

Effectiveness of Intercultural Competence to Enhance Reading Comprehension Ability of EFL Learners

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Abstract: This special project mainly focuses on investigating the effectiveness of intercultural competence to develop and enhance reading comprehension of English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in second language (L2) classrooms. Three areas will be explored in relation to the effectiveness of L2 learners' intercultural familiarity to their reading ability. First and foremost, the relationship between intercultural competence (ICC) and reading comprehension will be discussed by reviewing several related studies. Based on the ICC model proposed by Deardorff (2006), the components of intercultural competence are: awareness and knowledge, skills, and attitudes are the key factors to influence EFL learner's ICC. Finally, three factors: EFL learners, non-native Chinese teachers and schools and communities will be taken into account to improve EFL learners' ICC. As EFL learners, communicating with more and more foreigners online or offline can be one of the useful methods.

1. Introduction

Some have stated that reading is the most important skill in EFL learning process (Grabe and Stoller, 2019)^[14]. Reading offers EFL learners a real feeling of English language learning. However, it is an obvious big challenge for EFL learners to understand the context meaning without the specific cultural background knowledge of target language (Yakut and Aydın, 2017)^[35]. Some researchers claim that pragmatic skills play an important role in reading (Lightbown & Spada, 2021)^[28]. Under this circumstance, one of the effective ways to improve the L2 learners' reading comprehension is to broaden their cultural background knowledge of the target language (Erten & Razi, 2009)^[13]. Based on the revision of previous empirical studies, there is a correlation between intercultural competence and reading comprehension, the higher level of the ICC, the better reading comprehension will be (Hellerstein-Yehzekel, 2017)^[19]. Based on the study done Deardorff (2006)^[12], it is claimed that the three components of the ICC model, namely skills, awareness, and knowledge and attitudes need to be taken into consideration.

2. Research Questions

According to the literature review, the following research questions will be addressed in this project.

1. What is the relationship between reading comprehension and intercultural competence?
2. Why does intercultural competence influence learners' reading comprehension ability?

3. How can teachers help their learners improve their intercultural competence and reading comprehension?

3. Answers to the Research Questions

3.1. Answer to Question 1: What's the relationship between reading comprehension and intercultural competence?

Based on the outcomes of the studies done by the researchers, I have come to the following conclusions. First of all, the majority of the difficulties related to reading comprehension appeared due to a lack of intercultural background knowledge, because cultural familiarity and prior background knowledge play a significant role in a student's reading comprehension (Yu & Van Maele, 2018; Pritchard, 1990; Liu, 2015; Erten & Razi, 2009; Alptekin, 2006)^{[36],[33],[29],[13],[3]}. While reading, readers have to deal with various difficulties ranging from the micro-level features from the text aspect, such as the lexical use, syntactic structures and grammatical patterns, to the macro-level features from the reader's own aspect (Erten & Razi, 2009)^[13].

In general, the relationship between ICC and EFL learners' reading comprehension is a positive correlation. The more familiar with the context, the deeper understanding can be. Based on the outcomes proposed by Erten and Razi (2009)^[13], reading comprehension can be facilitated by EFL learners' cultural familiarity. Erten and Razi (2009)^[13] investigated 44 advanced-level students of English, the participants got the higher scores in the quiz of the reading text with their own cultural background

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knowledge than the quiz of the reading text with foreign cultural background.

Apart from that, Oller (1995)^[30] had mentioned that the words utilized affects the EFL learners' reading comprehension, and he came up with the idea that if turned some vocabulary and expression in the authentic texts into the ones that readers were more familiar with, they would get a higher score in the reading comprehension. The idea proposed by Oller (1995)^[30] responded to the outcomes concluded by Alptekin (2009) and Karakaş (2005)^[23]. Karakaş (2005)^[23] mentioned that previewing the reading materials is an effective way to enlarge readers' cultural background knowledge. According to Alptekin (2009)^[3] illustrated that when EFL learners were given the related information and knowledge to their reading materials in advance, they could have a better interference compared to they did not get any helps.

3.2. Answer to Question 2: Why does intercultural competence influence learners' reading comprehension ability?

-Knowledge and Awareness

Based on Deardorff (2006)^[12] concluded in her study, knowledge involves with several factors: the cultural self-awareness, culturally specific knowledge and social-linguistic awareness.

When an individual possesses high cultural awareness and abundant intercultural background knowledge, she/he can communicate with target language speakers successfully and effectively, the problems and difficulties can be minimized to some extent; but a person on the contrary has a higher possibility of having problems in understanding, interpreting, producing, and using written and spoken texts, the problem makes not only an EFL learner but also a professional linguistic scholar into a more serious situation (Cakir, 2006)^[9]. Apart from that, cultural awareness is one of the significant types of cultural background knowledge (Kuhi, Asl & Yavari, 2013)^[26]. In the study done by Kuhi, Asl and Yavari (2013)^[26], they gave the definition of what the awareness is from micro and macro aspects. Talking awareness from the micro aspect, it can be demonstrated as the ability to observe, to realize or to perceive of words, ideas or situations. When it comes to the macro aspects, it is the competence or quality of being aware of something new or something special.

