

Exploring Students' Intercultural Sensitivity in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that effective communication between different social groups and cultures requires not only knowledge about English as a language, but also competence in communicating with different cultures. Intercultural sensitivity is described as one of the elements that comprise an individual's intercultural communication competence, and it is linked to non-judgemental attitudes such as accepting, understanding and respecting cultural differences. Yet, it has been reported that mainstream EFL practice may not place enough emphasis on intercultural communication development. With an aim to promote the growth of students' intercultural sensitivity, as part of their intercultural communication competence, we developed a set of activities that used a short story about cultural differences. A post-lesson questionnaire revealed that most students identified and commented on the cultural differences between the characters in the short story. While some students were more likely to judge differences from the perspective of their own culture, most students showed an awareness of such differences as they are, with several attempts to understand the differences from a perspective outside their own culture. We believe these activities succeeded in allowing students to reflect upon themes and situations related to their intercultural sensitivity by comparing and contrasting cultural differences in discussion, analysis and reflection, and it may be of interest to EFL teachers in various contexts.

Keywords

Intercultural sensitivity, English as a foreign language, intercultural communication competence (ICC)

1 Background

Linguistic knowledge is arguably only one of the core aspects of learning a second/foreign language. However, it is widely accepted that effective communication between different social groups and cultures

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requires knowledge that goes beyond speaking and understanding English as a language. In other words, knowledge of English language itself is important, but communicative ability also requires an awareness of differences between people and cultures and understanding of the different perspectives we encounter (Barani, 2016). Yang (2017) notes that, although communication between people of different backgrounds happens more frequently than ever before, intercultural understanding is often limited because of lack of intercultural communication competence. It is agreed that the ability to speak and understand in a globalised society are widely regarded as essential. Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in different and diverse cultural contexts. Studies have been done on intercultural communication competence in the context of language education, including EFL education. This has led to the integration between communication and cultures in the EFL practice, curricula and resources in various contexts around the world. However, researchers have found that studies integrating behaviour and culture with language may sometimes be problematic. Yang (2017) has commented on the tendency of studies to conceptualise or define intercultural communication competence primarily on the basis of second language speakers' linguistic knowledge and verbal abilities (such as how to use language and discourse), while downplaying or neglecting the non-verbal aspects of communication. Nishida (1985), in her study on language and communication skills, points out that studies in communication behaviour have not taken into account the language spoken by the participants, and that "most of them assumed the participants spoke English" (p. 249). Similarly, according to Alptekin (2002) when the cultural aspects of the target language are included in the teaching model, learners acquire "new cultural frames of reference and a new world view reflecting those of the target language and its speakers" (p. 58). This contrasts with the fact that communication in English has happened increasingly more between non-native speakers worldwide.

Other researchers and practitioners have emphasised the relationship between communication and culture with less emphasis on the target language and the culture surrounding it. Byram (1997) has highlighted the existence of "fear of Western values as embodied in English as a foreign language" in the educational goals in some non-native settings (p. 46), and has argued that critical cultural awareness should be included in foreign language teaching, and that foreign language teaching should be conceived by both teachers and learners. In their extensive review of approaches to the study of intercultural communication competence, Chen and Starosta (1996) proposed a framework comprised of cognitive, behavioural and affective abilities. Together, these three concepts "form the foundation of intercultural communication competence" (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 4). According to the authors, the cognitive ability, represented by the concept of intercultural awareness, is defined as understanding cultures and change our thinking through interactions. The behavioural perspective, or intercultural adroitness, focuses on how to act appropriately in a particular situation. The affective ability, which is represented by the concept of intercultural sensitivity, is a mindset that helps individuals focus on non-judgemental attitudes, open-mindedness, and a desire to recognise, understand, and accept differences (Chen and Starosta, 1996, 2000).

This concept is also described by Milton J. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which describes perspectives and attitudes towards cultural differences (Bennett, 1993). Bennett's model is a continuum containing six stages of personal growth, which are grouped into either ethnocentric or ethnorelative stages. The first three stages of ethnocentrism are conceptualised by the experiencing of other cultures according to one's own culture as "reality". In contrast, ethnorelativism, also divided in three stages, is characterised by experiencing other cultures as different "realities" (Bennett, 2017).

By being more focused on personal growth and attributes rather than abilities connected to specific situations, intercultural sensitivity seems to be of particular relevance for EFL learning situations where students cannot easily experience situations involving communication between cultures in authentic intercultural settings.

