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In search for the independent learner: A case study

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Abstract. Three key problems in undergraduate academic English composition classes in Taiwan can be identified which restrict student achievement: differences in educational cultures (both L1 and L2 education cultures as well as differences between L1 high school education culture and L1 undergraduate education culture); issues dealing with the ownership of ideas and limitations in frameworks of approaching foreign language study. To ameliorate these problems, Foreign Language and Literature majors completed a semester-long assignment wherein they compiled their own individual treasuries of information which they felt would be a useful reference to consult when writing future English compositions. An analysis of their work approach to this assignment and their judgment in selecting information for inclusion in their treasury is provided. Finally, recommendations for the further implementation of this assignment are given.

Keywords: Teaching writing, writing in a foreign language, cross-culture writing, cross-cultural teaching, writing portfolio, Taiwanese students, Taiwanese studying habits

1. Literature review and description of the problem

Taiwan, being a Confucian heritage culture, places great emphasis on the traditional style of teacher-centredness, intensified by the modern reality of a largely examination-driven primary and secondary education. Hofstede (2001) describes this culture as high-power distance in which the distance between teachers (as authority figures) and students is great. Hofstede further identifies Taiwanese culture as valuing the avoidance of uncertainty. In this type of society, students in general have largely given up the locus of control for their own learning, resulting in feelings of less self-efficacy than exist in cultures with lower power distance and less uncertainty avoidance. Consequently, Taiwanese students have much less tolerance of ambiguity and a lower threshold for risk (Wu 2003). Furthermore, Taiwanese high school graduates have learned to study within defined boundaries that establish a 'safe way' to approach information: a focused, proven, right way to study in order to pass – largely multiple choice – tests. Their prior educational and cultural experiences have trained them to be teacher-dependent; it has also left them with little room for a learning curve to become less teacher-dependent. Jones (2003), in researching learner autonomy preferences for teacher-assigned topics in undergraduate academic English composition courses in Taiwan, illustrates this point: "... the majority of students (62%) preferred teacher-assigned topics." (Jones 2003: 427) "...it is sometimes helpful, perhaps even necessary, for writing teachers to control the *why* and the *what* of their students writing" (Jones 2003: 425). This "teacher-dependence" orientation limits students to being directed by teachers to "study" English composition and does not empower students to develop skills to "learn" English composition through an acquisition-oriented mindset. In a sense, they would rather be fully programmed to write com-

positions efficiently rather than serve an apprenticeship to learn through experience how to write them to express their unique (individual) ideas and opinions.

The second factor influencing student achievement in composition classes is the general pedagogy used in teaching English in secondary school which almost exclusively limits them to decoding English. Savignon (2002) gives the holistic purpose for learning language as “meaning-focused self expression” (Savignon 2002: 166). Huang (2001) likewise identifies the purpose of learning English composition as “writing for a communicative end” (Huang 2001: 458). Large class sizes in high school and the need for strictly objective examinations mean that teachers do not have the time or energy for assignments in which students encode (“write”) novel sentences or paragraphs frequently enough for them to emphasize using English as a tool to encode their own expression of self. The format of the Joint College Entrance Exam (which determines not only one’s qualification for admission to a university but even which department one is qualified to study in) has a rigid format; high school examinations are written in the same format, so students develop familiarity with the test-item format. Tertiary education continues to emphasize the ‘decoding’ orientation by making passing the GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) a graduation requirement. This five-level test, developed by the Language Training and Testing Center, tests the four skills using mainly a multiple choice testing format. As a result, in using English, Taiwanese students focus on error avoidance in their transmission of display knowledge rather than the more ‘messy’ communication which more generally characterizes English. That is, students prefer a low risk, objective test-oriented approach to English that does not include more open-ended activities which help to develop their overall fluency skills in English.

Scollon (in Ramanathan & Atkinson 1999: 53) notes that the nature of writing in Chinese is

“... not writing primarily to express [oneself] but for the purpose of becoming integrated into a scholarly community. The purpose of student writing [in Taiwanese Chinese culture] is to learn to take on a scholarly voice in the role of commentator on the classics and on the scholarship of others. One is writing to pass on what one has received.”

Since English composition instruction in Taiwanese high schools does not focus on Savignon’s “meaning-focused self-expression”, the students’ English compositions are characterized by shallow support and limited development. Because their high school teachers have used the more passive, product-oriented approach to teaching English composition, university students prefer this method and not the more active *carpe diem* process approach because students perceive the former as having more efficacy. As a result, university student compositions are more focused on form to ‘please the teacher’; when encountering the process-oriented approach, students express frustration and anxiety because it requires multiple drafts before the teacher is ‘pleased.’ This orientation can be summed up as “Students are unclear about what they are doing when studying English”.

