

MEMOIRS FROM A TAIWANESE PRIMARY SCHOOL: ONE ENGLISH TEACHER'S JOURNEY

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the author's first-hand account of his first semester of teaching Grade 2 English language classes in a private Taiwanese primary school. The author uses a process-oriented approach to analyze his own professional development, challenges and cultural opportunities. He presents similarities and differences between Western and Eastern education styles as well as captures his goals and experiences as a foreign language teacher in Taiwan. The author will share three silhouettes of his growth as a beginning teacher. He will conclude the paper with recommendations for the upcoming semester. The implications of teaching English as a Foreign Language or EFL will also be addressed.

Keywords: Primary school education, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English in Taiwan.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is considerable research in the field of teaching English abroad and teacher's experiences. However, much less explored are the experiences of beginner teachers in the Asian country of Taiwan. The aim of this paper is to present a personal reflection of my first semester teaching English in Taipei City, Taiwan at a private primary school. I begin with a brief background about the differences between Eastern and Western education styles, followed by my observations collected from the Grade 2 class in which he taught and interviews with homeroom teachers and other Taiwanese educators.

Following, I discuss my teaching experience, course activity, lesson preparation and my personal expectations both before and after arriving in Taiwan. Then, I discuss some strategies that I used to adjust to work life and Taiwanese culture. Within this I elaborate on what work and what did not. Finally, I share how I navigated through these experiences and reveal what I learnt. The paper concludes with recommendations for future teachers and other individuals who will live or are living in a new cultural environment.

Because of the nature of this ethnographic data collection, I describe my personal story of living in Taiwan as an English language teacher following the ethnographic approach of Damen (1987) who emphasizes the micro perspective of reflection upon day-to-day experiences and less on the exotic elements of macro-level culture (p. 57).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

The sole participant in this study is myself. I am a recent graduate with a Master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Bilingual Education from an American university. I grew up on a sheep farm in the countryside of northwest Ohio in the United States. Unlike most of my monolingual peers, I speak Chinese, Dutch and Spanish and had many opportunities that sent me abroad at a young age. Other cultures, languages and peoples have always fascinated me. Although I have worked in various part-time jobs in and done volunteer work and research abroad, my time in Taiwan has truly been my first 'real-day job' since graduating university.

2.2. Instruments

I looked at my teaching experience as a story (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). I also used Casanave and Schecter's 1997 reflection technique to better understand my experiences and myself. I conducted informal interviews with homeroom teachers at my school and around Taiwan for more insight into the culture and moral support. I kept detailed notes from these interviews. I also used participant observation and reflection of my own lessons and cultural adjustment practices in a journal. This comprised my field notes.

2.1.1 Rationale

I used these techniques because they align with ethnographic data collection methods as described by Saville-Troike (1989). Likewise, because I am at the beginning of my journey as a foreigner teaching English language in Taiwan, I hope that my experiences might be of benefit to other educators and individuals adjusting to a new culture abroad.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.1 Differences in Eastern & Western Culture

Each country has their unique differences that make it attractive for travel, work or living. These differences can be very complex and are compounded when we consider where we were raised or what we experience. These are as numerous as there are people. Some of these differences that I have observed while living in Taiwan include the definition of struggle, perseverance and endurance especially with regard to education and learning. Secondly, the students have difficulty converting their book knowledge into other contexts and being creative when making new sentences. Spiegel (2012) notes that most of these issues are a common occurrence for many foreign teachers abroad. These differences made it a challenge to adhere to the rigorous curriculum and try to be creative in making lesson plans and classroom activities that allowed students to apply their knowledge in useful ways.

