



## Enhancing EFL college students' cross-cultural awareness and English learning through the implementation of a SPROUT project-based textbook

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### Abstract

Sensitive to student needs in today's globalized world, this study reports the creation and trial, at a Taiwan university, of a new cultural awareness-focused handbook for an English reading course for non-English majors. Research questions were: 1. What kinds of intercultural knowledge needs do the students have? 2. What are students' views of instruction with the new SPROUT project based English Handbook, rich in cultural awareness material? Methodologically, first, a needs analysis was undertaken based on expert judgment, and questionnaire data from 617 students, which guided the construction of the cross-cultural Handbook. Second, a new undergraduate course 'Cross-cultural Appreciation and English Communication' was introduced in the General Education Center (Hung Kuang University) exploiting the Handbook, to develop students' critical reading skills and cross-cultural literacy. 179 freshmen from the Department of Nursing participated and wrote reflective reports. Qualitative thematic analysis of the reports evidenced English language learning and increased cross-cultural critical awareness. Key findings were: support for the value of the 'lived cultural experience by proxy' handbook material for both class and self/home use, and the successful teaching of English cultural awareness to students of quite modest English proficiency.

**Keywords:** SPROUT project, intercultural knowledge, English as a foreign language, critical thinking skills, cultural awareness, nursing students

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### 1. Introduction: The Language and Cultural Challenges of Globalization

In today's globalized world, many countries with emerging economies seek to establish and improve their commercial and political status in the global arena. English, being the language of globalization, is typically seen as a key part of achieving that [1]. However, this preoccupation overlooks the cultural dimension. That globalized arena, populated by good L2 English speakers of many backgrounds who outnumber English native speakers, is multicultural [2]. Hence intercultural skills are required in addition to English language skills [3], but are rarely a prominent feature of tertiary-level English courses for non-English majors. The significant objective of this study is, therefore, to contribute to filling that gap, by developing and trialing an English Handbook with a strong element of inter-cultural content. It aims to develop our understanding both of what cultures and intercultural topics are relevant and of how intercultural awareness is best stimulated, in students of limited English ability who are not English majors. This is of potential interest in many countries where English has a similar

status to that which it has in Taiwan (e.g., Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Turkey).

### 2. The SPROUT Project

Against this background, the Taiwan Ministry of Education initiated the SPROUT project ('Sustained Progress and Rise of Universities in Taiwan'). This aims to 'Facilitate universities to elevate international competitiveness....' [4] which would include improvement in English and intercultural competence. Full-time university teaching staff in Taiwan are mandated to participate in the SPROUT project in various ways. The present researcher at Hung Kuang University, as the front runner from her Department, served as a full-time coworker with PouHsin publisher (Aug. 2017 to Dec. 2018), and then put on a new culture-oriented English course, which is described below.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1 Tertiary English for Non-English Majors

Research on the teaching of English at the tertiary level often focuses on English majors, and/or on issues other than cultural ones. Main themes that have

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been pursued for non-majors however include motivation since one of the biggest challenges in teaching English to non-English majors is motivating students to learn a language that they may not see as relevant to their future needs, when their majors are not taught in English [26]. That connects with needs analysis which should be undertaken to determine the language skills that such students need to develop in order to succeed in their academic programs and future careers. This can help teachers and institutions tailor their instruction (syllabus, delivery and assessment) to meet the specific needs of their students [19]. A finding has been that such students may recognize some future needs for English for purposes such as communicating with foreigners, obtaining a good TOEFL score, or being able to use the Internet better, but still possess a low level of English proficiency and be reluctant to learn English autonomously [27]. This underlines the need for suitable instructed courses to be provided, such as that introduced in the present study.

Research on courses and materials specifically for tertiary-level non-English majors is sparse. Vietnam is reported as having developed a special program for this audience. Notably, it is tied to European CEFR criteria, but there is no mention of it possessing any special cultural or intercultural dimension [28]. By contrast, a study of the use of communicative teaching with such English learners in Taiwan [25] makes several mentions of culture as an associated necessary target. However, it concludes that this aspect is one of several that are not in practice well-represented in tertiary-level teaching, and that this could be in part due to teachers themselves not possessing the necessary knowledge. This, therefore, points to the need for new culturally rich materials for classroom use, such as those developed for the present study.

### 3.2 *Cross-cultural Awareness and English Learning*

While the need-to-know English in order to function in today's globalized world is quite clear to most people [5], the need for cultural awareness is less so. However, when diverse people communicate in English as an international language, cultural differences are not removed but may be just disguised [6]. Therefore (inter/cross) cultural awareness is needed [7].