2 Language and Culture in EFL

The role and importance of EFL in Japan, which is the context in which this study takes place, have gone through changes that have also been seen in other parts of the world over recent decades. Historically, English was used to “understand and follow good examples of advanced Western culture and thought” (Fujikawa, 2014, p. 123), and this was done through the translation of English-written works. In EFL education, this was reflected until recently by the prevalence of the Grammar-translation Method, a teacher-centred form of instruction that was popular in the 70s and 80s. At that time, the notion of being able to communicate in English began to gain strength not only in Japan but also around the world, which led the Japanese Ministry of Education to introduce, in 1989, a new curriculum that strongly emphasised the Communicative Approach (Torikai, 2007, as cited in Fujikawa, 2014, p. 124).

In recent decades, the Japanese government has made further changes to the curriculum for EFL teaching in Japan aiming to further develop pupils’ communicative abilities and increase their exposure to English. In 2002, the Japanese English education system shifted its focus from the traditional grammar-translation method to communication, and optional English classes were introduced in the elementary school curriculum. In 2011, mandatory English speaking-and-listening activity classes started nationwide at elementary-school level, and a full-scale launch of English as a mandatory subject in grades 5 and 6 in primary school (and activity classes mandatory in grades 3 and 4) took place in 2020.

The changes proposed by the Japanese government aim to promote the development of English language fluency and the development of English language competence, with focus on knowledge of the language and test-taking (Aoki, 2016). However, the extent of the presence of intercultural communication in the compulsory English language education in Japan (including the proposed changes), is unclear. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2011) objectives and contents for English language learning and teaching, the focus is on verbal communication and comprehension (p. 1). There is emphasis on the four macro skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing), with some descriptions of situations and relevant language functions.

In spite of these guidelines’ descriptions of skills and situations, the MEXT does not prescribe any specific pedagogical approach, nor do they guide individual schools or organisations to follow any prescribed approach or method in their instruction of English as a foreign language. However, as explained by Hollenback (2017, p. 261), the MEXT does have “direct influence over classroom content by approving the textbooks that are used in EFL classrooms” in primary and secondary levels in both public and private schools. In addition, these approved textbooks, which are bound to dictate the basic content and approaches to EFL teaching, are required to be used in public schools.

One problem, however, lies in the presence (more specifically, the absence) of diverse cultural representations in Japanese EFL textbooks. This has been studied numerous times (Igarashi, 2019). For example, Yamada (2011) discovered that, although textbooks may sometimes depict interactions between non-native speakers of English, the US remains the only country consistently shown besides Japan. Igarashi (2019) reported on the native-speaker bias in Japanese EFL textbooks, which tend to place the native speaker as the cultural and linguistic model. Hollenback’s review of studies on textbooks used in EFL classes in Japan highlights that, for the most part, these textbooks (which are approved by MEXT) are limited in exploring cultural diversity, customs, values, and that sometimes they reinforce stereotypes and the rather narrower notion that English is to be used between Japanese and native speakers of English (Hollenback, 2017). It could be argued that this emphasis on the native speaker as the linguistic and pragmatic model (rather than ICC development) is at least partly a result of students being generally evaluated on language ability and knowledge, particularly at school entrance exams. It is possible, therefore, that opportunities for developing the intercultural communication competence of Japanese students are not abundant in Japanese EFL classrooms. With the exception perhaps of students who have experienced prolonged exposure to different cultures (for instance, through studying abroad),

it is also possible to expect that their intercultural sensitivity remains underdeveloped in comparison with their knowledge of English language. This could imply that students' intercultural sensitivity may remain underdeveloped when they exit compulsory education and enter university.

To generate a better understanding about this situation, we designed a set of activities that focused primarily on students' intercultural communication competence, particularly from the perspective of intercultural sensitivity as described by Bennet (1993, 2017) and Chen and Starosta (1996, 2000). Through this approach, we aim to address the following question: By employing a reflection questionnaire, to what extent does this approach help us to understand the stages of development of Japanese EFL students' intercultural sensitivity and their perceived importance of non-verbal elements (such as culture and attitude) in communication?

