

Integrating Culture with Project-Based Instruction in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

While considerable research efforts have been made to explore the effective ways of teaching culture in second and foreign language settings, few studies have been carried out on the use of project-based instruction to promote language and culture learning. The purpose of the present study is twofold: to design a course using project-based instruction that would facilitate learning of language and culture as well as to investigate students' perceptions toward the project-based course. Thirty-four EFL college students in Taiwan participated in this study. Data regarding students' perceptions of the course were collected through a questionnaire as well as semi-structured interviews. The results of the current study indicated that students in general had a positive attitude toward project-based instruction after participating in the course. Students viewed that project-based instruction had the advantages of offering opportunities for active learning, enhancing their English reading skills, and increasing their ability to use online resources. As for culture learning, students perceived that the project-based approach was particularly useful in learning cross-cultural topics and helped them gain more understanding toward other cultures. In spite of these advantages, the participants also reported several challenges associated with the course.

Key Words: cproject-based instruction, culture in ELT, English teaching in Taiwan

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, an increasing amount of researchers have begun to promote project-based instruction as an effective means to merge content and language learning in both second and foreign language settings (Alan & Stoller, 2005; Beckett & Slater, 2005; Mohan & Beckett, 2003; Stoller, 2006). Project-based instruction (PBI), or project-based learning, according to Mills (2009), is an approach to learning in which students collaborate on sequential tasks and develop a final project. The notion of using projects, however, is certainly not new in the field of second language education and may be traced back to the early work of Fried-Booth (1986) and Legutke and Thomas (1991). Over the years, PBI has been widely recognized as a student-centered approach emphasizing the importance of creating an end-product in language classrooms (Fried-Booth, 2002). As one of the recent proponents of PBI, Stoller (2006, p. 24) proposed ten defining characteristics of effective project-based instruction which include

- (1) having a process and product orientation,
- (2) encouraging student ownership,
- (3) extending over a period of time,
- (4) the integration of skills,
- (5) attending to both language and content learning,
- (6) allowing students to work in groups and on their own,
- (7) requiring students to take some responsibility for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information,
- (8) assuming new roles and responsibilities of both teachers and students,
- (9) having a final product, and
- (10) concluding with student reflections on both the process and the product.

Because of these unique characteristics, research has indicated that PBI has the advantages of offering opportunities for students to learn language skills and content knowledge simultaneously (Alan & Stoller, 2005; Beckett & Slater, 2005; Levine, 2004), enhancing learning motivation (Gu, 2002; Trabelsi, 2013), increasing self-efficacy (Mills, 2009), as well as fostering learner autonomy (Fang & Warschauer, 2004).

As one form of content, culture, has always been present in the language pedagogy even if it is not always explicit (Risager, 2007). However, due to economic globalization and the increasing contact between people of all nations via the Internet, the incorporation of culture into foreign language instruction has gained prominence since the turn of the century (Su, 2008). While considerable research efforts

have been made to explore the effective ways of teaching culture in second and foreign language settings (Allen, 2004; Bateman, 2002, 2004; Jogan, Ana, & Gladys, 2001; Su, 2008), few studies have been carried out on the integration of PBI and culture learning despite the evidence gained from the project-based studies. The present study contributes to the field of foreign language education by exploring the effectiveness of using project-based instruction to teach language and culture in a university-level EFL classroom in Taiwan.

Benefits of PBI in Second and Foreign Language Settings

Among the advocates of project-based instruction, Beckett and Slater (2005) proposed the Project Framework as a useful tool for the integration of language, content, and skills. The framework was also intended to guide students to reflect on what was learned during the project work. More specifically, there are two key components of the Project Framework: the planning graphic and the project diary. The former, through the use of graphics, is meant to serve as an explicit reminder of student's learning goals (i.e., the learning of language, content, and skills). The latter is mainly a weekly summarization task, which encourages students to explicitly express the language, the content, and the skills they have been using during the process. Beckett and Slater (2005) also conducted a study to explore the implementation of the Project Framework on a group of 57 university-level ESL students in Canada. Based on the results obtained from a 14-week class, the researchers concluded that students were able to successfully achieve personal and instructional goals. In addition, students also indicated that they had learned about the topics as well as the language and skills needed to demonstrate their knowledge. Levine (2004) also reported another implementation of project work called Global Simulation (GS). The GS approach, as one form of PBI, involves engaging students in a long-term (usually a month or two or an entire term) global project which is based upon a single situation, examples including a particular business, organization, or group. In one of Levine's GS courses designed for intermediate university-level German learners, students were asked to design an Internet-based retail company through a website called www.technomode.de and they also had to present the company to potential investors in the hope of receiving their entrepreneurial support. Similarly, the other two GS courses, the Virtual Museum of German Cultures and German Language Film Festival, described in Levine's study, also involve students in long-term simulation projects. According to Levine, the GS approach to teaching not only provides rich opportunities for

meaningful task-oriented interaction but also facilitates the learning of cultural content.

Apart from the aforementioned benefit of merging content and language learning, another benefit of the PBI approach, increased motivation, was reported by Gu (2002). Gu conducted a 12-week study on project work at Suzhou University in China. The participants of the study were twenty Chinese students and twenty-eight American students. The Chinese students were doing projects about a Chinese silk pajamas exhibition and marketing strategies of Suzhou freshwater pearls. The results of Gu's study indicated that PBI enhanced Chinese EFL learners' motivation as well as improved performance in writing and communication. More recently, Trabelsi (2013) investigated the extent to which the project-based approach may produce a degree of authenticity in a business English course. Two classes of 25 university students majoring in business from Tunisia participated in the study. Based on students' responses to a questionnaire, the study indicated that most of the students reported gaining strong interest and a high degree of motivation in using language in the classroom after participating in the project.