The ability needed to deal with this level of communication is often called inter- or cross-cultural awareness. Specifically, Chen and Starosta [7] define this as "the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that affect how we think and behave" [7 p28]. Intercultural communication competence, in turn, is defined as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" [7 p28].

Teaching of such ability can occur in classes 'across the curriculum' [8], especially where the students come from multi-cultural backgrounds [9]. In Taiwan, however, that context does not widely occur naturally, but, we argue, intercultural awareness can arise through specially designed English course materials which can enrich learners' cultural understanding [10]. Indeed, for this reason English as a foreign/international language is not usually taught exclusively in association with the 'source culture' of the students' L1 [11], although in some countries that can be favored [12].

Researchers have studied the cultural content of textbooks on English as a foreign or international language [13, 14, 15]. Much of this, however, is simply document analysis research, showing what aspects of culture and/or what cultures are covered in existing textbooks, and how (e.g. [16, 11]), rather than, as in the present study, designing and trialing new materials. In addition, it is the researcher's understanding and analysis of what is in the textbooks that are central to such studies, not what the students using the textbooks understood or gained from them, which are focal in the present study.

Gashi [10], for example, conducted an evaluation of a culture-oriented English syllabus in Kosovo and concluded that 'English teachers, in Kosovo and potentially internationally, need to be more creative in utilizing more authentic cultural materials in their classes to bring to life the target culture.' ([10], p357). That call was addressed by the new material used in the present study. A study superficially closer to ours was [29] in China (PRC). However, that proved to be quite different in that it involved evaluating the cultural aspect of teaching on the assumption that such content should be a vehicle for delivery of state ideology and political knowledge to students, not as we believed, an occasion for development of cross-cultural awareness. Furthermore, it used automatic analysis of the facial expression of the students as a measurement of successful delivery which, although potentially interesting, was not a technology available to the present researcher, who relied on student self-report.

Finally, the literature often assumes that teaching culture is something done at an advanced level after students have become proficient in the language associated with a culture [17]. This view is however challenged [18] and it is one of the purposes of the present study to see if foreign UK and US cultural features can be taught successfully to students at university with low proficiency in the relevant language (English).

## 4. Research Questions

The following questions were, therefore, posed concerning non-English major tertiary level students in Taiwan.

1. What kinds of intercultural knowledge needs do the students have?
2. What are students' views of instruction with the new SPROUT project English textbook, rich in cultural awareness material?

### 5. Study Phase 1. Needs Analysis Method and Findings

The first phase, preparation, enhanced and disseminated teacher professional knowledge (consistent with SPROUT requirements), and ascertained student needs (RQ1), so as to inform the creation of a new textbook and course. The needs analysis was in part conducted through expert judgment of the researcher, by considering what needs for English they would likely encounter in future jobs after graduation. For instance, the nursing students who were focused on in Phase 2 needed to function in the school affiliated Kuang Tien General Hospital which had recently increased overseas patient intake, and many nursing graduates go on to work in local private hospitals which cater in part for international visitors to Taiwan. This entails a need for English as a lingua franca and some familiarity with commonly encountered cultures such as US, as well as nursing English (English for Professional or Occupational Purposes, not for Academic Purposes).

In addition, a short questionnaire survey was conducted of 617 students from a wide range of majors, at the end of a series of cross-culture workshops designed and hosted by the General Education Center. They were asked open questions about what cultural aspects they wanted to hear more about, and from what countries. In all, 43 different countries were named as of cultural interest, in 513 responses. On international multicultural themes of interest, 389 individual suggestions were given.

Since these student responses technically concerned their wants (what they were interested in) rather than needs (what they might require in a future workplace), they were interpreted with caution [19]. For instance, Japan was the most frequently named country of interest, but the researcher's attention in the textbook remained predominantly on cultures associated with English, given that North America came second, followed by other English using countries which in terms of trade together outweigh all other destinations including Japan [20]. The cultural topic suggestions also ranged very widely, testifying to a high level of student interest in learning more about different countries and cultures: they included K-POP, Buddhism, Canadian history, elephant culture, and Nordic diet. However, some broader themes stood out, such as (with numbers of mentions): travel (38), food (71), art (16), traditions/history (25), and overall culture of a distinct area (105). These, therefore, featured prominently in the specially created textbook course materials.