3 Method

One of our teaching goals through this set of activities was to support discussion and reflection and allow students to explore cultural possibilities and their perspectives without being constrained by cultural elements surrounding the target language. We used Eric, a short illustrated story (Tan, 2008), as our main resource. In the story, a foreign exchange student visits a family for a homestay experience. The story narrates the experience of having a foreign guest from the perspective of a (possibly young) member of the host family. One of the key characteristics in the narrative is that it fails to mention that Eric is not human, and rather "some kind of tiny leaf man" (Oliver, 2011, p. 62); this fact is only shown in the rather surrealistic illustrations. This may suggest that the story happens in "a place where difference and diversity are accepted" (Oliver, 2011, p. 62). One recurring theme in the story is that, when the narrator (the younger member of the family) encounters difficulties understanding Eric's behaviour, the host mother simply responds, "It must be a cultural thing." Although the story is written in English and illustrated, little else is known about Eric, the host, or the place where the story takes place, which leaves students with no obvious information about the possible cultural or linguistic background of Eric or the host family. Therefore, we expected this lack of background information was suitable to our approach, as the target language culture is not made explicit in the story.

The activities described in this article took place over a 90-minute lesson early in the semester. The participants were 58 students, most of them second-year English majors, in a one-semester elective English Communication Skills university course. 54 students were Japanese L1 speakers and four were foreign exchange students from other Asian countries who have sufficient ability in Japanese. The lesson was conducted primarily in English, with minimal use of Japanese by students and the teacher. Although their levels of EFL proficiency are not available, the target level was somewhere between A2 and B1, or pre-intermediate level. In addition, a few students had visited one of more foreign countries. These brief instances of exposure to different cultures may have had an effect on their responses. Throughout the lesson, students were encouraged to think about situations and consider their responses, feelings, and behaviours, and to share their views with their peers and the class. Table 1 shows an outline of the lesson.

Table 1

Lesson Outline

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1. Warmup and discussion: communication and interaction with foreigners
 2. Eric's story – pictures only: question prompts and group discussion
 3. Eric's story – pictures and text: worksheet with reading comprehension questions
 4. Worksheet about misunderstandings in the story
 5. Post-lesson reflection questionnaire
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3.1 The lesson

Throughout the lesson, question prompts and images were shown in slides on a big screen, and brainstormed items were written on the board. The lesson started with a warmup and discussion activity. The students worked together in pairs/groups and freely talked about aspects of communicating and interacting with foreigners. The prompts included “what if” hypothetical situations such as hosting a foreign guest, meeting a foreign student, and so on. In addition to these hypothetical scenarios, students also shared their own experiences involving interacting or communicating with a foreign person. The prompts and discussion aimed at leading students into the themes and activities involving the story of Eric.

The next activity introduced the online version of Eric to the students, with the text part of the story omitted. The pictures were shown on a big screen. Question prompts, such as, *Who is this? What does it look like? What is it doing? How is it feeling? What else do you see in the picture?*, were brainstormed (with the whole class) and written on the board. The teacher told the students that Eric is a foreign guest, but no other information was given. In pairs/groups, students were tasked with describing the situations and building a narrative on their own, based on the pictures in the story. For this activity, they used a worksheet showing the pictures from the story with a few lines to write on next to each picture. The teacher supervised the activity and worked as a resource, for language and content-related questions from students. Finally, the pairs/groups were disbanded; in new groups, students shared their stories and narratives, and discussed the pictures contents and meanings. They were encouraged to talk about the similarities and differences between their stories. Students were then invited to volunteer and share their narratives with the whole class.

The teacher then went through the story on the big screen once again, this time showing the text part of the story as well as the pictures. The teacher read the story aloud to the class while scrolling through the story. Finally, the teacher shared the weblink to the story, which students accessed from their smartphones. A few physical copies of the story were available for students who did not use a smartphone. First, students had to compare the actual story with the stories they had built in groups. At the same time, individually, students were given a worksheet with reading comprehension questions about the story. The questions focused on general and specific aspects of the story, such as the story flow, places, objects the characters interacted with, and characters’ actions and reactions throughout the story (Appendix 1). After answering the questions and checking them in pairs, the teacher conducted a whole-class feedback to discuss the answers to the questions.

Through a second worksheet (Appendix 2), students were then asked to find examples of misunderstandings between the main characters in the story, and explain the misunderstandings from the characters’ different perspectives, as well as writing down what they thought about each misunderstanding, from their own perspective. This was followed by a plenary feedback session, where different instances of misunderstanding were shared, and the reasons and different perspectives were discussed. This time, the teacher refrained from commenting on the answers, so as to allow students to share their ideas freely without interfering with their thinking or judgement.

