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Teaching European Environmental Health Issues in Taiwan: An EMI and Transdisciplinary Course with Interactive Activities and Educative Exhibition

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Abstract

Between September 2019 and June 2022, within the framework of a 3-year project financed by the European Union (EU) - Jean Monnet Module (JMM) -, Wenzao Ursuline University (Kaohsiung, Taiwan) proposed for the first time in Taiwan an EMI and transdisciplinary course entitled: “*European Union’s Environmental Health Policy, its Achievements, and main Challenges*”. Designed as a co-taught course, it was opened to Taiwanese and Foreign students from all departments with an interest in the topic. The module aimed at offering a tailor-made transdisciplinary course on EU policies and concrete actions in the field of environmental health, defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as addressing “all the physical, chemical and biological factors to a person, and all the related factors that can potentially affect health”.

This course discussed the EU's regional and international responses to some of the most urgent and common global issues linking environment and health, including chemical hazards, air pollution, climate change, water quality, plastics use,... to name a few, and compared them with the responses provided by Taiwan. After an overview of the pedagogical principles and goals of the module, this presentation aims at explaining how this project was executed (especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic), how foreign and Taiwanese students were practically involved through different types of learning activities (games, (online) exhibition, oral presentations...), and what kind of challenges students and coordinators had to address. Finally, the concrete results of this module will be presented, discussed, and put into perspective.

Keywords: European Union, Taiwan, Environmental health, EMI class

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Introduction

Between September 2019 and June 2022, within the framework of a 3-year project financed by the European Union (EU) - Jean Monnet Module (JMM) -, Wenzao Ursuline University (Kaohsiung, Taiwan) proposed for the first time in Taiwan an EMI and transdisciplinary course entitled: *“European Union’s Environmental Health Policy, its Achievements, and main Challenges”*. Designed as a co-taught course, it was opened to Taiwanese and Foreign students from all departments with an interest in the topic.

The module aimed at offering a tailor-made transdisciplinary course on EU policies and concrete actions in the field of environmental health, defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as addressing “all the physical, chemical and biological factors to a person, and all the related factors that can potentially affect health” (WHO, 2020) . This course discussed the EU's regional and international responses to some of the most urgent and common global issues linking environment and health, including chemical hazards, air pollution, climate change, water quality, and plastics use,... to name a few, and compared them with the responses provided by Taiwan.

After an overview of the pedagogical principles and goals of the module, this presentation aims at explaining how this project was executed (especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic), and how foreign and Taiwanese students were practically involved through different types of learning activities (games, (online) exhibition, oral presentations...), and what kind of challenges students and coordinators had to address. Finally, the concrete results of this module and the student’s perceptions of the benefits and challenges of this module will be presented, discussed, and put into perspective.

I/ Project presentation and rationale

A Jean Monnet Module is a short teaching program (or course) in the field of European Union studies at a higher education institution. Each Module has a minimum duration of 40 teaching hours per academic year and must focus on one particular discipline in European studies or be multidisciplinary requiring the academic input of several professors and experts.

The aim of the modules is to promote research and teaching experience among young researchers, scholars, and practitioners in EU issues, foster the publication and dissemination of academic research, create interest in the EU, and foster the introduction of an EU angle mainly into non-EU related studies and deliver tailor-made courses on specific EU issues relevant for graduates in their professional life.

This Jean Monnet Module on “EU and Environmental Health: Policy, Achievements and main Challenges” aim at offering a tailor-made course on EU policies and concrete actions in the field of environmental health, defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as addressing “all the physical, chemical and biological factors to a person, and all the related factors that can potentially affect health”.

In other words, this course focused on the EU’s regional and international answers to some of the most urgent and common global issues linking environment and health, including chemical hazards, air pollution, climate change, water quality, and plastics use,... to name a few.

The innovative aspect of the proposed course, and its added value in terms of teaching, is that, while in students may have learned about the EU institutions and its policy setting in various fields (e.g., economy, environment, health,...) in this class, professors particularly aim at demonstrating the interwovenness of EU’s policies, actions, and challenges towards human health and environmental quality.

Open to any Taiwanese or Foreign students enrolled at WZU (no specific other requirements) interested in the topic of this class, English has been then chosen as the medium of instruction (EMI) of the JMM.

From the course, students learned about the added value of linking environment and health measures in the context of the EU's involvement in regional and global affairs. It also aims to develop the understanding of the complexity of the issues, promotes critical analysis capabilities of previous policies, and finally enables students to design innovative solutions for environmental protection and human health improvement.

