

THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' READING LITERACY IN THE INDONESIAN EFL CONTEXT

Surya Asra, Rahmiati, Fadlia, Aina Mawaddah

Universitas Samudra, Langsa, Indonesia

E-mail: suryaasra2019@unsam.ac.id

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Abstract

Students' reading skills in English reflect the cultural interaction that takes place during language learning. When students are able to recognize and understand the cultural aspects of a text, it is predicted that they can usually interpret it more effectively. The purpose of this study is to examine students' understanding of intercultural communication in English reading and to investigate the relationship between intercultural communication and reading comprehension. The study applied a quantitative descriptive method, using a reading comprehension test and a questionnaire as the instruments for data collection. The participants consisted of 40 high school students, equally divided into 20 males and 20 females. The findings indicate a strong and positive correlation between students' intercultural communication skills and their ability to comprehend English reading texts. The linear regression analysis produced a strong correlation coefficient ($R^2 = 0.64$) by referring to Correlation *Pearson Product Moment*. These findings suggest that English teachers should consider the intercultural communication in teaching reading comprehension. Eventually, incorporating intercultural communication into English language teaching is essential, particularly to support the development of students' reading skills.

Keywords: *EFL context; intercultural communication; reading literacy; senior high school students*

1. Introduction

Students in Indonesia still face serious problems in understanding texts. It can be seen from the results of the PISA assessment, where Indonesia was ranked 68th out of 81 countries in 2022. The average reading score for Indonesian students was 371, while the highest score was 504 (OECD, 2022). In addition, more than 70% of students in Indonesia were found to lack reading comprehension skills. National assessments also show similar results. The 2021 National Assessment found that 50% of school-age children in Indonesia had not yet reached basic reading skills (Kemdikbudristek, 2021). These results show that reading problems in Indonesia happen in both Indonesian (the national language) and English (a foreign language). Therefore, literacy has become one of the key missions of the Ministry of Education in the program of *Kampus Mengajar*. This program is held in schools

where students' reading abilities are still below the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM) standards.

Reading in a foreign language is more than just knowing the words and grammar. It also involves understanding the culture behind the language. Intercultural competence and reading are closely connected (Chang, Bangsri, Jabion, & Pakdeewong, 2022). This is because when someone reads in another language, they also learn about the cultural background of that language. Adding intercultural learning into reading lessons in foreign languages can help improve language skills overall.

In Indonesia, students bring their own cultural background into the classroom. When they learn English, they also learn about the culture where English is spoken. This helps students understand texts better. Every text reflects the writer's cultural point of view (Gonçalves Matos, 2005). For example, when a text talks about a modern supermarket using AI technology, Indonesian students may not easily understand because such places do not exist in Indonesia. Or when the text talks about snow or playing in the snow, Indonesian students might not relate, because they have never seen snow. To fully understand these texts, students need intercultural competence (Huang, 2023). Understanding cultural background is very important for reading English texts well.

Students need to believe that all cultures are valuable in their own ways and times (Furyanto, Putra, & Islamiah, 2021). When reading, students need to use their own cultural experiences to help understand the text (Gonçalves Matos, 2005; Hoff, 2016; Singh, et al., 2017), whether the text is in their first language or in a foreign one. This is also true for English texts. To understand English literature well, students must also understand international culture. They should get this kind of experience during English lessons. In short, learning English also means learning about English-speaking cultures, because language and culture are connected.

Many studies support the idea that reading in English improves when cultural education is included. Research shows that intercultural competence helps students enjoy reading in English more (Chang, Bangsri, Jabion, & Pakdeewong, 2022), increases cultural awareness and language skills (Lin, 2021; Xia, 2024), and improves students' self-confidence in their intercultural abilities when they read a lot, especially fiction and foreign literature (Ngoc-Nguyen & Phuong-Nguyen, 2024; Ting & Jing, 2019). While many studies focus on reading literary texts, this study will focus on academic texts, and will look at how students see English culture as part of learning the language.

