The relationship between intercultural sensitivity and reading comprehension among 1st and 2nd-year high school students from municipal schools in Angol and Temuco

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Abstract

Chilean context has recently experienced a significant increase in intercultural dynamics. Consequently, educators must foster and cultivate students' Intercultural Sensitivity (hereafter IS) in the classroom, specifically through the development of speaking, writing, listening, and reading. This research examines the relationship between IS and reading comprehension among first- and second-year high school students from municipal schools in Angol and Temuco. The primary research question was: 'What are English teachers' perceptions regarding IS and reading comprehension?'. Mixed-methods research was implemented, utilizing the IS Scale with 192 high school students and interviews with six English teachers. The findings revealed a significant correlation between reading comprehension and intercultural sensitivity, particularly in the dimension of interaction engagement. Thus, teachers must recognize this correlation by employing a variety of engaging and meaningful resources in reading instruction, as well as promoting student interaction and reflection to advance both IS and intercultural communication.

Introduction

Reading comprehension plays an important role in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). EFL learners read different types of texts depending on preferences; they might read just to obtain information (intensive reading) or for pure enjoyment (extensive reading). Consequently, reading helps EFL learners to be more familiar with the subject and allows them to improve their language lexicon (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Mahmood, 2022) Therefore, according to Mundhe (2015), reading comprehension should not be underestimated because it is not only a receptive but also an interactive skill in which readers bring their personal knowledge to the text in order to understand it. Hence, not being able to develop effective reading can have adverse effects on learning the curriculum, motivation to read, attitudes toward life, and performance in the workplace (Meniado, 2016).

 In a similar study Borisova (2019) explored the relationship between intercultural communicative competence and reading comprehension, and teaching reading to EFL learners, concluding that teaching with different authentic reading texts is fundamental to enhancing learners' intercultural competence".

Moreover, Ma (2023) argues that familiarity with the context enhances learners' comprehension and that authentic texts improve their proficiency in the language; however, without a well-developed language and cultural background knowledge, EFL learners often struggle to fully understand the meaning of the authentic text. Although the literature suggests that using authentic texts is relevant, there is a necessity to deeply analyse the relationship between these concepts.

This research aims to analyze the relationship between IS and reading comprehension in 1st and 2nd-year high school students from Angol and Temuco. Specifically, to measure students' IS and the performance level of reading comprehension from high school students. Differences between male and female students will be an important topic to develop, with the goal of discovering if these two characteristics are connected with the previously mentioned variables, aiming to verify if there is a correlation between IS and reading comprehension proficiency. To complement this research, interviews will be conducted with EFL teachers as a way to understand their points of view and knowledge about the variables studied. Using different methods will give us a better understanding of the results of this investigation.

The development of this study presents numerous educational benefits. It is widely known that English plays a fundamental role when it comes to communicating with other cultures, and that multicultural interactions have increased significantly in recent years, thus exposing students to diverse cultures (Van Werven et al., 2021). Due to this, IS contributes substantially to EFL classrooms since it allows students to understand and acknowledge cultural differences in order to respect and appreciate them (Kaya et al., 2021), particularly in Angol and Temuco, where we can find a great number of Mapuche people. Hence, a way of developing IS is through the reading skill, as a way to allow students to learn and understand not only about cultures but also about the world itself (Isro'iyah & Herminingish, 2023), as well as leading to teachers' decisions about the type of texts they should use for developing reading comprehension. On the whole, reading comprehension holds significant importance in the development of intercultural sensitivity.

Theoretical background

The concept of IS has been defined in various ways by different authors. Chen and Starosta (1997) described it as the ability to develop emotion toward understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promote effective behavior in intercultural communication. Bennett (1986) viewed IS as a developmental process, where individuals progress from ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, minimization) to ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, integration). Bhawuk and Brislin's (1992) study suggests that people can be encouraged to modify specific behaviors to fit other cultures. In conclusion, these diverse definitions highlight the difficulty in defining IS but offer a broad theoretical framework to enhance the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Some factors, such as multiculturalism and social intelligence, can favor the development of intercultural sensitivity. Concerning multiculturalism, Tamam and Hashmi (2016) propose that the more ethnic-related diversity interactions and socialization among other cultures, the higher the level of intercultural sensitivity; as a result, interethnic interaction facilitates the development of intercultural sensitivity. Similarly, Uyun and Idi (2022) suggest that living in a multicultural environment contributes to confidence in cross-cultural interactions, subsequently leading to high intercultural sensitivity. Lastly, people who are socially intelligent, which means that they are capable of modifying their realities to insert themselves in new cultural environments, tend to possess intercultural sensitivity, showing compassion and respect for others (Yenphech & Intanoo, 2022). Even when multiple experiences and

ideals can tend to develop and promote IS in individuals, there are, as well, a variety of factors that potentially reduce IS

IS can be negatively affected by the presence of several factors, such as psychological processes, restricted exposure, and ethnocentrism. According to Rodríguez (2022), psychological factors such as creating wrong impressions, absence of confidence, and feeling threatened by other cultures and backgrounds may result in individuals' feelings and perceptions of prejudice, stereotyping, and even discrimination. Linares (2023) stated that restricted exposure to multicultural experiences, therefore a lack of involvement with people from other parts of the world with a variety of cultural patterns and backgrounds, could be a direct reason for a low level of intercultural sensitivity. Finally, as Luetkemeyer and Jordan (2022) note, the presence of a high level of ethnocentrism, which can take the form of discrimination, could be an important indicator of the non-presence of intercultural sensitivity. In essence, a dearth of ISin a person's nature could be caused by different sources, which play an important part in the evaluation and measurement of intercultural sensitivity.

