

Use of Realia in Developing Intercultural Competence

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Abstract. *This article explores the role of realia—authentic cultural objects and materials—in fostering intercultural competence (IC) among foreign language learners. The study highlights how realia, by providing tangible cultural experiences, enhance learners' ability to understand, respect, and effectively communicate across different cultures. Employing qualitative research methods, including teacher interviews and classroom observations, the study examines practical applications and challenges of using realia in language teaching. Findings suggest that realia significantly increase learner engagement, cultural empathy, and contribute to deeper intercultural understanding.*

Key words: *Realia, Intercultural Competence, Language Education, Cultural Awareness, Authentic Materials, Foreign Language Teaching.*

Introduction

In the era of globalization, intercultural competence (IC) has emerged as an essential skill, enabling individuals to interact effectively and appropriately across diverse cultural settings (Byram, 1997). Traditional language education, focused primarily on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary acquisition, often overlooks the importance of cultural knowledge and sensitivity (Fantini, 2000). Developing IC requires pedagogical tools that immerse learners in the target culture, moving beyond textbook descriptions.

Realia, defined as authentic objects or materials from the target culture used in language classrooms, serve this purpose by providing concrete, sensory experiences that abstract texts cannot always convey (Tomlinson, 2012). They include items such as currency, food packaging, clothing, advertisements, and artifacts. Using realia stimulates multiple senses, making cultural learning more memorable and impactful. This integration is especially relevant in promoting cultural awareness and empathy, key components of IC (Kramsch, 1993).

This paper investigates the effectiveness of realia in developing IC among foreign language learners, analyzing teachers' perceptions and classroom practices to understand benefits and challenges of this approach.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at gaining in-depth understanding of how realia contribute to intercultural competence development. Ten experienced English language teachers from different cultural backgrounds participated in semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected purposively to ensure they had direct experience using realia in their teaching.

Interviews focused on teachers' perspectives regarding:

- Types of realia used
- Integration methods in lesson plans

- Perceived impact on learners' cultural awareness and communication skills
- Challenges encountered during use

In addition to interviews, classroom observations were conducted in three language schools to document the practical application of realia in real-time teaching scenarios.

Data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved coding transcripts to identify recurrent themes and insights related to the pedagogical role of realia in fostering intercultural competence.

Discussion

Teachers unanimously acknowledged the value of realia as a bridge connecting language learning with cultural context. One teacher noted, "Using actual currency or food packaging from the target culture immediately captures students' attention and opens the door to discussions about everyday life, traditions, and values" (Interviewee 3).

Physical artifacts evoke curiosity and foster experiential learning, which aids in internalizing cultural norms and practices (Sercu, 2005). For example, bringing traditional clothing into the classroom encourages learners to explore cultural symbolism, social roles, and historical significance beyond linguistic forms. Such experiences promote empathy by enabling learners to 'step into' another culture (Kramsch, 1993).

Furthermore, realia help mitigate stereotypes by presenting culture as dynamic and multifaceted, countering textbook generalizations (Byram, 1997). However, the study also revealed obstacles: teachers often struggle with limited access to authentic materials, especially in regions far from the target culture. Additionally, some educators expressed uncertainty about effectively integrating realia into curriculum aligned with standardized language tests.

Despite these challenges, realia's benefits in enriching cultural knowledge and promoting IC were evident. The study suggests that teacher training on selecting and applying realia effectively could enhance outcomes. Moreover, digital realia and virtual resources may serve as alternatives where physical items are unavailable.

Conclusion

Realia constitute a powerful pedagogical resource in foreign language education for developing intercultural competence. By incorporating authentic cultural objects into lessons, educators provide learners with immersive experiences that deepen cultural understanding and improve communication skills across cultures.

To maximize the potential of realia, educational institutions should:

- Provide teacher training focused on intercultural pedagogy and realia use
- Facilitate access to authentic materials or develop digital resources
- Encourage curriculum design that integrates cultural learning objectives alongside linguistic goals

Future research could explore longitudinal impacts of realia use on learners' intercultural competence development and investigate learner perspectives to complement teacher insights.

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