

*Integrating Global Education into the University English Curriculum through
Technology-Enhanced News Circles*

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Abstract

Living in an increasingly globalized world, human beings have to solve more and more problems and face many new challenges together. It has thus become essential for English teachers in the 21st century to develop new and effective ways to integrate burning global issues and events in ELT. This paper reports on the approaches and outcomes of a technology-enhanced news circle project designed to incorporate global education into my University English course for Taiwanese university students not majoring in English. Twenty-five Taiwanese participants of this project were divided into six mixed-ability news discussion groups, or circles, based on the results of a TOEIC-style reading test. Thirty news articles about various current global issues or events collected from free news websites were posted on the news circle blog created for this project, and each group, or circle, had to conduct four online role-based discussions on four different pieces of news posted on the blog. Questionnaire surveys, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and group discussion records were employed to investigate the outcomes of this project, and the major findings show that this project was beneficial to raise these students' global awareness, increase their interest in looking for solutions to world problems, improve their critical thinking skills, motivate them to read and discuss in English on the Internet. The design and implementation of this project and the findings of this empirical research will provide valuable insights for those interested in integrating global education and ELT in EFL countries.

Keywords: global education, university English, news

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Introduction

Living in an increasingly globalized world, human beings as world citizens have to face and deal with more and more problems and challenges together, and the teaching of global issues, or global education, has thus become a crucial part of more and more school curricula worldwide. Within the field of English education, over the past few decades, there has been a growing interest in bringing real world content into the classroom as well as a strong call for making global issues “a central core of ELT” (Maley, 1992, p.73). For example, H. D. Brown claims in his plenary talk at the 24th Annual Conference of TESOL (1990) that English language teachers have “a mission of helping everyone in this world communicate with each other to prevent the global disaster ahead.” In a similar vein, Cates (1997) also stresses that the new commitment of ELT is to promote “international understanding” and “global awareness,” and that any English teaching can’t be called successful if the students, however fluent, do not care about the world and its problems. In his 2009 article, Cates argues that “language has a certain degree of flexibility of topic that other subjects do not,” so he urges all language teachers in the 21st century to deal with global issues in the language classroom in order to enable their students to effectively acquire the target language as well as “the knowledge, skills, and commitment required by world citizens to solve global problems,” such as “terrorism, ethnic conflict, social inequality, and environmental destruction” (p.41).

Through the efforts of the advocates of global education and scholars and educators in the field of ELT, many EFL instructors around the world have tried to integrate burning global issues and real world problems into their teaching in various ways in order to enhance students’ global awareness and linguistic competence at the same time. For example, Joritz-Nakagawa integrated global education and cooperative learning in an EFL reading class at a Japanese university and found that the use of global issues was “stimulating and challenging” for the students but these issues provided a rich context for them to learn to “communicate clearly despite difficulties with English” (2006, p.150). Focho (2010) developed an integrated approach to integrating the global curriculum in language lessons and made it possible for learners in their fifth year of secondary education to improve the four language skills, grammar, and vocabulary through a series of classroom activities closely linked to global topics. Omidvar and Sukumar (2013) brought global education into an English language conversation classroom by having a group of intermediate-level English learners aged between twelve and nineteen years old read one passage about a global issue for each class, discuss some questions related to the topic in small groups and then give a short talk about it during class; after the instruction, they found that these students showed a higher degree of understanding of global issues and became more capable of analyzing problems and thinking critically about those issues.

Although it is now widely acknowledged that it is important for teachers to develop ways to integrate global issues and world problems in ELT, global education is not particularly emphasized in many university EFL classrooms in Taiwan, and the lack of emphasis on exploring all subjects from a global perspective throughout the curriculum in secondary education, as well as Taiwanese media’s failure to report more on world news and international affairs, has led to the widespread ignorance of the world and its problems among Taiwanese university students (Huang, 2008). A number of university teachers (e.g. Prof. Chia-Tung Lee and Prof. Hung-En Liu) have

publicly expressed their concerns about Taiwanese university students' lack of interest in and knowledge of the world outside of Taiwan, and as a university English teacher myself, I have also found that most of my students are either unaware of or indifferent to global issues and the only world news they might care about is those related to their favorite sports, video games, or celebrities. Since English itself is an ideal tool to get access to global knowledge, issues and problems, it is thus crucial for university EFL teachers to take the responsibility for the integration of global education in ELT in order to help draw these students' attention to current issues of global significance and prepare them to be more active and responsible global citizens in this interrelated and interdependent world.