The third factor from Taiwanese educational culture influencing student achievement in English composition classes is that the students lack sufficient perspective and skills to see and evaluate their progress. Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimension of long-term versus short-term orientation originated from observations of Chinese culture. Nhuyen, Terlouw and Pilot (2005) describe it further: “Confucian heritage culture learners may take time (presumably to digest the materials) whereas others want to get the task done as soon as possible” (Nhuyen, Terlouw & Pilot 2005: 413). On the other hand, long-term time orientation students are less deliberate or less pointed in their approach to such assignments, taking a general approach instead: ‘The exam is around November, right? And there will be assignments somewhere during the semester? OK!’ Short-term time orientation students are more focused in their thinking about their participation in class (“I have to contribute at every possible tutorial!”) whereas long-term time orientation students are more relaxed in their approach (“So, OK, sometimes I contribute more, sometimes less. It evens up eventually. No fuss!”) (Nhuyen, Terlouw & Pilot 2005: 414). The effect of long-term time orientation in the process-oriented classrooms is that peer review groups tend to take a longer time to get organized and to work through their assignments. Further, since the Taiwanese test culture focuses on objective classroom experiences (as opposed to discovery experiences), students do not develop L2 fluency skills (compensation strategies, negotiation of meaning strategies) which contribute to fluency in a process-oriented approach

to composition involving peer group work. Additionally, the objective test culture does not by its nature promote student skills for presenting unique or novel ideas to others, both of which are key elements of peer review.

Not only does the long-term orientation of Taiwanese culture change the students' perspective on their achievement, it affects the efficacy of the process-oriented approach to English composition. From their prior educational culture, students associate progress in composition class with good grades on compositions, but true progress is an accumulation of effort, experimentation, feedback and experience. Good grades on high school tests largely come from exerting effort, but in academic English composition classes, making an effort does not always pay off with a good grade. Without regular and high grades on compositions (as is the case in the product-oriented approach used in high school), students in a new "process-oriented" environment will see fewer grades and thus have less evidence of their progress. Academic English composition classes need to provide more training concerning the concept that progress comes from taking a language code (e.g., English) and learning to express one's ideas ever more clearly through the "experimentation-feedback-learn-from-the-experience" cycle that is the process-oriented approach to writing English compositions. This type of success factor can be labelled "Students' lack of perspective to see their own progress".

The fourth factor influencing Taiwanese student achievement in academic English composition classes concerns the ownership of ideas and their appropriate use. The educational culture of their high schools values the transmission of culture and its direct display without attribution: in Chinese compositions written by educated Taiwanese, quote-worthy ideas are not attributed because educated people should recognize the authorship of the ideas. To attribute the ideas would simply be redundant, not to mention potentially insulting to the reader. Thus, Taiwanese education does not teach skills like paraphrasing or summarizing because there is no curricular or testing need to do so. These skills are carefully developed in U.S. primary and secondary education as skills to avoid plagiarizing others' ideas in a composition. Regrettably, Taiwanese undergraduates are caught in a no-man's land here because their academic English composition textbooks are those used in undergraduate classrooms in the U.S.: the authors assume the students already can paraphrase and summarize; therefore these skills are not included in their textbooks. Consequently, Taiwanese undergraduates in academic English composition courses have little instruction in the skills to avoid plagiarism in their own composition. This factor is known as "Lack of skills to avoid plagiarism".

The final major factor influencing student achievement in academic English composition classes comes from their attitude or framework in how they approach 'learning' English. Their high school English education has presented a fragmented approach in which they have only studied the rough form (the grammar, the vocabulary) which can easily be tested in objective tests. As discussed previously, this approach is teacher-centred and is not self-empowering for the students, leading to a lack of self-confidence in many students. With their English language framework defined by regular testing and lengthy lists of vocabulary and grammar to study and memorize, students focus on learning the testable minutiae of English and do not think to take the initiative in approaching English to master it as a communication tool. Many literature majors embrace their study of foreign (i.e. translated into English) literature using the same framework as they had used in high school, not realizing their English can be enhanced and enriched from reading literature: students compartmentalize English language skills courses separately from their literature courses. In so doing, they miss out on a mother lode of cultural references which they could use in expressing their ideas in Academic English composition in a concise manner which would greatly strengthen their voice as writers. This factor can be called "Not learning from their language experiences in literature courses".

2. The assignment

To address these five problem areas, a semester-long assignment was given in the spring semester to 13 Freshman English Composition students, 14 Sophomore English Composition students and 14 second-year Evening School students in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University. Most Evening School students are slightly older students who pursue their undergraduate degree while working full-time jobs. They have completed six years of English language instruction in junior and senior high school, with an additional

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year for sophomores and Evening School students. These students were given the assignment to compile from their readings in other courses a collection of information which they felt would be useful to them in writing academic English compositions at the undergraduate level. This “Composition Miscellany” was to be printed out as a booklet with six required sections in addition to any other sections which the students felt would be helpful in their writing. The six required parts were: *My Spelling Mistakes*, *My Grammar Mistakes*, *Transitions*, *Cultural Icons*, *Synonyms*, and *Composition Notes from Class / Reflections on Peer Reviews of Classmate’s Work / Reflections on My Peer’s Feedback / Feedback from Compositions*.

