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E-mail writing as a cross-cultural learning experience

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Abstract

This study looks into the cultural dimension involved in the e-mail correspondence between university EFL students in Taiwan and pre-service bilingual/ESL teachers in the USA. E-mail entries and end-of-project reports were analyzed to yield insights into the cross-cultural communication process. The data analysis focused on the types of cultural information transmitted and effects of cultural assumptions and values on communication effectiveness. The findings revealed perceived fundamental characteristics of both Chinese and American cultures by the two groups of participants. It was also found that curiosity toward the other culture was a motivating factor for on-going correspondence, but cultural presumptions were sometimes a hindrance for communication; positive interpretations of cultural differences and empathy were key factors contributing to the removal of communication obstacles. Although there is no substitute for actual experiences of immersing into the target culture, cross-cultural e-mail correspondence sensitized the participants to cultural differences and served as a learning experience for better cross-cultural understanding. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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It is generally believed that the learning of foreign languages can serve the purpose of “cultivating international understanding, responsibility, and effective participation in a global age” (Kramsch, 1991, p. 221). A foreign language course which disregards culture, on the other hand, can produce students who may know how to use the correct linguistic forms of the language to convey meaning but such a course

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is sterile (Morain, 1986). The study of culture, therefore, must be an integral part of the foreign language study if students are to derive lasting benefits from their foreign language learning experience (Omaggio, 1986).

Robin-Stuart and Nocon (1996) categorize the different theoretical perspectives regarding how culture is acquired in a foreign language classroom as the following: (1) culture as an automatic outcome of language instruction; (2) culture as knowledge or skills that may be objectified; and (3) culture as a meaning making process. The first, and probably the more traditional, view assumes that language study itself can automatically lead to cross-cultural understanding; even without any specific treatments designed to promote intercultural understanding and instruction, language study and performance per se will automatically open the door to another culture and to shared understanding. This assumption, however, as pointed out by Robin-Stuart and Nocon, is not supported by research and bears little pedagogical significance in the teaching and learning of culture in foreign language classrooms. The second view defines culture as facts to be learned and stored; culture is regarded as a list of facts to be cognitively consumed in the development of a knowledge base and is usually presented as “events of history marching in brisk, chronological order before a rich tapestry of art, music, and literature” (Morain, 1986). Again, educators of foreign languages find such an approach futile (Jarvis, 1977). Learning culture by amassing bits of information is ineffective because it does not adequately prepare students to recognize and understand cultural change over time and may actually encourage stereotypes rather than diminish them. The third perspective, and the most recent one, views culture as “a way of perceiving, interpreting, feeling, being in the world, wanting to smile, wanting to scream, loving, hating, and relating to where one is and who one meets” (Robin-Stuart and Nocon, 1996, p. 432). In other words, this view asserts that culture is not only located in cultural products and forms, but in the active lives of those who share those forms. It is this view that has the most impact on the current endeavor of helping foreign language students acquire cultural proficiency. Since the 1960s, there has been growing attention from foreign language teachers to help their students develop the proficiency that would enable them to communicate effectively and appropriately with target language speakers in various social settings and circumstances. The study of culture became an important aspect of foreign language teaching that is oriented toward communicative proficiency (Omaggio, 1986). The goal of foreign language instruction is framed as communication between cultures and cultural representatives, as opposed to the acquisition of knowledge or a scholarly skill, and the process of creating shared meaning in interpersonal interaction is primary.

As the views on culture learning and teaching progress from defining culture as the best in human life to everything in human life (Brooks, 1975; Seelye, 1974), foreign language educators propose more interactive approaches to facilitate culture acquisition in the classroom. Learning about the lived culture of actual target language speakers as well as about one’s own culture demands tools to assist foreign language learners in negotiating meaning and understanding the communicative and cultural contexts in which target languages are used. Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984) assert that cultural teaching processes should involve student discussions of

cultural themes and personal relevance. Omaggio (1986) recommends lectures, native informants, audiotaped interviews, observational dialogues, culture capsules, and some other activities to teach culture in a purposeful, integrative fashion in the foreign language classroom. Emphasizing the importance of in-depth understanding of the target culture, Barro, Byram, Grimm, Morgan, and Roberts (1993) suggest “home-ethnography” or field work — cultural studies involving current issues of concern in the target-language country. Robin-Stuart and Nocon (1996) advocate ethnographic interviewing techniques to help language learners to explore and understand cultural similarities and differences in different contexts. The idea is that learners have to actively participate in producing negotiated meaning with representatives of the target culture. The current direction in foreign language pedagogy reflects an increasing recognition of the importance of culture acquisition (Kramsch, 1983; Crawford-Lange and Lange, 1984; Morain, 1986; Omaggio, 1986) and personal contact with target language speakers (Barro et al., 1993; Robin-Stuart and Nocon, 1996).

