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Abstract: This article presents a place-based teaching technique comprising a field trip embedded within a university study abroad program for learners of Chinese as a second language. Designed to deepen students' understanding of the lifestyle and cultural practice of an Atayal Indigenous community in Taiwan, the one-day visit positioned learners within the tribe's physical, cultural, and historical landscape. Students participated in ancestral rituals, practiced traditional survival techniques, crafted artefacts from natural materials, and engaged with culturally situated language use. Drawing on students' worksheets, observations of their tangible participation, informal feedback, and post-visit interviews, this paper demonstrates the pedagogical value of integrating place-based and experiential learning in CSL contexts. The findings indicate that even a short, pedagogically designed field experience has the potential to extend learning beyond classroom boundaries, fostering embodied language competence, heightened cultural awareness, and environmental and ecological appreciation. Despite linguistic limitations, students effectively interpreted language and cultural practices through contextual cues, gestures, and embodied forms of communication. The results underscore the transformative potential of community-centered, land-based learning, which not only enriches cultural understanding and highlights interconnections among language, environment, and human relationships but also helps learners become more linguistically competent, ethically grounded, environmentally aware, and socially responsible.

Keywords: Chinese as a second language, community-centered learning, embodied language learning, experiential learning, place-based learning, study abroad

Introduction

In an era defined by unprecedented human mobility, environmental crises, and widespread cultural displacement, where traditional practices, identities, and languages are increasingly threatened by globalization and modernization, language learning has expanded far beyond grammar drills and vocabulary acquisition. It now encompasses how learners understand and ethically engage with people, histories, and ecologies that animate a language (Dewey, 1938; Gruenewald, 2003). Study abroad programs, long celebrated as immersive pathways to linguistic gains and intercultural competence, now stand at the intersection of global citizenship, sustainability, and decolonial education. Decolonial approaches challenge Eurocentric knowledge structures and foreground Indigenous and marginalized epistemologies (Dvorak et al., 2011; Lewin, 2009). Yet despite these shifts, language learning within many study abroad programs can remain confined to formal classroom instruction in host institutions, while field trips often serve a more exploratory role without serious pedagogical intervention. In contrast to the classroom context, place-based experiential pedagogy situates learners within living

landscapes—spaces where language, land, and culture intertwine, and where understanding arises through shared experience rather than passive consumption.

Place-based and experiential learning offer meaningful responses to these limitations by grounding education in real environments shaped by culture, history, ecology, and human interaction (Beames et al., 2012; Smith & Sobel, 2010). These approaches suggest that learning becomes most transformative when students move beyond observing a place to *inhabiting* it—listening, participating, and reflecting and forming ethical relationships with the world around them. Rooted in Dewey's philosophy of experience (1938) and further developed through ecological and critical pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003; van Lier, 2004), place-based learning encourages sensorial, relational, and ethical engagement. It prompts questions such as: What does it mean to speak Chinese while standing before a mountain regarded as an ancestral dwelling? Can linguistic knowledge be fully understood without encountering the land and community that sustain it?

While experiential and place-based approaches have gained traction across disciplines such as environmental humanities and culturally responsive teaching (Klimanova & Hellmich, 2021; Melin, 2019), research in Chinese as a second language (CSL) study abroad settings remains strikingly limited. Existing studies largely focus on linguistic development or intercultural sensitivity (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Vande Berg et al., 2009). Others explore learners' engagement with urban cultural spaces, including linguistic landscapes or museums in cities (Hancock, 2022; Sayer, 2010). However, few investigations address how short-term, immersive field experiences in Indigenous communities influence learners' cultural reflection, identity awareness, and ecological consciousness. Even fewer examine how meaning is co-constructed in contexts where spoken language is partial, gestures supplement verbal exchange, and understanding emerges through ritual, rhythm, and shared physical activity (Zheng et al., 2018).

This article responds to these gaps by presenting a pedagogically structured one-day visit to an Atayal Indigenous village in Taiwan, conducted within the University of Hawai‘i Summer Intensive Chinese Program. The field experience positioned students not as cultural spectators but as active participants, engaging in ancestral rituals, mochi pounding, weaving, hunting practice, and reflective dialogue about their role as language learners and cultural guests. Using student worksheets, and post-visit interviews, we investigate how linguistic comprehension, cultural empathy, and ecological awareness were jointly constructed through lived, embodied encounters.

Specifically, the pedagogical innovation presented here explores the potential of place-based experiential learning to foster intercultural competence, ecological awareness, and transformative learning among CSL learners by analyzing students' engagement with Atayal cultural practices and land-based knowledge through participatory, embodied activities. By situating language learning within Indigenous spaces and cultural practice, this article argues that study abroad programs should aim not only to enhance linguistic proficiency but also cultivate humility, ethical awareness, and relational understanding. The Atayal village thus becomes more than a cultural "site visit"; it becomes a pedagogical landscape—a place where language emerges from soil, memory, ritual, and human connection, and where the act of learning becomes a shared experience of witnessing, participating, and honoring.

Guiding Principles: Place-based and Experiential Learning

In their review of internationalization in higher education, Dvorak et al. (2011) identified two trends that have shaped the past few decades: going global and going green. These two forces have significantly influenced the design of language and culture curricula, on the one hand, encouraging the integration of international topics and ecological perspectives into classroom instruction, and on the other, moving learning beyond the classroom into real-world settings through study abroad. The early idea that *place* and *environment* can function as teaching and learning resources (Beames et al., 2012) advocated for outdoor learning to be woven into mainstream curricula as explicit learning objectives, and integrated into assessment practices. By situating learning in real places with real histories and culture, Beames et al.'s framework encouraged educators to design experiential tasks such as visiting local neighborhoods or taking more in-depth field trips. In such contexts, teachers serve as facilitators who scaffold and design activities that position students in a context where knowledge is learned as situated and relational. Learners, guided by curiosity and interest, can thus perceive the interconnections between humans and their environment, develop respect for places, and ultimately foster sustainable ways of thinking and behaving.

Recognizing that learning is shaped by place—and that place carries meaning and history—the place-based learning principle integrates the mastery of target skills with a deep understanding of the environments in which those skills are used (Klimanova & Hellmich, 2021; Smith & Sobel, 2010). By immersing learners in real-world settings where the target language is spoken and its culture is lived, place-based learning invites active engagement with the physical, cultural, and historical dimension of environment and community. Through direct interactions with local people, landscapes, and everyday practices, students develop a more holistic grasp of the target language and its sociocultural context, thereby strengthening both communicative competence and contextual awareness.