The importance of the intercultural awareness was also mentioned by Kuhi, Asl and Yavari (2013)^[26], they supposed that awareness contributes to construct the learners' inner and implicit knowledge system. When an EFL learner realizes the key points of culture and a language frequently, this person has the ability to compared it with his or her previous knowledge of linguistic and cultural background knowledge automatically, making a new assumption to adapt to the differences between the new information and previous one (Yu & Van Maele, 2018)^[36]. Besides that, as Hunter, White and Godbey (2006)^[21] claimed in their study that the most key step in increasing intercultural competence

is to form and to develop cultural awareness, which could be helpful and useful for assisting EFL learners to understand the meaning of the authentic native text. Based on Yang's study (2017)^[37], she illustrated the action done by Chinese Government, which is that the cultivation of cultural awareness has been demonstrated clearly in the new English Curriculum Outline, which much more focus on cultural knowledge education and cultural awareness cultivate, for example, adding more introduction of target language cultural background knowledge into the original English classroom as Yang (2017)^[37] mentioned in her study. Obviously, the action of putting the cultivating learners' cultural awareness into English Curriculum Outline is followed the idea proposed by Hunter, White and Godbey (2006)^[21].

-Skills

Skills such as observing, evaluating and analyzing, and critical thinking are needed to cultivate and develop, because skills play an important role in reading (Perry & Southwell, 2011)^[32]. EFL learners with the highly observing sensitivity to the objects, situation and patterns can enrich their eyes, under this circumstance, they always react more efficiently, accurately and promptly to something in the new environment than the people who are not equipped with proficient observing skills. The idea concluded by Perry and Southwell (2011)^[32] as I mentioned above correspond to Byram's finding (1997)^[6], who had mentioned that the skills of discovery are one of the key elements to improve readers' ICC. It is obvious that discovery is the first step while new information appears. In the following step, individuals have to do the critical thinking during the period of evaluating and analysing the differences between their own pre-existing knowledge and new information.

-Attitudes

Intercultural attitudes mainly concentrate on how a person receives other cultures from all over the world. The positive attitudes, such as respect, openness, and curiosity are the good initiation reflect that EFL learners are more willing to perceive a new thing (Deardorff, 2006)^[12]. While reading an authentic text, the positive attitude is one of the powerful elements to overcome the difficulties, because the learners have enough sense of curiosity while new thing appears which powerful enough to defeat the fearful feeling to the new situation and overwhelm the problems as Deardorff (2006)^[12] said in her study. On the contrary, the learners with negative attitudes will not be open to the new cultures, as they are immersed in their own previous or current cultures, someone even show their disrespect to the new cultures. In Deardorff (2006)^[12]'s ICC model, she claimed that individual attitude is the at the first place, which can adequately demonstrate how significance of attitude is in the development of ICC.

3.3. Answer to Question 3: How can teachers help their learner improve their intercultural competence and reading comprehension?

As the importance of intercultural competence for an EFL learner to be cultivated has been emphasized by scholars

in studies and academic books, many efforts have been devoted to develop EFL learners' English cultural learning. According to the results of a myriad of academic materials, Question 3 will be answered from three identities, the EFL teachers, the EFL learners, and schools and communities, in three domains: knowledge and awareness, skills, and attitudes.

-The identity of EFL teachers

The teaching methods and teaching activities that EFL teachers use and apply make a big influence on improving and enlarging students' cross-cultural knowledge and awareness (Yang, 2017; Hernández-Bravo, Cardona-Moltó & Hernández-Bravo, 2017; Barr & Chinwonno, 2016)^{[37],[20],[5]}. To illustrate this, Hernández-Bravo, Cardona-Moltó & Hernández-Bravo (2017)^[20] conducted a study involving 187 pupils in Spain, and proposed one teaching method – a teacher-led intercultural tutoring action program (TAP) – which can be deemed as a curriculum-based program, to improve EFL learners' intercultural competence. Three aims of the TAP are illustrated as follows. Firstly, imparting learners' attitudes towards various cultures is the most crucial process, giving students efficient guidance or instruction to help them build the correct attitudes towards diverse cultures. Secondly, increasing students' intercultural awareness by doing TAP while students are learning. Lastly, giving students useful suggestion to help them acquire diverse cultural knowledge, information and skills which are essential factors to understand an authentic text in class.

Apart from that, based on Yang's study (2017)^[37], she claimed the principles of cultural teaching: the Assimilative Principle, the Phasic Principle, and the Comparative Principle, which could be seen as an efficient guidance for EFL teachers to give EFL learners the class of cultural teaching. Following the Assimilative Principle proposed by Yang (2017)^[37], she suggested that EFL teachers have to choose the parts of target culture which are advantage to their own culture, and turn the useful parts of the target culture into the native culture gradually while imparting.