Another piece of evidence for the effectiveness of PBI found in the literature is students' increased level of self-efficacy. Mills (2009) investigated the influence of a project-based foreign language curriculum on students' self-efficacy. Forty-six U.S. undergraduate students participated in the study. The context for the project-based curriculum was a virtual voyage through francophone Europe. Students were asked to travel to different destinations weekly and report on their experiences in a travel diary; the ultimate goal at the end of the virtual travels was to collectively develop a personal guidebook, with each pair of students contributing a guidebook chapter on a different city in francophone Europe. Based on students' responses to a questionnaire administered at the beginning and the end of the course, the study showed that students improved significantly in terms of their self-efficacy after participating in the PBI course.

In addition to increasing self-efficacy, PBI was also found to foster learner autonomy. Fang and Warschauer (2004) reported a 5-year longitudinal case study of two project-based courses conducted within a broader educational reform program at a university in China. Using participant observation, interviews, surveys and text analysis, the researchers examined the extent to which students in Chinese higher education benefited from computer-mediated, project-based learning. The results of this study revealed that project-based instruction improved both students' learning processes and outcomes by increasing

authentic interaction, allowing greater autonomy, and providing content relevant to students' lives and careers. However, despite the positive outcomes reported, this study also showed that the curricular reform faced with a resistance particularly on the part of teaching staff. Few faculty in the study were willing to teach project-based courses because such instruction demands a great deal of time and effort and this type of learning also clashes with traditional norms in Chinese higher education.

Although the above review of literature on PBI reveals its various benefits in language classrooms, it is still not clear whether this approach can be successfully utilized to teach culture in an EFL context and whether the implementation of it can effectively enhance students' learning of both culture and language.

Teaching Culture in Second and Foreign Language Settings

Research on teaching culture in the second/foreign language classroom has progressed rapidly over the last thirty years. Learning about other cultures, according to Kramsch (1993), has come to be perceived as a process of discovery, which implies opportunities for students to explore aspects of the culture as well as reflect on the fruit of their explorations. Dłaska (2000) also suggested a skill-oriented and learner-centered approach in combining culture and language learning.

One method that promotes learners' exploration of the target culture is the use of portfolios. Jogan et al. (2001), for instance, designed a culture portfolio project using e-mail exchanges between 15 U.S. Spanish students and 15 EFL students in Chile. The portfolios included copies of the e-mail exchanges and critical commentaries in which students reflected on what was learned regarding the target culture and described the extent to which their original ideas about the target culture had been confirmed or modified. The results of the study indicated that the students were able to increase personal knowledge about and commitment to the target culture at the end of the course. It seems that utilizing cross-cultural projects has the potential to increase students' understanding of other culture. Similarly, Allen (2004) also utilized culture portfolios to deliver cultural lessons to a group of second-year university students of French in the United States. By engaging students in a step-by-step process of researching personal stereotypes regarding the target culture, the participants gained insight on a specific aspect of their own and francophone cultures. Besides, through such approach, students also recognized the influence their own perspectives have on understanding another culture.

In addition to the use of portfolios, a number of scholars have

advocated the benefit of incorporating ethnographic interviews in FL classrooms to teach culture. Bateman (2002, 2004) conducted two studies using quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the effect of ethnographic interviews on students' attitudes and feelings toward the target culture. The participants of the study were a group of American college students learning Spanish, who worked in pairs to conduct several ethnographic interviews with a native speaker of Spanish. Both studies revealed that the interview experience positively influenced students' attitudes and feelings about the study of Spanish and native Spanish speakers. Furthermore, the results of Bateman's (2004) study also indicated that students became more competent in relating to and communicating with people of other cultures as well as viewing situations from other cultural points of views. The participants also reported an increased awareness of the influence their own culture in lives. In a similar vein, Su (2008) also investigated the effect of ethnographic interviews on culture learning while focusing on a group of EFL college students in Taiwan. The results of her study indicated that the ethnographic interviews helped facilitate the development of cross-cultural awareness as well as communication skills. Most participants of the study also viewed the interview approach as an effective way of increasing intercultural/interpersonal understanding. Given the effectiveness of using ethnographic interviews to increase cross-cultural understanding, the present study also utilized this method and incorporated it into the course design.

The current review of literature on project-based instruction and teaching culture reveals that while the employment of PBI offers various advantages in language classrooms, the question of whether and how it can be effectively used to teach culture remains under-researched. Given the growing interest in the incorporation of culture into second and foreign language curriculum, it is worth investigating whether PBI can effectively help achieve such goal. Hence, the purpose of the present study is twofold: to design a course using PBI that would facilitate learning of language and culture as well as to investigate students' perceptions toward the PBI course utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The following research questions were formulated to address the aforementioned issues:

- (1) How does a project-based approach affect students' perceptions of learning?
- (2) How does a project-based approach affect students' perceptions of language development?
- (3) How does a project-based approach affect students' perceptions of the development of cultural knowledge?