I come from a dedicated and hard-working farm family. My parents and grandmother instilled the importance of perseverance and dedication. At a young age, I already knew the value of education and its importance for me. Although my parents did not have high education degrees, they supported me in seeking out opportunities to reach above my current farm life. With this, I see the same level of dedication for education and learning, but in Asian society, it seems even more pronounced. For example, many of the students that I taught would spend several minutes trying to pronounce a word. They would persist until they said the word correctly. Certainly, not all of the students were this diligent, but most were. Just the sheer amount of time that students were at school was shocking for me. Many would arrive at school by 6:30 in the morning and would not leave school campus until 18:00 in the evening. Many participated in after school preparation classes ranging from Japanese, English, Taekwondo, Chinese calligraphy and many more. Although my upbringing also consisted of early mornings feeding and caring for the sheep on our family farm, the time spent on education seemed far different than just reading about it from history books. After reflecting upon my childhood, I see how my experiences having Chinese lessons, Tai Qi, faith community and Boy Scout activities occupied most of my afterschool time. Thus, these layers of culture are more similar than they are different.

Furthermore, the struggle to learn a foreign language and other subjects is valued more than just giving up and saying that you tried to solve the problem. The end result is more emphasized, whether in test marks or final evaluations. I felt the same whenever my supervisor wanted to talk to me after observing one of my classes. There was a strong focus on the final outcome as opposed to what I was learning along the way. To me, this felt too limited and narrow-minded. But, as I understood and asked questions to other teachers and local friends, I became more comfortable with those around me and myself.

3.2 My Cultural Adjustment Process

Just like any new experience, every challenge brings new opportunities for growth. Everything has a beginning. For me, my cultural adjustment to Taiwan was both painful as well as rewarding. It did not happen quickly, but took time and effort.

For me, my journey began by asking questions frequently to my local fellow teachers in the primary school. In preparation for the new semester, I took many notes and observed their classes. I found this interesting because what I saw in this type of education system and my background were not the same. I noticed that in Taiwan the teachers seem more limited in their class instruction and curriculum. As a teacher in Taiwan, I feel that I must comply with what is given and follow strictly the suggestions from head teachers and other supervisors. From my own background this seems very different because many American teachers are freer to exert their own ideas in a meaningful way without the annoyance from other teachers. I asked the head teacher's first. I asked for their suggestions in advance and developed the classes in a way that the head teachers hoped. I created lesson plans within the curriculum framework. Although I was somewhat not used to this style, I did my best to fulfill the task and exceed their expectations.

Secondly, the way in which teachers are viewed, as a profession, is different than what I was raised with believing. In Taiwan teachers are viewed as experts, facilitators and omniscience beings that deserve respect. In my own culture, teachers receive low salaries and are viewed as nothing more than a job. When I came to

Taiwan I was most impressed by the way we started class. The students stood up neatly, bowed and greeted me as their teacher. This showed a level of respect that I was not familiar with. From an interview with a local university student, he shared his experience about the Taiwanese education system. On one occasion I could not answer his English grammar question sufficiently. This first year university student immediately rang up his old high school Taiwanese English teacher who graduated from Oxford University with a degree in applied linguistics. Within seconds the teacher provided him with a detailed explanation to his question. It was very clear and concise. Through this experience I saw the invaluable role that teachers play in students' lives, not just during their school years, but also throughout their lives. Furthermore, teachers in Taiwan are viewed more as lifelong mentors.

Second, I adjusted to Taiwanese culture by acquainting myself with local residents in the district where I lived. I collected information from them about their favorite eating establishments, local attractions, national parks and monuments. I became involved in local activities and festivals. This helped me better understand what the locals valued and why they acted the way they did. During a local summer children's festival, I got to see many families and their children enjoying themselves in a nearby park. At first I felt like an outsider and awkward to talk to anyone because I did not look like everyone else. Many people stared at me and were reluctant to talk to me. To overcome these uncomfortable feelings, I disregarded how I was different from them and immediately joined in the activities. This strategy proved useful because the locals began to talk to me and this made me feel more at home and welcomed.

Finally, I have mostly adjusted myself to the culture, but there are still some elements that I am trying to get used to. I used the above steps to accelerate my adjustment process. I also inquired local Taiwanese friends what they liked to be taught if they were students. I used their advice to adjust my ways of teaching. For example, one friend mentioned that he preferred foreign language teachers to be very strict and direct when giving directions for class activities. Thus, I have applied this principle to my own teaching.