In accordance with this pedagogical trend, sophisticated multimedia has been brought into the foreign language classroom to provide virtual cross-cultural contact (Donaldson and Kotter, 1999; Green, 1997; Kramsch and Anderson, 1999; Lixi-Purcell, 1996; Moore et al., 1998; Young, 1998). Recently electronic mail (e-mail) has been increasingly used to promote language learning and cultural acquisition through international communication (Krause, 1989; Oliva and Pollastrini, 1995; Warschauer, 1995). Many foreign language teachers consider it particularly well suited to fostering cultural awareness among their students. By writing to foreign peers and reading their responses, language learners can glimpse other ways of seeing the world. E-mail provides students with immediate, direct, and personal access to the perceptions of individuals currently living in the target culture. With the increased accessibility of e-mail, students no longer need to depend exclusively on the secondhand experiences and cultural comparisons presented by their teachers and textbooks. Through spontaneous, self-directed correspondence with target language speakers, students can explore for themselves the complex origins and nature of cultural stereotypes and experience the excitement of engaging intellectually with students in the target culture halfway around the world (Ham, 1995).

In the past decade, in various parts of the world, many cross-cultural e-mail projects have been implemented to take the advantage of what e-mail offers. The following are examples of e-mail projects that focused on the attainment of cultural learning experiences. Soh and Soon (1991) linked EFL students in Singapore and ESL students in Quebec, using fax machines for exchanges of graphics and e-mail for exchanging text. The authors reported that students “learnt to look at and assess their work and the works of others from different perspective countries;...[and] gained a better understanding of the use of the computer as a communicative as well as a learning tool” (p. 288). Sanaour and Lapkin (1992), in a content-based course designed to promote French writing skills through culturally-relevant topics, connected high-school students of French in Toronto with native French speakers in Montreal. They claimed that the anglophone students not only improved their French but also broadened their cultural awareness and assumed increased responsibility for

their own learning. Cononelos and Oliva (1993) reported on a content-based course on contemporary issues in Italian culture in which advanced-level students discussed cultural issues with native Italian speakers via the Internet. Goodwin, Hamrick, and Stewart (1993) provided a head start in language development and cultural/academic adjustment for a group of scholars in Latin America prior to their arrival in the USA via e-mail. The obvious benefits found in the implementation results were increased communication in the target language and one-to-one interaction between the instructors and the students. Ham (1995) incorporated cross-cultural e-mail activities into an advanced undergraduate German conversation and composition course to provide the students with an opportunity to actively use their language skills and foster an appreciation for the relativity of cultural perspectives. The exercise increased students' personal investment in cultural topics and made culture study relevant to the students. Kern's (1995) project was designed to promote the learning of language, history, and culture through written dialogue between students in an elementary French class at the University of California at Berkeley and students in a history class at the Lycee Frederic Mistral in Frenses, France. Kern reported that the e-mail exchange had enhanced the students' cultural and historical awareness as well as their overall motivation in learning French. Meskill and Rangelova (1995) report a long-distance collaborative apprenticeship between Bulgarian students and TESOL graduate students in the USA. The Bulgarians used e-mail to consult with the TESOL students over both linguistic and cultural issues that came up in the reading of contemporary American short stories. The Bulgarians also made use of audiotaped portions of the stories provided by the TESOL students. The TESOL students benefited in turn from the collective experience in dealing with the real issues and problems of language learners. Galloway (1995) designed a project to help Japanese university EFL students to become more aware of cultural relativity by keypalling with students in Los Angeles. The students gave positive responses toward the project.

Among the aforementioned cross-cultural e-mail projects, some focused on fostering cultural learning (Cononelos and Oliva, 1993; Galloway, 1995); some used the approach to facilitate not only cultural awareness but also linguistic proficiency and historical understanding (Goodwin, 1993; Kern, 1995; Meskill and Rangelova, 1995; Sanaour and Lapkin, 1992; Soh and Soon, 1991). The use of Internet, especially e-mail writing, has certainly brought together students of different languages and cultures to interact with one another in ways that were not possible before.

