

Content-Based Instruction: Teaching English and the “Green Movement” to Students in China

Joanna Labov¹ Bob Eckhart²

1.Department of English, Community College of Philadelphia, Philadelphia USA

2.American Director, College of Foreign Languages and Literature, WHU-OSU U.S. Studies
Center, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China

* E-mail of the corresponding author: jlabov@ccp.edu

Abstract

Content-based instruction was used to teach English and the importance of the relationship between humans and nature to Chinese students in an intensive English program in China. The authors used a nature thematic-unit to teach college students about critical issues related to the environment and how to respect Mother Earth. Three major topics were taught to the college students in a summer class in China: 1) We are the World 2) Green and Sustainability Efforts, and 3) Appreciating Nature-What You Can Do. Issues of preparation to teach English overseas and cultural assumptions related to the thematic unit will be discussed. It is important to examine the nature-related thematic unit designed to teach English to Chinese college students because it created high student engagement in the topic and English learning. It is meaningful to explore the nature-related thematic unit because the topic "protecting the environment" relates to all college students as well as every person alive.

Keywords: ESL, content-based instruction, go-green movement, China

1. Introduction

The current concern about the sustainability of Earth's resources is a crucial topic for English learners to understand (The Nature Conservancy, 2017). Content-based instruction was used to teach English and the importance of sustaining Mother Earth to intermediate-level Chinese college students in a summer program at Wuhan University in China. A nature thematic-unit, formally titled *The Relationship Between Humans and Nature*, was designed to teach the students about critical issues related to the environment. Three major topics were taught to college students in the summer class in China: 1) We are the World 2) Green and Sustainability Efforts, and 3) Appreciating Nature-What You Can Do.

This article will provide an overview of the intensive summer program and the nature thematic unit. The authors will discuss issues in the preparation of a curriculum and materials to teach English overseas. Also discussed will be the cultural assumptions related to the choice of topics used in the thematic unit about nature and the green movement.

1.1 The Wuhan Summer Intensive English Program

This article will report about a summer program that was held July 12- 30, 2010 when one author was a teacher and the other was the Program Manager. The three-week intensive summer program was a collaboration between the Wuhan University and The Ohio State University from 2004-2014. Wuhan University is located in Hubei Province that is in central China. Wuhan University is ranked among the top-10 universities in China. There were a total of three instructors who taught the thematic called *The Relationship between Humans and Nature*. In addition, there were nine other themes about the U.S. that were taught in this intensive English curriculum. They were each taught by a total of three instructors. The themes were: 1) USA, the land and the people 2) Sports & Recreation in U.S. Culture 3) Education in the U.S. 4) Food, Diet, and Wellness 5) Family Life in the U.S. 6) Entertainment in U.S. Culture 7) Music in the U.S. 8) Travel in the U.S. and 9) News and the Media.

The intensive English program in 2010 consisted of a total of 10 rotations of 3 classes in a period of three weeks. The duration of each class was three consecutive days of two hours each. During the three-week program, there were five classes in the morning (two hours each) and five classes in the afternoon (two hours each). The same three topics were taught to the students who attended each class. Therefore, these topics were taught in the mornings and afternoons for three days in a row: 1) We are the World 2) Green and Sustainability Efforts, and 3) Appreciating Nature-What You Can Do. On the subsequent three days, the three themes were taught to new students and so on. The short duration of each class and the rotation of the curriculum resulted in the instruction of as many students as possible. The class schedule for the three-week term is shown in this table:

Table 1. The Class Schedule for the Wuhan Summer Intensive English Program
 (July 12-20, 2010)

Week 1	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
am	Class 1	Class 1	Class 1	Class 3	Class 3
pm	Class 2	Class 2	Class 2	Class 4	Class 4
Week 2					
am	Class 3	Class 5	Class 5	Class 5	Class 7
pm	Class 4	Class 6	Class 6	Class 6	Class 8
Week 3					
am	Class 7	Class 7	Class 9	Class 9	Class 9
pm	Class 8	Class 8	Class 10	Class 10	Class 10

In addition to English classes, exciting extracurricular activities conducted in English were provided for the students to participate in and learn English communicatively. The extra-curricular activities consisted of: aerobics, a campfire club, ballroom dancing, board games, board-less games, disc-golf, flashmob, kickboxing, a kite making session, a leadership building session, line dancing, a poetry club, a scavenger hunt, a storytelling workshop, a video-photo club, wiffleball, teacher-student Olympics, yoga and a “Getting Around NYC” presentation. The “Getting Around NYC” presentation consisted of a powerpoint about interesting places to visit in NYC, a review of a NYC subway map and vocabulary needed to use NYC subways and get around NYC.

The program was designed to provide students opportunities to practice their English in a communicative setting in the classroom and during the extracurricular activities. In China, students learn English in a traditional setting, are taught with grammar-translation and are taught by Chinese teachers during the year. They do not have an opportunity to speak English in a relaxed setting and learn about American culture from American instructors. Therefore, the mission of the program is to allow an opportunity to: 1) practice speaking English in a communicative setting, 2) learn about American culture by attending classes and activities taught by American teachers, and very importantly, 3) have fun.

