Impact of Local Culture-Based Materials on the EFL Communication Skills of University Students in Kazakhstan

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Abstract This study examined the influence of local cultural materials on the English language communication skills of university students in Kazakhstan. Language instruction not only introduces students to native speakers and their culture, but also highlights aspects of the students' ethnic culture. Additionally, this instills universal values that can be used across contexts through comparative and contrastive studies, assisting in learners' cultural upbringing. The research was aimed at exploring the impact of local culture-based materials on university students' English communication skills. An experiment was set up, where one (experimental) group of language learners learned English with local cultural materials, while the other (control) group used materials untied to the local context. The research findings indicated that integrating local culture-based materials into teaching English positively contributes to students' communication skills. The authors conclude that students may benefit if English is taught alongside local content since familiar material makes language learning cognitively more impactful.

Keywords: *Communicative skills, Local culture, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Students, University*

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1. Introduction

The development of university students' communicative skills has become a critical focus in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching, as the primary goal is to form, improve, and enhance communicative competence. Articulating one's thoughts in a foreign language is a complex process, and many students hesitate to speak in front of strangers due to their lack of communication skills and public speaking experience. This fear can significantly hinder their language acquisition and confidence. Numerous research studies have highlighted the importance of enhancing students' communicative abilities in EFL instruction, demonstrating

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that effective communication is essential for success in both academic and social contexts. Hymes (1992), a pioneer of communicative language teaching, underscored that communicative competence includes not only knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but also the social knowledge necessary for meaningful interaction, defining it as "the ability of language learners to interact with other speakers" (p. 45). By fostering these skills, educators can better prepare students to navigate real-world conversations and engage more fully in diverse environments.

Teaching second language communicative skills involves helping learners develop essential intercultural and communication skill sets. To effectively learn a second language, students must enhance their speech-processing, discourse organization, and oral production abilities, which include using proper grammar, a wide vocabulary, clear pronunciation, and effective information sequencing (Hinkel, 2017). Speaking is regarded as the most crucial of the four language skills, serving as the primary means of interpersonal interaction and communication. Additionally, misunderstandings in the speaking domain are particularly evident (Khamkhien, 2010). Another vital aspect of communication skills is the ability to integrate multiple modalities of information. Jamalai and Krish (2023) define communicative skills as the ability to comprehend and interpret the values, attitudes, and objectives behind what learners hear; the capacity to effectively convey thoughts and ideas in various contexts through spoken, nonverbal, and written communication; and the ability to utilize media and technology for different purposes and situations. Together, these skills form a comprehensive framework for effective communication in a second language.

These points demonstrate that communication skills can or should be embedded in local contexts so that students can integrate multiple familiar modes of communication when they interact with others. Kazakhstan, being one of the world's developing countries, needs specialists with strong communication skills, as the importance of learning English stems from the fact that it is currently the most common lingua franca used in international communication. The level of communicative skills can be considered one of the key variables influencing the country's success. Studies have shown that countries with a higher level of English communicative skills tend to experience faster educational development, and investments in improving English proficiency significantly contribute to economic growth (Lee, 2009). Moreover, knowledge of English is a competitive advantage in the labor market, particularly in developing countries (Euromonitor, 2012). As such, promoting English language learning and embedding it as a fundamental skill helps a nation's population gain political and socio-economic significance.

To further enhance language proficiency, research has examined the effectiveness of local culture versus target culture materials in language learning. Studies focusing on local-culture materials emphasize the importance of integrating content that reflects students' own cultural contexts, which makes language learning more relatable and engaging. Local culture materials often promote greater emotional resonance, making the learning process more meaningful by allowing students to connect language with their lived experiences. On the other hand, research on target-culture materials stresses the importance of exposing students to the culture of the target language, fostering intercultural competence, and enhancing their ability to navigate cross-cultural communication. While both approaches have merit, integrating both local and target-culture materials in the classroom has been shown to create a more comprehensive learning experience. Studies by Kaltsum and Susiati (2019) and Eldin (2015) suggest that combining local and target-culture elements helps learners develop both linguistic skills and cultural awareness, ultimately improving their communicative competence in a global context. Thus, the incorporation of locally relevant content alongside target-culture materials enriches the learning experience and supports the development of effective communicative skills.

