Effects of Teaching Literature on Culture Learning in the Language Classroom

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Abstract: Problem statement: The role of literature in enhancing readers' cultural understanding in the language classroom was explored. It was a part of an extensive research which focused mainly on language learning and creativity. It is argued that the interface of language, literature and culture are at the forefront of present-day language and literature learning and this facilitates inter-racial, intra-racial and global understanding. **Approach:** As method, a quasi-experimental study was conducted on two intact groups; the control (n = 30) and experimental (n = 30) groups. Both groups underwent an eight week experiment whereby one short story, The Burden of Sin by S. Karthigesu was taught to both groups. The control group was taught using the routine and traditional reading and comprehension teaching approach while the experimental group was taught using the reader response approach adapting Ibsen's the I Model text exploration and literary devices. **Results:** Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted on the data collected using two non-parametric tests: The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to determine the significant difference between the experimental group's pretest and posttest scores and the Mann-Whitney U test to determine the significant difference between the scores of the experimental and control groups. **Conclusion:** The results proved to be substantially significant. The findings revealed that cultural understanding can be taught through literature in a language classroom and it is a valuable instructional medium in the learning of culture.

Key words: Language classroom, culture learning, teaching approach, intact groups, quasi-experimental, culture-specific, control groups, experimental group, literary devices

INTRODUCTION

As the world moves into the 21st century, it is clear that there are diverse forces demanding that inhabitants be better prepared to communicate with individuals, communities, organizations and nations within and around the globe. We have to come to terms with the diverse forces that confront us in this increasingly cross-cultural world. In an integrated language based literature curriculum, cultural knowledge is most often described synchronically, focusing, for instance, on values and beliefs, rules of behavior, conceptual categories, or basic social, political and economic structures. Can cultural knowledge be taught in a language classroom? Culture learning is the process of attaining the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills and attitudes most needed for effective communication and interaction with individuals across cultures. It is an energetic, developmental and ongoing process which strongly connects the learner cognitively, behaviorally and affectively. According to Paige and Stringer cited in Liddicoat *et al*. (2003) such learning would include:

- Learning about the self as a cultural being
- Learning about culture and its impact on human communication, behavior and identity
- Culture-general learning, i.e., learning about universal, cross-cultural phenomena such as
- Cultural adjustment
- Culture-specific learning, i.e., learning about a particular culture, including its language
- Learning how to learn, i.e., becoming an effective language and culture learner

Street (1993) opines that culture and language learning involve a strong relationship between the situation and the actors in which cultural context, prior experience and other factors come into function. Positioning culture at the core of language education enables preparation of students to be culturally attuned learners. Cultural contexts link words to their meaning. While language teaching traditionally has treated language and culture separately, more recent ESL proponents have begun stressing that linguistic competence alone is insufficient for a learner to be truly

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proficient in language. They argue that what is also needed is an understanding of the culture in which the target language is used thus providing the context for dynamic language to be practiced. Paige *et al*. (2003) emphasize that the study of language cannot be divorced from the study of culture and vice verse. The ability to function in another culture requires both prowess in the language and knowledge of the culture. It is only through language and literature that culture and its complexities can be taught formally in any classroom. Therefore it can be established that language, literature and culture are intertwined in culture learning.

Besides improving language skills, literature plays an important role in the ESL classroom as it is a product of culture and consists of a large amount of useful information. According to Lazar (1993) English is a global language by virtue of its status as a first or second language because English literary texts reveal the grandeur, fascinating diversity and richness of the world. The use of literature develops cultural awareness in students. Literature helps learners to empathize, understand and participate in discussions in the target culture and language (Muthusamy *et al*., 2010). Ellis (1987) claims that when students are presented with glimpses of aspects of the mainstream culture, literature becomes a vehicle to reduce the social and psychological distance between the target language and the learner. By teaching foreign literature, learners can be moved to a deeper understanding of other cultures besides their own. Vethamani (2004) has stressed that it enhances inter-racial understanding by exposing students to the diversified Malaysian way of life which strongly upholds values, customs and tradition. Pallardy (1997) states that through literature, student readers "will have the opportunity to develop insights and understandings of the cultures and people of the world; to develop their imagery and visualization abilities; and to gain new perspectives by testing their ideas with those found in books".

