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# Intercultural Competence through Extensive Reading

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## Abstract

Recent initiatives (e.g., Global 30 Project, Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development, Re-inventing Japan Project, and Top Global University Project) have sought to internationalize higher education in Japan. While universities and the government have primarily seen study abroad programs and international exchanges as a vehicle to promote internationalization, the university curriculum can play an important role in developing global human resources. Specifically, classroom activities like extensive reading (ER) can offer opportunities to expose students to different ideas and ways of life. According to Beacco (2013), thoughtful reflections on other ways of life can facilitate intercultural education. This study aims to explore how intercultural attitudes and knowledge, as defined by Deardorff's (2006; 2009) process model of intercultural competence, can be encouraged through extensive reading reflections from Japanese university students. Findings from this study of first-year university students aim to inform how intercultural competence can be monitored through ER. Implications for stakeholders who aim to support intercultural development in the classroom are provided.

The Council of Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization and Development (2012) describes three factors that foster global *jinzai* (global human resources). The first factor is linguistic and communication skills. The second factor is self-direction and positiveness. Here, one with a certain degree of global human resources possesses a positiveness, a spirit welcoming challenge, cooperation, flexibility, and a sense of responsibility and mission. The final factor is intercultural awareness and a sense of Japanese identity. This study aims to understand how extensive reading might help develop global *jinzai* (i.e., well-grounded individuals with foreign language communication skills, flexibility, and

cultural self-awareness).

Through higher education, some administrators have seen internationalization as a goal that can be readily met through overseas student exchange and foreign faculty (Koyanagi, 2018). These efforts can often take the place of actual internationalization of the curriculum (Takagi, 2013; 2017). However, resources like the linguistic communicative benchmarks (Council of Europe, 2001) and intercultural guidelines from the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (2006) have encouraged a heightened responsibility in internationalization through an intercultural turn in language teaching by bringing stronger connections of language and culture learning in the foreign language learning classroom. The National Standards in Foreign Language Project (2006) provides information on how to help students (1) understand other perspectives, (2) compare other languages and cultures with their own, and (3) use a foreign language outside the classroom. These goals place a focus on the intercultural component of language learning, rather than vocabulary and grammar.

While Waring (1997) and Nation (2004) have described the psychological and linguistic benefits of extensive reading (e.g., discourse awareness, meaning-focused input, and output), little research has explored what intercultural development, if any, can be promoted through extensive reading activities. Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor (2008) described how extensive reading, and other reading activities, can be utilized to focus on the intercultural component of foreign language classes. Research from Liaw (2006) and Zoreda and Vivaldo-Lima (2008) used extensive reading as a supplementary activity to monitor intercultural competence. Liaw (2006) found that intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills, according to Byram's (2000) criteria for intercultural competence, could be monitored through literacy activities. Zoreda and Vivaldo-Lima (2008) used graded readers or simplified novels in conjunction with films to monitor a change in attitudes and a reduction of stereotypes towards anglophone cultures. In Japan, Uemura (2020) described how extensive reading exposed students to other cultures, encouraged them to go abroad, and developed intercultural knowledge and knowledge of social issues. This exposure to other cultures can be challenging to navigate through reading literature involving other cultures. Specifically, the decisions based on the characters' values in the readings might be in contrast to the readers' values. Peer and teacher support can help develop an understanding of other cultures through literature circles (Maher, 2015). At the time of writing,

the authors of this study are unaware of other research focusing on promoting intercultural attitudes and awareness exclusively through extensive reading activities. This study aims to begin to fill in this gap in the research on extensive reading.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The shared assumptions and practices that each culture has can distinguish them from other groups. As one looks deeper, each culture comprises multiple groups and is made up of progressively smaller groups that distinguish themselves from other groups within that culture (Deardorff, 2020). These groups' interactions necessitate certain competencies to facilitate interactions across differences (e.g., age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity). As intercultural interactions increase, current university students will need to develop competencies to interact effectively and appropriately with others. This study is concerned with monitoring these competencies in order to foster intercultural development. When considering intercultural development, it is helpful to consider what competencies can make up that development. While definitions and conceptualizations in the West dominate much of our understanding of intercultural competence (see Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, for examples), UNESCO (2013) provides some of the common elements of intercultural competencies found in different cultures.

