



Promoting Intercultural Awareness Through Stories: A UAE Case

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Abstract: The interrelation between language and culture has shaped language teacher methodologies for the past decades. Learning a new language can mean learning a new identity and can influence learners' own identities. The aim of this study is to explore the impact of using L2 graded reading stories in a language classroom to promote intercultural competence among undergraduate Emirati female English language learners. Based on Byram's model of Intercultural Communication, students' competences of knowledge, skills, and attitudes were measured. Quantitative and qualitative data revealed that when attitudes, knowledge and skills are integrated into English Language Learning (ELL), students may show interest in understanding other cultures and accepting cultural diversity. Being exposed to foreign cultures in ELL course material had minimal effect on student identity even when there was explicit focus on culture. There was no evidence of student Emirati identities being destabilized due to ELL courses.

Keywords: Digital Stories, Extensive Reading, Intercultural Awareness, Intercultural Communication, ELL, Byram's Model

1. INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are two sides of a coin. Language learning would not be possible without understanding the cultural contexts it is used in. One's cultural identity is shaped by living in a culture and one's self-concept is developed by identifying oneself with that specific culture (Duty, 2015). Among the various factors that contribute to shaping one's identity and self-concept (i.e., educational experience, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, familial relations) (Phinney, 2006), learning a new language is associated with the development of self-concept and has a direct influence on a learner's own identity (Chik & Benson, 2008; Gao et al., 2007; Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

This interrelation between the language learning and identity has influenced teachers in ELL classrooms to design activities that are contextualized and relevant to real life issues (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). Additionally, it became a teacher's responsibility to encourage students to explore culture both in and outside of the classroom (Furstenberg, 2010; Kearney, 2010; Moore, 2008). Similarly, foreign language teachers are no longer expected to convey detailed knowledge about the culture

of the language they teach to students. Instead, they take on the role of facilitators who guide the learning process by actively involving students in tasks that encourage them to discover, analyze, and assess meaningful cultural information via primary and authentic texts, audio, video, and media (Byram et al., 2002; Atasever Belli, 2018). In such a learning environment, knowledge is shared, new values and opinions are considered, and students take ownership of their own learning.

Increasing learners' intercultural awareness would not only shape one's identity but also expose learners to differences in cultures and values. This knowledge is currently the focus in school and university programs to expand students' acceptance of diversity. This is particularly relevant in a multicultural setting like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where the country is advertising for a first-rate education system that promotes inclusion, tolerance, and acceptance as its main pillars (UAE vision, 2021). In the UAE, expatriates make up the majority of the population whereas Emiratis are only 11.48% of the total population (UAE Population Statistics, 2019).



The demographic imbalance in UAE is the outcome of the rapid growth in infrastructure and building that required expats to be employed as a result of oil-based economy. UAE and other GCC countries were able to offer attractive expatriate packages to make the region a popular destination for both qualified and unqualified workers (Ahmad, 2016). Apart from construction and retail, education is the third most common source of employment in the UAE which contributes to the high number of expatriates. Becoming a minority in their own land has brought heated discussions within the society voiced in media. Some see the situation as a threat to the existence of the society and the language (Al-Kitbi, 2008). Similarly, there are concerns regarding the unwanted influence of the foreign workforce on the cultural identity of Emiratis (AlShaiba, 2014). Such worries have pushed government officials to take measures to preserve national identity and culture. As such, UAE leaders have put strategies in place to ensure the continuity of the Emirati culture and traditions and embed these in the curriculum (Al-Khoury, 2012).

Emirati ELLs are exposed daily to the diverse cultures of their foreign teachers (mostly from western backgrounds), social media and books/course books. The application of western education models and best practices in teaching makes course materials inescapable sources of western cultural influence in classrooms across the country. Themes and information woven into textbooks effortlessly find place in the learning process of the students (G-Mrabet, 2012). This raises the question of whether such limited cultural exposure has managed to create intercultural aptitude and whether this exposure has any influence on the perspectives and opinions of young Emirati females.

