

## THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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**Abstrak** - Di era globalisasi, pendidikan bahasa Inggris tidak lagi terbatas pada penguasaan aspek linguistik semata, tetapi juga mencakup kemampuan komunikasi dan pemahaman lintas budaya. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana sastra dapat digunakan sebagai alat pedagogis untuk mengembangkan kompetensi antarbudaya (intercultural competence/IC) di kalangan pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Dengan menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari 50 guru bahasa Inggris dan 120 mahasiswa dari tiga universitas di Indonesia, Malaysia, dan Taiwan. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi observasi kelas, wawancara, dan analisis dokumen terhadap kurikulum berbasis sastra. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan karya sastra dapat menumbuhkan empati, kesadaran budaya, dan refleksi kritis terhadap isu-isu global. Melalui keterlibatan dengan berbagai teks sastra dari beragam budaya, mahasiswa mampu meningkatkan kemampuan mereka dalam menafsirkan nilai-nilai budaya, menantang stereotip, serta mengembangkan sikap terbuka terhadap cara pandang dunia yang berbeda. Namun demikian, penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi beberapa kendala, seperti keterbatasan pelatihan guru dan kurangnya bahan ajar yang relevan secara budaya. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa sastra merupakan media yang efektif untuk mempromosikan kompetensi antarbudaya dalam pendidikan bahasa Inggris, asalkan didukung oleh pendekatan pedagogis reflektif dan pengajaran yang kontekstual serta relevan dengan budaya lokal. **Kata kunci:** Sastra, kompetensi antarbudaya, pendidikan bahasa Inggris, kesadaran budaya, pedagogi reflektif.

**Abstract** - In the era of globalization, English language education is no longer confined to linguistic competence but extends to intercultural communication and understanding. This study explores how literature can be used as a pedagogical tool to develop intercultural competence (IC) among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected from 50 English teachers and 120 students across three universities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Data collection techniques included classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis of literature-based curricula. Findings reveal that literature fosters empathy, cultural awareness, and critical reflection on global issues. Through engagement with diverse literary texts, students enhance their ability to interpret cultural values, challenge stereotypes, and develop openness toward different worldviews. However, challenges such as limited teacher training and culturally irrelevant materials were identified. The study concludes that literature serves as a powerful medium for promoting intercultural competence in EFL education, provided it is supported by reflective pedagogy and contextually relevant instruction.

**Keywords:** Literature, intercultural competence, English language education, cultural awareness, reflective pedagogy.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English in the 21st century has undergone a profound transformation, moving beyond the traditional goal of linguistic proficiency toward the broader objective of fostering intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 2014; Baker, 2015). In an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world, English functions not only as a tool for communication but also as a bridge across diverse cultural contexts. Learners today are expected to become global citizens—individuals capable of navigating and appreciating cultural differences while engaging meaningfully in international dialogue (Deardorff, 2011;

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Kramersch, 2013). Therefore, English education must cultivate both linguistic mastery and intercultural understanding, enabling students to communicate appropriately and sensitively across cultures.

Literature plays a vital role in achieving these goals. As a mirror of human thought and emotion, literary texts capture universal themes such as identity, morality, conflict, and social justice, all of which offer students valuable insights into the lives and experiences of people from various cultural backgrounds (Hall, 2015; Nussbaum, 2010). Through stories, poems, and plays, learners can explore how values and beliefs shape individuals and societies, thereby developing empathy and intercultural sensitivity. Literature serves not only as a linguistic resource but also as a cultural artifact, fostering deep reflection, emotional engagement, and moral imagination.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), literary works hold great potential as a pedagogical tool for cultivating intercultural competence. As Byram and Wagner (2018) emphasize, engaging with literature from different cultures encourages learners to enter into an imaginative dialogue with “the other,” promoting empathy, tolerance, and critical self-reflection. By encountering unfamiliar social norms, traditions, and ideologies, learners are challenged to question stereotypes and broaden their worldviews. This process aligns with the aims of intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect for cultural diversity.