3.3 Teaching Experiences

My time in Taiwan has given me much to consider, especially with regard to my own teaching style. Even before coming to Taiwan for this work experience, I knew that I had a lot to learn. It was a new adventure learning the school culture, school curriculum, classroom management, student's English names and parents' expectations of a foreign English language teacher. In this section I will elaborate upon each of these aspects in small vignettes of my experience.

The school was located in a metropolitan part of Taipei City, Taiwan. Everything was conveniently located; the mass transit system (metro and bus lines) as well as access to cram schools. Within a 500 metre radius from the school there are over nine English language cram schools. With interviews with other local public school teachers, the demographics of the students are very different than other schools. The students come from very affluent families and expect only the best for their children. Thus, for me coming from the countryside, I had to become more refined in my mannerisms and how I presented myself both in and out of the classroom. Every Wednesday was English Day at the school. This was an opportunity for students to speak English with their peers and teachers all over campus. Every morning students were assigned cleaning different parts of the school, including classrooms. Morning clubs and activities and cultural activities allowed students to further develop their talents linguistically and intellectually.

I helped with the recital club. It allowed me to interact with Grade 3 students and be creative. It was my task to train and prepare them to give a 10-minute recital. I also helped with Halloween Day activities. I enjoyed the opportunity to see a new face to the students instead of just classroom settings. Many of the quieter students felt more comfortable to talk to me during this activity than in class.

The school curriculum was also something new for me. Prior to this experience, I was trained to read master's level textbooks full of theory. But I quickly discovered that theory is completely different from true practice in a classroom full of 22 eyes looking at you. The daily routine included recital, singing songs, English day thematic dialogue practice, the lesson and speeches. All must be finished within a 40-minute time constraint. Over time, the routines became just that, routine. I did not need to think which order to do them or where to find the audio files. The lesson plan development also took time. I was grateful for the coaching and training from my head teacher. She gave me daily feedback about what I could change to make my lessons more interactive and engaging for 7~9 year old children. Certainly this was a daunting task because my background was with university international students and not primary school children.

In addition, all lessons were to be taught solely in English. I understand the importance of giving students plenty of time to hear the language in class time, but in some instances I found it difficult to adhere to this policy

because I speak Chinese. I did not want to use the first language (L1) of Mandarin Chinese in the classroom for fear of disobeying my head teacher and not meeting the aims of the school. Likewise, Freeman and Freeman (1998) add that the issues of L1 use in the classroom are still a debated topic in second language education research. Like many other Asian countries, Taiwan is no exception with regard to entrance and exit examinations. From interviews with homeroom teachers, they shared that students are pressured daily, even at the primary school level. This issue is compounded because there are few opportunities for students to practice communicating in the target language of English (Kurihara, 2013). This fact made me feel very split between when it was an appropriate time to use English and when it would be more efficient to use Chinese.

To compromise these feelings, during one-on-one lunchtime extra help I found it beneficial for me to use Chinese when explaining a difficult concept or word but also when praising the students for their success. I also found myself allowing students, on occasion to use their L1 when aided by a high achiever student. These students served as the classroom interpreter for the frequent one-on-one extra help sessions that I had during my lunch hour. I was happy to find that by using Chinese on these limited occasions, it allowed the students to see another side of me as their foreigner English teacher. They began showing me their pencils boxes, notebooks and other small toys after class.

Knowing the school curriculum was not enough for bonding with students. They also needed a confident teacher who gave clear instructions during class time. The importance of a firm command of the class was given to me in an interview with one head teacher. She illustrated classroom management as a metaphor of catching fish with your bare hands. If you squeeze the fish too tightly it will die instantly, but if our grip on the fish is too loose, the fish will swim away. Instead you need a strong enough grip to show who is in command and prevent the fish's scales from cutting your skin. Likewise, as a teacher you need to have a firm, but feeling grasp of your students that you teach. Teaching is something that consists of adjusting, balancing and multi-tasking. It is important to have backup plans and be creative within seconds.