Overall, this study aims to emphasize the importance of embedding communication skills within local contexts, particularly in Kazakhstan, to enhance English proficiency among university students and its impact on individual success and national development. The incorporation of local culture materials plays a crucial role in this process, as it allows learners to engage with content that is relevant to their cultural and social environment, making language learning more meaningful. Effective communication skills enable learners to interact more authentically, practice the language in real-life situations, and gain a deeper understanding of both the language and its cultural nuances. By using

local examples, scenarios, and culturally relevant topics, students are able to connect their language skills to their own lives and contexts. This engagement not only improves vocabulary retention but also facilitates constructive feedback, allowing learners to identify areas for improvement. Ultimately, these skills boost confidence and competence in using English, contributing to both personal growth and broader national development goals.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Significance of Local Culture

Local culture is an inherently regional and cultural phenomenon. “Culture” comes from the Latin – “cultura”, which means processing and inoculation. It means changes made by human actions. However, over the past 50 years, many definitions of the concept of culture have appeared, which in social science believe that culture is closely related to human life. Since then, there has been a constant debate about the definition of culture. Tang (2006) claimed that despite several attempts to define the concept of “culture”, researchers have not yet come up with a single agreed definition or a common feature. Seeley (1993) believed that culture is “a very broad concept covering all aspects of human life”.

This concept substantiates the specificity of human labor, its connection with human activity, and the unity of man with activity. Culture is considered as the purpose of existence and the value system of an individual and his relationship with the environment in which he lives. Atkinson (1999) investigated six principles of culture. His final principle is worth mentioning: “Language (learning and teaching) and culture are mutually implicated, but culture is multiple and complex, concerns the vexed question of whether teaching language must automatically entail teaching culture” (p. 630). The topic of cultural variation and patterns in language learning and acquisition has been the subject of a plethora of studies. Such studies have concentrated on the idea of cultural knowledge, as opposed to intercultural knowledge, in teaching or learning a foreign language. Some researchers have also covered the fundamental importance of the cultural context and the circumstances in which language use necessitates intercultural communication competence (ICC, Almujaiwel, 2018).

Since language and culture are intricately intertwined, culture should be used in teaching languages (Alakrash et al., 2020; Byram & Flemming, 1998; Kim, 2020; Turan & Akcay, 2021). There is already research that promotes the benefits of using culture as part of learning languages. Ahangaran (2020), Klimanova and Hellmich (2021), and Jumanova and Makhmudov (2020) pointed out that immersion in the culture of the target language is the most effective method for learning a foreign language. To address the background, feelings, experiences, and culture of each student, educational materials and activities should include components from their home culture (Bao, 2016; McKay, 2003; Tomlinson, 2012). The authors believe that incorporating locally based cultural materials into language classes could have a great impact if it is linked to emotional experiences. Such materials can leave a lasting impression due to their uniqueness and relevance to the learners’ lives. By fostering emotional connections, these culturally rich resources not only enhance engagement but also facilitate deeper understanding and retention of the language being learned. This approach may lead to a more enriching and effective learning experience (Pishghadam et al., 2017; Pishghadam et al., 2016).

In Kazakhstan, the law requires that cultural values be ingrained in educational settings. While these values have already been integrated into the educational system, key governmental documents such as Rukhani Zhangyru’s “Spiritual Revival” (2021) and the development plan for higher education and science in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029 should be considered to understand the directions and strategies for incorporating local culture into EFL materials in Kazakhstan. Local culture encompasses ideals that are acquired through education over time and are used to uplift the communities residing in a specific geographic area (Oktarina et al., 2022). These policy documents have established that culture should be taken into account in language instruction in Kazakhstan by specifically mentioning it as a fundamental component of language acquisition and, moreover, by closely tying it to (intercultural) communicative aims. The texts, however, create a problematic foundation for affecting the nature of language teaching, both collectively and individually. The fundamental issue is how culture is conceptualized as a component of language instruction, or rather, the lack of a clear conceptualization that serves as the foundation for the policies (McConachy & Liddicoat, 2022).

