

Helping Second Language Literature Learners Overcome E-Learning Difficulties: LET-NET Team Teaching with Online Peer Interaction

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Abstract

This study presents and discusses results from an EFL second language literature program in which the instructional design included a team teaching scheme, blended learning practice, and computer-mediated peer-interaction. The team teaching plan used a Mandarin speaking English teacher and a Native English-speaking teacher collaborating and interacting via the Internet. In order to assist second language learners in in-depth textual understanding, videos presenting cultural perspective as well as multimedia glossaries were created as digital learning materials. An online forum was created using social media including Facebook and a conventional blog for the learners. Qualitative data was collected from interviews and from the Facebook/blog comments written by participants. Interview findings showed that participants of the program found the instructional design to be beneficial, including the team-teaching structure, the digital learning materials offered via the video, and online peer-interaction. Four primary themes and four additional secondary themes emerged in the student's online written discussion. Conclusions and recommendations for practice are presented.

Keywords: Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), team-teaching, NET-LET, EFL, CALL, social network, literature teaching

1. Introduction

Even though the reading of L2 literature plays a crucial role in second language education worldwide, insufficient cultural knowledge and linguistic difficulties often present challenges to EFL learners. Cultural aspects of the target language include physical objects that exist in one culture but not in another, proverbs, idioms and regional colloquialisms, social structures or roles, geographical and climate differences, rituals and customs, values and beliefs, taboos, styles of humor (Carter & Long 1991; Carter & Stockwell, 2008; Lazar 1993), and many other references and allusions that can confuse EFL learners, as well as the use of culturally-based metaphorical language that can be a serious impediment to textual comprehension (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Wahaibi, 2012; Picken, 2005). Indeed, in the process of comprehension, cultural context may play an even more important role than a reader's linguistic and literary competence (Hall, 2005; Nault, 2006).

In traditional teaching, the literature teacher provides neat, necessary, and appropriate information required for textual understanding (Lazar, 1993; Showalter, 2003; Sullivan, 2002). There is, however, a growing need for the reader to understand not just the references of English native speakers, but also cultures around the world that use English as a first or second language (Jay, 1991; Jay, 2008) and to make meaning from the work, as opposed to receiving meaning from some authority. This process, according to the Reader Response Theory, holds that the reader should engage actively with the text and complete the meaning through interpretation and experiential involvement (Carter & Long, 1991; Carter & Stockwell, 2008; Harmon, 2010). Scholars argue that personal experience involvement can create a long-lasting and enjoyable habit of reading, which can be a key to successful learning (Wu & Wu, 2008).

A number of new approaches to second language literature education have appeared since the 1990s. These have differed from the traditional model of teacher-directed lectures delivered to passive students in that they espouse the following paradigm innovations:

- Multicultural issues like socioeconomic status and ethnicity become valuable perspectives within literary discussions (Hall, 2005; Jay, 1991);
- Authentic material on the Web is used as a knowledge resource (Levy, 2009; Thorne, Black & Skyes, 2009);
- Blended learning using computer technology, such as video and computer-mediated communication (Goertler, 2009; Howard, 2012), facilitates classroom learning (Sharma & Barrett, 2007);
- Student-centered discussions are encouraged, with appropriate teacher involvement (Wu & Wu, 2008, Carter & Long, 1991; Carter & Stockwell, 2008; Hall, 2005; Showalter, 2007);
- Individual and collective experience is related to the reading itself (Carter & Long, 1991; Wu & Wu, 2008);
- Cultivating reading as an enjoyable and lifelong habit is a major goal of education (Carter & Long, 1991; Showalter, 2007; Wu & Wu, 2008); and
- Collaborative learning is used to increase the cultural awareness of learners and facilitate the L2 learning experience (Wu & Marek, 2010).

Upon review and synthesis of the above theories about teaching literature (Carter & Long, 1991; Hall, 2005; Lazar, 1993; Showalter, 2007), and particularly benefiting from the flexibility and convenience brought by technology, the authors concluded that a student-centered and strongly-motivated L2 literature classroom could be established through teacher collaboration, in which a local English teacher could collaborate with a native speaker for rich textual interpretations, deep cultural insights, and fresh teaching styles. The authors concluded that this type of team teaching would not be difficult to realize, if it were to use established asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMA) tools, such as social media platforms, to implement a strong interactive pedagogy. The authors further concluded that the use of videos would intrigue college-age audio-visual learners, with the videos including literary interpretation and/or cultural information designed particularly for textual comprehension, and with the videos placed in social media platforms for easy viewing by students.

This paper reports qualitative results from an instructional design that was based on the above conclusions, created with the goal of helping Taiwanese EFL learners overcome difficulties in reading literary texts. The instructional design included a partnership between a local English teacher (LET) in Taiwan and a Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) in the United States. The NET produced videos addressing cultural topics in the English short stories in the student's lessons, and the students and teachers discussed the stories and cultural elements via social media platforms. The experiences of the students were explored via a qualitative research methodology using both interviews and an analysis of the online discussion records as data.

