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# Engaging Learners in Intercultural Learning through Digital Literature Circles in Tertiary EFL Classroom

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## Abstract

With the advent of technology, cultural diversities have encouraged language teachers in tertiary education to push the current pedagogical boundaries to seek the best fits for cultural learning, despite the little emphasis on interculturality in day-to-day language learning. Entrenched to Byram's intercultural learning, this case study explored Indonesian tertiary EFL learners' perspectives of their intercultural learning through digital literature circles (henceforth DLC) within the context of tertiary education. Forty-five freshmen were involved in reflective culturally-laden DLC, during three months of an Extensive Reading course. Research data were garnered from focus group discussion (FGD) and students' reading logs in their DLC role sheets. Drawing on qualitative content analysis, this study has acknowledged that DLC evokes consciousness-raising, comparative interpretation, and criticality associated with intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Students voice the critical cultural awareness stemming from such transactional reading, manifest in richer propositions and ideas, deeper understanding of foreign and home cultures, and critical evaluation and reflection on cultures. The study corroborates the technological and socio-constructivist affordances of DLC to empower intercultural learning.

**Keywords:** digital literature circles, intercultural communicative competence, technology, tertiary EFL learners

## **1. Introduction**

In tertiary education, intercultural communication holds prominent values since it determines how graduates can establish their career in the new world-level workplace where intercultural relations in increased globalisation bear crucial roles (Hammer et al., 2003). As such, teachers cannot merely teach subject matter; they also need to consider strategies for developing intercultural awareness. Although it has remained uncontested that tertiary students need to understand cultural diversities, Bodenhorn et al. (2005) reported they have yet to be able to understand and value cultural diversities due to the lack of intercultural awareness. Extensive teachers' oral input and the lack of relevant resources for intercultural learning, coupled with groundless pedagogical frameworks, hardly result in optimal development of students' intercultural awareness (Byram, 2014).

To that direction, language class offers abundant exposures to intercultural learning which helps language learners to better understand themselves in their own language and culture since language is laden with cultural values and properties (Byram & Wagner, 2018). The existing literatures have delved into intercultural learning and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) within Anglophone and non-Anglophone settings (Ribeiro, 2016), yet there remains a call for pedagogical tasks supportive to escalating ICC in response to the overarching roles of English, such as English as Additional Language and English as Lingua Franca (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018). If the language class is meant to serve linguistic and intercultural learning, as the case in Indonesian EFL class (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018), classroom-based research needs to put specific emphasis on developing intercultural tasks along with cultural artefacts, such as Digital Literature Circles (DLC).

DLC represents an initiative to extend the existing scholarships on intercultural learning by drawing on the potency of technology, such as digital photography (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018), digital storytelling (Ribeiro, 2016), computer-mediated intercultural exchange (Torres & Smith, 2018), and online intercultural projects (Porto, 2015). As a form of literature circles *per se*, DLC scaffolds shared reflexive and critical understanding on one's own and others' cultural properties (McCall, 2010; Thein et al., 2011). In harmony, digital technology has the potential to amplify intercultural learning by affording abundant authentic resources to enrich intercultural learning (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; Porto, 2015; Ribeiro, 2016). This is increasingly crucial especially where learners do not have direct encounter with other cultures constituting the target language.

Notwithstanding, given ample reports on the power of literature circles to teach language skills, little has been documented on how literature circles can develop literacy skills while concomitantly fostering ICC. Although existent, literatures concerning the integration of technology to escalate literature circles geared to intercultural learning have only emerged in relative isolation. To fill this void, this study aims to model how digital reading and writing are integrated in literature circles, while serving important skills

corresponding to ICC, known as *savoirs* in Byram's work (1997), rather than being the by-product of literature circles or literacy practices of any sorts. We first highlight the relevance of intercultural learning for Indonesian tertiary education and clarify the foundations and processes in practicing DLC for intercultural learning. We then explore tertiary students' experiences in DLC, as guided by the following inquiries.