1. Context and purpose of the study

Although, like foreign language (FL) teachers all over the world, many Chinese EFL teachers recognize the need to include cultural learning in their classes in order to strengthen learners' communicative competence (Hu, 1990; Zheng, 1990), teaching students about culture remains one of the greatest challenges facing EFL teachers in Taiwan. Similar to the situation in many other non-English speaking countries, because of the global dominance of the homogenized USA culture portrayed in

movies, TV sit-coms and commercials, students in Taiwan are likely to have a superficial familiarity with certain packaged aspects of American culture. Being unaware of the false cultural assumptions can often make communication problematic (Galloway, 1995). Teachers in Taiwan have tried different methods to expand the boundaries of the EFL classroom but nothing in the past has offered the potential of the Internet to end the cultural isolation of the EFL students (Chang, 1992, Johnson and Liaw, 1996). In learning foreign languages and cultures, there seems to be no substitute for personal contact and this is what e-mail offers students.

Using computer networks as a tool to facilitate the students' cultural competence, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Tunghai University conceived of an e-mail project as a cross-cultural cooperation with universities in the USA to enhance its Freshman English Program. The project spanned a three-semester period and involved three universities in the USA. The Freshman English Program offers a required English course to enhance the students' general English language proficiency. Prior to taking this course, the university freshman should have had 6 years of English language instruction in junior and senior high schools.

The three participating universities were Texas A&M University, Northern Arizona University (NAU) in Yuma, and the University of Houston — Downtown. At Texas A&M University, where over 90% of the undergraduate pre-service teachers were white, middle-class students, the project was perceived as an opportunity to provide authentic interactions with college students from another world culture. The needs of the pre-service teachers at Northern Arizona University in Yuma were seen as equivalent to those of the pre-service teachers at Texas A&M University. Nearly a third of the students at Yuma were Hispanic, including a few for whom English was also a second language. The University of Houston — Downtown participants were pre-service teachers seeking Spanish/English bilingual education certificate. All were Spanish/English bilingual and almost all were of Hispanic heritage. The goals for the pre-service teachers at the three institutions were to (1) cultivate students' understanding through inquiry, discussion, and comparison of cultural information, (2) develop sensitive ways of improving their communication with non-native speakers of English, (3) examine ways that internet communications can enhance their future teaching.

The researchers were also the instructors of the courses. It was the hope of the instructors/researchers that the project would be mutually beneficial to the participating students in acquiring the cultural objectives of the two courses. To ensure a clear understanding of the effectiveness of the project, students' e-mail entries were collected and analyzed. The participating students were also required to write a report on their responses to the experience. Nevertheless, the project strove to maintain student autonomy by minimizing instructor interference during the corresponding process.

This research was conceived of as a descriptive study of how cultural exchange occurs in a minimally directed environment using e-mail in which the research goal was to achieve a better understanding of how cross-cultural interaction evolves in the naturalistic Internet setting. It was felt by the authors that this study could help practitioners determine the pedagogical strengths and weaknesses of such an

approach and provide enough detail to avoid some common problems associated with such an approach and to help establish reasonable expectations of students upon instituting such a project. There was no attempt to confound this research goal by also trying to do a comparative study. The authors determined that attempting to ascertain whether a cross-cultural e-mail project may contribute to an increased facility for and acquisition of a foreign language could be better accomplished in a separate study where the variables associated with a learning environment can be better controlled and, perhaps, even be guided by this study.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One class which consisted of 22 university EFL freshman students in Taiwan was paired up with two classes of pre-service ESL teachers at Texas A&M University in the first semester of the project. In the second semester of the project, 13 Tunghai University students were paired up with Bilingual/ESL pre-service teachers from one class at Northern Arizona University in Yuma for this cross-cultural e-mail project. In the third semester of the project, 21 Tunghai University students corresponded with Bilingual/ESL pre-service teachers from one class at University of Houston — Downtown. The students participated in the project voluntarily. However, the project was built into their syllabi as one of the optional assignments to ensure accountability from the students. Once signed up for the project, they were responsible for keeping regular contact with their e-mail partners and turning in portfolios containing hard copies of the e-mail interaction and end-of-semester reflective reports.