### 6. Study Phase 2. Intervention with a New Course

In the second phase, execution, the work was undertaken under the aegis of the MOE SPROUT ('Sustained Progress and Rise of Universities in Taiwan') project, and sponsored by the PouHsin publishing house. This first enabled the creation of 'East Meets West: A Cross-cultural Handbook', described fully below. Next, a new language arts undergraduate course 'Cross-cultural Appreciation and English Communication' came into being designed based on this SPROUT project textbook. All went through strict evaluation by the Department, College and School curriculum committees. This was then introduced in the General Education Center of Hung Kuang University, initially for the nursing students considered in the present study, but with the eventual aim to be used for students across disciplines and majors once its effectiveness had been demonstrated.

#### 6.1 Course Participants

179 freshmen from the Department of Nursing at Hung Kuang University participated. They are required to take one English language course (totaling 2 hours a week) over the first two years of their undergraduate study, although their Nursing instruction is all in Mandarin. All participants were Taiwanese, predominantly female, of varied social backgrounds, with the Chinese language as L1 and late beginner or low intermediate English proficiency at best (A2/B1 on the CEFR scale).

#### 6.2 Specially Created Textbook

The core of the new course intervention was an innovative new theoretical and practical teaching textbook created by the researcher, 'East Meets West: A Cross-cultural Handbook', published with PouHsin. The handbook is based on reading material whose content embraces East-West cross-cultural insights, drawing on the author's own experiences studying in the UK over 10 years and traveling internationally, with her daughter. It includes authentic materials, and survival medical English material relevant to nursing, as well as travel safety which became a crucial theme in the COVID pandemic era. It provides many examples to establish the concepts, and practical English teaching activities involving writing, and especially speaking skills, such as dialogs and conversations in English as well as after-class exercises.

Distinctive features include the following. The content, case study exercises, essay questions, and oral work are interwoven systematically. The cross-cultural information covered is evidence-based (guided by information from Phase 1 above) and diverse in country and topic. The writing style has high readability. To ensure comprehension, both English and Mandarin Chinese are presented in parallel in the book, together with Pin-yin transliterations. Potential

uses are abundant. For instance, the teaching material is appropriate for use in class or as self-learning material.

The cultural aspect is implemented with an eye to the view of Moran ([17], p3) that ‘culture learning, whether it occurs in a foreign language or second language context, inside or outside the classroom, with or without teachers, through books or through people, is best seen as a lived experience, as a personal encounter with another way of life.’ Although in Taiwan the students cannot by themselves readily live in another culture in that way, through this textbook they do directly access the lived experience of foreign cultures by another person from their own native culture, not just a dry third person description. As one student observed: *‘I can say “this is not a textbook but a journal” describing what a mother and her daughter saw, heard and felt in a culturally different context’* (C108xx05).

Furthermore, the fact that extensive use is made of translation is consistent with the view of Décuré [18] that a foreign culture does not have to be learned only through the associated foreign language.

The book (and the course using it) follows three main topical themes which are implemented in ways that further the overall aim to enhance students’ multicultural competence and communicative English language proficiency (Table 1). Between these topics, all five of Moran’s [17] dimensions of culture are covered.

### 6.3 Course Procedure and Instrument

The Cross-cultural Appreciation and English Communication course was delivered pre-COVID over one semester at the rate of 2 contact hours per week. The lead researcher, as the course teacher, was involved in teaching all four class groups, average class size of 47. Typically, one topic from the textbook was dealt with each week. It was exploited by engaging students first with comprehension of the content, and then with extended exercises to practice the four language skills, i.e., listening, reading, writing and speaking. This involved a wide range of presentation and practice resources, including films specifically produced based on the textbook unit, i.e., food, leisure, art and medical English, audio input, lecturer involvement, MALL (mobile assisted language learning, using Kahoot, Padlet etc.), CALL (computer assisted language learning, accessing KidsHealth.com and relevant cross-cultural YouTube videos, etc.), team work-based activities, and board games. The examples and case studies from the textbook were then given to the students for review and self-learning after class. In order to develop students’ logical and coherent thinking, the teacher pointed out the specific topics for students to cover in discussion and reflection.

The final course assessment involved a finale show where students role-played in groups, adopting any

cross-cultural topics they liked. Students had to draft a sketch, role play, and make a film as a final project which involved all four language skills. In addition, to enable the researcher to ascertain student perceptions after using the textbook (RQ2), and to assess learning progression and evaluate the textbook, the students were asked to write a reflective essay (in Chinese, often mixed with some English words) on their thoughts and experience of the course and the textbook. The reflective reports counted as a homework assignment and were graded; with student consent, they were further analyzed for the study. The 179 students generally wrote between 200 and 400 words. Using qualitative analysis, the data was read and reread, using the constant comparison method, and themes were identified by the researcher (checked with one other expert), as listed in Table 2.