In conclusion, language teaching should include intercultural communication. As Dervin (2022) states, "education needs to incorporate diversity." This means that in language education, teachers should introduce students to different cultures, languages, communication styles, values, and worldviews. This helps students learn to think more broadly and understand the world from many perspectives. Thus, this study focuses on exploring the importance of reading in English as a foreign language, especially in relation to intercultural communication skills.

2. Literature Review

Reading is a part of receptive language skills, along with listening. Reading is the activity of receiving and understanding meaning from written texts, whether in print or digital form (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). In simple terms, reading is the process of receiving

messages through written language. Alderson (2000) adds that reading is an interactive process between the reader and the text, done silently and with purpose.

The goal of reading is to help readers learn new words and gain information. McDonough (1998) explains that in the context of learning a second or foreign language, reading has two main purposes. The first is initial reading, which helps students who cannot read yet. The second is comprehensive reading, or reading comprehension, which is for students who can already read and are learning to understand texts better. At the high school level in Indonesia, English reading focuses on this second type—helping students understand the content of English texts.

The comprehensive reading is a deeper type of reading. It involves connecting the ideas in one sentence to other sentences and to the reader's previous knowledge. Kligner, Vaughn, and Boardman (2007) explain that comprehensive reading is an interactive process between the reader and their background knowledge, which includes the use of reading strategies. According to Ardiana (2015), comprehensive reading also includes understanding, evaluating, and using the ideas and information in the text. It is like a conversation between the writer and the reader.

To fully understand a text, readers need to develop certain skills. According to McNamara (2007), these include recognizing noun references, identifying the main idea, making assumptions, and drawing logical conclusions. This means readers must think carefully and use cognitive awareness to connect what they read with the context. The skill to connect the text into the context need a deep understanding by mastering culture of the target language.

In short, comprehensive reading means reading deeply to understand a text. It includes abilities such as identifying ideas, giving opinions, making predictions, completing information, and seeing differences in the text. These skills can only be developed if the reader has enough intercultural understanding to fully understand the author's meaning. Therefore, intercultural communication is very important when learning a foreign language.

Intercultural communication is a key skill in using any foreign language. It is not only needed for speaking and writing, but also for understanding written texts. In fact, the General Standards and Objectives of English Teaching in High Schools in Indonesia include the goal of "developing students' understanding of the relationship between language and culture" (Depdiknas RI, 2006).

Intercultural communication is how people interact with others who come from different social and cultural backgrounds (Holliday, 2021). This can happen through spoken or written language, body language, clothing style, or behavior. In the classroom, teachers can help students become more aware of how culture affects their lives. Newton (2016) suggests that teachers should help students gain the awareness and skills needed to handle cross-cultural situations and succeed in a global world where English is often used for intercultural communication.

Newton (2016) also offers three important principles for teaching intercultural communication. Students should: (1) take part in real social interactions, (2) explore culture through language, communication styles, and daily life, and (3) compare and reflect on different languages and cultures. Teachers should apply these principles to help students build their understanding of intercultural communication in the classroom.

When reading texts from other cultures, students go through different levels of understanding. This is part of Foreign Language (FL) reading. According to Hoff (2016), there are three levels. Level 1 – the student connects with the content and resources in the foreign language text. Level 2 – the student thinks about how different readers might understand the same text, and considers different meanings. Level 3 – the student compares the foreign language text with other texts from their own culture or from different time periods and genres. This level is suitable for high school students in Indonesia who are learning to read in English.

Good reading skills—whether in the first language (L1), second language (L2), or foreign language—require a strong understanding of intercultural communication. In academic reading, intercultural knowledge is very important. A student's understanding of the culture behind a text can affect how well they understand the content (Goncalves Matos, 2005). Hoff (2016) added the intercultural communicative competence should be integrated into literary reading. The same idea also suggested by Singh, et al. (2017), he revealed that multicultural competence is related to English language teaching.

3. Research Method

This study used a quantitative descriptive method. Quantitative research focuses on data in the form of numbers or data that can be changed into numbers. Descriptive research aims to describe a population, situation, or phenomenon by answering questions such as how, what, when, and where (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, quantitative descriptive research in this study was used to explain the learning situation in schools by presenting data from reading tests and questionnaires related to intercultural communication skills and students' attitudes toward English.