This research project focuses on the use of graded readers to examine the intercultural competence of undergraduate female Emirati learners. Data collection is based on a (pre and post) competence test, and student focus groups. To this end, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent, can reading graded L2 stories in language classrooms be used to promote intercultural competence?
2. Does learning about other cultures through stories in ELL classes destabilize young female Emirati selves/identities?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The linking of language and culture in the language classroom has been the focus of many researchers. The integration of cultural elements in language instruction adds a distinctive atmosphere to the classroom. It helps learners understand the art, politics, education, music, and

cuisine of the target language culture (McKeeman & Oviedo, 2014; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Cultural learning seems to be an equally important educational aim as to being able to communicate effectively in L2 (Moore, 2008; Kourova & Modianos, 2013). Language teachers have realized the need to integrate cultural awareness activities to foster students' cultural and intercultural understanding so they can fight ethnocentric thinking and become interculturally aware. However, the question remains as to how such cultural teaching should and could most effectively be conducted at the classroom level (Dema & Moeller, 2012).

Intercultural competence can be outlined as the ability of an individual to communicate, work with people from other backgrounds, think and behave appropriately as well as successfully across cultures. In this study, the term intercultural competence rather than cross cultural competence is preferred because it is the established term used in connection with language teaching (The Council of Europe, 2001; Commission of the European Communities, 2004; Gogolin, 2007).

Intercultural Communication

The value of intercultural communication was established during the post WW2 era as diplomacy, international communication and businesses developed. Soon it became evident that knowing the grammar of a language was not enough to have successful business and diplomatic relationships but also required knowledge of linguistics and behavioral sciences such as psychology and social psychology (Kourova & Modianos, 2013).

Language learning and teaching is an interpersonal and intercultural process whereby learners come into contact with teachers and other learners of diverse personal histories, experiences and outlooks either face-to-face or virtually. Language learning and teaching thus has close connections with the field of Inter-Cultural Communication (ICC), in particular where the notion of culture is concerned (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). Byram's model of ICC is at the core of the theoretical framework of this study. This is because this model is a "combination of knowledge (savoir), skills (savoir-faire), attitudes (savoir-être) which allow a speaker, to varying degrees to recognize, understand, interpret and accept other ways of living and thinking beyond his or her home culture" (Beacco & Byram, 2007, p 8). As such, the Competence in IC is achieved by improving these different aspects of ICC. This model is continuously updated (Byram 2008; 2012) and serves as a base for other ICC models (Deardorff, 2006; Tsai & Houghton, 2014). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) uses Byram's currently uncontested model to establish

attainment targets and descriptors (Council of Europe, 2017; Hoff, 2014). This model assumes that for speakers to have intercultural competence they must pay attention to 5 Savoirs:

- Savoir (knowledge)
- Savoir Comprendre (interpreting/relating skills)
- Savoir Engager (critical cultural awareness)
- Savoir Apprendre/Faire (discovery/interaction skills)
- Savoir Etre (attitudes)

To this end, it is vital to promote certain attitudes, knowledge and skills to achieve ICC. Attitudes measure an individual's readiness to overcome cultural prejudices. As for knowledge, it can be classified into two types: the first being knowledge of social groups, practices and products of both own and other culture, and the second being the broad knowledge of manners in individual and social interactions. The skills are linked to interpreting, relating, discovering and interacting, together with critical thinking and awareness of politics. When attitudes, knowledge and skills are integrated into English language learning, students may show interest in understanding other cultures and accepting cultural diversity as a natural presence in society which eases communication and prevents possible misinterpretations (Zorba & Çakir, 2019; Kourova & Modianos, 2013).

People with different native tongues communicating in English is an intercultural event, which requires speakers to show respect to each other, to their different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. For effective communication, speakers also need to adapt to the cultural context they are in which can only occur successfully if a certain level of ICC is obtained. (Zorba & Çakir, 2019). ICC is not a natural outcome of language proficiency, and it needs to be taught, developed, and practiced like any other skill (Stadler, 2011). In terms of language learning ICC is what prepares a speaker to be able to communicate with speakers of English from all cultures by creating cultural awareness. Byram's (1997) model is a holistic approach to ICC and makes it easy to assess categories that are developed and need further development.