Rooted in the philosophy of experiential education formalized by John Dewey (1938), learning through experience, especially in its place-based form, has long been practiced by Indigenous communities to sustain and transmit cultural heritage, well before it was recognized in Western higher educational theory (Roberts, 2012). As momentum builds for holistic and experiential approaches (Miller et al., 2018), the fusion of experiential and place-based strategies has become increasingly common across fields such as environmental science, cultural studies, and language pedagogy (e.g., Harrison, 2010; Stevenson, 2008; Zhang et al., 2020). This integration not only deepens learners' disciplinary and contextual understanding, but also accommodates diverse learning modalities, promoting perception-rich, action-oriented engagement with the world (van Lier, 2004).

Experiential learning, in this context, refers to an educational approach that integrates all aspects of the learner's being—mind, body, and spirit—into the learning experience. It recognizes that learning a new language involves much more than memorizing vocabulary and grammar; it entails engaging with the language meaningfully and connecting it to the learners' own life and experiences (Miller et al., 2018). In practice, this involves immersive activities where students not only practice the language but also engage with the cultural and environmental elements of the places where the language is spoken. The aim is to create educational experiences that expand the language learning experience by cultivating deep cultural understanding and appreciation for the people who use the language.

Another important concept often associated with place-based pedagogy is embodied language learning. The intellectual roots of embodied language learning trace back to embodied cognition research in the 1980s-1990s (e.g., Barsalou, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The conceptual link to second language acquisition (SLA) and language instruction gradually emerges as researchers apply embodied cognition frameworks to language learning. The explicit term "embodied language learning" appears in educational research by the late 2010s and early 2020s (e.g., Jusslin et al., 2022; Macedonia & Knösche, 2011). Embodied language teaching and learning conceptualize language as grounded in bodily action, perception, and interaction with the material world: learners construct meaning through movement, gesture, spatial orientation, and sensorimotor engagement in real or pedagogically designed activities rather than through abstract symbol manipulation alone (e.g., Barsalou, 2008; van Lier, 2004). When aligned with place-based pedagogy, embodiment situates language learning in locally meaningful environments, where linguistic forms emerge through participation in place-specific practices and encounters, echoing Dewey's emphasis on experience and Gruenewald's call to connect learning to lived places and communities (Dewey, 1938; Gruenewald, 2003).

Place-based education also aligns with principles of critical pedagogy, the purpose of which is to engage learners in the act of *awareness*, challenging them to reflect on a situation that has "spatial, geographical, and contextual dimension" (Gruenewald 2003, p.4). The intersection of these two approaches offers "a pedagogical space for authentic environmental and cultural learning by engaging students in constructing thick descriptions…and critical analyses" (Stevenson, 2008, p.353). In essence, learning environments outside the classroom provide a vital complement to traditional classroom instruction by drawing upon "content offered by the local landscape and its natural and built heritage" (Beames et al., 2012). Such frameworks create opportunities for authentic engagement with the environment, hands-on learning opportunities, and culturally grounded instruction. In this sense, critical pedagogy and critical analyses involve guiding learners to interpret place-based experiences reflexively, examine contextual meanings, and connect lived encounters with broader cultural and environmental understanding.

In its *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (TNSCB, 2015), the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) reiterates the importance of enabling learners to investigate, explain, and reflect on the interrelationships among the practices, products, and perspectives of the culture they study. This principle calls for pedagogical designs that move beyond static and discrete descriptions toward dynamic encounters with living cultural practices. Within this framework, place-based learning provides an effective approach that situates students in authentic environments where they can observe behaviors, interact with the communities, and engage in reflection that connects their own perspectives with those of the target culture.

Language programs, in particular, have begun to explore the potential of integrating environmental humanities and sustainability studies into their curricula (e.g., de la Fuente, 2022; Melin, 2019), thereby extending the goals of language education beyond linguistic proficiency. Integrating place-based and experiential learning have become a prominent framework for study abroad programs (e.g. Hodge, 2019; Kern & Rodic, 2022), as such programs enhance learning through site visits, cultural engagement, and authentic immersion, often accompanied by comparison and critical reflection (Zhang et al., 2020). Study abroad experiences thus provide an ideal setting for such approaches, yielding gains across cognitive, affective, and interpersonal dimensions (McKeown, 2009) and enhancing students' international awareness and multicultural competence (Anderson et al. 2006; Lewin, 2009). Various comparative studies have

demonstrated that study abroad tends to produce greater intercultural gains than domestic coursework, but outcomes depend heavily on program design, immersion and duration (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Vande Berg et al., 2009). Field trips, an essential component of many study abroad programs, often involve visits to cultural and ecological sites where landscape and landmarks illustrate the interplay between humans and nature. Such experiences are particularly vital for cultivating place-based, experiential learning in powerful environments outside of the classroom and can "profoundly change learners' perception of place, learning content and the ways in which learning outcomes are achieved" (Zheng et al., 2018, p.56).

Recent scholarship regarding place-based, embodied, and experiential learning has focused on how such approaches foster intercultural development and experiential engagement. However, research on cultural site field trips that address both linguistic and environmental learning outcomes remains scarce. The few existing studies suggest that field-based learning can enhance intercultural engagement and situated language use when environmental themes are incorporated (Klimanova & Hellmich, 2021), or that such field experiences can heighten language awareness, critical reading of space, and the connection between the classroom and the lived environment (Sayer, 2010). Hancock's (2022) study on students' visits to historical monuments during short-term programs showed that temporary field engagement can serve as a pedagogical tool for reflective understanding. Nevertheless, student experiences in Indigenous cultural environments, although increasingly integrated into study-abroad curricula, remains under-investigated, especially in terms of how and to what extent such visits shape their worldviews and cultural perspectives. Guided by the place-based experiential framework, this article seeks to address this gap by examining students' one-day visit to an Atayal tribe during a summer study abroad program in Taiwan. Specifically, it aims to provide a panoramic view of students' immersion in the Atayal community as a living laboratory for experiencing Indigenous culture and its ecological setting, and demonstrate a potential of how students' hands-on activities and reflective narratives reveal their learning and critical engagement with Atayal daily life.

Cultural Immersion: Experiencing the Atayal Lifestyle through a One-day Field Trip Place-Based Embodied Pedagogy and Instructional Design

The University of Hawai'i's Summer Intensive Chinese Program in Taiwan (UHM-TW) collaborated with the National Tsing Hua University in Hsinchu to integrate place-based experiential components into its curriculum. Although the program follows a highly intensive language training schedule, it includes a series of field trips designed to complement classroom instruction. Over 8 weeks, 14 students of various ACTFL proficiency levels (intermediate to advanced, see ACTFL, 2024) can participate in up to 10 of 14 curated site visits—ranging from the National Palace Museum and the TSMC (Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company) Museum of Innovation to historical towns such as Jiufen and Fort Santo Domingo. Among these, however, the visit to a village of the Atayal, Taiwan's most widely dispersed Indigenous group, offers an immersive cultural and ecological learning experience that differs fundamentally from the other guided tours in this program. Designed and operated by returning youth[1] committed to revitalizing their ancestral community through engagement with non-tribal participants, this field

[1] The term "returning youth" here refers to Atayal young adults who migrate back to their ancestral communities after periods of out-migration, motivated to reclaim cultural heritage and contribute to local revitalization. It is often used to foreground youth agency in sustaining Indigenous language, traditions, and place-based identity.

trip emphasizes direct participation in daily and major Atayal ceremonial practices, livelihood, and subsistence activities, rather than passive tourist observation.