Finally, students completed an online post-lesson questionnaire as their homework. They were instructed to do it within a day or two so that the experiences they had in class were still fresh in their minds. For this part, they were allowed to write their answers in English and/or Japanese.

3.2 Post-lesson questionnaire

For the purpose of understanding the extent of the success of these activities in helping us better understand students’ intercultural sensitivity, we looked at their responses to post-lesson reflection questionnaire. It is important to state that the questionnaire’s original purpose was to work as a reflection questionnaire for the students’ learning process, rather than trying to serve or fit in a specific research design.

The questions in the post-lesson questionnaire allowed students to draw comparisons between Eric and the host, as well as between the story characters and their own selves. Students also responded to questions about their personal thoughts about the story, such likes and dislikes, their overall impression, and the moral of the story. The questions are listed in Table 2. Questions were given in English only. Responses in Japanese were translated to English by the authors, and in some cases, the language in the responses was corrected for accuracy to aid the interpretation, analysis, and discussion.

For the purpose stated above, that is, to generate a general understanding of the stages of development of students' intercultural sensitivity, the analysis focused on attributes related to it, such as comments on cultural differences, their ability to be non-judgemental and open-minded, and whether students succeeded in recognising, understanding and accepting differences. In other words, based on the written responses, we attempted to find whether this approach would elicit language (such as descriptions, comparisons, and students' own ideas and opinions, for example) that could be interpreted as a display of ethnocentric or ethnorelative attitudes, using Bennett's (1993, 2017) DMIS as a guide, with particular attention to aspects related to non-verbal communication.

Table 2

Post-lesson Reflection Questionnaire

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1. What are some differences between Eric and the host family's cultures?
 2. Do you think you are more similar to Eric or the hosts? Please explain.
 3. What do you like/dislike about the story, and why?
 4. What is your overall impression of the story?
 5. In your opinion, what is the moral of the story?
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4 Results

Although they were given a choice to write in English and/or Japanese, most students chose to write at least some of their responses in English. Several responses consisted of short paragraphs, single sentences or sentence fragments, and the responses' meanings were generally clear.

In general, students described Eric's culture as different in comparison with the host's normal culture, with some describing Eric's culture as strange. Most comments that conveyed differences were about language, with 23 responses, such as "They speak different languages" and "There is a language barrier between them". Most comments about language were in the form of short responses to question 1, which was designed to encourage comparing and contrasting of Eric and the host, and which elicited 14 out of the 23 comments about language. In addition, Eric's behaviour was also commented on. For example, his interest in small objects was interpreted as "Eric brings back garbage" and "he wants strange things", and his choices of places were similarly seen as contrasting with those students' perception of what a comfortable room or a quiet space are. One comment (translated from Japanese) explained that "Eric is studying in the pantry, and not in a quiet place." Another response simply stated that "Eric wants to do strange things." When commenting on Eric's choice of place to stay, one student wrote, "The family prepared a comfortable room for Eric to stay, but Eric chose to sleep and study most of the time in their kitchen pantry." One student explained that "Eric likes the pantry, the host prefers the bedroom", and another concluded that everyone has different "lifestyles and interests".

Question 2, which asked students to compare themselves to Eric and the host, also collected responses that drew such comparisons and contrasts. 34 students described themselves as being similar to the host. Most students here described similarities in thinking and behaviour between the host and

themselves. However, 6 students wrote that they are unlike Eric. The most common reason for this is Eric's character, with comments like "I don't have a personality like Eric," and his behaviour ("I can't understand Eric's actions," "Eric doesn't care about their different cultures"). In contrast, 21 responses stated their similarities with Eric, such as high curiosity (4 responses), being unable to communicate in a foreign language (4 responses), and that they would be foreign students (in their study abroad experience) like Eric (4 responses). Three students did not compare themselves with either option.

