

Facilitating Intercultural Study through Novel Reading —The Application of Reading Task Journals

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Abstract—As English becomes the global lingua franca, the correlation between the English language and a particular culture is problematic (Baker, 2012). Thus, EFL learners are expected to cultivate their intercultural competence while improving their linguistic competence. There is a growing interest in introducing novel reading to intercultural communication courses, because EFL learners can be exposed to more cultural varieties and understand the culture concepts better by drawing on examples from the novel. However, many EFL learners feel overwhelmed to read due to the reading task difficulty and the lack of guidance about intercultural study. This paper aimed to investigate the effectiveness of applying reading task journals to facilitate students' intercultural study through novel reading. The research findings indicate that the difficulty of novel reading lies in the cultural aspect and the reading task journals successfully help EFL learners comprehend the novel, raise the awareness of the reading process, improve language skills, undertake intercultural study and enhance intercultural communicative competence in the end.

Index Terms—intercultural communication, novel reading, reading task journals, EFL learners, English as the lingua franca

I. INTRODUCTION

A. English as the Global Lingua Franca

Given the fact that English is used to a vast extent on a global scale, it has consolidated its position as the global lingua franca for people of different cultures to communicate with each other. Crystal (2008) estimates that there are two billion English users in the world and many of them are non-native speakers. It is noteworthy that English has numerous varieties and it is not owned by one culture or community. It is problematic to associate English only with the traditional inner circle English-speaking countries like the Great Britain and the United States. Baker (2012) also points out that it is problematic to correlate the English language and a particular culture and nation. Alptekin (2002) asserts that the conventional model of communicative competence has the problem of sticking to the native speaker norms in the target culture, and it will become invalid when it comes to using English in cross-cultural settings. For example, the mastery of American English is not sufficient to ensure an international student to have successful communication with every single person in the United States because some people may not speak American English or they do not express themselves in the American way. The English is now commonly used as “a contact language between interlocutors with different languacultures” (Baker, 2012, p. 63). Therefore, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are expected to cultivate their intercultural competence while improving their linguistic competence.

B. English Language Teaching and Intercultural Communicative Competence

Speaking of English Language Teaching (ELT), the traditional view puts the emphasis on the linguistic competence and aims to train EFL learners to master the phonology, lexis and syntax. However, the ultimate goal of language learning should be to use it for communication. Thus, ELT scholars and practitioners shift the emphasis to the ability to make use of linguistic resources to communicate successfully in the diverse sociocultural settings. It is very important to have a good understanding of the sociocultural setting but the task is challenging because the communication situation is in constant change. Only understanding one particular native-speaker community's sociocultural norms is not sufficient for global uses of English and it is necessary to have an extensive understanding of various cultural contexts (Baker, 2012). Knowing more cultures certainly helps intercultural communication, but culture knowledge learning is not equal to cultivating intercultural communication competence. Baker (2012) recognizes “a tension between established fixed forms of communicative practice and the more situated dynamic communicative practice of an L2” (p. 64), which indicates the significance of intercultural communicative competence, the ability to adopt appropriate communicative strategies based on the sociocultural settings.

In light of English as the global lingua franca, EFL learners are expected to be competent in the English language and intercultural communicative competence. As most learners study English in the classroom, teachers play an important role in supporting them to use English as an international language in the cross-cultural setting. Alptekin (2002) claims

that “[a] new pedagogic model is urgently needed to accommodate the case of English as a means of international and intercultural communication” (p. 63).

II. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

A. Course Design

In order to improve students’ English level, a Chinese key comprehensive university implements the English Enhanced Program, with five mission goals of proficiency, autonomy, sustainability, intercultural competence and critical thinking. When students are enrolled into the university, they have to take a placement test and will be put into a certain level course based on their performance. There are six levels ranging from Foundation to Level 5. Most freshmen begin with Level 1 or Level 2. All the courses are integrated skills courses and students receive lots of language inputs and have many practice opportunities because of the wide use of the communicative language teaching method.