- a. How did the students engage with their intercultural learning through DLC?
- b. What affordances does DLC create to develop Intercultural Communicative Competence?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence in Indonesian Tertiary education**

The curriculum at Indonesian tertiary education strongly emphasizes on students' centeredness and collaboration as the springboard to teach moral virtues, some of which include being friendly, peace maker, curiosity, tolerance, social awareness, and tolerance to diversity (Directorate of Higher Education, 2020; Ministry of National Education, 2011). Teachers therefore are responsible for inculcating moral virtues in linkage to burgeoning social diversity as a threat to social harmony (Qoyyimah, 2016). ICC is coherent with the educational agenda as it taps upon knowledge (e.g. culture-specific knowledge, knowledge of self and others), awareness (e.g. intercultural awareness, self-reflective awareness), and skills (e.g. discovery skills, comparative reflection, interaction skills, problem-solving skills, criticality) (Byram, 1997).

According to Byram's ICC framework, intercultural communicative competence initially stems from intercultural awareness. This component sets the cornerstone for developing the other *savoirs*, and therefore needs to receive careful attention at the outset of intercultural learning. He identifies five components contributing to intercultural communicative competences.

#### **a. *Savoirs* (knowledge)**

This is not solely knowledge about a particular culture but instead the knowledge of how social identities and groups function, the knowledge of social processes, the knowledge about how others see themselves, and the knowledge about individual and societal interaction.

#### **b. *Savoir être* (openness and curiosity)**

Openness and curiosity are evident of the readiness to suspend belief about one's own culture and the disbelief about other cultures. This also involves the willingness to readjust one's own beliefs, values, and behaviors. This implies the willingness to decenter from one's cultural spectacles to an outsider's viewpoints.

c. *Savoir apprendre/faire* (discovery skills and interaction)

The constituting elements in this facet are concerned with the ability to acquire novel knowledge of a culture or cultural practices. Equally important is how acquired intercultural knowledge, attitude, and skills lead to effective interaction and communication.

d. *Savoir comprendre* (interpreting and relating skills)

This facet deals with the competence in interpreting an event or document from another cultural perspective, explaining and relating it to event or document from one's own culture, relating different cultural artifacts to each other, and interpreting each in the view of the other.

e. *Savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness)

This competence lies in critical evaluation based on specific criteria, practices, perspectives, and products in one's own culture or other cultures. This evaluation is expected to spark critical reflection on one's own culture or other cultures subsequent to the exchanges of stereotypes. This competence requires the development of the other four areas of ICC.

ICC implies students-centric approach where teachers serve as facilitator, mediator, and activator to students' experiential learning by organizing project-based tasks, problem-based tasks, and research-driven activities geared to intercultural learning. These instructional approaches are in fact far from being new in the the Indonesian tertiary education context. Pedagogically, Porto (2018) highlights four instructional stages grounded within ICC, which include introductory stage, awareness raising, intercultural dialogue, and civic or social action. The introductory stage aims at triggering students' interest in a chosen theme by conducting research, exploration, and reflection. This stage subsequently leads to awareness raising in which students critically analyze texts as the representation of cultural diversity that may affect their behavior and perception. Intercultural dialogue affords the opportunity for the students to share their views and perceptions of cultural diversity based on the findings in the first two stages. This stage aims at raising the awareness of cultural diversity by producing and sharing learning artifacts, such as leaflets or posters. Eventually, students organize a civic or social action in their social community as an initiative to reconstruct public view. As a literacy practice, DLC attends to the first three stages through which students collaborate to reconstruct their knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity and share the refashioning of attitudes with their peers. In the following section, we will highlight how DLC pedagogically corresponds to the *savoirs* in ICC.

## 2.1 Why Use Digital Literature Circles to Develop Intercultural Communicative Competence?

Pedagogically, DLC coheres with the ICC framework as the latter is open to diverse pathways for intercultural learning (Byram et al., 1997), including reading cultural texts.

