English and Cultural Literacy Enhancement: Southern Context Based-Innovation Effectiveness

Budsaba Kanoksilapatham,
Faculty of Arts,
Silpakorn University, Thailand.
E-mail: kanoksib@hotmail.com

Abstract

Despite serious attempts across all educational levels, English literacy in Thailand has achieved limited success. One of the factors causing this problem is a lack of relevant teaching materials that enable Thai learners to feel a sense of connection with the English lessons and classroom. This presentation highlights a project which aims to ameliorate this situation by enhancing young Thai learners’ English literacy in conjunction with their knowledge of their southern contexts as measured by southern Thainess and vocabulary pre/posttests. In this study, southern contexts are eight prominent southern Thai tourist attractions elicited via a survey completed by the southern communities to display diverse southern cultural dimensions. Based on the survey result, the lessons, accompanying multimedia materials were developed and subsequently implemented to a class of 34 Grade 4 students in a southern elementary school. The analyses of the southern Thainess and vocabulary test scores demonstrate the positive impacts of the innovations in fostering southern Thainess knowledge and enlarging vocabulary repertoire. In short, the innovations yield pedagogical implications that can be applied to other educational levels, instilling in Thai learners’ southern Thainess awareness and enhancing English literacy.

Key Words: English literacy, southern Thai context, cultural literacy vocabulary, Thainess, elementary education
1. Introduction

Literacy is traditionally defined as the ability to read and write, and later expands to include skills to access knowledge through technology and the ability to assess contexts. Be it the former or the latter definition, literacy levels are acknowledged to be one of the prominent indicators of a nation’s growth and development. Consequently, nations endeavor to boost their citizens’ literacy.

Given the era of prevailing globalization and regionalization in Asia, the English language has been increasingly permeating all aspects of life. The role of the English language has been strengthened further when it was designated as the working language in the ASEAN region. This relatively newly acquired status has motivated nations to improve English literacy in order to be able to compete regionally and internationally. Thailand is no exception in this scenario.

Despite serious attempts across all educational levels, English literacy in Thailand has achieved limited success. Based on the test scores of Thai learners in English, be it a national or an international test, a picture of Thais’ English language proficiency becomes clear. That is, it is considered unsatisfactory, inadequate, or low (Fernquest, 2017; Kanoksilapatham, 2014, 2017; Prapphal, 2003; Wongsothorn et al., 2002). A number of factors were identified as possible reasons, including unqualified teachers (particularly in elementary schools), learners’ lack of motivation, lack of English curricula that best satisfy Thai learners’ demands, and unsatisfactory assessment systems (Kanoksilapatham, 2014; Prapphal, 2003; Wongsothorn et al., 2002).

One of the crucial factors responsible for Thai learners’ unsatisfactory performance which is rarely mentioned is a lack of relevant or appropriate teaching materials. Typically, commercial texts are prescribed by the Ministry of Education to be used in public elementary schools nationwide in Thailand. Since these commercial textbooks are designed and written to be used by language learners from multiple language backgrounds, the content is principally relevant to the target language of English or the culture of the native speakers of English. The fact that the government advocates the use of commercial textbooks would not be considered a threat to English language education in Thailand if the learners were more mature. If they had a wider perspective and experience in life, they would be able to handle and understand the target language content without great difficulty. However, for young Thai learners in public elementary schools, especially in rural areas, these prescribed textbooks focusing on the target language culture do not always enable Thai learners to feel a sense of connection with the English lessons and the English classroom. On the other hand, Thai culture-based textbooks would facilitate English language learning and, at the same time, enhance Thai cultural literacy, which is increasingly subjugated by western influences widely spread through developed technology and social media.
This paper highlights a project which aims to enhance young Thai learners’ English literacy in conjunction with their local context knowledge of southern Thailand by developing a set of English lessons based on prominent tourist attractions in the south of Thailand. Then, two different sets of English vocabulary and southern Thainess pretests and posttests were administered. The analyses of the data and the comparison of the pretest and posttest scores demonstrated the positive impacts of the lessons, generating a number of pedagogical implications that can be applied at other educational levels and to other contexts in Thailand.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Thai Learners’ English Literacy

