

Impact of Literature Circles on Students' Intercultural Awareness

ผลของวงจรรวบรวมต่อความตระหนักรู้ ระหว่างวัฒนธรรมของนักศึกษา

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the impact of literature circles on undergraduate students' intercultural awareness. The participants were 26 students, and this qualitative study employed semi-structured interview and journal to collect the data. The results showed that reading children's literature integrated into literature circles could help the undergraduate students increase their intercultural awareness. In addition, students could develop not only their own cultural awareness but awareness for different cultures as well.

Keywords: Intercultural Awareness, Literature Circles, Children's Literature

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาผลของการใช้วงจรรวบรวมต่อความตระหนักรู้ระหว่างวัฒนธรรมของนักศึกษา กลุ่มตัวอย่าง คือ นักศึกษาจำนวน 26 คน และเป็น การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ เก็บข้อมูลโดยใช้การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างและการเขียนบันทึก ผลการวิจัยพบว่า การอ่านวรรณกรรมเด็กรวมกับวงจรรวบรวมสามารถช่วยพัฒนาความตระหนักรู้ระหว่างวัฒนธรรมของศึกษาทั้งในด้านความตระหนักรู้วัฒนธรรมตัวเองและความตระหนักรู้วัฒนธรรมที่แตกต่าง

คำสำคัญ : ความตระหนักรู้ระหว่างวัฒนธรรม วงจรรวบรวม วรรณกรรมเด็ก

Introduction

Intercultural communication has been studied and integrated because of its significant role for English language teaching nowadays (Byram, 1997). In addition, only English competency is not enough for students to communicate with other people with different cultural backgrounds successfully, and intercultural skills are, therefore, incorporated into English language teaching inevitably (Gómez, 2014).

Before achieving intercultural communication effectively, English language students should be equipped with intercultural awareness, an important cognitive competence of intercultural communication (Zhang & Steele, 2012). In addition, intercultural awareness is considered as the ability to realize and understand not only one's own culture but also other cultures, and it comprises of three levels which the first level relating to understanding other cultures regarding on stereotypes, the second level relating to recognizing one's culture differing from others, and the third level relating to seeing culture from insider's viewpoints with understanding (Chen & Starosta, 2005). Furthermore, Baker (2012) defines intercultural

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awareness as the realization of cultural patterns and practices which consisting of basic cultural awareness, advanced cultural awareness, and intercultural awareness. In this sense, intercultural awareness is significant to be raised as the cornerstone of developing intercultural communication proficiently.

Numerous intercultural studies have been investigated in English language classroom. In the first place, perceptions of English language teachers are studied and the results indicate that English language teachers have an agreement on the significance of intercultural communication, and it is also important to be integrated into the classroom (Bickley, Rossiter, and Abbott, 2014; Zhang & Steele, 2012). Although English language teachers consider the important position of intercultural communication, they have limited intercultural knowledge and insufficient intercultural teaching experiences. These will affect how English language teachers incorporate intercultural communication into their classroom (Bastos & Sá, 2015). They, furthermore, have several difficulties such as teaching strategies, materials, and assessments of intercultural communication in English language classroom; consequently, these problems could cause both the demotivation and unsuccessful intercultural development of English language students (Demircioğlu & Çakır, 2015). It is apparent that English language teachers' intercultural knowledge including teaching strategies, materials, and assessment play a significant role in integrating intercultural communication into English language classroom.

Consequently, literature circles may come into play as an effective way to minimize the existence of inefficient intercultural development in English language classroom. Literature circles are developed from numerous perspectives such as reader-response theory (Strickland, Galda & Cullinan,

2004), scaffolding theory (Young & Mohr, 2018), and collaborative learning (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). In addition, Daniels (2002) indicates that literature circles are a small group of students reading the chosen books, sharing information, discussing the emerging issues, and presenting to the classroom. He further points out that in a small group, students have to be assigned their roles such as discuss director, summarizer, vocabulary enricher, literary luminary, and illustrator, and students read and respond to the books relating to their assigned roles in the group. After that, students present what they have learned from the books and discuss with other groups in the classroom. After finishing the first circle, students have to choose another book and form the new circle depending on the chosen books with the new roles and the same activities. In this sense, students can choose the books that they want, find information outside the books to support their comprehension, share the information, and discuss the issues with friends collaboratively. Teachers, obviously, play a role as a facilitator and a guidance counselor in the classroom.

