

## Effects perceived by Vietnamese B1 EFL students of extensive reading on intercultural competence

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### ABSTRACT

Investigation of effective approaches for supporting students' linguistic and intercultural competence in the process of learning English as an international lingua franca has generally been an issue of great concern for teachers and researchers in language education. The study considered how fiction reading and non-fiction reading supported students' reading comprehension and fostered their self-perception of intercultural competence. The scaffolds were tested in a pretest-posttest design on 58 participants, and in a classroom-based setting. Two measurement instruments included a reading comprehension test and a questionnaire on students' self-perception of their intercultural competence. Both groups made significant progress in reading comprehension. Fiction reading condition was also found to contribute to the higher self-perception of intercultural competence. Discussion of the pros and cons of the experimental design and suggestions for further research into extensive reading and speech act appropriateness are in the last part of the paper. The paper finally puts forward the suggestion that short literary texts of cultures around the world might be considered as one of the meaningful inputs in B1 EFL classrooms.

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### 1. Introduction of intercultural competence in EFL contexts: Expectations and challenges

*A high degree of intercultural competence is desirable for any foreign language learner* (Fernandez, 2021). Prospective global citizens refer to those who should be able to interact successfully with different individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds who “do not share knowledge, assumptions, values, and forms of discourse with them” (Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2012, p. 280); some authors considered communication as being effective when “individuals achieve a shared understanding, stimulate others to take actions, and encourage people to think in new ways” (Bovee & Thill, 2000, p. 4). Some research has investigated inappropriate strategies of linguistic forms in universal speech acts as causes of misunderstandings or breakdowns in intercultural communication (Cohen, 1995, p. 23; Sercu, 2000, p. 33). In brief, in the scope of the study, we took the notion of intercultural competence of Bennett (2015): “The competence is highly related to the knowledge and awareness of concepts and practices of speech acts in different contexts of interaction” (p. 767).

### 2. Objective of an appropriate pedagogy for intercultural competence in a second language classroom

Although teachers believed in the crucial role of intercultural competence in a foreign language classroom (Klein, 2004), it was given less emphasis in English language syllabuses due

to the lack of testing approach, textbook, and institutional guidance (Young & Sachdev, 2011). The textbooks for students in EFL contexts may generally be “excessive Anglocentric stress” or a stereotypical representation of the first language culture and the target language culture (Luong & Nguyen, 2016). Speech-act-focused instructions in language teaching materials for nonnative speakers were “based on an assumption of sociopragmatic universality [without considerations of gender, status differences, and topics]” (Basturkmen, 2006, p. 51), therefore, the question about effective treatments for second language learners’ acquisition of speech acts has still remained unanswered. In addition, the question concerning the teachers’ qualification in intercultural knowledge as well as the teaching and testing approach for intercultural competence has hindered its application in EFL classes (Nguyen, Harvey, & Grant, 2016).

In general, embedded in Asian cultures, Vietnamese EFL learners, may have had cultural practices and norms in communication different from those of the people from Anglophone cultures. Second language acquisition researchers and practitioners stressed the importance of linguistic strategies in intercultural communication (Spencer-Oatey & Kadar, 2021). Scaffolds for linguistic strategies in realizing the cross-cultural speech acts were necessary (Pham, 2016; Thieu et al., 2019; Tran & Duong, 2015); one example could be using graded readers as a source of teaching syntactic structures related to speech acts (Richards, 2001, p. 9). However, the question of how reading literary texts supports linguistic diversity and promotes intercultural competence still invites further research for a smooth integration of literature in EFL classes.

### **3. Literature review of the relations between extensive reading and intercultural competence**

#### ***3.1. The concept of extensive reading***

Extensive reading usually meant free voluntary reading or reading for pleasure (Day & Bamford, 1998). Different from intensive reading, extensive reading emphasizes reading for the meaning of what is being read rather than the language (Carrell & Carson, 1997; Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In extensive reading, quantity, and variety of literary materials read was the focus, rather than reading for testing or marks (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002, p. 296). Although its original purpose was not for language learning, second language teaching pedagogy has emphasized the importance of extensive reading for students’ language and communication competencies because through reading large quantities of materials that were pleasurable to the readers, their magnitudes of linguistic competence and reading comprehension were accordingly larger (Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill, & Pincas, 2003; Grabe & Stoller, 2013). Studies on second language acquisition have reported positive results of extensive reading on reading habits, fluency, strategies, and other skills such as writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar (Eur, 2013). Specific examples in EFL classrooms included the effects of extensive reading on the retention of vocabulary and autonomy (Boutorwick & Macalister, 2019; Lee & Mallinder, 2011) on reading comprehension, speed, and writing skills in South Korean and Japanese contexts (Han, 2010; Krashen & Mason, 1997, respectively).