In this fast-changing world in which digital technology has penetrated all aspects of our lives, people across the globe can connect with each other instantly. This technology has tremendously changed the way we live, shrunk the world, and enhanced our lives. At this juncture, along with digital technology and its positive impacts, the English language has obtained the status as an international language, becoming a vehicular means of communication. The already significant role of the English language has expanded because of our increasing reliance on technology to effectively and efficiently perform our daily activities.

In response to this increasing demand of English in diverse realms of daily life, English language education in Thailand has been the center of attention for some time. In this regard, a scrutiny of Thai learners’ English ability as depicted by a number of measurements, be they national or international, can be quite elucidating. For instance, the Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) is a test consisting of a number of subjects including English, and is compulsory for all Grade 6, 9, and 12 students in Thailand. The English O-NET administered in 2018 shows that the mean scores of the English subject across the entire educational paradigm are low. To be precise, based on the most recent administration of O-NET, Grade 6 students’ mean score of 36.34 out of 100 in 2018 is four points lower than that of the previous year. Similarly, Grade 9 students’ mean score in 2018 of 30.45 out of 100 shows no improvement from the previous year (The Nation, March 27, 2018). In addition, an examination of the Thais’ performance as assessed by an international test is also revealing. For instance, based on recent TOEFL scores, Thai adults’ English proficiency was low when compared with other neighboring countries (Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL iBT Tests, 2017). In the most recent test called “Education First English Proficiency Index” organized by English First, Thailand was ranked 53rd out of 80 countries around the world and 15th out of 20 Asian countries, with an average score of 49.78, and thus was labelled as “low proficiency” (EF EPI, 2017). In short, the assessments based on national and international tests reveal a congruent picture of Thai learners’ English. That is, Thai citizens’ English literacy is low, limited, or unsatisfactory.
Based on this evidence, and in contrast to huge efforts invested in every possible way to rectify the English language education situation in Thailand, the outcome of English education in Thailand across the educational paradigm has been disappointing. Since English language competence is currently needed and will be in higher demand in the future as a tool to compete with other nations both regionally and internationally, it is imperative that Thai citizens’ English be improved. In response to this dire need, constant and concerted efforts have been mobilized to increase Thai citizens’ English literacy levels.

2.2 Cultural Literacy

Despite the positive impacts that digital technology has exerted and the augmented significance of the English language, there is increasing concern of the Thai national identity being subjugated by an influx of western influence. Given the crucial role of national identity that shapes the nation and its citizens, it is imperative that it be maintained and instilled in its citizens for conservation and preservation purposes.

This article is based on the tenet that language and culture are inseparable (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003: 237; Liddicoat, 2002; Wardhaugh, 2006). It is common practice when learning a language that the learner is simultaneously exposed to the culture of the target language. At this juncture, a burgeoning question emerges in the context of Thailand, in which the target language of English needs to be improved and the national culture needs to be maintained: What culture should the English material be focused on? To properly and adequately answer this question, a pertinent factor that interfaces with the former question needs to be taken into consideration: the age of Thai learners. It is acknowledged that elementary education is the grassroots and foundation of the entire educational paradigm. Given the young age of Thai learners in elementary education which means that these young learners are limited in their experience, perspectives, and English exposure, the answer to the above question becomes clear. That is, material content focusing on Thai culture, not English culture, would be most appropriate to facilitate their language learning.