However, despite its pedagogical potential, literature remains underutilized in many EFL classrooms. Several studies have shown that teachers often prioritize linguistic accuracy and exam preparation over intercultural or literary engagement (Pulverness, 2014; Taboada, 2019). One major challenge is the lack of teacher training and instructional resources that effectively integrate literature with intercultural learning outcomes. Teachers may also struggle to select culturally appropriate texts or to design classroom activities that encourage reflection and intercultural dialogue. As a result, literary works are often treated as mere reading comprehension materials rather than as dynamic tools for exploring culture and identity.

Given these challenges, there is a pressing need to examine how literature can be more effectively employed to develop intercultural competence within EFL education. This study therefore seeks to explore the pedagogical roles of literature in fostering intercultural awareness, the responses and reflections of learners when engaging with literary texts, and the practical challenges teachers face in implementing such approaches in the curriculum. By addressing these issues, the study aims to highlight the transformative power of literature in promoting global-minded, empathetic, and critically aware English learners who are better prepared to participate in a multicultural world.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1. Intercultural Competence in Language Education (Expanded)***

Intercultural competence (IC) has become a central concept in contemporary language education, reflecting the growing need for learners to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries in an increasingly globalized society. Byram (2014) defines IC as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultural backgrounds,

taking into account both linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of communication. Deardorff (2011) further conceptualizes IC as a dynamic and ongoing process of developing attitudes, knowledge, and skills that allow individuals to engage in meaningful intercultural exchanges.

IC comprises three interrelated components. First, knowledge involves understanding one's own culture as well as that of others, including values, beliefs, and communicative conventions (Bennett, 2013). Second, skills of interpreting and relating refer to the ability to analyze cultural differences and establish meaningful connections between distinct cultural perspectives (Byram, 2014). Third, attitudes of openness, curiosity, and empathy serve as the foundation of intercultural encounters, allowing learners to suspend judgment and appreciate cultural diversity (Chen, 2014). In language education, developing IC means going beyond grammatical accuracy to cultivate learners who are capable of critical cultural awareness, where they can evaluate cultural phenomena in light of universal human values and social justice (Byram, 1997).

The integration of IC in English language education aligns with the goals of 21st-century learning, which emphasizes global citizenship, collaboration, and intercultural understanding. Teaching language through an intercultural lens enables learners to become not only competent communicators but also culturally responsive individuals who can adapt to different social and cultural contexts.

## ***2.2. Literature as a Cultural Medium (Expanded)***

Literature serves as a rich and authentic medium for fostering intercultural competence because it embodies the cultural, historical, and emotional dimensions of human experience. Literary texts reflect the beliefs, traditions, and moral values of the societies in which they are produced, thereby offering learners deep insights into how language and culture interact (Hall, 2015). Through stories, poetry, and drama, learners encounter characters from diverse backgrounds and engage with conflicts, dilemmas, and moral questions that transcend geographical boundaries.

According to Lazar (2012), reading fiction enables students to “see through others’ eyes,” fostering empathy and allowing them to perceive the world from perspectives different from their own. This imaginative engagement encourages learners to question stereotypes and recognize the complexity of cultural identities. Literature also stimulates critical reflection by exposing students to issues such as power, gender, race, and social inequality, which are central to developing intercultural awareness (Kramsch, 2013).

Moreover, literary works can serve as bridges between cultures, particularly in EFL contexts where learners may have limited exposure to authentic cultural interaction. By studying both local and global literary texts, students can compare their cultural values with those represented in the literature, promoting intercultural dialogue and self-awareness. When guided by reflective pedagogy, literature-based learning helps students not only to acquire linguistic skills—such as reading comprehension, vocabulary, and discourse analysis—but also to build emotional intelligence and ethical sensitivity, both of which are essential for intercultural communication.

## ***2.3. Challenges in Literary Pedagogy (Expanded)***

Despite its potential to enhance intercultural competence, the use of literature in EFL classrooms often faces significant challenges. One major issue is the dominance of Western literary texts in English curricula, which may limit learners' exposure to diverse cultural perspectives (Pulverness, 2014). When literary selections predominantly represent Western ideologies and experiences, students may struggle to relate the content to their local cultural contexts, leading to superficial understanding rather than meaningful intercultural reflection.