For a long time I have struggled with classroom management, even at the university level. My sheer appearance alone warrants little respect. My stature is small (1.65 metres) and I look younger than my age. I also have a softer tone to my voice, which does not help when trying to grasp command of a class of 22 Taiwanese Grade 2 students. After observing other local Taiwanese teachers' classes, I noticed that their classes had controlled fun; students were well behaved during lesson instruction and followed the teacher's commands during game time. They were stricter and had a stronger command of their class than I did. In these classes it appeared that the students knew exactly who was the teacher and who was the student. I applied this approach to my classes and it went much smoother. I spoke deeper and was more serious. I praised students verbally in class and one-on-one after class. For the naughty students, I chose to begin a reward system that fit that particular class interests. Some like the cute stickers that I provided them with while other classes valued winning the game. I found myself documenting and tracking student's success and achievements and thinking of new creative ways to keep them engaged during class time. This was no easy task considering some classes had extreme differences in motivation, language speaking aptitude and family situation. I felt that my classes were a roller-coaster ride. Every day was something new. Whether trying to train students to keep seated during lesson and game time while trying to show compassion and concern for their personal lives outside of school, each day brought something new. Some days I found myself evolving into a more "manly" English teacher; more confident and secure about my new environment.

My classroom management was aided when I finally mastered each of the student's English names. They felt more attached and liked by me as their English teacher. In the beginning weeks of school I made a seating chart, documented physical characteristics and made name connotations with my family members back home. As the weeks passed, I made rule that each team would get ten additional points each time I forgot a student's name. I would also greet the students before class, calling them by name. Sometimes it was difficult to remember, but I was motivated by their happy facial expressions each time they saw me on campus and their sad faces each time I forgot their names.

3.4 Lessons Learnt

Through this personal narrative, I have learnt many valuable lessons. First, I have learnt the importance of trusting in oneself. Every day I am learning something new about the students, whom I teach, but their parents and their expectations, as well as the school culture in which I work. Second, each day is a new adventure. I need to see my experience and time that I spend in the classroom as being meaningful. Finally, I have learnt that I have experienced the same education struggle as my students. I feel that I have persevered despite the heartache of taking harsh criticism, correction, but most importantly I have become stronger in the process.

Because I am at the beginning of my journey as a teacher, I am certain that I will have many more experiences that will define who I am as an individual, a countryside farm boy and as a teacher. Most importantly, this first semester teaching in Taiwan has taught me the importance of being patient with others and myself. I have tried to apply Kiernan's 2010 use of reflection as a means for shaping my identity. In discovering who I want to become as a teacher, it is important to evaluate my teaching practices. If I do not feel confident with my adjustment to the new school environment, Taiwanese culture and teaching lessons, it is impossible for my students to feel confident about their learning as well. I compare my teaching to sheep farming. If the sheep sense that you're nervous or uncomfortable, they will mirror how you feel and not do what you want them to do. However, if you feel confident, comfortable and secure around the sheep, they will go where you want them to go. The same principle can be applied to teaching. If you present yourself as a confident and well-adjusted teacher, your students will want to be around you and more eager to learn from your lessons.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

When moving forward from this discussion, I hope that readers can evaluate their own teaching practices and experiences that have defined who they are as an individual and teacher. Certainly, everyone has a different journey, but despite where you are at on your journey, it is worth it. The most important part is to remember who you are. We each have experiences in our repertoire of life, so let's share them. Some experiences are painful, traumatic, enjoyable, memorable and even delightful. By learning from them we can become even better teachers and help students succeed.

5. CONCLUSION

According to my experiences thus far, I have learnt that the differences between Eastern and Western culture have both positive and negative aspects. To me, cultural differences between Taiwan and the United States might appear different on the outside, but underneath the layers, they are the same. My cultural adjustment process took a concerted effort on my part, but was very rewarding when I finally could feel at home in my new environment. Some of the strategies involved trial and error, but persistence was key. In closing, the teaching experiences over the past semester have taught me many valuable lessons that I can apply to my future lessons and life.

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