Although educators commonly believe that cultural material is taught within typical language classes, local culture or activities based on local culture have not been sufficiently integrated into course materials and the teaching of foreign languages (Doganay, 2013). Putra and Musigrungsi (2022) suggested that despite their significant contributions, cultures are still viewed as "stepchild" in EFL classrooms. Together, these insights underscore the necessity of innovating cultural integration in ELT to ensure that local contexts are effectively represented and utilized in language learning.

2.2. Integrating Local Culture into Language Instruction

As the core of language instruction, culture must be integrated into language teaching (Tang, 2006). Language and culture are intricately linked, shaping how communities perceive and express their realities. Language serves as the most comprehensive measure of culture and is the primary instrument of communication. The central figure in this process is the individual; mastering a language enhances the ability to express thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Ultimately, the greater the difference between languages and cultures, the more challenging it becomes to master a foreign language as an effective means of communication. The peculiarities of language as a communication medium necessitate the use of local, geography-based materials in foreign language instruction. Local materials embody humanistic potential within education, fostering spiritual values and character development. Individuals who embrace a strong national vision reflect this in their thoughts, attitudes, and actions, thereby cultivating respect, responsibility, and patriotism. This necessitates a radical update in educational content that merges language structure and rules with the national and cultural interests of the state. While a person should embody their national culture, understanding their folk history is essential for fostering this connection.

Teachers integrate local aspects of the culture into foreign language curricula as supplemental resources. However, this focus should also aim to impart social orientation and ethno-cultural values to students. When selecting local culture-based materials for foreign language studies, it is crucial to prioritize their role in fostering regional knowledge and shaping students' scientific worldviews (Bystrova, 2002).

3. Methodology

3.1. English in Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, English is taught at all levels of school. It is initially taught in primary school, where the program's curriculum aims to cultivate students' interests and foundational language abilities. In middle school, English instruction targets Levels A1 and A2, according to the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR). In high school, students are expected to complete language instruction at the B1 level.

Teaching English is carried out at universities for non-linguistic majors as well. For these students, they must reach a B2 level proficiency by the end of their first year. The modern idea of teaching a foreign language in non-linguistic departments gives students who are eager to interact with people from different cultures the chance for personal growth. In addition, it enables students to self-realize while also meeting job market demands for specialists who can continue their education and work in a foreign language environment. The textbooks used to teach English are chosen from the selection provided by foreign publishing organizations like Cambridge Publishing, Oxford Press, Macmillan, and others. These textbooks provide educators with the resources they need to teach students using practical examples while also exposing them to various English-speaking countries. However, they don't include any local content-based elements specific to Kazakhstan. We hypothesize that students will benefit if the foreign language is taught alongside local content since familiar material makes learning it more meaningful.

By the term "local content" in this research, we consider incorporating local culture-based materials into teaching English. This is connected with the purpose of modern education, which is to prepare not only highly qualified specialists but also "persons of culture". These people must be able and willing to interact with and cooperate with people of various races, nationalities, religions, and cultures in order to achieve peaceful coexistence in a society that values cultural and national diversity and is based on humanistic and democratic principles (Tazhitova et al., 2022). To test the hypothesis

that local culture-based materials could positively impact students' communicative skills an experimental method was used. The experimental method revealed the initial and final communication level of students who studied the use of locally produced culture-based teaching materials and evaluated their efficacy in EFL courses.

3.2. Participants

The participants were students of L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University students located in Astana city studying pedagogical specializations. Their age range was from 18 to 19. We chose two groups of students; one group was assigned as the experimental (EG), and one was assigned as the control group (CG). There were 16 students in each group. Their level of English was intermediate when the study was conducted. None of the students who took part had ever been abroad for longer than a week, and they were all native Kazakh speakers. In the CG, there were 7 girls and 9 boys, while in the EG, there were 8 girls and 8 boys. The sampling was based on the students' level of English, specifically selecting those who had an intermediate level of English proficiency.