2. Framework of the Study

The current study was grounded in the extensive body of research into second language education in peer-reviewed literature. In order to more clearly situate this study in that rich base of knowledge, the following section explores the importance of cultural understanding in second language reading comprehension and specific aspects of the current research design, including NET-LET teaching, and the various roles of computers in the modern language classroom.

2.1 Cultural Issues and EFL Literature Readers

It has been widely argued that cultural issues are highly influential in language learning and cannot be divorced from language (Chu, 1994; Nair, Setia, Ghazali, Sabapathy, Mohamad, Ali, Muniandy, Theethappan, Hassan, & Hassan, 2012; Nault, 2006; Risager, 2005). Peterson and Coltrane (2003) pointed out that language is not part of the definition of culture, but reflects the culture. Other scholars have portrayed the close relationship between language and culture as two sides of a coin (Nault, 2006). Agar used the term "languaculture" as part of his argument that language and culture cannot be separated (as cited in Risager, 2005). Even though Risager was dissatisfied with the position of a culture-bound language definition, she admitted that language is still "an integral part of society, culture, and the psyche" and added that "language is always cultural in some respects" (p. 185) indicating that culture not only defines the role of language, but is part of it.

But language as discussed in Risager (2005), refers to general language. In a literature classroom, literary language is often charged with more historical or artistic meaning than the version of English used to discuss

everyday life. Inoue (2007) stated that a student with good cultural schema will have better access to language comprehension, which presumably holds especially true in a foreign language literature classroom. Cultural contexts cover a wide ground. They can be identified socially, linguistically, philosophically, ritually, economically, politically, geographically, and in many other ways. Table 1 summarizes Lazar's (1993) taxonomy of foreign cultural issues.

Table 1. Lazar's (1993) Taxonomy of foreign cultural issues

Objects or products that exist in one society, but not in another.
Proverbs, idioms, formulaic expressions which embody cultural values.
Social structures, roles, and relationships.
Customs/rituals/traditions/festivals.
Beliefs/values/superstitions.
Political, historic, and economic background.
Institutions.
Taboos.
Metaphorical/connotative meanings.
Humor
Representativeness—to what slice of a culture or society does a text refer? Does it describe a particular class or subgroup?

Because of the strong tie between culture and language, problems caused by cultural issues in foreign literature teaching have drawn the attention of many scholars. Lazar (1993) found that EFL learners discovered that it was easier to respond to a text reflecting their own culture, but felt dismay about a text filled with foreign cultural references. Therefore, one of the primary tasks in teaching literature in EFL classrooms must be to help the learner with foreign cultural issues. Carter and Long (1991) encountered the same frustration on the part of EFL students struggling to understand foreign cultural issues in literary texts. They suggested that EFL students build up world knowledge in order to cope with those foreign cultural references. Hall (2005) concluded that cultural factors dictate the level of comprehension of EFL learners more than do linguistic factors. Hall framed his understanding in terms of cultural strangeness or familiarity and labeled cultural understanding as an element that may hinder the textual comprehension of EFL learners.

In light of this, the treatment of cultural context in modern classrooms has changed much since the time when L2 literature first took on a prestigious status in EFL learning, diminishing the stranglehold of the traditional lecture-memorization model of teaching (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Wahaibi, 2012; Hall, 2005; Lee, 2007; Nair et al., 2012; Truong, 2009). Pluralistic perspectives and connecting the text to the individual experience of the learners are now encouraged (Jay, 1991). Lazar (1993) proposed five different ways to improve the accessibility of texts, despite cultural ignorance – 1) providing cultural glosses (i.e., glossaries), 2) making cultural comparisons, 3) making associations, 4) inferring cultural information, and 5) providing cultural background information. The individual responses of readers to the texts are much emphasized in these instructional designs stressing increasing of culture-awareness, because drawing on the readers' own experiences can lead to a sense of achievement and a joyful learning experience, and will ultimately become the power that sustains life-long learning. Peer discussions are one important way that students can share and explore their own experiences as they relate to the text. Hall (2005) found that peer discussions are useful to the learning of second language literature.

2.2 The NET-LET Team Teaching Scheme

Innovative teachers seek instructional designs that engage students in active learning using the principals of Social Constructivism (Powell & Kalina, 2009), in which students interact actively with each other and the teacher and have significant control over their learning, including choices in the use of technology, in order to strengthen the ability of the students to select information and make connections to other knowledge in their minds (Brandon & All, 2010; Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1999), thus learning more deeply than superficial memorization (Sengupta, 2001). In Social Constructivism, the creation of knowledge within an individual is seen

as personal and subjective, meaning that teachers play the role of facilitators who foster an authentic and student-centered learning environment, compared to the Objectivist model, in which teachers are authoritarian transmitters of knowledge (Bae, 2004; Kocadere & Oagen, 2012).

