

*Learning International Literacy and News English through Cross-disciplinary Instructional Modules*

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**Abstract**

Voicing one's opinions on international affairs demands multidisciplinary knowledge and communication strategies. The demand is elevated for nonnative English speakers when critical ideas are exchanged for controversial topics in English among discussants. This research explores the value of an innovative ESP training featuring blended learning and cross-disciplinary team-teaching, to introduce international literacy to 26 college-level Taiwanese English learners and guide them to develop analytical perspectives on global news and discussion strategies. The training includes three learning modules with three themes tackling major global issues at the present time. Each module is composed of six stages: starting from an orientation, followed by guided and intensive English news reading and topical research techniques, journalistic communication unfolded by a field practitioner, blended roleplay, task production, and finally group briefing. Data collection includes entry and exit assessments, focus group interviews, and work products. Descriptive statistical analysis and qualitative analysis unfold the induced effects of the training. The learning outcomes after comparing the entry and exit assessments show positive progress. The results from interviews also reveal participants' satisfaction toward the training. The blended role-play creates the affordance to facilitate students to contextualize global news from the media and develop relevance and insights. The results show that the training can re-educate news readers/viewers by equipping them with journalistic knowledge and clear logic.

Keywords: News English, Role-Play, International Literacy

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## Introduction

The on-going pandemic has given everyone in the world a wake-up call to realize how closely connected we are in a global village. International literacy is unprecedentedly vital for readers to process daily news from all over the world and stay relevant in this battle excluding no one. Under this premise, this section will build from the current status quo of English education in Taiwan as the basis to necessitate the innovative course design of **News English for International Literacy**. Attempts to promote English education began in 2001 *The White Paper on Higher Education Policy to Blueprint for Developing Taiwan into a Bilingual Nation by 2030*<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, years of governmental endeavors from top to bottom haven't yielded fruitful outcomes because of the lack of immersive input of international literacy, in addition to insufficient exposure of diverse world cultures. It leads to youngsters' indifference for the global development and insensibility to international affairs. Ceaseless criticism targets millennials' attitude toward social and global issues. It should be noted that this study reveals the curricular vacuum in Taiwan, yet similar problems actually transcend national boundaries.

The induction of insensibility to international affairs—results from scarce English reading in or listening to global news media—form a vicious cycle. To be more specific, news watching seems to rapidly vanish from modern youth's daily routine. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Taiwan being excluded from the World Health Organization has been relying on international media to voice herself and partake in the global battlefield against the fast spread disease. However, watching/reading news requires “background knowledge”, “theoretical framework”, and “logic” (p.5-6), according to Dr. Liu, B. R., a local expert in International Relations (2008). It helps the audience develop a system to process and categorize news logically and build up personal perception gradually when rummaging through a large quantity of multimodal sources and ever-changing developments. All these echo the definition of *literacy* based on UNESCO (2006): “...from viewing literacy as a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills, to using these skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development, to developing the capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change” (pp.147). On the top of English competence, they also need to have the analytical skills, the type of literacy that UNESCO (2006) has coined as “applied, practised, and situated” (p.151), supported with background knowledge to identify if news is lost in translation.

There is no quick fix for the perpetual problem at hand, but a laissez-faire approach is certainly not an option. This research adopts a cross-disciplinary method to reintroduce international literacy to college students and guide them to develop analytical perspectives through direct access to international journalistic media, in order to substantiate their knowledge in English for specific purposes (ESP) studies and global issues. It's an action research to tackle the real problems emerging in many classrooms in my school and likely around Taiwan and many countries. The innovative course titled **News English for International Literacy** aims to address the above problem through systemic awareness-raising and rigorous training. The

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.ey.gov.tw/Page/448DE008087A1971/b7a931c4-c902-4992-a00c-7d1b87f46cea>

curriculum is pedagogically pioneering for its use of role play and collaborative teaching with experts to enrich a genre-based ESP instruction.

### **Research Questions**

Two questions will guide the research direction:

1. What is the instructional design for the training of ESP for international literacy?
2. What progress do students make in their international literacy with the training?