THE STUDY

Participants and Setting

Thirty-four college students enrolled in the same Freshman English course at a national university in northern Taiwan participated in the study. Their average level of English proficiency ranged from intermediate to upper-intermediate. According to students' responses to the background questionnaire concerning their English scores of College Entrance Exam taken in the year of 2010, based on a scale of 0 to 15, the rankings they received were from Levels 12 to 15 for their performance on the English test. According to the statistics reported by College Entrance Exam Center in Taiwan in the year of 2010, the number of students who scored above Level 12 accounted for the top 17% percent of the whole population pool, indicating an average upper intermediate level of English proficiency of these participants.

The Freshman English course offered by the university generally runs for two semesters. This project-based course was conducted in the second semester. The class met 2 hours per week and the duration of the project-based instruction was 12 weeks.

The Project-Based Course: Festivals around the World

This 12-week project-based course was specifically designed to meet the ten features or characteristics of effective project-based instruction proposed by Stoller (2006) as described earlier. The goal of this course aimed to strengthen students' English skills as well as increase knowledge about other cultures through implementing a project on cultural festivals. This particular topic was selected since previous research has found the effectiveness of using festivals to teach culture (Yang, 2006) and festivals as one of the common themes in cross-cultural communication (Su, 2008). In this project, students were required to collaboratively investigate the world festivals that were of interest to them. Each group of students was responsible for the collection and reporting of festivals within a particular foreign country or region based on students' own choice. The final product was a class video disc of festivals from the countries the groups reported on. In addition to the class disc, there was also a collection of essays written by every student. Students were required to compare two foreign festivals based on their own choice. The following sections describe the course components in detail including class activities and assignments.

In-class reading material. The reading package for the course consisted of four English passages adapted from various online sources

regarding world festivals. The first passage introduced the definitions of festival as well as gave some examples of Taiwanese festivals and holidays. The rest of the three passages introduced three different American festivals. During the class, students were encouraged to focus on the main ideas of each passage by answering comprehension questions and creating oral and written summaries. In addition to skimming for key concepts, students also practiced identifying details in a passage by scanning the text for important information of interest such as the types of food eaten and events or activities held during the festival. They were also taught how to look for synonyms or parallel expressions to define target vocabulary items. After class, students were given post-reading assignments to complete at home. For these assignments, students were instructed to find certain information online, write a one-paragraph summary, and present it to the class in the week followed. For instance, one of the assignments was to ask students to choose one of their favorite festivals from www.festivals.com, write a short summary of them, and present it in class. After each student orally presented his/her favorite festivals in groups, each group had to choose the most interesting festival and share it to the whole class.

Interviews. Students were required to form groups based on their choices and collaboratively conduct an interview outside the classroom. Each group had to interview at least one foreign resident in Taiwan about festivals that are popular in his/her home country as well as get his/her perceptions about some of the festivals in Taiwan. Students were required to present the interview results to the whole class. In addition to the interviews conducted outside of the classroom, students were also instructed to do several practiced interviews in class following interview guidelines (see Appendix A), which were designed to help students become familiar with the interview process.

Individual essays. For this assignment, each student had to write a five-paragraph essay comparing two foreign festivals. They needed to complete it at home and then posted to the course website. During class time, students were given writing instructions on how to write a comparison and contrast essay. The format of a typical English essay was taught and discussed in class. Students were also given two example essays to read in class. It was hoped that through such instruction students learned the organizational and writing skills they needed to complete the project.

Project diaries. Each student was required to keep records of individual learning during the project in the form of a diary. The diary form was adapted from Beckett and Slater's (2005) (see Appendix B). Each student was required to complete at least six project diaries

within twelve weeks. The diaries were intended to offer students with the opportunity to regularly reflect on their own learning process and product.

Final videos. Each group was required to make a 15-minute video as the final product of the world festival project. The video should include a presentation of at least three different festivals found within a specific country or region and should be presented in a way that would help promote the tourism industry of the area. Each group was asked to present its video at the end of the semester. A total of seven group videos were presented in a two and a half hour class time. Students were required to evaluate each video based on the criteria of content, language, and creativity. After that, the students were required to vote for "the best video." All the videos submitted were made into a class DVD disc with the title of Festivals around the World. This video project was intended to provide students with an opportunity to share their research and present it in a multimedia format.

The above-mentioned course components were designed to integrate the learning of the English language and world cultures. The tasks were arranged and interconnected in a way that the skills and knowledge students acquired from one task would prepare them for the completion of subsequent tasks. For instance, the reading material and listening assignments provided students with the necessary background knowledge about world festivals as well as the online searching skills needed for completing other tasks such as writing the essay and making the video. Likewise, the interview experience and the data from the interviews contributed to the final presentations of world festivals. In addition to the interconnection between tasks, this course design also provides a natural integration of the four language skills, encourages students to take responsibilities for learning, allows individual, as well as cooperative work, and facilitates reflection of the learning experience.

Data Collection Method

This mixed-method case study drew on data from two sources, one primary and the other secondary, to gain an understanding of the participants' perceptions toward the project-based course. The rationale for adopting a mixed-method design in this study was that previous studies on teaching cultures in the language classroom (Bateman, 2002, 2004; Su, 2008) have shown the benefit of using it to triangulate findings from different data sources. The following part describes each data type in detail.

