

ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE USING SHORT STORIES: A CASE STUDY OF SECOND-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, HUE UNIVERSITY

Ngo Thi Lien Huong, University of Foreign Languages, Hue University
Nguyen Ngoc Bao Chau, University of Foreign Languages, Hue University

ABSTRACT: This research aims to investigate the effectiveness of short stories as supplementary materials to enhance students' intercultural competence. In our study, weekly short stories and guided reading questions were delivered online using Blackboard Coursesites[®] learning management system, for a sample of 135 second-year English majors at the University of Foreign Languages, Hue University. After the four-week treatment, a questionnaire was administered to assess students' self-evaluation towards their intercultural competence. The data gathered was analyzed quantitatively, combined with the qualitative analysis of the students' recorded answers. Results indicated that students' intercultural ability was significantly enhanced after reading the stories. They demonstrated critical knowledge towards a specific culture during a given time, and were able to make a meaningful interpretation, relation, and negotiation within the texts. These findings implicated the incorporation of short stories into the English teaching syllabus for intercultural development and the application of online platforms in supplementing reading skills.

KEY WORDS: intercultural competence, short stories, reading skill, culture.

RECEIVED: JUNE 25th, 2020.

EDITED: NOVEMBER 19th, 2020.

1. Introduction

Given the context of increasing globalization, current linguistic theoreticians and practitioners have underlined the pressing need for incorporating cultural dimensions into the English Language Teaching (ELT) curricula. Byram (2008) places the emphasis on developing critical cultural awareness in learners and cultivating them to be intercultural speakers since one of the desirable outcomes of teaching languages should be the ability to acknowledge and mediate cultural variations and similarities.

One of the most effective and practical ways to provide learners with appropriate and sufficient knowledge to deal with cultural encounters in the real world is through the implementation of authentic materials in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Of all the exploitable authentic reading texts, literature works are widely considered as invaluable sources that do not only foster learners' deeper insights into cultural topics but invite them to discuss and immerse in embedded layers of meaning and culture as well (Sharifian, 2012). It should be noted, however, among various authentic resources and literary texts, short stories can be seen as the more feasible, valuable and effective means of engaging students in intercultural activities by allowing deeper reflection for understanding the culture of self and others (Stevens, 2014).

Above all, short stories, if selected and exploited appropriately, can greatly enhance the cultural insights of students since they contain the multi-faceted cultural dimensions (Ali, 2017). It is, therefore, worthwhile to explore the effect of reading short stories on students' intercultural development.

2. Literature review

2.1. Intercultural Competence

Over the last five decades, there has been much controversy revolving the definite concept for the complex term "Intercultural Competence". Among the myriad definitions, Byram's (1997) seems to be the more influential and widely used in traditional studies and literature (Bennett, 2015). According to Byram (1997), in the context of foreign language education, Intercultural Competence (IC) is closely linked with Communicative Competence, which reflects a person's effectiveness to act appropriately in a foreign language with regard to linguistic, socio-linguistic and pragmatic aspects (Council of Europe, 2001). The term IC can be clarified systematically based on five main factors as follows (Byram, 1997, p. 34-38):

Intercultural Attitudes:

An intercultural speaker tends to show an open and curious attitude towards other cultures or cultural expressions. They easily put themselves in the position of the other interlocutor, so as to gain an inside view, to empathize with and relate to, either similar or exotic, cultural meanings, beliefs and behaviors.

Intercultural Knowledge:

Through formal education and casual socialization, the individual gains knowledge about the social groups they belong to, the norms and other sets of values that represent their national identities. On the other hand, they have a certain understanding of other countries and identities, either similar to or different from that of their own country.

Skills of interpreting and relating:

This involves the ability to adopt a position from which the speaker can make sense of the cultural situation and expression (interpreting), and set up common or uncommon grounds to establish the connection between two cultures (relating) (Gomez, 2014).

Skills of discovering and/or interacting:

Learners are supposed to recognize the implicit meaning or the implied message from the other interlocutor, to discover things at a deeper cognitive level, things that are not shown explicitly.