Some scholars have proposed that second language literature teachers best fit the role of a source of cultural knowledge required for textual comprehension. Carter and Long (1991), for example, proposed relating or involving learner experience through designs constructed by the teacher, because the teacher is considered to be the best available cultural information source and therefore is supposed to be able to present concise and economical explanations based on the needs of the student.

However, while all teachers have strong interests and intellectual convictions (Showalter, 2007), local English teachers generally put more emphasis on the language aspect of text rather than on cultural exploration (Risager, 2005). Second language literature teachers may hold back from probing too deeply into cultural context because they believe that vocabulary, phrasal usage, sentence pattern, and grammar are the keys to teaching English. Fluid and dynamic interactions between the target language and its culture are, nevertheless, important aspects of L2 learning (Carter & Long, 1991; Chu, 1994; Hall, 2005; Lazar 1993). A solution to these difficulties is the NET-LET team teaching model, which involves collaborative teaching between a native-English speaker and a local English teacher.

The NET-LET scheme has been widely implemented in English classrooms in Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Thailand, Japan, Korea, and now in elementary education in Taiwan, the site of this study. In these collaborative teaching schemes, native English teachers contribute to pronunciation correction, phrasal expression, and serve as cultural anecdote providers. The current state of research generally concurs that NETs have certain advantages as EFL teachers. They possess and produce vocabulary in depth and breadth (Carless & Walker, 2006), grasp cultural and linguistic aspects of the evolving target language due to their status as insiders, are more adept at explaining and exploiting culture in the classroom, and can create authentic learning environments. In general, NETs as cultural information providers have been shown to be beneficial in EFL literature teaching (Genc & Bada, 2005; Luk & Lin, 2007; Tsou, 2005).

2.3 Computers in the Language Classroom

Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) is generally thought to satisfy the various needs and learning styles of students because computer-assisted instruction is usually flexible and can support a variety of learning strategies and learning pathways (Mayer & Massa 2003; Lee 2007). CAI can be used in a variety of disciplines and the direct application of CAI to L2 instruction is called Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (Ward, 2001). The application of modern computer and web resources to L2 learning is not only innovative and vital (Wu & Liu, 2012; Garrett, 2009; Levy, 2009), but also fundamentally beneficial (Showalter, 2003). As current trends in L2 literature learning move toward a student-centered and collaborative classroom, emphasis on individual and collective experience, multiculturalism, and reader response has gained acceptance (Carter & Long, 1991; Hall, 2005; Lazar, 1993; Showalter, 2007). Computer technology can assist this new paradigm of second language literature learning in many ways. It extends learning activities beyond the time and space confines inherent to classroom sessions, and makes learning more convenient for many. Furthermore, computers can help learners of all kinds, and particularly second language learners, to train in practical skills related to what they have learned (Garrett, 2009; Levy, 2009).

Sharma & Barrett (2007) proposed a form of computer-mediated communication in which instant messaging, emails, forums, and video-conferencing could be included as part of the classroom experience in order to improve teacher-student interaction and peer-learning. Interaction, in general, in the classroom enables idea-sharing, promotes feedback, stimulates autonomous learning, provides chances for peer learning and intercultural confrontation, and adds up to more opportunities for teacher/student exchange. The use of technology in education extends these functions outside the classroom, resulting in time and cost saving, accessing the most current information and knowledge, serving the needs of young learners, providing authentic materials, providing a place or venue for study away from the confines of the classroom (Sharma & Barrett 2007), and enabling limitless opportunities for intercultural communication, and strengthening peer interaction.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), ubiquitous as it is in the spheres of work, play, and study, has been employed to great effect by language teachers, and its application to educational goals has been widely discussed (Bubaš, 2001; Merryfield, 2003; Spitzberg, 2006; Zeiss & Isabelli-García, 2005). Synchronous CMC can serve as a convenient tool for educational purposes if learners are not hindered by differences in time zone and academic calendar (Wu & Marek, 2010). When considering second language literature education, however, asynchronous CMC may be more appropriate as learners usually need to think, ponder, and research the subject

matter before they write their comments, but there is little research on this question (Claro, 2009; Gorjian, Moosavinia, Kavari, Asgari, & Hydare, 2011).

There is much literature that speaks to the potential pitfalls of enlisting CMC for educational purposes. The authors (2010) concluded that, even though CMC is potentially helpful in the development of linguistic, social, and pragmatic L2 competencies, online interaction is sometimes fragmented and the flow of discussion is disconnected. To Tolmie and Boyle (2000), Merryfield (2003), and Fuchs (2004), a complex combination of factors influences the ongoing process of CMC and makes it a tricky thing to harness.