However, intercultural studies in Thai context are still limited, and this would be interesting to investigate the advantages of literature circles along with children's literature, a rich intercultural source to help students raise intercultural awareness. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the implementation of literature circles on students' intercultural awareness.

The search question is as follows:

What is the impact of literature circles on EFL undergraduate students' intercultural awareness?

Materials and Methods

This is a qualitative study which aims to investigate deeply the events and the emerging data. This section will indicate participants and context, Research instrument, and research process.

Participants and Context

Convenient sampling was used to obtain in this study. The participants were 26 students enrolling in Introduction to Literature at a private university. They were 2nd year students, 21 female students and five male students. Their English Proficiency was considered at the low level. Therefore, children's literature which was less language difficulty than the classic literature was used in the study. With too difficult and complex language written on the books, students tend to demotivate to read them (Ur, 2012).

Research Instruments

Children's Literature

To select the Children's literature in the study, researcher surveyed the books from numerous sources such as Children's Literature Association, Australian Children's Literature Association for Research, and American Library Association. These could validate the quality of the books to employ into the study. Researcher also considers the level of students and the duration of the study. Then students were asked to choose three books from six books regarding to their interests. Consequently, three books used in the study were *Iguana Boy Saves the World with a Triple Cheese Pizza* by James Bishop (2018), *Hari and His Electric Feet* by Alexander McCall Smith (2018), and *Planet Omar Accidental Trouble Magnet* by Zanib Mian (2019).

Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interview was conducted with ten students. These ten students were randomly selected from 26 participants. After reading children's literature relating to literature circles, semi-structured interview was administered. The ten students were asked to clarify their thought toward own cultural points and different cultural points based on the intercultural awareness concepts of Baker (2012) and Chen and Starosta (2005) as the framework in this study.

Journal

The students had to write journals after reading children's literature and participating literature circle activities. The construction of journal consisted of time, date, and pages. In addition, students were required to express their idea toward various points as the guidelines including 1) the issues which they learned via the activities, 2) own cultural issues that could be noticed in the story, and 3) different cultural issues that could be found in the story.

Research Process

Firstly, researcher explained the objective of the study to students. Then in the first day, the researcher also indicated that the study will be conducted in this course as well. The researcher explained the study procedures and informed students that this study will not affect the grade of the students. Then the researcher demonstrated how to form literature circles to the students.

From the second to the fourth week, students read children's literature participating in literature circles and wrote their journal after activities in each week.

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For the fifth week, students presented their interesting issues to their classmates.

For the sixth week, ten students were interviewed to investigate their opinions on the intercultural aspects after joining literature circles.

Results

In order to examine the research question below, semi-structured interview and

journal were administered. Firstly, the results from semi-structured interview were presented, and secondly, the results from the journal were also portrayed.

What is the impact of literature circles on EFL undergraduate students' intercultural awareness?

Semi-structured interview

In doing so, ten participants were randomly selected as the interviewees after using literature circles. Ten students were under the pseudonyms of student A, student B, student C, student D, student E, student F, student G, student H, student I, and student J; therefore, their identities were concealed. The purpose of the interview was to investigate opinions of the interviewees relating to the development of intercultural awareness of the participants. Then the interview data were presented.