There are several instruments to assess the latent trait of intercultural sensitivity. Two of them are the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which measures the orientations toward cultural differences based on the developmental model of IS(DMIS) (Hammer et al., 2003). The second, the ISScale (ISS), which consists of five factors: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness, has demonstrated high internal consistency with .86 and .88 reliability (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Klenner et. al. (2021) validated a Spanish version of the ISS in a sample of 427 university students from La Araucanía, showing adequate levels of validity and reliability of the instrument. In sum, this instrument has demonstrated the ability to accurately measure intercultural sensitivity, allowing for its use in the present study.

The concept of reading comprehension has been defined from different theoretical perspectives. Nunan (2003) states that reading is a process in which readers combine information from a text with their own background knowledge to build meaning; therefore, the goal of reading is comprehension. According to The Simple View of Reading (SVR) (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018), at the broadest level of analysis, reading comprehension is determined by two cognitive capacities: decoding, the ability to recognize words in print, and language comprehension, the ability to understand spoken language. Therefore, as Oakhill et

al. (2014) mentioned, reading comprehension is a complex task that requires the orchestration of many different cognitive skills and abilities to acquire reading comprehension proficiency.

Reading comprehension can be enhanced by different factors, such as the application of reading comprehension strategies and fluency. Good readers apply strategies before, while, and after reading a text, such as asking questions, summarizing, or making predictions (Lee & Spartley, 2010). Additionally, strategies such as bottom-up, in which readers analyze linguistic units, and top-down, used to establish connections with background knowledge to reach a better understanding of the text, are strategies that work together and facilitate comprehension of a text (Nadea et al., 2021). Similarly, several studies have demonstrated how fluency (the ability to read accurately) has contributed positively to reading comprehension, making a correlation between these two concepts (Yun, 2017). Even though all these factors mentioned previously enriched the process of reading comprehension, there are a variety of factors that can be considered potential drawbacks to the proper development of reading comprehension.

Different circumstances can affect this process negatively, such as the absence of reading strategies, limited vocabulary, and a dislike for the foreign language. Following the ideas stated by Alotaibi (2022), limited vocabulary, a restricted dialogue between the class and workgroup, and not reading fluently can be important problems in developing the skill. Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) state that EFL students are inclined to develop a negative attitude toward or dislike for English can lead to deficient reading comprehension among EFL students.

According to Diasti et al. (2023), the lack of successful reading strategies could be an immediate indicator of low reading comprehension proficiency, making the student a poor reader. To help their students, teachers must be aware of these elements that reduce reading comprehension

There are a variety of international tests to assess the reading comprehension level in English, such as TOEFL, IELTS, and KET. TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is used as an academic indicator of English language proficiency around the world (Mahmud, 2014); IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is administered to measure academic and general English language proficiency (Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, 2000); and KET (Key English Test) is a Standardized A2 level test that demonstrates a speaker's

competence in English Portales et al., 2021). The Chilean government has an EFL standard that requires high school graduates to achieve an English proficiency level of A2 to B1, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Philominraj et al., 2021). For this reason, the latter test is suitable for the Chilean context.

Method

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitatively, a non-experimental correlational study (Salkind, 1999) examined the relationship between reading comprehension and IS among 1st- and 2nd-year high school students from Angol and Temuco. Qualitatively, basic research (Merriam, 2009) explored English teachers' perceptions of these variables. Data collection instruments included a sociodemographic questionnaire, the ISScale (Chen & Starosta, 2000), and the Key English Test (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2020), focusing specifically on reading comprehension (Parts 1–3). The ISScale, validated and reliable ($\alpha > .76$), measured students' attitudes on a five-factor, 24-item Likert scale, while the Key English Test assessed reading at the A2 CEFR level. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to capture their perspectives on the link between reading comprehension and intercultural sensitivity.

Results

1. **Quantitative results**

   1. *Group differences*

Before the descriptive analysis of differences between independent groups, the assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity were checked for each of the previously mentioned variables. For this reason, the values of kurtosis and asymmetry were analyzed, which present values between -1.0 and +1.0, showing normal distribution (Muthen & Kaplan, 1985).

Thus, to answer the specific objective 3, "To compare the differences between sex in ISand reading comprehension", a student's t-test was applied to analyze the differences between biological sex concerning Interaction Engagement, Respect for cultural differences, Interaction Confidence, and Interaction Enjoyment alongside activities 1, 2, and 3, from KET.

