Project-Based Inquiry:

Professional Development with Chinese EFL Elementary Teachers

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The Chinese Ministry of Education introduced a new English language curriculum in 2003 (Ministry of Education, 2003) to promote the development of communication-based English language skills as opposed to the traditional methods of rote learning of vocabulary and grammar (Wang, 2007; Wang & Lam, 2010). Additionally, the new curriculum focused on task-based teaching methods that would enable students to develop *communicative competence*—the knowledge of sociolinguistic behaviors and dialogic patterns of the target language in addition to vocabulary, grammar, and syntax (Canale & Swain, 1980). The overall goal of this new curriculum was to allow students to better communicate internationally.

Despite China's new English language curriculum, teachers still have difficulty teaching English in a communicative way (Rao & Chunhua, 2014) due to longstanding views of how English has been taught and of high expectations on test performance. In this chapter, we first review the history of second language learning in China, as well as the newest English language curriculum's emphasis on communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language instruction (TBLT), based on sociocultural theory. Second, we address the challenges many Chinese teachers face implementing CLT and TBLT in the classroom, and how a specific inquiry model involving project-based learning, called project-based inquiry (PBI), can help teachers engage students in the kinds of tasks the new curriculum suggests. Third, we describe a professional development program that we conducted with Chinese EFL teachers which was based on the PBI model. Finally, we conclude that Chinese EFL teachers will adapt the PBI process to their educational and cultural needs.

History of Foreign Language Learning in China

There are three periods recognized in the development of foreign language education in China; the first was from 1949-65, the second from 1966-76, and the third from 1977 onwards (Wang & Lam, 2009). As Lam (2002) notes, these periods are the results of the upheaval that happened before and after the Cultural Revolution, which occurred during the second period. During these times, China vacillated between renouncing foreign language learning and viewing the learning of English as a way to renew connections with the West and to modernize their society.

From 1991 and forward, China became more globally oriented, hosting the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and joining the World Trade Organization (Wang & Lam, 2009). As China became more open to the rest of the world, they also became more open to learning foreign languages, specifically English. In the 1990s, China designed and revised materials regarding English language learning for all levels of education.

The curriculum revisions emphasized that students should develop communicative competence in English. For example, the 1993 *Quanrizhi Gaoji Zhongxue Yingyu Jiaoxue Dagang* [English Language Syllabus for Full-time Senior Secondary School] specifically mentioned that students were to "develop *basic skills (listening, speaking, reading* and *writing)*" and "lay a solid foundation for further learning and use of English" (Ministry of Education, 1993, p.1, as cited in Wang & Lam, 2009, p. 70; emphasis in original). By 2000, the same curriculum had been modified to note that "the learning and mastery of a foreign language for international exchange is a *basic requirement for a citizen in the 21st century*" (Ministry of Education, 2000, p.1, as cited in Wang & lam, 2009, p. 70; emphasis in original). These changes evidenced China's newfound concern with global citizenship. This was seen again in 2003,

when China revised the curriculum once again, this time adding that English "can help enhance our national standards, meet the needs for the Open Door Policy, for communication with the world, and for the growth of national strength" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 1-2, as cited in Wang & Lam, 2009, p. 70).

With this newest curriculum, students were to begin learning English at age eight and spend a minimum of 80 minutes a week learning the language (Anayaegbu, Ting, & Li, 2012). Students were now to learn how to communicate using English, rather than just learn vocabulary and grammar for an examination. To achieve this new goal, the curriculum highlighted task-based language instruction, a communicative language teaching method used to help students learn communicative competence in a foreign language.

A Sociocultural Approach to EFL

Teaching methods such as communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching are rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Through social interaction, humans learn and develop. It is through mediation—"the process by which socially meaningful activities transform impulsive, unmediated, and natural behavior into higher mental processes through the use of instruments or tools" (Eun & Lim, 2009, p. 15)—and meaningful speech that humans learn to accomplish new tasks and communicate meaningful messages in a socially accepted way.

