THE USE OF ENGLISH READERS IN IMPROVING STUDENTS’ INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated 13 secondary school teachers’ feedback on the intervention of Intercultural Reading Programme (IRP) among 292 Malaysian Form Four secondary school students by using a Malaysian English reader titled Ripples by Shih Li Kow. The intervention among the students was conducted to identify their level of intercultural knowledge and intercultural behaviour before and after the intervention. In order to gain teachers’ perspective on the benefit of the intervention, qualitative data was collected through one-to-one interview involving 13 teachers at the end of the intervention. The data was analysed using Atlas. Ti 7.0 software. Teachers’ feedback in this research is segmented into eight main themes indicating the use of Malaysian based English literature infused with the elements of local cultures such as the Malays, Chinese, and Indians that is very important towards strengthening national unity. These findings contributed to the design of Intercultural Reading Framework which is an output of the intervention. The newly created framework will focus on improving intercultural knowledge and intercultural behaviour among Malaysian secondary school’s students in enhancing intercultural competence. The framework will support nation building agenda for a united Malaysia. It is also timely that the curriculum planners and material selectors consider the use of Malaysian based English literature written by local writers and that focuses on local cultural themes embedded in their work.

KEYWORDS: INTERCULTURAL BEHAVIOUR, INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE; INTERCULTURAL KNOWLEDGE; INTERCULTURAL READING PROGRAMME (IRP); TEACHER FEEDBACK

Introduction

The measures taken by the Malaysian government to nurture unity among Malaysians has started as early as before Independence in 1957. Education system in Malaysia has become a medium for the government to inculcate national integration among the citizens, starting from the school level throughout as guided by the national educational policy (Ministry of Education, 2012). Thus, it is not only the schools’ responsibility to infuse intercultural knowledge among the students, but at the same time educate the students of cultural differences in order to maintain positive inter-cultural relationship between them beginning at school level. Previous efforts taken by the government in improving knowledge via reading and in creating a literate society was through extensive reading outside classroom hours (Kaur, 2000) such as BUKTI (Baca Untuk Tingkat Ilmu) and DEAR (Drop Everything and Read). However, such reading activities were implemented with the objective to only develop independent and autonomous reader in learning (Kaur, 2000).

Unity has become one of Malaysia’s major objectives since independence (Federation of Malaya, 1958;1960), it is crucial to build intercultural competence among the school students as intercultural competence is a set of skills that enable the students to function effectively according to different cultural
settings (Ashwill & Hoang Oanh, 2009). According to Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence, as a set of skills is the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions. Therefore, Intercultural Reading Programme (IRP) as a classroom intervention to improve secondary school students’ intercultural knowledge and intercultural behaviour. The improvement of intercultural knowledge and its practice in terms of positive intercultural behaviour are considered as dual pronged efforts to develop students’ intercultural competence. Using the same concept as extensive reading that has been implemented earlier in Malaysian education context, IRP introduced Malaysian based English reader to Form Four students in selected Malaysian secondary schools and administered with the guidance of the teachers. Specifically, for this research, in developing the students’ intercultural competence, teachers’ feedback on the intervention is considered to play a significant role to facilitate the progress of the students in the development of intercultural knowledge and its practice in intercultural behaviour and eventually the success of the intervention in developing its output that is the Intercultural Reading Framework for future use in Malaysian classrooms.

Related Literature

Culture can be defined as the way of life, including expected behaviour, beliefs, values, language, and living practices shared by members of a society. It consists of both explicit and implicit rules through which experience is interpreted (Herbig, 1998). As for intercultural competence, Bennett and Bennett (2004: 149) indicated that intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts. In the context of feedback, Hattie and Timperley (2014) defined feedback as information provided by an agent. Specifically, in this research, an agent is referred to the teachers with regards to the aspects of one’s performance or understanding. Earlier, in the context of learning, Saddler (1989) highlighted that feedback plays a crucial role and it should be used by the teachers to explore the concept of excellence in order for the students to achieve the goals set for them. Tunstall and Gipps (1996) further added that feedback from teachers to students in the development of formative assessment is a major requirement for students’ development in learning. Tunstall and Gipps also (1996) suggested that it is a process of reviewing, judging, or evaluating students’ work, or performance and this kind of feedback helps in shaping or improving students’ competence.