### **Genre-based Instruction and Role-Play in ESP Teaching**

In the case of the current study, multimodal journalistic materials are the primary communication contents. Hence, genre features in news articles, news podcasts, and news reports on TV are the foci of the instruction. For contemporary ESP instruction, genre-based pedagogy is predominant in ESP teaching. After decades of evolution, genre-based instruction still calls for dynamic approaches and subsequent empirical evidence. Play or playful task is reckoned as a means to cultivate L2 learners' sensitivity and flexibility to adapt to new social actions. For example, Tardy (2016) describes a successful multimodal project experience in which her graduate students not only applied but also synthesized knowledge from various genres to combine mixed-media resources in response to function (to communicate) in an emerging academic genre. *Play* creates affordances for students to innovate with genres by transforming learned knowledge. Therefore, in this research, *role-play* which is known for its playful nature is devised to serve this purpose to improve the likelihood of learners' uptake and subsequent use in communicative contexts.

Over decades, role-play came to prominence in Communicative Language Learning and continues to be used as an instructional method to focus on learners' needs. Role-play creates an irreplaceable affordance *context simulation* which helps address learner's future purposes (communication needs) (Carver, 1983). Under the influence of systemic functional linguistics, ESP classroom practitioners embrace the principles to place the function of language as central in order for the learners/speakers to perform in various social contexts (Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997). Simulation through role-play allows ESP learners to engage in *quasi-professional communication* without risking real-life consequences. Lee (2008) and her classroom research validated the values of role-play and the functional accounts of language teaching. She designed missions (tasks) commonly seen in business settings to stimulate students' use of negotiation, cooperation, and socialization strategies and speech acts in L2. The outcomes showed that the role-play activities can successfully elevate learners' communicative competence and learning motivation. In addition, she underlined how role-play activated participants' passive knowledge of lexicogrammar, so they could effectively express themselves. This is vital for English as a foreign language (EFL) students, such as Taiwan English learners, because they spend years to learn English by memorizing but not using a large amount of vocabulary and grammar rules.

Similar affordances of role-play in ESP courses can also be found outside of Taiwan. Burns and Moore (2008) reported an ESP task to practice accounting discourse in simulated accountant-client consultations. The discursive practice emerging from the actual data served as evidence that the participants successfully acquired power

relations in turn-taking, the co-construction of clarifications, and advice-giving initiation and termination. The extensive use of role-play retains pedagogical substance yet further combines technology and social communication medium. Role-play can unfold abstract concepts of human interaction through situated and collaborative learning. From the concise discussion on role-play's affordances in genre-based ESP, this pedagogical approach has shown its multidimensional capacities and high compatibility to a wide array of educational contexts and objectives. Therefore, the marriage of the two should also serve as an effective tool in the cross-disciplinary training that this research demonstrates.

## **Participants**

An elective course titled **News English for International Literacy** enrolled language majors as well as students from related majors on campus, e.g., Mass Communication, Political Science, and Psychology. The composition of student sources reflected the nature of the course complexity and called for collaborative teaching with field experts. A class of 26 students along with the instructor-researcher have given consents to be included in the study. All the participants shared Chinese Mandarin as their first language and were all born and raised in Taiwan. This study lasted for three months, and accidentally shared the timeline with Covid-19 global outbreaks. This study intends to explore the effects and the viability of the cross-disciplinary ESP training, incorporating journalistic media and international literacy.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection instruments included 1) entry assessment, 2) exit assessment, 3) focus group interviews, 4) task products, and 5) lesson plans. In addition, to boost up the research value and curricular quality, a pilot study in the previous semester also served as the prototype for the official instructional design. A short summary of the pilot study is presented in the next section.

The entry and exit assessments were respectively implemented in the beginning and the end of the course, for the researcher to diagnose students' international literacy and comprehension of English news. The discrepancy between the two tests indicated participants' progress; the scores were compared. Students work products after each learning module were collected to validate the learning outcomes of the instruction. The results offered a macro-view of the learning quality. The main constructs shared by the two assessments were 1) knowledge of major international affairs, and 2) news comprehension. It's also noteworthy that the design of the two assessments were parallel and comparable; both were reviewed and validated by an outside expert in the field.