Level 3 is a content-based integrated skills course focusing on intercultural communication and discussion skills. It has three major components to foster students’ intercultural communicative competence. Firstly, it introduces key culture concepts to students to familiarize themselves with different cultural dimensions, such as individualism vs. collectivism, loose cultures vs. tight cultures, stereotypes, ethnocentrism, hierarchy, culture shock, etc. At this stage, students are equipped with sufficient culture knowledge. They are able to describe the general characteristics of a certain culture and differentiate various cultures. Secondly, Level 3 course provides many critical incidence exercises for students to have imaginative intercultural experiences. The critical incidence is about someone who has an intercultural encounter but gets stuck in that situation and has no idea why it happens and how to solve the problem. Students are encouraged to come up with a number of interpretations and never rush to conclusion. By interpreting the critical incidence from different perspectives, such as considering personal reasons, situational reasons and cultural reasons, students gradually form the habit of thinking through an intercultural situation and develop the critical thinking skills. Thirdly, Level 3 course makes every effort to use authentic materials to enrich students’ learning experiences. They are required to watch an American TV series and read a novel for further discussion. While the American TV series stimulates the comparison between American and Chinese cultures, the selected novel aims to provide a third culture to enrich cultural diversity. With the introduction of various cultures, students will have a “more dynamic and heterogeneous perspective on culture and reject as simplistic the equation of a language, culture, and national identity” (Baker, 2009, p. 570).

B. Novel Reading and Intercultural Communicative Competence

Reading is a good way to enhance literacy and acquire knowledge. Students are actively engaged in the reading task and it requires “attaining a deep understanding of what is read, remembering important information, linking newly learned information to existing schemata, knowing when and where to use that information, using it appropriately in varied contexts in and out of school, and communicating effectively with others” (Graves, Juel & Geaves, 2000, p. 24). There is no doubt that reading a novel can expose students to a large amount of language inputs and push them to improve their reading comprehension. Students not only benefit from novel reading linguistically, but also benefit culturally. Students will understand the culture concepts learned in Level 3 better by drawing on examples from the novel. Students will go beyond the sociocultural norms and settings in the traditional native-speaker communities by getting to know a non-English speaking country’s culture. Moreover, novels distinguish themselves from textbooks in terms of the authentic language. Authentic literary texts are loaded with real language, providing EFL learners with the opportunity to get in touch with the people, traditions, norms, taboos and other distinctive cultural products of a certain culture, which helps learners to know about and appreciate the glamor that culture (Byram, 1997).

Gómez R. (2012) claims that “intercultural communicative competence should be understood as the ability to identify cultural issues that are necessarily expressed through real language in use” (p. 51), because language is the carrier of culture. Therefore, novel reading can serve as a perfect means to foster students’ intercultural study in the sense that a novel has authentic language in use and the cultural elements are naturally embedded into the language.

C. Problems in Actual Teaching Practice

The novel selected for Level 3 is *Veil of Roses* by Laura Fitzgerald, which talks about an Iranian girl who goes to the United States to study English with the hope of finding her Mr. Right before the visa expires. It is a typical romantic story with a happy ending, and the most valuable part is the cultural conflicts between the Iranian girl and her relatives in America, her potential husbands, her classmates and other characters. However, a lot of students feel overwhelmed to read this 320-page book because they think it is very long and they do not have a clear reading purpose expect for reading to know the unfolding plot. That is to say, students are less motivated to read because of the reading task difficulty and the lack of guidance about intercultural study while reading a novel. In order to solve the problem, an action research was conducted, which introduced the reading task journal assignment to help students ease their reading difficulty and have a clear guidance of intercultural study.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Questions

1. What factors hinder students' novel reading to enhance their intercultural communicative competence?
2. How effective is it to apply reading task journals to facilitate students' intercultural study through novel reading?

B. Participants and Settings

Participants were 69 undergraduate students of different majors who took the integrated skills course Level 3 at a Chinese key comprehensive university. Among the 69 students, 58 were freshmen and 11 were sophomores; 21 of them were males while 48 were females. They had two sessions of 100-minute English instruction every week and the course lasted for sixteen weeks.

C. Reading Task Journals

In order to address the problem that students feel overwhelmed to read the selected novel, reading task journals were introduced to help them become independent and reflective learners. Because the main purpose of reading a novel is to facilitate the intercultural study, the reading task journal should not disrupt the pleasure of reading, and it should not involve too much work for the students. There were five components in a reading task journal to encourage students' thoughts about the reading content, reflection on the reading process, connection to intercultural communication and vocabulary learning. Here is the detailed description of the journal requirements:

Date: _____

Chapters: _____

1. Memorable Scene (Describe which scene strikes you most. You can write with words or draw with a comic strip.)
2. Cultural Observation (What cultural difference you notice or what scene that can be an example of a culture concept learned in Level 3.)
3. Opinion (Give your opinion about the character or the plot.)
4. Reflection (How is your reading going? Easy, OK, or Difficult, and why?)
5. Vocabulary (What new words do you want to remember?)

