ENHANCING CROSS-CULTURAL READING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM THROUGH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the significance of integrating literature into the English language classroom, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between literary texts and the cultures they originate from. The influence of readers' cultural experiences on their interpretation of literature is examined, along with the representation of culture within literary works. The primary focus of this study is the short story "Paper Menagerie" by Ken Liu, which serves as a representation of Asian-American culture. To conduct this study, an open-ended survey approach was employed as part of a qualitative research methodology. The survey was administered to individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds across different parts of the world.

Keywords: ELT, literature, cross-cultural reading, multiculture

INTRODUCTION

Incorporating literature into the language classroom holds immense importance, particularly when viewed through the lens of cross-cultural reading. Literature offers a rich and multifaceted platform for students to explore diverse cultures, perspectives, and experiences. By introducing literary texts from different cultures, educators can foster an environment that encourages intercultural understanding, empathy, and critical thinking. Engaging with literature from various cultural backgrounds enables students to gain insights into the values, traditions, and social complexities of different societies. Moreover, it provides opportunities for students to examine their own cultural assumptions and biases, promoting a more inclusive and global mindset. Through cross-cultural reading, students develop language proficiency while also developing cultural competence, enhancing their ability to communicate effectively and respectfully in an interconnected world. Therefore, integrating literature in the language classroom serves as a powerful tool for promoting cross-cultural awareness, empathy, and intercultural communication skills among students.

This study aims to explore the correlation between literature and culture by examining how a literary text can reflect both differences and similarities across cultures. The importance of incorporating literature into the language classroom will be initially discussed, followed by a focused analysis on the relationship between Ken Liu's short story, "Paper Menagerie," and its cultural context, specifically Asian-American culture. The purpose of this study is to investigate how individuals experience literature from cultures different from their own, and to assess the potential of diverse literature as a means to promote cross-cultural understanding among students.

To achieve this, a survey was designed and distributed to participants with diverse cultural backgrounds, in order to gather a range of perspectives for comparative analysis.
Through an analysis of this literary work, this research aims to address the following questions:

1. What approaches can be employed when dealing with cross-cultural literature?
2. In what ways can multicultural literature be utilized as a valuable instrument for promoting cross-cultural communication and enhancing mutual understanding?

By exploring these questions, this study seeks to shed light on effective strategies and methodologies for engaging with cross-cultural literature and harnessing its potential to facilitate intercultural dialogue and appreciation.

LITERATURE AND CULTURE

For language learners who cannot physically immerse themselves in the target country's culture, alternative methods are necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the way of life in that country. Collie and Slater contend that literature, along with other mediums such as radio, films, and newspapers, provides indirect yet rich insights into different social backgrounds, customs, beliefs, and behaviors. By delving into the vivid and imagined worlds created by literary works, foreign readers can swiftly grasp the societal codes and preoccupations that shape a real society, making literature a valuable supplement for enhancing cultural understanding alongside other learning materials (Collie and Slater, 1987:6).

The incorporation of cultural elements in literature brings together language, emotions, and intercultural experiences, offering foreign language students a valuable exposure to authentic, living language that may otherwise be missing in their language learning journey (Shanahan, 1997: 168). Kramsch (1993) explores the complex issues related to the intersection of culture and literature in foreign language instruction. One of her significant contributions is the concept of "third places," which represents a neutral territory that language learners must navigate independently to reconcile their familiar native language world with the new realm of the foreign language. The valuable contributions made by Kramsch (1993) and other researchers have significantly deepened our understanding of how certain aspects of the language learning journey can be facilitated by a heightened awareness of the target culture and its connection to language acquisition. This increased awareness enables us to focus on key elements of intercultural encounters, such as resistance, the importance of tolerating ambiguity, and a comparative examination of values and customs. However, despite these advancements, there is a need for an interpretive framework that systematically explores the affective nature of language, the ways in which language allows literature to harness the affective dimension, the impact of literature on language learners, the cultural significance embedded within this impact, and other related inquiries. Thus, there is a call for an initiative that will expand our knowledge of affect, language, literature, and culture, and utilize these findings to enrich the language learning experience (Widowson, 1982).