The Atayal Yamai ("stone") Village is located in Wufeng Township, Hsinchu County, at an elevation of roughly 300 meters. Nestled among northern bamboo forest and mountain streams, it offers a rich ecological environment that supports the community's continuing cultural practices. As Taiwan's third-largest Indigenous group, Atayal people are unique for their strict ancestral code of conduct, traditional facial tattooing signifying maturity and skill, and exceptional proficiency in weaving and hunting (TCGIPC, 2020). The selected activity, the *Atayal Hunter School* experience, was chosen for its strong integration of livelihood production and cultural practices, including hunting, weaving, food preparation, and ritual practices governed by ancestral norms (*gaga*) and respect for the natural environment. These practices provided an authentic sociocultural context in which Chinese functioned as a working language for action, interaction, and reflection rather than as an abstract classroom subject.

Pedagogically, the activity was conducted around principles of place-based, experiential, and embodied learning. Prior to the community visit, students engaged with a structured PowerPoint module that introduced Taiwan's Indigenous groups with a focused emphasis on Atayal social organization, belief systems, subsistence practices, and the instructional role of the indigenous 教官(*jiaoguan*, or teaching/training officer). In this context, *jiaoguan* does not simply denote a "teacher," but a hybrid authority figure who simultaneously serves as a trainer of hunting and craft skills, a cultural insider authorized to transmit Atayal knowledge and ancestral norms, and an officer-like authority responsible for discipline, safety, and ritual protocol. This pre-activity preparation scaffolded key content knowledge and task-relevant Mandarin vocabulary, enabling students to participate meaningfully and respectfully in subsequent on-site activities.

During the visit, instruction was delivered primarily in Mandarin Chinese by three Indigenous *jiaoguan*, and students engaged in embodied, hands-on activities (e.g., archery, trap-making, weaving, millet-based food preparation, and ritual enactment) while completing a guided worksheet that prompted observation, description, and analysis of language use, cultural meaning, and ecological values in situ. Following the activity, learning was consolidated through peer-based oral sharing and written reflective assignments, in which students connected embodied experience to linguistic expression and cultural interpretation. Collectively, this instructional process operationalized the integration of language, culture, body, and place within a study-abroad context.

The student learning outcomes (SLOs) for this trip were threefold: (i) to develop an understanding of Atayal livelihood production, cultural practices, and environmental beliefs through direct participation; (ii) to enhance Mandarin Chinese proficiency by following instructions, asking questions, describing actions and materials, and interacting appropriately with culturally authoritative speakers in a non-classroom setting; and (iii) to cultivate intercultural and ethical awareness through reflection on positionality, authority, and place-based knowledge transmission.

Language Proficiency Development through Embodied, Place-Based Interaction

Throughout this field trip, students are expected to use Mandarin Chinese purposefully and appropriately to follow and respond to instructions given by the Indigenous teaching officer, ask clarification questions, describe actions, materials, and processes during hands-on activities

(e.g., hunting tools, weaving, food preparation, ritual steps), and recount and reflect on the experience orally and in writing. Upon the completion of this field trip, students are expected to demonstrate increased listening comprehension, interactional competence, and contextually grounded vocabulary and structures, showing the ability to align linguistic choices with authority relations, activity types, and cultural expectations in a real-world, non-classroom setting. This outcome foregrounds Mandarin as a working language for action, not merely a medium of explanation. Language development emerges through embodied participation, social interaction with culturally authoritative speakers, and place-specific tasks, thereby reinforcing the integration of language, culture, and environment that is central to study-abroad learning design.

To prepare for this visit, teachers held a pre-trip orientation session introducing students to the itinerary, communicative etiquette, and simple expressions in Atayal language. Students were also briefed on respectful behavior during ceremonial events. Prior to departure, they received assignment sheets structured into multiple tasks ranging from language-based exercises to cultural awareness preparation (see Appendix A for a list of tasks with descriptions). These preparatory and follow-up tasks encouraged active observation, interaction, and reflection, turning the field trip into a structured pedagogical sequence rather than a recreational outing.

Immersion in Atayal Practices

The one-day immersion in Yamai Village unfolded through eight sequential activities: (i) communal dance and bamboo cannon salute, (ii) face tattooing and ancestral ritual; (iii) millet dumpling preparation; (iv) hunting site illustration; (v) arrow shooting; (vi) string-basket weaving; (vii) mochi pounding; and (viii) bamboo barbecue. Throughout the process, Atayal hosts communicated mainly in Mandarin Chinese with a local accent, while UHM-TW instructors participated alongside students as co-learners rather than supervisors. This flattened hierarchy encouraged shared discovery and reduced distance between teacher, learner, and host community. Students were instructed to complete the worksheet (see Appendix A) upon returning to the classroom. Although the worksheet required students to respond in Chinese, language learning was not the primary focus; rather, students used Chinese at their level to record, recall, and reflect on various highlights of the day.

Upon arrival, students participated in a welcome ceremony. Female participants donned traditional Atayal vests woven in bright red with black horizontal stripes and matching headbands, while male participants wore darker vests with red horizontal stripes and matching headbands. The group joined hands in a circular communal dance, following rhythmic foot movements guided by tribal hosts, and the ceremony concluded with the firing of a saluting bamboo cannon, symbolizing festivity and warm reception.

Figure 1
Communal Dances

Source: Photo courtesy of authors.

The next activity introduced the ancestral worship ritual. Participants received symbolic facial tattoos—diamond-shaped on the cheeks for women and vertical bands across the forehead and chin for men—signifying adulthood, courage, and spiritual connection with ancestors. Each participant held a cup of millet wine, faced the mountain believed to embody ancestral spirits, dipped a finger into the wine, and flicked drops toward the effigy while chanting “Mhway Su” (“gratitude” or “thanks!”) This ritual concluded when all participants finished their millet wine after the communal cheer.

Figure 2
Worshiping Ancestral Spirits

Source: Photo courtesy of authors.