By drawing upon their previous knowledge and showing sensitivity towards cultural differences, he or she can act as a mediator between people of different cultural and social origins.

Critical Cultural Awareness

All of the above-mentioned factors contribute to foster learner's critical cultural awareness, which is the ability to make critical judgments towards the perspectives, practices, and beliefs in one's own and others' cultures.

These five essential assessment features have formed the theoretical framework of this study, on which the researchers can base to further investigate the effectiveness of the literary text usage in promoting learners' intercultural competence.

2.2. *The correlation between reading short stories and improving Intercultural Competence*

In addition to the linguistics benefits, reading short stories also greatly enhances students' intercultural ability, which accounts for its increasing popularity in language classrooms.

First, short stories expose readers to a specific society, set in a specific period of time, and in this way, enable students to acquire "cultural knowledge and sensitivity" (Shanahan, 1997, p.165). Through short stories, students can gain entrance into a world familiar or unfamiliar to them, depending on the cultural aspects. Specifically, the people, the social customs and traditions, daily life manners, the contemporary history of the depicted culture are all mirrored in the stories. By immersing themselves into the story worlds, students are supposed to get a sense of how people in different countries live, think and feel (Hibbs, 2016). These processes can help learners challenge their stereotypes concerning other people (Ali, 2017).

Similarly, short stories give readers a glimpse of the social contexts and life experience of the characters in a flash (Stevens, 2014). Unlike other reading channels such as factual texts, short stories have the affective dimension which can powerfully stir the readers' feelings and sympathies (Stevens, 2014). Therefore, they are great tools for language teachers to help their students acquire a deeper cultural understanding, expand their cultural knowledge and insights through encounters in the short stories. Indeed, these short literary texts help enlighten students' knowledge about other cultures, tolerate cultural differences and develop intercultural sensitivity (Zahra & Farrah, 2016).

When facing a new culture depicted in the literary texts, students can also reflect back and become more aware of their own (Erkaya, 2005), and thus, develop the skills of interpreting and relating. In exploring the new values, identity and worldviews, they begin to make comparisons between the two cultures to identify the similarities and differences, which gradually helps them to establish the connections between their own personal society with the current society presented in the short stories

(Zapata, 2005). Thus, students can develop their understanding and empathy for the other culture and learn to appreciate the ideologies different than their own.

Furthermore, while following the line of the short story, students are encouraged to negotiate meaning by putting themselves in the position of the characters. They are able to examine the issues from the perspectives and life experiences of the characters in the book. Hence, literary short stories justifiably prepare and empower readers to respond objectively to real-life situations of the world (Gomez, 2014). They are able to deal with topics such as social class differences, gender inequality or discrimination from a more sympathetic viewpoint, considering that they have viewed those experiences through the angles of the characters (Gomez, 2014).

Similarly, in Burwitz-Melzer's study (2001), the observed behaviors of students after reading the given short story indicated that they could promote some of the intercultural objectives such as the ability to identify cultural conflicts, national stereotypes, and prejudices, and make comparisons between their own culturally determined opinions with those of the learners. The author further concluded that, through writing their own texts, students showed that they could take over the perspective of a character and see from inside, and at the same time, use their own cultural viewpoints to look at the texts from the outside.

In most related studies, the pedagogical procedures mainly involved explicit instructions through in-class activities (e.g., Gomez, 2014; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018). Currently in the literature, there is little research on using short stories as supplementary self-learning materials in which cultural elements are elicited through guided reading questions. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the effectiveness of short stories as supplementary reading materials to increase students' intercultural awareness. Results can inform the incorporation of short literary texts in the English teaching syllabus to enhance intercultural attainment among students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Participants

The subjects for this research were 135 second year English-majored students coming from three Reading 4 classes at the Faculty of English, HUFL. The students' language proficiency is at low CEFR B2 level, presumably capable of handling the provided literary texts. These students have not studied literary or cross-cultural communication courses before. Therefore, the outcomes of this study reflected the effect of short stories on developing IC.