## 7. Findings from the Reflective Essays

Answering RQ2, overall, considerably more points were identified that related to the cross-cultural themes (535) than the language themes (208) (Table 2). This perhaps reflects the participants’ identification of the course and textbook as more directed to cultural learning than language learning, or simply that the cultural aspect caught their imagination more and therefore inspired more reflection and comment. For reasons of space, only the culture-related findings are reported here.

## 8. Culture and Contrast Themes

Rich evidence of the student view of, and response to, the cultural aspect of the content was found, with more than two and a half times as many points directed to it than to language aspects. The predominant themes uncovered in their reflections were critical thinking and connection with personal experience.

In their responses, students often exhibited critical thinking (58.9%, the highest percent for any subtheme in the data), in a variety of forms. Here it takes the form of extracting implications about war from the input text followed by giving a personal response.

*‘From this text, I can imagine people in Rome, dressed in clothes appropriate to their era, selling things in the marketplace. While women were buying food, the men were fighting away from home. But how many wars have taken so many lives? How many happy families were ended, when the war took away relatives? All this is so real, ...’* (C108xx15).

By contrast, here a student was prompted by the text to think more widely about the issue of protection of the environment to save the planet (so...):

*‘The issue of using plastic bags has also greatly affected the world, so we advocate environmentally friendly bags, environmentally friendly chopsticks, and environmentally friendly straws’* (C108xx41).

**Table 1.** Sections of the Textbook

<b>Part 1: Childhood</b>		<b>Part 2: Travel</b>	<b>Part 3: Survival Kit (Medical English)</b>
Formosa / Taiwan	History	Introduction and Scenic Sites	Basic conversation
Childhood in England	Natural Science and Invention	Food	Making payment
School work	Extra Curricular topics	Art and Leisure	Medical English
Language Arts			

**Table 2.** Percentages of students making one or more points related to the identified themes

<b>English language learning</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Cross-cultural reflection</b>	<b>%</b>
Pictures	22.3	Exhibit critical thinking	58.9
Idioms	21.1	Relate to personal experience	57.7
Vocabulary	14.9	Make comparisons (incl. cross-cultural)	37.1
Variety of contents	7.4	Add further related information	36.0
Enhance reading ability	6.3	Experience the country oneself	26.9
Sentences	6.3	Learn new cultural knowledge	25.1
English accompanied by Chinese	6.3	Do some online research	9.1
Improve English ability	5.7	Quotations	6.3
Dialog	5.7	Festivals	5.7
Phrases used in daily conversation	5.7	Protecting the environment	4.6
Pinyin	5.1	Recommend the country to others	2.3
Practice	5.1	Religion	2.3
Medical English and phrases	5.1		
Content interest	4.0		
Grammar	2.9		
Content clarity	0.6		

Next, it was noticeable how often student response was to the content (message), rather than the language (medium) and was quite personal, evidencing how engaging they had found the classes to be. 57.7% of students were coded as making comments relating to personal experience, e.g.

'After reading the content written by the teacher, I am particularly interested in tourism. Since I was a child, my family has been fascinated by it, no matter what the weather is in the four seasons,.....'

We see here a fully communicative response to the message in the book, drawing on personal experience. Such a response provided direct evidence that the book was absorbing their attention, engaging them with its message, and hence likely generating more input and a greater intake from it.

Another common response, as we had hoped, was to draw attention to cultural contrasts (37.1%). In the following case, it is between England and Taiwan, which is the contrast most invited by the author of the textbook, due to her own life experience. Here a student offers their own interpretation:

*'I also saw the author's daughter's love for the UK. The UK seems to be more leisurely than Taiwan, and the pace is more relaxed. Although I have never been to the UK, maybe the British know how to relax at the right time, and life should not be too stressful. On the other hand, in Taiwan's cities, such as Taipei, every time you go to Taipei Main Station, everyone's footsteps are very fast. It may be because of hard work or a busy life...'* (C108xx42).

As she admits, the contrasting picture she creates may not be entirely correct. Indeed, possibly it is col-

ored by the fact that the author of the textbook spent much time in the UK in a provincial town (Colchester, UK) rather than a great city like London, where it is likely that the crowds and bustle are similar to those in Taipei. Nevertheless, what is important is that the student is 'doing work' on what she reads (= critical reading) and getting the habit of observing and elaborating on cultural comparisons for herself (cultural awareness).