One of the justifications that lends support to the favor of adopting Thai culture-based materials or lessons is attributed to Alderson’s schema theory (Brazer, Kruse, & Conley, 2014). According to this theory, learners’ previous experience and background plays a crucial role, determining the success of language learning. That is, for instance, to enhance language learning, students’ schemata need to be primarily activated. In this case, the local context-based materials offer Thai students a certain level of familiarity, allowing them to build upon their existing schemata and thrive in language learning. In short, to scaffold young Thai learners’ learning process, it can be argued or claimed that national culture needs to be instilled in young learners prior to their exposure to the English language-related culture.

The crucial role of course content that pertains to young learners’ national culture when designing the content of an English subject has been substantiated by a number of scholars from
diverse linguistic backgrounds including Nepal (Regmi, 2011) and Indonesia (Margana, 2009). Therefore, it is interesting to examine if Thainess-based lessons can help improve young Thai learners of English.

3. Methodology

3.1 Objectives

This study has the objective of demonstrating the effectiveness of a set of southern Thainess-based innovation in enhancing young Thai learners’ local cultural literacy and English literacy, particularly in the area of vocabulary. For an accurate understanding, two terms need to be subcategorized at this juncture: cultural features literacy and English literacy. First, the cultural features of a nation encompass a number of constructs including traditions, cooking, geography, local wisdom, architecture, rituals, and clothes. In this regard, Appelbaum in Margana (2009:126) categorizes culture into two types: material and immaterial culture, or concrete and abstract culture. The former refers to all physical objects created by the members of a particular society to shape their lives and are concrete in nature, including consumed goods, places, food types, statues, and artifacts. However, immaterial culture refers to aspects of culture that are abstract in nature including values, beliefs, customs, habits, and rules. To accommodate the learners’ age, “southern Thainess” in this study refers to some tourist attractions or cultural attractions located in different parts of southern Thailand. Second, the term “English literacy” in this paper refers specifically to English vocabulary literacy that is associated with southern Thai contexts or southern cultural contexts. Specifically, only the vocabulary subskill of meaning identification was focused on.

3.2 Participants

One small-sized elementary school located in southern Thailand was selected to be the research site based on the researcher’s convenience of commuting, the schools’ technological readiness (e.g., projectors available for viewing multimedia materials), and the school’s flexibility with time management. The school, as shown in Figure 1, is in Songkhla Province, with a total number of 262 students, offering kindergarten programs up to Grade 6 of elementary education (Education Management Information System or EMIS, 2018). The participants are 31 fourth grade Thai learners (10-12 years of age) consisting of 17 boys and 14 girls. Figures 2 and 3 depict the physical condition of the classroom and the researcher delivering a lesson to the class.
Figure 1. School Building

Figure 2. Classroom setting

Figure 3. Lesson delivery
3.3 Instruments

As subcategorized in 3.1, one of the major instruments of this study is a set of southern Thainess-based lessons depicting eight prominent southern Thai tourist attractions. As known, individual tourist attractions can feature a number of cultural dimensions. For instance, a tourist beach in southern Thailand can be described from a number of cultural dimensions including geography, history, botany, and zoology.

In order to identify a list of southern Thai tourist attractions serving as the topics of the English lessons to be constructed, a survey consisting of 46 tourist attractions was devised and distributed to different groups of local residents in 14 southern provinces in Thailand. Based on the survey results, the most popular eight tourist attractions were identified and lessons were developed, including corresponding accompanying multimedia materials, to scaffold language learning. Each lesson begins with a set of 10 vocabulary items and followed by a set of 6-8 simple sentences containing all the vocabulary items presented earlier. To illustrate, one of the eight lessons developed is shown in Figure 4 – Lesson 4 (Temple and Mosque).

As shown above, Lesson 4 focuses on the topic of “Temple and Mosque,” highlighting one of the most important temples in southern Thailand - Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan. It is located in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, the largest province in the south. As one of the most prosperous port towns of the Eastern world, a lot of archaeological evidence was found at many sites in Nakhon Si Thammarat supporting literary evidence. This area became a flourishing port town in the 5th century. In addition, the mosque focused in this lesson is the Central Mosque of Pattani, one of the largest and most beautiful mosques in Thailand in Pattani Province. It was constructed in 1954, and the construction of this mosque took almost nine years to complete. This mosque is the center for Islam in the South. The architecture has some similarity to the Taj Mahal of India. It has a large, central dome surrounded by four smaller ones and two minarets. The mosque contains a large prayer hall and long corridors. It is fronted by a big pond.