The research was carried out at a private high school in Langsa. The school was selected using purposeful sampling, based on the consideration that the students have above-average abilities, a good learning environment, and high-quality teachers. It was assumed that the students had already learned some intercultural knowledge before learning academic reading skills. A total of 40 students took part in the study, with 20 male and 20 female students. This study was carried out in two different classes, one after the other.

The instruments used in this research included a set of reading test and student's questionnaire. To collect data, an academic reading comprehension test using expository texts was used as the main tool. An intercultural competency test, adapted from Fenghua (2023), was used to measure students' intercultural competence. To find out the students' attitudes toward English, both a questionnaire and interviews were used, adapted from Fenghua (2023) and FURYANTO, PUTRA, & ISLAMIAH (2021). One English teacher and six students were interviewed to gather their opinions about intercultural communication.

The data collection process included several steps. First, students were given a reading test with 25 questions based on three texts related to the social and cultural aspects of English-speaking countries. These questions were adapted from the TOEFL standardized test. Second, students filled out a questionnaire to measure their understanding of intercultural communication and their opinions on how it is taught in the classroom. The questionnaire had 30 items using a 5-point Likert scale (0 = Strongly Disagree, 1 = Disagree, 3

= Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree). Lastly, interviews were conducted with selected students and an English teacher to learn more about their views on integrating intercultural communication into English lessons. The reading test scores were categorized into five groups: *Very High* (85–100) *High* (69–84) *Medium* (53–68) *Low* (37–52) *Very Low* (20–36) (Sugiyono, 2015). The intercultural communication questionnaire was given before the reading comprehension test. This was done to make sure that the reading test would not affect students' answers or opinions on the questionnaire. The questionnaire and reading test were given on separate days.

The main method of data analysis was quantitative. The analysis process included three steps: measurement, correlation, and interpretation. In the measurement stage, scores were calculated for both the reading test and the questionnaire. The maximum score for the reading test was 100, and for the Likert-based questionnaire, it was 150. In the correlation stage, the Pearson Product Moment (a type of linear regression) was used to see the relationship between the two main variables: reading skills and intercultural communication (Arikunto, 2003). Finally, the results were interpreted using Table 1, which presents the findings clearly.

Table 1

Correlation Pearson Product Moment

Coefficient Interval	Relationship Level
0.80—1.000	Very strong
0.60—0,799	Strong
0.40—0,599	Strong Enough
0.20—0,399	Low
0.00—0,199	Very Low