Based on the preliminary findings from the entry and exit assessments, the researcher-instructor also conducted focus group interviews to elicit participants' insight for the micro-view of the learning performance and evaluation of course design. The findings from the pilot study informed the researcher-instructor during the lesson plan development. Because of the cross-disciplinary nature of the curriculum, field practitioners were invited to offer their expertise in the form of workshops—to provide field knowledge, to jointly assess students' performance, and to assist with the course/material design. The collaboration with field practitioners elevated the

professionalism required for this cross-disciplinary course. Readers should be reminded that the course timeline also synchronized with the occurrence and evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic. The velocity of the pandemic heavily affected the instructional design because of the journalistic elements in the course objectives.

### **Instructional Design**

To answer the first research question, this ESP training for international literacy was to prepare students to interact with multimodal journalistic sources and understand ever-changing international relations. Building on the foundation from the instruction prototype in the pilot study (conducted in the previous semester), the training of ESP for International Literacy modified and expanded by adding more substance, leveraging technology-assisted role-play, and enlisting field experts as co-teachers.

#### ***Pilot Study***

To verify student needs and to confirm the viability of the instructional design, a two-week pilot study was conducted in a previous semester. Using the ongoing tariff dispute between China and the United States as a prelude, the researcher instructor asked the students to follow the APEC Summit and the tension among certain member countries. The prototype instruction was designed in a step-wise fashion:

1. Activating background knowledge
2. Setting up the objectives and core queries: Students researched the news on the APEC Summit 2018 and raised queries to each other.
3. Materials and tools: A simplified online role-play scenario was set up. Each group played the role of a national representative of their choice.
4. Role-play and briefing: The role-play simulated the APEC summit. Each country came with its own agenda and diplomatic objective to achieve. During the role-play, mini-groups were formed for students to have discussions with and support each other to process constant incoming and outgoing messages during the intense multilateral negotiations with other characters. After the role-play, each group held a briefing.

Findings from the pilot study indicated that the theme-based module had presented an unanticipated level of challenge to the students. First, because of their long-term negligence of global development and English news, they struggled in every task. They could not make predictions or interact with the news materials. Second, the vocabulary and genres in international news were overwhelming, which led to the next setback. Third, instead of quality sources, students sought oral commentaries in short videos and opted for unprofessional and humorous discourse. This type of commentary is usually filled with prejudice and often lacks credentials or a solid basis. Finally, when students were researching for background knowledge, they did not know what to look for or how to sort out a system or logic. Hence, the queries were scattered and invalid.

Fortunately, they still gathered enough materials to partake in the role-play of the APEC meeting. From the multilateral negotiation, they also realized why certain nations would form alliances with each other, despite the consequences or injustice. They also understood that fighting for a nation's best interest should be well thought out and vocalized. Meanwhile, these representatives also were human beings with emotions and prejudices. Regardless of hurdles in the process, the prototype of

instruction still successfully induced their curiosity and teamwork. Lastly, they learned more about the genre-based discourse when approaching international journalistic media. Most important, it verified the absolute necessity and significance of this training.

### **Formal Study**

The instructional design of the innovative ESP training for the course News English for International Literacy is shown in Figure 1 and described below.