3.3. Procedure

There were three phases to the experiment. Determining the students' English communication proficiency was the goal for the first phase. The aim of the second phase was to integrate new local culture-based materials into the learning process for one-half of the learners; the other half used materials untied to the local culture. The goal of the third phase was to assess the difference between students' initial and post-experiment communicative levels by group.

As for the first phase, we determined the communicative level of the CG and EG students in English through culture-based materials. A language test comprising culture-based reading, listening, writing, and speaking materials was employed to define students' communicative level. The reading level of the students was defined through the text about the local culture. Students had to answer 10 questions according to the context of the text. They were given 2 points for each correct answer (overall 20 points for the reading comprehension). The level of listening was assessed by listening to a text on the local culture. Students received two points for each accurate response to each of the 10 listening questions, for a total of 20 points on the listening. The writing level was determined by students' writing and essays, and their speaking level was determined by talking about local-culture topics. The level of writing was evaluated using rubrics such as task implementation, cultural knowledge vocabulary, logical coherence, and grammatical correctness. The level of speaking was assessed through the following descriptors: general local culture knowledge, vocabulary, structured communication ability, and fluency. Students received an overall 30 points for each section. The communicative level was calculated using 100 points in total (reading - 20, listening - 20, writing - 30, speaking - 30).

The communicative levels of the CG and EG students were determined in accordance with the international standards of English proficiency Common European Framework (CEFR). With the total number of points, the following levels were determined.

- 1 - 0 low;
- 41-70 medium;
- 71-100 high.

The following manual has been offered to the EG students in the second phase of the experiment. Students of the CG were taught according to the regular syllabus. Using SPSS for the third phase, we ran t-tests to analyze the data.

3.4. The Experiment

Based on the local culture-based materials compiled by us, a manual entitled "Kazakhstan Regions in Focus" was developed and introduced into the teaching process of the discipline "Foreign language" at the Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Tazhitova & Kalkeeva, 2022). The main purpose of this manual was to provide information and methodological support for the implementation of the

local component in the learning process. The study also examined the development of the student as a carrier of national culture on the basis of local culture-based materials. The goal of our "Kazakhstan Regions in Focus" handbook for non-linguistic students is to solve educational, cognitive, and educational challenges with the cognitive component aiming to increase understanding of the home country.

An integrating didactic goal was established for the process of learning a foreign language through the use of culturally relevant materials: students had to demonstrate awareness of the value of studying national history, engage in discussion, show value orientation when completing tasks for school and work, make their own decisions, and display conviction. The creation of valuable and valuable-meaningful orientations was the top objective.

The local culture-based materials presented to students of the EG in a volume of 5 chapters included regional, historical, geographical, and cultural materials about five parts of Kazakhstan (South, West, Central, Eastern, and Northern). The materials were taken from the "National Sacred Objects of Kazakhstan" and other resources, and we systematized, compiled, processed, and translated them into English, taking into account the requirements for the development of educational materials (Mukhamediuly, 2017). The materials supplemented the content of the subject "Foreign language". Topics were given for each chapter and class. Since the subject was "Foreign language", texts for reading and listening were taken as the main materials. In total, 34 texts were provided for reading and 15 texts for listening. Since the level of English proficiency of students of the EG was intermediate, the volume and complexity of texts were obtained in accordance with this level. The knowledge of students of the EG was supplemented by the following topics.

Table 1
Example Topics of Local Culture-Based Materials

Chapters and Titles	Educational Materials for Reading	Educational Materials for Listening	Educational Materials for Writing	Educational Materials for Speaking
Welcome to South Kazakhstan! Natural beauties of southern Kazakhstan	Charyn gorge, Turgen waterfall	Khan Tengri	Man, Nature, Environment	Writing a report on visiting a popular place
Welcome to western Kazakhstan! Sacred underground mosques	Beket Ata, Karaman Ata, Shepherd Ata belowground mosques	Shakpak Ata belowground mosque	Cultural and historical background	Writing the similarities and differences of belowground mosques
Welcome to Central Kazakhstan! Picturesque mountains of Central Kazakhstan	Bektau Ata, Karkaraly-Legend of the steppe mountain	Edige peak	Writing a descriptive essay about your visit to the ancient city	Historical monuments in Central Kazakhstan
Welcome to East Kazakhstan! Amazing places in the East	Lake markakol, Mount of Muztau	Alakol	Education	Places of historical significance in the East

It is worth noting that the success of using local material depends on creative approaches and the definition of various forms and methods of teaching. These methods can not only motivate the study of local material but also contribute to the solution of educational tasks for communicative skills and the involvement of students in solving professional tasks.