Deardorff's (2006) definition of intercultural competence primarily informs this study's conceptualization of intercultural development. This definition was derived from her Delphi study in Deardorff (2004) which gathered a consensus of conceptualizations of intercultural competence from experts in North America and Europe. According to Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence is the "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 249). From this definition, Deardorff (2006; 2009) provides a useful, circular-style model to visualize the lifelong process of developing intercultural competence. To start this process, one must have the requisite attitudes (openness, curiosity, and respect). These attitudes form the jumping-off point to develop intercultural knowledge (cultural self-awareness, in-depth cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic

awareness) and skills (to listen, observe and evaluate, to analyze, interpret and relate). Deardorff's (2006) definition of intercultural competence encapsulates all three factors of global *jinzai*, provided by the Council of Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization and Development (2012). Despite Deardorff's (2006) conceptualization of intercultural competence as being informed by the West, this study uses Deardorff's (2006; 2009) model to understand what intercultural attitudes and knowledge can be monitored through extensive reading reflections.

## Methodology

The participants in this study ( $n = 46$ ) were first-year students at a private university in Japan (females = 35, males = 11). Two classes of non-English majors participated in simultaneous research in this study over two quarters of the school year. The participants wrote weekly book reflections (see Appendix) on the graded readers they read. The students in this study wrote eight reflections on the books they selected or were assigned to read. The researchers selected books (hereinafter referred to as “teacher-selected books”) because the extensive reading library at the researchers’ institution had enough copies for the entire class to read simultaneously. As a part of the extensive reading program at this private university in central Japan, the non-English majors are expected to read 4,000 words per week from books of their choosing at a level equivalent at Oxford University Press Level 2 by the end of their first year of studies. Books at Level 2 of Oxford Bookworms contain between 600-800 headwords and are rated at the CEFR A2-B1 Level.

For this study, each class of 23 students was assigned to read three books of the teacher’s choosing and read five books of each student’s choosing over two academic quarters. The book reflections involved a summary of the book and two questions: (1) What was interesting? and (2) What did you learn? The book reflection’s final component included a space for other classmates to comment on their classmate’s reflection. See the appendix for a sample of the book reflection form. All participants gave informed consent, and this study follows the university’s institutional review board’s standards. The researchers assigned pseudonyms and removed any identifying information. Thus, this study will focus on reading reflections as a means to address the following questions:

- 1) What intercultural attitudes and knowledge, if any, can be monitored through extensive reading book reflections with first-year university students in Japan?
- 2) What development of intercultural attitudes and knowledge, if any, do students report through extensive reading?

Both Group A and Group B were given a teacher-selected book for the first week of this study. At the end of the week, the students were assigned to write a book reflection consisting of a summary, interesting findings, and what they learned. In class, the participants shared their reflections with a partner. Then, their partner wrote some comments on their classmate's reflection. Following this study, participants completed a questionnaire on their extensive reading experience. The questionnaire was comprised of both 5-point Likert items and open-ended questions. Responses from the 5-point Likert items are presented in Table 3 in the Results section. The participants' book reflections were coded for instances of both intercultural attitudes (openness, curiosity, and respect) and intercultural knowledge (cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness), according to Deardorff's (2006; 2009) process model of intercultural competence. See Table 1 and Table 2 for instances of intercultural attitudes and knowledge.

The researchers coded the reflections individually and shared their codes to confirm the findings. When coding for intercultural attitudes, the researchers looked for reflections that mentioned: openness to others, a desire to know more about other ways of life, a heightened interest in other cultures, and the importance of withholding judgment. The researchers coded reflections that were deemed to express attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect under attitudes. Next, when coding for intercultural knowledge, the researchers looked for reflections that mentioned a heightened knowledge of oneself and the lives of others. The researchers also coded comments comparing and contrasting the ways of life of others to one's own life under the category of intercultural knowledge.

Two of the teacher-selected books were *Ned Kelly* and *The Elephant Man*, and the teachers selected different titles for the third teacher-selected book. In Group A, the students read *The Withered Hand* and students in Group B read *Run for Your*

*Life*. The students checked out books from the university library, e-books from the university online library, or their local public library.

## Results

This section aims to provide examples of the intercultural attitudes (openness, curiosity, and respect) and knowledge (cultural self-awareness and in-depth cultural knowledge) monitored in the participants' reflections. Moreover, this section provides participants' reflections on extensive reading to better understand their experience. Tables 1 and 2 show the number of instances of intercultural attitudes or knowledge found in book reflections (BR) from Group A and Group B.

In Group A 16 instances of intercultural attitudes were monitored from reflections from *The Elephant Man* and 10 instances from *Ned Kelly*. Group B had eight instances of intercultural attitudes from reflections on *The Elephant Man* and five instances from *Ned Kelly*. Some participants mentioned an intercultural attitude of curiosity about others and their different values, as illustrated in the following comment.