This research focuses on feedback about students’ acceptability of the intervention and their performance in participating in the intervention tasks. Airasian (1997) defined this type of feedback as the feedback on how well a task is being performed or executed, as for example, the ability of the students to distinguish correct answers from the wrong ones, obtaining extra information, and in building more knowledge. Generally, this type of feedback is also known as corrective feedback or knowledge of results as it can relate to correctness, neatness, behaviour or few other criteria required to fulfil the tasks given.

As teacher’s feedback on the IRP intervention has a crucial role in improving students’ intercultural competence, Hattie (2009) suggested that for feedback to be effective, it has to be clear, with apparent and meaningful purpose, and compatible with students’ preceding knowledge, in order to present reasonable connections. Hattie (2009) also proposed that if feedback is properly utilised, it can help students to comprehend, engage or develop effective strategies to process the information intended to be learned. Therefore, when feedback is combined with effective instruction in classroom, it can be very powerful in enhancing learning.

Therefore, utilizing teacher’s feedback in developing students’ intercultural competence is not a new concept (Crooks, 1988; Sadler, 1989). Black and Williams (1998) in their research on classroom
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Formative assessment further accentuated the importance of teacher’s feedback in enhancing students’ achievement. Besides that, feedback from the teachers helps in determining ‘next steps’ and produce ‘results’, specifically in terms of raising students’ various skills (Timperley & Wiseman, 2003).

Research Question

1. What is the teachers’ feedback on the intervention of Intercultural Reading Programme (IRP) among Malaysian secondary school students?

Methodology

Intercultural Reading Programme (IRP) intervention was conducted in four phases, which are: Phase 1: Pre-Intervention, Phase 2: IRP Classroom Intervention, Phase 3: Post-Intervention and finally Data Analysis.

Phase 1: Pre-Intervention

The Permission to conduct the research in secondary schools was obtained firstly, from the Ministry of Higher Education (MoE), then, Penang State Education Department (JPN). Schools were selected based on a balanced racial composition of students’ ethnicity comprising the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. This study warranted a balanced racial composition of Malays, Chinese, and Indians who constitute Malaysia’s biggest number of population. Next, the 13 selected schools were approached through their school principals. Visits were organised to the schools to meet the school principals. Teachers’ training invitation letters were given to school teachers identified by their respective schools that agreed to participate in the research.

During the first phase, a training session was conducted by one IRP researcher to train 13 teachers for the IRP intervention. A module was created by five IRP researchers. Teachers were trained on how to use the module for their intervention. The training for the English language teachers was scheduled a week before the research started and was held at a selected venue. During the training session, teachers were briefed on the background of the intervention, their role, and their students’ role and lastly, on the use of the reader, module and other instruments such as the pre-and post-questionnaires and journal entry to be used in the study. Consent form was provided to the teachers to ensure their voluntary participation.

Phase 2: IRP Classroom Intervention

During the first meeting between the teachers with their respective Form Four students, IRP briefing was conducted by the teachers as it is important for the students to know and to understand the procedure of IRP and the expectations of the intervention. A pre-questionnaire was administered before the start of the intervention. Next, the students were provided the reader and a diary. The students were expected to do journal entry in their diary as their discussion of the four story progresses throughout the duration of the intervention. The diaries were collected at the end of the intervention. The journal entry was based on two questions guiding each story. The intervention (IRP) consisted of the use of four short stories from a reader, Ripples and the scheduled period for each story to be finished is two weeks during one English period (35-40 minutes) weekly. At the end of the intervention, the post-questionnaire was administered and focus group interviews were conducted with the students. The intervention was expected to be completed in eight weeks’ time. However, due to curricular and co-curricular activities that took place unexpectedly at schools, the research was only completed after a period of four months.
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Phase 3: Post- Intervention - Data Collection through One-to-one Interview with the Teachers