Culture and Language Instruction

Research conducted on teaching culture has proven that culture and language are interrelated and should be dealt with together (Shulz, 2007; Zorba & Çakir, 2019). Analyzing language in isolation of the speaker is not possible as language is an illustration of the human experience (Kramsch, 2004; Kourova & Modianos, 2013). Furthermore, Byram (1989) emphasizes that language cannot have a function independent of the context it is used in, which means language always contains information

beyond itself. It contains the cultural context. Despite this connection between language and culture, many teachers spend their class time focusing on accuracy and lexical components of the language and leave the teaching of culture as the least significant component of the curriculum. However, the advancement of technology shifted the education system and curriculum to ensure that teachers allocate at least half of their instruction time on teaching culture (Moore, 2008; Zorba & Çakir, 2019).

While instruction time spent on teaching culture has increased over the past decades, finding the most effective approaches for teaching culture as part of language courses remains a major issue. It is evident that a fundamental component of ELL is intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Language is the primary channel of one's expressing the self (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008; Brdarić, 2016). Learning a new language may mean learning a new identity and influencing one's own identity (Chik & Benson, 2008). In particular, prolonged contact with an L2 and a new and different cultural setting could cause irreversible destabilization of the individual's sense of self. As such, for learners to learn, relate and use the target language, classroom activities need to be contextualized and relevant to real life issues (Kramsch & Hua, 2016).

Stories have always been used by teachers as instructional tools to deliver important messages, morals and information in form of myths, real-life examples, parables and fairy tales. Stories are invaluable tools to convey values and culture and to connect one to a community (Kukulska-Hulme, 2010). For instance, folklore and fairytales have been identified as effective sources for teaching L2 culture in language courses (Quyen, 2019). They are effective tools that lend learners to think about the theme and structure of a folktale (discourse competence) which help them relate the knowledge and awareness they learn through stories to their own cultural background. This process helps students to become aware about the L2 culture in multiple aspects such as beliefs, moral values, lifestyles, and history. Other similar tools that aid the learners to construct the cultural knowledge could be watching movies, listening to audio books and podcasts, making film, or creating podcasts. Moreover, using digital storytelling has become an effective teaching mean of cross-cultural communication because of its adaptive nature (Ya-Ting, Yi-Chien, & Hsiu-Ting, 2020).

Similarly, problem-solving activities are also accepted as tasks that increase cultural awareness in language classrooms. There are three problem-solving strategies listed by Azizmohammadi & Kazazi (2014, p. 54) in culture teaching; "culture aside", "slice-of-life" and



“critical incident.” Culture aside technique asks students to summarize a comparison of two cultures using a word that has a cultural connotation or background. The “slice-of-life” technique requires students to report a comparison in which a cultural aspect or a problem is solved in two different cultures by students using their own knowledge of L2 and L1. Cultural differences are highlighted as students discuss the different scenarios of the same issue in different cultures. The third strategy “critical incident” focuses on misunderstandings and miscommunication aspect of cultural awareness. Students are asked to explore, reflect and comment on cultural values about a situation and the reactions of the involved people.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a mixed methodology in order to emphasize the research problem and adopt all viewpoints available. Adopting a mixed methods approach helped the researcher obtain a better understanding of the topic studied (Cohen et al., 2007). The quantitative part is based on pre- and post-test to examine the impact of teaching culture explicitly in an EFL course through course material (Graded L2 stories) on learners’ intercultural competence. Student scores on the pre- and post-test helped the researcher in drawing a broad picture of trends within the sample and in determining any possible changes in perceptions before and after the activities. The qualitative part which is from the focus groups aided the researcher in making meanings from individuals’ complex views on their experience of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2014 p. 8). It also presented an overall understanding of participants’ views on cultural differences and provided in-depth data on their levels of intercultural competence.

Participants

The participants in this study were all female, Arabic-speaking university students (n=39). They were all enrolled in an intermediate-level English course at a public university in the UAE. Their ages ranged between 18 and 21. All the participants were required by the university to take an IELTS exam to ensure equal English language proficiency. An independent t-test of their IELTS scores indicated no significant differences among all participants ($t = 2.15, p \leq .05$).

Ethical approval was obtained from the university’s ethical clearance board prior to the start of the project. All students were asked to sign a consent form prior their participation. The aim of this form was to provide information regarding the purpose of project and the anonymity of student participation. In addition, it was made clear to participants that their participation is voluntary with no effect on the course grade.