#### ***3.2. Review of empirical studies related to improving intercultural competence through extensive reading***

Much of the focus in the current research on intercultural competence has been on scaffolding second language learners in “producing appropriate linguistic forms that correspond to the speech acts” (Bennett, 2015, p. 767). “Literature is a perlocutionary speech act” since it has influenced readers’ feelings, thoughts, and actions (Broek, 2001, p. 376). Literature, therefore, has been advocated as a fundamental source to advance students’ intercultural speech acts in second-

language classrooms. While textbooks teaching spoken speech acts were found to fall short of examples that reflect the way people actually speak and “wrongly emphasize explicit rather than tacit knowledge of how we speak” (Boxer, 2003, p. 50), fictional texts might encourage readers’ interpretations of speech acts in the context (Adams, 1985; Ghosn, 2002).

There have been pedagogic suggestions for using literature in teaching speech acts in general, for non-native speakers learning English or for the native ones learning other foreign languages. Foreign language teachers were encouraged to use literary texts in teaching speech acts, since the resource offered activities for speech act learning. For example, after reading a literary text, students should devise a role play of a speech act enacted in the context of the story (DiPietro, 1982; Pardede, 2011). However, most published studies on extensive reading have focused on “reading speed, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar” and test forms were common “cloze test, reading comprehension, and reading speed” (in reference to the meta-analysis of extensive reading studies in 26 journals of Nakanishi, 2014). Not much empirical evidence existed with reference to the influence of extensive fiction reading on intercultural competence in second language acquisition research. In the EFL context of Vietnam, although the importance of authenticity of reading materials in language pedagogy has been generally emphasized (Nguyen, 2022), evidence of extensive reading as support for intercultural communicative competence has not been reached experimentally (Le, 2005). Correspondingly, there was almost no inclusion of extensive reading in EFL classes in Vietnam (Tran, 2018).

#### 4. Methodology

##### 4.1. Research question

*How does extensive reading with fiction, compared with non-fiction, affect Vietnamese B1 EFL students’ self-perception of their intercultural competence?*

*How does extensive reading with fiction, compared with non-fiction, influence the reading comprehension of Vietnamese B1 EFL students?*

Through the questions, we would like to see how two different forms of scaffolding in a second-language reading program might support the students in their reading comprehension and self-perception of intercultural competence.

##### 4.2. Experimental design

The design was pretest posttest control group (Shadish, Cook, & Campell, 2002). The research was conducted in a real setting of EFL education. Table 1 showed the design of the study, and Table 2 contained the specific activities of two groups in the experiment.

**Table 1**

Research design

Group (number of participants)	Pretest	Experimental panel	Posttest
Experimental group (27)	Instrument 1,2	Extensive reading with fictional material	Instrument 1,2
Control group (31)		Reading with non-fictional material	
Note Instrument 1: reading comprehension test Instrument 2: questionnaire of self-perception of intercultural competence			

Source: Compiled by the authors

### 4.3. Participants

Both groups participating in the study were students at B1 level of English proficiency and registered for an Preadvanced Reading Course for English major students. The selection of participants for the experiment was based on their availability, their agreement, and permission from the Faculty of Foreign Languages in the research setting. A total of 58 second-year undergraduate students participated in this study, with 11 male and 46 female students. There were 27 students in the experimental group and 31 in the control group. All participants were taught by one teacher.

### 4.4. Data collection

Data included reading comprehension tests and questionnaires; they were collected at the two moments of pretest and posttest.

**Reading comprehension test.** was in the format of a PET (Preliminary English Test) test with 25 items testing vocabulary knowledge, text-based comprehension from minor points of factual information to global reading that required the readers' inferences about the attitudes, opinions, and purposes of the writers and the reading texts. The intermediate level test was chosen to measure whether the students could reach a B1 level of proficiency in reading comprehension, the level the students need to achieve in the second year of the B.A. curriculum.