On the other hand, Sharma and Barrett (2011) and Showalter (2007) have shown that CMC can facilitate student learning and thinking in closely interactive ways via comments and feedback (Paulus, 2007). CMC, as it takes place in social media, is often short and fragmented but is also highly interactive, and avoids the traditional “banking model” teaching style (Showalter, 2007), wherein teachers provide the only source of textual interpretation. Therefore, in order to ensure the educational function of this unwieldy tool, it is necessary for teachers to state rules concerning task-purpose, timing, frequency, and content of CMC prior each task (Wu & Liu, 2012; Spitzberg, 2006; Tolmie & Boyle, 2000). In an L2 literature class, it may sometimes be necessary for teachers to provide extra guidance to help low-level EFL students with the potentially formidable task of communicating online. With careful manipulation, however, CMC can activate student learning, strengthen motivation, bring forth a sense of achievement, and encourage students to engage in interesting, lively discussion (Showalter, 2007).

3. Methodology

3.1 Instructional Design

Based on their understanding of the needs of EFL students with respect to comprehension of cultural allusions in English texts, and of the potential of CMC to address this need, particularly when conducted via the Internet, the authors began developing their instructional design in 2008-2009 and have refined it in subsequent academic years (Marek & Wu, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Wu & Marek, 2009; Wu, Marek & Wu, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). The Local English Teacher (LET) is an EFL faculty member at a technical university in central Taiwan. The Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) is a mass communication faculty member at a public liberal arts college in the central United States.

The instructional design they have used for several years has included three core strategies, LET-NET team teaching, custom made online videos, and computer-mediated communication via social media, combined to help EFL learners overcome learning difficulties. The local English teacher teaches conventional face-to-face classes, helping participants with linguistic difficulties, semantic meanings, and literary themes, as well as generally managing the classroom. The native speaker serves as the cultural insider, focusing on the cultural interpretation of the texts. The curriculum development process for each lesson is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Curriculum development

Steps	LET	NET
Select English short stories, one per lesson.	√	
Identify cultural issues in text.	√	√
Develop video script addressing cultural issues.		√
Present the short story to students using conventional instruction.	√	
Provide students access to cultural video.		√
Students and teachers discuss story and cultural issues in social media venue, with prompt questions from the LET and NET.	√	√
Evaluate students.	√	

The LET chose 20th Century American Short Stories by Jean A. McConochie, Vol. 1, 1995, as her text and the LET and NET created lessons for five stories. Table 3 shows the stories and their relation to selected elements of Lazar’s (1993) taxonomy of foreign cultural issues. The LET chose the stories and themes based on her

experience because they were rich in cultural information and for their potential to interest the general EFL reader.

Table 3. Stories used in the study and cultural themes they demonstrated

Title of Story	Author	Geographic & climate differences	Regional differences	Values and beliefs	Differences in social structure
No Speak English	Sandra Cisneros			√	√
Love	Jesse Stuart	√	√	√	
The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse	William Saroyan		√	√	√
Hills like White Elephants	Ernest Hemingway			√	
A Blizzard Under Blue Sky	Pam Houston	√	√	√	

The videos for each lesson averaged 7-8 minutes, a length selected so that students would not become bored or distracted while viewing. The NET read the selected stories repeatedly, compared notes with the LET about what references and allusions would be outside the experience of EFL students in Taiwan, and developed video scripts, which were again reviewed by the LET. The videos provided insights about the cultural references, but did not provide teacher-centered interpretations of the final meaning of the texts. The final videos featured the NET “on camera” but also included still photographs and video illustrating the cultural points. The videos were uploaded to the social media platform selected for the class. Initially, the classes used a blog on the popular Taiwanese social media site *wretch.cc*. After Facebook became popular with college students in Taiwan, the teachers also made use of a closed Facebook group for presentation of the videos and subsequent discussion.

As the semester progressed, the LET introduced each story, its author, and background, and prepared the students for the literary language they would encounter when reading the texts. After reading the texts, but before watching the cultural videos prepared by the NET, students received a copy of the transcript of the video and went over it in class under the guidance of the LET, to ensure understanding of the vocabulary used. Students first watched the cultural videos during class time. They were then assigned to leave social media comments responding to either the text itself, or the video, and to reply to at least two comments made by their peers. Both teachers joined in the online discussion, as appropriate, and provided prompt questions. For example, for the discussion of the story “Love” by Jesse Stuart, the prompt questions included “Why does the father hate the snake?” “How does the son feel about his father's cruel act?” “What is the most touching part of the story to you?” and “What does the title ‘Love’ mean?”

3.2 Research Design

This study presents a meta-analysis of qualitative data from two successive academic years in which separate groups of students in Taiwan were taught the American Short Stories English literature course, with the same instructional design, except that some students watched the NET’s videos and engaged in discussion in a Facebook group and some used a conventional blog. If this were quantitative methodology, employing experimental and control groups, it might be inappropriate to combine findings from students using multiple social media platforms. In the current study, however, the findings are qualitative and thus were intended to explore the experiences of students. Both social media platforms in this study comply with the criteria by which CMC platforms are evaluated for suitability (Marek & Wu, 2012a). In addition, there is a growing body of literature holding that in the EFL discipline, there are too many variables to be successful in excluding all but one for experimental testing (Marek & Wu, 2013). Therefore, the authors judged that it was the overarching social media framework, rather than a particular social media platform, which provided the beneficial CMC dynamic in the larger instructional LET-NET instructional design.