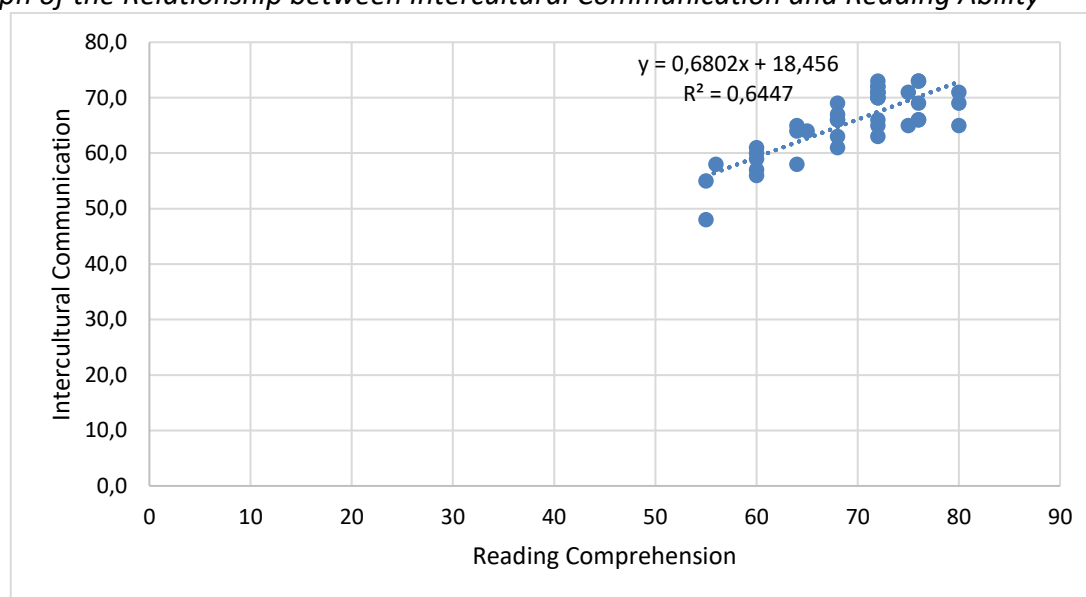
4. Results and Discussion

The results of the comprehensive reading test and the intercultural communication questionnaire showed a strong and positive relationship between students' intercultural communication skills and their ability to understand English texts. In addition, interviews with teachers showed that they understood the importance of teaching intercultural knowledge. However, in practice, teachers found it difficult to teach cultural content due to limited time and the pressure of classroom learning goals.

The results were obtained by analyzing 40 students from the total of 52 students (only 40 complete sets of reading test and questionnaire). Then the two sets of data were analyzed using a cross-sectional analysis method and the Pearson Product Moment (a type of linear regression). The results of the cross-sectional analysis showed a strong and positive correlation between the two variables (reading comprehension and intercultural communication) with a value of $R^2 = 0.64$ (strong relationship level based on *Correlation Pearson Product Moment*). It means that there is a significant connection between intercultural communication skills and reading comprehension. In other words, students with stronger intercultural understanding also showed better ability in reading and understanding English texts (see Table 1 for the score conversion).

Figure 1

Graph of the Relationship between Intercultural Communication and Reading Ability



Furthermore, the results also revealed that students with stronger intercultural understanding also showed better ability in reading and understanding English texts. Conversely, students with low intercultural communication skills had difficulty in understanding English texts. However, this result does not necessarily mean their reading comprehension and intercultural communication skills are at a high level. The important note is in fact both variables measured were at the average level as explained in detail below.

The detailed analysis then showed that the intercultural communication skills of the students (N = 40) were in the neutral (moderate) category, with an average score of 2.18 out of a maximum of 5. This means that students had adequate but not strong intercultural communication skills. For more information, see Table 2 below.

Table 2

Average Score of Intercultural Communication

Class Interval	Average Score	Category	Frequency	Percent
4.1-5.0	0	Very high	0	0
3.1-4.0	0	High	0	0
2.1-3.0	2.38	Currently	31	77.5
1.1-2.0	1.95	Low	9	22.5
0-1	0	Very Low	0	0
Rate Total rate	2.27	Currently	40	100

Table 2 shows that students' perception of their intercultural communication skills is in the neutral category. This means that students are not fully confident in their ability to understand the English culture they are learning. This may explain why many students struggle to understand English reading texts—because they lack knowledge about the cultural background often found in those texts.

Meanwhile, the reading comprehension ability of the high school students (N = 40) was at a slightly high level, but very close to the medium category. The average score was 69.12 out of 100. The details of the reading test results can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Average Comprehensive Reading Ability Score

Class Interval	Average Score	Category	Frequency	Percent
85-100	0	Very high	0	0
69-84	74.27	High	22	55
53-68	62.83	Currently	18	45
37-52	0	Low	0	0
20-36	0	Very Low	0	0
Σ	69.12	High	40	100

From Table 3, it can be seen that none of the students scored in the very high category. The average reading score was only slightly above the limit for the moderate category. This shows that many students still struggle with comprehensive reading in English.

Overall, the results of this study show a strong and positive relationship between intercultural communication skills and students' ability to understand English reading texts. However, interviews with students and teachers revealed that intercultural communication skills are not clearly included in curriculum documents such as the syllabus, lesson plans, or teaching materials. Students also said that these skills were rarely taught directly in class. According to the students, teachers only explained cultural terms when students had difficulty understanding the meaning of the text. Most of the time, teachers used a traditional method by translating the text into Indonesian and focusing only on helping students answer questions, rather than teaching the cultural context of the text.