When writing about their likes and dislikes about the story (Question 3), a great many students commented on the ending of the story, which describes Eric's departure and subsequent finding of his farewell written message. Eric's departure is described as a low point in the story (10 responses), and the characters' communication problems were described as a negative point by 6 students. Three students wrote that they didn't like the fact that Eric is not human, which made it difficult for them to understand him. Three other students criticised Eric's choice to sleep in the pantry instead of the bedroom. According to two responses, Eric should have considered the hosts' hospitality, and the third student wrote that, in Japanese culture, guests generally follow the hosts and accept their hospitality. In contrast, two students praised Eric's choice, explaining that the pantry may be a quiet place to sleep and study. Two students commented on the characters' unwillingness to understand each other more, explaining that they could have tried to communicate and understand each other more. Eric's message to the family was the highlight of the story for 16 students. Other preferred points include Eric's looks (12 students describe him as cute), and his character was described as curious (2 responses), adventurous (2 responses), and kind (2 responses). Their general cultural differences were seen as both positive (4 responses) and negative (1 response), and the pictures (which show only Eric's point of view) also received a mixture of positive and negative comments. Most students wrote about both likes and dislikes.

Students' comments on their impressions (Question 4) were generally positive. As with the previous questions, the cultural differences were the most common topic of discussion (16 responses). Such responses commented on the benefits of diversity, the importance of being aware of differences, and how we should focus on understanding and not judging. One student, for example, wrote that "the host family's mother emphasizes the cultural differences strongly." Another student wrote that "cultural differences are not to be confused [about] but to be enjoyed." Another student wrote, "it may not be possible to understand language or culture but accepting the other person can make us friends." Other responses include students' feelings about the story and other descriptors of the story, including 9 students who found the story difficult to understand.

The most common topic described as the moral of the story relates to culture (29 responses). The terms used here included culture, intercultural communication, cultural differences, and others. In addition, 17 other responses highlighted the importance of understanding differences and being nice to others (common words here included "kindness," "compassion," and "consideration"). One student wrote, "the things that you think are interesting or fun may not be common for others." Language was mentioned in four comments. One student wrote, "even if you don't understand the language, you can communicate with gestures."

5 Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate whether our activities involving cultural differences helped us to understand the stages of development of students' intercultural sensitivity. The following subsections describe the results according to our interpretation of whether they indicated ethnocentric attitudes or ethnorelative attitudes towards cultural differences, as these attitudes are connected to limited or developed intercultural sensitivity, respectively.

5.1 Ethnocentric attitudes towards cultural differences

As described earlier, intercultural sensitivity is characterised by attitudes towards cultural differences, either from one's own cultural lens (ethnocentric) or from the perspective of the other culture (ethnorelative). Most students were able to identify and describe the cultural differences in the story from their own perspectives. Responses showed that students were most likely to comment on cultural differences considering their own culture and/or the host's culture as the norm. This tendency to discriminate cultures with a us and them perspective is connected to ethnocentric perceptions. When addressing differences, responses described Eric as quiet and unable to speak the host's language, and commented on Eric's behaviour, particularly his interactions with the environment. In most such cases, students tried to understand and accept differences, although sometimes these differences were judged and/or met with criticism. For example, when students compared themselves with Eric and commented on their similarities and differences, particularly with regards to personality, actions, and Eric's foreignness, the differences were sometimes judged from students' own perceptions of cultural normality. Words like "garbage", "comfortable", "quiet", "strange", were used to describe actions involving Eric. Although this wording may hint at students' attempts to analyse the other culture, it may suggest that there are limitations in attempting to understand or accept some of Eric's behaviours as a result of Eric's own culture, which in turn may indicate limitations in their intercultural sensitivity.

One frequent theme in the story is that the characters try to understand and accept each other's differences as they are. Some students viewed this as a display of tolerance, which is linked to ethnocentric attitudes (Bennett, 2017, p. 4) rather than acceptance, and they disagreed with this approach. For example, some critical responses stated that the characters only coped with each other but still retained their own way of life. Some students interpreted such actions as the characters' unwillingness to adjust their own behaviour and/or adapt to the new situations. In several such cases, Eric's laid-back attitude was criticised, and some students implied Eric should have tried to compromise, and behave in a "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" fashion. According to Bennett (2017, p. 4), a preference for a dominant or central culture, or highlighting and problematising the differences, is connected to ethnocentric perceptual structures, which in turn are connected to limited intercultural sensitivity. In addition, a few comments seemed to describe differences in culture as hindrances.

5.2 Ethnorelative attitudes towards cultural differences

In contrast, several students commented on specific situations and events in the story with a positive attitude and an open mind. For example, some comments hinted at accepting the differences without attempting to make judgements, and other comments described things in common between Eric and the commenter. Such responses may suggest that those students are able to apply a higher level of intercultural sensitivity to at least certain situations, going beyond the ethnocentric stages.