3.2. Data collection instruments

In this research, two types of tools were adopted to gather the required data and information from the subjects, including:

1. Selected short stories used as supplementary materials, along with guided reading questions:

Four short stories were carefully selected based on the suggested criteria of Zacharias (2005) and Alemi (2011). Each week, one story was introduced to students as optional reading material during a four-week treatment plan. Specifically, the short stories, which range from 1000 to 3000 words, are within students' presumed linguistic and cognitive level and carry rich cultural messages with high exploitability for IC (see Appendix 1). The set of guided reading questions were used at the end of each story in order to provoke thinking about a variety of embedded intercultural encounters and cultural themes. The answers were recorded to distinguish participants who demonstrate critical understanding of the texts.

2. An exit-questionnaire delivered at the end of the experimental period:

Besides qualitative analysis of students' answers in the short stories, questionnaires were employed as the second instrument for the quantitative data collection and to understand the impact of short stories on students' IC. In detail, the survey consists of five sections and was designed based on the theoretical criteria for IC assessment. The first section provides a profile of the intercultural background of the sample, whereas sections two to five address students' IC through the four previously read short stories (see Appendix 2).

3.3. Data collection procedure

1. Short stories as supplementary materials:

Stories and guided reading questions were administered via Blackboard Coursesites[®]. This learning management system was already familiar to students since it was in use as the platform for other class assignments. The short stories and guided reading questions were administered online on a weekly basis,

continuously in 4 weeks. Suggested answer key was uploaded after students read the story and completed the following set of questions, so that they could reflect on the issues and self-evaluate their reading comprehension.

After the treatment period, students were categorized into two groups, based on their overall level of understanding regarding the given short stories. Group 1 consisted of 50 students who read the stories thoroughly and demonstrated critical understanding through their answers of open-ended questions. Group 2 were 47 students who neither read any short stories nor showed basic apprehension of the events in the texts.

2. Exit-questionnaire distribution:

The questionnaire was delivered to the participants at the end of the treatment. Students were provided with the Vietnamese questionnaire version (see Appendix 3.2), for the purpose of avoiding any misunderstanding or confusion which may arise due to the language barrier.

3.4. Data Analysis

The researcher employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to process the data. First, the data from the questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively using SPSS. The mean values for five main themes were calculated in both groups. Independent t-tests and effect sizes were calculated afterwards to find out if there was any significant difference. Second, regarding the qualitative instrument, students' answers in the online Blackboard Coursesites[®] system were recorded and closely examined to discover whether students displayed understanding in terms of Byram's five IC criteria.

4. Findings and discussion

Better responses to the IC elements among the short stories readers

After collecting data from the filled questionnaire forms, descriptive statistics were calculated for the questionnaire items that are related to the five assessment criteria, as shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Group Statistics

IC Assessment Criteria	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attitudes	1	3.7800	.07536
	2	3.5532	.09471
Knowledge	1	4.0613	.04587
	2	3.6667	.07319
Skills of Interpreting and Relating	1	4.0429	.05645
	2	3.5684	.08250
Skills of Discovery and Interaction	1	3.8475	.05432
	2	3.4787	.06826
Critical Cultural Awareness	1	4.0514	.06359
	2	3.5173	.08643

It is obvious from the statistics table that the mean values of Group 1 are larger than those of Group 2 in all five criteria. Basically, those who had read the given short stories critically demonstrated better awareness and understanding towards the cross-cultural elements in the texts, as well as the ability to make meaningful interpretations and relation.

Different levels of IC awareness, knowledge and skills across groups

To find out whether Group 1 students have reported significantly better awareness of IC, independent t-tests were conducted, with the results illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Independent t- tests among five criteria

	t	df	p
Attitudes	1.885	95	.062
Knowledge	4.628	95	p < .01

Skills of interpreting and relating	4.797	95	p < .01
Skills of discovery and interaction	4.254	95	p < .01
Critical cultural awareness	5.054	95	p < .01