3.3 Research Participants

Eighty-two students took the English Literature course in the first academic year and 47 students took the course in the second academic year. In the first academic year, 46 students watched and discussed the video lessons in a Facebook group and 36 used a blog on the *wretch.cc* social media platform, which was popular in Taiwan. In the second academic year, all students used a Facebook group, which was separate from the group used the previous year. All participants were applied English language majors and all were juniors in a technology university in central Taiwan. Their average TOEIC score was 500. The participants had each taken prior English literature courses. In each academic year, the local English teacher explained the purpose of the social media community and the nature of the experiment to the students at the beginning of the course, and received expressed permission from each student to analyze their classroom work as anonymous data for the study.

3.4 Data Analysis

Two categories of data were collected for analysis in this study. They were 1) semi-structured interviews conducted at the end of each academic year, and (2) the asynchronous student social media comments about the five literary texts. The interview protocol was developed based on a review of the literature from related studies, and from the personal background of the LET and NET. The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that the interviewees were given flexibility in expressing their ideas as long as they addressed the questions. The interviews of seven voluntary participants were chosen purposefully for this analysis because they provided the most detailed, thoughtful comments across the two academic years. Each participant chose the interview location and each was interviewed individually. All the interviews were recorded to allow transcription and were conducted and analyzed in Mandarin, the native language of the participants. The researchers sorted the interview answers into themes and selected answers were translated into English for quotation below.

The researchers also read the social media discussion comments repeatedly, including their original posts and their replies to other students. The comments were sorted into categories and themes. Naming for the themes was inspired by Kim (2004), but adapted in accordance with the present data. In all analysis, the students were given pseudonyms in order to ensure privacy. For the findings section, the student pseudonyms were adjusted again to represent a straightforward Student 1, Student 2, etc., in the interview findings and Student A, Student B, etc., in the asynchronous CMC findings section.

4. Findings

4.1 Themes & Analysis of Interviews

Four major themes and fourteen sub-themes were identified in the student interviews. Table 4 lists these coding themes and their rate of occurrence. It is important to note, however, that although the table places each subtheme within a certain major theme, many subthemes were actually closely correlated and their occurrences in the interviews did not follow the cut and dry demarcations of specific questions.

4.1.1 Benefits of APMC to Language Learning

Most interviewees agreed that asynchronous CMC via social media enabled peers to engage in close and valuable interaction with each other. Indeed, the subtheme of sharing ideas and getting inspiration appeared most frequently in the student interviews. Students felt that reading the comments of others not only allowed them to socialize with their classmates, but also became their biggest source of inspiration and good writing examples. In general, almost all the interviewees deemed these interactions beneficial and positive. Several interviewees expressed the conviction that based on what they had learned through the online conversations, they now had more to talk about with native speakers.

Table 4. Themes and sub-themes extracted from student interviews

Themes	Sub-themes	Occurrences
Benefits of APMC to language learning	Sharing ideas and getting inspiration	29
	Learning from good language models	11
	Strengthening textual memory	12
Improved writing ability	Difficulties forming an opinion	8
	Independent thinking ability	5

	Building up confidence in writing	13
Traditional vs. blended learning	Ubiquitous learning environment	11
	Classroom hierarchy	5
NET-LET teaching	Strengthening and combining the training of the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening	15
	Benefits to language skills training	15
	Richness of learning material	26
	Different sources for textual interpretation	8
	Cultural learning	24
	Making cultural comparisons	13

Some interviewees reflected that the process of generating personal comments combined the skills of text review and writing. They had to recall the content of the stories, think of what to write, and examine the story details more closely. The overall text reviewing process and the fulfillment of the writing tasks strengthened their memory of the stories, they said. Usually, a clear idea about the story, a feeling of personal connection to the story, and familiarization with the text were produced in the process.

4.1.2 Improved Writing Ability

Many interviewees talked about writing and responding to social media comments. For a large number of interviewees, difficulties arose when it came time to write comments. Students mentioned implementing several writing strategies: rereading the text, thinking, drafting, looking at the comments of others for inspiration, researching on the Internet for more information, and seeking help from instructors. Despite the difficulties most interviewees felt they had encountered, they also all agreed that they felt a sense of achievement when they finished their comments. Two interviewees also reported feeling happy and successful when they received feedback from other participants. Even beyond the sense of achievement generated by the entire comment and response process, some interviewees also stated that their writing tasks had built up their confidence in learning about L2 literature.