Questionnaire. Learners completed a follow-up questionnaire in Chinese. It was an attitude survey (see Appendix C) designed in this

study. Although the questionnaire was not statistically validated, it served the purpose of eliciting participants' perceptions toward the project-based course. The survey consisted of two sections. In light of the existing research findings on the various benefits of PBI, the items designed in this study attempted to investigate whether the participants would also agree that PBI has the advantages of merging language and content, enhancing motivation, self-efficacy, and fostering learner autonomy after participating in the course. Consequently, Section I of the survey contain fifteen items focusing on the following four main aspects: (1) general feelings about the project-based course, (2) perceptions about learning the language, (3) perceptions about learning the content knowledge related to cultures, and (4) perceptions about learning ability and motivation. Each item was followed by a five-point Likert scale, indicating the degree of agreement ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Section II of the survey, unlike Section I, contained four open-ended questions, which provided the participants with the opportunity to freely express their opinions about their most and least favorite course activities, the greatest advantage and disadvantage of the project-based course, as well as any other comments pertaining to the course. In addition to the survey, the questionnaire also included a separate page with questions designed to collect demographic information from the participants. To ensure the readability of the questionnaire, all the items were reviewed by a graduate research assistant before administration.

Semi-structured interviews. A secondary data source of the study was semi-structured interviews carried out a week after students' completion of the course. Although the invitations were sent to all the participants, since most students had to move out of the residential halls for the summer during the week for the interviews, only eight students participated in the interviews. To allow participants to fully express their opinions about the project-based course, the interviews were all conducted in Chinese. The interview questions consisted of the open-ended questions taken from Section II of the survey. Each interview lasted for 20 ~ 30 minutes and was audio-taped. The audio data were later transcribed verbatim and translated into English for further analysis.

Data Analysis

The primary data for this study consisted of students' responses to the questionnaire, which included both closed-end (i.e., Section I) and open-end (i.e., Section II) questions. Data collected from Section I of the survey were put into statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics including

the mean, and standard deviation of each item were calculated. As for the data collected from Section II, all of the written responses including students' comments about the most and least favorite course activities as well as the greatest advantage and disadvantage of the project-based course were all categorized and tallied.

To analyze data collected from the interviews, which formed the secondary data source of this study, a qualitative approach was adopted. As is typical in most qualitative research (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Merriam, 2009), the data analysis method utilized by the current researcher was also primarily inductive and comparative. The researcher thus drew heavily from the constant comparative method first proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1976). To begin, the researcher read the entire interview protocols and looked for segments that illustrated the participants' perceptions or reactions to the project-based course. The identified segments were all tagged and then each segment of the data was compared with one another. These repeated comparisons led to a list of 26 initial categories constructed from the entire data set. Then the list was refined by grouping related categories and then renaming the combined theme. For example, six of the initial categories *problem with time/time management*, *problem with teammates*, *problem with making video*, *problem with too many new words*, and *difficulty of finding information* were grouped and renamed *problems encountered while conducting the project*. As a result, a total of five themes were constructed, which are shown in Table 1.

Having extracted all the segments and grouped them under the relevant themes, the researcher then tested the validity of the five themes by rereading the entire interview protocols to find additional segments that could disconfirm the existing categories and themes. Since no such segments were identified, the original themes were retained. The themes emerged from the interview data were used to triangulate the findings from the questionnaire as well as provide additional insights on the participants' attitudes and thoughts toward the course. Table 1 presents a list of themes from the two sets of data in tandem.

RESULTS

General Feelings about the Project-Based Course

Questions 1 and 15 of Section I dealt with students' general attitude toward the project course. The mean scores and standard deviations for

Table 1
A list of Themes from the Questionnaire and the Interviews

Themes from the questionnaire (Primary data)	Themes from the interviews (Secondary data)
Section I	
1. General feelings about the project-based course	1. Positive feelings associated with project-based learning
2. Perceptions about learning the language	2. Statements about language skills
3. Perceptions about learning the content knowledge related to cultures	3. Positive feelings about culture learning
4. Perceptions about learning ability and motivation	4. Reactions to the tasks/materials
	5. Problems encountered while conducting the project
Section II (open-ended)	
5. Most and least favorite course activities	
6. Greatest advantage and disadvantage of the project-based course	

these two items are listed in Table 2. As revealed in the table, students' mean scores of the two items were 3.8 and 4.1 respectively, indicating an overall positive attitude toward the project-based course.

Students' overall positive feelings toward the course also emerged as one of the five themes from the interview data. For instance, one student said (all names are pseudonyms):

The project was interesting because you could learn stuff not found in the textbooks. Textbooks generally suck. Doing the project made learning lively and you don't just focus on stuff in the textbooks. (Chris, interview)

However, although the participants in general showed positive attitude toward the course, the mean score for Question 1 (i.e., 3.8) concerning whether they like the project seemed to indicate some unstated doubtfulness. One possible explanation emerging from the interview protocols suggested the problem of time needed to complete the various project tasks. The issue of time or time-management seemed to be the top problem faced by these students since many of them mentioned that the festival project took up too much of their time:

Table 2
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the Items in Section I

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1 In general, I like the festival project conducted over the semester.	3.8	.79
15 In general, I have a positive feeling toward the project-based instruction.	4.1	.70
3 The project course has helped me enhance my overall English proficiency.	3.6	.77
4 The project course has helped me enhance my English reading skills.	4.0	.55
5 The project course has helped me enhance my English writing skills.	3.5	.74
6 The project course has helped me enhance my English speaking skills.	3.5	.82
7 The project course has helped me enhance my English listening skills.	3.3	.76
2 I have learned new knowledge about my topic through the project.	4.1	.62
10 I gain more understanding toward other cultures through the project.	4.3	.71
11 I know more about the differences between other cultures and my own culture through the project.	4.1	.72
12 In general, the project-based instruction is a good way to help students learn about other cross-cultural topics such as food and education.	4.2	.71
8 I have learned how to collect information about my topic by using different online resources.	4.1	.68
9 My overall learning ability (such as doing research and integrating information) has been increased through the project.	4.0	.72
13 Compared to the previous College English course, the project-based course has offered more opportunities for students to learn actively.	4.0	.69
14 Compared to the previous College English course, the project-based course has increased my own learning motivation.	3.7	.91

Note. Items were arranged by categories. Scores: 1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = agree, 5 = completely agree.