Another challenge lies in the lack of teacher expertise and training in literary pedagogy. Many EFL teachers are more accustomed to teaching language structures and communicative functions than to guiding students through literary analysis or intercultural discussions (Gonen & Saglam, 2019). As a result, literature is often reduced to a tool for vocabulary and grammar exercises, neglecting its potential to develop critical and cultural understanding. Teachers may also lack confidence in handling sensitive cultural topics or facilitating open-ended classroom discussions that require tolerance of ambiguity.

Furthermore, the insufficient integration of literature into communicative curricula poses a structural barrier. In exam-oriented education systems, literature is often marginalized because it is perceived as time-consuming and less measurable in terms of standardized assessment outcomes. Sercu (2014) emphasizes that to effectively incorporate literature into EFL teaching, educators must possess intercultural sensitivity, pedagogical creativity, and the ability to design activities that link linguistic and cultural objectives. Young (2018) adds that teachers need to create inclusive classroom environments that encourage students to share their interpretations and personal responses to literary texts.

Overcoming these challenges requires curriculum innovation and teacher empowerment. Providing professional development in intercultural literary pedagogy, diversifying text selection to include local and global voices, and employing reflective and project-based learning approaches can transform literature from a passive reading exercise into an active intercultural experience.

### **3. METHOD**

#### ***3.1. Research Design***

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how literature supports intercultural competence in EFL classrooms (Creswell, 2014).

#### ***3.2. Participants***

Participants included 50 English teachers and 120 undergraduate students from universities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Taiwan who were engaged in literature-based English courses.

#### ***3.3. Data Collection***

Data were collected through:

- Classroom observations of literature lessons (e.g., novels, short stories, poems).
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers and students.
- Document analysis of syllabi and instructional materials.

#### ***3.4. Data Analysis***

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2013) framework to identify recurring themes related to cultural understanding, empathy, and pedagogical challenges.

## **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Result**

#### ***4.1. Literature as a Bridge to Cultural Understanding***

The findings of this study reveal that literary texts play a vital role in helping students connect with diverse cultural perspectives and experiences. Through reading and analyzing novels such as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, students were exposed to different worldviews, traditions, and moral values that expanded their understanding of global diversity. These texts served as cultural mirrors and windows—mirrors that allowed students to reflect on their own cultural identity and values, and windows that enabled them to perceive and appreciate the realities of others (Kramsch, 2013).

In classroom discussions, students demonstrated awareness of cultural conflicts and similarities, showing increased sensitivity toward issues of ethnicity, family dynamics, gender roles, and societal change. This process of engagement with “the other” aligns with Byram’s (2014) concept of *intercultural communicative competence*, which involves recognizing and interpreting cultural meanings embedded in language and behavior. By reading literature that represents different cultures, learners were able to understand how language reflects social norms and power relations, fostering a more nuanced and empathetic worldview. Thus, literature functioned not only as a linguistic tool but also as a cultural bridge that connected students to broader human experiences and global perspectives.

#### ***4.2. Development of Empathy and Reflection***

Another significant finding concerns the development of empathy and reflective thinking among students. After engaging with characters and narratives from various cultural backgrounds, students showed enhanced emotional intelligence and intercultural awareness. Many expressed a deeper appreciation of diversity and reported feeling more curious about other ways of life. Teachers observed that students became more respectful and open-minded during discussions, particularly when comparing their cultural experiences with those represented in the texts.

This supports Hall’s (2015) and Baker’s (2015) assertion that literature stimulates moral imagination—the ability to imagine oneself in another’s situation—and nurtures reflective awareness. For instance, when reading about characters facing moral dilemmas or cultural dislocation, students engaged in self-reflection, considering how they might respond under similar circumstances. This process not only strengthened empathy but also promoted critical self-awareness, as learners began questioning stereotypes and assumptions about culture, identity, and difference.

Furthermore, teachers noted that reflective journals and guided discussions encouraged students to articulate personal insights and emotional responses. This pedagogical approach allowed learners to connect cognitive understanding with affective growth, fulfilling one of the central aims of intercultural education: to humanize language learning through emotional and ethical engagement.