Process

This project comprised of four stages. Prior to the start of the project, participants received language learning materials explicitly focusing on content related to cultural issues as part of a language class.

Stage One was to identify learners’ cultural awareness in relation to the target language culture and its identities. In this stage the researcher collected data through a pre-intercultural competence test. Next, students participated in class discussions based on what they can interpret about different western cultures, mainly English-speaking countries such as the USA and the UK. In this stage students in small groups were given ‘critical incident’ discussion cards and were asked to discuss the situations they received as a speaking activity during class (Azizmohammadi & Kazazi, 2014).

Stage Two of the study was the discovery stage. During this stage, participants read around 90,000 words through contemporary L2 storybooks that they accessed through the university library. The researcher provided a list of books to guide the students to read literature in which they could find scenes reflecting the contemporary L2 target culture. Students were asked to keep notes from their stories about topics such as wedding ceremonies, family life, gender roles, festivities and so on.

In Stage Three, the researcher aimed to find out if levels of intercultural competence and L2 cultural exposure influence L1 learners’ cultural identity in any way. This stage was based on the ‘slice-of life’ technique proposed by Azizmohammadi and Kazazi (2014). Stories are tools to communicate beliefs, instill values and preserve culture. By asking students to rewrite stories the researcher aimed to see the cultural differences and similarities between L1 and L2 culture reflected on student generated stories. Thus, learners were asked to choose and reconstruct one of the L2 storybooks they have read. Each student summarized the original story highlighting the main characters, the climax, the problem the story is based on, and the resolution using a chart given to them as course material. They were next asked to rewrite the stories using their own cultural contexts following the ‘slice-of-life’ technique. This task required them to change the characters and the story setting but to keep the conflict and offer a resolution that they believe fits their cultural norms. Then, they reconstructed the story using the same story plot, but in the Emirati cultural context by switching the setting and characters. Consequently, the characters behaved and reacted the way learners thought was most appropriate and expected in their own culture. The students collaborated in small groups to create their stories, filled out story outline charts highlighting the conflicts and resolutions that took place in stories and

reconstructed the stories based on their cultures. They were invited to discuss their stories with the researcher. After that, students reflected on what they have learnt throughout the process and justified their reconstructed stories outlining cultural differences.

In the final stage students were given the intercultural competence test as a post-test to see if their perceptions changed after having gone through activities of cultural studies in this study. Two focus groups were formed to discuss the results of the pre- and post-tests.

Data Collection

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The quantitative data was collected through pre- and post-test on intercultural competence. The test used in this research is an adapted version from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and based on Byram (2012) model mentioned above. CEFR is an international standard for describing language ability and is used around the world to describe learners' language skills and analyze individuals' intercultural competence by specifying and quantifying personality traits. Due to its high level of English language, the test was modified to suit the language level of participants. This test is a self-answer questionnaire that measures students' knowledge, attitudes and skills about intercultural competence and makes sense only in relation to a particular context. It contains a total of 30 questions in three thematic sections: knowledge, attitude, and skills. The test was administered online using google forms and data was collected anonymously.

The qualitative data was based on two instruments:

- a. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 39 participants to collect data on their views on cultural differences and on their levels of intercultural competence. As such, a total of 7 interview questions were developed by the researcher to gather participants' views on the changes they made in the stories, explore the rationale for these changes, and investigate their thoughts regarding the differences and similarities between their culture and the culture reflected in the story. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and transcribed by the researcher.
- b. While interviews helped the researcher collect in-depth information about the topic, it was necessary to conduct focus group discussions to socially construct data within the interaction of the group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher also

conducted two focus groups (5 students per group) for an average of 35 minutes each. Students volunteered to participate in these focus group discussions which were completed on campus at break time. During these discussions, participants elaborated on the ideas expressed in the interviews and reflected on the project and the test results.

Data Analysis

Students' scores on the pre- and post-competence test were collected based on a 5 Likert-scale ranged from 1(never/rarely) to 5 (always) and results were analyzed using the comparison charts on google forms. Percentages of students' scores were calculated to compare their results on the tests.

Data collected through individual interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using an inductive approach. The researcher moved back and forth between the various forms of data collected to describe, interpret and make understandings of the findings and answer the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As such, a separate list of comments, terms, and notes from the interviews and focus groups were derived and merged into one master list of concepts or patterns which later on consisted of the categories. Categories were sorted, combined, and refined into themes.