Table 1. Group A's instances of intercultural attitudes and knowledge

Group A ( $n=23$ )	BR1*	BR2*	BR3	BR4	BR5	BR6	BR7*	BR8
attitudes	16	10	5	4	5	4	2	8
knowledge	4	10	8	3	6	7	1	2
total	20	20	13	7	11	11	3	10

Note: The \* represents teacher-selected books and BR represents book reflection.

Table 2. Group B's instances of intercultural attitudes and knowledge

Group B ( $n=23$ )	BR1*	BR2	BR3	BR4	BR5	BR6	BR7*	BR8*
attitudes	6	2	2	4	2	2	8	5
knowledge	7	2	1	6	4	3	1	9
total	13	4	3	10	6	5	9	14

Note: The \* represents teacher-selected books and BR represents book reflection.

*I learned that people have various way of thinking. If two people look a lifestyle of one man, opinions they have are different from each other .... I think that meeting new ideas is very interesting. (Ned Kelly; Maya)*

In addition to attitudes of curiosity about others' lives, participants described the importance of openness by withholding judgment.

*I learned we should not to judge people by only looks and rumor .... there are reasons that he (Ned Kelly) stole horses and money. So, he is not only bad, but also a good man for some people. That's why we should not determine bad people by look and rumor. (Ned Kelly; Karen)*

In reflections, some participants related the importance of withholding judgment to their own experience.

*When I see a student with flashy hair, I often think of him or her as a scary person. However, once I talk with him or her, I find the person is kind. It is important to judge from not appearance but character. (The Elephant Man; Maya)*

Others took an interest in the historical differences by comparing the ways of life of people in the book to their own culture.

*It was interesting that people with different appearance was a show in Britain at that time .... I have never heard the show of people with different appearance. Difference between now's life and past was interesting. (The Elephant Man; Mayu)*

Additionally, intercultural attitudes were monitored through reflections on student-selected books. Participants described curiosity and mindfulness toward others in their reflections.

*....The natural things in their own house could be sometimes stressful things in host family's house. To spend comfortable time, they should think about each other. (The Meaning of Gifts; Maya)*

In sum, the intercultural attitudes of openness, curiosity, and mindfulness were monitored through their reflections in both teacher-selected and student-selected books. However, reflections on teacher-selected books provided more instances of intercultural attitudes.

*Intercultural knowledge through teacher-selected books*

In addition to intercultural attitudes, knowledge of other cultures, and one's own culture were monitored in the book reflections. Participants' reflections mentioned the knowledge in addition to the curiosity they have about other cultures' histories. Participants mentioned the knowledge they obtained would not typically be presented to them in the media.

*This story was interesting because we can learn dangerous age of Australia. We cannot get information about other countries daily life. I can get different perspective about Australia .... (Ned Kelly; Kana)*

*In 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have more understanding about illness and disabilities .... We should know that we must communicate with disabilities as we do normal. (The Elephant Man; Kenta)*

Participants also related the events or cultures of the people in the teacher-selected books to their own culture.

*I'm interested in changing judgement of people depending on wealth. Lately, car accident happened in Tokyo and driver haven't been arrested. It's said that the driver had worked officials and because of it he doesn't arrested. I can't tell the right or false, but there is clearly a difference between Japanese like this story. Who decide the judgement what to do people? (Ned Kelly; Aya)*

Moreover, participants mentioned some historical knowledge of other cultures as well as their own in their reflections on the books they self-selected.

*We should deal equally with rich people and poor people. And an identity card is very popular now. But old days it is not used by poor and small villages people. I didn't*



*know that. We can learn the life of old days by reading book. (Rich Man Poor Man; Momoka)*

*It was interesting for me that Japanese who migrated abroad had a several reasons .... We had to use a ship to go abroad in old Japan, and the public didn't like people going abroad. So I was moved by the strength and courage. (Japanese Communities around the World; Marie)*

In sum, like intercultural attitudes, there were more instances of intercultural knowledge for teacher-selected books compared to student-selected books. Some students reported this knowledge provides an alternative to what they are typically presented within the media. Additionally, some participants like Aya demonstrated intercultural skills by relating current events in Japan to life in Australia during the 1870s.

#### *Intercultural attitudes via questionnaire*

At the end of the study, participants reflected on their experience with extensive reading. In terms of intercultural attitudes, participants mentioned the importance and desire to be more open to others' ways of life.

*I have curiosity towards other cultures because everyone in the book thought different from me. I guess the difference of cultures makes people do different, actions, thought, and so on. So I want to know more information about cultures all over the world .... We must not judge someone or some culture only after we look at one side of them. These thoughts may lead to discriminate against minorities, so we have to always pay attention to that, and have widely point of view. (Karen)*

In addition to curiosity about others' lives in cultures far away, the participants in this study also showed interest in the perspectives of their own classmates even when they read the same books.