Attitudes

The difference between the two groups' self-reports concerning the Attitudes component is not significant ($p > .05$), sharply contrasted to the other four criteria. This indicates that there is little difference in attitudes between the students who had critical reading of the short stories and those without. In a sense, the result can be interpreted that: reading short stories within a short period of time, is not likely to bring about considerable meaningful changes in learners' attitudes towards different cultural and social groups. The mean values for this variable in both groups (approximately 3.78 and 3.55), generally shows that most students are curious about exotic cultural elements, but to only a moderate extent.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that, changing intercultural attitudes is not an easy task as it involves fulfilling important cognitive and sociological functions (Sousa, Neto & Mullet, 2005), particularly when taking the restricted classroom context into consideration. Though considered one of the key factors of IC, attitudes tend to change slowly, just like beliefs, norms or values of a culture (Ala-Louko, 2017). A few months is not long enough to impact people's attitudes that are learnt previously and for such a long time in their own culture.

Knowledge

There is significant difference in terms of intercultural knowledge and understanding across two groups, $t(95) = 4.628$, $p < .01$, and $d = 0.94$, which means there is a big difference between the two groups regarding Intercultural Knowledge. The outcome indicates that reading short stories can be a potential and useful source for enhancing learners' intercultural knowledge. This is in line with several studies which suggest that the primary appeal of using short stories and the major value lie in its cultural content (Berado, 2006; Rahayu, 2009; Shanahan, 1997; Zacharias, 2005). Zahra and Farrah (2016) similarly pointed out the positive link between reading short stories and being aware of intercultural differences and understanding.

Students' responses in their homework papers also show their critical understanding about cultural differences after reading the texts. When reading Mark Twain's story in particular, learners acquired geographical information such as the location of the town Stanislaus where the story took place, historical references in regard to the life of the frontier West during the American's Gold Rush as well as the cause of conflicts.

During the Gold Rush, the gold-mining activities caused gold seekers to look for gold further west and expanded to the territory of Native Americans. As a result, the Indians were attacked and driven out of their land by the gold seekers. That is why the Indians kidnapped Henry's wife. (Student ID 20).

Furthermore, in *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*, students were able to comprehend some of the basic conflicts happening within the story and within that historical time period:

Some of the conflicts in the story are: Firstly, the conflict between Scratchy Wilson and the salesman. Secondly, Scratchy Wilson with the lock house of the village, he shot both guns into the air, challenging anyone to fight him. Finally, a noticeable conflict between Wilson and Potter when he and his wife just came home. (Student ID 13)

Skills of interpreting and relating

Data from Table 2 reveals that students who read the short stories critically are significantly better at interpreting and relating skills, compared with those who did not, $t(95) = 4.797$, $p < .01$, and the difference is at large value, $d = 0.98$. This result can be interpreted as, reading short stories help learners to improve their intercultural ability considerably in terms of interpreting the events and relating to their own experiences. This is in total agreement with the previous research mentioned in the literature review (Erkaya, 2005; Gomez, 2014; Burwitz-Melzer, 2001; Zapata, 2005).

When examining student's answers in their homework, it is evident that students were able to make critical interpretations of the events and also made relevant relation to themselves, as illustrated in all four short stories. For example, in the first week reading titled *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, some students stated that since the old man believed in and was loyal to God, he was rewarded by God. Student ID 15, 18 and 20 even argued that, the Elves were God-sent creatures helping the shoemaker get his job done,

and the shoemaker returned the favor by giving the two Elves clothes. This clearly shows that students were able to interpret the events and details in the story critically, and not just accept the surface meaning. Additionally, when reading the second story concerning the importance of tradition keeping, students made comparisons between the characters in the story and their own country's people. Some pointed out that Vietnamese people stick closely to traditions just like the women and the Old man:

On Tet Holiday, people always keep their traditional activities like making Chung cake, decorating houses, receiving lucky money and praying in the pagodas, etc.
(Student ID 24)

These convincing evidence shows that learners could promote negotiation of meaning and establish connections with their own cultures. In these examples, students expressed their critical analysis of the events to make sense of the stories from different viewpoints, and also their skill to establish meeting points across cultures.