In addition, the intensive English program included a daily one-hour homeroom period which was used by the instructors to answer their students’ questions, conduct mini-lessons on topics needed, and improve the students’ speech development, grammar, pronunciation etc.

1.1.1 The Go Green Movement “Humans and Nature” Thematic Unit

Three instructors created the Go Green Movement thematic unit prior to teaching it (Joanna Labov, Michael Reed and Michelle Schaner). They collaborated online by sharing their thoughts together as they wrote each topic lesson of the unit.

1.1.2 Thematic Unit Day 1 Topic: We Are the World

The first topic used in the nature thematic unit was *We Are the World*. The goal of the lesson was to explore new ways to think about our planet, its environment and the creatures that inhabit it. The topics consisted of discussion of an interesting quote by John Muir “Tug on anything at all and you’ll find it connected to everything else in the universe.” (Although it is commonly assumed that the above quote is correct, I have found out since that the John Muir’s quote is “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” Muir 1911 p.110).

The class discussed the meaning of the term “global warming” and “climate change” and why they are happening. The students learned about how changes made by humans in one small environment have an impact on everyone. The students discussed three popular widely-held beliefs about Earth and a definition of ecosystems. The three statements were: 1) There is life on the outer layer (crust) of the Earth, but the earth itself is dead 2) Living things have evolved separately to maximize their own survival and 3) The highest level of interdependent living things is known as an ecosystem, such as a coral reef, a rain forest, living things on the Great Plains of the U.S. etc. The students’ thinking about the Earth was challenged and their imagination was stretched by the consideration of the Gaia Hypothesis that proposes that the whole Earth is “one living being.” These concepts were discussed by the entire class and in-group discussions.

1.1.3 Thematic Unit Day 2 Topic: Green and Sustainability Efforts

The second theme used in the nature thematic was *Green and Sustainability*

Efforts. The topic was entitled Go Green! Keeping our planet healthy and happy!

The class discussed the concept of being “green” along with examples such as a green building, a green roof, a green campus or green city. Also discussed were the concept of a carbon footprint, efforts at the macro level for sustainability such as governments, international, national organizations and businesses. The students discussed recycling, “Reduce, Reuse and Recycle” as well as natural foods and local foods.

1.1.4 Thematic Unit Day 3 Topic: Appreciating Nature: What You Can Do

The third theme used in the thematic unit was *Appreciating Nature: What Can You Do?* The topics discussed were appreciating nature, planning a nature tour, preserving nature and celebrating nature. The session began with a photo of East Lake in Wuhan on a powerpoint with these class discussion questions: 1) What do you like about East Lake? and 2) What does East Lake mean to you? The class discussed Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences and careers that suit people with “Nature Intelligence” such as naturalists, farmers and gardeners. The students discussed the questions: Do you have high Nature Intelligence and 2) Do you enjoy the world of plants and animals and enjoy learning about them?

Groups of students listed five sites in China that everyone must visit to appreciate nature. Each student named a site, how to get there and used adjectives to describe it. The class voted for the best tour. This communicative activity was successful because it allowed the students to become the “knowers” and tell the class about places in China that they had visited. Then the class discussed endangered places such as coral reefs, arctic preserves and rain forests after viewing photos of them on a powerpoint. The students learned about organizations that preserve nature and animals. They discussed some problems China is having with regard to water and issues related to preserving East Lake.

The class discussed nature holidays (water festivals, Summer Solstice, Winter Solstice, Earth Day, Groundhog’s Day and any other nature holidays with which the students were familiar.) As a communicative group activity, the students discussed their favorite nature holiday.

The students learned the names of the nature holidays discussed in class. Vocabulary that was taught to the students consisted of these selected words among other words: green, (green campus, green building) Mother Earth, Father Time, interdependence, creatures, hypothesis, ecosystem, and pollution.

2. Discussion

2.1 Preparation of the Curriculum

An inherent challenge in creating a curriculum for students who live overseas is the creation of materials without knowing what background knowledge the students possess about the topic taught. When the three instructors created the Go Green thematic unit, they had not been able to assess what the students knew about current local, national and international environment-related issues. In addition, it was not possible to know the students’ interests in nature, Mother Earth and sustainability issues. Due to the short rotation every three days, there was no time to revise the thematic unit based upon the students’ interests, knowledge and needs. Also, the instructors were not able to conduct a needs analysis of the students prior to the creation of the thematic unit in order to understand their prior knowledge.

The instructors included in the Day 3 materials a discussion of East Lake in terms of the need to preserve it, how it is being polluted and what can be done to clean it up. They did so with the understanding that the students would be interested in the topic of preserving nature with a discussion of a local environmental issue. The instructors were not able to create a needs analysis to determine what the students needed to learn about sustainability, the green movement and respecting Mother Earth. This is due to the constraints of preparing a curriculum for students who live thousands of miles away from the instructors and have not met any of them yet. The instructors were aware of the environmental issues related to East Lake because one of them had taught the theme during the previous year’s program and explored these issues in class discussions. In addition, the instructors searched online for environmental issues related to East Lake.