2.2. Procedures

2.2.1. Preparation

Prior to e-mail communication between students, the instructors/researchers planned out the project logistics and familiarized the participants with the functions of computer networks.

The Tunghai University freshmen were automatically given a computer account when they first enrolled. However, most of the participating students did not have prior e-mail experience, therefore training sessions were held. At the beginning of each semester, two 50-minute training sessions were held in the university computer lab with a technical assistant to familiarize the students with the use of e-mail procedures. The students were trained to use the mail application of the Pine/C-Pine system¹ in Telnet. The Chinese language was used for e-mail training to ensure that the students could fully understand the use of the computer and e-mail procedures. To be certain that the computer accounts were working well and the students were

¹ C-Pine is a mail system that permits the user to write both in Chinese and English text.

comfortable with the use of e-mail, the students were asked to send short messages to the instructor/researcher during the training sessions. A short message was sent in response to the student to confirm successful transmissions. The students who did not receive a confirmation had to report to the instructor and retry the transmission until everything was well set up.

At the USA Universities, similar training sessions were conducted. At Texas A&M University, students were given training in the College of Education laboratory by a lab technician and the instructor. The Yuma students sent their first messages to the Tunghai instructor during their training session conducted by the computer lab's director. From the received messages, the Tunghai instructor then matched her students with those whose messages had been received. The University of Houston — Downtown (UHD) training session was given by the Urban Education technology instructor. The Tunghai University students first sent their messages to the UHD instructor expressing their interest in corresponding with American partners. The UHD instructor then assigned his students to the Tunghai University students according to the requests. Due to the differences in numbers of participants from the two countries, some American participants had multiple partners from Taiwan.

2.2.2. E-mail to cross-cultural partners

Considering that computer-mediated communication lends itself to conversations controlled by the participants (Kelm, 1996) and to ensure a student self-directed approach, the topics were left to the students to decide. To be certain that the students at Tunghai University had necessary access to send and receive e-mail messages, the Tunghai University instructor reserved the university computer labs for four sessions during each semester; each session lasted for 50 minutes, for the students to use the computers. In addition, the students were encouraged to go to computer labs to write e-mail messages during open lab time. The students had to keep all the correspondence in their electronic files. At the end of the semester, hard copies of the correspondence were printed and submitted to the instructor.

The USA pre-service teachers had access to the computer labs on campuses. It was also made clear to the pre-service teachers that the participation would be voluntary and their e-mail entries would be documented and analyzed for potential benefits of using such an approach for cultural learning in a foreign language classroom. An e-mail project permission form was given to and signed by the pre-service teacher.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The data collected for this study included: (1) the e-mail entries written by the Taiwanese university students; (2) the e-mail entries written by the pre-service teachers at the three USA universities; and (3) the written reports by the participants.

Instead of fitting data into pre-determined categories, an inductive analysis process was adopted to allow “the categories to emerge from the data through an interactive process of analysis and tentative category assignment” (Nunan, 1999, p. 56). The e-mail entries were scanned for categories of cultural phenomena. Special

attention was given to communication difficulties that seemed to have occurred due to cultural assumptions or differences. The notes were further analyzed to reveal information about how students overcame communication barriers. The categorization of cultural themes was discussed and agreed upon by both researchers. In addition, the end-of-semester reports were triangulated with the e-mail entries for better understanding of the meaning ascribed in the categories and to obtain the participants' reactions toward the culture learning experiences. Taking the data from participants of different groups (i.e. participants of the two countries) in different formats (i.e. both e-mail entries and final reports) an overall picture was then configured to reveal the cultural images formed by the participants on both sides of the Pacific Rim and interpret the process in which these images took shape.

3. Findings

3.1. Recurring cultural themes

By focusing on topics of familiarity such as holidays, hometowns, school lives, family members, and hobbies, the students on both sides of the Pacific transmitted and received considerable cultural information. The students also used more direct approaches (e.g. asking specific questions) to obtain cultural information.

To most participants, this project was their first intensive contact with someone from a different culture. To take advantage of the opportunity, the students explored a wide range of topics. As one of the students put it, "We talked about our culture, living place, holidays, and many other more. I thought it's quite interesting."

The most common cultural themes occurring in the correspondence included geographical information, holiday celebrations, school systems, names, history, languages, religions, interpersonal relationships, and current events.