-The identity of EFL learners (Out-of-class learning)

There are lots of effective ways that EFL learners can adapt to improve their intercultural competence after class. Based on the study done by Yang (2017)^[37], she claimed that talking with the English Native Speakers is the best and direct way for EFL learners to get familiar with the intercultural differences so as to get well known with the thinking ways and expression ways of the English native speakers. Yang (2017)^[37] claimed that with the development of the globalization, there exist plenty of chances for EFL learners to communicate with English native speakers, so EFL learners need to take full use of each opportunity to talk to English native speakers as more as possible. Through chatting with the foreigners, EFL learners can learn as much knowledge as they can, it is true that the information or knowledge they acquire from English native speakers cannot find out in the text books which they use at school.

-The identity of schools and communities

According to Perry and Southwell (2011)^[32], intercultural competence can be taught in a variety of subject areas as part of a school's curriculum. This curriculum-based intercultural teaching is common among international schools and curriculum providers, such as the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO). The IBO is a global Educator in the international education developing young people who are inquisitive, knowledgeable, and caring and who contribute to the creation of a better and more peaceful world through education that fosters intercultural understanding and respect (IBO, 2023). EFL learners studying in the international schools obviously have the higher level of intercultural understanding, intercultural awareness sensitivity and intercultural skills than the students learning at non-international schools (Straffon, 2003)^[34]. Additionally, as Perry and Southwell (2011)^[34] said in their study, based on the intercultural-based teaching curriculum, the EFL learners can totally immerse in the authentic foreign situation, which is the efficient way to improve intercultural understand and knowledge, to cultivate intercultural awareness, and practice intercultural skills.

4. Implications and Recommendations for Teaching Practice

-Using Intercultural-based Teaching

First, an effective way for EFL teachers to develop and improve EFL learners' intercultural awareness and knowledge is using intercultural education-multicultural TAP which is the intercultural-based teaching, adopting from the study done by Hernández-Bravo et al. (2017)^[19], they proposed that EFL teachers have to accept teaching training to ensure give the EFL learners the best teaching before setting off the tutorial plan, such as explanations the lesson plan, modelling the whole class and role-playing the lesson. Moreover, based on Hernández-Bravo et al. (2017)^[19], I believe educators involved in intercultural education have the responsibility to build the outline of the intercultural teaching, and then EFL learners can follow the intercultural guidelines suggested by the educators.

Apart from that, as Hernández-Bravo et al. (2017)^[19] concluded, the teaching aims of intercultural class are as follow: first, setting the correct attitudes towards diverse cultures; second, cultivating intercultural awareness; third, acquiring knowledge and skills of a new cultures presented in the class.

-Project-based Reading Instruction

Concerned with the skills that EFL learners have to construct sensitive intercultural awareness and abundant knowledge, intercultural skills and positive attitude towards other cultures to get the high level of ICC, according to the study done by Barr and Chinwonno (2016)^[5], they proposed that Project-based Reading Instruction (PRI) is an effective way to build the skills that EFL learners can use while reading and to improve their intercultural knowledge from the reading materials and activities. Based on the framework of PRI proposed by

Barr and Chinwonno (2016)^[5], the final teaching object is that EFL learners have the ability to make the connection between their own cultural background and the target language cultures. Two activities can be adopted by EFL teachers while teaching, exploring target cultural knowledge and linking to EFL learners own cultural so as to find the similarities and difficulties. During the exploring and linking process, it is a wise way for EFL teachers to adopt video clips to attract EFL learners' attention and activate their previous basic knowledge, under this circumstance, students will be enjoyable and active.

- Role playing

In terms of the last component of ICC, EFL learners' attitudes towards diverse cultures cannot be ignore in the field of intercultural education. Based on Yang's study (2017)^[37], it could be suggested that adopting role-playing can be a useful way for students to learn English culture. While role-playing, students can be engaged in each topic and produce their real feelings for each situation, under this circumstance, not only their original cultural knowledge can be activated, but also the correct attitudes to the English language culture can be constructed, which is totally different from they build their attitudes towards English cultures according to what they hear or see from other second-hand resources, such as videos or reading materials. Taking the topic of shopping as one of the examples, students can be separated into two groups, one is in a Chinese shop and the other is in a Western shop.

5. Conclusion and limitations

Overall, the literature review demonstrates the significance of ICC to improve EFL learners reading comprehension and reveals several useful suggestions for both EFL learners and EFL teachers to develop ICC and to adopt while teaching separately. However, there still exist several shortages and deficiencies that scholars and researchers need to address in future research. The answers to question 2 did not take the framework of ICC model into consideration, all the studies that I referred to only mentioned the effect of skills, awareness and knowledge, and attitudes to reading comprehension separately, however, they did not mention much about why these three elements of ICC work together as a unit to influence EFL learners reading comprehension.

It is undoubtable that reading comprehension plays an important role in improving EFL learners' English proficiency, with authentic texts being effective material for EFL learners to learn new language, such as the vocabulary, grammar structures and expressions. However, without having a developed language cultural background knowledge, it is often hard for EFL learners to fully understand the meaning of the authentic text. The terms of ICC have been proposed by scholars so as to enhance EFL learners' understanding of English culture.

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