4.1.3 Traditional vs. Blended Learning

The combination of a traditional classroom learning style with the blended learning that was employed in the current study was mentioned many times during the interviews. Six out of seven interviewees acknowledged the benefits of blended learning. A common benefit they cited was that the ubiquitous online learning environment extended the limited time and space available to them when they were physically in the classroom. Enabled by computer technology, students learned through peer interaction and teacher-student interaction outside class time. Learning via computer technology made learning pathways various, flexible, and convenient. Student 3 admitted that she watched the online videos and read the social media comment several times at home. “The information is always there,” she explained. “It is very convenient for re-reading. You will never miss a thing.” The breakdown of classroom hierarchy was another theme mentioned by multiple students. For instance, there were no “teacher’s pets” in the online learning environment; each student had an equal chance to give their personal opinion.

Students also commented on their improved cultural understanding and language ability. Some recognized that the insights they obtained from the online discussions strengthened their foreign cultural competence, while some also proposed that greater cultural competence not only assisted in literature understanding but also made them more willing to engage in intercultural communication. Further, all the interviewed students agreed that their language abilities in general had improved. Bolstered by the LET’s advance preparation and guidance, the NET’s online presentations gave students opportunities to improve their vocabulary, diction, and pronunciation. Reading, re-reading, discussing, and thinking about both the literary texts and the cultural videos deepened their understanding of the background of the stories and related cultural topics. Writing and giving feedback helped them formulate thoughts, build confidence, and train independent thinking.

4.1.4 NET-LET Teaching

The NET-LET scheme was appreciated by all interviewees for a number of reasons. Students felt that NET-LET team teaching had enriched the teaching content by offering two sources of textual interpretation. A general attitude of the interviewees was that they welcomed textual interpretation from different perspectives and viewed it as inspiring. Student 4 stated: "Having a native speaker as cultural informant is beneficial in that he was able to provide an insightful inspection of the cultural issues." By way of example, Student 4 mentioned that he had not known to relate the farmer's hatred of the snake in "Love" to any commonly held religious beliefs in traditional American society until he watched the NET's explanation in the online video. The NET quickly grasped the connection between the farmer's feelings and actions, and the traditional religious motif of evil serpents that is embedded in American culture. He could, therefore, explain this to the students with an insight that the LET could not provide. On the other hand, Students 3, 5, and 7 mentioned that the LET was very helpful in making cultural comparisons with reference to vocabulary and idiomatic expression, as well as helping students with the literary background of the texts.

Given that, in this particular methodology, the NET in the NET-LET team was primarily available to students via the cultural videos he provided, it is not surprising that the interviewed students spent considerable time addressing the videos themselves. Student 1 recalled the photos of Appalachian Mountains that were provided in the video as background for the story "Love." They made a deep impression on him, allowing him to visualize the setting of the story and piquing his interest about that region of the United States. Student 6 stated that a Pepsi commercial video clip added to the NET's cultural report for the story "No Speak English" immediately excited the whole classroom as well as enabled the learners to understand how Mamacita's little baby learned to sing the English song. Student 4 explained, "The videos made the classroom not boring, which is how a traditional classroom can be described. Combining sound, clips, and photos, the videos greatly satisfied audio/visual young learners." Student 2 said, "Texts are lifeless and hard to read. I can hardly imagine struggling through a swamp filled with difficult words and sentences and the ideas of another culture. However, the native English-speaking professor's videos truly heightened my motivation to learn. I felt more excited about reading after watching his videos."

Another aspect of the NET-LET teaching team that the interviewed students appreciated was the opportunities for them to practice the listening and reading skills, along with pronunciation practice. The cultural videos and accompanying transcript pages allowed learners to listen to American English pronunciation, read authentic material, take in cultural information relevant to the stories they were reading, and learn vocabulary that was required for the extra cultural explanation. Thus the online videos served as electronic "glossaries" which challenged their listening and reading abilities while at the same time satisfying their aural and visual needs.

4.1.5 Analysis of ALCM Records

The analysis of the actual posts and replies of the students in asynchronous computer mediated communication social media yielded four frequently-occurring primary themes and four additional themes that appeared occasionally (Table 5). The analysis was inspired by Kim (2004) and some aligned with Kim's themes, but the researchers also identified additional themes to describe the comments of the students.

Table 5. Themes in social media posts

Primary Themes
Giving personal opinions
Interpretation discussions
Evaluation (characters, plots, construction, literary value)
Excitement toward different cultural items
Secondary Themes
Making personal connections
Cross-cultural comparison
Literature comprehension discussions
Benefits gained from the online videos

The theme “giving personal opinions” was by far the most commonly seen in the data, with the opinions directed toward the characters and plots of the texts. Often this meant expressing judgments about positive or negative actions of the characters in the stories, or expressing other likes and dislikes.

Student A provided thoughtful personal opinions about the short story “Love” by Jesse Stuart, particularly the roles played by the dog and the snake in the story:

“I think the part of the story that touches me is that the author doesn’t want the snake to be killed by the dog,” said Student A. “In this world, many people keep animals as pets, but sometimes they don’t really care. If you can’t breed and care for them, you must not keep an animal as a pet from the very beginning. Every animal in this world has its own way to help this world that can maintain it as good environment. For instance, the snake helps us to catch mice from the fields. I identify with the author’s action a lot, even though I did not grow up on a mountain. I think human beings and animals can keep peace living altogether, if we all understand the true meaning of love.”

