

PROMOTING PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY THROUGH COMPARATIVE LITERATURE¹

İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMEN ADAYLARININ KÜLTÜRLERARASI
DUYARLILIĞININ KARŞILAŞTIRMALI EDEBİYAT YOLUYLA
GELİŞTİRİLMESİ

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Abstract

This study attempted to help pre-service English language teachers at a big state university in Turkey to improve their intercultural sensitivity through comparative analysis of literary texts. The present study was part of a larger quasi-experimental research project with pre-test/post-test control group design. This study presents findings gathered from qualitative data only. Participants for this study consisted of 12 senior pre-service English language teachers from the experimental group who were assigned to analyze literary texts from different cultures such as Turkish, American, British and Chinese comparatively during the 2014-2015 fall semester within the framework of the course entitled Selections from British Literature. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 students from the experimental group. Data analysis yielded four main themes: respect for one's own culture, individualism vs collectivism, from prejudice to tolerance, global interconnectedness. Findings are discussed in relation to empowering intercultural sensitivity in teacher education programs.

Keywords: Pre-service English language teachers, intercultural sensitivity, comparative literature.

Özet

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de bir devlet üniversitesinde öğrenim gören İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının edebi metinleri karşılaştırmalı edebiyat kuramı yoluyla inceleyerek kültürlerarası duyarlılık geliştirmelerine yardımcı olmak üzere hazırlanmıştır. Bu araştırma, daha büyük çaplı olan ön-test/son-test kontrol gruplu yarı deneysel bir projenin, nitel verilerinden elde edilen bulgularını ele almaktadır. Araştırmaya, İngiliz Edebiyatından Seçmeler dersi kapsamında, farklı kültürlerle ait edebi metinleri karşılaştırmalı olarak inceleyen deney grubundan 12 son sınıf İngilizce öğretmen adayı katılmıştır. Bu öğrencilerle yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Elde edilen veriler dört ana başlık altında toplanmıştır: kendi kültürüne saygı, bireycilik/toplulukçuluk, önyargının hoşgörüyü dönüşümü, küresel bağlılık. Sonuçlar öğretmen yetiştirme programlarında kültürlerarası duyarlılığa yer verilmesi bağlamında tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngilizce öğretmen adayları, kültürlerarası duyarlılık, karşılaştırmalı edebiyat

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Introduction

In today's global world, the language classroom is strictly interrelated with culture. Language teachers are recognizing the need to incorporate socio-cultural factors into their classrooms, however, there is a lack of a particular approach on how to integrate cultural elements into the English language classroom. Comparative literature can be regarded as a tool to integrate cultural elements into the language classroom.

Comparative literature stands at the very center of culture as it is the composition of cultures from different contexts. Comparative literature, as Henry Remak (1971) defines, "is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression (p.1)". Similarly, Aldridge (1969) states that comparative literature provides "a way of looking beyond the narrow boundaries of national frontiers in order to discern trends and movements in various national cultures and to see the relation between literature and other spheres of human activity" (p, 1).

In the age of globalization, it becomes evident that comparative literature enhances pedagogy parallel with the changes in the social world. Foreign language teachers are now required to teach two types of culture: "a global culture of communication for the sake of communication and local cultures of shared values" (Kramsch, 2014). Therefore, what we need to build in today's world are cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity that will encompass various changes in the language learners' mode of thinking, which can be achieved through comparative literature.

Through comparing literary texts from different cultures, comparative literature subconsciously develops a sense of intercultural awareness. As Baker (2011) explains, intercultural awareness entails an awareness of:

- culturally based frames of reference, forms, and communicative practices as being related both to specific cultures and also as emergent and hybrid in intercultural communication
- initial interaction in intercultural communication as possibly based on cultural stereotypes or generalizations but an ability to move beyond these through
- a capacity to negotiate and mediate between different emergent socio-culturally grounded communication modes and frames of reference based on the above understanding of culture in intercultural communication (p. 5).

Byram (as cited in Frank, 2013) clarifies this issue further, pointing out that people who are interculturally competent have a solid understanding of their own culture and how it has shaped them, and make connections between how cultural elements manifest in behaviors across cultures. According to Byram, intercultural competence includes these features:

- a curiosity and openness to other cultures,
- an understanding of social practices and products in both one's own culture and the target culture,
- the ability to relate something from another culture and make it comprehensible to members of one's own,
- the ability to use new knowledge of a culture in authentic situations,
- the ability to critically evaluate the cultural practices and products of one's own culture and that of other countries (p.6).