Byram and Grundi refer to the concept of 'context' as equally complex as 'culture,' with the latter being notoriously challenging to define. In language teaching and learning, 'culture' is often pragmatically understood as the culture associated with the target language. However, this definition raises numerous questions. To explore these questions and other aspects related to 'context,' a conference titled Context and Culture in Language Teaching and Learning took place at the University of Durham in June 2001. This conference was part of a series that connected Durham, Besançon, and Bremen universities, forming a partnership to pursue shared research interests for students and faculty. The partnership remains open to other universities, and contributions from various institutions were welcomed at the conference (Byram and Grundi, 2003).
Within the scope of cultural competence, Joan K. Hall (2012), argues that learners need to acquire not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to navigate and understand cultural norms, values, and practices in

order to communicate effectively in real-world contexts. She further refers to Intercultural communication as a central goal of language education because it emphasizes the need for learners to develop the skills and strategies to interact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, fostering mutual understanding and bridging cultural gaps.

USING MULTI-CULTURAL LITERATURE AS A TOOL FOR FOSTERING CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

During early childhood, children undergo a process of identity formation, where they recognize their individuality and establish a sense of self in relation to others. They become aware of their distinctiveness and learn how they want to be perceived by their peers. Additionally, children acquire knowledge about the specific traits associated with their gender, race, and ethnicity, presenting an opportunity to foster their understanding of diversity. Studies have shown that children tend to show biased behavior from ages three months to six years old (Doyle et.al., 1988). Children are not born biased but are taught (both consciously and unconsciously) by adults and peers to discriminate and hold prejudices against certain groups of people. Helping them understand that differences in race, skin color, and ethnical background don't matter will help them see people for who they really are.

This is where multi-cultural literature comes into play. For example, Koeller (1996) has noted that using multicultural literature fosters personal, and cultural, pride within students and promotes cultural awareness, mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding among those with diverse backgrounds (p.101). So, by using literature to teach students about different cultures and their customs, they are better able to accept and respect diversity. Those exposed to books with diverse characters and stories will understand cultures that they may not have been exposed to otherwise, as well as develop empathy for others.

Multicultural literature has the power to serve as a catalyst for social action, for helping students to appreciate their similarities and their differences, and for increasing students' cultural awareness and sensitivity (Ford et al., 2000). By exposing students to diverse situations and multicultural literature, we help them develop resilience, empathy, and adaptability—all skills that will serve them well throughout life. As educators, it is crucial for us to prioritize the establishment of an inclusive and accepting classroom community that promotes understanding and tolerance. Utilizing multicultural literature can serve as a powerful and valuable tool in achieving this objective, as it allows us to introduce our students to diverse perspectives and experiences, fostering a warm and tolerant environment within the classroom.

In an increasingly diverse world, it is essential to prioritize cross-cultural reading in our educational approach, as it equips students to navigate and contribute to the global community effectively. Through the introduction of multicultural literature, we provide our students with the means to embark on a literary journey to various countries, enabling them to explore and gain knowledge about diverse cultures. By engaging with literature from distant lands, students not only expand their cultural understanding but also develop the necessary skills to become global citizens.

3.1 Paper Menagerie, Synopsis

The short story "Paper Menagerie" revolves around the life of Jack, a boy of mixed race with a white American father and a Chinese mother who immigrated to the United States. During his childhood, Jack's mother makes an origami menagerie for him, which magically comes to life when she breathes into it, providing Jack with companionship and joy. However, after a confrontation with a classmate who mocks his Chinese heritage, Jack becomes ashamed and hides the menagerie, distancing himself from his mother, who gradually becomes more reserved. As Jack grows older, the strained relationship between him and his mother persists, creating an

uncomfortable dynamic. Upon his mother's passing, Jack discovers that she had been writing letters on the paper of his discarded menagerie, revealing her own untold story and the struggles she had been silently grappling with.