The other seven lessons included in the innovation set are: Samila Beach (in Songkhla Province), Islands in the South (including Samui Island and Similan Islands in Surat Thani Province and in the Andaman Sea), Temple and Mosque (in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Pattani Provinces), Songkhla Zoo (in Songkhla Province), Cheow Lan Dam (in Surat Thani Province), Khiriwong Village (in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province), Emerald Cave (in Trang Province), and Phromthep Cape (in Phuket Province). It can be seen that these tourist attractions and also the lesson topics represent a myriad of cultural dimensions that help shape the unique features of the southern part of Thailand. In order to visualize what each lesson or each southern tourist attraction is like and to highlight the diversity of the entire set of the lessons, Figure 5 is presented.
Lesson 4

Temple and Mosque

LESSON 4: Temple and Mosque

Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Thai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>temple</td>
<td>วัด</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people</td>
<td>ผู้</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddha image</td>
<td>พระ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>top</td>
<td>ยอด</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pagoda</td>
<td>พระ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gold</td>
<td>ทอง</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mosque</td>
<td>มัสลีม</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>build</td>
<td>สร้าง</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>นุ้ม</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pray</td>
<td>ทำบุญ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phra Maha That Woramahawihan Temple
(พระมหาธาตุวรมหาวิหาร) or Phra That Temple
or Maha That Temple is in Nakhon Si Thammarat.

People can see many Buddha images.

The top of the pagoda is gold.

In Thailand, Pattani Central Mosque
is the most beautiful mosque.

It takes 9 years to build the mosque.

Muslims pray at the Pattani Central Mosque 5 times a day.
Figure 5. All of Lesson Topics

LESSON 2: Samila Beach
(หาดสมิรา)

LESSON 3: Islands in the South
(เกาะเก่งในทะเลใต้)

LESSON 4: Temple and Mosque
(วัดและมัสยิด)

LESSON 5: Songkhla Zoo
(สวนสัตว์สงขลา)

LESSON 6: Cheow Lan Dam
(เชื้อแยงเขาร้่น)

LESSON 7: Khiriwong Village
(ชุมชนกิริวง)

LESSON 8: Emerald Cave
(ถ้ำมรกต)

LESSON 9: Promthep Cape
(แท่นพระเจ้าเพล_SIZE-0.5_หน้า)

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To assess the effectiveness of the instructional lessons, two sets of tests corresponding to the lessons constructed were devised: a southern Thainess pre/posttest (cultural literacy) and a vocabulary pre/posttest (English literacy) as shown in Figures 6 and 7, respectively. Each test consists of 40 items generated directly from the eight lessons, and the southern Thainess test was written in Thai. Figure 6 is the English translation of the five questions about Samila Beach. The students were required to complete the blanks.

**Figure 6: Southern Thainess Test Items**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Samila Beach is in the province of</td>
<td>…………</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Samila Beach is on the Gulf of</td>
<td>…………</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Samila Beach has a statue of the</td>
<td>…………</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Samila Beach has a lot of</td>
<td>………… trees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. From Samila Beach, one can see the two islands of</td>
<td>………… and …………</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7 illustrates a vocabulary test item. In this task of 40 items, each word was read to the students twice. The students were required to listen to the word pronounced, and then identify one of the four pictures concurrently projected by marking an X on corresponding letter on the answer sheet. Each test took about 20 minutes to complete. For both tests, one point was awarded for a correct answer and zero for a wrong answer. To ensure that the content was appropriate for the young learners, the English language used in the lessons was verified by a native speaker for accuracy. Similarly, lesson and test content validation was performed by two social science elementary teachers.

