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Intercultural Competence and Reading

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Abstract

The article deals with a critical discussion of intercultural competence (IC) and its correlation with reading. It bends itself to expound that English learners' IC can be developed through reading. The principal objective of this article is to demonstrate a critical understanding of IC and to further contribute to language teachers' awareness of IC and their practice in teaching reading to English language learners. This article is composed of three themed parts. The first part gives a brief review of different definitions of IC in the literature. The second part examines the development of IC through reading and various factors that influence this development. The final part includes a discussion of different perspectives that have emerged in the literature regarding IC and literacy education. The sticking point of the discussion is that whether students should be offered culturally modified texts to facilitate the development of IC. The author of this article gives a negative answer regarding this discussion and advocates the use of original texts in literacy education.

Keywords

Intercultural competence, home culture, foreign culture, third culture, reading, multicultural texts, authentic literary texts, literacy education, culturally modified texts

1. Definitions of Intercultural Competence

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the discussion of intercultural competence (IC). A growing body of literature can be found that recognizes the definitions of this term. Byram (2000) defines IC as the ability to “see relationships between different cultures – both internal and external to a society – and to mediate, that is, interpret each [culture] in terms of the other, either for [himself] or for other people”. Stier and Stier (2006) concur, providing a comprehensive framework of IC by categorizing this term into two parts, namely content-competencies and processual competencies. Specifically, content-competencies refers to the knowledge base of both home culture and foreign culture, and processual competencies involve intrapersonal (cognitive and emotional skills) as well as interpersonal competencies (interactive skills). In this regard, IC can be viewed as the dynamic interplay of one's home culture and target culture.

However, some researchers argue that IC does not only involve bicultural competence; rather, it should go beyond the conventional boundaries of only two cultures, and there is a “third culture” in between. Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Tejeda (1999) stress that a “third culture” is concerned with the neutralization of hybridity and conflicts of different mainstream cultures, which connects cultures instead of dichotomizing them. Kostogriz (2002) further remarks that a “third culture” is by no means a zone that addresses similarities or differences between cultures; instead, it is a constantly developmental zone where learners are encouraged to live and learn with contradictions and ambivalences of

diverse cultures.

With the emergence of a “third culture”, the development of IC can be a complex issue in that language learners are situated in a multicultural context full of tension, conflicts, differences and contradictions, and they have to endeavour to either appreciate those cultural conflicts or negotiate between their own cultures and target cultures so as to achieve successful cross-border communication. Since English is commonly regarded as the global lingua franca, it is undoubted that it also functions as the medium which connects diverse cultures in the global settings. However, from a traditional perspective, English is solely concerned with one culture, especially the dominant English-speaking culture, such as the UK culture and US culture. This perception is, perhaps, problematic because EFL learners are now not only exposed to monocultural settings, but also to more diverse sociocultural settings. Thus, as Baker (2012) stresses, it may not be sufficient to understand one specific foreign culture, and it is desirable to develop deep insights into diverse cultural contexts to cope with more complex global interaction. Pulverness (2004) also claims that in the case of language education, teachers need to use multicultural texts and materials to increase language students’ IC instead of focusing only on one particular culture.

2. Development of Intercultural Competence Through Reading

Extensive research has shown that IC can be developed through reading. To date, learners can have access to a wide variety of reading texts, ranging from conventional texts, such as coursebooks, newspapers, and magazines, to more authentic literary texts, such as poems, short stories, novels and plays. Many researchers insist that authentic multilingual literary texts are better than conventional texts in the enhancement of IC, because authentic literary texts are more representative of the cultural diversity of the English language and culture, and learners can have opportunities to visit and experience diverse cultures during their interactions with authentic literary texts. For instance, Gómez (2012) selects five American short stories for some advanced level of EFL university students and seeks to build their IC, with the findings that short stories can help students to broaden their thinking horizon, understand and appreciate different values from other cultures, and reduce prejudice and stereotypes, thus building their IC. In the same vein, Rodríguez and Puyal (2012) concur, noting that multicultural fictions offer students a platform where they are encouraged to critically analyze different assumptions and beliefs presented in the text, and experience varied values and attitudes from foreign cultures. In doing so, tolerance and empathy can be developed, and IC is naturally built and enhanced.

Furthermore, Nie (2017) investigates 69 undergraduate students from a Chinese comprehensive university by having them read English novels, finding that novel reading can not only help students develop linguistic competence, but also help them consciously ponder on cultural issues embedded in the novel and draw on examples from the novel. In this regard, novel reading can be viewed as an ideal tool for facilitating IC. It is noteworthy that poetry, a type of authentic literary texts, also makes great sense in developing IC in some cases. In a research project, Scott and Huntington (2002) explore how students’ C2 (a second culture) competence can be established through poem reading, concluding that students’ traits, namely affective awareness and cognitive flexibility, are activated when they read poems, because they tend to relate ideas and images from the poem to their own lives and try to establish cross-cultural connections between home culture and target culture. Therefore, evidence from the abovementioned studies has shown that the development of IC can be achieved through reading.