One's own cultural awareness

The results, obviously, revealed that the participants compared and contrasted the characters that they read and discussed with themselves. This could help participants raise their own cultural awareness. The first example was from Student E. Additionally, Student E noticed some similarities between her and Omar, a main character in Planet Omar (2019). Student E stated below:

Omar had a daily routine like me starting from going to school, praying to Allah five times a day, going to mosque every Saturday and spending Muslim's life such as eating, dressing, and praying. Student E's interview data

Holding Muslim's principles, Student E and Omar were likely to share cultural values, cultural beliefs, and cultural behaviors relating to the same religious. In addition, these cultural elements demonstrated clearly the basic elements of a particular culture. Another example is from Student I, he found that the family of Hari, a main character in Hari and His Electric Feet (2018) was a big family. Student I also stated below:

I had a big family like Hari. I lived with my parents, sister, grandmother, and aunt. My grandmother was very kind to me and I loved her a lot. Student I's interview data

This could indicate that when reading the story of Hari, Student I could find the similar aspect of the family of Hari and him. In addition, Student A raised the interesting point about his life and Hari's life. Student A indicated below:

Hari and I had to work in order to help family. Hari delivered lunch box, and I did a part-time job at the restaurant after class. I had to take care of my own expense like Hari. Student A's interview data

It was apparent that Student A compared his own life with Hari that both of them had difficult life, but this hardship could make them stronger to live by themselves. Student A also indicated that he understand Hari.

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These examples could indicate that while students reading and discussing the books with their friend, the events in the books could reflect their own cultural awareness. Although these stories occurred in different cultural settings, students could find some cultural similarities as well.

Different cultural awareness

The first example is from Student B, she found the interesting Indian sweet, barfi, in Hari and His Electric Feet (2018). Student B stated below:

I found that barfi was interesting because Hari made this kind of sweet and sold for money. Mr. Ram liked this sweet so much. I found out that barfi was easy to make and I wanted to make it. Student B's interview data

This indicated that Student B found different kinds of sweet like barfi, and this stimulated her interest. She then searched for information and learned how to cook it. In this sense, this could develop students' inquiry skill for them when encountering unknown aspects. Another example was from Student G. He indicated that he could learn a lot about Muslims in Planet Omar (2019). Student G indicated below:

I didn't know much about Muslims. I didn't have a Muslim friend here. When I read and discussed with my friends about Planet Omar. I had learned a lot about them such as their beliefs, routines, and fasting. Student G's interview data

It was clear that Student G had an opportunity to know about Muslims, and Student G stated that some issues were neglected to investigate because those issues did not relate to his life. For instance, he was a Buddhist, so he had nothing to do with other religious beliefs and routines. This story of Omar could help him to understand Muslims better with the easy way. In addition, Student D indicated that she liked Hari, an Indian boy in Hari and His Electric Feet (2018). Before reading the story of Hari, she accepted that she had a negative attitude towards Indian people. However, her attitude was changed after exploring Hari's life in the story. Then Student D showed her respectfulness to Hari because he was very diligent and tried to overcome the difficulty in Indian society with his strong mind. Student D revealed below:

I had negative feeling toward Indian people because of some news I watched and some stories I listened to from people, but Hari could change that negative feeling into admiration. Student D's interview data

This could imply that Student D could gradually develop more respectfulness and openness to Indian people without stereotyping and prejudicial bias after reading the story of Hari. From these examples, the participants' different cultural awareness was developed because they could show their sympathy and respectfulness over people with different cultures.

Journal

In addition, journal was administered in order to construct the solid data concerning to the development of intercultural awareness of

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participants. Therefore, journals of participants were investigated and analyzed by using the conceptual framework of intercultural awareness (Baker, 2012; Chen & Starosta, 2005). In doing so, this section was presented into (1) one's own cultural awareness and (2) different cultural awareness.

One's own cultural awareness

The results from journals could emphasize clearly the development of intercultural awareness. One's own cultural knowledge was raised through children's literature integrated into literature circles. Below was an example of one's own cultural knowledge:

I liked Planet Omar because it was a story about accepting the differences of other people, especially religious. This story reminded me of my friend's life. My friend was a Muslim and I was a Buddhist. Although we believed in different religions, my friend and I could be a good friend. I understood my friend more after reading this story.