Following these initial rituals, students engaged in a sequence of hands-on cultural practices. They first learned to make millet dumplings, wrapping the mixture in reed leaves, and tying them with colored strings for identification before steaming. Next came a demonstration of traditional hunting techniques, where an Atayal instructor explained how hunters interpret wind direction and animal footprints to locate prey.

Figure 3

Hunting Site Visit

Source: Photo courtesy of authors.

They strategically dig traps that exploit the terrain and use spring-loaded bamboo poles to hoist trapped animals. The thickness and curvature of the bamboo poles, rope length, soil depth, and arrangement of fallen leaves all determine the effectiveness of the trap and the type of animal likely to be caught. The demonstration introduced students to the ecological knowledge and material precision intertwined in this Indigenous technology. Following the demonstration, students were given the opportunity to engage in traditional arrow shooting practice using Atayal bows and arrows to aim at a paper target shaped like a wild boar, divided into labeled scoring sections. Students lined up to shoot, targeting the higher-scoring sections. Afterward, students moved to participate in a workshop to weave bottle carriers from linen strings—a traditional utilitarian craft that reflects both aesthetic design and practical functionality in Atayal life. The completed carriers can be used to carry disposable plastic water bottles or bubble tea cups, linking traditional craftsmanship with contemporary everyday use.

The activity emphasized collaboration as the group proceeded to a tent where instructors demonstrated millet mochi pounding. Millet mochi is a sacred and celebratory food in Atayal culture, traditionally prepared and served during important occasions such as the Ancestral Spirit ritual, the Sowing Festival, and weddings. The collaborative pounding of glutinous millet rice thus symbolizes close social bounds, agricultural abundance, and the communal unity through which Atayal heritage is sustained (TDOE, 2019). Working around a large mortar, two demonstrators alternated pestles in synchronized motion, guided by a staff member's rhythmic chants to facilitate coordination. Students then joined in pairs, maintaining coordinated foot positions, proper pestle-holding posture, and rhythmic turn-taking in pounding. Each pair took

turns and was replaced by the next when they felt tired or sore, continuing until the instructor announced that the mochi dough had reached its ideal consistency.

Figure 4
Mochi Pounding

Source: Photo courtesy of authors.

This cooperative process emphasized teamwork, communication, and cultural rhythm, ensuring that every student and teacher participated and contributed, making everyone eligible to share and enjoy the freshly prepared mochi together.

The final activity featured an Atayal-style barbecue. Each participant received a six-foot bamboo stick, sharpened on one end to skewer marinated pork, mushrooms, and sausages, and flattened on the other to anchor into banana trunks surrounding a central fire. Students tended their own skewers and enjoyed the meal together around the campfire, symbolizing both community and closure to the day's shared experience.

Perspectives on Land, Environment and Experiential Learning

The visit to Atayal Yamai Village represents a pedagogical approach that extends language and culture learning with integration of environmental and sustainability perspectives by taking students beyond classroom walls and positioning learning within lived experiences, as done in a similar study abroad course by Thomas (2020). As illustrated in the last section, students were provided Chinese worksheets to complete (see Appendix A), which they submitted upon returning to the Hsinchu campus in Taiwan. Preliminary review of these reflections indicated that many responses remained at a surface level, reflecting the constraints of students' limited target-language proficiency. Most descriptions relied on generic expressions such as "interesting" or "I'm quite interested" and did not articulate deeper critical reflection on cultural

understanding, environmental awareness, or the relationship between language and learning in a particular place.

To gain more substantive insights into their experiential learning process, six out of the 14 students who were highly engaged during the visit and submitted more reflective Chinese short-essays than their peers were invited for follow-up interviews. Among them, three—abbreviated as S-G, S-W, and S-P—granted oral consent for their interview data to be used by the authors. The semi-structured interviews in English centered on three main dimensions: (i) which activities students found most meaningful and why; (ii) how they personally connected these experiences to themselves, including memories, identities or cultural background; and (iii) whether the visit influenced their views on human-environment relationships, their Chinese learning, life in the United States, or their sense of global citizenship.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 58 minutes, was video recorded, transcribed via Otter.ai, and subsequently categorized into three perspectives based on the thematic keywords generated in each interview, as elaborated in the following three subsections. In this section, students' interview responses are cross-referenced with their worksheet submissions to provide a more nuanced interpretation of their learning. The analysis focuses primarily on activities (i), (ii), (iv) and (v), which were consistently identified as the most impactful. These include ritual worship and face-painting, arrow-shooting, trap-setting demonstration, and mochi pounding, all of which combined embodied practices, in-place interaction, and cultural symbolism. Together, these experiences had the potential to enable students to encounter culture not as abstract knowledge, but as lived practice embedded in land, tradition, and daily survival.

Awareness of and Connection to the Land through Environmental Immersion

Analysis of the 14 completed post-field trip worksheets indicates that most students expressed highly positive evaluations of the excursion, frequently identifying it as one of the most meaningful learning experiences in the program. Students also emphasized that such an experience is specific to the Taiwan context and difficult to replicate in their home country. Their fascination stemmed not only from learning Indigenous culture but from engaging with activities they had never encountered before—observing animal traps, weaving string baskets, participating in ancestral worshiping with facial tattooing, and hiking through the natural environment. Some also expressed mixed feelings about the communal dance—calling it "fun" despite sweating heavily, yet also "awkward," especially when traditional garments slipped during dancing movement.

Among all activities, arrow-shooting stood out as "most fun" and "very cool," and it "filled me with a competitive spirit". Recollecting her high school archery experience in a formal sports context, S-G reflected that drawing a bow made of real wood during the visit required more strength and effort. This physical challenge led her to realize that for the Atayal, arrow-shooting was not a recreational pursuit but "their lifestyle, how they hunt." Similarly, S-P compared it to his Boy Scouts experience in the United States: "it was just an activity for fun"; whereas "in Taiwan it was a way of life. There, every motion had meaning—when to shoot, how to stand, even how to breathe…it's for survival." This reflection allowed him to imagine himself in the position of a hunter, leading him to question environmental sustainability: "if the guys in the village hunt all the boars, then they're not going to have any more boars left because they haven't given the boar enough time to repopulate."

Students were equally impressed by demonstrations of traditional traps used to capture animals. They described these mechanisms as "smart," "special and amazing," "reflective of wisdom," and "[a] way to deal with the natural environment." What particularly surprised one student was learning that Atayal could immediately tell whether the trap had actually caught an animal or whether the movement of the string swinging was merely caused by the wind. Another student noted that Atayal follow sustainable practices; for instance, they are allowed to catch red-faced squirrels but must release white-faced ones in compliance with governmental ecological protection regulations. S-G reflected on how the traps were made entirely from natural materials, "from what they could find in the forest—vines, sticks, rocks—nothing wasted," and added, "it made me realize how much knowledge you can gain from paying attention to your surroundings," concluding that the Atayal "connection to the land isn't abstract; it's physical and living every day." S-W also admired the ingenuity of the traps, describing them as "amazing contraptions," and noting, "they're just observing what they see, and that's how they are able to trap birds or, like, small other types of animals…they don't have to wait and stake out…they can make something that does it for them." Whether using arrows or traps she believed that Atayal "showed us their respect towards nature and their gods."