Keeping Baker's and Byram's criticisms in mind, English teaching professionals need to first consider the issue of intercultural awareness and then dessemesterine pedagogical goals that better satisfy students' needs. At the very center of these concepts, comparative literature stands as a marvelous tool to develop intercultural sensitivity. It takes the responsibility of building both cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity through focusing on different literary texts from different cultures. The word 'different' is crucial in understanding the vital role of comparative literature in the curriculum as it triggers readers to tolerate differences in social life. As Robinson (1985) states, when people expand their cultural repertoire, they "would become a little bit of 'other,' and would have a degree of psychological match with more people" (p. 101). That kind of a psychological development through comparative literature helps destroy the concept of prejudice and encourages tolerance and sensitivity.

Several research studies have addressed the issue of incorporating literary texts into the curriculum in order to develop learner's intercultural sensitivity. Louie (2005) conducted a case study in the Unites States in order to nurture a sense of empathy in high school students, analyzing a literary text from Chinese Literature through techniques such as poster analysis, film, etc. The study concluded that students achieved to develop different types of empathy after penetrating into an unknown culture and its remote elements. In another study conducted in the Unites States, Salisbury (2010) used children literature from different cultures in order to develop children's global attitudes and intercultural sensitivity. At the end of the 12-week study, children displayed an increased sense of global awareness and intercultural sensitivity. In Turkey, one of the few studies conducted on a related issue is Önalın's study (2005), which focused on English language teachers' perceptions of culture in English language teaching. Out of 98 instructors who participated in the study, a total of only 12 instructors indicated that they used culture in their classes in order to develop a global understanding of other cultures and people. In addition to this study, Üstün (2011) investigated the variables that may affect primary and secondary school teacher candidates' (N=414) intercultural sensitivity and ethnocentrism levels according to department, gender, regions where they grew up, size of their hometowns, type of high school they attended, their going abroad experiences and having friends form different national or cultural backgrounds. This study conducted at a big state university in Istanbul indicated that intercultural sensitivity levels vary according to the department student teachers attended. The study found out that pre-service English language teachers displayed a higher level of intercultural sensitivity and a lower level of ethnocentrism when compared to students from other departments.

Even though there has been an increase in the amount of attention given to the lack of culture and interculturality incorporated in language teaching and language teacher education, most of the educators still ignore the potential of comparative literature as a tool to fill in this gap. Giving the limited number of studies conducted on the issue, the current study is an attempt to improve pre-service English language teachers' intercultural sensitivity through comparative analysis of literary texts.

Method and Procedures

The present study was part of a larger quasi-experimental study with pre-test/post-test control group design. This study presents findings gathered from qualitative data only. Participants for this study consisted of 12 senior pre-service English language teachers from a comprehensive state university in Turkey. Within the scope of the bigger project, 40 students in the experimental group were instructed to analyze literary texts from different cultures such as Turkish, American, British and Chinese comparatively during the 2014-2015 fall semester within the framework of the course entitled *Selections from British Literature*. For the present study, out of 40 students in

the experimental group, 12 students volunteered to be interviewed. Nine of the subjects were female and three were male. Their ages ranged between 22 and 24. The research team consisted of three university professors. Following a 14-week instruction period, the research team conducted 45-minute semi-structured interviews with participants. During the interviews, the researchers implemented a number of predesemestered questions, but they felt free to ask other questions to elicit additional information.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and corresponding written texts were created. Data analysis followed Creswell's (2002) strategy for the coding process. A preliminary exploratory analysis was conducted to obtain a general sense of the data. Then the text was divided into segments of information with codes. In subsequent analyses, these codes were reduced to a few major themes through the process of eliminating redundancies and codes that could not be conveniently categorized. Finally, saturation occurred and no new information surfaced during the reading and re-reading of the transcripts. During the analysis, the research team discussed any disagreement until consensus was achieved. Rigor was supported through member-checks, as suggested by Morse et al, (2002). Following the identification of the themes, the research team talked to participants and solicited their feedback. They all agreed that the themes identified were accurate.