4. RESULTS

Pre & Post Tests

In terms of students' ICC awareness there was an overall dramatic increase of scores on the post-test when compared to the pre-test. In part 1, Knowledge, questions focused on interaction, social practices, and world views and belief systems. In terms of interaction, in the pre-test, 51% of students were confident they considered both verbal and non-verbal messages. This number increased to 89.7% in the post-test. Similarly, 61.5% claimed they retold their ideas in different ways to make them clearer for others. Comparatively, in the post-test the number went up to 89%. In social practices, there was an interesting dramatic increase in students who answered positively, who went up to 43.58% from 10.25%. This indicated an increase in interest in other cultures and how people behave. Concerning world views and belief systems, there was no noticeable change in the positive answers; however, half of participants who answered as 'sometimes' shifted to 'always' bringing the percentage up from 7.7% to 20.25% indicating an increase of awareness in understanding others.



Part 2, Attitude, asked about respect, tolerance of ambiguity, open mindedness and curiosity, empathy, and self-awareness. Regarding respect, in the first test 64% of participants were in the sometimes bracket however in test two this number decreased to 23%. Additionally, 30.7% positive answers declined to 10.25%. There was a clear shift to negative from positive replies. Questions on tolerance of ambiguity demonstrated an increase in patience level signifying an increase in understanding and accepting differences among individuals. There was a drop in the negative answers from 30.7% to 5.1% and an apparent increase in positive answers going up to 58.9% from 23%. This is a clear indication that participants were trying to show tolerance of ambiguity and on how others maybe feeling. Attitude in terms of open mindedness and curiosity was also tested. The number of participants saying they sometimes displayed this attitude increased from zero to 15.3% between the pre-test and post-test. Moreover, when it came to empathy, 100% of the participants kept their answers and remained in the positive bracket in both tests. Finally, self-awareness as an attitude was also examined. There was an increase in the positives to 79.5% from 92.3%. This indicated that participants were able to ask for support more comfortably from their instructors and peers compared to the time they did in the pre-test.

In the third and last part, Skills, the questions asked about critical thinking and problem solving. Critical thinking skills reflected in participants' answers showed there were no negatives for both tests. The answers aligned with the fact that participants preferred to find information that aligned with their language competencies. Participants researched to find sources they could understand although it lowered the credibility of their sources. The percentages went up to 46.1% from 20.5 %. As for problem solving and collaboration skills, participants consistently believed this was their strength. There was a slight increase in the positive answers going up to 23% from 15.3%.

Interviews & Focus Groups

In answering the two research questions of the study, data was combined from the interviews and the focus groups. Findings can be divided into four categories: self-awareness, cultural awareness, respect, and empathy. Below is a summary of the findings in relation to the research questions.

Self-awareness

When asked about their self-awareness and ability to grow, participants expressed that due to being university students, they were expected to learn new things, but they found no time to explore subjects apart from their courses.

One participant explained that "I feel more confused about what I want compared to the day I started the university," which is the same week they took the pretest. Another participant stated, "I find myself thinking about the way I think ...I know it is confusing, but I am trying to improve myself." This shows students have been critically thinking about their goals during the project because their answers indicate they have been reflecting and self-questioning their goals and choices.

Overall, there was a clear increase in awareness levels of self and others. Students spent time reflecting on their behavior, knowledge and skills. Answers on the post-test indicated an increase in competence and critical thinking and their views collected through the focus groups and interviews leave no doubt that students' awareness and intercultural competence improved since their knowledge, attitudes and skills in ICC have increased. It was clear that many had spent time thinking about cultural similarities and differences. There was no evidence of derailment of Emirati cultural identity reflected in their answers. In contrast, there was evidence of time spent more on cultural diversity and understanding culture of other. As one participant explained based on her story writing experience,

Our culture is very different, stricter. But I never thought before that dreams are same for everyone. I always thought we are different, but when I wrote my story, I understood everyone wants to be successful and respected. When you read stories, it is different than watching tv shows. The characters' problems are not deep but when I read, I feel we are the same.