*All of students in this class read same books. But they have different idea about the books. It is interesting for me to talk with them. (Momoka)*

*Intercultural knowledge through questionnaires*

Through their reflections on extensive reading, participants mentioned heightened intercultural knowledge. Participants mentioned knowledge of other cultures as well as their own culture.

*.... Sometimes it's hard to sympathize (with other cultures) but I could understand there are many customs in the world. (Ruka)*

Some participants even provided specific examples of knowledge they received. This participant's reflection refers to the teacher-selected book in Group A, *The Withered Hand*.

*In America, they (milkmaids) work in farm to get money. It's similar to Japanese "jotyu," which is a woman work at rich house if they move to somewhere to live. (Yui)*

However, not all students mentioned a heightened knowledge of their own culture as the following comment illustrates.

*I learned about other countries' cultures for example their life, food and clothes from extensive reading. However, I didn't get any knowledge of my own culture. (Miku)*

This study monitored some emerging intercultural attitudes and knowledge from extensive reading activities. However, some participants felt that they did not develop knowledge about their own culture. This perceived lack of knowledge about their own culture is suggested in a short questionnaire at the end of the study. Table 3 shows that a heightened knowledge about one's own culture was rated the lowest (3.32). Growth of knowledge of other cultures was rated the highest (4.25).

## **Discussion**

In this study, some students exhibited a certain degree of intercultural competence and global *jinzai* through their reflections. The participants' reflections demonstrated intercultural attitudes and a heightened knowledge of

Table 3. Extensive reading questionnaire

Statements 5-point Likert scale (n=44)	Mean $\mu$	SD $\sigma$	Variance $\sigma^2$
I became more interested in other cultures through extensive reading.	4.09	0.70	0.49
I became more open to other cultures through extensive reading.	4.00	0.80	0.64
I became more respectful of other cultures through extensive reading.	4.05	0.82	0.68
I learned more about other cultures through extensive reading.	4.25	0.61	0.37
I learned more about my own culture through extensive reading.	3.32	0.90	0.81
I know more about other cultures not typically presented in the media through extensive reading.	3.8	0.92	0.85

other cultures and their own. Moreover, the participants claimed a heightened sense of intercultural attitudes and knowledge through extensive reading. Both intercultural attitudes and knowledge suggest a degree of flexibility, cooperation, and intercultural knowledge described as components of global *jinzai* by the Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development (2012). Healthy skepticism should be exercised toward the degree of intercultural competence development the students made through extensive reading. The participants may have written reflections and answered surveys in a manner that they believed were more socially acceptable. Thus, the participants' reflections might be subject to a certain degree of social desirability bias.

## Conclusion

This initial exploration into monitoring reflections for intercultural competence from Japanese university students has some potential for other EFL classrooms using extensive reading activities to develop and assess intercultural competence. Future studies are needed to provide a clearer description of the effect of extensive reading on intercultural attitudes and knowledge. Pre and post-test instruments (e.g., Cross-cultural Adaptability Inventory, Intercultural Development Inventory) and semi-structured interviews could help provide a

better understanding of the nature of intercultural development possible through extensive reading activities.

Finally, the researchers acknowledge that teacher-selected books are at odds with the self-selection of materials component of extensive reading. However, to investigate effective ER teaching methods for scaffolding intercultural competence, the researchers felt it was necessary to take this unorthodox approach. Uemura (2020) calls for further investigation into effective teaching methods to foster intercultural education through extensive reading. The researchers hope this small pilot study may encourage other investigation into the intercultural dimension of extensive reading.

Language educators can provide more autonomy to address the self-selection component by guiding students' selection of books or stories that may facilitate interesting discussions and reflections. Choosing books and publishers can be challenging due to what Villanueva de Debat (2006) describes as a lack of appropriate extensive reading materials. Educators can make extensive reading a meaningful activity by thinking beyond word counts and linguistic development by making themselves more familiar with the types of extensive reading materials available to your students to better promote intercultural development. Extensive reading undoubtedly offers the students possibilities to be introduced to different values, identities, and ways of life. Reflecting on these differences provides an opportunity to scaffold progress toward our institutions and classrooms' internationalization and intercultural competence goals.

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## APPENDIX: Extensive reading reflection form

Reading Log

Student No.:

Name:

Title:

Level:

Publisher:

Word Count:

Book summary:

What was interesting?:

What did you learn?:

Classmate's comment