The Miscellany also included a self-assessment of the students’ language proficiency in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. All information gathered by the students from their readings in other courses had to be cited in either the MLA or APA style. To help them develop regular work habits in English as well as in using citations by giving them more practice, the students could not simply copy lists of information (e.g., transitions, synonyms) from a single source. At the end of the assignment, students completed a questionnaire about how they worked on the assignment, their experience in doing it, and their recommendations for improving it. This questionnaire formed the basis of a post-assignment interview with the teacher in which students presented portions of the completed Miscellany.

The assignment was announced in the semester syllabus for the class on the first day of class in the second (spring) semester. It was one of four assignments for the semester, with three compositions worth 100 points each and the Miscellany worth 400 points. In part, this assignment’s weight in the course grade was designed to help students who got lower grades on their compositions – despite making a great effort on them – to have a greater feeling of achievement in the course.

At the beginning of each class, the teacher would ask for questions or comments about the assignment and provide encouragement about it. As the class worked on useful resources in class, the teacher would occasionally remark that this sort of information would be suitable for inclusion in their Miscellanies. In addition, a sample copy of the Miscellany’s layout was brought to class throughout the semester for student reference.

The Miscellany assignment was focused on addressing the five major success factors outlined in the previous section. It was intentionally designed to be an open-ended endeavour in which students could explore the various resources available to them in this age of the Internet and globalization. The first factor discussed previously (“Students are teacher-dependent”) was addressed by having students change their locus of control and strengthen their feelings of self-efficacy through regular and consistent efforts in creating their Miscellany. These new work or study habits were designed to promote more student independence from the teacher. Although all of the required sections of the assignment promoted this change, the *Composition Notes from Class* reviewing their class notes and the *Feedback from Compositions* section analyzing teacher feedback on their composition in particular dealt with this. In addition, by framing the assignment in terms of what the students felt would be helpful to them in writing compositions, it was hoped they would take more ownership of the assignment and their study of English.

The second factor (“Students are unclear about what they are doing when studying English”) was addressed by having students reflect on their learning experiences from class (e.g., compositions) as well as recycle new vocabulary from readings in other classes. Sample sections which had this focus include *My Spelling Mistakes*, *Words I’d Like to Use in the Future*, *Reorganized Class Notes*, *Reflections on Peer Reviews of Classmate’s Work*, and *Reflections on My Peer’s Feedback*.

The third factor (“Students lack perspective to see their own progress”) came into sharper focus for students when they completed the various self-inventories related to the art of composition: *My Composition Profile*, *My Strengths*, and *My Weaknesses*. With this baseline self-assessment, students could track the types of linguistic, organizational and mechanics problems which appeared in their compositions, including drafts and finished compositions.

The fourth factor (“Lack of skills to avoid plagiarism”) was addressed by direct instruction in how and when to cite information as well as by the assignment prohibiting copying lists of words from a single source (e.g., they couldn’t copy lists from a single textbook).

The fifth and final factor (“Not applying their language experiences in literature courses to composition courses”) was addressed by requiring them to recycle and encode information that they encountered in English readings in other courses. Many of the required sections were designed to showcase this potential link to students, for example in the sections *Cultural Icons*, *Transitions*, *Synonyms*, and *Collocations*. In academic compositions, writers often use shared cultural references as shorthand ways of referring to a larger concept, for example, by using the cultural icon ‘Helen of Troy’ as a symbol of beauty, an ‘ugly duckling’ to represent an ugly or awkward child who grows up to be successful, or ‘John Doe’ to represent a hypothetical average person. The *Cultural Icons* section would contain lists of shared cultural references which students could use to enhance the concise presentation of their ideas in academic English compositions.

Students had great latitude in defining the extra non-required sections that they added to their Miscellany. These covered a wide range of topics from vocabulary (e.g., *clichés*, *euphemisms*, *how to say Chinese things in English*, *words to avoid using in academic writing*, *proverbs*, *idioms*, *easily confused words*, and *sexist language*) to gaps in their grammar background (e.g., *order of adjectives*) to mechanics (e.g., *Romanization charts*, *capitalization rules*, *citation rules*, and *hyphenation rules*) to things like *Computer shortcuts*, *Internet search suggestions* and *measurement systems (metric vs. English)*. Some students also scanned or photocopied portions of the handbook which was used as the course’s main text.

The teacher considered providing more structure to the assignment, including such things as requiring students to bring their assignments-in-progress to class on specified days as well as assigning students to work in small groups. The former was rejected because it seemed too teacher-centred; the latter was rejected because from previous experience in English conversation classes with Taiwanese undergraduates, the teacher knew that they would likely use a divide-and-conquer, time-efficient approach, resulting in a diluted learning experience for all.

3. Analysis of the completed assignment

3.1 Analysis of the completed Miscellanies

Any analysis of the assignment and the Miscellanies which the students completed is subjective to some degree because the researcher was also the class teacher. Despite this inevitability, the results are still relevant as they document student performance in completing a long-term assignment and their perceptions of the resources which they felt would be helpful to them in their writing.