The project had some advantages but I had to spend much more time on it. In the past, I just needed to study the book and prepare for the exam. The project was different. You need to do the interview, look for information, and then you can write about it and so forth. (Ken, interview)

Perceptions about Learning the Language

Questions 3 to 7, of Section I, dealt with students' feelings regarding the project-based course and if the course enhanced their general English in each of the four language skills. The mean scores and standard deviations for these five items can also be found in Table 2. The results showed that students moderately agreed that the course had helped improve overall English proficiency given the mean score for Question 3 was around 3.6. As far as the four language skills are concerned, the results indicated that the project-based course was considered most helpful in increasing students' reading skills due to the fact that the mean score for Question 4 was 4.0, relatively higher than the rest of the three skills (i.e., 3.5 for writing, 3.5 for speaking, and 3.3 for listening).

The overall perceived usefulness of the project-based course in increasing students' language skills was endorsed by several students during the interview. For instance, one student reported:

The project course is helpful in learning (English) because if you want to learn English well, you can't just study what's in the book. You really have to do many things outside the classroom. (Anne, interview)

In addition, students affirmed that the project-based course offered more opportunities to read in English:

This semester I spent more time looking for information outside the classroom. During the process, I had to read things, those things online, you know. At least, I had more chances to read than other people. (Eve, interview)

The project-based course is a better way to learn (English) because when you look for information on the Internet, you'll find tons of information, all in English. Then we had to start reading them. (Ken, interview)

Many students also reported that the project-based course had helped improve reading and writing skills in particular.

When I did the essay, I had to look for more information, additional things. Because of finding information and trying to understand some strange stuff, the process itself helped improve my reading and writing. (Chris, interview)

Because I like to write and I don't like to use the same word all the time, I would use online dictionary. And I also had to look for materials and study them. I had to integrate and express things. I could enhance my English ability in this area. (Betty, interview)

However, despite the perceived usefulness of the course in enhancing students' reading skills, many students also reported having problems with too many new words when reading online material. For instance, one student talked about his frustration.

There were so many words I didn't know. So I googled and read and read and googled. The process was somewhat difficult. I felt that I lost my English ability ever since I graduated from high school. Where were the words that I learned before? (Chris, interview)

Generally speaking, although the project-based course had offered students more opportunity to learn the language outside the classroom, students only moderately agreed that the project-based course had helped improve their English skills. One possible explanation might be the fact that the project-based course only lasted for twelve weeks and given such a short period of time, it was difficult for students to determine whether the project had actually helped enhance English proficiency. As one student said in the interview:

Watching the video in class (about festivals in other cultures) did help improve my listening ability though the conversation was really fast. People (in the video) spoke so fast. And the interview also helped because I needed to speak English. But it was difficult to say that my English has improved because it was only one semester you know. (Jane, interview)

Perceptions about Learning the Content Knowledge Related to Cultures

Questions 2, 10, 11, and 12, of Section I, specifically focused on students' perceptions about the effectiveness of learning cultures through project-based learning. The mean scores and standard deviations for these four items are also presented in Table 2. As revealed in the table, students in general had a very positive feeling toward the learning of culture through project-based instruction. The mean scores

for all the items in this category exceeded the value of 4, ranging from 4.1 to 4.3. More specifically, students perceived that project-based instruction was quite effective in learning about the content knowledge related to culture. Additionally, students also thought the course could positively increase understanding towards other cultures as well as the differences between native and foreign cultures.

The interview results seemed to mirror such favorable attitude toward learning cultures through project-based instruction. More specifically, students reported that the project helped acquire understandings of other cultures.

I did gain more understanding toward other country. Like our group, we interviewed a student from Myanmar. Before that, we had no idea about Myanmar. We didn't even know the English name of the country. We only knew vaguely about where it is. And we never had the need to know about this place. And then my roommate introduced this guy for us to interview. I think it was very meaningful. I learned a lot from the interview. (Ken, interview)

For culture learning, I think I like the project, the interview, because it was more interesting. If you only read and study culture, it was dead. I mean the things (culture facts) were just there. (Chris, interview)

Furthermore, students in general approved the idea of learning about other cultures in the English classroom. For instance, one student reported:

It is necessary for students to learn about other cultures in the English class because I mean English is an international language! You can use this international language to learn about other cultures. I mean if you don't do it, it's weird, isn't it? (Joe, interview)

Perceptions about Learning Ability and Motivation

Questions 8, 9, 13, and 14 of Section I asked whether the project-based course has increased students' overall learning ability such as using online resources and integrating information as well as created more chances for active learning and increasing motivation. The statistical results for these items can also be found in Table 2, which revealed that the first three items, Question 8, 9, and 13, had mean scores of 4.1, 4.0, and 4.0 respectively, indicating a rather strong agreement on these areas. In other words, students perceived that the project-based course was particularly beneficial to increasing their overall learning

ability, their ability to use online resources in particular, as well as their chances to learn more actively. As for Question 14, students moderately agreed that the course had increased their motivation toward learning English given that the mean score was around 3.7.