Before the mid-term exam, students were not required to keep reading task journals. However, when the reading problem was identified, the pedagogical intervention was implemented and the students were asked to keep a reading task journal when they finished reading around five chapters. Altogether they kept five journals.

D. Data Collection and Instruments

Questionnaire 1 was used before the pedagogical intervention. It had 5 items to detect students' reading performance, and their reflection on reading and intercultural communication.

Questionnaire 2 was distributed after the pedagogical intervention. It had 19 items formulated on a 6-point Likert scale and 5 other items to investigate students' attitudes toward reading and intercultural communication, and attitudes toward the implementation of reading task journals.

In the exam papers, there was a part about applying culture concepts to analyze culture issues in the novel. One sample exam question was: "Find one element of American culture from *Veil of Roses* that you think might be a stereotype about Americans. Explain why you think this stereotype is problematic for readers who are learning about American culture." Students' mid-term exam and final exam scores in that part were collected to assess improvement in the ability of analyzing the novel from an intercultural communicative perspective.

All the quantitative data were processed and analyzed by SPSS 16.0. The data from the questionnaire Likert scale were shown by descriptive statistics. The mid-term and final exam scores were compared by dependent samples *t*-test. Other qualitative data were processed by textual analysis.

See appendices A and B for the full Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2 respectively.

E. Research Procedures

Step 1: Before the mid-term exam, students received no pedagogical intervention.

Step 2: Before the pedagogical intervention, students finished Questionnaire 1.

Step 3: Students finished five reading task journals in the second half of the semester.

Step 4: After the pedagogical intervention, students finished Questionnaire 2. Mid-term exam and final exam scores were collected.

Step 5: Data analysis of two questionnaires and two exam scores.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings from Questionnaire 1

There were 66 successfully collected questionnaires. Before the mid-term exam, students were expected to finish 19 chapters of the novel. However, according to Table 1, up to 87.9% (58 out of 66) students didn't finish the reading assignment.

TABLE 1:
THE NUMBER OF FINISHED CHAPTERS

	Frequency	Percent
Less than 5 chapters	10	15.2%
5-10 chapters	11	16.7%
10-15 chapters	24	36.4%
16-19 chapters	13	19.7%
More than 19 chapters	8	12.1%
Total	66	100%

When the students reflected on the reading experience, more than half students (56.1%) had neutral attitudes toward the novel although 31.4% admitted that they resisted reading the book (see Table 2). However, Table 3 shows some reassuring data that up to 87.9% (58 out of 66) students believed that reading the novel was helpful for intercultural communication. They thought that it was worthwhile to read the novel to strengthen their intercultural communication skills. Such positive feedback suggested that if appropriate pedagogical intervention was in place, students would become motivated to read and benefit from the novel.

TABLE 2:
STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE NOVEL

	Frequency	Percent
Hate it	7	10.6%
Dislike it	17	25.8%
OK	37	56.1%
Like it	5	7.6%
Love it	0	0%
Total	66	100%

TABLE 3:
STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NOVEL READING AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

	Frequency	Percent
Extremely helpful	4	6.1%
Helpful sometimes	54	81.8%
Not helpful at all	3	4.5%
Not sure whether it is helpful or not	5	7.6%
Total	66	100%

B. Findings from Questionnaire 2

In total, there were 65 successfully collected questionnaires.

In Section 1 of this questionnaire, students reported why they found it difficult to read the novel. Table 4 reveals that the difficulty in novel reading mainly lied in culture rather than the language itself.

TABLE 4:
DIFFICULTY IN NOVEL READING

Difficulty Factor	Disagree	Agree
Vocabulary	61.5%	38.5%
Grammar	72.3%	27.7%
Reading skills	73.8%	26.2%
Cultural Background	45.3%	54.7%