Within the framework of the course entitled *Selections from British Literature*, 40 student teachers in a class conducted by one of the researchers were assigned to analyze literary texts from different cultures, namely, American, British, Chinese and Turkish, comparatively. The idea of including non-native literatures in English in the curriculum is supported by Kachru (1999), who comments that such literary texts are a repertoire of resources for providing linguistic and cross-cultural explanations as they reveal how language and culture are interrelated. Each week, students were asked to do some research about the cultural codes, sociocultural and historical background of the texts that they were going to analyze. In the class, students discussed cultural codes and sociological and historical issues that could enlighten the comparative reading process.

During the course, students were encouraged to develop cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity through various ways. In the first module of the project, students did some research about post-modern culture in general. They were asked to integrate the information they gathered into the global world which they experience. Through forming discussion groups, students tried to find out the common codes of post-modern culture. In the following module, students were asked to focus on the selected novels and their writers. They mainly analyzed how the two novels reflect post-modernism and post-modern culture. Then they compared the cultural codes in the novels *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk and *Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Safak. Through analyzing cultural codes, students mainly developed intercultural awareness and a sense of empathy. Many discussed their views about cultural differences and underlined the need for tolerance and respect towards other cultures.

In the following modules, they analyzed *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Flower Feet* by Ruth Fainlight from Chinese literature, and several poems from Turkish literature. In these modules, students mainly focused on the issue of 'womanhood' and how the role of women differed in different cultures. In *Pride and Prejudice* students focused on cultural codes of British culture; and in *Flower Feet* they analyzed cultural codes of Chinese culture. After they had analyzed the two texts, they compared the cultural codes and compared them with Turkish culture. Each module naturally encapsulated the comparison of cultural codes of Turkish culture with other cultures. At the end of each module, they were asked to write an essay in which they comparatively analyzed the cultural codes and sociological issues highlighted in the

texts. At the end of the semester, they were asked to do presentations that encompassed the issues discussed throughout the course. Discussion, analysis, movies of literary texts, pair work, literature circles and research were the primary elements of the course.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the data collected. These included respect for one's own culture, individualism vs collectivism, from prejudice to tolerance, global interconnectedness.

Respect for one's own culture

Intercultural sensitivity not only helps the individual to respect other cultures but also know about and appreciate one's own culture, as illustrated by some of the participants' remarks:

Although I'm from İzmir I did not know much about the Aegean culture. For example, the richness of the cuisine shown in our presentations surprised me a lot. Also, I was amazed by the power of the women from the Black Sea region. It was fascinating to know more about my culture.

I was overwhelmed by the richness of the seven regions of Turkey, especially Anatolia. Mevlana and Şems were a kind of new experience for me. Thanks to this course, I had the chance of reading and analyzing Tasavvuf, which is very important for our culture.

I heard about Nilgün Marmara for the first time in my life. I did not have any information about her period. Her influence as a female Turkish poet, her literary power and strength as a woman impressed me a lot.

Individualism vs collectivism

Students indicated that through the comparative analysis of literary texts from Turkish and American cultures, they began to realize significant cultural codes specific to western and eastern cultures. They considered individualism as one of the basic components of American culture and collectivism as a characteristic of Turkish culture. They indicated that they realized the world is based upon differences and comparative analysis of literary texts helped them to develop a broader world view. They came to realize that differences are not something to be avoided or neglected, as illustrated by one male student teacher:

We identified different things as cultural codes, I recognized that every culture has specific codes. These can be materials or thoughts. I think differences are better for us. I like differences... With the differences we can manage different things.

Similarly, another student teacher focused on differences, referring to the concepts of individualism and collectivism in eastern and western cultures respectively:

The course enriched my horizon. Every culture has their own cultural codes and it really changes even within the same country. Every person is unique. Every culture is unique. For example, in *The Fight Club*, they have found meditation and feel so lonely, they have support clubs. It's so strange, in Turkey we do not need it. We have families... We have friends.

Another female student, likewise, mentioned the differences in western and eastern cultures:

Whenever I need to cry I just call my friends and my family. But they [Americans] do not have strong ties. It is something strange but I still respect.