3.1.1. Geographical information

In participants' initial messages, information on the geographical locations, demographics, tourist attractions, and climates was exchanged and compared. Although most of the Taiwan students were familiar with the names of the different states in the USA, some had only vague ideas about where each state was located. Naturally, they were most curious about the states where their partners lived and asked questions about Texas and Arizona. Many Taiwanese students had learned about the names of the states from commercials of foods and goods. For example, one Taiwan student wrote that he thought Texas is the name of a fried chicken restaurant and was surprised to know that it was also the name of a state. Since the USA pre-service teachers provided the geographical information of Texas and Arizona to their Taiwan partners, the students in Taiwan reciprocated the information by introducing the geographical location of Taiwan. The students proudly introduced the cities of their universities and hometowns to their partners. To better illustrate their points, some even tried to draw comparison between places in the USA and Taichung. For example, one student wrote, "My school locates in Taichung, which is the third

large city in Taiwan. . . There are about 900,000 people lived here. But during the day, active people will be over one million. . . I consider Taichung the most beautiful city of Taiwan. Many people call it “California in Taiwan” because the weather is pretty good here.” The analogy might not be exactly accurate but the student obviously had gotten his message across. His USA partner replied, “From your letter I feel you live in a beautiful city. Perhaps it would be nice to visit!”

The climates in the two countries were another topic the students enthusiastically discussed and compared. One student wrote that he envied his partner who could live in a place where it snowed because he “. . . always imagined living in a snowing place and playing with the snow while [he] was very little.” Many Taiwanese students were very surprised to find out that most parts of Texas and Arizona did not have snow in the winter since they had the image of the USA covered in snow during winter from movies and popular Christmas songs! “So far, yet so near,” exclaimed one of the Taiwanese students.

3.1.2. *Holiday celebrations*

By far, the most asked about holiday celebrations by Taiwanese students were those of Thanksgiving and Christmas. Although Thanksgiving is not a holiday commonly celebrated in Taiwan, the EFL students had learned about it from the textbook used for their language lab, *Family Album, U.S.A.* (Kelty and Beckerman, 1992). Based on what they learned from the textbook and video, they inquired about more detailed information and the origin of the celebration. They were amazed by the historical context of the holiday.

As to Christmas, unlike Thanksgiving, it is a big event for young people in Taiwan. However, instead of perceiving it as a religious holiday, it is celebrated more as a fun holiday when young people hold dance parties and take their loved ones out for a romantic evening. The students of the two countries were surprised to find out how differently the same holiday has been celebrated in different parts of the world. One Taiwan student wrote, “Christmas is coming soon but it is not for “Jesus” in our country. But we young people may have a party on X’mas eve. We will get many cards and exchange our gift. Or crazy for all night.” This student’s description well represented the way Christmas was viewed by the young people in Taiwan. This view, however, amused the students in the USA. One American student wrote, “Something very interesting about her culture is that Christmas is very famous in Taiwan. It sounds as if it is a very big celebration. . . She mentioned that many people from everywhere go to that party at the university. It sounds interesting.”

Holidays uniquely celebrated in each culture were introduced with greater elaboration. Histories, origins, and activities were described. Important Chinese holidays, such as the Double Ten’s Day (also known as the National Day), Tomb Sweeping Day, and the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), were introduced to the American pre-service teachers. American students also introduced lesser known holidays (e.g. Halloween) and special activities (e.g. county fairs) to the Taiwanese students. One Tunghai student introduced the Chinese New Year as the following, “. . . to celebrate the new year. . . Little kids will get lucky bags — this is the children’s most expected day during the whole year. And you can hear the sounds of fireworks

everywhere. New year is children's day without saying. Kid will get new clothes and there parents will take them to visit some relative, and they will get chance to play with their cousins long time no see..." Chinese New Year and Thanksgiving were somehow seen as of equivalent importance to the Chinese and the American.