Section 2 of this questionnaire tried to investigate students' reading habits and attitudes toward reading task journals. Table 5 shows that although more than 80% students believed that reading was beneficial to intercultural communication study, only half of them were able to consciously undertake the intercultural communication study while reading. Therefore, it was necessary to ask students to keep reading task journals to become independent and reflective readers. Table 6 illustrates that the majority of students had favorable attitudes toward reading task journals. 84.6% of them (55 out of 65) considered the journal assignment to be OK and even liked it. Students believed that reading task journals brought about lots of benefits in terms of the comprehension of the novel, the awareness of the reading process and the intercultural study. Keeping reading task journals gave students a means to sustain their reading, to reflect on their reading process, to improve the reading skills, to think about the cultural issues and have a holistic reading experience. Students gave lots of positive feedback like "It is totally OK and it made me think more about the cultural difference." "It helps me understand the novel. And it provides a clearer goal to make me read the book. So I can pick up the key points." "It is not hard to finish, and it can help me focus on the cultural dimension." While reading task journals did not impose much burden on students, they helped them to enhance the linguistic competence and intercultural communicative competence.

TABLE 5:
STUDENTS' READING BELIEFS AND HABITS

Statement	Disagree	Agree
Reading an English novel is an intercultural communication process.	18.5%	81.5%
Reading an English novel is helpful for intercultural communication study.	15.4%	84.6%
I pay attention to the culture differences while reading.	49.2%	50.8%
I pay attention to the cultural dimensions.	53.8%	46.2%

TABLE 6:
STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS READING TASK JOURNALS
A.

	Frequency	Percent
Hate it	1	1.5%
Dislike it	9	13.8%
OK	44	67.7%
Like it	9	13.9%
Love it	2	3.1%
Total	65	100%

B.

Category	Effectiveness	Disagree	Agree
Comprehension of the Novel	Understand the content of the book	33.8%	66.2%
	Stimulate thinking about the plot and characters	33.8%	66.2%
Intercultural Study	Become sensitive to cultural differences	24.6%	75.4%
	Become sensitive to cultural dimensions	27.7%	72.3%
	Understand the culture concepts learned in the course	27.7%	72.3%
Awareness of the Reading Process	Be aware of the reading process	32.8%	67.2%
	Identify the reading problems	35.4%	64.6%
Linguistic Competence	Enlarge the vocabulary	23.4%	76.6%
	Helpful for reading	28.1%	71.9%
Intercultural Communicative Competence	Helpful for intercultural communication study	21.5%	78.5%

Reading task journals yielded favorable outcomes not only in students' positive learning beliefs but also in their exam scores. Table 7 shows that the mean score of the final exam ($M = 7.83$) was higher than that of the mid-term exam ($M = 5.86$). As for the samples correlations, because $sig. < .05$, the mid-term and final exam scores were closely correlated (see Table 7-b). Concerning the dependent samples t -test of both mean scores, final exam score was significantly higher ($M = 7.83$, $SE = 0.345$) than the mid-term exam score ($M = 5.86$, $SE = 0.462$). This difference was significant because $t(68) = -4.28$, $p < .05$.

TABLE 7:
MID-TERM AND FINAL EXAM SCORES
A. PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Mid-term	5.86	69	3.836	.462
Final	7.83	69	2.863	.345

B. PAIRED SAMPLES CORRELATIONS

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Mid-term & Final	69	.377	.001

C. PAIRED SAMPLES TEST

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
				Pair 1: Mid-term & Final	-1.971			

V. CONCLUSION

As English becomes the lingua franca, people from different cultures use English to communicate more frequently. Thus, while improving their linguistic competence, EFL learners are expected to cultivate their intercultural competence. Novel reading is conducive to extend EFL learners' intercultural study because they can understand the culture concepts better by drawing on authentic examples from the novel. However, a lot of EFL learners feel intimidated to read a novel due to the reading task's difficulty level and the lack of guidance about intercultural study through extensive reading.

The results of this research successfully identify the factors which hinder students' novel reading. The reading task difficulty mainly lies in the cultural aspect instead of language aspect. There are a number of cultural factors, such as lack of the target culture background knowledge and unawareness of the cultural differences. While students tend to

believe that reading an English novel helps cultivate intercultural communicative competence, they pay little attention to the cultural differences and dimensions in reading, so it is of great necessity to include reading task journals to address this problem. Students generally find reading task journals acceptable or favorable and the journals are effective to help students comprehend the novel, raise the awareness of the reading process, improve language skills, undertake intercultural study and enhance intercultural communicative competence in the end. Students will succeed in the exams due to their improved intercultural communicative competence.