This example indicated the similar circumstance relating to religion like Islamic beliefs in the community. This student was aware of the existence of different religions in each community, and the student indicated that the student could be friends with people who believed in different religions as well. Another example also indicated the similar cultural aspect. The example showed below:

When I finished reading Hari's story, it made me think about my family. I didn't stay with my parents because I moved to study here. I had to do a part-time job to support my expense. I understood Hari. I missed my parents, but I had to study here and did my best for them. After graduation, I wanted to take care of my parents as the same as Hari did.

The example showed that this student compared story of Hari with student's life, and this student found that the living conditions and relationship of the family were not different. In addition, the love and warmth of family could be everywhere, and this was the basic element of culture. People in each society also had various living conditions, and people had to find their ways to survive in the society as well.

Different cultural awareness

The findings showed that different cultural awareness of students was apparently increased after reading children's literature integrated into literature circles. The first example presented the different cultural respectfulness. The student mentioned that Dylan in *Iguana Boy Saves the World* (2018) was an example of representing his endeavor and effort to triumph over people's stereotyping and prejudice. Below was the example:

I admired Dylan because he showed many attempts at being a helpful and reliable superhero. The picture of such a superhero in people's mind would be someone who was strong and powerful, and the abilities of the superhero would be some extraordinary power such as

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flying in the sky, running swiftly in a flash, having laser beam eyes. From these viewpoints, I considered that people still stuck in the stereotype of many superheroes. The power of Dylan was that he could only talk and understand his iguana, so Dylan had to fight against his self-esteem and other people's bias, insults, and laughing over his power.

According to the finding, this could interpret that the student could triumph over the stereotype of general superheroes. This also meant that the student could tolerate the differences of other people without any stereotyping and bias. In addition, the student could notice and learn the important message in this story that although the story was set in the superficial setting or the unknown place, the issue of stereotyping still existed.

Discussion

The results of this study clearly suggested that intercultural awareness of students gradually developed through reading children's literature integrated into literature circles. Furthermore, students could perceive not only one's own cultural awareness but also different cultural awareness. Firstly, in the aspect of one's own cultural awareness, the results from both semi-structured interview and journal obviously indicated that students were aware of their cultural elements by comparing the events and issues of the stories with themselves. The cultural elements which students could perceive were family patterns, ways of life, living conditions, and religious beliefs. This showed that students developed their awareness and openness of one's own cultural complexities, particularly subculture (Chen

&Starosta, 2005). The example of subculture was religion, and students showed their openness toward the different religious as well. The results were in the same way with Farris, Nelson and L'Allier (2015) and Iwai (2015) that children's literature and literature circles could help students develop their attitude and openness towards people with different cultural backgrounds as well. The second aspect was different cultural awareness. The results also revealed the increase of different cultural awareness of the students. Not only interview data but also journal clearly emphasized that reading children's literature integrated into literature circles could develop their different cultural awareness. They could show their understanding, openness, and sympathy for other people. These may result from students had a chance to read and find information by themselves; moreover, the students brought those issues and information to share and discuss with their friends, like the results in previous studies by Bista (2012), Herrera and Kidwell (2018), and Osorio (2018). Students' attitudes and options toward the particular issues were changed and reshaped through reading children's literature and discussing in the literature circles. Therefore, one's own cultural awareness and different cultural awareness of the students were clearly raised by reading children's literature and participating in literature circles.

Conclusion

In brief, students could develop their intercultural awareness through reading children's literature integrated into literature circles. In doing so, one's own cultural awareness can be raised by participating in the literature circles. In addition, students learned to realize their own cultural heritage, cultural norms, cultural values, cultural beliefs, and cultural

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behaviors by comparing and contrasting the issues that students found in various stories. Furthermore, students could increase their different cultural awareness as well. They could realize that in the different territories, there were some similarities. For those differences, they could learn to tolerate, open, and sympathize with them.

Recommendations

In regard to the possible implication, it will be interesting to investigate the process of literature circles such as reading individually and discussion with group members in the aspect of intercultural awareness development. In addition, children's literature is another source to study on the development of reading comprehension. The last implication which is interesting is that speaking skill could be investigated though using literature circles as well.

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