Such collaborative learning exposes learners to unique culture knowledge within a meaningful discourse. English classes employing literature circles have acknowledged the growth of learners' critical thinking (Thein et al., 2011), awareness and interdependence (McCall, 2010), and engagement (McElvain, 2010). These skills are fundamental for escalating intercultural flexibility, awareness, and openness to cultural diversities (Piątkowska, 2015). Literature circles foster not only individual growth by exposing students to dynamic meaning-making, but also the holistic potential of human beings by appreciating individuals' link to cultural and social communities.

As a complex meaning making enterprise, literature circles oftentimes pose challenges to readers with limited linguistic repertoires and schemata, which therefore limits their reflection and discussion to mere surface information or linguistic repertoires found in a text (McCall, 2010). This amplifies the values of digital resources to enrich literature circles by empowering online research, comprehension, literary analysis, and reflection (Siegel, 2012). With ample opportunities for exploration and proper instructional structure, technology affordances can enhance literature circles by creating stronger engagement, deeper understanding, and richer meaning-making as the catalyst for intercultural learning (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; Whittingham, 2013).

This study argues that DLC can escalate readers' ICC through shared critical reflection on (cultural) readings by allowing their agency and authority upon enacting shared interpretation in meaningful engagement with texts (Thein et al., 2011). This is made possible by active joint interpretation of texts, wherein learners put forward their knowledge and attitude to interculturality in a discursive space, thus mediating the refinement of their cultural awareness and attitude (McCall, 2010). In this regard, resultant learning autonomy, critical reflection, and intercultural reflection help to refine their perspectives and attitudes to cultural diversity. These three metacognitive processes are vital to the development of ICC through reading as social practice (Piątkowska, 2015). Drawing on previous works on literature circles (e.g. Thein et al., 2011; Whittingham & Arkansas, 2013), we designed the following roles in DLC, while maintaining their relevance to Byram's (1997) ICC framework.

a. **Discussion leader** manages the group discussion by creating several comprehension questions with different levels of difficulty. These questions deal with factual understanding (e.g. *what are 10 Korean customs that foreigners must know before visiting Korea?*), interpretive understanding (e.g. *what is the moral virtue behind Korean etiquette?*), and applied understanding (e.g. *as a foreigner, how do we overcome the culture shock when we go to Korea without any preparation and do not know about the Korean custom beforehand?*). This role taps upon *savoirs* (knowledge) and *savoir-être* (openness and curiosity) as it attempts to delve into the unknown or blurred parts of a target culture.

b. **Connector** finds the link between a text and the student's and/or his peers' life. The identification of these links requires the student to reflect on his beliefs, views, and attitudes to differences, which corresponds to *savoir-être* (openness and curiosity). A

connector is also encouraged to expand his *savoir-comprendre* (interpreting and relating skills) as he is responsible for the reflection on cultural similarities and differences.

c. **Investigator** identifies missing or inappropriate information in texts. Investigator deals with decentering from one's own cultural perspective and then initiates the inquiry of cultural properties of a particular community. This inquiry aims to establish richer and balanced cultural beliefs, views, and attitudes. In nature, this role encourages *savoir-être* (openness and curiosity) and *savoir-apprendre/faire* (discovery skills and interaction),

d. **Summarizer** sums up the other peers' works and the results from the whole group discussion. Instead of being responsible for simply collecting the artifacts of intercultural learning, this role taps upon *savoir-comprendre* (interpreting and relating skills) by identifying the connection among artifacts and how the connection makes sense to himself and the whole group.