Another powerful moment was the ritual facial tattooing, performed with washable ink before ancestor worship. Students described the patterns on each other's faces as "very cool". S-P reflected that the act felt spiritual: "like showing gratitude and becoming part of the environment." He added that it reminded him that identity is "not only about who we are but also where we belong." For S-W, walking up the mountain to the worship area felt sacred; she realized it was a place "where these people have lived their whole lives and taken care of. So we need to respect that." S-G connected the ritual to her Navajo heritage and to broader Indigenous practices, noting a shared belief in a "deep connection with the land and the environment that you're around…while honoring that and in the same way you're honoring where you are" which made the ritual "even more meaningful as it's connected to the place you're in."

Being situated in an unfamiliar physical, cultural, and ecological environment prompted students to think spatially and contextually (Gruenwald, 2003). Immersions allowed them to "read the world" rather than just "read the word" (Freire & Macedo, 1987), fostering reflection grounded in sensory experience rather than abstract classroom knowledge. S-G elaborated on face-painting and ancestral worship by explaining that honoring mountains, water and ancestors reflects reverence for elements of the environment that are both spiritual and cultural. She emphasized that wearing face paint during ritual created a sense of belonging "personally within [the] tribe." For her, it was not merely artistic decoration but a lived expression of environmental respect, cultural identity, and spiritual connection.

Culture, Connection, and Comparison

A section of the worksheet (see Appendix A, Task #6) asked students to identify connections between Atayal culture and other Indigenous cultures with which they were familiar. This prompted several students to compare what they witnessed in the village with Native Hawaiian or Native American traditions. One student, a Hawaiian resident, wrote that "Native Hawaiians traveled by canoe across great distances to reach Hawai‘i; they were very kind-hearted; they cultivated taro, which helped purify the river water—a very environmentally friendly practice (translation by authors, see student writing in Appendix B). This task encouraged students to reflect not only on the land they visited but also on the land they inhabit,

thereby bridging their experiences in Taiwan and their own cultural heritage in the United States. Some students further extended this comparison to political and historical critique. For example, one noted "the United States practiced colonialism against Indigenous peoples and seized their land" (see Appendix B). Another student observed that although Native American and Atayal people share similarities in clothing, communal dance, and traditional food, "the biggest difference is that Native Americans in the United States were persecuted by the government" (see Appendix C). These reflections collectively highlight students' awareness of colonial histories and the complex power relations that have shaped Indigenous experiences in different national contexts.

Although most students' written responses in Chinese were limited to simple comparison of the lifestyle or environment, deeper cultural reflection emerged more explicitly in the interviews. For example, S-G's wrote briefly: "I have Navajo ancestry, and this Indigenous tribe has many different types of clothing, mainly due to the climate, the Navajo people live in the California desert" (see Appendix D). However, during her interview, she offered a more profound reflection on mochi pounding, connecting it to her own cultural practice. She explained that the process "reminded me so much of grinding the dough to make tamales with my family in Mexico. Both are about patience and teamwork, and both bring people together." She elaborated that this realization helps her understand that "food is not just something you eat—it's how culture is passed down, how families stay connected." Her reflection underscores the idea that cultural practices associated with food often serve as a medium for intergenerational connection and identity preservation.

Similarly, S-W's responses in Chinese were relatively brief, such as contrasting Hawaiian and Atayal food practices "Hawaiians don't eat rice, but eat taro. Also, the way they cook pork is different; we cook pork underground" (see Appendix E). However, in her interview, she expressed a deeper emotional and cultural resonance. She explained that the day in the village reminded her "of being in Hawaii, doing farming and fishing. It's the same idea of living with nature, not just using it." She felt that both communities view the land not as property but as kin—something to respect and care for. She reflected, "I felt like the people there and us back home were connected because we both respect the Earth as part of who we are." She further noted that the experience reminded her of Hawaiian cultural values: "We use Hawaiian words, teach kids to respect the land and honor our ancestors. Seeing similar values in Taiwan showed me that Indigenous respect for nature is universal."

S-P also engaged in comparative thinking, particularly when reflecting on arrow-shooting, as discussed in the previous subsection. He noted that the same physical action—shooting an arrow—served entirely different purposes across cultures: "one for fun, one for survival." This comparison encouraged him to think critically about how different communities related to survival, environment, and modernity. He expanded on this by contrasting the lifestyle of the Atayal community with that of contemporary society. In his words, "we don't have to worry about clean water, because we can just get it out of the faucet, or buy bottled water, or whatnot, we don't have to work too much of those things…actual survival is kind of really distant past for a lot of people compared to those guys, who have to do it again." Here, he acknowledges the privilege of modern life, where survival needs are easily met, and contrasts this with the lived realities of Indigenous communities, who still rely on intimate environmental knowledge.

He further admired the Atayal's ability to live sustainably and resourcefully, noting, "that's one thing that they have over us guys that live in the modern world, which is being able to

make do with less, or be able to do more with less compared to what we have." This reflection highlights a perception of loss—modern society has convenience and abundance, yet lacks the resilience, gratitude, and environmental responsibility that characterize Atayal life. His statement suggests a moral and ecological critique of modernity, recognizing that technological advancement often comes at the cost of environmental awareness and communal independence.

This process of cultural comparison frequently led students toward introspective questions about their own identity. As S-W summarized, "It also made me reflect on my identity. Being part Hawaiian, I felt like I was meeting cousins across the ocean, their songs, their rituals, their connection to the Earth—all of that felt familiar. It strengthened my sense of who I am and where I come from." Her metaphor of "meeting cousins across the ocean" suggested a sense of pan-Indigenous kinship—a recognition of shared ancestral values, land-based spirituality, and cultural resilience, despite geographical differences. This encounter fostered identity affirmation, cultural pride, and a deeper understanding of belonging.

Comprehension and Communication in Cultural Immersion

Students participating in the UHM-TW study abroad demonstrated Chinese proficiency levels ranging from the ACTFL intermediate-low to advanced-mid. During the visit to Yamai Village, all communication from Atayal staff was delivered in Mandarin, though often pronounced with a regional or Indigenous accent. This stood in stark contrast to students' experiences in classroom environments, where instructors typically adjust their speech for comprehensibility and scaffold linguistic input based on student's proficiency. Immersed in an authentic communicative context, students encountered speech that was not only non-simplified but also embedded in cultural practices, non-verbal communication, and environmental cues.