The purpose of one-to-one interview with the 13 teachers involved is to gain their feedback or perspective on the intervention of Intercultural Reading Programme (IRP) among the Form Four secondary school students. The one-to-one interview session offers comparison and verification for the data gathered from the students involving pre-test and post-test questionnaire, journal entry questions, and focus group interview. The one-to-one interviews were conducted with the teachers who administered the IRP because they “are likely to be more knowledgeable and informative about the subject under investigation” (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, p. 378)

Thirteen English language teachers from 13 schools involved in this research study agreed to take part in the one-to-one interview. The interview was held after the completion of the IRP intervention and the interview took place at their respective schools. A set of open ended questions was prepared by the IRP researchers. The criteria in preparing the interview questions include the implementation of IRP, a general view of IRP, the suitability of the reader and impact of IRP on students’ intercultural competence. The interviews conducted lasted between 30 to 45 minutes per session.

Although the teachers were guided by the questions for this one-to-one interview session, they were still given the opportunity to discuss and share issues concerning the progress and changes of their students’ cultural perception and behaviour, their opinions on the students’ existing knowledge, about the students’ own culture and culture of others and the measures taken by the teachers to overcome the challenges in making the IRP a success. The interviews were audio recorded and the IRP researchers did the transcription immediately after each interview ended. The transcriptions were analysed by using Atlas.Ti version 7.0, a qualitative data analysis software.

Phase 4: Data Analysis

The teachers involved for one-to-one interview were coded according to school code as only one teacher from each school were involved in this research. For example, a teacher interviewed from School 1 is coded as T1. The symbol T represents Teacher and 1 represents the school’s number. The coding was done to ensure anonymity of the teachers.

Research Instrument: Reader titled Ripples

The instrument used in the IRP is a Malaysian English literature titled ‘Ripples’ written by Shih Li Kow and was published by Silverfish Books Sdn Bhd (2008). Ripples, which consists of 25 short stories managed to be shortlisted for the 2009 Frank O’Connor Short Story Award (Shih-Li Kow, 2008). The reader was chosen for this research because the short stories in the reader took local or cultures in Malaysia as its background theme. Besides that, ‘Ripples’ offered short stories with rich cultural elements especially cultural practices, traditions, and customs that most locals will be able to relate with especially in their daily practice. Thus, four short stories in ‘Ripples’ were chosen as the text for their intercultural knowledge and intercultural behaviour acculturation.

The selection of the four short stories from ‘Ripples’ were based on the outcome in the context of the cultural themes and cultural values to be learned by the students from the use of the stories in the intervention, the suitability of difficulty level of language used, the cultural content, and the length of the stories. The number of short stories selected is based on the time frame of two months. This is because add-on curriculum activities for the school students are basically not encouraged by the schools’ management. The participating teachers have to accommodate the intervention of IRP with the normal English language teaching workloads. The four stories are:
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**Story 1: One Thing at a Time**  
Value Acculturation: Interracial Harmony  
Topic: Interracial Marriage

**Story 2: Deep Fried Devil**  
Value Acculturation: Interracial Harmony  
Topic: Traditional Food Customs

**Story 3: Courting of Cik Zahirah**  
Value Acculturation: Intercultural Values  
Topic: Cultural Beliefs

**Story 4: The Prize**  
Value Acculturation: Intercultural Values  
Topic: Religious Beliefs

In making sure that the language level suits the language level of the targeted respondents, ‘Ripples’ was first introduced to the English teachers of the participating Form Four (4) classes during the pre-intervention stage (teachers’ training phase). The teachers were required to read the four short stories and discuss whether the language level suited their students’ English language proficiency.