The length of the Miscellanies ranged from seven to 43 printed pages. Freshmen Miscellanies ranged from seven to 18 pages, with 13 pages being the average length. Sophomore Miscellanies ranged from 11 to 43 pages, with 17 pages being the average. Evening School Miscellanies ranged from 10 to 42 pages, with 25 pages on average.

Overall, the Miscellanies produced by these students contained a good variety of content that was presented in a variety of ways, some more user-friendly than others. There were numerous mistakes which could have been corrected if the students had done a better job of proofreading their work. But with many of them taking more than 22 credit hours of classes each semester, little time was apparently available for it.

Although the students made an excellent effort to provide citations for each item that they included in the Miscellany, there were numerous problems with the minutiae of citation-making. Since the assignment was designed in such a way that students could recycle the articles they had read in other courses, the citation types should have been limited to books, chapters in books, and articles. However, some students used non-course reading assignments and needed to cite dictionary definitions from their electronic dictionaries and websites, which unexpectedly required a deal of investigation involving the Internet to resolve.

The impression of the overall quality of their work was also restricted due to the rather primitive use of space, shading and bold facing in the Miscellanies. This points to the fact that students need to learn more about cultural uses of space, shading and fonts on the printed page. Students may have reported knowing how to use the MS Word software program, but they needed more practice in using its various features more skilfully. On the other extreme, however, one student was skilful and thoughtful enough to use a different colour for each part of a citation, making it very clear to understand the component parts.

3.2 Analysis from questionnaires

Prior experience with independent, long-term projects

Since this was a semester-long assignment, determining the influence of previous experience and expertise in completing long-term assignments is important as it could be an important factor in analyzing the outcome. Only eight percent of the students who took part in this assignment reported doing any long-term projects in high school. So, this prior experience was not an important factor influencing the outcome.

Table 1 Overall work pattern

	Overall	Freshmen	Sophomores	Evening School Students
Started immediately	57%	23%	70%	83%
Started 1 month before deadline	31%	61%	20%	8%
Started 2 weeks before deadline	8%	15%	10%	8%
Started less than a week before deadline	3%	0%	0%	0%

Almost two-thirds of all students reported starting their work on the Miscellany assignment immediately, with roughly one-third starting one month before the deadline. Eight percent reported starting two weeks before the deadline, and three percent reported starting it less than one week before the deadline. One quarter of the freshmen started immediately, and two-thirds started a month before it was due, while the remaining 15% started two weeks before the due date. Among sophomores, 70% reported starting the assignment as soon as it was assigned, 20% started one month before it was due, and 10% started two weeks before it was due. Eighty-three percent of Evening School students reported starting the assignment as soon as it was set, with eight percent starting a month before it was due, and another eight percent starting it less than a week before it was due. The older the students and the more academically experienced they were, the sooner they started work on this long-term assignment.

In addition, since the mid-term examination period ended approximately one month before the deadline for the assignment, many students seemed to postpone starting work on the assignment until after finishing their examinations. This reflects some compartmentalization in student time planning perspectives.

Table 2 General work pattern

	Overall	Freshmen	Sophomores	Evening School Students
Working steadily/daily	30%	38%	30%	23%
Working weekly	47%	38%	60%	46%
Working periodically	14%	15%	0%	16%
Working intensively for 1 to 3 days	8%	8%	10%	14%

Student self-reports of their working pattern in this assignment were categorized into one of four ways: working steadily (daily) on it, working weekly on it, working periodically on it, and working intensively on it for one to three days. It is important to note here that not all students began working on the assignment at the same time, so students who reported working on the assignment every day do not necessarily show the same amount of work effort or quality. Overall, 30% reported working on it daily, 47% reported working on it weekly, 14% reported

working on it periodically and eight percent reported working on it intensively for one to three days. Among freshmen, 38% reported working on it every day, 38% reported working on it weekly, 15% reported working on it periodically, and eight percent reported working on it intensively for one to three days. Among sophomores, 30% reported working on it daily, 60% reported working on it weekly and 10% reported working intensively on it for one to three days. Among Evening School students, 23% reported they worked on it daily, 46% reported working on it weekly, 16% reported working on it periodically, and 14% reported working on it intensively for one to three days.

Once they began working on the assignment, 77% of the students overall, worked systematically – either daily or weekly – on the assignment, with 23% working either sporadically or in intensive one- to three-day sessions. 38% of freshmen, 30% of sophomores and 23% of Evening School students worked on it daily, and 38% of freshmen, 60% of sophomores and 46% of Evening School students worked on it weekly. 15% of freshmen and 16% of Evening School students worked on it periodically, and eight percent of freshmen, 10% of sophomores and 14% Evening School students worked intensively on it for one to three days. No pattern could be found in how soon students started the assignment and the length of output; between their computer proficiency and the beginning the assignment; or the length of the output and their work pattern. The only pattern which held up in all but one case was that those who began the assignment immediately used regular work patterns (daily, weekly). The single exception was an Evening School student who commuted over two hours to attend class, so he had less discretionary time to spend on it. In post-assignment interviews, these students reported more often having seen the value of the assignment than those who postponed starting work on it.