From prejudice to tolerance

Individuals involved in this study indicated that they overcame their prejudice against “the different” and “the other” with the help of the literary texts they comparatively analyzed throughout the semester. Participants generally reported that despite their previous conception of otherness as a condition of difference that is imposed upon by a more powerful culture, American culture in our context, their views about “the other” transformed into tolerance and empathy after having comparatively analyzed the novels *Fight Club* from American literature and *The Forty Rules of Love* from Turkish literature. One female student teacher reported:

I am not the type of person that is a follower of American culture. For example, a coffee at Starbucks has no special meaning for me at all, although it might be something cool for others. Or shopping from IKEA... I still don't like it, but I am less prejudiced. I learnt how to respect differences.

Before I had taken this course, I always interpreted differences between my culture and other cultures as something dangerous. However, after the course, I began to interpret differences as a natural part of our lives and I learned to understand people who are different from me. I realized that prejudice is dangerous, not differences.

Global interconnectedness

Findings indicated that students began to see the communicative practices presented in different literary texts as ‘emergent’ and ‘hybrid’, as indicated in Baker’s (2011) framework of intercultural awareness. Students in the sample did not simply use their own countries and cultures to make universal claims. Instead, they became more inclusive of different ideas and worldviews, as supported by Grant and Portera (2011). In this final phase of intercultural awareness, students were able to move beyond stereotypes and generalizations to a more global world view, as two student teachers illustrated in their remarks:

Cultures are different; however, we are all human beings sharing both common and different values, which is a good thing. I feel I can communicate with anyone in English, regardless of his gender, nation or culture.

As a future English teacher, I do believe that both home and other cultures should be known well in order to successfully educate global citizens.

As Grant and Portera (2011) suggested, “to be globally aware as well as sensitively responsive to the ever-increasing diversity that influences our immediate contexts, we all have to learn about different people and places” (p.8). At the end of the semester, students in the sample seemed to have embraced the fact that there are many appropriate ways to be in the world.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings of the present study are congruent with the findings from Louie’s (2005) and Salisbury’s (2010) studies which found that the use of literature from different cultures in the language classroom helped to develop both a sense of intercultural sensitivity and global awareness among students. The increased sense of global awareness and intercultural sensitivity created a broader world view that could help them both in educational and social settings.

The importance of culture is underlined by Edward T. Hall's (as cited in Frank, 2013) 'cultural iceberg' analogy. Hall used this analogy to illustrate differences between what we readily see when we enter a new culture and the imbedded aspects of the culture not readily visible. The comparative analysis of literary works from different cultures enables learners to see beyond what is readily visible and explore those imbedded parts of various cultures. The use of comparative literature as a tool for developing awareness in various areas minimizes misunderstandings when communicating within international, cross-cultural and multicultural settings. English learners clearly require heightened cultural awareness, or the recognition that culture affects perception and that culture influences values, attitudes, and behavior (Gaston, 1992).

It, thus, becomes clear that the teacher education curricula need both literature and cultural studies in order to create better qualified individuals around the world who can adapt into the global world. Above all, English learners and teachers need to adopt and promote a more cosmopolitan outlook that recognizes and accepts other ways of life, modes of thought, and styles of English usage beyond Great Britain and the United States.

At the end of the 14-week instruction, participants in our study seemed to have developed a considerable degree of intercultural sensitivity. They developed a sense of tolerance towards other cultures. Instead of focusing on hasty generalizations about other cultures or differences between cultural norms and practices, they achieved to develop a sense of empathy towards different cultures, which is an essential component of intercultural sensitivity. Consequently, student teachers developed better communication with the help of this newly acquired sense of tolerance and empathy and formulated better communication patterns both in social and educational life.

As suggested by Baker's framework for intercultural awareness (2011), student teachers in this study gained awareness of culturally based frames of reference, forms, and communicative practices as being related both to specific cultures and also as emergent and hybrid in intercultural communication. They were able to move beyond stereotypes or generalizations and overcome their prejudices. On the whole, they developed a capacity to negotiate and mediate between different emergent socio-culturally grounded communication modes and achieved intercultural sensitivity.

In conclusion, it can be asserted that English as a global lingua franca forces us as educators to go beyond notions of teaching a fixed language and cultural context as adequate for successful communication. The English language classroom should be a site in which learners, and ideally teachers, are necessarily engaged in multilingual and multicultural practices through the use of comparative literature or other sources.

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