
Exploring The Role Of Literature-Based Language Teaching In Enhancing Intercultural Competence And Critical Thinking Skills In Tesl Undergraduates

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the impact of literature-based language teaching on the development of intercultural competence and critical thinking skills among TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) undergraduates in Henan Province, China. Using a mixed-methods approach, data was collected from 100 students through pre- and post-intervention assessments, interviews, and focus groups. The analysis revealed significant improvements in both intercultural awareness and critical thinking abilities in the group exposed to literature-based teaching compared to the control group taught using traditional methods. The findings suggest that incorporating literature into language education plays a key role in broadening students' cultural perspectives and improving their analytical reasoning skills.

Keywords: Literature-Based Language Teaching, Intercultural Awareness, Critical Thinking, Reasoning Skills

Introduction

Language education has evolved beyond the simple acquisition of grammatical structures and vocabulary. Modern pedagogical approaches emphasize the importance of equipping students with the tools necessary to navigate an increasingly interconnected world, which includes developing intercultural competence and critical thinking skills (Byram, 1997; Lazar, 1993). Literature-based language teaching methods, which integrate literary texts into language instruction, provide students with a rich context for exploring diverse cultural narratives while engaging in deep analytical thought (Paul & Elder, 2008).

Literature offers more than just linguistic benefits; it serves as a bridge to understanding complex cultural dynamics and fostering empathy for other perspectives (Kramsch, 1993). In contrast, traditional language teaching methods often emphasize rote memorization and grammar drills, limiting students' exposure to real-world cultural contexts (Lazar, 1993). The aim of this study is to investigate the role of literature-based language teaching in enhancing both intercultural competence and critical thinking skills among TESL undergraduates in Henan Province, China.

Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was used to examine the effects of literature-based teaching. Quantitative data was collected through pre- and post-tests measuring intercultural competence and critical thinking. Qualitative data was gathered from focus groups and interviews with both students and instructors.

Participants

The study sample consisted of 100 TESL undergraduates from two universities in Henan Province, China. Participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental group (literature-based teaching) or the control group (traditional teaching).

Instruments

1. Intercultural Competence Questionnaire: Adapted from Fantini's (2000) model, it measured students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity.
2. Critical Thinking Assessment: Based on the Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (Facione & Facione, 1992).
3. Focus Group Discussions and Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather students' and instructors' reflections on the teaching methods.

Results

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis for the themes presented in the table highlights the frequency of student responses, offering insights into the impact of literature-based teaching on TESL undergraduates. The analysis reveals that 40 students reported higher engagement, 35 noted enhanced critical thinking, and 28 emphasized improved cultural awareness, demonstrating the effectiveness of literature in fostering critical competencies in students. This data provides clear evidence of the positive influence of literature-based language instruction on both cognitive and intercultural skills.

Table 1: Intercultural Competence Pre- and Post-Test Scores

Group	Pre-Test Mean Score	Post-Test Mean Score	% Improvement
Experimental Group	52.4	74.6	42.37%
Control Group	53.1	61.8	16.39%

The experimental group showed a significant improvement of 42.37% in intercultural competence, compared to 16.39% in the control group, suggesting that literature-based teaching greatly enhances students' cultural understanding.

Table 2: Critical Thinking Pre- and Post-Test Scores

Group	Pre-Test Mean Score	Post-Test Mean Score	% Improvement
Experimental Group	48.2	71.4	48.13%
Control Group	49.6	59.2	19.35%

The experimental group also demonstrated a significant increase of 48.13% in critical thinking skills, compared to only 19.35% in the control group. This highlights the potential of literature-based instruction to foster deeper cognitive engagement.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Focus group discussions and interviews revealed that students in the experimental group found the literature-based teaching method engaging and stimulating. One student remarked, "The stories we read helped me understand the culture better, and I was able to connect them with my own experiences, which made learning more meaningful." Similarly, instructors noted a marked improvement in students' ability to analyze texts and discuss complex cultural themes.

Table 3: Qualitative Themes from Focus Group Discussions

Theme	Frequency	Example Quote
Cultural Awareness	28	"The Stories helped me see things from another culture's perspective."
Critical Thinking	35	"We had to think about what the characters' actions meant in a deeper way."
Engagement with Material	40	"I was more interested in the class because the stories were interesting."

The table 3 demonstrates that literature-based language teaching significantly enhances student outcomes in terms of cultural awareness, critical thinking, and engagement. By exposing students to diverse cultural content, encouraging deep reflection, and making learning more enjoyable, literature emerges as a powerful tool in the development of both linguistic and cognitive skills in TESL undergraduates. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data helps build a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of literature-based instruction.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that literature-based language teaching can significantly enhance intercultural competence and critical thinking skills in TESL undergraduates. The experimental group's higher improvement rates suggest that exposure to culturally rich literary texts helps students develop a deeper understanding of the target language's cultural context. These findings align with Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence, which emphasizes the role of attitudes, skills, and knowledge in effective cross-cultural communication.

Moreover, the significant improvement in critical thinking observed in the experimental group supports Paul and Elder's (2008) assertion that literature encourages analytical reasoning and the evaluation of multiple perspectives. By engaging with texts that present diverse viewpoints and challenging situations, students are compelled to think critically and question their assumptions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that literature-based language teaching plays a crucial role in enhancing intercultural competence and critical thinking skills in TESL undergraduates. Incorporating literature into language instruction offers students more than linguistic benefits; it provides them with the cultural and cognitive tools necessary for global communication and analytical reasoning. The findings suggest that TESL programs, particularly in Henan Province, China, should consider integrating literature into their curricula to better prepare students for the complexities of an interconnected world.

Recommendations

1. Curriculum Design: TESL programs should incorporate literature-based teaching materials that focus on diverse cultural narratives and thought-provoking themes.
2. Teacher Training: Educators should be provided with training on how to use literature to foster both language acquisition and critical thinking.
3. Further Research: Future studies could explore the long-term impact of literature-based instruction on students' academic and professional outcomes.

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