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The design employed was quasi-experimental design as subjects were not randomly assigned to treatments. In this design one quasi-experiment was conducted with two groups, the control and experimental groups. The control group was taught using a reading and comprehension activity and the experimental group was taught a literature based approach specifically Ibsen (1990). The I-model text exploration which consists a three- stage text exploration, a reader response method and handouts of notes on literary devices. A total of 60 students (N = 60) from two classes of BEL 200 of the Hotel and Catering Faculty at Dungun Campus participated in this research. Both were intact groups. The experimental group (N = 30) belonged to the Diploma in Food Science Management or DFSM programme and the control group (N = 30) belonged to the Diploma in Culinary Art or DCA programme.

As instrument, a short story by a Malaysian writer entitled The Burden of Sin by Karthigesu (2003) was chosen. Briefly the story is about how Velu, a father of Indian origin rejected an inter-racial love relationship between his son and his Malay neighbor and friend, Sulaiman's daughter and lived to regret it. He returned to the village after twenty five years to "wash the burden of his sin" an allusion to Hindu religious practices. The pretest and posttest fielded to the subjects were open-ended essay questions.

Pretest questions:

- Can this story promote good relationship between Malaysians of diverse beliefs and practices?
- Do you think that Velu made a mistake in not accepting Hasnah's (Sulaiman's daughter) and Devan's (Velu's son) love?

Posttest questions:
Malaysia is a multiracial country:

- Do you think this story can help enhance the relationship between the different races in Malaysia?
- Is Velu wrong in not consenting to the marriage?

As treatment, intervention and instructional procedures, the short story was distributed to the students to be read in the first week. Before the pretest was conducted, a pilot test was run on a few samples from the same population. Next pretest questions were handed out to the students where the students had to answer questions based on their comprehension of the short story. Later the experimental group underwent an eight week intervention programme where they were taught text exploration using Ibsen's the I-model, a reader response approach, along with lectures on literary terms and devices. Meanwhile the control group underwent a normal reading and comprehension activity. Then a posttest was administered on both groups. The questions were similar in content as the pretest questions but significantly different in structure. The essays collected from the students as pre and post tests served as the data for the research. They were later coded with numerals that only one researcher can identify. The essays were open ended and therefore

generated information which needed to be tabulated before quantitative measures could be applied.

In order to observe reliability and validity of measurement during content analysis and grading of the essays, an external judge or rater was employed. The rater or judge specializes in the area of literature. To test whether students have displayed cultural understanding or cultural relativism, an external judge recorded students' answer of either "yes" or "no". The data gathered whether "Yes" or "No" was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Based on the data, an average score, (the mean score) of each group; the experimental and the control group were tabulated. Then, the difference of the mean scores of both the groups was tabulated. The difference of the mean scores of both the groups was indicated to determine which group had performed better in the post test. To obtain the mean scores, the total scores of each group were totaled up and then divided by the total number of subjects in the corresponding group. This procedure was later followed by an inferential analysis. Since the samplings were not randomized, a non-parametric test was employed to elicit this information. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was used to determine whether the distribution of scores in (two samples) the pretest and posttest differed significantly. Whilst the Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine whether the distribution of scores of two independent samples (experimental and control groups) differed significantly from each other.

RESULTS

Performance for Cultural Understanding (Question 1) of the Experimental Group in the Pretest and Posttest.

The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures in Table 1 had yielded the following results z = 0.00, N = 30, p>0.05. There is no significant difference between the mean ranks (scores) of the pretest and posttest as attained by the subjects of the experimental group.

Performance for Cultural Understanding (Question 2) of the Experimental Group in the Pretest and Posttest

The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures in Table 2 had yielded the following results z = -3.464, N = 30, p<0.05. There is a significant difference between the mean ranks (scores) of the pretest and posttest as attained by the subjects of the experimental group.

Performance for Cultural Understanding (Questions 1 and 2) of the Experimental Group in the Pretest and Posttest

The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures in Table 3 had yielded the following results z = 0.000, N = 30, p>0.05. There is no significant difference between the mean ranks (scores) of the pretest and posttest as attained by the subjects of the experimental group.

Performance for Cultural Understanding (Question 1) of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Pretest and Posttest

The Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples in Table 4 had yielded the following results: z = -1.506, N = 30, p>0.05 in the posttest. Similarly, the pretest result also shows the mean ranks (scores) difference between the two groups was not significant (z = -1.506, N = 30, p>0.05). This suggests that the performances of the subjects from both the control and experimental groups for Question 1 did not change even after undergoing the treatment phase.

Performance for Cultural Understanding (Question 2) of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Pretest and Posttest.