**Findings and Discussions**

Based on the one-to-one interview conducted with 13 teachers from 13 schools in Penang, eight themes emerged from the findings. The themes are **exposure, awareness, critical thinking, sensitivity, sharing, tolerance, reserved and openness.**

**Theme 1: Exposure**

One-to-one interview with the participating teachers reported that IRP has helped to expose their students to cultures other than their own. According to T7, even though students were well aware about certain practices and traditions of other cultures, IRP helped to create greater realisation of their intercultural knowledge by reviewing and providing awareness about the practices. At the same time, respondents were able to expand their knowledge on intercultural elements.

“It is actually a good exposure for the students and this kind of exposure is important for them. I get a chance to share and expose them through IRP actually.” [T8]

“I think that it is good that we introduced common culture among the students. Whereby they understand the culture and they can know more about it”[T4]

Besides that, IRP functions as an *exposure platform* to provide the respondents a lens into other cultures despite their differing personal culture. For example, T6 mentioned that for practices such as inter-racial marriages, only students that come from inter-racial marriages family were able to relate and to understand. IRP managed to create a channel whereby through classroom discussions, the students were able to get better exposure and knowledge about other ethnics’ cultural practices.
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Theme 2: Awareness

According to the teachers’ observations, the students also lacked awareness of cultural issues such as food, cultural practices and have restricted awareness on specific culture based activities. Surprisingly, the students were not only unaware of cultures of others, the teachers also surprisingly mentioned that the students were unaware of their own cultural practices.

“Even when they’re mingling with each other, I don’t see them get into each other’s culture much. It’s like everything is Malaysian. Even when it comes to food, they cannot identify the origin of the food. For them, they are all Malaysian food.” [T13]

“They didn’t even know that gambling is forbidden.” [T11]

“One of my students, Malay student also interested in living together before marriage. He listed down benefits and advantages of living together before marriage. I need to tell him that it is not okay and it is against Islam.” [T3]

The use of controversial cultural sensitive questions to probe understanding can be a challenge in multi-cultural educational context. This caused the teachers to worry about the consequences. However, as the students’ discussions were on-going, teachers such as T3 agreed that the students were able to learn and understand about their own culture as well as cultures of others simultaneously.

Theme 3: Critical Thinking

Based on the post reading activities of IRP, the teachers (T1, T2, T3 and T11) indicated that the respondents developed critical thinking skill. During the post reading discussion activity, the students were able to form more critical questions that probed the cultural values and answered those questions with justifications.

T11 highlighted the importance of the development of critical thinking skill in issues discussed through IRP’s four selected short stories as it helps to transform students’ mind set/idea about their cultures and cultures of others that the parents and family members instilled in them since young. As a result, the students improved their thinking skills and they were able to improve themselves in terms of understanding and adapting to cultural differences and cultural restrictions.

Theme 4: Sensitivity

In classes with only mono-ethnic students, the teachers concluded that they did not face problems in addressing sensitive issues among the students. However, T10 expressed concerns that the implementation of IRP involving the multi-racial school communities might not have a positive impact on the development of the students’ intercultural competence. T13 expressed the same concern and disagreed with the choice of the four short stories used for the IRP as the selected stories in her opinion presented extreme cultural elements that might affect the intercultural relationship among the students as issues of food, culture based practices, and beliefs are sensitive issues that are prone to triggering disharmony among the respondents.

However, another teacher, T2 reported that the students who are teenagers were aware about cultural specific issues such as gambling being illegal in certain cultures such as the Malay and the students did not pursue the issue for further deliberation. Adding to that, T2 indicated that the students were also
worried about expressing their opinions via writing due to restrictions such as touching on sensitive issues that might invite trouble and language constraint.

“There wasn’t really verbal argument or anything because my students are open minded, they can give their views but they don’t go to that extreme. Maybe it is the environment.” [T2]

**Theme 5: Sharing**

The teachers informed that group discussions during post reading session allowed the students to deliberate among themselves the discussion questions. The students were able to arrive at mutual consensus on the issues discussed during the discussion and sharing sessions after much discussion on agreeing or disagreeing on the matter discussed. Teachers agreed that the discussions and sharing sessions allowed the students to be more receptive and accommodative of different ideas. According to T6, IRP encouraged the respondents to be more open in sharing their cultures with students of different ethnic backgrounds especially those who came from multicultural background such as students who were being born and grew up in interracial marriage families.