This idea is easily applied to language learning, especially given Vygotsky's own emphasis on the importance of language for human development. When applying this theory to language learning, it becomes clear that for one to learn a language, one must interact with others who speak that language. Mediation can occur naturally within the social context; in fact,

children develop their second-language proficiency by interacting with other people in

the target language, with these forms of social interaction becoming gradually

internalized, thus inducing language development. The student becomes independently

able to use forms and functions of language that can be employed only in the context of

oral interactions with other people. (Eun & Lim, 2009, p. 22)

However, Eun and Lim (2009) note that "not all adult-child interactions produce

mediational effects in instructional situations" (p. 22). Certain factors affect the process of

language development, including "the people engaging in the interactions, as well as the setting

where the interactions occur" (p. 22-23). In a classroom environment, for example, the teacher

must play the role of the mediator. This not only means the teacher must speak with his or her

students in the target language, but also provide students with the instruments or tools to be able

to communicate in this language. According to Eun and Lim (2009), along with Vygotsky

(1997), "the best—or the only possible—role that the teacher can play in the dynamic process of

teaching and learning is that of the 'director of the social environment'" (Eun & Lim, 2009, p.

23, citing Vygotsky, 1997, p. 339). Essentially, "the only way a teacher can influence a student's

learning process is by changing the instructional environment….by introducing appropriate

activities and creating challenging problem-solving situations" (Eun & Lim, 2009, p. 23). One

particular approach to this is through the communicative language teaching method, which will

be discussed in the next section.

Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), based in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural

theory, views social interaction as the most efficient means to language learning and emphasizes

instruction in communication skills as opposed to the traditional method of teaching grammar

and vocabulary. CLT has been popular since the early 1990s (Liu, 2015; Rao & Chunhua, 2014) though there is still debate around some features of the teaching method (Woods & Cakir, 2011; Najjari, 2014; Littlewood, 2014). Still, most agree that the intention of CLT is to teach students to communicate with native speakers of the target language (Savignon, 2007).

One particular approach to CLT is known as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT; Scrivener, 2011), which, in its most ideal form, uses real-world tasks to engage students in using the target language (Kelch, 2011). Such activities might include planning a trip to a place where the target language is spoken, asking a person for directions, ordering a meal at a restaurant, or buying a souvenir from a local market. During these activities the students would play varying roles—for example, from the latter example of a task, one student might be the customer, while another is the seller—and both would only speak the target language during the activity. The task, determined by the teacher, would be to accomplish a goal within this scenario; i.e., a student might need to negotiate the price of a souvenir with the seller in order to buy the artifact for a cheaper price.

TBLT can work well in a classroom. Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011) indicate that since TBLT fosters a learner-centered educational environment, has "specific constituents such as goal, procedure, specific outcome" (p. 46, citing Skehan, 1998; Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2004), and "supports content-oriented meaningful activities rather than linguistic forms" (p. 46, citing Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Carless, 2002; Littlewood, 2004), it aligns well with classroom practices.

How TBLT is implemented, however, remains vague. There is no true consensus on exactly what a "task" is, though Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu (2011) have defined it as "an activity having a particular goal and it contains communicative language in the process" (p. 48). Though there are a variety of approaches to TBLT (Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985; Skehan 1998), they

all have one main idea in common: the tasks should provide students with the opportunity to use the target language in a natural context (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011).

TBLT can be seen throughout China's new English curriculum. Zheng and Borg (2014) translated some guidelines featured in China's English language curriculum which were designed to help teachers develop tasks. They list the following:

- Activities must have clear and achievable aims and objectives.

- Activities must be relevant to students' life experiences and interests; the content and style should be as true to life as possible.

- Activities must benefit the development of students' language knowledge, language skills and ability to use language for real communication.

- Activities should be of a cross-curricular nature, promoting the integrated development of students' thinking and imagination, aesthetic and artistic sense, cooperative and creative spirit.

- Activities should make students gather, process and use information, using English to communicate with others in order to develop their ability to use English to solve real problems.