The greatest influence on the success of EFL instruction is thought to be the teachers. For example, Qu (2010) created a ground-breaking framework for teaching university students about culture through a range of methods, such as role-playing, mini-dramas, conversations, dances, music, pictures, movies, bulletin boards, and speaking with native speakers. Our study's definition of communicative ability includes topics such as vocabulary and grammar structures in developed materials, the harmony of the four fundamental skills, the type of activities that involve students and activities tailored to their abilities, the linearity of the curriculum, and the flow of teaching materials. In order to develop and improve the communicative ability of the EG students, the following activities were offered during the second stage of the experiment:

a) students read the texts about the cities of Kazakhstan;
b) students responded to some statements with certainty/curiosity expressions;
c) students created a brief dialogue with certainty/curiosity expressions;
d) students asked questions, including the active vocabulary;
e) students matched the words in column A with the ones in column B to create sentences;

- To develop students' listening skill, they had to respond to a few questions regarding the dialogue's substance.
- To enhance their reading skill, we gave the students texts about the lakes in Central Kazakhstan with some questions that they had to read and respond to based on the text's content. Moreover, they had to match the English word with the meaning, and we incorporated grammar into the skill by giving them a dialogue that contained questions that they had to respond to. Students were also instructed to fill out the table using the proper format for the comparison degree.
- To develop their writing skill, students were given two different exercises: a) a text with blanks that needed to be filled in by the teacher and sentences with jumbled words that needed to be organized into good scrambled phrases.

Therefore, the materials of this collection not only aimed at the implementation of cultural knowledge but also allowed students to consolidate the lexico-grammatical material.

4. Results

We analyzed the data, focusing on the students with an intermediate level of English proficiency. Table 2 demonstrates the results of the tests of the EG and CG communicative levels in the initial and final stages of our experiment.

Table 2
EG and CG Students' Communicative Level at the Initial and Final Stage

Groups	Indicator	Stage	Levels			overall
			low	middle	high	
EG	%	initial	37.5	59.38	3.12	100
	%	final	12.5	81.26	6.24	100
CG	%	initial	34.38	62.5	3.12	100
	%	final	31.26	65.62	3.12	100

Table 2 shows that 37.5% (EG) and 34.38 (CG) of students were at the low level of communication, while 59.38% (EG) and 62.5% (CG) were at the middle level of communication. The percentage of high-level students was the same in both groups (3.12%). After the treatment, the percentage of low-level students decreased in the EG (12.5%) and in the CG (31.26%). The percentage of middle-level

students increased in the EG (81.26%), while in the CG, the increase was only 3.12%. The percentage of high-level students doubled in the EG but remained the same in the CG.

Table 3
Difference between the EG and CG at the Initial Stage

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
EG vs. CG	-1.338	30	0.186	-3.969	2.965	-9.896	1.959

The t-test results indicate no significant difference between the means of the EG and CG ($p > .05$).

Table 4
Difference between the Initial and Final Stages of EG

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Initial Stage vs. Final Stage	2.542	31	0.01	2.965	-4.896	1.959

Table 4 provides the results of the paired-samples t-test on the initial and final stages of the EG. As the table shows, there is a statistically significant improvement in students' performance before and after the intervention ($p < .01$).

Table 5
Difference between the Initial and Final Stages of CG

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Initial Stage vs. Final Stage	1.328	31	0.61	3.498	-3.842	2.471

Table 5 shows that there is no significant difference between the beginning and the end of the performance of the CG students ($p > .05$).