The advantage to teaching in an intensive English program in China was that the instructors learned from their students about their concerns for the environment. The instructors who returned to teach in the Wuhan University Intensive English Program year after year were able to benefit from their experiences in the previous year. They were able to prepare to teach their students with an understanding of the students’ needs and interests in learning about the green movement as well as their appreciation of nature.

2.2 Cultural Assumptions Inherent in the Thematic Unit

The students were given engaging, interesting activities in the nature thematic unit from micro and macro perspectives. The topics included: the Go Green movement, Reduce, Reuse and Recycle, ecological footprint, rain forests, the Arctic, the interconnectedness of ecosystems, smart houses, global warming, climate change and holidays that celebrate nature.

The topics selected as part of the thematic unit were based on the cultural assumption that it was important for them to be included in the curriculum. An argument could be made that every culture may have its own

assumptions about what topics should be discussed in class. The students who attended the classes had their own cultural background and schemas about the importance of respecting Mother Earth, how to do so and sustainability issues. The students were offered new ways of thinking about the planet Earth as an endangered resource. They learned to appreciate the value of coral reefs, rainforests, and endangered animals such as Canadian grizzly bears. Since one of the goals of the Wuhan University Intensive English Program is to expose students to U.S. culture, it stands to reason that the selection of topics by American instructors for their curriculum may represent an inevitable but useful cultural bias on their part.

3. Future Research Directions

It is important to examine the extent to which the students comprehended the content taught in the thematic unit as well as the vocabulary used. This could be accomplished by providing future students assessment forms to measure their knowledge before and after the content was taught. It would be of interest to determine whether and how many students retained their comprehension of the material taught 5 or 10 years later. It would also be of interest to learn the instructors' perceptions of the effectiveness of the thematic unit. They could be surveyed to determine the extent to which students learned and profited from the thematic unit.

4. Conclusion

The Chinese students who were taught about the environment as part of the Wuhan University Intensive English Program learned a great deal about the green movement, the concepts of sustainability, and respecting Mother Earth. The strengths of the Wuhan University Intensive English Program are the use of enjoyable, communicative activities and content-based instruction for the students. As a result of the short duration of each thematic unit (three days) the students were exposed to a breadth of total of 10 thematic units: 1) USA, the country 2) Sports & Recreation 3) Education in the U.S. 4) Food and Diet 5) Family Life in the U.S. 6) Entertainment 7) Music in the U.S. 8) Travel in the U.S. 9) News and the Media and 10) The Relationship Between Humans and Nature.

The students learned from the variety and range of interesting classes provided in English. They increased their comprehension of the content and improved their ability to communicate in English at the same time. Instructors in subsequent years used some of the material taught in this thematic unit to educate their students about this important topic. Thousands of students were taught using content-based instruction during the duration of this program.

References

- Gardner, H. (1993). *Multiple intelligences: The theory in practice*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gardner, H. Retrieved on July 15, 2017 from https://howardgardner.com/books/mi_new-horizons/
- Muir, J. (1911). *My first summer in the Sierra*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (*Sierra Club Books 1988*.)
- The Nature Conservancy. (2017). The biggest environmental challenges of 2017: Perspectives from our global and regional leaders on the most pressing issues facing people and the planet. Retrieved September 11, 2017 from <http://global.nature.org/content/environment2017>
- Wuhan Lake Retrieved on July 25, 2017 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Lake_\(Wuhan\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Lake_(Wuhan))
- Wuhan University-Ohio State University Intensive English(July 25, 2017) Retrieved from Program <https://oia.osu.edu/internationalagreements/141-moa/1543-wuhan-university-summer-intensive-english-program-and-wuhan-university-summer-students-overseas-program-peoples-republic-of-china.html>

Acknowledgements

The first author would like to thank Minru Li, the program coordinator, and Bob Eckhart, the program manager, of the Wuhan Summer Intensive English Program for hiring her to teach in their wonderful program. It provided the author with invaluable and memorable experiences in teaching English and culture to students in China. She would also like to thank William Labov for his insightful comments and suggestions on a draft of this article.

Joanna Labov is Assistant Professor in the English Department of the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP). Her specializations at CCP are the teaching of English as a second language and culture to immigrants. Labov teaches reading/writing, and listening/speaking skills to English as a Second Language immigrant and international students. She earned a masters degree in TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language) in 1988 and a Ph.D. in Educational Linguistics in 2000 from Penn (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania USA).

Bob Eckhart

Bob Eckhart is the American Director of the WHU-OSU Center for U.S. Studies, which is on the campus of Wuhan University. He has been the Program Manager for the Wuhan University Summer Intensive English Program (2004-2014) and currently manages language programs each summer in China, Indonesia, and Turkey.

Eckhart was the Executive Director of the Combined ESL Programs at The Ohio State University from 2013-2015. His degrees are in Economics (B.S., Miami University, 1991), Comparative Cultural Studies (M.A., The Ohio State University, 1995), and Law (J.D., The Ohio State University, 2001).