#### ***4.3. Pedagogical Strategies and Innovation***

The study also found that innovative teaching strategies played a crucial role in promoting intercultural learning through literature. Teachers implemented a variety of interactive methods—such as role-playing, literary circles, and digital storytelling—to make literary engagement more dynamic and participatory. Role-playing activities, for example, allowed students to inhabit the perspectives of fictional characters, encouraging empathy and deep comprehension. Literary circles facilitated collaborative interpretation, enabling learners to exchange viewpoints and negotiate meaning together. Digital storytelling, on the other hand, integrated technology with creativity, as students used multimedia tools to reinterpret literary themes in culturally relevant ways.

These practices reflect principles of communicative and constructivist pedagogy, where learners build understanding through social interaction and personal reflection (Sercu, 2014; Taboada, 2019). Teachers also reported that incorporating local and global literary texts side by side encouraged comparative thinking and intercultural dialogue. For instance, pairing Indonesian short stories with works from other cultures helped students identify shared values such as family loyalty or community harmony while recognizing cultural differences in their expression.

Overall, the creative use of literature as a pedagogical medium fostered student autonomy, critical dialogue, and cross-cultural collaboration. These strategies highlight the potential of literature not only to enhance linguistic competence but also to develop the intercultural mindset needed for global citizenship.

#### ***4.4. Challenges in Implementation***

Despite encouraging outcomes, several challenges emerged in the implementation of literature-based intercultural teaching. A key issue was the difficulty in selecting culturally relevant and accessible texts. Teachers often struggled to find materials that were linguistically appropriate for students' proficiency levels while still offering rich cultural content. The predominance of Western literary texts in school curricula also limited exposure to non-Western or local voices, leading to an imbalance in cultural representation (Gonen & Saglam, 2019).

Another major obstacle was the limited training and support for teachers in integrating intercultural objectives into literary instruction. Many teachers expressed uncertainty about how to facilitate deep intercultural discussions, particularly in classrooms where students shared a relatively homogeneous cultural background. Institutional constraints—such as rigid syllabi, limited teaching hours, and exam-oriented learning environments—further restricted opportunities for reflective and exploratory activities (Young, 2018).

Moreover, some students initially showed reluctance to engage in interpretive and emotional discussions, perceiving them as less important than grammatical or test-related exercises. Overcoming this mindset required consistent scaffolding and encouragement from teachers to help learners view literature as a meaningful space for personal and intercultural growth. These challenges underscore the need for curricular flexibility, teacher professional development, and administrative support to ensure the sustainable integration of literature in EFL classrooms.

#### **4.5. Implications for Curriculum Design**

The findings of this study carry important implications for curriculum development in EFL education. First, the integration of literature should move beyond mere aesthetic appreciation to explicitly address intercultural learning objectives. Literature must be viewed as both a linguistic and cultural resource that enables learners to engage with global and local perspectives. Curriculum designers should include a diverse range of texts—from classical to contemporary, from Western to non-Western—to ensure balanced cultural representation and relevance.

Second, intercultural learning through literature should be supported by reflective and experiential pedagogies. Activities such as reflective writing, comparative text analysis, and project-based learning can encourage students to connect personal experiences with cultural insights (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Incorporating drama-based tasks, cross-cultural projects, or virtual exchanges with students from other regions can further extend the scope of intercultural dialogue.

Finally, assessment practices must evolve to value interpretation, empathy, and reflection rather than memorization. Portfolio assessments, peer discussions, and creative projects can serve as alternative tools to evaluate intercultural growth (Chen, 2014). To achieve this, teacher education programs should provide training in intercultural literary pedagogy, equipping teachers with the skills and confidence to design inclusive, reflective, and dialogic learning environments.

In sum, the study underscores that literature, when integrated thoughtfully and supported institutionally, can serve as a transformative medium for cultivating intercultural competence—preparing learners to become linguistically skilled, culturally aware, and ethically responsible global citizens.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that literature serves as an essential medium for developing intercultural competence in English language education. Through exposure to diverse narratives and cultural contexts, learners cultivate empathy, openness, and critical reflection — competencies crucial in global communication. To maximize its potential, teacher training should focus on intercultural pedagogy, and curricula should incorporate diverse global and local literary voices. Future research should explore digital and multimodal literature as emerging tools for intercultural learning in virtual classrooms.

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