The second most common theme found in the social media posts and replies was “interpretation discussions.” While these interpretation comments were also opinions, they focused on understanding the issues and literary intent of the authors. For instance, “No Speak English,” by Sandra Cisneros elicited mainly interpretations of the importance of learning English but almost no comments about issues like immigration, multicultural issues, or Latin culture, as might have been expected. In the discussions about “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway, learners discussed the ethics of abortion and judged the male protagonist’s attitude about love and women. Both male and female learners criticized the man’s behavior and sympathized with the female protagonist.

In the theme “Evaluation,” Student B focused on the writing style of Hemingway and on his construction of the characters:

“I think Hemingway had a unique writing style,” said Student B. “In the story the two characters show their emotions strongly through their language. Jig was bewildered about the abortion and thought she needed to hear the advice from the man at first; the man in the story keeps trying to encourage the girl to do the abortion, because the man is an adventurer, and he didn’t want any burden at all.”

A large portion of the comments surrounding “A Blizzard Under Blue Sky,” by Pam Houston focused on the excitement students felt about foreign cultural items that are mentioned in the story and that had been demonstrated in the online video, such as Kool-Aid, yodeling, blizzards, and the two-step dance. Student C said:

“In this video, the teacher talked about Kool-Aid. It’s so amazing,” said Student C. “Next, the teacher showed us the two-step with dancing. It’s country style. Another is yodeling. This singing style is very quick. I think if I want to sing this song, my tongue must be agile. Finally, this is very great information from the video. I know there is a lot of winter camping in the West Mountains [of Taiwan]. Taiwan’s mountains are not very cold compared with the story.”

5. Discussion

Understanding of the purpose of teaching EFL literature has evolved over time with aspirations following the trends of education and research literature on second language teaching. Certainly the first goal of the teaching of literature in the EFL classroom is simply improving student proficiency in English. But ever since 1990, the focus of both research and practice has emphasized student experience and cultural awareness, rather than teachers simply lecturing about grammar and vocabulary (Carter & Long, 1991; Hall, 2003; Hall, 2005; Kim 2004; Showalter, 2007; Wu & Wu, 2008). Among the current main goals of second language education, as represented in the literature, are to help students develop analytical and critical thinking skills, to become autonomous learners, and to apply the skills they learn to their affairs and relationships, including international and intercultural connections. Literature education in particular now focuses on cultivating a lifelong interest in reading and encouraging students to be more motivated to read by making the classroom experience more enjoyable (Carter & Long, 1991; Kim, 2004; Picken, 2005; Wu & Wu, 2008).

The original intent of the authors, in beginning this study, was to show that a student-centered, and strongly-motivated L2 literature classroom could be established through teacher collaboration, in which a local English teacher would collaborate with a native speaker for rich textual interpretations, deep cultural insight, and different teaching styles. The goal was pursued in the context of helping students understand cultural references in the texts. The authors have demonstrated a methodology in this study that, according to the findings, involves students in active learning and in thoughtful reflection on their literary texts. The students participating in the study generally approved of the videos, seeing them as cultural glossaries similar to, but more desirable than, the

paper-based glossaries often found in EFL classroom materials. The overall methodology, furthermore, dovetails well with current literature stressing student-centered active learning for EFL instruction, as opposed to the teacher-centric model.

In addition, the findings of this study show that the students had a strong interest in the cultural information, and that making these references accessible to the students caused them to be more engaged and interested in the texts. This finding aligns with many studies which have advocated use of cultural information as a vehicle for EFL literature instruction (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Wahaibi, 2012; Hall, 2005; Lee, 2007; Nair et al., 2012; Truong, 2009). In particular, the students appreciated and were interested in what many might consider minor elements of culture, such as Kool-Aid, as opposed to major themes of American culture, such as independence versus collectivism. The authors believe this is because the cultural references in texts often do allude to trivial or popular culture elements, as opposed to defining parameters of the culture. Indeed, major mainstream cultural themes usually appear to be more serious to EFL students whereas popular cultural items like food or necessities of life more easily bring people together. That is why intermediate to lower-intermediate level EFL students showed more interest toward these minor cultural items. At the same time, these minor cultural elements are the hardest for teachers who are not native speakers to grasp, signaling the value of the LET-NET instructional design employed in this study.