Table 3 Self-reports of computer proficiency

	Overall	Freshmen	Sophomores	Evening School Students
Novice (can only use Word)	16%	23%	10%	15%
Competent (Word and Excel)	64%	54%	60%	77%
Proficient (can design website)	17%	23%	20%	8%
Expert (can manage a website)	3%	0%	10%	0%

Since the assignment required using the MS Word software program to compile the Miscellany, students were asked to self-report their familiarity and expertise with using the software program and computers in general. Using a four-item scale ranging from Relative Novice (being proficient only with using Word) to Competent (able to use Word and Excel) to Proficient (able to design a website) to Expert (confident in managing a website) students reported their computer proficiency. Overall, the majority reported being competent (64%), 17% saw themselves as being proficient, and three percent felt that they were expert computer users. A quarter of freshmen reported being only novice computer users and over three-quarters of Evening School students reported being only competent users. Limited freshman computer proficiency derives from the limited use of computer programs in completing homework assignments in high school. The lack of advanced computer proficiency among Evening School students can be attributed to their limited free time to improve their computer skills as well as their primary use of computers solely to using them in their jobs. A strong increase in computer proficiency can be seen between the freshmen and sophomore year of college, reflecting the increased important of using of computer programs during their first two years of college.

The following tables present data on the sections which students rated as the easiest, their favourites, and the ones they had most trouble or difficulty working on. In some cases, students either did not give an answer or provided more than one answer. In addition, numbers are rounded up or down as appropriate.

Table 4 Easiest sections to work on

	Freshmen	Sophomores	Evening School Students	Overall
My Spelling Mistakes	23%	7%	7%	12%
My Grammar Mistakes	0	7%	7%	5%

	Freshmen	Sophomores	Evening School Students	Overall
My Composition Profile	0	0	0	0
Composition Notes from Class	8%	0	0	2%
Peer Editor Comments	0	0	7%	2%
Teacher Comments	0	0	7%	2%
Synonyms	46%	7%	7%	20%
Clichés	0	0	0	0
Euphemisms	0	0	0	0
Phrases and Idioms	0	0	0	0
Collocations	0	7%	0	2%
Transitions	8%	21%	29%	20%
Cultural Icons	8%	0	21%	10%
Citation Methods	0	21%	0	7%
How to Say Things in English	0	7%	0	2%
Table of Contents	8%	0	0	2%
Measurements/writing resources	0	7%	7%	5%
Searching Internet	0	0	0	0
Computer Problems	0	0	0	0
Organizing Information	0	0	0	0
All Parts Were Easiest	0	0	0	0

Overall, students reported the three easiest required sections to work on as being *Synonyms* (20%), *Transitions* (20%), and *My Spelling Mistakes* (12%). Among freshmen, the easiest required sections were *Synonyms* (46%) and *My Spelling Mistakes* (23%). Among sophomores, the easiest required sections were *Transitions* (21%) and *Citation Methods* (21%). Evening School students thought that *Transitions* (29%) and *Cultural Icons* (21%) were the easiest. With the exception of *Cultural Icons*, the sections named as easiest were all very traditional, very concrete types of sections to complete, requiring little in the way of evaluating or judging an item's value before its inclusion in a section. Freshmen rated *Synonyms* and *My Spelling Mistakes* highly because these items were closely related to activities they were familiar with in high school. The *Cultural Icons* section, on the other hand, required students to think outside the box more to discern the potential symbolism of an item as well as its future usefulness to them as writers. The drastic drop-off in the popularity of the *Synonyms* section after the freshman year can be attributed to improved student understanding of other language features which are central to writing strong Academic English paragraphs. The strong increase in the *Transitions* section after the freshman year reflects more student appreciation of transitions as unifying organizational devices in the presentation of their ideas.

Table 5 Favourite section to work on

	Freshmen	Sophomores	Evening School	Overall
My Spelling Mistakes	0	7%	14%	7%
My Grammar Mistakes	0	0	0	0
My Composition Profile	0	0	0	0
Composition Notes from Class	8%	7%	0	5%
Peer Editor Comments	0	7%	0	2%
Teacher Comments	0	7%	0	2%
Synonyms	15%	0	7%	7%
Clichés	0	7%	0	2%
Euphemisms	0	0	0	0
Phrases and Idioms	8%	0	0	2%
Collocations	0	14%	0	5%
Transitions	23%	0	43%	22%
Cultural Icons	46%	0	36%	27%

	Freshmen	Sophomores	Evening School	Overall
Citation Methods	0	0	0	0
How to Say Things in English	0	21%	0	7%
Table of Contents	0	0	0	0
Measurements/writing resources	0	0	0	0
Searching Internet	0	7%	0	2%
Computer Problems	0	0	0	0
Organizing Information	0	0	0	0
All Parts Were Favourite	0	0	0	0