3.1.3. *School systems*

The e-mail partners shared with each other their views on the educational systems of the two countries. They compared and contrasted the similarities and differences between the two. Since the American participants were pre-service teachers, they provided insights into the American education system to their Taiwanese e-mail partners. The Taiwanese students also shared their personal experience to illustrate the educational system in Taiwan. For example, one Taiwanese student wrote that he was preparing for a transfer examination and through his explanations revealed the education and entrance examination system in Taiwan. Another Taiwanese student took the opportunity to obtain the information about USA schools that he would like to go to for advanced study. In describing the experience as university freshmen in Taiwan, several students discovered a very different image of college students from their older partners. They were surprised (or even shocked) to find out that their partners were much older than they and were even married and had children, something that rarely happens in Taiwan prior to university graduation! The following response from a Taiwanese student was typical: "I got little surprise about your having a 5 years old boy. I live with my parents, and my parents still treat me as a little kid till now. It's a little difficult for me to imagine being someone's parent myself."

3.1.4. *Names*

With very few exceptions, the USA pre-service teachers asked their partners the meanings of their names and how to write and pronounce them. The Taiwanese students typed their names in Chinese characters with C-Pine for their partners. Unfortunately, the system in the USA could not recognize the codes and the characters that came on their USA partners' screens were a series of unrelated symbols. For example, one Tunghai student's name came on the screen of her American partner as "2x0670"; and the other one became "= AAL = AB = BA = A7g."

The Taiwanese students explained how babies were named and how the name represented the quality of the baby. Such information fascinated their American partners. Nevertheless, the USA participants were surprised to know how casually the Chinese chose their English names! They inquired why they had to use English names and were surprised that was only to help English speakers to pronounce their names. Whereas the American students explained apologetically that their names did not necessarily have any special meaning, the Taiwan students were excited to find out that their partners' names were the same as some of their favorite movie stars and sports heroes!

3.1.5. *History, language, and religion*

Since the students of Houston–Downtown were of Hispanic heritage, they explained the links between Hispanic culture and Texas history. Similarly, the

Taiwanese students described the differences between Taiwanese and Chinese people and languages and the difficulties for Taiwan to be recognized as an independent nation, not part of China. Both sides were equally fascinated by each other's local history.

The students were also curious about what religions their partners had. They compared and contrasted the rituals of Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism. The American students asked their Taiwanese partners how to say and write certain things in Chinese and the Taiwanese students asked their American partners to correct their English grammar. The Taiwanese students tried to introduce the Chinese characters but had to give up due to their computers' incapability to handle Chinese writing. The American students, on the other hand, did not try to edit their Taiwanese partners' writing. Instead, they replied with praise for their partners' communication skills in English.

3.1.6. Interpersonal relationships

The students in Taiwan tended to have very romantic ideas about their American partners' university life. They wanted to know when their partners started dating and what kind of things people did when they went out on dates. They complained to their partners that they were not permitted to have boyfriends or girlfriends.

The Tunghai students described a great deal of how they interacted with their little circle of dorm mates and classmates; the American students talked about how they handled interpersonal relationships and family lives. Feeling that their American partners had more experience in interpersonal relationships, the Tunghai students sought advice from their partners and got it, too.

3.1.7. Current events

Although both groups of participants proudly introduced their own country and culture, they also warned each other about the escalating social problems in their countries. The Tunghai students reported several high profile criminal cases to their partners and described the Taiwanese society as a "greedy society". The American students confessed their worries about the increasing gang activities, rapes, AIDS, and violence in their communities.

3.2. Effects of cultural assumptions and values on communication effectiveness

Cultural perspectives sometimes converge and sometimes diverge in unexpected ways. Most of the students in the two countries had similar hobbies due to the fact that they were all university students. For example, the love for popular culture (i.e. movies, sports, and music) was shared. The Tunghai students were familiar with the favorite movie stars and music groups their American partners liked. Some partners found it very easy to relate to each other because they shared similar life experience and seemed to think in the same wavelength. For example, Lilly, a UHD pre-service teacher was ready to hear her partner out and accept different view points. She wrote, "I just received your message and I found something that I can relate to you. The word "adapt" is a word that I really like. . . I'm glad to hear that you are willing

to adapt to your surroundings. I hope we could share different points of view toward our world and life experiences. I love to hear different aspects of things, I consider myself pretty much open-minded. So feel free to share your opinions or anything.”