Although most students tended to side with the host culture and/or state that it is "the same as ours", several responses highlighted open-minded and non-judgemental attitudes towards both the host's and Eric's cultures. In some cases, students took a more neutral perspective to comment on differences. They understood that these differences may be simply a result of personal preferences.

Some students attempted to understand Eric's viewpoint to explain his behaviour. For example, some students attributed Eric's actions to his size, which gave him a different perspective of the world and allowed him to interact with "so many things [we] normally use in a different way". In addition, some students agreed with the host's assertion that it is "a cultural thing", which is one recurring theme in the story. Such examples that may hint at displays of empathy and attempts to understand and accept a different culture, to put oneself in someone's shoes, are directly connected to high intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2017, p. 5).

It is also important to point out that not all negative attitude or judgement is a sign of ethnocentrism or low sensitivity. Individuals with high intercultural sensitivity may accept cultural difference while at the same time disagreeing with it from a standpoint other than their cultural position (Bennett, 2017, p. 5). In addition, some of the criticism to the characters' attitude may be interpreted as a suggestion for characters (particularly Eric) to adapt to or at least accept and understand the situation. This shift in cultural terms is linked to high cultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2017, p. 6), and it's not unlike adopting a foreign language when visiting a foreign area. It is possible, therefore, that some of the interpretations and criticism seen here may not necessarily be linked to an ethnocentric attitude from students towards a cultural difference.

One interesting finding in some of the responses that hinted at a more developed intercultural sensitivity is the ability of some students to shift their thinking and consider a given situation from a different perspective. Bennett (1993, p. 53) defines this shift as "empathy". This is of particular importance for the teaching context described in this study. According to Bennett's model, the highest stages of one's intercultural sensitivity can usually only be attained through prolonged experience (usually longer than a year) in a different/foreign cultural setting. Nevertheless, the ability to empathise (regardless of the accuracy of emphatic statements) is one of the central abilities to one's intercultural sensitivity, and according to Bennett's model, empathy may be one of the strongest indicatives of high stages of development that do not necessarily require experiencing a different culture from within.

Most students who expressed their similarities with the host's culture seemed to empathise with the hosts and their actions, such as the fact that it is heavily implied the hosts are human, and that if they had been the hosts, their actions, choices, and responses would have been the same. Several of these students wrote about their desire to take care and be kind to someone in the same way the hosts treat Eric in the story, and others stated that, as with the host, "[they are] learning about foreign culture now". This ability, which Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2019, p. 280) refer to as *isomorphic attribution*, is responsible for attempting to "cognitively interpret the behaviours of members of the other group from that group's cultural frame of reference." This is also responsible for attitudes of respect, non-judgement, and empathy.

A great many students who compared themselves with Eric described a number of similarities. One interesting finding is that the same points that turned some students away from relating to Eric were seen by others as characteristics they have in common. For example, most students here answered that Eric's curiosity and attitude are relatable. One student commented on the fact that Eric leaves presents for the hosts, which is similar to the customs in their own culture, and other students explained they too go their own way. In addition, also contrasting with those who explained being different from Eric, some students empathised with Eric's foreignness because they either have experienced or imagined the experience of being in a different place, such as someone's house or a foreign country. In addition, some students stated that, like Eric, they cannot speak a foreign language well.

Several responses about the story were about the positive relationship between Eric and the host, and their efforts to get along in spite of their different cultures were commonly mentioned as their favourite part. In addition, several students praised the host for accepting Eric's way of doing things, and Eric's laid-back attitude, which was criticised by some students, was described as a positive trait by others. For some students, Eric and the host's inability to understand each other and communicate effectively was generally described with positive words, and a great many students commented on the characters' positive relationship in spite of their clear cultural and linguistic differences. For example, some students described that the characters made efforts to understand each other's feelings, and that Eric and the host were genuinely interested in the new cultural exchange. This is an interesting contrast to responses that showed disagreement with the characters' differences in culture and approaches towards one another.

Another interesting finding relates to the students' descriptions of the story as a whole, particularly in the case of questions 4 (their impressions) and 5 (the moral of the story). The majority of students

(29) wrote that this story is about culture and related terms, and another sizeable number (17 responses) described specifics such as understanding and acceptance, all of which are related to ethnorelative attitudes. While this may not necessarily indicate their own intercultural sensitivity development, it is interesting nevertheless that most students derived culture and other non-verbal aspects of communication, including attitudes and emotions, from the story. We believe this is of interest for mainly two reasons. First, other prominent aspects of the story, such as language and verbal communication, are arguably more closely related to the course title (Communication Skills) and theme (English as a foreign language) but were commented on by significantly fewer students. Second, this set of activities relied on students' prior experiences, as they did not receive explicit input on concepts related to intercultural communication or intercultural sensitivity in this class.