S-G reflected that she could follow the instruction for the communal dancing but noted the shift in interpretive responsibility: "as a linguistic student, not only studying languages but also cultural unity within language, it's really off the bat." She elaborated that the ritual began with symbolic practice—"the donning of the garments, we're all one big family"—followed by holding hands in a long chain to form a circle. For her, this circle formation and collective movement function as a powerful symbol of "unity and togetherness," amplified by "the kicking and the joy." Such reflections demonstrate that the cultural meaning of the dance could not be fully conveyed through verbal explanation alone, nor could it be comprehended from classroom cultural lectures; instead, it emerged from a context in situ, through embodied participation—wearing traditional costume, following communal rhythms, sharing collective space in steps and movements, as well as emotional engagement.

Students repeatedly emphasized that, despite partial comprehension of spoken language, meaning was accessible through non-verbal strategies. S-G remarked that even when she could not understand every word, "you can communicate just by watching people's gestures and expressions." She appreciated that Atayal staff were patient, often repeating instructions "with their hands or with examples," which helped her infer meaning. This experience led her to conclude that "communication isn't only about language, but also empathy and attention." S-W similarly described the challenge of navigating unfamiliar pronunciation: "going to a place where I don't really understand what people are saying…with those different accents…even if you open your ears up a little bit more, and just think this is what that word is." She became increasingly aware that Mandarin Chinese is not the first language of many Indigenous people in Taiwan and that she, too, was operating in a second-language environment. This mutual

linguistic negotiation fostered empathy and respect. She explained that immersion required her to "use everything—your eyes, ears, and even intuition—to figure out what people mean," and found it more engaging to observe "how people express themselves naturally," "not just memorizing vocabulary." She concluded, "That's something I learned from being there, not from the classroom". For S-W, immersion paralleled first-language acquisition, which was the advantage of learning outside the classroom: "in addition to context and clues, it's like you're a child learning a language, like your mother is speaking to you."

S-P, despite being among the higher-level Chinese proficiency students, also noted partial comprehension. He recalled, "I could only understand half of what they said, but used context and body movement to guess the rest" during the demonstration of pounding mochi in a mortar. He said, "when the guide showed how to hold the stick or where to place your foot near the bottom of the mortar, that visual part made everything clearer than words alone." He concluded, "In that kind of environment, you don't just hear the language—you feel it. The rhythm of how people talk, the pauses, the laughter—it all becomes part of the meaning. I learned that understanding comes from listening beyond words." He further observed that his mode of learning was highly pragmatic: "there's no paper to note down what you just heard," suggesting that comprehension in such settings is immediate, embodied, multimodal and situational rather than text-based.

Taken together, these reflections indicate that students' comprehension during the visit relied on multimodal and relational forms of communication. They recognized that language in such contexts is inseparable from gesture, rhythm, spatial movement, tone, and interpersonal sensitivity. Their experiences illustrate that immersion-based language learning aligns more closely with first-language acquisition, in which meaning is constructed through sensory input, emotion, and shared activity rather than through structured grammatical instruction. As summarized by multiple students, real-world interaction allowed them to experience language as lived practice—contextual, embodied, and deeply human—highlighting dimensions of communication that classroom learning alone cannot replicate.

Pedagogical Implications: A Transformative Dimension

The integration of place-based learning into the study abroad curriculum reinforces the central pedagogical goal of deepening intercultural competence, nurturing empathy, and cultivating an appreciation for Indigenous ecological knowledge. By situating students outdoors, learning unfolds in an environment where meaning emerges through lived human experience and interaction (Thomas, 2020). The Atayal visit is not a regular field trip but a deliberately designed pedagogical excursion with clearly articulated linguistic, cultural, and ecological objectives, as outlined in the previous section. It represents an illustrative model of experiential pedagogy—one that fuses linguistic, cultural, and ecological learning into a single, embodied process. Following the broader trend in outdoor education as "a much-needed complement to more conventional outdoor/environmental curriculum and instruction" (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000, p.2), this field experience exemplifies the benefits of learning through situated practice, where knowledge is socially structured and contextually enacted. From a sociocultural perspective, it embodies the essence of critical pedagogy by positioning learners not as observers of culture, but as active participants in co-creating meaning through engagement with people, place, and environment. Students' reflections illustrate how such embodied experiences transcend traditional language learning. Rather than merely observing Indigenous traditions, they enacted

them—participating in routines, crafts, and rituals that integrated sensory, physical and linguistic engagement. This kind of learning aligns with ACTFL's cultural standard emphasizing the triadic relationship between practices, products, and perspectives (TNSCB, 2015), thereby offering a multidimensional space where language, culture, and environment intersect to form authentic communicative experiences.

The trip to Yama Village, therefore, was far more than a cultural visit; it was an enactment of socially and ecologically responsive pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003). As S-W recalled, she made an effort "to approach every activity that day with an open mind" because she "respects their culture and Hawaii culture too," linking the two and "feeling really connected through that respect." She became aware of "the importance of preserving authenticity," emphasizing that "actually being in their space is so different from reading about it." Unlike her traditional classroom experience with teachers or textbooks, S-W observed that "when we were in the village, it felt real and alive…you're there to learn, and the respect of the people there connect you. You take their knowledge and learn something new in their place that you won't be able to get from the teachers or textbook." As the only student who participated in the summer program twice, with the Atayal visit as a recurring highlight, S-W's reflection reveals longitudinal impact: "when I came back home, I found myself re-evaluating my lifestyle. The way the tribe respected the land and lived simply stayed with me. I started hiking more, buying less, and teaching my friends about Indigenous respect for nature. It changed how I live every day." Her experience illustrates not only the cognitive but also the affective and behavioral transformation central to experiential and transformative learning.

This transformative dimension was further articulated in the reflections of S-G and S-P, whose responses demonstrated the sustained pedagogical influence of the field experience. For S-G, the encounter prompted her to reflect "on how culture, language, and empathy connect" when she observed how the Atayal "live close to nature." The experience led her to "question what I really need" and reconsider her relationship with materialism and globalization, recognizing that "globalization isn't just economic—it's human." She concluded that "understanding others deeply can dissolve prejudice," a realization that "changed how I want to engage with people in my future career." Similarly, S-P reflected that the Atayal "live pragmatically," while he and his peers "live idealistically." He lamented "how modern life separates us from the natural world," realizing that "the tribe's way of living showed that knowledge isn't only in books—it's in the environment, in people's habits, in their stories. It made me want to slow down and pay more attention to the world around me." Their reflections collectively reveal how immersion in an ecological community can foster self-reflexivity, ethical awareness, and a redefinition of knowledge itself—an epistemological shift from abstraction to lived experience.