### 3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected in this study are from the southern Thainess and vocabulary pretests and posttests administered in the first and last week of the lesson implementation phase. Prior to the implementation of the lessons, a Thainess pretest and a vocabulary pretest were separately administered, one after the other in the first class meeting. Then, the instruction of the eight lessons proceeded in the following eight weeks (one lesson a week). The lessons were delivered by the researcher at the school in a regular classroom setting, and time slots were arranged by the school. Upon the completion of the eight lessons, the southern Thainess and vocabulary posttests were administered, scored, and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Subsequently, paired t-tests were conducted on the mean scores of the two sets of pretests and posttests to determine whether the students’ pretest and posttest performance was significantly different after the lesson exposure.
4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the statistical analysis of the data collected from the two sets of pretests and posttests on southern Thai tourist attractions. Table 1 shows the results generated from the descriptive statistics of the southern Thai Tourist and English vocabulary test scores. As can be seen, the same pattern was found across the two tests. Before exposure to the southern Thai-based lessons, the students had a relatively limited knowledge of their local contexts and English vocabulary, because the mean pretest scores were only 8.24 and 16.60 for southern Thai knowledge and English vocabulary knowledge, respectively.

However, after the implementation of the lessons, the mean posttest score of southern Thai Tourist was 24.72, resulting in an average gain score of 16.65. In the same manner, as far as the English vocabulary test scores are concerned, the students’ knowledge increased from 16.60 to 29.76, with an average gain score of 13.10. Finally, in order to determine whether the innovation exposure had had a significant impact on the students’ test performance, paired t-tests conducted on the southern Thai Tourist and vocabulary scores demonstrate a significant difference, representing the most striking aspect of the results.
Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Paired T-Test Results \((n = 31)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Gain Score</th>
<th>(t)</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thainess Pretest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.24</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>16.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thainess Posttest</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24.72</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>15.835</td>
<td>.000*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocab Pretest</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16.60</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>3.606</td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocab Posttest</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>29.76</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>3.606</td>
<td>.001*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(*t = -15.835, p<0.05; ^*t = 3.606, p<0.05\)

Based on the above table, statistically significant improvement in the test scores indicates that these young learners became more knowledgeable of the southern tourist attractions and associated vocabulary through exposure to the lessons. In short, the analyses of the southern Thainess and vocabulary test scores clearly demonstrate the positive impacts of the innovations in fostering southern Thainess knowledge and enlarging vocabulary repertoire. These findings lend support to a number of scholars including Bennett, Bennett, and Allen (2003: 237); Brown (2007); Byram and Flemming (1998), and Turkan and Celik (2003). They advocate the importance of incorporating the learners’ local culture or cultural contexts into the English lessons.

A number of reasons were speculated to be contributing factors for the positive impacts of the innovation in enhancing young Thai learners’ local context awareness and English vocabulary associated with the local contexts. First, the lesson topics and corresponding content are those that the students are familiar with. In alignment with Alderson’s schema theory (Brazer, Kruse, & Conley, 2014), as southern Thai residents of 10-12 years of age, these students must have developed their southern Thai schemata to a certain extent. Their existing southern Thai schema was then activated during the instruction, and thus their understanding of the lesson content was facilitated. As a result, their southern knowledge became significantly more solid. In this scenario, the students were liberated from worry about the content and thus devoted their attention to focus on the language. Consequently, their English vocabulary was substantially expanded and their learning outcome was maximized. To clarify and in comparison, if these students were exposed to commercial textbooks containing a number of language cultures that do not exist in their schema, the tasks of both learning the language (vocabulary) and also trying to understand what the lesson content is about might be somewhat overwhelming and frustrating.
In addition to the potential that the learners’ schema is activated by the set of lessons, enhanced motivation is likely to be another major driving force that contributes to the learners’ achievement. It is widely known that language learning and motivation are inter-related. In this study, the southern Thainess-based lessons possibly allow these young learners to be familiar with the lesson content and the class because of their existing schemata associated with southern Thailand. That is, even though they are novice language learners, they have knowledge about their local contexts. Moreover, they are likely to feel proud of their southern contexts because they are included and portrayed in the English lessons. As a result, the students are more likely to be motivated to engage in language activities and feel that the English classes are worthwhile because the lessons equip them with an instrument for them to express themselves. Finally, the students can find opportunities to authentically practice what they learn from an English class in their daily life. Thus, learning English is no longer a burden or an extraneous element, but can be embedded and interwoven in their daily life.