Nevertheless, not all communications went smoothly. Sometimes the cultural lessons learned were difficult. Although many correspondents from both sides of the Pacific developed quick friendships and felt very close to their pen pals, Barbara and Mel discovered cultural misunderstanding could sometimes be painful. Mel was a 20-year-old, articulate Taiwanese freshman with a sense of humor; Barbara was a 48-year-old grandmother who related well to her younger peers. That first letter from Mel in March 10 was the only letter Barbara would receive until June 9th. Between those times, Barbara would write four more letters without a response. In Barbara’s second letter was the seed of discontent. An offhand request by Barbara for an opinion from Mel led the young Taiwanese student to research the question in the library without success. With feelings of shame, Mel could not bring himself to correspond with Barbara until his final heartfelt letter, full of apology. The Chinese reverence for the elderly could not bring Mel to consider Barbara a peer. However, the lessons that both correspondents learned were powerful. Mel stated in his final report that “If somebody asks me a question that I have no idea how to reply, I will tell him honestly that I don’t know about it, but we can try to find out the answer.” In Barbara’s report, she wrote, “I had written [in an earlier journal entry] that I worried about his being vulnerable; however, I found out that I was vulnerable also. I was myself and wrote like I talk. I forgot the differences in our cultures — ideas about age, gender, family life, and other facets about which I have not studied.”

Cultural differences sometimes hindered effective communication, other times they caused the participants to strive for the means to bridge the gaps. To cope with cultural dissonance some students chose to abandon certain topics. For example, Taiwanese students did not answer or respond to some of the questions about Santa Claus; instead, they focused on their own ways of celebrating Christmas. Although this may not seem like a strategy that successfully bridged the communicate gap, the students at least had a new topic for discussion so the discourse could continue.

Some participants, however, used a less ambiguous approach. They directly requested for clarification. When they did this, it was almost guaranteed that they would get an elaborated explanation. However, the Taiwanese participants usually requested with apologetic tones and asked for forgiveness for their cultural ignorance or lack of linguistic proficiency. As for the American participants, they were quick to ask for clarification. For instance, one of the students was confused about her Taiwanese partner’s “four families”. She asked directly and was returned with a frank answer. Nonetheless, not all of the American students were this direct and some had specific reasons not to be. For example, a female NAU in Yuma student was confused by her correspondent, a male, when he stated that he wrote letters to “cute guys” as a hobby. She suspected the he meant “cute girls” but wasn’t sure and avoided the topic.

It was also noted that most participants started off introducing familiar cultural topics such as holidays, foods, family members, and school activities. Such culturally

familiar content served as an essential ingredient in introducing new concepts. After having initial exchanges on general information, they would then scaffold and help their partners to associate with something more culturally specific. For example, starting from personal issues, two students had a lengthy discussion on how women had been treated in their own cultures. Another good example occurred when a pair of students wrote to each other about horoscopes. After sharing the information about their own signs, the Tunghai student described in detail the origin of the Chinese zodiac and even helped her American partner figure out the animal signs of her and her family members.

The cultural experience went beyond mere contact. Through interaction and retrospection, the students explored and shared their own cultural perceptions. The students often asked each other, “what do you think of your own culture?” Some were brave to admit that they did not like their own culture. Some felt a sense of pride when their own culture was accepted by others. One wrote, “Knowing that you like my introduction to Taiwan, I feel very happy.”

The students from both countries valued the opportunity to establish international friendships. Even when there was confusion or miscommunications, they demonstrated a high degree of consideration and sensitivity by either avoiding a sensitive topic or making a positive interpretation. The cross-cultural communication might not have been always effective, but the students maintained a spirit of cultural courtesy. One commented, “We had some minor communications problems. I read her letters for content, not grammar. If I read each sentence closely, it would be confusing. Sometimes words would be misplaced. There were also spelling errors and an uncommon usage of certain words. Errors did not repeat over and over again. . . Understand what she means needs a little inference. . . I feel Violet and I developed a real friendship just by writing. I have learned so much about her culture that a book could not tell me. . . I hope she will agree to continue to write even after my semester is over.” The other one wrote, “In my opinion this project gave me an opportunity to learn about Chinese culture (i.e. beliefs, traditions and values). . . the grammar errors that I found do not seem to be a problem that would impede communication.”