From an academic standpoint, the trip also reoriented students' understanding of language learning. S-G contrasted her perception before and after the experience: "Before this trip, I mostly saw language study as vocabulary and grammar, but being with the tribe showed me how language lives in people's stories and actions." She concluded, "Now I see it as building relationships, not just collecting words." S-P similarly recalled that he "used to think learning ended with grades," but after the trip, "now I see it continues with reflection. The trip made me more curious, more patient, and more aware of how much I still have to learn from others and from the environment." Recognizing that "what I know is actually very small compared to what can be learned," he reflected that "learning never stops, and thinking you already know everything is just living in ignorance." These reflections vividly articulate Mezirow's (1991)

hallmarks of transformative learning: shifts from passive to active learning, from surface comprehension to reflective awareness, and from self-centered understanding to intellectual humility. Through this trip, learning became both lifelong and life-wide, extending beyond linguistic boundaries to encompass moral and ecological consciousness.

This pedagogical innovation underscores how place-based learning redefines the roles of teachers and students. Teachers become designers and facilitators of curriculum responsive to local realities rather than dispensers of pre-packed content (Smith, 2002). Students, in turn, move beyond consuming culture toward critically and reflectively engaging outdoors. This approach repositions cultural immersion not as academic tourism but as a dialogic, transformative encounter. It enables students to transfer their insights homeward, retroflexing their learning (Harrison, 2010) by reassessing their own cultural assumptions, values, and habits. In this way, place-based pedagogy enriches both linguistic and humanistic dimensions of language education, bridging intercultural learning with ethical self-cultivation. S-G's concluding reflection encapsulates this transformative pedagogy: "I realized that studying abroad isn't just about improving Chinese. It's about learning humility—recognizing that every person you meet has knowledge you don't. That awareness itself is transformative." This statement embodies the essence of global citizenship education and the ultimate goal of language pedagogy—to nurture learners who are linguistically competent, ethically grounded, environmentally aware, and socially responsible citizens capable of engaging in the world with empathy, humility, and critical reflection.

Concluding Remarks and Future Research

This article introduces a place-based experiential learning design in CSL education that foregrounds the interconnection among language use, land, culture, and ethical engagement. Rather than pursuing broad generalization, the instructional design emphasizes situated learning and interpretive meaning-making within a specific Indigenous context. The one-day field experience in an Atayal community and the accompanying learner reflections illustrate how short-term, community-engaged encounters can foster linguistic awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and ecological consciousness in study abroad settings, echoing prior work that highlights the contextual and developmental nature of experiential learning outcomes (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Vande Berg et al., 2009).

As a report of a pedagogical innovation, this article describes how learners at the ACTFL intermediate or advanced level have the potential to engage meaningfully with culturally and ecologically complex context, even when their language proficiency constrains expressive precision or nuances. Most written reflections were produced in intermediate-level Chinese; however, follow-up interviews conducted in students' first language enabled fuller articulation of affective, ethical, and environmental insights. This bilingual reflective architecture underscores the instructional value of allowing multilingual meaning-making in experiential learning while also signaling the need for careful handling of translation and interpretation in analysis (van Lier, 2004). Because the authors also served as program coordinators, learners' reflections emerged within authentic instructional relationships, highlighting the importance of examining how pedagogical authority and relational dynamics shape reflective practices (Lewin, 2009).

The pedagogical outcomes further point to the temporal dimensions of transformative and intercultural learning. While immediate post-experience reflections capture emotional engagement and heightened cultural awareness, only one returning participant reported sustained

changes in her lifestyle practice. This aligns with scholarship emphasizing that transformative learning unfolds over time and requires repeated opportunities for critical reflection and integration (Mezirow, 1991; Tarrant et al., 2021). Future inquiry would benefit from longitudinal study incorporating delayed interviews, reflective journals, or multimodal narratives to trace how experiential insights mature into durable orientations toward culture, ecology, and identity.

An additional pedagogical consideration concerns epistemic stance, perspective, and reciprocity. Although Indigenous knowledge and practices are central to the learning experience, interpretation is filtered primarily through visiting students and instructors. This configuration highlights the importance of future pedagogy and research that position Indigenous community members as co-educators, co-designers, and even co-narrators. Participatory and community-based approaches can promote reciprocal knowledge exchange, strengthen ethical engagement, and generate more culturally grounded interpretations of place-based learning (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Looking forward, expanding the geographical and cultural scope of place-based CSL pedagogy presents a productive direction. Comparative experiential learning initiatives across other Indigenous communities in Taiwan—such as the Amis, Paiwan, and Bunun —or among communities in the broader Chinese-speaking world, including the Naxi and Yi peoples of Yunnan, may illuminate how linguistic comprehension, land-based knowledge, and cultural values vary across contexts (Lewin, 2009; Zhang et al., 2020). Such comparisons would refine pedagogical design principles while accounting for multilingualism and cultural sustainability. Pedagogically, this report underscores the value of more deliberately scaffolded experiential cycles. Structured pre-visit learning on Indigenous ecological ethics and protocols of respect, followed by post-visit multimodal reflection, may help learners transform immediate impressions into deeper, sustained intercultural understanding while aligning experiential learning with ACTFL cultural standards (Zheng et al., 2018). Finally, in contexts of restricted mobility, digital and virtual delivery—such as 360° immersive environments or interactive ethnographic platforms—offer complementary avenues for extending place-based pedagogy beyond physical field sites.

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Appendix A
Worksheet for the Atayal Visit

班級：303 姓名：[redacted] 日期：_____ A+

雅麥部落——部落野趣逍遙遊

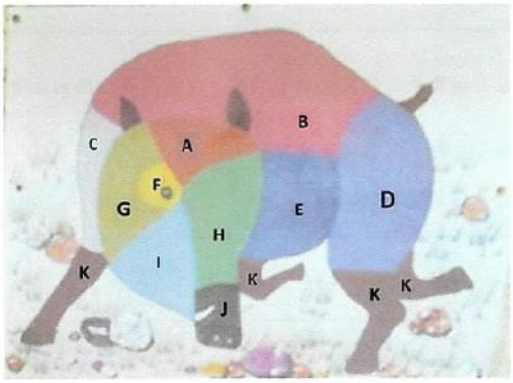
Task 1: what does "Yamai" mean?
一、「雅麥」是什麼意思？石 ✓

Task 2: What did we do today? Please arrange them in the order we did them
二、我們今天做了什麼？請按照順序排序。