Table 1: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures for Cultural Understanding (Question 1)

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of ranks
Ranks d				
Question 1- Posttest	Negative Ranks	0a	0.00	0.00
Score - Question 1 -	Positive Ranks	0b	0.00	0.00
Pretest Score	Ties	30c		
	Total	30		
Test Statistics [b c]				
	Z	0.000a		
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000		

a: Question 1- Posttest Score < Question 1 - Pretest Score; b: Question 1- Posttest Score > Question 1 - Pretest Score; c: Question 1-Pretest Score = Question 1- Posttest Score; d: Group Orientation = Experimental Group; a: The sum of negative ranks equals the sum of positive ranks; b: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test; c: Group Orientation = Experimental Group

Table 2: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures for Cultural Understanding (Question 2)

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of ranks
Ranks d				
Question 2-Posttest	Negative ranks	0a	0.00	0.00
Score-Question 2-	Positive ranks	12b	6.50	78.00
Pretest Score	Ties	18c		
	Total	30		
Test Statistics [b c]				
	Z	-3.464a		
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001		

a: Question 2- Posttest Score < Question 2 - Pretest Score; b: Question 2-Posttest Score > Question 2-Pretest Score; c: Question 2-Pretest Score = Question 2-Posttest Score; d: Group Orientation = Experimental Group   ; a: Based on negative ranks; b: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test; c: Group Orientation = Experimental Group

Table 3: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures for Cultural Understanding (Overall-Questions 1 and 2)

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of ranks
Ranks[d]				
Question 1 and 2- Posttest	Negative ranks	0a	0.00	0.00
Total Score-Question 1 and	Positive ranks	0b	0.00	0.00
2 pretest total score	Ties	30c		
	Total	30		
Test statistics [b c]				
	Z	0.000a		
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000		

a: Question 2- Posttest Score < Question 2-Pretest Score; b: Question 2 - Posttest Score > Question 2-Pretest Score; c: Question 2-Pretest Score = Question 2-Posttest Score; d: Group Orientation = Experimental Group; a: The sum of negative ranks equals the sum of positive ranks; b: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test; c: Group Orientation = Control Group

Table 4: Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples for Cultural Understanding (Question 1)

	Group Orientation	N	Mean Rank	Sum of ranks
Ranks				
Question 1-Pretest Score	Experimental Group	30	32.5	975
	Control Group	30	28.5	855
	Total	60		
Question 1-Posttest Score	Experimental Group	30	32.5	975
	Control Group	30	28.5	855
	Total	60		
Test statistics[a]				
	Question 1- pretest score	Question 1- posttest score		
Mann-Whitney U	390	390		
Wilcoxon W	855	855		
Z	-1.506	-1.506		
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.132	0.132		

a: Grouping variable: Group orientation

The Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples in Table 5 had yielded the following results: z = -3.136, N = 30, p<0.05 in the posttest. On the other hand, the pretest result shows the mean ranks (scores) difference between the two groups was not significant (z = 0.000, N = 30, p>0.05). This suggests that the performance of the subjects from the experimental group for Question 2 had improved as a result of undergoing the treatment phase as compared to the subjects of the control group who did not undergo any treatment.

Performance for Cultural Understanding (Questions 1 and 2 = Total) of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Pretest and Posttest.

The Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples in the Table 6 had yielded the following results: z = -2.912, N = 30, p < 0.05 in the posttest. On the other hand, the pretest result shows the mean ranks (scores) difference between the two groups was not significant (z = -0.120, N = 30, p > 0.05). This suggests that the performance of the subjects from the experimental group for both Questions 1-2 on the whole had improved as a result of undergoing the treatment phase. In other words, the subjects of the experimental group had shown a significant improvement in their overall level of cultural understanding (Questions 1-2) in the posttest after undergoing the intervention stage, as compared to the subjects of the control group who did not undergo any treatment.

Table 5: Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples for Cultural Understanding (Question 2)

	Group Orientation	N	Mean Rank	Sum of ranks
Ranks				
Question 1-pretest score	Experimental Group	30	30.50	915.00
	Control Group	30	30.50	915.00
	Total	60		
Question 1-posttest score	Experimental Group	30	36.50	1095.00
	Control Group	30	24.50	735.00
	Total	60		
Test statistics [a]				
	Question 1-pretest score	Question 1-posttest score		
Mann-Whitney U	450.000	270.000		
Wilcoxon W	915.000	735.000		
Z	0.000	-3.136		
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000	0.002		

a: Grouping Variable: Group Orientation

Table 6: Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples for Cultural Understanding (Overall-Questions 1 and 2)