Based on the survey responses, it seems that project-based instruction had the advantage of involving students in a more autonomous fashion in their learning. The interview data also provided evidence for such finding. Among the various reactions students had toward the tasks, many of them indicated that students actually took a more active role in their own learning. The following comments are illustrative:

We found lots of information online for the project. During the process, we learned a lot. For example, when we did the interview, the interviewee mentioned something about a festival. Then we had to look for it carefully so we could use it when making the video. (Jane, interview)

I felt that I had spent more time getting in touch with English this semester. When I wrote and tried to integrate (information), sometimes I needed to find my old textbooks or tried to recall things I had learned in the high school. So I would look for things. (Anne, interview)

Most and Least Favorite Activities in the Project-Based Course

Section II of the survey contained four questions, which allowed the participants to write down opinions about the project-based course in an open-ended manner. The first question specifically asked students to indicate their most favorite activity in the course. The results revealed that, among the five major activities (reading, interviewing, writing essays, making videos, and doing project diaries), students preferred interviewing and making videos the most with each activity taking up 32 percent of the total counts. Many of the students who enjoyed conducting interviews expressed that the experiences of speaking English with foreigners were fun and it was interesting to learn about foreigners' culture as well as their perceptions to Taiwan. And students also thought the interview process provided them with more opportunities to use English. As for students who were fond of making videos, most of them considered the video as an interesting way to present information. Many of these students also expressed that the process promoted teamwork and helped building relationship among teammates. However, it should be noted that although most students

during the interviews showed a positive attitude toward making the video and working in groups, a couple of students expressed their difficulty in these areas. For instance, one participant reported:

If your team didn't function very well, that could be a major obstacle. For example, our teammates from the X department, they would disappear, you know. We had sent them the material a month before the final presentation and they didn't do anything. We called several times and couldn't find them until the very last week. Although they somehow got the job done in the end and our group video turned out okay, the rest of us were so worried and frustrated. (Joe, interview)

The second question of Section II tried to find out what activity was considered least favorite by the participants. The results showed that 52 percent of the students regarded the project diaries as the least interesting activity. Most students expressed that writing the diaries didn't help them learn anything. Many indicated that the assignment was so boring and a lot of time they simply didn't know what to write. Students' resentment with the reflective diaries was also found in many of the interview protocols. For instance, one student reported:

My least favorite activity was definitely the diary. I often forgot to do it. Sometimes I browsed through many web pages, looked for things, and then I logged out. It was gone. I never felt like writing them down. Sometimes, I just didn't know what I was doing. By the time I had to turn in the diary, it was very tiring to find things to write. (Anne, interview)

The Perceived Greatest Advantage and Disadvantage of the Project-Based Course

Question 3 of Section II asked students to indicate the greatest advantage and disadvantage of the festival project. Concerning the greatest advantage of the course, the results showed that nearly a half of the participants reported that the course promoted their understanding toward other cultures. Almost one-quarter of the students expressed that the course was interesting. Others considered that the course had the advantage of learning things not included in the textbook, offering diverse ways of learning, promoting learning motivation, enhancing reading skills, and giving them a chance to make friends with foreigners. As for the question on the biggest disadvantage of the course, it brought out a remarkable variety of responses, although approximately 20 percent of the students reported that the project required too much work from them. Other disadvantages mentioned by

the students included: having too much group work, being very time-consuming, encountering too many new words when reading, having difficulty in understanding information about some festivals written in languages other than English. It should be noted that these written opinions about the benefits and drawbacks of the course could also be largely found in the interview protocols. For instance, two students being interviewed also mentioned the problem of finding information about certain festivals written in other languages. The following quote is illustrative:

Some of the Japanese festivals, the information we found were mostly in Japanese, from Japanese websites. And we didn't know where to find the English or Chinese versions. We used Google to translate but a lot of them still didn't make sense. (Chris, interview)

As for the last question on additional comments, most students indicated having no further opinions about the course though many of them expressed their gratitude to the instructor. Others affirmed that the project was interesting and they had a wonderful semester.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study showed that students in general had a positive attitude toward the project-based instruction. Students viewed that project-based instruction had the advantages of offering more opportunities for active learning, enhancing their English reading skills, and increasing their ability to use online resources. As for culture learning, students perceived that the project-based approach was particularly useful in learning cross-cultural topics and helped them gain more understanding toward other cultures. In spite of these advantages, the participants also reported several challenges associated with the course such as requiring too much of their time and effort as well as having difficulty in keeping the reflective journals.