METHODOLGY

This research was carried out by means of a survey and it included qualitative elements only. A total of six questions are included. The participants were asked to read a short story (*Paper Menagerie* by Ken Liu) first before proceeding with the survey, considering some of the questions revolved around it. All questions are open-ended questions, meaning they require the participants to elaborate on them. At first, we had reservations regarding the utilization of qualitative data as it presented challenges in terms of collection and classification. However, the importance of obtaining genuine insights from the participants, and the realization that quantitative data alone would not adequately reveal the desired information, led to the decision to prioritize qualitative data. To accomplish this, a survey was created via Google Forms, which was shared with the participants on social media platforms.

A total of 18 responses were recorded, representing participants from different age groups ranging from 21 to 40 years old. The survey was conducted with participants from different countries. More specifically, the participants come from Australia (2), the USA, Brazil, Tunisia (2), Angola, Turkey, Germany, Poland, France, Denmark, Kosovo (3), North Macedonia (2), and Montenegro.

In a way, the inclusion of participants representing different countries in the survey was predetermined by the research topic, with diversity serving as the fundamental theme. The feedback received from the participants has been overwhelmingly positive, with many expressing their enjoyment of reading the short story and engaging with the questions. Remarkably, some participants were moved to tears by the profound impact of the story. The underlying vision for this research was to foster genuine interest among the participants and prompt them to contemplate various aspects through the raised questions concerning the short story and the overall topic.

RESULTS

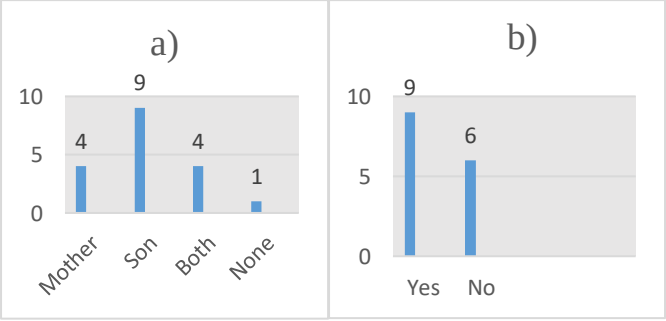
The first question of the survey is asking two questions that were integrated into one.

a) is related to the short story that they were asked to read in advance; b) is regarding the participant's own experience.

Question no. 1

a) Who do you identify with more: The mother who cannot integrate herself into the society, or the son who suppresses his roots and culture to fit into the Western world?

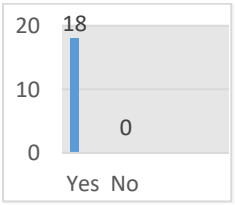
b) Growing up, have you ever felt like you were caught up between two cultures, two identities?



As the chart a) shows us, most of the participants identified with the son (from the story, the son was trying hard to fit into the Western world, thus constantly repressing the Asian side that he inherited from his mother). Few of them identified with the mother, another few with both of them, and one with none of them.

Chart b) shows us that half (9) of the participants have felt like they were caught up between two cultures growing up. Six of them didn't feel that way, and the remaining three didn't answer the question.

Question no. 2
Were you able to empathetically engage with this story, considering it's written by an author from a culture far removed from your own?



The chart reveals that all of the 18 participants did engage with the story, even though it's written by an author from a culture (Asian-American) far removed from theirs.
Some of the most elaborative answers include:

P1: *Yes, I was, I actually cried. I guess eventually we are all human beings, which implies the existence of some fundamental emotions that connect us all, regardless of our cultural backgrounds.*
P2: *I cried at the end even though it was only nine pages. When writing about family, it feels easier to connect because we can share similar problems.*
P3: *It is hard to understand the character's feelings as I have never experienced something such as they did, but I felt their pain through the words and description of the author.*
P4: *I was able to connect with the story, partially because of how skilled a writer Ken Liu clearly is, partially because I think elements of the story are universal, and partially because I have been exposed to Chinese American stories in the past.*

It appears that when universal themes are touched upon by a well-written piece of literature (in fact, it is believed that all literature considered good accomplishes this), the geographical and cultural remoteness of the country of origin does not hinder its ability to emotionally engage readers. As expressed by some of the survey participants, although our life experiences differ, we seem to share common problems. Certain emotions connect humans on a fundamental level, transcending borders. The short story "Paper Menagerie" serves as an illustrative example, thus making it an ideal literary material for this research. As a result, when carefully selecting a literary text, the focus should be on the themes it addresses and whether our students could/would engage with them, rather than its place of origin. If Asian-American literature, for instance, succeeds in emotionally engaging and teaching us (new) things, it should be considered for more frequent inclusion in the teaching curriculum, alongside other cross-cultural literary works. This research has convincingly demonstrated the potential of unfamiliar or less explored literature to evoke excitement in students, which is highly promising.