Another participant who worked in a group that reconstructed a story about family relationships added,

I found that fathers are the same in other cultures. They don't take care of children. Having a mother is very important. Men are the same everywhere. Culture does not matter... I watch a lot of English movies but usually fathers are more fun in the movies but in my story, it is like about my father.

A different student who wrote an ending to a story about family relationships and environmental issues stated "some people don't care about the environment. It is not important which country you are from. You must respect the environment."

Finally, the majority of participants indicated that they were able to ask for support more comfortably from their instructors and peers after the project compared to the time, they did the pre-test. One participant said, "I am not shy now to ask for help from my teacher and my friends. I don't feel ashamed to reach for help anymore." There was

also an increase in students' answers of their self-awareness and measures of their attitudes especially concerning family relations. They explained they talked easier with their mothers and avoided confronting their older brothers and their fathers. There was one student in the discussions who said she preferred talking to her father who was more open-minded compared to her mother who came from more traditional background. One participant clarified,

It is easy to talk to my mother about many things now because I understand how she thinks. She is different from me and the way I think. Also, my father is very traditional, and I must respect his way and not make trouble in the house.

Cultural awareness

When asked about their cultural awareness and world view systems, students indicated that after the study, they had become more aware and understanding of others. One student explained,

Before when my instructor gave feedback, I felt upset. I thought she did not like me. But now after a semester I understand she wants me to think in a different way, from another point of view. She told me I like you, you are a very good person, but I don't like your work. I want you to do better. Now when I get feedback, I remember what she said. I don't feel angry I know it's only about my work.

Students also showed an increased awareness towards their perceptions of other cultures and higher tolerance of ambiguity and patience levels signifying an increase in understanding and accepting differences among individuals. For instance, one participant stated that,

I try to leave the class clean. I stay behind and throw the cups away because the cleaning lady's baby is in her country, and she is here alone to work for her family. It is not easy to leave your baby behind and clean in another country. I always thank her.

The question whether their identities were affected by the changes in their country was also answered in the discussions by students, although they were not directly asked. They insistently repeated certain behaviors were not welcomed in their culture, for example dating before getting married or living alone. An interesting conversation occurred when one student claimed this was changing and the society was more acceptant towards such behavior now. There was a backlash from one student who insistently argued this was not the case, which surprised other students in the group. She said "some girls want to be like in the foreign movies and they think it is the same

here but that is not true. If I go abroad to study, I cannot find a husband." This created a heated discussion among the students. However, they all agreed that the society was different than the past as times had changed, and technology had advanced however all families respected the Emirati culture.

They all emphasized the influence of social media platforms such as Tic Toc and Snapchat on the younger generation. They believed the younger generation coming after them was different as they had the chance to see and learn everything in the world. When asked if they thought this was a positive or negative influence, they were more concerned about the sedentary lifestyle the young generation was leading. They also mentioned cyber bullying and that it was very common among children. To direct the conversation to culture and identity, the researcher asked if they thought the younger generation would continue the Emirati lifestyle and traditions. All participants were confident that such education was given within families and that traditions would continue.

Respect

When asked about the respect they displayed towards different people and factors, participants expressed the importance of valuing others and criticized some peers who were not polite to campus workers. Students showed an increased awareness towards the importance of respecting others and their beliefs and cultures. One participant indicated, "I used to think that only my culture and religion is right. Everyone else is wrong. But now I changed my mind. I can understand others and respect them."

Also, in the focus group discussions participants revealed that during the semester their ideas had changed regarding their peers and some faculty. Therefore, their answers on the post-test were affected. One participant in particular said,

I am now more comfortable with my friends who are different, and I am respectful of my teachers who are not Emirati. Even the ones who speak Arabic, they are different because they are not Emirati. I respect this difference more. It is important to be different.

Empathy

Generally, participants showed positive attitudes towards empathy. Students agreed that being empathetic to others' cultures, values and beliefs was very important. Students said they see their professors differently after working on the stories and some of them said they spent time during breaks with foreign faculty to get to know



them better and to find out more about their cultures. One student said, "Because of films, I thought all foreigners told their children to leave home when they are 18 but I was surprised to find out my professor's parents had paid for her university fees and took care of her."

Additionally, another student explained,

The more I thought I was sharing other people's feelings, the more frustrated and unsuccessful I felt compared to the past. Now I am not sure if I was caring enough. I need to be more understanding. It is very important to see things from others' feelings and to be kind to them.