- Activities should not purely be limited to the classroom but also extend to out of school learning. (Zheng & Borg, 2014, p. 206)

As can be seen, these guidelines are not specific and do not provide any examples to teachers. The lack of practical examples, as well as much needed professional development, led to many issues with the implementation of the new curriculum in Chinese EFL classrooms (Li & Baldauf, 2011).

Issues with TBLT in the Chinese EFL Classroom

Research has shown that Chinese teachers struggle with incorporating TBLT in their classrooms (Li & Baldauf, 2011; Rao & Chunhua, 2014; Yan, 2012). Certain issues, such as large class sizes (teachers typically teach classes of 40 to 50 students), make many teachers wary of attempting to incorporate a communicative approach, as supervising so many students can be very difficult. Other issues identified have been a lack of teachers' proficiency in English as well as a lack of resources and time (Li & Baldauf, 2011). Zheng and Borg (2014) also found that many teachers were still unsure of what TBLT was and had not received appropriate training on the teaching method.

Given the challenges Chinese EFL teachers face with implementing TBLT instruction, it is understandable that many might continue with the traditional method of teaching grammar and vocabulary as a means of exam preparation. This method, however, does not promote the development of abilities that would be useful outside of the classroom and exams. In order to provide a research-based pedagogical approach that would provide a framework for CLT and TBLT in a Chinese EFL classroom, we used project-based inquiry with elementary EFL teachers from China.

Project-Based Inquiry with EFL Teachers from China

In this section, we first define project-based inquiry in terms of how we are using it both with teachers during professional development and with students in their classrooms. Second, we describe how we applied PBI with elementary EFL teachers from China in a week-long workshop setting. Finally, we explore the successes and challenges of using PBI in this specific cross-cultural context.

9

What is Project-Based Inquiry?

A longstanding view of inquiry is its goal of engaging the learner in authentic, intellectual work (Dewey, 1927; Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 200l; Mackenzie, 2016). A well-established pedagogical approach that facilitates a minds-on, hands-on type of student engagement is project-based learning (Boss & Krauss, 2007). Because there are different types of project-based learning with varying prototypes, studies heralding its effectiveness are hard to find (David, 2008), with the most comprehensive review of project-based learning, to date, being that of Thomas (2000). He reviewed several experimental studies that compared high school students using project-based learning with a control group and found significant effects in the areas of problem solving and decision making. Additionally, Holm (2011) found significant effects for project-based learning in the areas of content knowledge and information literacy.

For the past decade, we have used a specific process for project-based learning that we refer to as project-based inquiry (PBI) (Spires, Kerkhoff, & Graham, 2016). By having well-defined elements within PBI, we can create a shared language and process for teachers and students to use as they engage in the complexities associated with inquiry and foreign language learning. The PBI approach consists of five phases, which begin with posing a compelling question and end with an opportunity for students to share, publish, and act on the answer to their question. The specific phases are: 1) Ask a compelling question, 2) Gather and analyze sources, 3) Creatively synthesize claims and evidences, 4) Critically evaluate and revise, and 5) Publish, share, and act. Each phase contains a specific task, and the entire project results in one overarching task; as such, we argue PBI can be considered a type of task-based learning and is therefore appropriate for foreign language instruction. Furthermore, the larger aim of PBI is for

the learner to engage in deeper learning, which includes a real-world orientation, critical thinking, choice, collaboration, effective communication, and deep content knowledge.

The PBI process has been designed and implemented with teachers and students alike at various levels in diverse instructional settings. We have applied the PBI process in teacher education in America and in China (Author, 2012), middle-grade classrooms (Author, 2012), high-school classrooms (Author, 2016) and a graduate literacy program at North Carolina State University (Author, 2013; Author, 2013). In the following section, we describe how we applied the PBI process with elementary EFL teachers from China.