When it came to the favourite required section to work on, students overall liked working on *Cultural Icons* (27%) and *Transitions* (22%). Freshmen favourites were *Cultural Icons* (46%) and *Transitions* (23%). The popularity of *Cultural Icons* is closely connected to the required freshman literature course *Sources of Western Literature* in which they studied the mythology of the western world. Sophomores preferred *How to Say Chinese Things in English* (21%) and *Collocations* (14%) as their favourite sections. The former reflects the increased awareness that students have of the reader's need for more complete presentations of ideas from their Chinese life. The latter reflects new interest in understanding more completely how words are used in English. The two top vote getters that Evening School students identified as their favourites were two sections: *Transitions* (43%) and *Cultural Icons* (36%). Students said that they liked working on the *Transitions* because citing their sources was 'the most mechanical work in this assignment.'

Non-required information which students thought would be helpful in their writing

In addition to the six required sections, students were encouraged to include any other information which they felt would be helpful to them in writing English compositions. At first, they were puzzled by this, perhaps because they were not aware of their needs in writing English composition aside from general areas like grammar and vocabulary. This is further evidence of the tendency for Taiwanese students to be teacher-dependent in their study of English: they have little experience in taking more command of their own learning. In the end, the additional information which students included in their Miscellanies included vocabulary items (*Clichés; Euphemisms; How to Say Chinese Things in English; Collocation; Phrases & Idioms; Words to Avoid Using in Academic Writing; Proverbs; Easily Confused Word; and Sexist Language*), reference items (*Citation Method; Measurement Systems; Internet Resources; Abbreviations; and Romanization Tables*), gaps in their grammar background (e.g., *Order of Adjectives*), personal feedback on their compositions (*Peer Editor Comments on their Own Work; and Teacher Comments on their Compositions*), mechanics (e.g., *Capitalization Rules; Citation Rules, and Hyphenation Rules*) and computer information (*How to Use Word and Internet Search Suggestions*). Some students also included pages from the composition handbook used in class.

Overall, freshmen and Evening School students were consistent in their evaluation of their work in the non-required sections of the assignment, reporting little difference in the degree of difficulty or ease in completing the different sections. Three sections, however, stood out for sophomores: 21% selected the *Cliché* section as being difficult to work on, 21% felt the *Citation Methods* section was the easiest, and 21% selected the section *How to Say Chinese Things in English* as their favourite section to work on.

Table 6 Sections which students had trouble completing

	Freshmen	Sophomores	Evening School Students	Overall
My Spelling Mistakes	0	0	0	0
My Grammar Mistakes	23%	0	21%	15%
My Composition Profile	0	0	7%	2%
Composition Notes from Class	8%	0	0	2%
Peer Editor Comments	0	0	0	0

	Freshmen	Sophomores	Evening School Students	Overall
Teacher Comments	0	0	0	0
Synonyms	0	0	0	0
Clichés	0	21%	0	7%
Euphemisms	0	14%	0	5%
Phrases and Idioms	0	0	0	0
Collocations	0	0	0	0
Transitions	31%	7%	36%	24%
Cultural Icons	38%	14%	29%	27%
Citation Methods	0	0	14%	5%
How to Say Things in English	0	0	0	0
Table of Contents	0	0	0	0
Measurements/writing resources	0	0	0	0
Searching Internet	0	0	0	0
Computer Problems	0	7%	0	2%
Organizing Information	0	7%	0	2%
All Parts Were Difficult	0	0	0	0

Freshmen reported difficulty completing the *Cultural Icons* (38%) and *Transitions* (31%) sections, with 23% reporting difficulty in completing the *My Grammar Mistakes* section. Problems identifying Cultural Icons arose from being unaccustomed to thinking about such things in relation to English composition class or from carrying over such knowledge from their *Sources of Western Literature* course. Freshmen attributed their difficulty completing the *My Grammar Mistakes* section to two different sources: some said that they could not know their strengths and weaknesses since they had not had the chance to compare their own work to that of their classmates; others said that since the teacher had not told them what their strengths were in writing, they did not know. Overall, students were not very reflective on their work and progress in class.

Twenty-one percent of Evening School students also reported problems completing their *My Grammar Mistakes* section. Some students said that this was because they could not discern from their teacher's feedback on their compositions what their strengths and weaknesses were. In some interviews, students suggested that since humbleness is stressed in Chinese culture, it was not appropriate for them to state what their strengths were, but other students strongly rejected this thinking in the interviews. Indeed, in Taiwan from grade school onward, the results of each test are posted in class as well as on the returned exam papers, indicating not only a student's performance on the test, but also his ranking compared to the other students in class who took the test. One student said teachers always tell students what they are bad at or need to improve, so students do not recognize what they are good at.