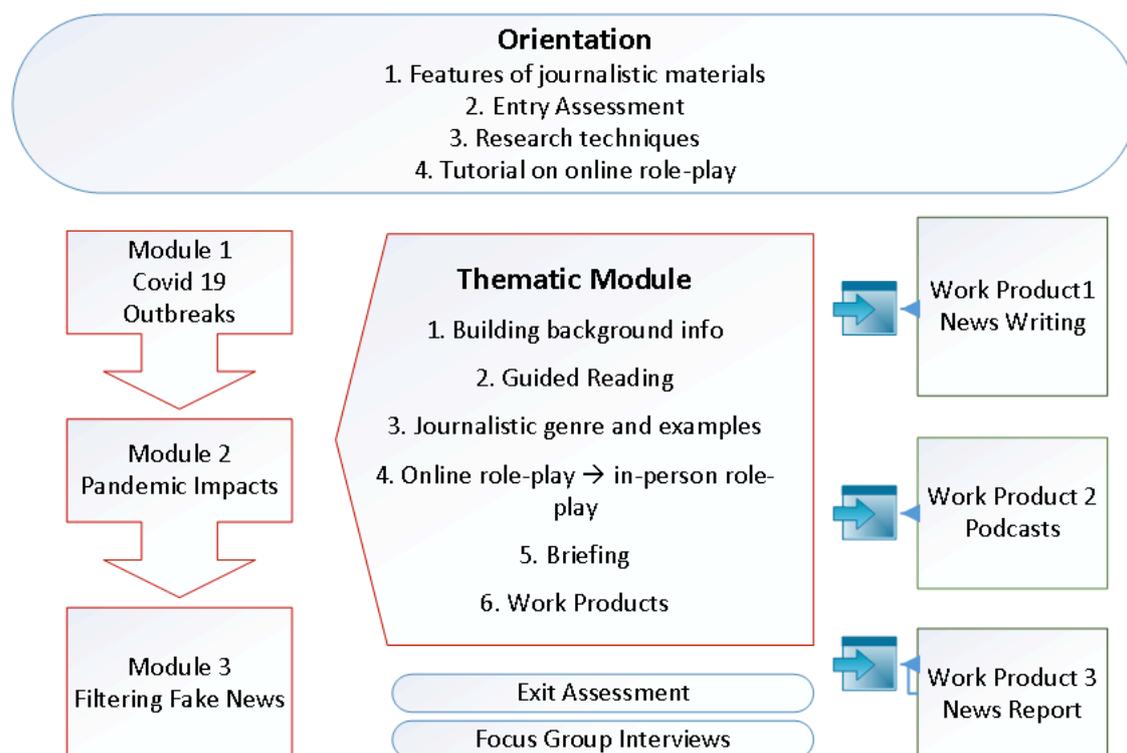


Figure 1: Instructional design.

### **Orientation**

The course began with genre-based instruction to introduce the basic organization of news articles and news reports (in online videos forms and on TV). Simplified news will serve as a transitional medium to familiarize students with the specific discourse and organization frequently used in journalistic media. This part of the instruction will consult Hyon's framework (2018), constituting lexicogrammatical features and pedagogical applications. In her genre-based ESP instructional demonstration, an inductive approach guides the students in accordance with Swale's principles to tackle a category of texts sharing a set of communicative purposes and various patterns of similarity in structure, style, content, and intended audience (purpose). Guidance is offered for students to compare samples and to analyze genre moves, lexicogrammatical features, and news contexts. The course design raises student awareness on two journalistic genres in the aspects of content, structure, language style/rhetoric strategies, and purpose in hard news and feature articles (commentaries). At the end of the orientation, they were able to identify the basic structure, rhetorical strategies, content, and purpose (agenda or bias) of journalistic materials. It prepared

learners for the upcoming learning modules. During this time, an entry assessment was conducted to help refine or adjust the instructional design.

### ***Thematic Modules and Work Products***

After the orientation, the researcher-instructor consulted the field practitioners to decide on one major piece of international news that occurred during that period—set as the theme for a module interlaced with three tasks. As shown in Figure 1, there were three thematic modules: 1) Covid-19 outbreaks, 2) Impacts from the pandemic, and 3) Filtering fake news (media literacy). Readers should be informed that during that semester, regular schooling were interrupted from time to time because of the rapid spread of coronavirus. The instruction was more or less reformulated in response to the need for distance learning while the pandemic worsened. For instance, the briefing sessions became prerecorded videocasts, and online role-play sessions were completed at home. Under the premise, each module proceeds in six steps:

1. Building background information
2. Guided reading.
3. Journalistic genre and examples (by field practitioners)
4. Online role-play and in-person role-play.
5. Briefing on the success and failures during the learning process.
6. Showcasing group work products: news article writing in Module 1 (Figure 2), podcast production in Module 2, and news reporting (videocasts) in Module 3.