Skills of discovery and interaction

Data from Table 2 indicates the significant difference between the two groups regarding this variable, $t(95) = 4.254$, $p < .01$, with $d = 0.87$, implying the difference at a large value. From this result, it is suggested that reading short stories can empower the readers to discover key cultural features portrayed in the given texts. Hibbs (2016) claimed the significant contribution of short stories to learners' exposure to and interaction with cross-cultural aspects (see more at Ali, 2010; Collie & Slater, 1992; Stevens, 2014).

Evidence can be found in students' homework. For example, in *The Californian's Tale*, students discovered the role of women in the contemporary society by digging deeper layers of meaning as it was not shown explicitly. A number of students commented that women played an essential role in this hyper-masculine society by citing evidence from the text "A nice little garden...white curtains...pictures...books and china vases full of flowers". They suggested that it was women who brought a cozy and home-like atmosphere by all the little things they do in the house, and they were also the motivation for their husband (Student ID 13), as well as the contribution to the West society balance (Student ID 9). In addition, from the text *Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen*, students recognized the importance of preserving and passing on tradition to later generations. They argued that traditional activities and customs were valuable lessons to teach children about national identity and cultivate in them a sense of belonging (Student ID 2, 13, 18, 27).

Traditions are stories, beliefs, rituals and customs that are passed from one generation to the next. Keeping traditions help teach children about the things their family values. These traditions help fill the individual's need to belong because being a part of special events make us feel the sense of belonging. (Student ID 18)

These remarks show that the selected short stories enabled learners to identify the implicit values and meaning and recognize their significance within the given social contexts. They were able to establish relationships among the events depicted in the short stories to figure out implied messages and ensure understanding.

Critical Cultural Awareness;

The data result is consistent with the last component of IC assessment criteria. Table 4 shows that Group 1 students gained significant cultural awareness, compared with their Group 2 counterparts, $t(95) = 5.054$, $p < .01$. The difference is at a rather large value, as the effect size was calculated with $d = 1.03$. The results implicate that short stories could be valuable sources which are beneficial to learners' critical cultural awareness. With the positive findings of the three previous criteria, namely Knowledge and the set of Skills, it is inevitable that students' critical cultural awareness would be enhanced accordingly. These results back up the idea that short stories in language training programs could greatly develop learner's cross-cultural awareness. This is in line with the previous studies (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018; Stevens, 2014; Zacharias, 2005).

Evidence can also be found in the students' recorded answers. For example, in the short story *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, students were aware of the appearance of Elves as "naked and small" since magic was feared and hated in the Medieval world, whereas those who use magic in their own culture always dress in beautiful clothes with good-looking appearance, and always receive respect, love and welcome from everyone (Student ID 3, 12, and 33). Furthermore, when reading Stephen's story,

students drew upon their knowledge and skills to infer that it was the bride in particular who tamed the Wild West as she brought civilization with her. Although she appeared shy and intimidated, it was her presence that prevented Wilson from carrying out the shooting and in the broader sense, put an end to the Texas gangster era (Student ID 18, 21, 28, 32, 38, 39, and 42). These examples suggested that learners were able to identify and interpret values and ideologies involved in the document in their own and other cultures.

5. Implications and conclusion

5.1. Implications

The results of this study have several pedagogical implications for both language learners and teachers. First, as language learners, EFL students should equip themselves with intercultural knowledge by carrying out more comprehensive reading of materials related to various cultures and social groups.

As for English language teachers, they should be aware of the importance and the pressing need for improving students' IC and thus frequently provide their students with relevant materials for intercultural enrichment. They should also foster learners' curious and open attitudes towards culturally different phenomena and cultivate the desire to explore these issues. Teachers should consider incorporating literature teaching into the language classroom, especially in Reading classes, along with engaging activities. Potential materials could be either fiction or non-fiction genre. In order to ensure the best outcome, teachers should choose texts with relevant cultural themes which can encourage students' engagement, but still suitable for learners' levels and interests. Moreover, delivered materials should be accompanied with appropriate study guide, including comprehension questions which allow students to stay focus on the main themes, along with questions to provoke thinking on intercultural matters.