Applying PBI to EFL Teachers from China

We had the opportunity to conduct a week-long professional development session with 14 EFL Chinese elementary teachers who were visiting the U.S. to learn about innovative pedagogies that they could apply to their EFL instruction. The teachers were accustomed to lectures when they engaged in professional development so asking them to be active participants in which they were to create products of learning by the last day was a challenge. Of the participants, all who were from a suburban area in Beijing, China, seven had more than 10 years of teaching experience. Five of them had taught for 6-10 years and two were in the early stage of their teaching career. The Chinese elementary EFL teachers reported that they mainly used games and storytelling as their teaching strategies to engage EFL students in their classrooms. In terms of school technology infrastructure, Powerpoint was available for teachers to use in school as well as some Smartboards, which teachers were beginning to use in the classroom. Students were limited to using the Internet in computer labs.

We first initiated a process of getting to know each other by modeling how to write a bio poem and then having each teacher write their own bio poem. See Figure 1 for one participant's

bio poem. This process allowed the teachers to begin the workshop by focusing on content that they were intimately knowledgeable about, namely themselves. By having each teacher read her/his poem aloud to the group, we began the process of helping the teachers become comfortable speaking in English to a larger group. Since Mandarin was their first language, speaking English as they learned new content was challenging. However, this provided the teachers with the opportunity to use English in a natural, task-based learning environment.
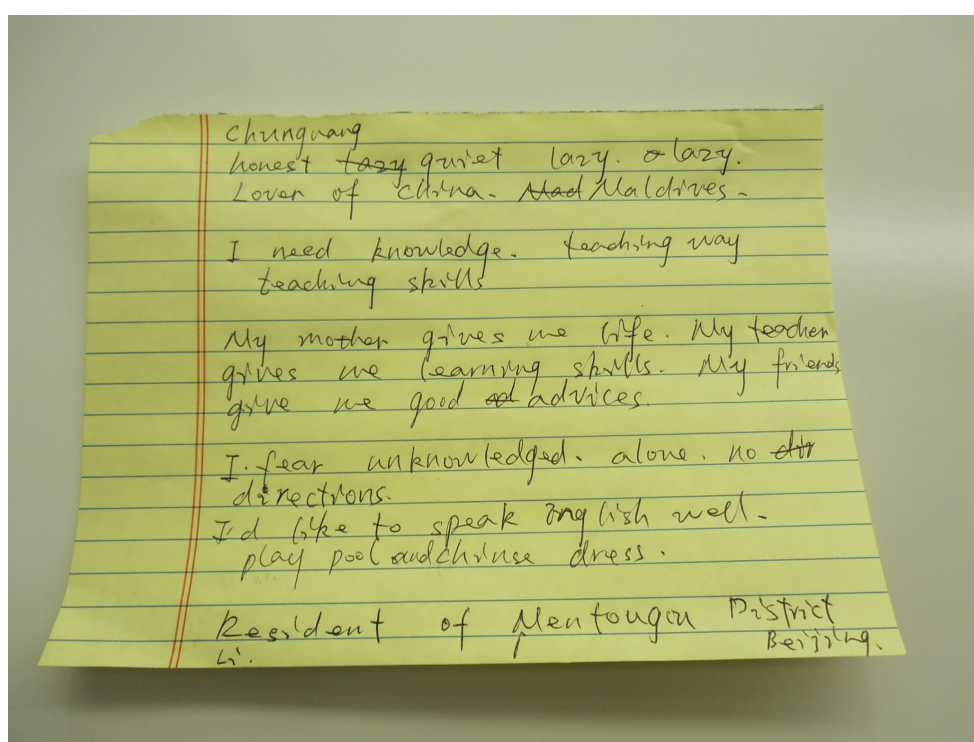

Figure 1. An example of one teacher's bio poem.