5.1 A Better Classroom Environment

The underlying goal of the teaching of literature in the 21st Century is always to involve students communicatively in the classroom and to enable them to discover for themselves what is significant about the texts, instead of just telling them what they should have perceived. The role of the teacher is not merely, or even principally, that of knowledge transmitter but rather decision maker, learning partner, and also a source for learning. Most EFL students in Taiwan, the site of this study, depend heavily on the teacher's interpretation of literary texts. In the current study, however, the computer-based interactive tasks were an extension of the classroom, accessible at many times and places. Answering the prompting questions caused the students to transform passive attendance of a class into active involvement, stimulating the self-learning ability of the students. They also learned the art of constructive criticism and how to neutralize opinions that are off-base. The online literary forum in this experiment enabled every participant to give opinions on a level playing field outside the confinement of the classroom. This study, therefore, aligned with other literature which has found technology-based literature instruction to be flexible, convenient, inspiring, interesting, and contributive to students and learning (Zeiss & Isabelli-García, 2005).

The student-centered approach used in the current study also provided a more democratic, multicultural, and balanced viewpoint than a single source of knowledge disseminated from a teaching authority. Indeed, the LET and NET declined to tell the students what they should believe about the meaning of the texts, instead providing a framework in which the students could make meaning on their own. Rather than stressing one theory over another to the whole class, the NET and LET, in Gerald Graff's words, made the classroom "an open, democratic, inclusive arena of political and critical conflict" (quoted in Showalter, 2007, p. 31). The social media literary forum in this study enabled the convergence of different ideas based on the realization of a democratic, multicultural, and balanced viewpoint and was considered a much better location for a forum than would be a traditional classroom. In traditional classrooms, there are always some power-struggles involving privilege or priority, particularly in a teacher's personal view of different students. As a result, advantages and opportunities are not always equally distributed in a traditional classroom, but online forums greatly democratize this distribution.

5.2 The Teacher as a Guide

Although much has been made in the academic literature about student-centered active learning and Social Constructivism (Brandon & All, 2010), the teacher remains a dynamic guide for the students. Rather than dictatorially announcing meaning, the teachers in this instructional design more subtly guided the students, understanding that some interpretations that students may develop are more thoughtful and valid than others. One of the primary means by which the LET and NET accomplished this in the present study was through the questions asked in the interviews and the discussion prompts in the social media forums. In this way, the teachers guided and channel the discussion, without overtly giving answers to the students.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the comments of students in their social media posts tended to follow the path set by the teachers in their prompt questions, or that they often addressed specific things in the NET's videos. For example, there was extensive comment about Kool-Aid, a popular children's drink in the United States

which is relatively unknown in Taiwan. The video demonstrated the actual mixing of Kool-Aid powder with water to make the drink, intriguing the students and capturing their imaginations.

It could be argued that the instructional design used by the authors gave the study's undergraduate participants an "easy way out" by simply allowing them to express their personal opinions rather than engaging in more serious literary discussion. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to expect high-level scholarly discourse from low-to-intermediate proficiency college students who still struggle with the grammar and syntax of the text. Indeed, the students were expressing opinions, supporting their ideas with evidence drawn from the stories and the videos. This was the key point of the social media literature forums, and of any literary discourse -- to have the students develop ideas based on evidence and then compare those ideas with others to either strengthen or realign them via the process of critical thinking. The content analysis of the social media discussion and the responses of interviewees showed that the methodology achieved its goal. The authors believe that the discourse was appropriate to the proficiency of the students, whereas the same instructional design employed with higher proficiency students would likely lead to higher level discourse.

5.3 Recommendations for Practice

This paper has presented a methodology that helps learners overcome difficulties of cross-cultural competence when reading L2 literature. Based on the findings of the study, and the authors' experiences, the following recommendations for practice are offered:

NET-LET team via distance and social media technology teaching is a viable instructional design for EFL, including L2 literature curricula. LETs should use networking skills to seek NET partners.

NET-LET team teaching should use appropriate online forums to provide a student-centered framework for critical thinking about literary texts, with teachers guiding rather than directing the thinking of the students.

Videos and other online materials used as part of LET-NET partnerships should be conceptualized as enriching the text, not explaining it, so that students will seek their own explanations and compare them to the interpretations of others.

The materials that serve as "electronic glossaries" should match the proficiency level of the students, challenging them slightly with new vocabulary, but not presenting content that the students see as overwhelmingly difficult.

Additional research could explore use of alternative social media platforms, including standard platforms such as Twitter, and contrast those standard platforms with internal platforms, such as university-operated Learning Management Systems, particularly given growing concerns in academic circles about privacy in standard social media venues. In addition, it would be valuable to study categories of prompt questions in more detail to see how variations in types of prompts affect student reflective thinking.

6. Conclusion

Reading can play an important role in language learning. Reading is often an important factor when young children are learning their native language. Literature can also play an important role as foreign language learners work to both improve their understanding of grammar and syntax, and seek richer understanding of the target culture. Language learners, however, need to be able to both understand the language itself, and the cultural context of the stories, which are often filled with references that are obscure to cultural outsiders. The authors hope that their model for LET-NET instruction will both provide theory-based best practices and inspiration for language teachers wishing to offer the advantages of CALL to their literature students.

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