Sophomores reported problems completing *Clichés* (21%), *Euphemisms* (14%) and *Cultural Icons* (14%). Difficulties with identifying and processing clichés and euphemisms arose from lack of sufficient information or exposure to these aspects of language. Second-year literature courses do not emphasize the mythology of western literature as much as first-year literature courses do, so sophomores may not have encountered as many of these items in general course reading assignments as they did in their freshman year.

Evening school students also reported problems completing the *Transitions* (36%) and *Cultural Icons* (29%) sections. In addition to the explanations previously mentioned for difficulties completing the *Cultural Icons* section is the fact that compared to regular undergraduates in the day school, Evening School students have limited time to study for their courses. They have fewer opportunities for deeper or closer readings of their literature assignments, so they may have paid less attention to the cultural icons they encountered in their reading.

3.3 Analysis of the post-assignment interviews

General insights from student post-assignment interviews

In this section, general insights from the student post-assignment interviews will be reported. Their suggestions and recommendations for improving the assignment for use with future classes are discussed in Part 4.

In post-assignment interviews, the students presented their work in a five-minute interview in English. The structure of this interview was guided by a set of open-ended questions to encourage them to discuss the way in which they worked on the Miscellany, to share the different areas of difficulty which they had in doing the assignment as well as which sections were their favourites, easiest, and so on. Since this assignment was made in a composition class, the interview itself was graded solely on a pass/fail basis, with failure only possible if a student failed to come to the interview. Despite efforts made to reassure students as to the nature and expected structure of the interview, many students reported worrying about their presentations, especially about whether they would “meet the teacher’s expectations” and “have the correct content”. Since this was a divergent experiential project (one in which a wide range of content was expected), the teacher did not expect students to be concerned about meeting any special expectations aside from the few requirements of the assignment. From the teacher’s point of view, as long as the students followed the directions and made a good effort, a suitable grade could be expected.

As can be expected in interviews in Confucian heritage countries with large power distance preferences and in which the teacher is considered an authority figure, the majority of students interviewed gave mostly positive feedback on the assignment. Only one somewhat harried Evening School student pointedly did not recommend that students in future courses do the assignment. This student was among a handful of students who, it turned out, were not entirely clear about the rationale and the methods to be used in the assignment, those who laboriously read scores of articles to locate transitions to include in their Miscellanies. Among the positive feedback was this comment from a sophomore: “*(It) makes me more aware of my problems so I can do something about them.*” Another sophomore commented on her perception of the value of the assignment in this way: “*Revising my class notes made me understand more about what the teacher said in class.*”

Students also made general comments that it would be best for them to work in groups of three on projects like this. They said if there were only two students, there may be communication problems because “*both of them must be responsible.*” One student also remarked “*If (there are) only two students, then they will be nervous and not know how to proceed.*”

Many students reported frustration with completing the *Transitions* and *Cultural Icons* sections because they could not simply find a website or other source from which they could cut and paste information to satisfy the assignment’s criteria. By design, work on these two sections should have been a cumulative effort, meaning that students through their own normal reading in English for other classes would gradually collect information for these sections.

This design reflects an experiential approach to information gathering. The students in this study, however, were of a mindset that such information should have already been prepared/packaged for them by the teacher and been readily made available to them. They approached the assignment with the expectation that their responsibility was only to memorize the information, not to collect it.

Many students in the post-assignment interview did not realize the important weight that it had in their final grade, so they did not work as actively on it as they might have. This points to a failure in the presentation of the assignment to the students at the beginning of the semester. The assignment was worth so much because it was designed to give more self-confidence to those students who put enormous effort into their compositions, but often saw no improvement in the grade for it. In the Miscellany assignment, their grade would be directly determined by the amount of effort they put into it.

Ann-Marie Hadzima (2009), In search for the independent learner: A case study. *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht* 14:1, 83-96. Abrufbar unter <http://zif.spz.tu-darmstadt.de/jg-14-1/beitrag/Hadzima.pdf>.

The interviews also revealed more details into the student reasoning behind relying on each other when they encountered problems and not asking the teacher for clarification. When they had questions about the format or content, many of them would discuss their problems with each other so “*we could share information with each other and laugh.*”

3.4 Analysis of non-compliance with assignment criteria

With regard to the six required sections, most Miscellanies contained only three: some transitions, a few cultural icons, and some synonyms. Most did not include their spelling or grammatical mistakes from their compositions or their in-class composition notes. Most Miscellanies contained the same sections as had been in the brief sample which the teacher brought to class. In doing so, the students indicated that a picture is worth a thousand words: they mostly ignored the written instructions and clung to the brief sample provided in class. One area in which Taiwanese students generally need more practice is following written directions in English. The tests and exams given in high school in Taiwan always follow the format of the Joint College Entrance Examination, so students do not have much experience in reading directions carefully.