The Technology-Enhanced News Circle Project

This paper reports on the approaches and outcomes of a cross-cultural technology-enhanced news circle project inspired by my experience of using technology-enhanced literature circles with Taiwanese and Japanese undergraduate students, and designed to incorporate global education into English language courses for Taiwanese and Japanese non-English majors. The literature circle, first introduced by Daniels Harvey in his book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, is a small peer-led discussion group whose members read the same literary text and gather together regularly to discuss it with "discussion roles" (e.g., discussion director, connector, summarizer, and travel tracer) before they choose a new text and "move to a new cycle" (1994, p.13). With the help of computer and online technologies, I developed a cross-cultural technology-enhanced literature circle project to promote literature-focused communication and collaboration between Japanese and Taiwanese EFL university students, and a lot of positive feedback from the participants encouraged me to take this approach into consideration when I looked for appropriate ways of introducing global issues to my students. After I read Gregory G. Anderson's 1996 article about the importance of using alternative supplementary materials such as newspapers and magazines to teach global issues instead of relying solely on a good textbook, I decided to use newspaper articles about global issues as the reading material and change the name "literature circles" into "news circles" to highlight the difference in the reading and discussion topics between them.

The six discussion roles designed for news circles are Discussion Director, Summarizer & Recorder, Background Researcher, News Tracker, Connector, and Word Wizard, all of which are rotated among members in the same news circle and are assigned different tasks to carry out so as to ensure equal participation and contributions in the discussion process and enable students to understand the world issues reported in the news from different perspectives. For example, the Discussion Director has to develop a list of open-ended questions about the news article to promote thoughtful discussion on the global issues presented in the news among group members and to make sure each member makes equal contributions during the discussion. The Background Researcher needs to search on the Internet for articles, images, sound files, or videos related to the background or cause of the major global event(s) or issue(s) presented in the news article, study the information provided by these materials, and share the findings with the others during the group discussion. The Connector's task is to find the connections between the global issue or event in the news and his or her own life experiences, similar events at other times and places, a book, a story, an article, a movie, a song, or a television program on the same topic.

The News Tracker tracks the news story or event by finding out what happened next and by studying how the same event or issue was reported or presented in the other news websites before sharing the findings with the others during the group discussion.

In order to add the element of intercultural communication to news circles that focus on the reading and discussion of global issues, I decided to take advantage of the power of technology in this news circle project and started to look for a group of foreign university students to work with Taiwanese students on the project. Thanks to the help of my Japanese acquaintance, I had the privilege to know Asami Nakayama, a Japanese university English teacher that was concerned about Japanese youth's lack of interest in global issues, and she managed to find eleven Japanese volunteers in her TOEIC class at Nagoya Gakuin University. These Japanese Economics-major students and twenty-five Taiwanese students from Fu Jen Catholic University not majoring in English participated in this project and were divided into six mixed-ability news discussion groups, or news circles, based on the results of a TOEIC-style reading test. Each group of six (either four Taiwanese and two Japanese or five Taiwanese and one Japanese) had to use Skype or LINE to conduct four role-based synchronous online discussions on four out of thirty online newspaper articles of different lengths and levels of linguistic difficulties and about a variety of current global issues, concerns or events (e.g. terrorist activities, virus disease outbreak, social justice, gender inequality, democracy, racial discrimination, and environmental protection and destruction), collected from news websites such as *CNN*, *BBC*, and *Taipei Times*, and posted on a blog created for this project.