Question no. 3
a) Do you feel that when you're being exposed to literature from different cultures you get more interested and excited because you're increasing your awareness of different values, beliefs, and social structures?
b) Did you learn anything new about Asian-American culture from this text?

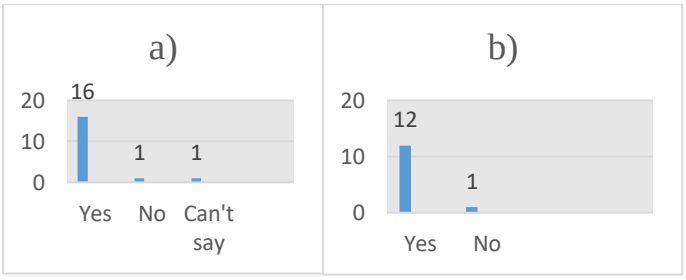


Chart a) suggests that the majority of the participants do feel that exposure to multi-cultural literature gets them excited and more interested because it raises their awareness of the different values, beliefs, and social structures that there are in the world.

Selected answer samples:

P1: *I think being exposed to literature depicting different cultural experiences from your own is invaluable, it opens up your worldview and understanding of others, and I think stories are the best way to do this.*

P2: *I love discovering new cultures, and reading novels written by foreign authors is always interesting because I get to understand their way of looking at the world allowing me to think about how I see the world, which results usually in a "better" perception of this life.*

P3*: I think reading stories from different cultures is a way of learning and understanding other people's cultures.it helps you hear their stories as the mom's life story. It allowed me to understand and appreciate other people's ethnicity.it made me identify with other people and sympathize with their situations. it is a source of enrichment also, as it helps you to think in diverse ways and to minimize divisions based on differences.*

P4: *I get very excited reading from authors of different cultures because I always learn something more about those cultures, which would maybe not be possible to learn even if you visit those places, being that the authors describe things that you can only know if you've lived them.*

These responses show that literature is a great tool for enhancing our understanding of ourselves and others. Reading stories from different cultures gives us an appreciation for different ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Through this information, we not only learn about the values and attitudes of others but also gain insight into their culture. Furthermore, they give us the opportunity to examine ourselves and reflect on our lives and beliefs through fiction created by others The latter offer valuable insights into the sentiments held by individuals scattered around the world, it is argued while such experiences may indeed be extensive knowledge of the world The willingness to accept ideas lies ultimately within the individual.

Chart b) shows that, by reading *Paper Menagerie*, most of the participants did learn something new about Asian-American culture.

Selected answer samples:

P1: The way the origami is valued in this piece was so interesting. It shows how culturally diverse some objects and skills are and that people should know of their value.

P2: After reading this I am more interested in Chinese cultural traditions and definitely learned something new about the celebration of ancestors in Chinese tradition.

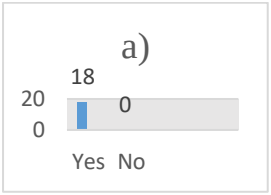
P3: I learned that in China, kids, especially girls are more of a commodity than living beings.

P4: Many of the depictions I've seen of Chinese American parents paint them as having very high expectations of their children, something I have seen criticized by some Chinese Americans since this isn't all of their experience, even if it is the most common one. It was nice getting to read about a different parent-child relationship than the one you normally get to see.

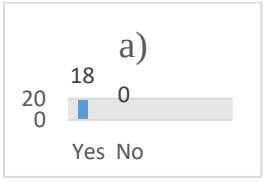
P5: Yes, I didn't know it was possible to find wives through catalogs.