6 Limitations

This paper emphasised pedagogy over research; in addition, the questionnaire was designed for its application in the language classroom rather than for research purposes, and the results discussed may have limited generalizability.

Language, backgrounds, and experiences in life may have been a limiting factor, and it is possible that reading a questionnaire and writing answers in a foreign language may have hindered some students, for example. In addition, the choice of words in some of the questions may have limited the range of responses, including cases where a word may have a different connotation if translated to another language. For example, when being asked about *differences*, students may have focused exclusively on differentiating and setting the characters apart, with limited information about similarities between them. In addition, in Asian cultures (which are generally collectivistic), the word *difference* may be interpreted as “not fitting in”, or “unable to behave appropriately in a group.”

There are obvious limitations in relation to interpreting the comments from students. While we believe the activities were a productive opportunity for exercising one's sensitivity, without further investigation, it is not possible to ascertain whether some negative comments or attitudes were due to students' ethnocentric perspectives, or whether they were commenting on their understanding of an ethnocentric Eric. This is because the story itself could be interpreted in different ways.

Another limitation is related to the context around which these activities took place. Students were, for the most part, limited to a single story with a few characters and situations to work with. While several students were able to display behaviours that placed them well into the ethnorelative stages of intercultural sensitivity development, it is important to point out that a stage of development is not a permanent state of being, and different individuals may display ethnocentric or ethnorelative attitudes interchangeably depending on the situation and their experiences, for instance. In other words, it is safer to say this experience revealed a glimpse of students' levels of intercultural sensitivity development, rather than asserting whether they are firmly placed in one or another side or stage of the scale.

7 Conclusion and Implications

In spite of the students' prior knowledge and preconceptions of cultural aspects of cultures related to English language, we believe the situation in Eric's story required students to form a fresh understanding and interpretation about a new culture, which in some ways challenged their own (existing) understanding of cultural norms. Overall, the responses revealed students identified some aspects of the characters' cultures, their cultural differences, and the effect of these cultural differences in their interaction in the story. Although students often used their own cultural background to support their

responses, with a few of them making remarks that may sound judgemental, several students attempted to understand and accept the foreign themes in the story with an open mind.

Although we are unable to ascertain or verify the presence of measurable improvement or the extent of students' cultural sensitivity stages of development, we believe that students had an opportunity to notice, reflect on, and discuss about themes related to cultural differences, and it is possible that, to some extent, personal growth and intercultural sensitivity development happened due to this experience. In addition, through some of the responses we were able to identify instances where students were clearly aware of the existence of multiple cultures that are not "better or worse" than others, and they attempted to empathise, and acknowledge and respect possible differences.

In conclusion, we believe this is a simple and valid approach that helped students recognise differences (which is one of the attributes of intercultural sensitivity) and explain their views and feelings about these differences, with the added challenge of doing so mostly in a foreign language. In spite of the class these activities took place in, which (as with most foreign-language classes) is primarily about language and verbal communication, students' responses may hint at their awareness and willingness to emphasise that certain non-verbal elements, such as culture and attitudes, are just as important for foreign language learning and communication. Therefore, we believe this approach could be relevant to teachers and students of EFL in various contexts, independent of their L1, not only for working on intercultural sensitivity, but also for discussion, language learning, and a positive EFL communicative experience.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Read the story and answer the questions in pairs or groups. You can write sentences, or just make notes.

1. What's the story about?
2. Who is the narrator? (How do you imagine the narrator?)
3. Who is Eric?
4. What does Eric do in the story?
5. How does Eric feel?
6. What does the narrator do in the story?
7. How does the narrator feel?
8. What's the end of the story?

Appendix 2

What are some misunderstandings and differences between Eric and the host? Write about one or two situations, and about the actions/reactions of Eric and the host.

Example (do it with the teacher and make notes)

Misunderstanding/difference	
Eric's actions/reactions	Host's actions/reactions

1

Misunderstanding/difference	
Eric's actions/reactions	Host's actions/reactions

2

Misunderstanding/difference	
Eric's actions/reactions	Host's actions/reactions

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