Nevertheless, to develop IC through reading is not that easy, because there are some factors that can influence this development. Firstly, schemata can be a crucial contributing factor. As Nassaji (2002) defines, schemata refers to readers’ knowledge structures; Erten and Razi (2009) further categorize schemata into three types, namely formal schemata, content schemata, and cultural schemata. Based on this schemata theory, to comprehend texts from other cultures can be demanding in that readers may be exposed to unfamiliar cultural norms. In this sense, if a reader lacks schematic knowledge, the big gap in cultural knowledge may aggregate the workload of that reader. When readers’ comprehension is hindered by schematic gap, the development of IC is unlikely to be achieved because that gap can never be naturally removed, and unfamiliar cultural content in the text is always out there.

Secondly, the extent of learners’ motivation to learn the language can also influence the development of IC. From my own teaching experience, some learners are less motivated to learn other cultures in reading, because they tend to resist novelties or simply want to stay in their comfort zones. If learners lack motivation or interests of foreign cultures, developing their IC can be a daunting job. Conversely, if learners are fully motivated to visit other cultures, they tend to employ more cognitive resources to deal with the unfamiliar cultural content in the text, or resort to teachers or online resources to resolve cultural issues that impede their comprehension. In doing so, motivation exerts a positive impact on the development of IC.

Thirdly, learners’ age and language proficiency are also unignorable factors. It is fair to say that with all possible variables keeping the same, IC of adults can be developed to a larger extent than that of children, possibly because

adults have a more mature mindset and clearer learning objectives than children, and adults usually have better intercultural awareness out of their demands of intercultural communication. Language proficiency is also worth considering. Based on my reading teaching experience, I discern that advanced learners can develop better IC than intermediate learners and beginners. Learners with low level of language proficiency usually have to struggle with the decoding process in reading, such as word identification and grammatical parsing, thus failing to use extra cognitive resources to deal with the cultural content of the text. By contrast, advanced learners can cope with the text comprehension both linguistically and culturally because they focus more on meaning instead of form.

Fourthly, learners' cultural exposure can influence the development of IC. Even though people from different countries can connect with each other more efficiently out of technological advance, the opportunities for EFL learners to get into contact with foreign cultures are few, especially in the language classroom where cultural content is usually absent in reading materials. In this regard, cultural exposure is far less sufficient for them to develop IC. Meanwhile, it is not unconceivable that learners will be less willing to promote their IC if they do not plan to live or work in another country in the future, because they suppose that few cultural contacts will occur in their future lives. Thus, the extent to which cultures learners are exposed to or will be exposed to different cultures can have positive and negative repercussions on their IC development.

Furthermore, other factors, such as teachers' sociocultural knowledge, teachers' teaching approaches, and the selection of reading materials, also need to be noted. Teachers with sufficient cultural knowledge can help learners to facilitate their intercultural understandings, whereas teachers with poor cultural knowledge tend to focus more on vocabulary and grammar teaching. Teachers with appropriate teaching approaches, such as the inquiry-based approach, dialogic approach, transactional approach, and content-based approach proposed by Gómez (2012), can efficiently help learners to build IC during their interaction with multicultural literature. Teachers who can select appropriate reading materials from an intercultural perspective can certainly help students to get into authentic contact with the real cultural phenomenon.

3. Different Perspectives

It is interesting to note that, more recently, literature has emerged that offers contradictory facts regarding the issue of IC. Some researchers advocate that texts can be culturally modified to compensate for learners' lack of cultural familiarity. Erten and Razi (2009) demonstrate that a culturally adjusted text, with unique conceptual cues or cultural elements from target culture changed, can help readers to achieve better comprehension. This practice coincides with what Alptekin (2006) terms as "nativization". Nativization is concerned with the adaptation of the textual and contextual elements of the original text into the readers' home culture. The consensus reached by these researchers is that readers' linguistic capacity and schematic knowledge are limited, and it is a desirable way to give them culturally modified texts to facilitate their reading comprehension.

However, from my personal perspective, this practice is not feasible in all cases. As is claimed by Barton and Hamilton (2000), the aim of literacy education is to empower students to become analytical and questioning, instead of solely teaching vocabulary and grammar in a text; critical literacy teaching requires teachers to examine whether students can interpret the values, positions and contexts of a text from foreign cultures, which is a vital aspect of IC. In this sense, culturally modified texts, with unfamiliar but crucial cultural content eradicated from the original texts, are certainly not conducive to the development of IC. What teachers in reading class need to note, however, is that the development of students' IC through reading is a complex issue, with multifaceted factors contributing to the process of that development. In this sense, texts used in reading class, whether they are culturally modified or not, should cater to the target students' schemata, learning motivation, age and language proficiency, and cultural exposure. Teachers should be cautious and professional in the selection of reading materials. In the meanwhile, teachers themselves, especially those who work in EFL classrooms, should work to increase their sociocultural knowledge and polish their teaching approaches for the purpose of facilitating the students' IC in the reading class.

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