“When we discussed about interracial issue, they were kind of excited so they start connecting it to their peers and they start talking about interracial marriage and some of them from interracial marriage background. They could share a lot of things and they share the advantages of being born in interracial family.” [T6]

In addition, T10 reported that the students were very responsive in terms of asking questions and were actively involved throughout the sharing session. The students also enjoyed sharing their opinions and gave feedback to questions prompted by other members of their group.

**Theme 6: Openness**

Majority of the teachers (92.3%) agreed that the students were excited and enthusiastic of being a part of the IRP intervention. Some teachers indicated that the respondents even started reading the stories before it was used for the intervention stage. These stories have also indirectly contributed towards encouraging reading habit among the students.

“I think they were very open. You know, when I first introduced the first story they were excited because it is something which was different from the normal stories that they have read.” [T10]

“When I first introduced IRP in this class, they were so excited like they were really looking forward to it and when I actually showed them the book; a few of them are keen readers and they have started reading the book. They said the stories are very interesting and they look forward to discussion.” [T5]

According to T7, T10, T4, T8 and T5, the students from their schools were found to be very receptive toward the idea of learning about cultures of others when IRP was initially introduced. T10 also highlighted that during discussions that were held after the reading session for each selected short story, the students actively exchanged opinions.

“I told them that this is going to be like stories about different
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"cultures and races in our country so they kind of like excited about it.” [T7]

“They were more curious about the other ethnics and cultures and they were excited to watch videos especially regarding the Chinese ethnic that I downloaded from YouTube”. [T8]

In relevance to the theme of openness, the teachers also found the students to be very open and flexible in learning about other cultures and races in Malaysia. According to T13, one of the contributing factors of the students’ openness are the way the students communicated with each other at school, their multi-cultural surroundings, and their school environment.

Besides that, T10, T1, T11 and T12 stated that the students were found to be very responsive as they enjoyed learning about different cultures and the students were very active especially in responding to questions during classroom discussion. According to T11, based on the students’ perspective, every issue raised in the stories was presented for discussion no matter how sensitive those issues might be towards intercultural harmony. Thus, the students were able to question everything in an non-discriminatory environment to achieve common understanding among themselves.

Theme 7: Reserved

The teachers also revealed that some of the students were reserved in voicing out their opinions either verbally or in their writings. According to T11, the students worried about writing cultural and races related reflections as their journal entry because they were worried of being discriminated by their friends. Thus, the students tended to be more tactful in writing statements especially in their journal entries as noted by the teachers after a story was discussed. This was also supported by T2 through observations during the IRP’s implementation. According to T2, the students found it more comfortable to verbally express during the discussion sessions as they know that they were not recorded and they will not be judged based on their opinions.

“Personally I guess, they thought people will be reading what they write and they will be judged from what they write so they will be more careful to write cultural and races related statements.” [T11]

T13 and T2 also suggested that some students were reserved in sharing opinions during the discussion and sharing session because they lacked knowledge on cultural related issues even though it is based their own ethnic’s culture. T2 highlighted that the students shared limited information and their opinions were restricted before they read the stories. However, during the post reading activity, the respondents tended to be more comfortable and confident to discuss as they acquired intercultural knowledge during the short story reading event and classroom discussions.

Theme Eight: Tolerance

According to T1, the students’ tolerance towards others of different cultures was interrelated with their openness and acceptance towards cultural differences. T3 reported that the students have no issues when it comes to racial tolerance and instead, were discovered to be more tolerable due to a balanced racial composition of their school and their own ethnic background. However, T3 doubts the success of IRP’s introduction and implementation in rural area schools with an imbalance of ethnic composition to achieve the same tolerance level as where the intervention was conducted.
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T6 asserted that the students were able to react in positive manners and if they found the discussion provocative; they were responsible in choosing to move on instead of prolonging the discussion. T12 also reported that based on personal experience in conducting the IRP in the related Form Four classroom, the students reacted positively even when discussing the cultural elements from the stories.