To sum up, in the focus groups, participants indicated they were more confident in considering both verbal and non-verbal messages and paying more attention to different body language others were using. As such, they expressed they were more observant while interacting with expats from different nationalities working at shopping centers and as well as their own faculty. However, they were not always sure what the body language meant. For example, a few of them said they had to look up the way their teacher nodded her head to make sure if she meant yes or no.

Additionally, some of the students explained that they started to reflect on their attitudes in terms of open mindedness and curiosity more than before and now in their words 'it is not that simple' anymore. This clearly indicates an increase of awareness of self and others. This could be explained when students discussed in the focus groups that they were eager to make new friends and socialize with people from other cultures despite their full course loads. They were mindful of making an effort to form these new bonds.

Throughout the discussions, it became clearer to the researchers that some students were surprised to notice there are more similarities among cultures than they had thought. When reflecting on the stories project itself, some reported that although they preferred watching TV shows to reading, being asked to read stories changed their perceptions. To them reading stories as an experience was a different practice than watching movies and TV shows, mainly because they found the stories to be more descriptive and that they found it easier to analyze the feelings of story characters. In movies, they said they could see things, but everything is fast, and they focus on events and action more whereas while reading they had the chance to feel the same way as the characters. They also thought the activities forced them to think further about L2 culture and Emirati culture when they had to share their ideas about the new characters, setting, the conflict and resolution.

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to shed light on as how much the intercultural competence may change through extensive reading and English language learning activities that explicitly promote critical thinking and cultural exploration. Additionally, this paper explored whether teaching culture has any impact on increasing cultural competence among undergraduate Emirati ELL female students.

Quantitative and qualitative data collected showed evidence that using graded L2 readers was a successful teaching strategy to promote intercultural awareness among Emirati undergraduate female students. Activities reacted to this strategy were contextualized and relevant to real life issues which have promoted students to learn a new language but also to learn a new identity and values (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). Furthermore, findings showed that students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills increased after the implementation of this strategy. As such, students were readier to overcome cultural prejudices, their knowledge of social groups, practices and products of both own and other culture increased and were able to relate, discover and interact with another culture (Beacco & Byram, 2007).

Results also showed that this teaching strategy promoted critical thinking and cultural analysis as an explicitly designed task. As such, students commented that they felt they knew more about the world and other cultures after the activity was over. They also reflected on their own culture and revealed positive feelings towards their culture. Participants believed they were well protected, nurtured and supported in making free career choices, and they believed these were areas many women suffered in other cultures.

Consequently, it was evident that when attitudes, knowledge and skills are integrated into English language learning, students may show interest in understanding other cultures and accepting cultural diversity as a natural presence in society which eases communication and prevents possible misinterpretations (Chik & Benson, 2008; Gao et al., 2007; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Also, being exposed to foreign cultures in ELL course material had minimal effect on student identity even when there was explicit focus on culture. There was no evidence of student Emirati identities being destabilized due to ELL courses. The change may occur due to social media platforms the younger generation follows as expressed by the participants however ELL course material and curriculum on their own are not influential to destabilize cultural identities.



6. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper was limited to a period of one course and therefore, both longitudinal and experimental studies are recommended to investigate the impact of using L2 graded readers to promote students' intercultural competence. The researchers acknowledge that the small sample size (39 students), the homogeneity of the student group (all female, all one ethnicity and nationality, all in one university and one department) all impose limitations on generalizing the results of this study. Researchers are also recommended to investigate the influence of social media on cultural identities of young female Emiratis when compared to the possible influence of explicit cultural studies in ELL classrooms.

7. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study clearly support the idea that participants are open-minded to new knowledge and culture, yet highly aware and loyal to Emirati ways and cultural values. Therefore, it is rightful to conclude that the UAE government policies and vision to protect and promote Emirati identity has been successful when female Emirati higher education students are considered. The implications of the influence of social media on the cultural identity of younger generation is an area that must be further investigated. A comparative study with female higher education students should be conducted in the next 5 years to understand the direction of cultural change that is occurring at the moment and whether government policies will still be effective in preserving the Emirati identity from the harsh effects of globalization.

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