Limitations

Within the scope of this study, the researcher investigated the aspect of IC gained from self-learning and discovery of literary texts. Future research which examines supplementary reading materials can consider including space for discussions among students through online forums, discussions threads or follow-up-in-class discussions. In addition, although the questionnaire was designed to cover all factors that might relate to IC criteria, there might still be some overlooked potentially influential factors. On the other hand, since the data collected from the questionnaires were self-reported based on student's own assessment and opinions, they may be subjective to a certain extent. Therefore, the researcher suggests that other instruments such as achievement tests should be designed in order to objectively assess students' IC gain in future research.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the application of short stories as supplementary materials in the EFL context proves to be beneficial for EFL learners to develop their critical IC. The evidence reveals that reading literary texts helped learners gained exposure to different cultural elements and ideologies, from which they were stimulated to identify and explain the events in order to make sense of the story. Furthermore, these short stories became motivating tools for students to express their own critical thoughts and opinions, to argue, negotiate meaning within the texts, and find the connections among different cultures. Learners were encouraged to view important issues from their own and others' perspectives, drawing upon the knowledge and skills they had gained. In this sense, their Intercultural Competence has been fostered.

REFERENCES

1. Ala-Louko, R. (2017). *Developing International Competence and Intercultural Communication skills is an investment in the future*. Lumen: Lapland University of Applied Sciences.
2. Ali, A. O. (2017). *Effect of using short story in EFL classroom on developing intercultural awareness and communicative competence of University students*. Khartoum: Sudan University of Science and Technology.

3. Burwitz-Melzer, E. (2001). Teaching intercultural communicative competence through literature. In M. Byram, A. Nicholas, D. Stevens, & (Eds.), *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice* (pp. 29-43). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
4. Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
5. Erkaya, O. R. (2005). Benefits of using short stories in the EFL context. *Asian EFL Journal*, 8, 1-13.
6. Gómez, L. F. (2014). Relational teaching: A way to foster EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence through literary short stories. *Columbian Applied Linguistic Journal*, 14(2), 135-150.
7. Hibbs, B. (2016). Developing students' intercultural competence through children's and adolescent literature. *Studie z aplikované lingvistiky-Studies in Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 7-19.
8. Liddicoat, A. J., & Scarino, A. (2013). *Intercultural language teaching and learning*. Chichester: Wiley- Blackwell.
9. Rezaei, S., & Naghibian, M. (2018). Developing intercultural communicative competence through short stories: A qualitative inquiry. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 6(2), 77-96.
10. Sharifian, F. (2012). World Englishes, intercultural communication and requisite competences. In J. Jackson, *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication* (pp. 310-322). New York: Routledge.
11. Zacharias, N. T. (2005). Developing intercultural competence through literature. *Celt: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching & Literature*, 5(1), 27-41.

Nâng cao năng lực liên văn hóa sử dụng truyện ngắn: Nghiên cứu thực tiễn trên sinh viên năm hai chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Ngoại Ngữ, Đại học Huế

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này đánh giá mức độ hiệu quả của việc sử dụng truyện ngắn nhằm nâng cao năng lực liên văn hóa của sinh viên, được thực hiện trên 135 sinh viên chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh ở trường Đại học Ngoại Ngữ, Đại học Huế. Hàng tuần, một bản truyện ngắn kèm câu hỏi hướng dẫn được tải lên hệ thống Blackboard Coursesites[®]. Sau bốn tuần, sinh viên làm khảo sát tự đánh giá năng lực liên văn hóa của bản thân. Kết quả dữ liệu phân tích thể hiện năng lực liên văn hóa của sinh viên được cải thiện đáng kể sau khi đọc truyện ngắn. Người đọc truyện có kiến thức về một nhóm văn hóa cụ thể, có khả năng phân tích và liên hệ đối với các sự kiện trong văn bản. Kết quả này chỉ ra sự cần thiết của việc kết hợp truyện ngắn trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh, đồng thời ứng dụng các kênh online hỗ trợ kỹ năng đọc của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: năng lực liên văn hóa; truyện ngắn; kỹ năng đọc; văn hóa.