Importantly, there was also explicitly stated evidence of the **learning of new cultural knowledge (25.1%)**:

*'I learned about foreign cultures, art, food, customs, history, etc., and appreciated the differences between cultures of various countries. It is rare to see so many travel experiences written into a book: all life is written in the book very realistically'* (K107xx01).

A related benefit was that the students were motivated to follow up on some topics in the textbook text and **do their own research online** to obtain extra information (9.1%). An example is:

*'They .... went to the aquarium in Singapore. I also searched the Internet a little bit about the statues that they saw. I found that they are really great pieces of work, and I had never noticed them before'* (C108xx41).

We cannot be sure of course whether this extra research was on English or Chinese language websites. In either case, however, the arousal of interest in cultural differences and their further investigation is valuable.

The other prominent theme was expressing an interest in actually going to visit countries that were men-

tioned, at some time in the future, to experience the culture (26.9%).

*'I hope to go to the UK one day to experience the feeling of local residents. .... also, I want to learn more about teaching methods used in England that I have never experienced in Taiwan' (C108xx23).*

In such an enterprise the textbook was recognized as of practical value for facilitating travel for a family.

*'It allows me to take my parents abroad on holiday... to communicate in terms of language, and to arrange the itinerary and accommodation, so that my parents can have a happy journey, experience more different and interesting things, and enjoy traveling' (C108xx27).*

Finally, it is notable that the themes that attracted relatively minor attention from the students included ones like **quotations, festivals, and religion** which are commonly highlighted in the traditional approach to the study and teaching of culture in language courses [13.16]. This demonstrates that the strength of the textbook and course in the present study lies not in its coverage of such traditional cultural topics so much as in its promotion of processes of noticing and critical thinking about culture, i.e., (inter) cultural awareness, which are represented in the most popular themes above.

## 9. Discussion and Conclusion

The present paper focuses on participant's feedback on an English course for non-English majors, which constituted the culmination of the Hung Kuang SPROUT inspired initiative, and featured the use of the handbook specially written by the researcher, with a strong cultural component. It affords a means of illuminating the process, effect, and success of the handbook within the course.

One student summed up the textbook as follows:

*'This book is a cultural book worthy of being familiar with, and it is also a good book for learning English' (K107xx01).*

As confirmed by the findings above, this presents the book, with its novel thread of the author's personal cultural experiences, as of benefit for both English and cultural learning, but more so for the latter. A limitation of course is that we have only students' (and teachers') perception to base this conclusion upon. No tests of language or culture knowledge were administered that can provide objective evidence of the extent of knowledge gains over the period of the study. We can however draw special attention to the heightened interest in reading that the content of the textbook generated, shown in the nature and extent of the comments, and resulting in more out-of-class reading. Such extra exposure to English, along with the translation support provided, would have met Krashen's requirement [22] that what is needed for

acquisition to occur is plenty of comprehensible input in the target language. Such increased motivation toward extensive reading is, therefore, something widely desired in any reading course [23]. With respect to cultural awareness raising there was ample evidence of the achievement of this in the many deep reflective comments such as those cited above. These spanned students making connections with their own experiences as well as making comparisons between different cultures. There was evidence of students engaging in their own original and critical thinking and even undertaking research in the area of culture. In short, cultural awareness was stimulated. All this was achieved with students of quite low English language proficiency [21], so runs counter to the claims of many such as Moran [17] that cultural learning is something that is only possible or appropriate with students at the high end of proficiency in the language associated with the culture.

Overall, then, the value of the material for both class and self/home use in developing both language and cultural competence was supported. It can be usefully complemented in Taiwan by other cultural initiatives such as the portfolio project of Su [24]. Clearly, work remains to be done using the textbook with wider groups of students, so that the breadth of its usefulness can be assessed. However, the value of its unique nature, especially for cultural awareness raising through presenting culture as lived experience by proxy, seems clear. The present study suggests that its use does support learning goals implied by the SPROUT initiative in Taiwan, and indeed similar aspirations in many other countries in a parallel socio-economic position in the world.

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### Competing Interests Statement

The Ministry of Education SPROUT initiative provided no funds to the project and PouHsin only contributed by paying the university for the researcher's time, so that alternative staff could be paid to fulfill her university commitments. Thus, neither of these bodies had any financial or other influence on the data gathering or analysis that could bias the study.

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