The workshop consisted of a series of topics in which the teachers worked interactively with the workshop leaders, the majority of whom spoke English natively. The topics included new literacies in the EFL classroom, technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK), close reading and vocabulary building, and digital tools (e.g., Thinglink, Voicethread, Padlet, and Storybird) for the EFL classroom. A key feature of the workshop was helping the teachers

understand the inverted Bloom's Taxonomy in which more time is spent on the level of create with the other cognitive processes such as understand, remember, and apply all positioned in service of the creative process. See Figure 2. This visual representation helped teachers understand the pedagogical shift that we were advocating in which knowledge and language learning is constructed in a communicative way, rather than being transmitted from teacher to student. In the afternoon of each day, teachers participated in Design Studio, in which they worked in teams to implement their PBI. Following is the process they engaged in with explanations of how they navigated each of the five PBI elements.
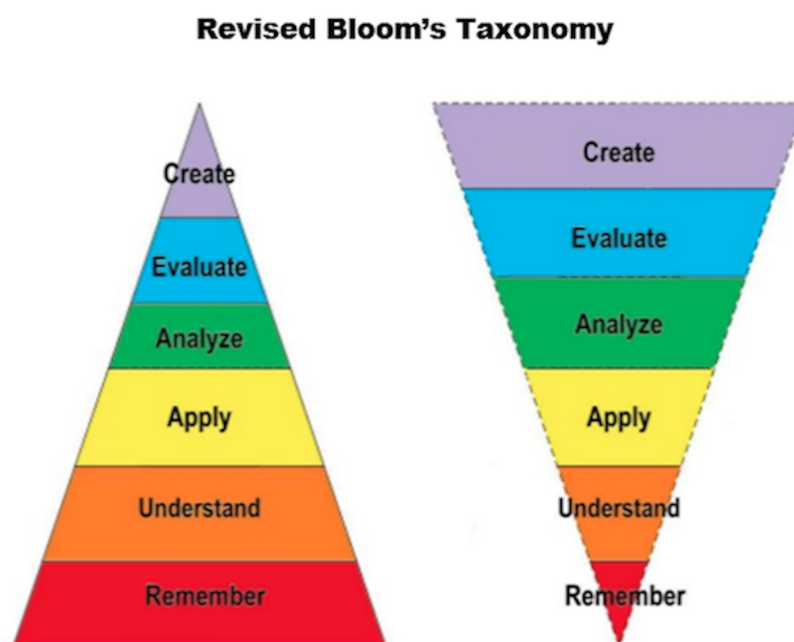
Revised Bloom's Taxonomy

Figure 2. Revised Bloom's Taxonomy. Adapted from Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) and Spires, Wiebe, Young, Hollebrands, & Lee (2012).

Ask a compelling research question. In teams of three, teachers were required to ask a question related to EFL that would organize their inquiry work for the week. An example of a compelling question was: How can we creatively incorporate English speaking skills in the EFL

classroom? See Table 1 for additional examples, along with links to each team's final products, which will be discussed further below. The function of having the teachers pose a question was that it helped them be in charge of their own professional learning, rather than being on the receiving end of a transmission of information. Additionally, having the teachers pose their own question guaranteed that they would focus on a topic that would be highly relevant to their teaching goals.

Table 1. Teachers' compelling questions and PBI products by team.

Team	Compelling Question	Link to PBI Video
Team 1	How can we creatively incorporate English speaking skills in the EFL classroom?	http://bit.ly/2hGvpsO
Team 2	Why should teachers engage EFL students in group work?	http://bit.ly/2gC9JZB
Team 3	How can we creatively teach without technology resources?	http://bit.ly/2hOUAFk
Team 4	What are the similarities and differences of flipped English classrooms in the US and China?	http://bit.ly/2gKicPv

Gather and analyze information. Based on their question, teachers conducted research with the aim of creating or exploring a variety of sources, both print and digital. The goal for the teachers was to be intentional about designing an answer to their question, pushing them beyond their comfort level with technology as well as requiring them to engage with sources in the target language. We instructed them in how to conduct Internet searches and to assess the quality and reliability of their sources. As we modeled this process, we emphasized the importance of this type of instruction with their students as well.