Table 6
Difference between the EG and CG at the Final Stage

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
EG vs. CG	2.044	30	.045	6.031	2.951	1.133	4.930

The results of the t-test at the beginning of the experiment (Table 3) showed no significant difference between the two groups, indicating they were homogeneous. However, the t-test results at the end of the experiment (Table 6) showed a significant difference, meaning that the EG outperformed the CG ($p < .05$).

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to advance the field of EFL by addressing the gap related to enhancing the communicative skills of EFL students through local culture-based materials. This research

investigates the effectiveness of utilizing locally relevant content in universities where students are learning foreign languages.

At the start of the research, the t-test revealed no statistically significant differences between the mean values of the EG and CG. This homogeneity at the beginning was crucial for ensuring a valid analysis of the impact of the intervention. The significant improvement in the EG students' scores following the intervention highlighted its potential to enhance performance. However, the CG students showed no significant improvement after the intervention. The results obtained confirm the effectiveness of the intervention applied to the EG, in contrast to the CG, where changes were statistically insignificant. By the end of the experiment, the t-test results revealed a significant difference between the performance of CG and EG students at the final stage, indicating that the EG performed better than the CG.

To justify the findings, it should be mentioned that one important aspect of language acquisition is described as teaching culture through language. The study's findings underscored the importance of using materials centered on local culture, as they help students articulate their cultural and national values in English. Kaltsum and Susiati (2019) support the notion that one of the best methods to promote local culture is through the inclusion of local materials in English teaching. Systematic and well-selected resources have been shown to enhance instructional strategies and yield positive outcomes (Kaltsum & Susiati, 2019). Eldin (2015) further emphasizes that the distinct qualities of local culture-based materials significantly impact language learning. Additionally, research by Pishghadam et al. (2016) suggests that when learners connect emotionally with local culture-based materials, their engagement and retention improve markedly. This emotional resonance fosters a deeper understanding of the language and its cultural nuances. The findings indicate that local knowledge and understanding are crucial elements influencing effective communication in the target language. As Thanasoulas (2001) notes, local culture-based materials assist EFL students in grasping the appropriateness of language and associated behaviors. Moreover, the integration of language and culture is a key aspect of language learning that fosters development and comprehension (Lysiuchenko et al., 2021). Thus, materials with local content are integral to the educational framework of foreign language instruction. They play a vital role in raising educational standards and are among the most effective means of maintaining student interest. Our pedagogical experiment demonstrated that the inclusion of local resources enhanced students' English communicative skills, enriching the learning experience and personalizing it to each student's unique potential.

This study has significant implications for EFL education in Kazakhstan, particularly in the multilingual and multicultural context. It suggests that educational policymakers should prioritize the integration of local cultural materials into English language curricula. By doing so, they can create a more engaging learning environment that promotes both language proficiency and cultural awareness. Additionally, the findings highlight the necessity for teacher training programs to equip educators with the skills to effectively incorporate emotion-based and culturally relevant materials into their instruction. This approach will not only enhance students' communication skills but also prepare them to navigate the complexities of global communication. However, prioritizing local cultures in EFL education may pose challenges due to Kazakhstan's commitment to preserving its native traditions. Nevertheless, to achieve the primary goal of developing proficiency in the target language, it is essential to incorporate cultural elements into foreign language instruction.

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of integrating local cultural materials and emotion-based instruction on students' language proficiency and career success. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how these educational approaches influence not only language acquisition but also professional outcomes in the labor market. Additionally, comparative studies between different regions within Kazakhstan could shed light on the varying effectiveness of culturally relevant instruction and communication skills development. Investigating the role of technology in facilitating emotional connections to language learning could also be beneficial. As digital platforms gain popularity in education, understanding how they can enhance emotional engagement and cultural familiarity may yield important findings. Finally, expanding the scope of research to include diverse demographic groups could provide a more comprehensive understanding

of how different contexts influence the development of communication skills in language learning. In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding the instruction of local content in EFL programs. It provides valuable insights that can be utilized to develop a model for locally based EFL curriculum design, emphasizing that the use of resources grounded in local cultures can significantly enhance foreign language instruction for students in non-linguistic majors.

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