“When I asked the Malay students, are you in favour of this kind of marriages? (Referring to intercultural marriage). So I picked a few students and asked. They were able to tell me like ‘Teacher, no. We don’t because in our religion it goes like this... But some might say I don’t mind if it is from different race as long as it is from the same religion.” [T12]

Discussion

It is generally accepted that teachers’ feedback or assessment plays a major role in students’ learning (Saddler, 1989). If teachers’ feedback or assessment is critically explored, teachers’ feedback can facilitate students to improve their intercultural knowledge and intercultural behaviour. All participating teachers reported that the IRP intervention among Form Four students has a positive impact in improving the level of the students’ intercultural knowledge and intercultural behaviour.

The findings of this study revealed that IRP managed to become a platform for students to acquire intercultural knowledge and improve on their intercultural behaviour according to the different cultures’ practices. IRP in this research which was implemented via certain stages, such as the instruments in pre-intervention, during intervention and post-intervention stages, provided an avenue for the students to have access to intercultural based learning outcomes in classroom with the guidance of the participating teachers. The results acquired mirrored Hattie’s (2009) conclusion whereby effective instructions in classroom and feedback when combined help to enhance learning progress. Other than that, teachers’ reflection in the one-to-one interview during the intervention of IRP included information on their personal feedback to student views in regards to cultural related issues as well as adding more information that was not explicitly indicated in the four short stories involved in IRP.

This study also suggests that the intervention of the IRP among Malaysian secondary school students witnessed the improvement of other skills such as critical thinking skills among students. Consensus from teachers indicated that the students were able to generate critical questions that provoked cultural values in intercultural classroom environment. In such scenario, corrective feedback from the teachers is crucial in correcting the unclear ideas that the students had about cultures other than their own that has been instilled in them since they were young.

Similarly, Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William (2003) and Clarke (2003) in previous studies concluded that the quality of the classroom discussion is enhanced through effective question and answer sessions between the teachers and the students as well as among the students themselves. Therefore, in order for the students to perceive better understanding of their culture in depth and cultures other than their own, more effort is required for the students to think and to share opinions among themselves with the help of the teachers and the suitable intercultural reading material. Such effort will indirectly promote higher order thinking skill among the students.

Although Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William (2003) and Clarke (2003) suggested that effective questions and answer sessions between the teacher and the students as well as among the students themselves boost the quality of the classroom discussions, this current study proved otherwise, due to the fear of possibility in making errors and disconfirmation of information. Such fear was proven to build an invisible wall between the extrovert students and the introvert students. Students’
engagement in learning is likely to be constrained by the gap that was built throughout the IRP session. In addition, the fear of making mistakes forced the introvert students to share their views only when they were fairly sure that they could respond correctly. Otherwise, responses from the students through IRP session were difficult to retrieve and have to be heavily teacher prompted.

However, a smaller number of the teachers indicated that IRP is suitable for a class of multi-cultural composition for knowledge sharing of cultural elements among students of diverse cultures. This criterion will truly affect intercultural relationship among the students. This was also supported by Kulhavy, (1977) whereby if students were exposed to unfamiliar topics and subjects during the learning process, teachers’ feedback alone will not have a significant effect on their students’ intercultural knowledge and behaviour. Thus, the students will have problems in trying to relate the new information with the existing ones.

Conclusion

The study revealed that teachers’ feedback or assessment helps in encouraging the students to voice their opinion on the intercultural knowledge issues in the four short stories through effective question and answer sessions during classroom discussions between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves. Learning environment influences the ways in which students process new intercultural information and understand how they should react when involved in discussion about intercultural knowledge. The positive intercultural behaviour portrayed by the students during and after the intervention will be the deciding factor in building intercultural competence among the students and ensuring the success of the intervention. Therefore, the teachers play a crucial role in shaping and building the students’ intercultural understanding, awareness and openness in accepting the knowledge of new cultures or cultures other than their own that has been a part of the nation, even before Malaysia’s independence.

References


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