Creatively synthesize information. In order to arrive at a creative synthesis, teachers engaged in an iterative design and development process that resulted in representing their research results in a new and original way. The process required them to demonstrate complex thinking with their content by integrating information across multiple texts (print, web-based, and video), drawing inferences, summarizing, and making novel connections for their video product. They also, of course, had to use the target language throughout the design process. Teachers ensured their plan reflected high intellectual, aesthetic, and technical quality. They gathered necessary music, narration, video, and images as well as made sure to comply with copyright and fair use law. They used Animoto to create a 4-5 minute video that reflected their PBI process as a final product of learning.

Critically evaluate and revise. To ensure broad based and high-level feedback for their video products, teachers engaged in a three-part evaluation: self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and evaluation by workshop facilitators. Evaluations were based on the following rubric elements: 1) Intellectual Quality, which included clear purpose, synthesis and construction of ideas, appropriate curriculum connections, clear beginning and ending, and sources cited appropriately; and 2) Aesthetic and Technical Quality, which included camera techniques, editing/transitions, audio (music and dialogue), and creativity/originality. Using multiple sources of feedback based on the evaluation rubric, the teachers were directed to revise their video production accordingly. See Appendix A for evaluation rubric.

Publish, share and act. As a culminating activity, teachers shared their videos with a larger audience through a Design Studio Showcase. The audience included the teachers' principals, who had been attending a different workshop on leadership. Now the principals joined in celebrating their teachers' culminating products. In creating a video of their PBI and

sharing it, the teachers were making their learning public. Additionally, the teachers posted their PBI videos and images from the Showcase on WeChat so that their colleagues in China could share in their celebration. We encouraged the teachers to use this same Showcase process with their students, so they could realize the benefits of sharing learning products and engage in authentic language use with an authentic audience.

The ultimate goal of having the EFL teachers move through the PBI process is for them to understand the process as a learner so that they can in turn model for their students how to conduct PBI as English language learners. From a sociocultural theoretical standpoint, the PBI process acts as a mediator—a tool or instrument—of instruction for the teachers, as well as a mediator of language learning by scaffolding the inquiry process for their EFL students.

Successes and Challenges

Overall, the participants found the new approaches to teaching EFL to be helpful and even enlightening. Bloom's Taxonomy and PBI were the two teaching approaches that the teachers said had the most influence on their thinking and their potential to make changes in their EFL classrooms. One teacher noted that she thought PBI was useful, as it allowed "the students to learn in groups" in order to "learn from each other and share different ideas." Another teacher stated that PBI was "very useful in the aspect of cultivating student's creativity. The students get long-term development [over] the course of [the] inquiry and get confidence." The participants seemed to take delight in collaborating with their peers to apply their newfound knowledge and create and share their final PBI products.

Still, these teachers admitted that they would face certain challenges when they returned to their classrooms in China. The teachers mentioned experiencing many of the challenges that typically accompany interactive, communicative language teaching approaches, such as the

difficulty of conducting such activities with a large amount of students. As one teacher stated, "there are more than 40 students in our classroom, so it's difficult to apply some kinds of games and activities." A lack of resources is also an issue; teachers noted that "we are short of resources" and that students often do not have computers at home, which limits the technology teachers can use for homework assignments and would also limit the teacher's ability to implement PBI. One teacher also mentioned the issue of *gaokao* and exam-oriented learning environment, stating that "students' scores at the end of the term" was a challenge she faced in teaching EFL in China. As PBI is not intrinsically focused on the outcome of exam scores, some teachers might have difficulty engaging students who are preoccupied with examinations in this novel learning method.

Conclusion

Applying an inquiry process with Chinese EFL teachers opened up new avenues for EFL teaching, in general, and specifically for Chinese teachers. The EFL field has embraced sociocultural theory as a lens in which to design instruction for EFL learners (Eun & Lim, 2009), and specifically emphasizes the use of communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT). Along those lines, the PBI process that we used not only emphasizes the development of communicative competence, the goal of CLT (Savignon, 2007), but also includes TBLT. Both of these are time-honored approaches for foreign language instruction in the U.S. (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011) and emerging approaches in China (Liu, 2015; Rao & Chunhua, 2014). The Ministry of Education has mandated more innovative pedagogical approaches in all areas of Chinese education, and specifically in the area of EFL so that Chinese students can better communicate internationally. We know, however, that teachers in China will

adapt and transform new instructional approaches to meet the academic, social and cultural needs of their students, including their EFL learners.