4. Discussion and conclusions

This cross-cultural e-mail approach enabled the participating students to form their own cultural images of the target culture through on-going interpersonal interaction. An analysis of the e-mail entries and final reports revealed the overall cultural images and the process in which these images were formed. The cultural themes that occurred in the exchanges included geographical information, holiday celebrations, school systems, names, history, languages, religions, interpersonal relationships, and current events. The students started with general information and then moved on to personal events, then moved from historical facts to the current developments in the societies. Pfister and Borzilleri (1977) suggest an inventory of cultural topics for curriculum design to include (1) the family unit and personal

sphere, (2) the social sphere, (3) political systems and institutions, (4) the environmental sphere, and (5) religion, the arts, and the humanities. In comparison with this inventory, the cultural aspects naturally explored by the participants of this project have covered most of the categories suggested by Pfister and Borzilleri. In other words, cross-cultural e-mail correspondence could be a viable approach for learners to explore the various aspects of the target culture.

In recent years, much effort has been made to show the inter-relatedness between language acquisition and cultural understanding (Byram, 1989; McLaughlin, 1987; Tang, 1999). One of the major concerns of the foreign language profession today is to find a way to promote better cross-cultural understanding while continuing to develop linguistic skills (Evans and Gonzalez, 1993). In facing this challenge, it is necessary to teach language and culture in an integrated fashion (Omaggio, 1986; Seelye, 1974). This integration has been achieved by using the cross-cultural e-mail exchange approach. Due to the interactive nature of the approach, the learning of culture was seamlessly joined with the use of the target language. For many of the participating students, the project was their first extended cross-cultural encounter and e-mail exchanges had provided them with a less threatening medium than face-to-face meetings would have been. It was an authentic context in which they not only learned about the target culture but also received significant language practice. Without leaving their home environment, the students acted as cultural informants and agents of cross-cultural exchange. As the EFL students interacted with representatives of the target language culture, they became aware of the process of culture in very real and personal ways. They experienced the process of intercultural communication that contributed to their personal affective development as well as to the development of a more receptive group of language learners. Being cultural informants, the EFL students were able to make equal contribution to the interaction. They were also free from being tied to the traditional “do as the teacher does” or “do as you see and hear native speakers doing” foreign language learner positions (Kramsch, 1996). Among the American pre-service teachers, an increased respect for the culture and talents of the Taiwan students was evident. One Houston–Downtown student was so inspired by the interactions that she did some Internet research on Taiwan and developed a thematic unit on the island for future use in her bilingual classroom.

A major purpose of an exchange program is to cultivate a deep appreciation of other countries, their cultures, and their people. This implies a fundamental change in how students perceive others, what they believe about other cultures, and how they revise their worldview (Windschitl, 1998). The participating Taiwanese EFL students were sensitized to the cultural factors in the communication process. They have realized that lacking linguistic proficiency is not the sole reason for miscommunication. Cultural acquisition and the awareness of the cultural subtleties when communicating with native speakers of English are just as important as linguistic competence, if not more important. Some preexisting stereotypes of American people and culture were challenged and a more realistic image of the USA culture and people emerged. The students were surprised by the similarities between the two countries but struck by the deviations from previously held beliefs. In order

for students to appreciate and understand new cultures, it is crucial for them to identify and voice their present thoughts and feelings about that culture and about their own culture. E-mail activities in which students ultimately develop relationships with students in other cultures should have some influence on the learners' sense of the world.

Observing the National Curriculum in Britain, Morgan (1993) points out that understanding and acceptance of other cultures are key pedagogical aims for foreign language education. She suggests that language teachers take on the responsibility to impart knowledge and foster attitude change toward the target language. In a cross-cultural e-mail writing environment, the teacher's role is to facilitate the on-going exchanges. The credibility of the communicator can ensure positive attitudes toward the target culture. Setting up a trusting atmosphere and relationship between partners is also crucial. Like what had happened in the project, communication breakdown may occur during e-mail exchanges and students respond to cultural dissonance differently. Although most students coped with it and eventually overcame the dissonance, not all had done it without assistance. When culture shock happens, the teacher should be accessible to the students to encourage continuous communication. After all, good communication relies heavily on mutual effort and willingness to understand each other. Without on-going exchanges, bridging the cultural gap becomes less likely.

This study has looked closely into the process and results of the cross-cultural e-mail correspondence. Although challenges multiplied during the implementation (e.g. identifying cross-cultural partners, matching academic calendars, finding technological assistance, etc.), the effort has proved worthwhile and the results were quite fruitful. The effect might not have been as good as a live-in experience but, to a certain extent, e-mail writing does make personal cultural contact possible and cultural learning contextualized. With proper planning, the EFL teachers can take full advantage of this modern day technology to change the way culture has been instructed in the classroom.

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