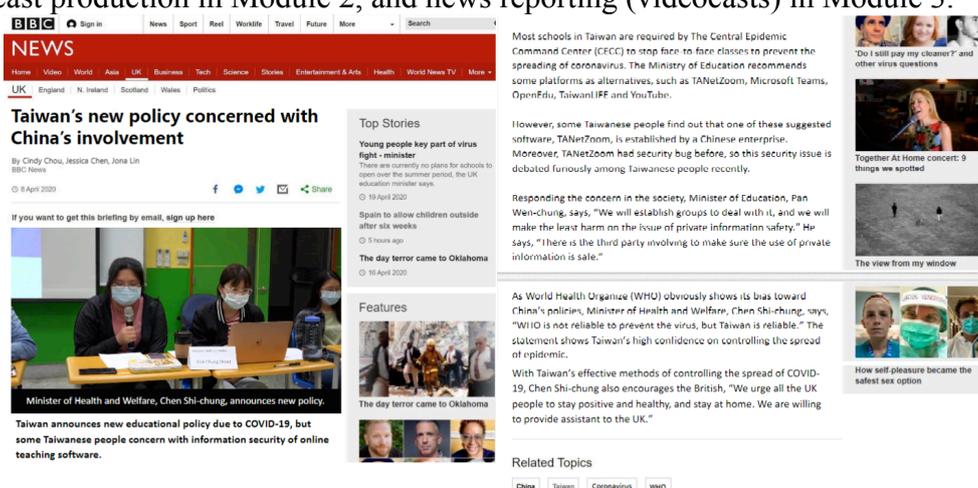


Figure 2: An example of student group news writing based on the module theme and role-play.

### ***Role-Play and Work Products***

Take Module 1 for example, the theme was Covid-19 Outbreaks. After guided reading and background information were completed, one of the enlisted field practitioners, an expert in journalism communication, joined the class. She introduced the structures and components of press conferences which everyone paid extreme attention to on TV. She demonstrated how journalists usually report the media kit and engage in the role of response/reaction elicitation before they can publish stories. Afterwards, students joined a press conference simulation by two stages: 1) online role-play for warm-up and question-formation, and 2) in-person role-play to engage in a Q-and-A session between the government officials and journalists. At the first stage on-line role-play, students taking the roles as journalists from diverse news agencies

researched the hidden agenda behind the scene, as well as the position they respectively represented. Based on which, they posed the inquiries and specific questions to elicit responses from the responsible directors of governmental divisions. During this stage, participants received feedback from fellow reporters and governmental representatives to request clarifications or to point out erroneous or misleading information. This stage created an affordance which students used knowledge and language intake to visually compose or evaluate questions to comply with a specific genre structure and context. After the revisions and clarifications, students entered the physical press conference set up in the classroom (see the image in Figure 2), and proceeded in real action. Based on the multilayered knowledge and experience gained from the module, students formed small groups to write up news articles. The researcher-instructor and the field expert offered feedback for revisions. The work product in Figure 2 appeared to be an almost authentic news piece commonly seen in real newspapers. To wrap up a module, students reflected on their successes and frustrations, as well as individual problem-solving approaches. Briefing sessions were to ensure the occurrence of deep learning and learners' application of metacognition.

Based on the interviews, students realized when news articles (their writing pieces) based on a simulated experience could be easily produced, which appeared almost genuine, they would need to be extra cautious when reading daily news to filter out fake or false information from all over the world. Furthermore, in the role-play sessions, they learned to inspect grave risks behind every policy-making moment from the government's side. Most importantly, their awareness of social responsibility arose simultaneously when playing journalists on the scene. They not only practiced the target language at the surface level, but they were obliged to harness the newly adopted discourse, the nuances between synonyms, the implications behind delicate tone-changing, and the extreme accuracy crafted in news reports. However, these challenges also became students' favorite instructional components. From the instructional design viewpoint, various levels of task complexity embedded across six stages in a module served as the formative and summative assessments that motivated participants to overcome with positive attitude and ambition.

