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SVC Project: Critical Reflection on SVC Students

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SVC Project: Critical Reflection on SVC Students

Cross-cultural communication plays a critical role in the global village today. It not only encourages people from different countries to exchange culture experiences, but it also allows us to expand our views and learn how to respect others' cultural backgrounds. SVC service-learning camp is a project designed by students from Fu Jen University. The purpose of the camp is to collaborate with SVC students to teach English in Guo-tai Elementary School. Thus, the focus in this report is to discuss my observation of cross-cultural relationship in the SVC program, as well as SVC students' thoughts after experiencing the camp. The reason to focus on the cultural relationship is that children in Guo-tai seemed to recognize SVC students as the main role during the lesson, and FJU students as assistant teachers. The possible cause of this phenomenon is that people are affected by the world's leading power and would produce a received idea of cultural superiority. On the other hand, SVC students' thoughts after experiencing the camp is also a major point for me to consider. Their feedbacks not only reflect their opinions about the whole camp, but they are also helpful reference for FJU students and teachers to examine whether the plans and arrangement worked out smoothly.

“Intercultural communication” is reckoned to be one of the core concepts regarding SVC camp. According the the article “Intercultural communication in

English language teacher education,” Dogancay-Aktuna defines the term as “the process occurring when the producers and receivers of a message belong to different cultures” (Dogancay-Aktuna 100). In other words, intercultural communication is the action and development when people interact with others with diverse cultural backgrounds. The goal of SVC camp, similarly, is to promote cultural exchange among American and Taiwanese students by designing courses and planning activities. It turned out that students from Guo-Tai elementary school seemed to have a great time interacting with SVC students. During the sight-seeing activity to Tamsui, Grace, a freshman from SVC College informed me that originally, many of them determined to visit Asia to gain insight by joining service-learning projects, yet only a few of them have teaching experience. However, although not all of the SVC students are teachers or working in the field of education, it appears that some children tend to recognize them as professional English teachers and consider FJU students as assistant teachers. Though SVC and FJU students are on the equal footing in the camp, children seem to form different images and impressions because of our nationalities. In fact, this is not a recent phenomenon in Taiwan.

Over the past few decades, English has become the most commonly used language in the world. The number of people learning English as a second language is constantly rising, and students in Taiwan are no exception. In Taiwan, foreigners, especially English native speakers, are often hired to teach English in after-class schools though they have no relevant experience in teaching. Nevertheless, many people believe that native speakers are better English teachers than those of Taiwanese teachers. The fact is that foreign teachers, including those who are

inexperienced, receive higher payments and benefits than local teachers. A close friend of mine is a Taiwanese American who has taken the teacher education program in her college. When she moved back to Taiwan, she determined to teach English in after-class schools. Yet, she was refused for her Asian look, and the school would only offer her a job, which is a teaching assistant. Indeed, native speakers can provide different views in terms of culture or learning methods from their own countries, but I still hold the opinion that Taiwanese teachers can also be creative in course-designing and are able to lay the foundations for students' future success in mastery of the English language.

Moreover, the global trend and culture are also factors which influence people's perspectives on foreigners who teach English. The United States has gradually become a world power since the late 19th century. Since English is known as a global language nowadays, there is no denying that the country plays a critical role with its dominance and influence. In terms of language, I consider that language learning is closely related to culture. When people acquire a new language, they will also gain an understanding of the country's culture. For instance, the topics in many English teaching materials or text books are often in connection with American culture and lifestyle. Students will be more familiar with the information provided in the materials and would indirectly form the impression of their world view by receiving such cultural input. In the process of language learning, students would develop the cognition of the fact that America is the remaining superpower in the world. Taiwan, as an Asian country, is rather inferior for not being as influential as the U.S. In Barauskienė and Klimovienė's article "The Importance of Students' Eco-cultural

Competence and Possibilities for its Development Teaching Foreign Languages,” they mention that it is likely for learners to be affected by their “frames of references from the past culture” when they are in multicultural classrooms (Barauskienė and Klimovienė 34). Learners tend to comprehend and acquire knowledge on the basis of their native language and culture, as well as their world view. Since Taiwan is a relatively powerless country compared to the U.S, it is considered natural that Americans are superior to Taiwanese, and people would prefer to have foreigners as English teachers. Although not all of the students have such preconceptions, many of them are still affected by the current world situation and have thus become stereotyped. Therefore, it is possible to notice the effects of cultural on perception from children in Taiwan.

In terms of SVC students’ views on the camp, most of them indeed enjoyed the process of teaching in Guo-Tai Elementary School. Neal, a graduate student mentioned that the camp helped him to gain confidence in interacting and teaching foreign students. He considered that teaching English in America is different from foreign countries because Americans don’t do many activities in class but focus more on grammar and spelling instead. Neal claims that the camp gave him so much positive influence, and he loved how students are willing to learn and improve their English abilities. He also learned some basic Chinese from the students such as “I am Neal,” “thank you” and “come here.” Neal suggested that if possible, he would like to show more pictures, videos, or even prepare the props themselves and share with the students in Taiwan. Alicia, a girl majoring in psychology reveals that the camp broadened her horizons for how much work and efforts are put into the lesson plan,

and she is glad that children are willing to engage in the activities. Another SVC student, Grace, told me that it is her first time traveling in Asia, and she was impressed by the local delicacies here, especially the Xiaolongbao from Din Tai Fung. She was also surprised that FJU students were full of passion and hospitality, which broke her stereotype of Asian people being rather introverted or timid.

Gabby, a student majoring in education, explained that it was her third time participating in the camp. From her observation, language is not a barrier when communicating with foreign students because they often use emotions, hand gestures and body language. She mentioned that it would be great if FJU and SVC students can try video chatting and work on the lesson plans together so they could be more involved in the activities. Gabby's future plan is to teach English in Asian countries such as Taiwan and China, so she also shared her attitude towards Asian culture with me. When she decided to come to Asia, her family and friends thought that it is a dangerous and undeveloped place. However, Gabby holds a different opinion after her journey to China and Taiwan. She met many people who were willing to provide help; people who gave her a beaming smile and waved; and people who appreciated her visit to the orphanage and rural schools. It was not until Gabby traveled in Asia that she realized people there are hospitable and gracious. Despite her family's stereotype of Asian countries, she believes what she saw and experienced instead. To me, this is the most inspiring part during the camp because I have realized the saying that "Do not judge a book by its cover." People are often judgmental in terms of culture and ethnicity, yet not all of them have the experience interacting with those they had

criticized. Thus, it is time to break down the stereotypes and develop our own thoughts through experience.

In conclusion, intercultural communication is a great method to interact with people from different cultures. Living in the world of globalization, it is inevitable that people tend to have preconceived ideas about culture for being affect by the world's most influential countries. However, the process of cultural exchange should be based on the equal footing with regard to my experience in SVC camp. All cultures are equal in value, and so are all languages. Education, similarly, should as well be offered "with no position being advanced in favor of another" (Barauskienė and Klimovienė 35). Consequently, teachers and educators should understand the relation between culture and language, and take students' cultural backgrounds into consideration in class. In this way, cross-cultural communication would be carried out smoothly. Moreover, SVC students' reflection and their sharing of culture knowledge in the camp are also inspiring. Cross-cultural communication might be new to both SVC and FJU students, yet it worked out well for everyone's cooperation and enthusiasm for the whole project. It is glad to know that SVC students enjoyed the camp, and I am looking forward to working with them next year.

(word count: 1627 words)

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