In particular, the PET test involved a range of reading skills, with a variety of texts, from short texts of signs, messages, notes, and emails to longer texts taken from a newspaper, a magazine, and a review. There were four parts with twenty-five items. Part 1, marking the letter next to the correct explanation, was to focus on reading real-world notices or short texts for the main message. Part 2, matching the descriptions of people, focused on detailed comprehension and specific information. Part 3, choosing the correct or incorrect statements, focused on factual texts for the scanning skill. Part 4 tested students' reading for gist, inference, and global meaning. The score range for the test was from 0 - 10. The guidelines on the test format were issued by Cambridge University Press & Assessment; however, for the focus of the research, the last part of the format involving vocabulary skills was left out.

**Questionnaire of students' self-perception of intercultural competence.** The items of the questionnaire took the form of a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, ranging from 1 to 5. The items were adapted from the questionnaire on self-efficacy in intercultural communication of Kabir and Sponseller (2020, p. 8) and the questionnaire on self-perceived communication competence of Ngwira, Mapoma, Hong, Sariyo, and Kondowe (2015, p. 79). Typical items of the questionnaire were *I can communicate in impromptu situations, I can build consensus when I communicate, I feel that people from other cultures have many valuable things to teach me, I think it is important to look for opportunities to interact with people from other cultures*. The reliability of the 15 items for pretest and posttest moments reached Cronbach's  $\alpha$  from .71 to .73, respectively.

#### 4.5. Course specification

**Table 2**

Research activities

Time	Experimental group	Control group
90 minutes	<b>Pre-test</b> - Reading comprehension: PET test - Questionnaire	
Seven weeks (3 hours per week)	Seven chapters in the textbook <i>Reading for Today Concepts 4</i> . (Note. The textbook was used for the preadvanced reading course in the setting)	
	One story per week and one reading response form as a follow-up activity	One non-fiction material per week and one reading response form as a follow-up activity
90 minutes	<b>Post-test</b> - Reading comprehension: PET test - Questionnaire	

Note: At week 3 and week 7, students of the experimental condition chose one situational prompt, among the three ones set by the teacher, to create a conversation. Ideas for the speech act situations were from an L1/L2 contrastive study of requests and apologies of Reiter (2000, p. 186).

Source: Compiled by the authors

In the experimental period, for each week, the experimental group read one fairy-tale, fable, or folk tale from the website <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/> (Florida Center for Instructional Technology, 2023), while the control group read one academic material from the online resources suggested by the institute. After reading a fiction or non-fiction text, students were asked to fill in a reading response form (in reference to the response form for extensive reading of Mikulecky & Jeffries, 2007, p. 24). In the particular response form, students were asked to report around book information, their emotions while reading, what they liked best and least from the book, what they might learn from the book, and what they found challenging from the book. It was noted that the questions were common for two types of reading, fiction, and non-fiction, so the reading response form was not peculiar to the intercultural issues of the reading materials. Before the experiment, to give the students an example of what was expected for the form, the teacher thought aloud through the process of filling out one response form for a sample story she read. It was also noted that at week 3 and week 7, in a self-assessed assignment, an experimental condition was required to create a conversational dialogue for a problem situation.