### Learning Outcome

To answer the second research question, participants' scores in entry and exit assessments were recorded for comparison. In Table 1, clearly the mean score in the exit assessment ( $\bar{x}=77.08$ ) is higher than that in the entry assessment ( $\bar{x}=53.31$ ) by 45%. The improvement also shows in the decrease of standard deviation from  $s=11.92$  in the entry to  $s=7.90$  in the exit assessment. The score distribution was more centered at the end of ESP training; the international literacy level showed more homogeneity. The individual progress is plotted in Figure 3. The line graph and the upward trendlines indicate individual learner's progress from entry to exit assessments. This is clear evidence which endorses the effectiveness of the innovative instructional design.

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Score_Entry	26	10.00	76.00	53.3077	11.91896
Score_Exit	26	60.00	88.00	77.0769	7.90404

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Entry and Exit Assessments

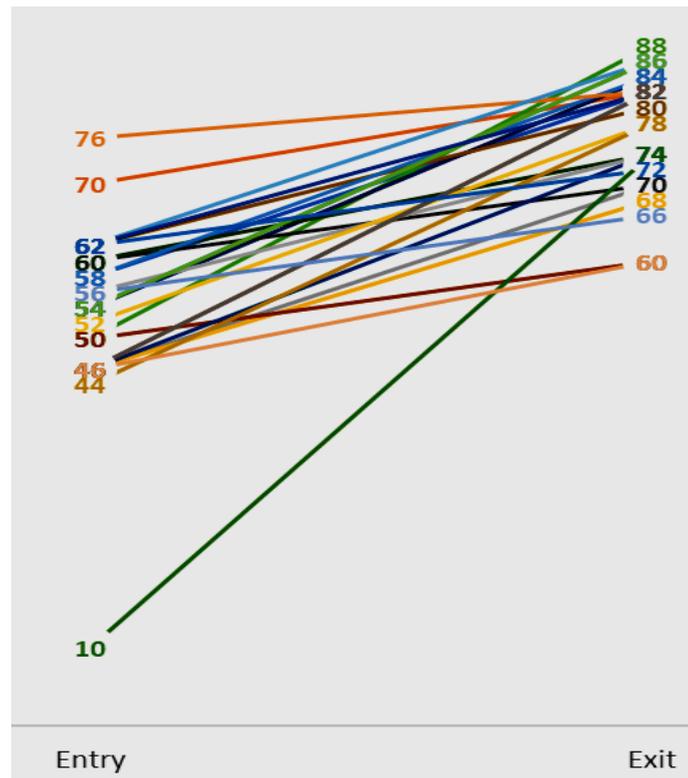


Figure 3. Line graph plotting individual learner's trendlines of progress between entry and exit assessments.

## Conclusion

Schetzer and Warschauer (2000) pointed out that “literacy is a shifting target, and we have to prepare our students for their future rather than our past” (p. 172). Taiwan recently announced *The Blueprint for Developing Taiwan Into a Bilingual Nation by 2030*, which involves the promotion of English media channels, programs, school curricula, governmental services, and so forth. The 360-degree bilingualization in the public and private sectors is creating an unprecedented high demand for those with skills in ESP. In response to the educational, social, and economic changes and the emerging needs in domestic and international platforms, new curricular elements demonstrated in this study should be introduced to prepare future professionals to leverage global opportunities. The manifestation of constructive and creative components in blended learning environment, including guided reading, instructor-field expert collaboration, role-play, news researching techniques, briefing, and news report production, offer flexibility and feasibility during the time when pandemic interrupts conventional schooling. This study hereby presents an innovative training in ESP for international literacy with solid evidence of successful learning outcomes and viable instructional design to facilitate those who share similar needs or interests.

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