Here, the cultural aspects of Paper Menagerie had to be taken into consideration. The answers were diverse, some focusing on the new things the text taught them about Asian-American culture, while others depicted deeper teachings beyond culture. Some cultural aspects (taken from A Guide for Teachers and trainers, pg. 53-54) that the participants learned about include social structures, roles, and relationships (pg. 3); customs, traditions, and rituals (pg. 2); objects that exist in one society, but not in another (pg. 1); representativeness, meaning how far do the characters from the story represent Asian-Americans (pg. 4); taboos (P5). Others saw past the cultural aspects and focused more on the message of the overall story, saying that it taught them about the risk of replacing your culture, tradition, and habits to be recognized by others. All in all, it seemed that the story made everyone question some things and they all took something out of it. This proves that cross-cultural literature has a lot of different things to teach us if we give it a chance.

Question no. 4
a) Do you think there are universal themes to the text that we all can identify with, regardless of our background?
b) What does this make you understand about cross-cultural literature?



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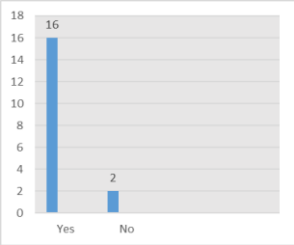


As the chart shows, all 18 of the participants picked on universal themes in the story.
Selected answer samples:

P1: *I think anyone with parents could relate to this story, even if the specific details are different, the feeling of rejecting and being dismissive of a parent, only to learn more about them later on and regretting past actions is I think a universal experience, even outside of a parent-child relationship.*
P2: *Some themes of bullying.*
P3: *Yes, this story contained quite a few lessons that can be generalized, the misery in surrendering to social pressure, even ignoring things you enjoy for acceptance, denying your identity and culture to fit in, etc. it gives us a clear perception of the difficulties in balancing out identity and surroundings.*
P4: *Unfortunately, how women are exploited and abused all over the world.*
P5: *Yes, anyone can identify with loneliness, isolation, and the want to fit in. I also went through a period in my youth in which I did not get along with my mother and this makes me sad looking back upon it. This means that across different cultures we can find the same themes and struggles.*
P6: *We're all different yet deep under we are all still humans and have feelings, when the feelings are provoked by similar situations we can identify with the text.*
b) After answering the first part of the question, this is what some of the participants wrote about their feelings towards cross-cultural literature:
P1: *I think this [universal themes] makes cross-cultural literature a lot more accessible than people might think, many of the things writers choose to tackle universal human experiences that you don't need to be part of a culture to understand.*
P2: *Cross-cultural literature is an excellent way to broaden one's horizons and deepen cultural understanding.*
P3: *The meeting of different cultures, traditions, and habits, makes it possible to cross borders through the reading of other cultures.*
P4: *Cross-cultural literature is a great way to acquire knowledge about other cultures. This would permit a better understanding of the different perspectives and make the reader more empathetic towards foreigners*
P5: *I think cross-cultural literature is a powerful tool to bring people from different cultures together. It helps us to understand our cultures and others' cultures at the same time.*

It was very pleasing to observe that the universal themes were identified by the participants and they were able related to the themes on a personal level. Thus, the purpose of cross-cultural literature was fulfilled, as the same opinion seems to be shared by the participants. It is recognized that people are brought together, and a better understanding of ourselves is achieved through the understanding of others, as well as a better understanding of others through the understanding of ourselves. Cross-cultural literature is not merely about reading words; it is an experience in itself. It involves traveling countries through reading, and it is believed that it deserves more space in the literature teaching curriculum.

Question no. 5
When doing cross-cultural reading, do you think you're being challenged to re-position yourself between your world and that of the text?



For this question, the chart reveals that 16 of the participants do feel that they are challenged to re-position themselves between their world and that of the text when reading cross-culturally.