The overall project was based on three major pillars:

- A semester-based seminar on “EU and Environmental Health: Policy, Achievements, and main Challenges”
- A traveling exhibition on this topic, created, organized, and managed by student
- An academic research project on “EU's involvement in environmental health in Asia” (conducted by the two responsible professors)

II/ Teaching Context and Project Execution

With the main objective of the course laid out to equip students with a better understanding of Europe's involvement in Environmental Health, the course progressively guided the students through previously unknown territory. Since most of the students had little knowledge of the matter, the instructors had to structure the course in several phases: First, it started with a general historical, institutional, and legal presentation of the EU's involvement in Environmental Health. Second, the EU's engagement on specific environmental health topics was provided and discussed, and third, the students were guided in their preparations for their exhibition products. The course was opened for three consecutive years and slightly modified based on gained experiences. Table 1 provides an overview of the course structure.

Table 1: Overview of the course

PHASE 1 – Introduction: General framework of the EU's involvement in environmental health

Week 1: Introduction to the Course; course objectives and contents “Environmental Health”: Definitions, approaches, illustrations, and main challenges.

Week 2: Overview of the EU: History, Overview of major institutions, governance, achievements, and challenges

Week 3: Historical overview and policy framework of the **EU's involvement in environmental issues**. The EU and Environmental Policy-making. Vision, strategies, and objectives. The EU's emergence as a global environmental leader. The European Union and its engagement with multilateral environmental organizations.

Week 4: The international context of EU's engagement in environmental health / Historical overview and policy framework of the **EU's competencies and involvement in health issues**. Europeanization and governance of public health in Europe./ The EU as a global health actor?

PHASE 2 – Selected Topics as Case studies

Week 5: **Climate Change and its Consequences:** EU strategies and policy measures to prevent/respond to health threats of climate change in Europe and beyond. International efforts against climate change. Taiwan's efforts to fight global warming.

Week 6: **Noise Pollution:** How the EU is facing such rising environmental health issues in Europe?

Week 7: **A world of plastic:** EU's Environmental Strategies and achievements in plastics reduction in Europe and beyond. Assessing Taiwan's efforts on plastic reduction. / EU efforts towards establishing a **Circular Economy**. CE-Developments in Taiwan.

Week 8: **Chemicals hazards in Europe:** An urgent health challenge for the EU, its citizens, and beyond. Case study: Asbestos / Endocrine disruptors.

Week 9: *Mid-term exam*

Each class consisted of a preliminary lecture on the topic of the day followed by document analysis (EU directives, regulations, newspapers, documentary), case study, or debate.

The mid-term exam, composed of questions about the course and open questions, aimed at evaluating the level of knowledge and the analysis skills obtained by the students after a half-semester of classes regarding environmental health.

PHASE 3 – Exhibition preparation

Week 10: Exhibition preparation (topics, methodology, activities, game, board, booth,...) (Visiting Kaohsiung Science and Technology Museum) + website content

Week 11-13: Working groups (preparation, discussion, exchanges with academic coordinators)

Week 14: Group presentations - Interactive discussion between groups, exchange of ideas

Week 15-17: Working groups (preparation, discussion, exchanges with academic coordinators)

Week 18: *Final Project Presentation* and Submission (Presentation of the exhibition parts)

III/ Main course outcomes

The course was not only designed to enable space for discussions (among students and with instructors) but also emphasized integrating hands-on participation. By choosing to show the students' work in a presentation, we aimed to achieve two targets: First, to train students with needed skills to deeply understand an academic issue matter and do individual research on it but also to ensure that the acquired knowledge is presented in a way that attracts the attention of the audience. Second, we aimed to increase students' motivation in producing a solid and good outcome since their products will be

displayed publicly. Third, the exhibition should raise public awareness of the importance of environmental health issues in Europe and Taiwan and thus stimulate discussions in the audiences.

The following presents some key information about the three-year module:

- The JMM attracted a solid number of Master's students for a course of that design: **42 students** joined JMM in total over the 3-years period.
- The course benefitted from a great diversity of nationalities of participants: A total of **11 nationalities** (including Australian, Chinese, Filipinos, German, Hong-Kongese, Indonesian, Portuguese, Spanish, Taiwanese, US, and Vietnamese students)
- The course resulted in the creation of exhibition products covering **16 core issues** related to Environmental Health in Europe and Taiwan. The topics include Light Pollution, Air Pollution (PM 2.5), Bathing Water Plastic Pollution (BPA), Drinking Water, Battery Pollution, Genetically Modified Organisms, Soil Pollution, Pesticide Usage, Passive Smoking, Noise Pollution, Microplastics, Indoor Pollution, Fragrance and Perfumes, and E-Waste.
- JMM resulted in a diverse exhibition including **different types of outputs** (almost) entirely designed and made by the students. As one of the key requirements for the exhibition products was interactive elements included in the exhibition, students integrated several ideas to make the exhibition more interactive. Among the outcomes were posters, explanatory videos, cartoons, interactive games (pollution maps, light pollution box,...), newsletter articles, sculptures (plastic whale, a battery,...), surveys, websites, etc...
- A **physical version** of the Exhibition (printed posters) could be displayed twice (June 20th, 2020; Dec. 4th, 2020). The course achieved a high level of participation from students. Visitors could take part in a quiz game (Kahoot) during their exhibition visits.
- Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, on-spot exhibitions had to be stopped. So we decided to integrate a **virtual version** of the Exhibition with a dedicated website: <http://jean-monnet.envihealth.wzu.edu.tw/>
- **Publication of an academic article** jointly written by the two JMM coordinators entitled: Framing Covid-19 as an Environmental Health Issue: Narratives in Europe and their interpretations. (Rollet & Ibitz, 2021)
- **Traineeship at EU delegation in Taipei:** As a direct consequence of the course, one participating student decided to apply for a traineeship at the EU delegation in Taipei and was chosen for the position. (6 months)

IV/ Project Evaluation

Coordinators' observations

The course was conducted three times between 2019 and 2022 and the evaluation of the module can be divided into two main categories: The evaluation and observation from the instructors and the evaluation from students.

As of now, we are still in the process of evaluating the outcomes of the course. However, here are some key observations from the faculty:

Outcomes

- Designed as CLIL-course, the focus was not on language training itself but more on content. We refrained from correcting students' grammar mistakes but helped to articulate their opinions in a way to be understood. However, students needed **a certain time for adapting to such an academic course context and getting familiar with vocabulary** related to Environmental health and also EU political reports language. With a high proportion of international students joining the course, we had a situation where students had to switch to English to communicate with their peers. While most of the groups were **multilinguistic**, only a few remained **monolingualistic** (Mandarin-speaking students). However, the quality of the final outcomes was not greatly influenced by such settings.
- **Since the course was designed not as a pure lecture but included learning activities** students were given the opportunity to learn and practice specific English vocabulary (chunks). We could observe that most students were actively using newly acquired vocabulary from provided sources, however, sometimes with an inappropriate application.

Besides language learning, the course also aimed to train skills for their professional careers. Designed as a course based on group work, teamwork was a major goal. And we found that **issues related to teamwork** among team members. We observed that the teamwork and support from groups actually supported the use of language. Peer learning (in language usage but also software application, and design tools) was observed regularly. The course provided space for students to come up with their own exhibition ideas. As the outcomes prove some students showed a high level of creativity in their final works.

However, creativity takes time and for some groups, progress was extremely slow. In these cases, we supported the teams in finding a way to overcome their struggle. The course required some basic skills in research and organization of information as the groups were working all on different topics and they had to acquire a basic background knowledge on their subject matter. Here, the instructors had to support some groups in dealing with the information overload.

All in all, **guidance** plays an essential role in such a course. From the beginning to the end of the JMM. However, we saw our roles not in explaining everything in detail but to set the goals that should be achieved and supporting students when they are stuck in their progress. The instructors saw their role not in pushing students' work in certain directions but to play the role of an enabler for working on their own ideas.

Challenges

- Understanding scientific (articles, statistics) and law documents from the EU (directives, regulations) and Taiwan about environmental health and being able to summarize them into a pedagogical and easy-to-understand poster or activity **was the main challenge for all the students**.
- Some groups did not submit a complete final project. Reasons: initial overestimation of their skills and time resources; lack of understanding of the topic, teamwork interaction, motivation.

- Some groups were overwhelmed by the amount of scientific information to read and understand before being able to produce relevant output for the exhibition (lack of time; lack of research skills; time management)
- Underestimating the workload of creating an exhibition of quality
- Some groups failed to uphold proper teamwork even if English was not a problem
- Students overestimated their digital skills (“website is easy to make”; “easy to make online quiz”)
- For the faculty: Necessity to **review carefully all the outcomes** produced by the students to verify the **scientific integrity** of the content as well as to **proofread it**.

b. Students’ perceptions, evaluations, and feedback

The evaluation from students is basically derived from two sources: the course evaluation (after each semester) and an online survey conducted by the instructors. Regarding the course evaluation from students, all the JMM hit a higher approval rate than other courses offered at the university.

| <u>JMM</u> | <u>University-wide average (max. 5)</u> |
|-----------------|---|
| Y1: n.a.* | 4.50 |
| Y2: 4.55 | 4.51 |
| Y3: 4.84 | 4.56 |

*not enough students provided their feedback on the course, and the university did not disclose numbers.