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Appendix A

Sample Rubric for PBI: EFL Inquiry Project

PARTICIPANTS WILL:

1. In groups of 3 or 4, create an inquiry question based on your EFL interests and topics addressed during the workshop sessions
2. Begin research and use your research to support answers to your inquiry question.
3. Design and develop a video presentation based on your findings and the process.

ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS:

1. Work with colleagues in cooperative groups.
2. Use tools such as web 2.0 tools, camera techniques, editing/transitions, audio (music and dialogue), and creativity/originality.
3. Using multiple sources of feedback based on the evaluation rubric; revise your video production accordingly.

	(D) Below Expectation	(C) Approaches Expectation	(B) Meets Expectation	(A) Exceeds Expectation
Compelling Question /10 pts	__ Inquiry is limited and is incomplete or confusing, __ Inquiry is not developed from a unique cultural observation, __ The purpose is unclear and undeveloped, __ Connection to stories analyzed is missing	__ Inquiry is either somewhat limited or too open ended, __ Inquiry is not clearly linked to a unique cultural observation, __ Purpose is unclearly presented, __ Connection to stories analyzed is confusing or unclear	__ Inquiry is well developed and answerable, __ Inquiry is derived from a unique cultural observation, __ Purpose is clearly presented, __ Connection to stories analyzed is clear	__ Inquiry is thought-provoking and well developed and answerable, __ Inquiry derives from a unique and compelling cultural observation, __ Purpose is clearly and eloquently presented, __ Connection to stories analyzed is clear and brings added insight
Intellectual Quality	__ Project is unclearly supported with research including more	__ Project is somewhat supported with research including 3+	__ Project is supported with good research including 3+ sources,	__ Project is clearly supported with thorough and insightful research

/40 pts	than 3+ sources, __ Attempts to synthesize and construct unclear ideas from research gathered, __ Attempts to cite research, Works Cited is incomplete and flawed	sources, __ Attempts to synthesize and construct ideas from research gathered, __ Attempt to cite research, Works Cited is flawed	__ Synthesizes and constructs ideas form research gathered, __ Research is cited with a Works Cited	including more than 3 sources, __ Thoroughly synthesizes and constructs ideas form research gathered, __ Research is appropriately cited with a Works Cited
Aesthetic and Technical Quality /40 pts	__ Ideas are unclear and incorrectly or inappropriately expressed for general audience, __ Audio is unclear with inappropriately chosen music, __ Images are of low quality or unsuitably chosen, __ Transitions are awkward and rough, __ Doesn't include a title	__ At times, Ideas are unclear and/or awkwardly expressed, may be inappropriate for general audience, __ Audio is unclear with unrelated music, __ Images are of inconsistent quality, __ Transitions are inconsistent, __ Includes a title unclearly related to inquiry purpose	__ Ideas are clear, complete, and appropriate for a general audience, __ Audio is clear with appropriate music, __ Images are of good quality and well chosen, __ Transitions are consistent with a clear rhythm, __ Includes a clear title related to inquiry purpose	__ Ideas are clear, complete, and persuasively expressed for a general audience, __ Audio is clear with music that stirs an appropriate emotional response, __ Images are appropriate, varied, and stir an emotional response, __ Transitions are varied, consistent with a creative and clear rhythm, __ Includes a clear title that thoughtfully relates and enhanced purpose of inquiry
Effort /10 pts	__ Mistakes made detract from content and purpose, __ Assignment is missing 2+ key components	__ Mistakes made detract from content, __ Assignment is missing 1-2 key components	__ Mistakes made don't detract from content, __ Includes all requirements	__ Carefully edited with few mistakes, __ Includes all requirements and pushes limits

Total: **/100 pts**   **Comments:**