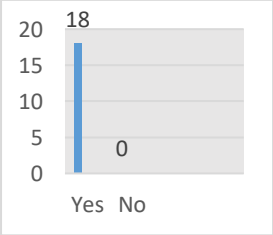
Selected answer samples:

P1: *I think: you automatically have to reposition your thinking when reading cross-culturally. Even when reading within the same culture, we encounter worldviews that are different from our own, and experiences that differ wildly from the ones we've had. I think it depends on the text that you are reading, and what aspects of culture a writer chooses to depict.*
P2: *I honestly was influenced by the story itself. I was putting myself into the characters' shoes. For this particular story, I went on searching on the Chinese cultural revolution to understand the mother and I've found myself learning Origami. So yes it has challenged me to open my eyes to the text world and as a student abroad it has brought back some childhood memories of traditional things mom was doing to connect with us.*
P3: *Yes, because different cultures may have different traditions, norms, or even different sets of morals. Especially specific cases that may be common to the culture and odd to us.*
P4: *There are so many concepts in cross-cultural reading that I don't know of so it's hard not to consider where you stand in this place of different concepts.*
P5: *I think so, yes, a little. You have to put yourself into the characters to be able to truly understand their world and where they're coming from.*

It seems that when people are exposed to cross-cultural literature, they are automatically repositioning their thinking and that's because they are being shown something new and fresh that makes them ponder and raise questions in their heads. It as well inspires them to dig deeper into that culture and become more knowledgeable about it. This is another positive aspect of cross-culture literature. In other words, it raises curiosity in readers and makes them think twice about certain subjects and their attitudes toward them.

Question no. 6

In your opinion, is introducing multicultural literature into the English language classroom a good way to foster cross-cultural understanding among students?



As the chart shows, all 18 of them seem to support the idea that introducing multicultural literature into the English language classroom is a good way to foster cross-cultural understanding among students. In fact, many of them answered with "absolutely, definitely, totally", which shows the intensity with which they support the idea.

Selected answer samples:

P1: *Absolutely yes. I think the more we know about different cultures the better we can deal emphatically with people and it is super important to avoid misunderstanding while having multi-cultural gatherings.*
P2: *I would say yes. The literature piece is written in a way that is not only interesting but genuinely makes you think of other cultures. Some people I've met never really consider other cultures besides their own and to have literature that broadens our knowledge would be an asset.*
P3: *Yes. Clashing with different cultures can trigger different forms of passion for people. In learning different kinds of relations with the culture, art, frameworks on concepts from any field, improving basic and specific knowledge.*

P4: *I think that would be an amazing thing, especially in countries like Kosovo or smaller countries where we only learn about certain cultures, i.e. western culture and European culture, I think it would be very helpful for everyone to see different cultures and be able to resonate more with eastern cultures.*
P5: *Definitely I think it is very important to expose students to different cultures to expand their knowledge and mindset and encourage tolerance for others.*
P6: *A broader space to learn in can help young minds develop more potential, so absolutely.*

The responses reflect a consensus on the importance of exposing students to cultural diversity. Participants highlight many benefits such as increasing empathy, avoiding misunderstandings across cultures, expanding knowledge, and developing tolerance towards others. They recommend the story and see it as capable of engaging readers and stimulating cross-cultural thinking. The participants also emphasize the importance of learning beyond their culture, and discuss the potential for personal growth, improved relationships, and a more open mind.

CONCLUSION

As English teachers, it is our job to teach students language, as well as culture. Because culture cannot be separated from language. It is said that language is born in a culture and dies with it. By helping students interpret the cultural factors in a text, we are helping them understand more fully the language in which it is written (Lazar, 1993, pg. 54).
The results of this study support that statement, they indicate that students' exposure to literature from diverse cultures had a significant impact on their understanding of different cultures and people; it also helped them build a better understanding of themselves as well as their own identity. The results also showed us that there is a correlation between reading about diverse cultures and being more open-minded about different things. Regarding my question as to how we treat cross-cultural literature, I found out the following:
First of all, the way people from different countries treat cross-cultural literature is very interesting to analyze and observe; Second, this is because different people are brought up in different environments and they have different life experiences. Some may focus on the setting of a story while others may focus on its characters' personalities. Some may see it as a way to escape reality while others may use it as a way to learn more about other cultures and societies; Third, in addition to that, many other factors influence our perception of any given piece of literature such as our educational background, culture, and values which makes us see things differently from others.
Finally, this research reassured us that implementing multi-cultural literature in the English language classroom as a tool for fostering cross-cultural communication and understanding is the way to go for English teachers.

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