Students' perceived positive learning outcomes of both language skills and culture content reported in this study are consistent with the previous research on implementing PBI in the language classroom, which also showed its effectiveness in integrating language and content (Alan & Stoller, 2005; Beckett & Slater, 2005; Levine, 2004). Besides, since the present study also incorporated the use of interviews, the results also lend support to the effectiveness of using ethnographic interviews to increase cross-cultural understanding in Bateman's (2002, 2004) and Su's (2008) studies. However, it should be noted that in Su's study and

also in many other studies, the learning of culture was limited to the culture of the native speakers of the target language such as American or Canadian cultures when the target language is English. Given the role of English as the world's *lingua franca*, English nowadays is used most commonly not by native speakers but as a contact language between interlocutors with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Baker, 2012). Much communication of English as *lingua franca* nowadays takes place in multilingual and multicultural contexts, which makes the traditional correlation between the target language and a particular culture and nation become problematic (Baker, 2009, 2012). It is therefore essential for the present-day EFL curriculum to include a wide variety of cultural content to cater for learners' diverse intercultural communication needs and more importantly, the learning of culture in the EFL classroom should no longer be limited to the Anglo culture alone. The findings of this study demonstrated that the project-based instruction has the potential to bring about positive outcomes in relation to the learning of different cultures particularly in the EFL educational context. However, the study also pointed out at least one challenge associated with teaching world cultures through English, which was the availability of certain cultural information written in English or at least in students' native language. Both teachers and students should be aware of such limitation and make the necessary adjustments when doing cultural projects in the EFL classroom.

Another significant finding of the study was that the project-based course promoted learner autonomy through offering students more opportunities to learn actively. This finding is consistent with Fang and Warschauer's (2004) longitudinal study which also revealed that project-based instruction allowed greater learner autonomy. Nevertheless, despite the benefit of encouraging active learning, the present study also demonstrated that the project-based approach tended to require a large amount of time and effort from the students. Similarly, Fang and Warschauer's study reported that their teachers also felt that the project-based course was time-consuming and too much work. Perhaps for students and teachers from an educational setting such as China and Taiwan, the project-based approach simply clashes with the more traditional norms and instructional formats. Both teachers and learners are overwhelmed by the kind of changes that project-based instruction entails. However, if such approach can indeed help students to be responsible and autonomous learners, it is worthwhile investigating ways that can help them adjust to it. The course design described in this study offered a viable way for language teachers to implement a project-based course in higher education. As for the students, it is

suggested that these learners need constant guidance, encouragement and support from teachers to help them overcome difficulties and take more responsibility for their own learning. For an improved future project-based course, one way to deal with students' problem of time-management is to help them set achievable learning goals in a set time frame (e.g., a month) and to provide them with necessary assistance when they fail to achieve those goals. Based on findings from the motivational research, one important strategy to motivate language learners is to increase their goal-orientedness (Dörnyei, 2001).

An additional important finding of the study was that the project-based course had the potential to enhance students' reading skills as well as their ability to use online resources. This was mainly because when doing the festival project, students not only needed to collect information about the topic but also had to integrate and organize information for making the video, composing the essay, or doing the oral report. Dłaska (2000) also advocated the use of Internet for cultural learning in foreign language teaching mainly because the web-based resources not only provide students with authentic up-to-date cultural information but also allow them to have greater choice and control over the information obtained. On the other hand, Dłaska also warned that although surfing the Web can be beneficial for culture and language learning, it is also very essential that the learning needs to be task-oriented and outcomes need to be monitored. The project-based course of the present study provided such an opportunity for students to explore and obtain cultural information from the World Wide Web while at the same time allowed for necessary supervision through various class presentations and teacher evaluation of the learning product.

Finally, another finding that deserves further attention was that many students had difficulty in keeping the project diaries. Despite the provision of the project diary form, most students still considered it a daunting task and could not see the value of doing it. To improve the festival course so that it can help learners to better take charge of their own learning process by reflecting upon it on a regular basis, several modifications to the current task, the project diaries, need to be made. First of all, it is important to explain to students from the very beginning the purpose of the task and how it can help them assess their own learning over time. Secondly, instead of giving students a single unitary format for reflection throughout the whole project, it might be more plausible to provide them with specific guidelines for each major task (e.g., reflection guidelines for the interview) structured in the form of prompt questions. By following these guidelines, students can have

a clear idea of what elements are involved in completing each task and how to assess them. This kind of guidance is of primary importance for students who came from a more traditional educational setting and were in general not very accustomed to the process of self-assessment. Finally, another major area for improvement in the diary task is the lack of feedback during the reflecting process. The provision of motivational feedback, in particular, informational feedback, which comments on progress and competence, is a useful way (Dörnyei, 2001) to motivate language learners and to encourage positive self-evaluation. Therefore, for future implementation of the course, it is important to ensure that students receive on-going feedback for their learning journals.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown a positive aspect of using project-based instruction to teach language and culture in the EFL classroom. Despite such contribution, the findings reported in this article need to be interpreted with caution because the number of participants was relatively small and since this case study was situated in a Taiwanese university context, additional research carried out in different countries and educational settings is needed. Moreover, the present study is also limited in terms of the type of culture content being addressed (i.e., world festivals). Although knowledge of other social groups and their practices is one of the five elements of intercultural competence proposed by Byram (1997), it is still not clear whether learning about festivals would contribute to students' development of intercultural competence. Future studies may need to incorporate other elements of intercultural competence such as attitude and skills to enhance students' learning in this area. Another limitation of this study has to do with the analysis of qualitative data. Since the participants of the study used their first language, Chinese, when answering open-ended questions in the survey and during the interview, translation was involved in both data analysis and presentation and the task was done by the researcher alone, which might contaminate the data and result in biased judgments. Future implementation of the study should utilize procedures such as doing back-translation or employing more than one translator in order to guard against problems in this area.