## 5. Results

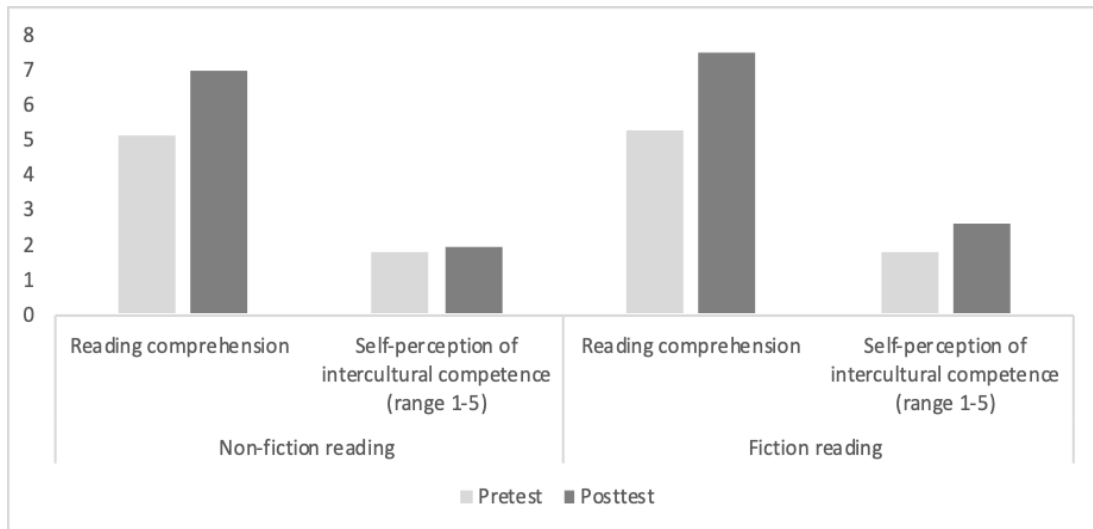
### 5.1. Data analysis

To observe the effects between fiction reading and non-fiction reading on intercultural competence, we applied univariate covariance analyses with condition as independent factor, the pretest score as covariate, reading comprehension and students' self-perception of their intercultural competence as dependent variables.

### 5.2. Results

*For reading comprehension.* No significant effect of condition was found on the variable ( $F(1, 55) = 1.97, p = .17, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$ ).

*For self-perception of intercultural competence.* There was an effect of condition on students' self-perception. Scores on self-perception of students in the fiction reading condition were higher than those in the non-fiction reading, controlled for the pretest score ( $F(1, 45) = 33.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $partial \eta^2 = .43$ ).



**Figure 1.** Mean scores of reading comprehension and self-perception of intercultural competence

## 6. Discussion and implications for further research

*For the first research question.* Initial data from the questionnaire on students' self-perception of intercultural competence suggest the ones in fiction reading condition, supported with reading response and speech act realization activity, may express a more positive perception of their quality of communication in English. This result may be in line with the pedagogic argument which says that dialogues found in literature could be used as an authentic source of relevant spoken language samples for teaching conversations (Burns, 2006, p. 251). Furthermore, the simulated speech act activity that students in the experimental group did in the process of extensive reading, as compared with the other group who did not do the task, and its possible after-effect on students' self-perception of intercultural communicative competence should be noted.

*For the second research question.* Students in both conditions improve their comprehension. The finding supports the view that Vietnamese B1 EFL students may improve their reading proficiency by reading. The result is in line with the reported effects of extensive reading as a meaningful input on linguistic and reading competence in the EFL contexts in Asia (see Eur, 2013; Tran & Seepho, 2016). The result would appear to suggest that in addition to non-fiction reading materials, the selection of fictional texts may possibly be another option for teachers in EFL reading classes.

*Implications for further research.* A few questions still need appropriate answers from larger-scale research. First, the question of how the integration of literature in an EFL classroom influences students' speech act appropriateness remains unanswered. Unfortunately, due to the context-based challenges of conducting an empirical investigation nested in the course content within the required time frame, the speech act realization activity is a self-assessed assignment and beyond our control for the specific number of speaking turns and the length of conversations. Second, another question could be the measurement of intercultural competence. There might be a need for a wider range of possible scores for the simulated speech acts, for example, separate

scores on language accuracy and speech act appropriateness. One final question would probably be, in extensive reading, how fiction materials from the Anglophone and non-Anglophone cultures (for example, Vietnamese stories translated into English) support speech act realizations of students in EFL contexts. Within the scope of the study, it can be concluded that reading short literary texts of cultures around the world may support the reading comprehension of B1 EFL students and their self-perceived competence in intercultural communication.

## 7. Conclusion

*The first research question is on how extensive reading of fiction, compared with non-fiction, affects EFL students' self-perception of their intercultural competence.* Initial data from the questionnaire on students' self-perception of intercultural competence suggest the ones in fiction reading, supported by reading response and speech act realization activity, may express a more positive perception of their quality of communication in English.

*For the second research question on how extensive reading with fiction, compared with non-fiction, influence reading comprehension of Vietnamese B1 EFL students.* Students in both conditions, fiction and non-fiction extensive reading, improved their B1 level reading comprehension.

## 8. Limitations of the study

Within the scope of the study, extensive reading activity has been integrated into a conventional reading course. There is not much disturbance to the customary routines of textbook-based instructions in a regular EFL class. Therefore, it might be said that, to some extent, the findings were reached in a natural setting. On the other hand, the effects may become blurred from other classroom activities like textbook-based reading and language activities from the textbook.

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