The major limitation of this research was that the scope was not wide enough, and only 69 students at the same university were investigated. The research findings based on the Chinese context may not be generalized for all EFL learners in various settings. More qualitative data are needed for follow-up research. Although 84.6% students had positive feedback on the reading task journals, only 16.9% liked or loved this assignment. It will be interesting to probe into the reasons why only a small number of them genuinely loved the reading task journals.

Anyway, the research findings indicate that reading task journals successfully lead EFL learners to a fruitful experience in intercultural communication skills building through novel reading.

APPENDIX A. QUESTIONNAIRE 1

Survey on the Reading of *Veil of Roses*

- This survey aims to investigate students' reading of *Veil of Roses* in the context of intercultural communication.
- It is an anonymous survey that will NOT affect your grade. Please be honest in your answers.

1. There are 35 chapters in this book. So far, you are expected to have finished 19 of them. How much of the book *Veil of Roses* did you read?

- less than 5 chapters
- 5-10 chapters
- 10-15 chapters
- 16-19 chapters
- more than 19 chapters

2. What do you think of this book?

- I hate it
- I dislike it
- It is ok
- I like it
- I love it

3. Please briefly explain why you feel this way (Question #2) about *Veil of Roses*.

4. What do you think of undertaking intercultural study from reading *Veil of Roses* (i.e. some cultural differences and some scenes in the book help you better understand the culture concepts, such as individualism/collectivism, stereotypes, culture shock, loose/tight cultures, violated expectations, etc.)?

- It is extremely helpful and I learn a lot
- It is helpful sometimes
- It is not helpful at all
- I am not sure whether it is helpful or not

5. Please briefly explain why you think so (Question #4) about undertaking intercultural study from reading *Veil of Roses*.

APPENDIX B. QUESTIONNAIRE 2

Survey on Reading Task Journals and Intercultural Study through Novel Reading

• This survey aims to investigate students' attitudes toward incorporating reading task journals into intercultural study through novel reading (e.g. *Veil of Roses*).

- It is an anonymous survey that will NOT affect your grade. Please be honest in your answers.

Basic Information:

1. Gender: Male Female

2. Year of study: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

3. College: College of Liberal Arts School of Art and Design

Business School College of Engineering College of Science

Law School School of Journalism and Communication

4. Experience abroad

no experience abroad travel study work conference others, please specify:

Where: _____

Duration: less than a month 1 to 6 months 6 months to a year more than a year

PART 1

Scale: Please finish the following items by ticking the number.

1=Completely disagree 2=Strongly disagree 3=Slightly disagree
4=Slightly agree 5=Strongly agree 6=Completely agree

On Reading and Intercultural Communication						
Item	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	I find it hard to understand an English novel because I do not have enough vocabulary.					
2	I find it hard to understand an English novel due to the difficult grammar.					
3	I find it hard to understand an English novel because I do not have good reading skills.					
4	I find it hard to understand an English novel because I do not know the cultural background of the book.					
5	I think reading an English novel is an intercultural communication process.					
6	Reading an English novel is helpful for intercultural communication study.					
7	When I read an English novel, I always pay attention to the cultural differences in the book.					
8	When I read an English novel, I always pay attention to the cultural dimensions (e.g. individualism/collectivism; power distance; etc.) in the book.					
On Reading Task Journals						
Item	1	2	3	4	5	6
9	Reading task journals help me understand the content of the book.					
10	Reading task journals stimulate my thinking about the characters and the plot.					
11	Reading task journals make me sensitive to cultural differences.					
12	Reading task journals make me sensitive to cultural dimensions (e.g. individualism & collectivism; power distance; etc.).					
13	Reading task journals help me understand the culture concepts learned in Level 3 better.					
14	Reading task journals make me aware of my reading process.					
15	Reading task journals encourage me to identify my reading problems.					
16	Reading task journals help me enlarge my vocabulary.					
17	Reading task journals are burdensome for me.					
18	Reading task journals are helpful for my reading.					
19	Reading task journals are helpful for my intercultural communication study.					

PART 2

- What do you think of reading task journals (compared with group-discussion and essay-writing on the book)?
A. I hate it B. I dislike it C. It is ok D. I like it E. I love it
- Please briefly explain why you feel this way (Question #1) about reading task journals.

- Which part of reading task journals do you like best?
memorable scene cultural observation opinion reflection vocabulary
- Which part of reading task journals do you dislike most?
memorable scene cultural observation opinion reflection vocabulary
- In the part of memorable scene, do you prefer to write with words or draw with comic strips? Why?
write with words draw with comic strips
Reason: _____

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