1.烤肉	2.編織手提袋	3.弓箭體驗	4.打麻糬
5.包小米粽	6.聽陷阱解說	7.跳舞	8.放竹炮

7 → 8 → 5 → 6 → 3 → 2 → 4 → 1 ✓

Task 3: In the archery activity, the __ area receives the highest score, and the ___ area receives the lowest score. Please ask the staff why the scores are different
三、射箭活動中，___F___部位的分數最高，___K___部位的分數最低。請問問看工作人員為什麼分數不同？最高的意思是你很快殺了豬，是好的. K是豬的眼睛，眼睛很小最不容易



Task 4: Match the following Atayal experssions with Chinese meanings
四、泰雅族語怎麼說？(連連看)

你好	blaqniqun
好吃	sgayeta
再見	lokah su

✓

敬祖靈時，我們對祖靈說什麼？ B

A. Hakuna Matata B. Mhway Su C. Bahway su D. Whway tsu

是什麼意思？謝謝

五、請採訪一位現場的工作人員，問問他有泰雅族語名字還是中文名字？什麼

時候大家叫他的泰雅族名字？什麼時候叫他的中文名字？ 他喜歡別人怎麼稱呼

Task 5: Interview a host staff member about whether they have an Atayal name; if so, ask when they prefer to use their Atayal name versus their Chinese name, and how they prefer to be addressed?

他？

我们都没问这些问题.

六、你知道美國的原住民文化嗎？請說一說美國原住民與台灣原住民有什麼不

Task 6: Do you know about the indigeous cultures in the U.S.? Please describe some differences between indigeous cultures in the U.S. and in Taiwan, such as food, clothing, and music.

同？比如說：食物、衣服、音樂等等。

在乔治亚州，我们有人民，是但是我觉得他们不一样.

主要的区别是食物，乔治亚的住民一般吃素菜，比如，

玉米，壁球，等，同时台湾住民一般吃米饭，猪肉，

等等. 這是什麼

Task 7: Please recall today's experiences and reflect on the most interesting ones. Write approximately 200 Chinese characters.

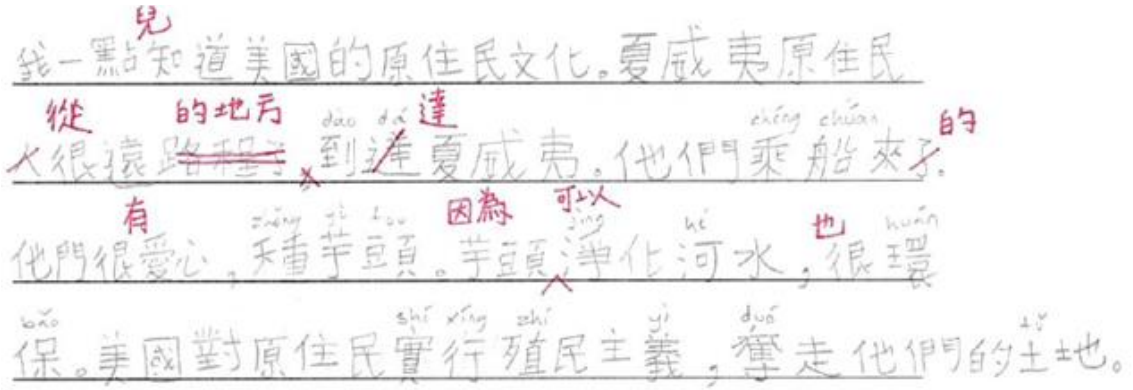
七、請回想今天你體驗了什麼活動，哪些特別有意思？請寫 200 字遊記

原来，他们介绍一下他们的文化，然后

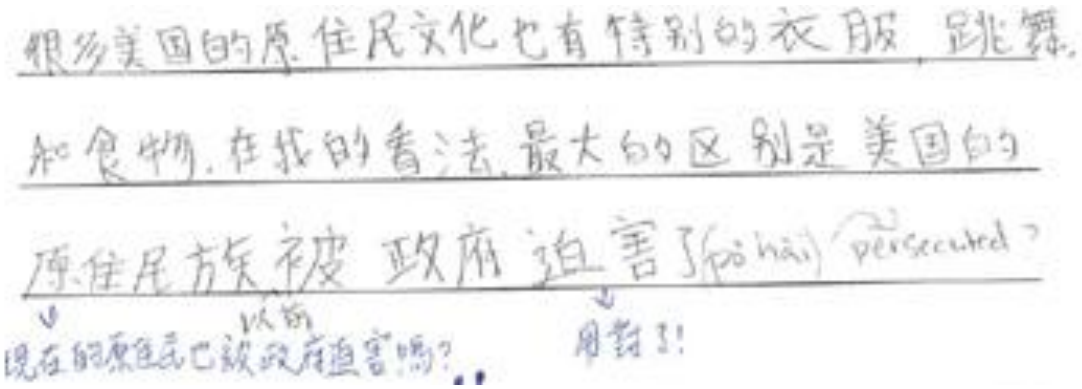
让我们跳兆舞. 我真不喜欢跳舞，后斤我觉得

是有一点麻烦，但也让我很小京牙，因为有一点

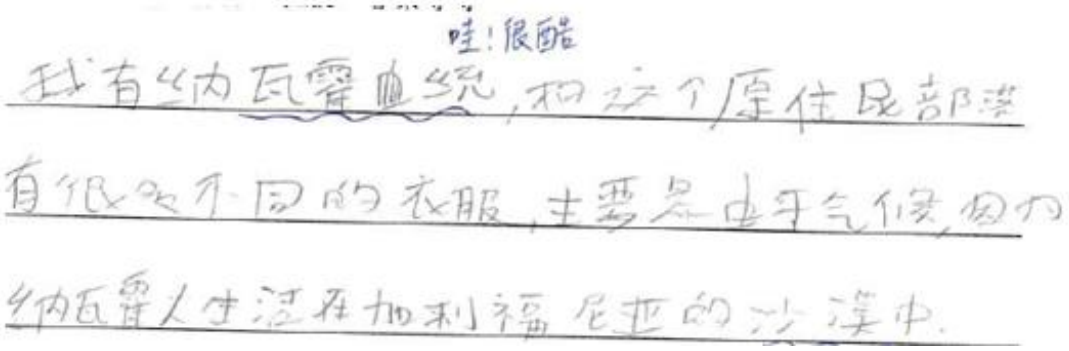
Appendix B
Student Worksheet Response on Native Hawaiian Culture (Task #6)



Appendix C
Student Worksheet Reflection on Differences Between American Indigenous Culture and Atayal Culture (Task #6)



Appendix D
Student Worksheet Response on Navajo Culture (Task #6)



Appendix E
Student Worksheet Response on Native Hawaiian Food Culture (Task #6)