Successful implementation of the set of southern Thainess-based lessons suggests that English language learning does not need to be treated as a single and stand-alone subject. As demonstrated, this study sheds light on the multiple benefits of the multidisciplinary nature of the English lessons, preparing the students to be versatile and well-rounded citizens. According to Mesthrie et al. (2009: 28), Peterson (2004), and Tulia et al. (2003), a myriad of constructs are encapsulated in the concept of culture. As illustrated in the lessons developed for this study and in alignment with these scholars, the content of each lesson manifests a number of cultural features or dimensions including the environment, history, beliefs, way of life, symbolic structures, or patterns of habits that pertain to individual tourist attractions. Therefore, a number of disciplines can be naturally integrated into the English lessons to empower the learners and to better satisfy real world demands.

It is clear that a number of practical pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study. In this case, an English class can provide an effective avenue for the students not only to learn the target language but also to appreciate their own culture. In this regard, sensitivity to local culture needs to be primarily instilled in the learners through the English lessons. The English language can be used as a vehicle to express students’ own local culture, corroborating what Brown (2007), Sowden (2007), and Sysoyev and Donelson (2002) asserted. Once these learners are more proficient in the English language, exposure to other intangible local cultural aspects using the target language can be gradually introduced. These steps are crucial, preparing the students to be able to observe cultural variations, as well as similarities and differences across cultures. In fact, such practice has been successfully implemented in the context of Indonesia (Marmaga, 2015) and Nepal (Regmi, 2011). Then, for advanced learners, exposure to the target culture and other cultures should adequately prepare them for real-life
international demands, giving them the tools to survive and thrive in diverse communities and contexts.

This study is not without limitations. As reported here, the implementation of the southern Thainess-based lessons was limited to only one southern school, and thus the findings remain to be substantiated in a wider context in the southern region of Thailand. In addition, a test to assess the students’ active use of the vocabulary is needed. Since this study has demonstrated the enhanced knowledge of local Thainess and vocabulary, it would be interesting and challenging to devise a practical task, such as a tour guide assignment, to assess the students’ ability in integrating both their cultural and language literacy.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper argues in support of the crucial role of cultural literacy particularly for young learners. The impetus for this current study stems from two competing needs: maintaining cultural national identity and enhancing English literacy. The empirical evidence generated by the use of the southern Thainess-based lessons and the tests highlights the significant positive effect of the lessons on the young students’ augmented Thai culture and English vocabulary literacy. Given the local-based nature of the lessons which are also authentic, meaningful, relevant, and practical, the students can easily connect with the lessons. At this juncture, the students not only gain linguistic knowledge but can also act as cultural ambassadors who can perform their role with confidence and an appreciation of their own culture. This study also demonstrates that these two types of literacy can be complementary, by contributing to each other to enhance the students’ lives. It can be envisioned that more effort is needed to explore the integration of cultural literacy and English language education at other educational levels and within other contexts. Therefore, strategic plans, curriculum designs, and material construction need to be devised to integrate cultural features into English language teaching. The students will then be equipped to transition to a wide variety of surrounding cultures, and be able to participate in an intercultural world embracing cultural differences nationally, regionally, and globally. Pedagogically, the integration of local culture can be expanded to embrace abstract cultural features both in scope and scale including morals, beliefs, and attitudes.

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