The results of this study show a strong relationship between intercultural communication skills and students' ability to understand English texts, especially as a foreign language. This supports the findings of previous studies by Gonçalves Matos (2005), Hoff (2016), Short (2009), and Huang (2023), which all concluded that to fully understand texts in a foreign language, students must also understand the culture behind the language. These studies also suggest that foreign language teachers should teach intercultural knowledge as part of language learning.

In addition, this study found that teachers are aware of the importance of teaching intercultural communication, but they face difficulties when trying to include it in the classroom. These findings are in line with Chau and Truong (2019), who also found that teachers understand the value of intercultural learning but rarely use intercultural activities in their teaching.

From the interviews, teachers explained that the main reason they do not include intercultural communication skills in their lessons is because of time limits and the pressure to meet learning goals in the classroom.

I often run out of time if I talk too much about the context of a text in its real-life context in England. I get around this by simply telling something that interests the students or that students ask about the story behind the text.

Furthermore, intercultural communication skills are not explicitly addressed in curriculum documents (syllabi, lesson plans/teaching modules, or general teaching materials). This makes it even more difficult for teachers to integrate learning time into formally discussing English culture within texts.

I hope these intercultural communication skills can be explicitly included in the curriculum documents. This way, as teachers, we have clear guidelines for their implementation. Furthermore, perhaps the duration of English lessons could be extended so we have sufficient time to familiarize students with the cultural differences between Indonesia and England.

In addition to the teachers' views, students also felt that intercultural communication skills were rarely taught directly. They noticed that teachers only explained cultural terms when students had trouble understanding the text or when they asked specific questions. Because of this, students often found it difficult to fully understand the reading, which made it harder for them to answer the questions correctly. Students said they would like teachers to give a more complete explanation of the text, especially about the context in the culture of the country, such as England.

The findings of this study also highlight the importance of including intercultural knowledge in English reading activities. One way to do this is by choosing reading materials that include different cultural elements. For example, teachers can help students get used to reading foreign fiction or literature (Ngoc-Nguyen & Phuong-Nguyen, 2024; Ting & Jing, 2019).

In brief, this study supports the idea of adding cultural learning to the English curriculum at the secondary school level, as suggested in Xia's (2024) research. Doing so may help improve students' positive attitudes toward reading in English (see Chang, Bangsri, Jabion, & Pakdeewong, 2022).

5. Conclusion

Intercultural communication is very important in language teaching, especially for understanding English reading texts. At the very least, students should be introduced to the culture of English-speaking countries, especially England, as the origin of the language. More broadly, teachers should also explain the cultural background of the topic in the text. For example, if a text is written in English but tells a story about the North Pole, the teacher should explain how people live in that region. This helps students gain a deeper understanding of the text.

This study found a strong link between intercultural communication skills and the ability to understand English texts. The research showed that students' reading ability was at an average level, and their understanding of intercultural communication was also moderate. Many students still felt unsure about discussing foreign cultures, including English culture, which is part of the language they are learning. Therefore, teachers can design intercultural reading modules based on authentic texts written by native English for reading.

The findings of this research are expected to help teachers recognize the value of integrating cultural sources and contexts into teaching English texts. Such insights may encourage more deliberate lesson planning that incorporates cross-cultural knowledge. One way to do this is by giving students authentic reading materials, such as short stories, novels, or magazines that show life in England or other English-speaking cultures. Additionally,

teachers can assign reading tasks related to foreign cultures to broaden students' perspectives.

For students, the findings can be a reflective medium to take the initiative to learn independently by reading books or watching films and videos set in English-speaking countries, which will help them better understand the cultural context of the language. Meanwhile, policymakers should consider officially incorporating intercultural communication into curriculum documents. This inclusion would encourage teachers to integrate cultural learning into their lessons more consistently. Such changes could be made by updating syllabi, teaching guidelines, and lesson plan formats to support intercultural learning effectively.

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