also, American students who kept asking questions gave the interns the opportunity to drill their listening ability. Therefore, they indicated that the most significant achievement skill they gained from this program was to have their listening comprehension improved. One student stated, "My listening comprehension improved a lot. In addition, I become more confident to speak English than before."

From having problems initially to fewer or less problems eventually: One question appeared in both pre and post survey questionnaires, "Do you think you have or do not have problems with communicating with people in the U.S.?" All three students answered 'yes' in the pre-questionnaire but 'no' in the post questionnaire. At the beginning, they stated that they could not understand what Americans said because they talked too fast. However, they remarked that they could figure out their meaning and give responses right away when the program was almost over. In the questionnaire, one student responded, "I don't have problems in conversation. I may not understand some words they say, but I know their intention." Another student indicated, "If I don't understand the words the interlocutors use, I will ask them to explain them to me, and vice versa." And the other student reported, "I usually use simple words to converse with Americans and they will use simple words in return. When they saw my puzzled facial expressions, they knew I did not get it and would try it again in other way." In this, they learned a skill to prevent their oral communication from breakdowns. In addition, they went to visit tourist attractions and enjoyed a wider range of American food by themselves on weekends. This demonstrates clearly how immersing oneself in the target culture is very helpful for enabling language learners to improve their language skills.

Implication and suggestions

In contrast with the quiet and non-supportive attitudes Taiwanese students usually act in the class, the three interns were very impressed by the American students' enthusiastic and endless questioning. However, they also reflected several times in their reports that American students were very noisy, or their attention spans were very short in the learning process. They felt frustrated and annoyed but did not discipline them in order not to offend those American students. Interestingly, they admitted that they had similar discipline problems as they had had when they were in the classroom in Taiwan. In this case, EFL teachers may need to think more carefully about how to conduct a successful classroom management.

By the end of this internship program, the three interns could understand Americans well while they had conversations with one another. However, they constantly stated that American people talked too fast. Chen (2008) mentioned a similar situation that occurred in her study of how Taiwanese students would become silent because they could not figure out the rapid speech of the Americans. Implied is that Taiwanese students who major in English seem not well enough prepared to handle the entire English speaking environment independently. The native English speaking teachers in Taiwan could be encouraged to occasionally speak to students at a "normal speed" in the English classroom.

Although Taiwan has been westernized, the students still encountered culture shock during their visit to the U.S. After joining a Valentine's party held by American college students, they felt a little disappointed because it was quite different from the one they had seen on the TV program. One student indicated, "I suppose that the party will have a lot of fun. However, when I went there today, it was not what I had imagined. It was quite different from those presented in the movies." They had



certain stereotypes about American culture. So, when the event conflicted with their assumptions, they felt certain negative emotions. Similar situation also occurred in the Chinese classroom. They were surprised that American students had no ideas about Taiwanese food and festivals. They did not recognize that people from different cultural backgrounds might have no concepts about it. It was one purpose for them to conduct the intercultural communication. Therefore, it is important for language teachers to combine language and culture together while they are working with students on language teaching.

Conclusion

It was a great challenge for the three Taiwanese students to conduct the overseas internship. They experienced many trying events and felt frustrated frequently while working with American students on Chinese learning. However, they all claimed that if they could be given a second chance to conduct an overseas internship, they all believed that they would try to make the class atmosphere more active and interesting. This suggests that they had learned the skills of working with people from different cultural backgrounds appropriately. In addition, they all felt regret that they had not prepared sufficient traditional Taiwanese cultural items to share with American students when they found that American students were interested in knowing more about their country. In this case, a very important point is presented, that is, students became aware of the importance of taking their own culture into consideration after immersing in the target cultural environment. In addition to gaining self-confidence and cross-cultural awareness, the students improved their ability in English proficiency while situated in the target culture for a month. Speaking English became part of their daily life. English became lively and not just an imaginary foreign language for them to practice. They had more opportunities to apply English, such as teaching Chinese in English, taking the transportation system, going shopping, and asking directions.

In addition to reinforcing English ability and developing cross-cultural awareness, while contacting with people from different cultural backgrounds in the U.S., three interns also had the opportunity of social skills training. They always felt shy and timid when they met people in the U.S. Because of their young age, they had had fewer opportunities to learn appropriate social manners. In Taiwan, education places less emphasis on cultivating appropriate social manners in students. That is why when they are in front of people they are unfamiliar with; they will become ungraceful, uneasy, and anxious. By participating in this overseas internship program, three interns had the opportunity to acquire appropriate social manners.

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