In the evaluation, the students had the chance to provide remarks for the instructors. Here are some selected excerpts from students’ feedback on the course:

S1: “...combines the theoretical and the pragmatic sides of the discussed topics...”

S2: “...gave me an opportunity to apply what I learned and create an output(s) that would last for others to see...”

S3: “ ...encourages us to improve our abilities. I gained a lot of knowledge and had fun!”

S4: “...Thank you for your feedback and for being so supportive throughout the process of finishing our projects.” // “...sometimes it's quite hard to follow what you taught in class, maybe it's because the topic is pretty big while taught in English...but I learned a lot and benefited from your course.”

In order to evaluate students’ perceptions of the JMM on Environmental Health in the EU and Taiwan, an online survey has been conducted at the end of the project among the students who participated in this class. The survey can be distinguished into two main categories of questions: a) Questions related to EU & Taiwan Environmental Health, and b) JMM as CLIL class.

From 42 students we received 20 answers. For this presentation, allow us to mainly focus on the second batch of questions.

Here are some of the results we obtain for this survey:

- Regarding **students’ motivations behind** their choice of this module, no student seems to have chosen JMM to use/improve her/his English.

- **94%** of the students consider that attending JMM **helped them to improve their English ability** (reading, speaking, and writing). Especially through the readings, interactions with the coordinators and their classmates, searching for information online, by producing a concrete outcome in English
- **94%** of the students indicate that they **could understand well** during the lecture given by the JMM coordinators,
- **92%** of the students consider that **they now can better read and comprehend texts** written in English and related to environmental health issues,
- **100%** consider that they **could engage in discussions** with classmates on environmental health issues in English.
- **82.4%** of the students replied that **they were confident in using English** in classroom discussions, however, **11.8% disagree**.
- **82.4%** of the students acknowledged that they **used other languages than English to search for information** related to the EU and environmental health, **11.8%** did not.
- **70.8%** of the students acknowledged that they **had “sometimes” difficulties in understanding new vocabulary and expressions**, scientific terms, and concepts in English, **23.5% “never”**, and **5.9% “often”**.
- **58.8%** of the students shared that they **“never” had difficulties in understanding the content of Professors’ lectures** in English while **41.2%** acknowledged that it was **“sometimes”** the case,
- **76.5%** of the students **“never” had difficulties in understanding their classmates’ presentations** in English while **23.5%** acknowledged that it was **“sometimes”** the case
- **100%** of the students would **recommend JMM to their classmates** but for reasons which are **not related to English learning**.

Qualitative post projects interviews will be conducted with some students in the future to fine-tune our results.

V/ Reflections and Recommendations

This CLIL project-based course provided an opportunity to involve students in a full-English environment with the aim to advance not only students' English proficiency but also their professional skills. The conclusions drawn from this module underline the importance that a combination of language skills and content learning is not only possible but also acquitted from students.

By overcoming the challenges in conducting the course the instructors gained a lot of insights on how to design future project-based courses. While English as lingua franca helped to conduct this course, there should be no hesitation to establish similar courses in other foreign languages across Taiwan. Upholding a variety of foreign languages in the education sector is a necessity for an advanced industrialized trading nation like Taiwan.

As for the faculty, the course provided a motivating opportunity to enable students to learn about environmental and health issues in Europe and Taiwan. While refraining from correcting obvious mistakes may seem to come at the expense of correct language acquisition, the instructors see language more as means of communication and thus prioritize the communication function of language during class activities rather than focusing on correct pronunciation and accurate grammar usage. The room to make mistakes enable students to practice their language usage and during the course, students had plenty of opportunities to engage in group discussions in a foreign language without facing the fear of being corrected immediately.

This course may have been one of the most-energy intense courses of the faculty, however, taking into account the solid and highly satisfactory outcome the efforts have paid off. Project-based courses are time and energy-consuming but rewarding. Not only could students learn more about the topic and practice their English but during their exhibition preparations they could apply (or gain) skills highly needed for their future careers, such as research skills, collaboration, communication, critical thinking as well as digital skills (video editing and AR applications).

The originally EU-funded Jean-Monnet-Module is not integrated into the curriculum of the Master's program of European Studies and will hopefully attract more students in the future.

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