	Group Orientation	N	Mean Rank	Sum of ranks
Ranks				
Question 1-pretest score	Experimental Group	30	36.30	1089.00
	Control Group	30	24.70	741.00
	Total	60		
Question 1-posttest score	Experimental Group	30	30.30	909.00
	Control Group	30	30.70	921.00
	Total	60		
Test statistics [a]				
	Question 1 and 2 pretest total score	Question 1 and 2 posttest total score		
Mann-Whitney U	444.000	376.000		
Wilcoxon W	909.000	741.000		
Z	-0.120	-2.912		
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.904	0.004		

a: Grouping variable: Group orientation

DISCUSSION

From the experiment, subjects of the experimental group had shown a significant improvement in their overall level of cultural understanding (Questions 1 and 2) in the posttest after undergoing the intervention stage, as compared to the subjects of the control group who did not undergo any treatment. In question 1 of both pretest and posttest, there were no significant difference as almost all subjects whether experimental or control group agreed and answered "Yes"; that this story helps foster cultural understanding! Perhaps the posttest question for question 1 should be in negative form, "This story cannot help enhance the relationship between the different races in Malaysia. Do you agree?

For question 2, it is found that the experimental group through the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures had yielded z = -3.464, N = 30, p < 0.05 (Table 2) indicates that there is a significant difference between the mean ranks (scores) in level of cultural understanding after treatment phase. Whereas the Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples is: z

= -3.136, N = 30, p < 0.05 (Table 5) in the posttest. This divulges a significant difference between the mean ranks (scores) of the experimental and the control groups in the posttest. In other words, there is a significant improvement in the level of cultural understanding (Question 2) of the students after going through the treatment phase. In the pretest 6 out of 30 subjects in the experimental group answered that Velu made a mistake in not consenting to the marriage and in the posttest 18 out of 30 (experimental group) subjects answered that Velu did not make a mistake. The subjects were all Muslims yet they sympathized with Velu, a Hindu and agreed that Velu is not wrong in disallowing his son, Devan to marry Hasnah. In posttest, Nuralmas of the experimental group writes, "I do not think that Velu made a mistake in not consenting to the marriage. He was the one who made the decision to move from the kampong and separated Hasnah and Devan, but he is not to be blamed for their unhappiness. There's no guarantee that Hasnah and Devan would be happy if they were together. Everything happened for a reason; we may not see the goodness behind all these things that are tested on us but He knows best".

These were some of the comments from the students in the findings that can be accepted as culture learning has taken place:

- I do think that being an Indian the author did quite fine in showing Malay sensibilities, customs and values in the story
- He loves and respects his religion and wants a better life for his only son whom he loves very much
- Trust love and God, if Devan converts for his love for Hasnah then this is not good
- Velu decided well. As a father he knows what his son best needs
- People in love can be blind
- Velu is defending his religion
- Not easy for Velu to accept that his son will have to convert to marry Hasnah and scared that he will lose his son
- Suffering for love is not long but suffering for religion is lifelong and a life sentence
- Back then people tend to stick to their own religion but now people accept mix marriages
- Devan and Hasnah should think before acting-they are betraying their own religions and families
- His son has to convert and they will have a tough time because relatives will boycott them and life will be miserable
- We should not destroy our lives for religion. Both families may be estranged after the marriage
- We Malaysians are weird! We share the same taste in food, clothing, culture and but when it comes to race and religion we fight
- Mix marriages nowadays no big deal. We Malaysians should ignore racial differences to give love a chance
- Our new generation now has grown up together so by mix-marrying we can produce a neo mixed multicultural race in the future ance. He and Sulaiman have been friends for a long time and definitely they can adapt

A very interesting issue cropped up on issues of sin, fate and God's will. Many students' felt that Velu did not sin because he could not have predicted the future as it's fated that things happen according to God's will. From the story, Sulaiman although badly affected because his daughter, Hasnah, though married twice, is still unable to find happiness, explained to Velu that things happen because they were meant to happen. This is an interesting issue in understanding cross-cultural differences and complexities. One student from the experimental group wrote, "I do think that being an Indian, the author did quite fine (well) in showing Malay sensibilities, customs and values in the story."

CONCLUSION

This finding does indeed correlate with researches done earlier that when learners are exposed to foreign culture or ideology, the aspect of tolerance can be taught and stressed upon as they learn and appreciate cultures and lifestyles outside their usual domain . The study reveals that culture can be learned and taught and this can be made possible in a language class through the study of literature. Literature not only teaches about another culture, but it also may give more reasons to respect cultural diversity.

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