Researching into the Effects of the Project

All the six groups completed the four cycles of news circles successfully though not all the participants joined the discussion every time, and a mixed-method study was conducted to investigate into the practice and effects of this project through both quantitative and qualitative data collected from questionnaire surveys, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and group discussion records. The major findings of this study are as follows:

1. Drawing students' attention to world news and global issues

The results of the "getting started" questionnaire survey show that 5% of the respondents strongly agreed and 35% agreed that they seldom read world news about things that happened or are happening outside their country although 54% of them strongly agreed and 41% agreed that as global citizens, they should spend more time reading news about current global events, issues or problems. The exit questionnaire survey results, however, show that all of the participants believed that to some extent, reading and discussing the news articles had made them care more about world events and global issues. The interview data are also in accordance with the questionnaire results. For example, most of the interviewees said that they would like to follow the latest development of the world event or global issue reported in the news articles they had read and discussed with their group members, and some of them mentioned that this news circle project had made them start to think more about some world problems and their possible solutions.

2. Enhancing students' critical thinking skills

As Metzger argues, teachers have to help students become “intelligent and critical media consumers” (1988, p.15). The news circle project was designed and implemented in a way that could encourage students to read the news articles more carefully, seek out alternative sources of facts or all sides to a certain global issue, and pay closer attention to how different people react differently to the same issue. After a careful examination of the discussion records, I found a lot of evidence showing that students learned to think critically of what they read from the news. For example, when discussing the news about Obama's response to the Ebola outbreak, a group of students questioned why the American President would feel that the world was expecting America to combat the spread of the virus alone as reported in the article. Many interviewees also mentioned that this project had given them the chance to do more thinking about the global issues and how they were presented in the news articles instead of simply reading the news and take in the information without any doubts.

3. Motivating students to read world news and discuss global issues in English

The chance of working with foreign group members gave many students strong motivation to take part in this news circle project. According to the results of the “getting started” questionnaire survey, 56% of the respondents seldom discussed current world events or issues reported in the news with other people, but 19% of them strongly agreed and 57% agreed that they would like to know whether they and foreigners share the same view on these events or issues. In the exit questionnaire survey, 74% of the participants felt that working with group members from another country had given them stronger motivation to do a good job for this project and 68% of them felt disappointed when their foreign group members couldn't join the news discussion for some reason. The interview data also show that the interviewees felt motivated to read the news and discuss it with the others, especially their foreign group members, and they thought affirmatively of this way of improving their English ability.

In addition to these positive findings, there is also evidence related to the other benefits of this project in the data, such as the improvement of students' English ability, especially reading and communicative skills, and the development of students' cooperative learning skills. However, the participants also made some negative comments on the project. For example, the Taiwanese students often complained that their Japanese group members either said very little during the discussion or disappeared without giving any reason before the discussion was over. The Japanese students found it very hard to join the online discussion because they were often busy with their part-time jobs after school but their Taiwanese group members preferred to have the discussion in the evening. Besides, they felt that their English was not good enough for them to join the discussion conducted in English, and they often had trouble understanding what their Taiwanese group members said. In other words, the differences in the English proficiency level and the daily or weekly schedule sometimes made it very hard for these two groups of students to work together on the project. These problems might not be so unusual in the process of conducting a project involving cross-country collaboration and communication, but they should be taken into careful consideration in the preparations for future practice of any similar project.

Conclusion

As Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989) argue, language is a means of learning about the world. English teachers should stop sticking their heads into their textbooks, most of which may not cover enough of burning global issues or “treat them trivially as an overlay on the linguistic syllabus,” and pretending that none of the world problems that our planet faces exist (Cates, 2009). Instead, they have to introduce students to important global problems and deepen their interest in the outside world through the use of authentic materials and thought-provoking student-led discussion activities. Although there is still room for improvement, the major advantage of this news circle approach to integrating global education into ELT is that it can be implemented in any English language curriculum or teaching programs and used with English learners physically based in different EFL/ESL countries, because it is mainly conducted out of class through internet technologies. It is hoped that the design and implementation of this technology-enhanced news circle project as well as the findings of the current study will provide valuable insights for those interested in promoting EFL students’ global awareness through effective language teaching.

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