The results obtained in the KET show a slight difference, in which males demonstrated a higher level of reading comprehension (M= 6.77, SD= 3.78) than Females (M= 6.01 SD= 2.97).

Significant difference was found in the factor Interaction Engagement, in which Females show M= 3.59 SD= .56 and Males M= 3.4 SD= .52, t (192) = 2.18, p= .030, 95% CI [.02, .33]. The remaining factors do not present major differences because they are above .05 of significance level.

Table 1

T-test for group differences by biological sex

Factors	Female			Male			gl	t	p
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD			
KET	105	6.01	2.97	87	6.77	3.78	161.51	-1.56	.129
Interaction Engagement	105	3.59	.56	87	3,4	.52	187.82	2.18	.030
Respect for Cultural Differences	105	4.06	.59	87	3.92	.68	173.39	1.54	.125
Interaction Confidence	105	3.38	.68	87	3.31	.68	183.63	.65	.514
Interaction Enjoyment	105	4.02	.67	87	4.04	.64	186.21	-.14	.892

Correlations

The following results answer the objective: To determine the correlation between the variables of ISand reading comprehension. The correlation level between KET and Interaction Engagement is (r (192) = .16, p<.0.05), meaning a high positive relation between both factors. However, for the rest of the factors and KET it is not possible to perceive a significant correlation.

Table 2

	KET	ENGAGEMENT	CULTURAL	CONFIDENCE	ENJOYMENT
KET	-				
ENGAGEMENT	.16*	-			
CULTURAL	.19	.58**	-		
CONFIDENCE	.77	.40**	.33**	-	
ENJOYMENT	.11	.43**	.56**	.44**	-

*The correlation is significant at the level 0.05.

**The correlation is significant at the level 0.01

Discussion

Purpose of research

This research aimed to analyze the relationship between IS and reading comprehension of 1st and 2nd-year high school students from municipal schools in Angol and Temuco. Thus, to achieve this goal, it was necessary to measure IS as well as reading comprehension. The former referred to the relationship between different factors such as Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, and Interaction Enjoyment. The latter referred to the process in which readers combine information from a text with their own background knowledge to build meaning (Nunan, 2003). Nevertheless, this was not the only data analyzed, as it was also required to compare the differences between females and males, regarding the perception of IS and Reading Comprehension, to get a general idea of the Chilean context. In addition, it was intended to analyze the relationship between the previously mentioned variables, which displayed a significant correlation exclusively in the factor of Interaction Engagement. Similarly, through the results of the interviews, a general conclusion was made, which pointed out that the majority of teachers were prone to promote the concept, while through the instrument applied, students demonstrated an acceptable

perception towards intercultural sensitivity. Conversely, the reading component revealed poor performance of students in that skill. This finding was supported by the interviewed teacher, who stated that reading was one of the most difficult skills for students to master.

The information established a connection between IS and pedagogical goals for reading comprehension, arguing that developing this skill would enhance students' sensitivity and benefit their English learning."

Study implications

This research contributes to teachers' methodological options to increase IS through reading comprehension in English classes of 1st and 2nd-year high school students. Taking into account that the world is in constant change, Chile is especially immersed in an intercultural context due to the existence of Indigenous population and immigrants. Consequently, the results provide a significant consideration for the Ministry of Education to include resources that encompass other cultures beyond the Anglo Saxons. In this way, ministerial guidelines which promote IS will foster the integration of students into a multicultural world by using diverse texts that expose students to a variety of sociocultural contexts, and so forth developing appreciation, respect, and critical thinking for both: one's own and other cultures (MINEDUC, 2021)

Limitations

Throughout the current investigation, some events were considered to have hindered the research. To begin with, a) Due to the limited accessibility to educational institutions, the research was biased because 80% of the instruments were applied in a specific school in Angol and the 20% left were applied in a specific school in Temuco, b) another limitation was that teachers were not aware of the concept of intercultural sensitivity; however, through the interviews, implicit knowledge was identified. c) Regarding students, they were not familiar with standardized tests like KET, mainly because of the lack of opportunities to practice with these kinds of instruments during classes, making it difficult to understand the items present in them. d) Similarly, participants were not willing to answer the previously mentioned test since they found it difficult and tedious.

Conclusion

This research explored the relationship between IS and reading comprehension by applying the Key English Test (KET) and the ISScale (ISS) to 192 first- and second-year high school students from municipal schools in Angol and Temuco. Results show a significant correlation between reading comprehension and interaction engagement, particularly among female students, who scored higher than males. Based on these findings, a pedagogical proposal of four lesson plans was developed to foster intercultural sensitivity, especially interaction engagement, through diverse classroom activities that provide equal opportunities for all students, in line with Decree 83 (MINEDUC, 2015). The study also revealed students' low performance in reading comprehension, often perceived as boring and difficult, highlighting the need for more engaging resources and interactive strategies to promote intercultural communication. Additionally, it emphasized the importance of teachers' ongoing professional development to improve pedagogical practices and address challenges such as limited awareness of interculturality in the curriculum and reluctance to teach about other cultures, calling for further research in this field.

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