When asked in the post-assignment interview why they had not included some of the required sections of the assignment, students generally said they felt that that information would not be helpful to them as writers. In other words, they felt it was their right to ignore those parts of the assignment which they did not like. This raises issues rooted in educational culture: (1) they were not accustomed to completing assignments which are graded using a completion rubric, so they did not realize that their non-compliance with required portions of the assignment resulted in a lower grade for their work. (2) In an educational culture where students are usually so teacher-dependent that they often monopolize the teacher’s break time with questions about their school work, when it came to following the assignment requirements, many students relied on each other when they encountered problems or questions and did not ask the teacher. The post-assignment interviews also revealed a strong tendency among students to resist having to follow the assignment “rules”, seeing this as an infringement of their rights and freedom.

Another insight from student non-compliance with the assignment requirements demonstrated that students did not “seize the day” to notice that in any of their classes there was a possibility of encountering useful information to put into the Miscellany. The assignment’s design was for it to be a knock-on bonus for students to use minimal time by recycling the reading that they already had to do in other classes to find examples of transitions or synonyms or other items that would be useful in their own writing. Instead, many students reported using enormous efforts to locate acceptable information to include. Because they were prohibited from copying lists of transitions from a textbook, they used just such a list to identify ‘good’ transitions which they then used as search terms to locate new articles (i.e., not used in other courses they were taking) on the Internet. For example, they found the transition “*in the final analysis*” in a textbook list and then used a search engine to locate an article which contained this phrase, read the complete article and cited it in their Miscellany. Their inventiveness in locating such examples of transitions is clever, indeed, but it was totally unnecessary since the teacher had modeled how to identify examples of synonyms, cultural icons, transitions and so on from an article that had already been read in class. They apparently had a basic problem connecting the teacher’s modeling of the expected behaviour and its application to their completion of the assignment. Instead, they used their high school education cultural imperative of “the more effort I make, the better the grade I will receive”.

Finally, one of the primary goals for this assignment was to train students that they needed to cite all information included in the Miscellany. Several students complained about this, saying they did not like to “have to follow forms.” This, like the previously described student practice of ignoring those parts of the assignment which they did not like, indicates that a more systematic curriculum needs to be implemented to teach students why citations are necessary, as well as the purpose of the constituent parts of citations

4. Recommendations for the implementation and improvement of this assignment

In both the questionnaire and the post-assignment interview, students had opportunities to make suggestions on improving the implementation of this assignment as well as its design. Some of them have already been discussed in Part 3. Two of the most useful and thoughtful student suggestions were to give examples of the completed assignment earlier in the semester, and beginning the project in the fall semester so they could learn more from doing it. To make their Miscellanies more useful, some students suggested using a grammar code such as that used by Longman in their *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Quirk 2003). This would allow them to record useful usage information along with definitions. Students also recommended that the teacher provide more worksheets to help students work on the project, an attempt at making the assignment more teacher-directed.

To their recommendations, I would add six additional ones, mostly focused at the introduction of the assignment:

- Since some of the students did not ‘buy into’ the assignment and failed to see its purpose and value, the introduction of this assignment should not be rushed. Students need to understand the rationale for the project in more depth, as well as become comfortable with the divergent results which come from this type of experiential learning. In this way, they would have more secure internal benchmarks against which to measure their own effort and work.
- Since this is essentially a transition project between the teacher-centred education in Taiwanese high school and the student-centred, meaning-centred university English composition class, more overt teacher direction is necessary in the beginning months of the assignment. Just as high school teachers in the U.S., who teach students to write research papers, divide their course into separate parts and set multiple deadlines for students to complete each part to keep them focused on their work, this assignment would benefit from a similar set of deadlines throughout the semester.
- The assignment itself should be integrated into the class each week, with students sharing their findings (especially the Cultural Icons, which can be a difficult concept for students), their work approach and their difficulties. Doing this will inject a stronger sense of ownership of the assignment among students, making it an adventure of sorts.
- Teachers should pair students with weaker computer skills with those who are more capable so as to reduce any frustration or anxiety about using search engines to locate information (if needed) and using software programs to record their findings in tables or charts.
- Once the assignment is progressing under its own steam, teachers should turn the class’s attention to the presentation options which they have in recording information in the Miscellany. Almost all of the Miscellanies that students produced would be difficult for native speakers of English to use because they lacked organization. Whether this is an L1 educational culture issue or a generational issue (e.g., Internet- and computer-savvy students know that software programs and browsers can easily search a text displayed on computer screens for specific words and phrases) is unclear. But, since the Miscellany is a printed reference, there are no options for those types of search to locate a term in it or to sort the information into categories upon demand.
- An unexpected stressor for students was the flexible nature of the assignment. Teachers coming from western cultures tend to approach these types of assignments with a light hand, preferring to be non-directive, so that a good variety will appear in the final product. This non-assertive, non-directive approach was unsettling for many students who are accustomed to assignments resulting in more convergent, uniform products. Whereas western teachers would be more rigid in demanding that the requirements of the assignment be followed to the letter, yet flexible in a diversity of the end product, it would seem Taiwanese teachers would be more rigid in demanding that the final product conform to a uniform product and more flexible in how the final product was created or produced. More support is necessary in this area to empower students to take the risks necessary to more fully be responsible for their own learning.

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