Finally, future research in the following areas may also help L2 practitioners design and implement project-based courses and successfully integrate the teaching of language and culture. (1) Can the project-based courses have long-term positive learning outcomes in promoting language and culture learning? (2) How can project-based

instruction be adapted to optimize language and culture learning in a wide variety of educational contexts? (3) What other aspects of culture in addition to festivals can be effectively taught through project-based method? (4) How do L2 teachers perceive the use of project-based method to teach language and culture? These are important questions that need to be answered. It is believed that through considerable research effort in these areas we are able to achieve one of the ultimate goals of foreign language education in this globalized world; that is, according to Byram (2008), to cultivate intercultural citizenship through foreign language education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank the participants of this study for their time and cooperation. I am also very grateful to the reviewers of this paper for their valuable and constructive comments.

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APPENDIX A

The Interview Guidelines

- I. **Begin with self-introduction and statement of purpose:** Each one of you should briefly introduce yourself to the person being interviewed. Then you should explain the reason why you are conducting this interview and estimate the time you probably need to complete it. If you would like to audio-record the interview, be sure to ask permission before doing it.
- II. **Use open-ended WH-questions during the Interview:** Use WH-questions to learn more about your interviewee. You may focus your interview on the following three aspects.
 1. To find out the interviewee's backgrounds such as information about his/her nationality and time of living in Taiwan
 2. To learn about the culture of the interviewee's home country centering first on popular festivals in his/her home country and his/her personal favorites
 3. To know the interviewee's ideas about festivals in Taiwan and his/her personal favorites
- III. **Close the interview with acknowledgement:** When you finish the interview, be sure to thank your interviewee for his/her time and participation. If possible, provide contact information. If you would like to take pictures, again be sure to ask permission first.

APPENDIX B

The Project Diary

Week/Dates:

Name:

Activity (Things I did this week.)
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I spoke English to2. I talked English about3. I read4. I looked for and found5. I looked for and didn't find6. I wrote7. I
Knowledge and skills (Things I learned this week.)
<p>I. <u>Language</u> (e.g., vocabulary expressions, grammar)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1.2.3.4.5. <p>II. <u>Content</u> (new information about the project or assignment)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1.2.3.4.5. <p>III. <u>Skills or others</u> (description of other things that you learned this week)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1.2.3.4.5.
Things I hoped to learn this week, but didn't. (State reasons for not learning)
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1.2.3.

(Adapted from Beckett and Slater, 2005)

APPENDIX C

A Survey on Students' Perceptions of the Project-Based English Course

Section I.

Directions: Questions listed in Section I of the survey are statements about the project of Festivals around the World conducted over the semester. Note that there is no right or wrong answer for each statement. Please circle the number to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

There will be five numbers after each statement (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) and the meaning of each is described as follows:

1 = completely disagree

2 = disagree

3 = somewhat agree

4 = agree

5 = completely agree

- | | | | | | | |
|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | In general, I like the festival project conducted over the semester. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2 | I have learned new knowledge about my topic through the project. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3 | The project course has helped me enhance my overall English proficiency. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4 | The project course has helped me enhance my English reading skills. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5 | The project course has helped me enhance my English writing skills. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6 | The project course has helped me enhance my English speaking skills. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7 | The project course has helped me enhance my English listening skills. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8 | I have learned how to collect information about my topic by using different online resources. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9 | My overall learning ability (such as doing research and integrating information) has been increased through the project. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10 | I gain more understanding toward other cultures through the project. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

- | | | | | | | |
|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11 | I know more about the differences between other cultures and my own culture through the project. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12 | In general, the project-based instruction is a good way to help students learn about other cross-cultural topics such as food and education. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13 | Compared to the previous College English course, the project-based course has offered more opportunities for students to learn actively. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14 | Compared to the previous College English course, the project-based course has increased my own learning motivation. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15 | In general, I have a positive feeling toward the project-based instruction. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Section II.

Directions: Questions listed in Section II are also about the festival project conducted over the semester. Please write down your answer to each question. Again there is no right or wrong answer. Please feel free to provide your own opinions about the course.

1. Among the activities conducted for the festival project (including the reading of articles, the interview, the essay writing, the making of video, and the project diaries), which is your favorite one? Please indicate why.

2. In contrast, among the activities listed above, which is your least favorite one? Please also indicate why.

3. In your opinion, what are the greatest advantage and disadvantage of the festival project? Please list them and explain why.

4. Do you have any other comments or opinions about the festival project? If yes, please indicate them below.

文化教學融入英語課室之探究： 以專題導向教學法為例

摘要

儘管過去不乏有關的研究文化教學法的研究，但較少研究探討如何將專題式導向教學法，運用在語言能力與文化學習方面的實際成效。本研究主旨在於呈現如何在外語課室中運用此教學法，來促進學生的英語及文化知識的學習，並且探討學生對此課程的看法。研究參與對象為 34 位臺灣的大一學生，資料蒐集採問卷調查及訪談的方式。研究結果顯示，學生大多對此一專題導向式課程抱持正面的態度。學生認為此課程提供較多主動學習的機會、有助於提升英語閱讀能力、並且增加他們運用線上資源的能力。至於文化學習方面，學生認為此教學法特別有助於學習跨文化相關的主題，並且使他們更瞭解其他文化。除了上述的優點之外，本研究也呈現實施專題過程中，學生所遭遇到的一些困難。

關鍵詞：專題導向教學 文化在英語教學 臺灣英語教學

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