The *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness) is not exclusively operative in one of the roles; rather it is seen as the eventual outcome of shared reading, discussion, and reflection grounded within the other *savoirs*'. This rationale follows Byram et al. (1997) who underscore the values of knowledge and facts as the fuel to shared analysis, reflection, and readjustment of self- and shared beliefs, views, and attitudes essential for developing new skills (*savoir apprendre/faire* and *savoir comprendre*), new attitudes (*savoir être*), and new critical awareness (*savoir s'engager*). This hypothetical development resonates with the taxonomies of Methodological Model of Intercultural Competence (MetMIC) (Borghetti, 2013) which describes learners' cognitive development in their intercultural knowledge and understanding (first taxonomy), affective gains evident of intercultural awareness and tolerance (second taxonomy), and ethical as well as socio-political commitment to diversity (third taxonomy).

### **3. Research Method**

#### **3.1 Setting and Participants**

Informed by participatory qualitative research (Kral, 2014), this study explored naturally occurring events in the classroom as a sociocultural setting. Reading class was viewed as a sociocultural reality where teacher and students engaged as members of a community of practice in the landscape of language-culture learning. We employed case study design (Yin, 2018) to document and examine the sociocultural portrayals of students' unique lived experiences throughout their engagement in DLC. The participatory paradigm guided the researchers to promote students' engagement and capacity building in completing their tasks in DLC through sharing their experiences and expertise. In this regard, the students were involved in the decision making with regard to the design, implementation, and evaluation of the tasks and procedure in DLC. This dialectical relationship implied that the researchers and the researched served as co-investigators.

This research was carried out at a state university located in the eastern part of Java, Indonesia. There were three Extensive Reading classes at the English Education department, and only one class was involved in this study because the first author had full access to the class as instructor, thus allowing intensive collaboration with research participants. There were 45 first-year students in the class, which consisted of 13 males and 32 females, aged 18-20 years old with B1-B2 language competence according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). These students spoke Javanese, Madurese, Osingese, English, and Bahasa Indonesia on daily basis. Notwithstanding, they never had any previous intercultural encounters with people from different countries. Prior to the research commencement, the first author explained the purpose and procedure of the study to the students. Afterwards, they signed an informed consent sheet for their research participation.

### **3.2 Instructional Procedure**

The Extensive Reading course aims at developing positive reading habits and expanding students' schemata. The latter holds strong correlation with language-culture learning since they are teacher candidates who need to be aware of and tolerant to cultural diversities throughout their education and future teaching career. DLC was run for three months, resulting in four cycles of literature circles. The students worked on the tasks in DLC both during and after class hours. The overall activities in one cycle of DLC involved four stages. The first and second stages were completed in week one of a DLC cycle, while third and fourth stages were conducted in week two and three, respectively.

In the first stage, the teacher informed the target culture as the focus of DLC. The class discussed cultural diversities across different circles of English, such as British cultures, American cultures, and Asian cultures. Some of the topics discussed in DLC were cuisine, table manner, routines, history, fashion, and social customs. Despite the compulsion on the topic to address, each group was liberated to determine sub-topic of the target culture for their discussion. After selecting the sub-topic, the students discussed the role distribution in their group. These roles were shifted across different cycles of DLC, which allowed everyone to experience different perspectives of intercultural learning.

In the second stage, the students started working on their own role, yet they also collaborated to search online resources, i.e. texts, pictures, and videos. The source texts were generally concerned with descriptive, explanatory, and expository genres. The number of words in each text ranged from 400 to 1,000 headwords, with Flesch reading ease varying from 40 to 60. These properties were deemed relevant for EFL learners at tertiary level. Teacher and students collaborated to check the number of headwords and used online Flesch reading checker to analyze text difficulty level. They used smartphones and laptops to navigate texts, pictures, and videos to support discussion and reflection. Once they finished curating online resources, they shared them with the group and evaluated the language and content to determine the relevance to their discussion. Apart from the linguistic goal, this collaborative inquiry was also essential to scaffold

intercultural learning by encouraging them to readjust their beliefs and views on a particular culture entity. Equally pivotal were the teacher and peer supports throughout the new multimodal literary practices, as in digital reading and writing throughout DLC, to develop their research skills and expand their cultural knowledge and understanding (Porto, 2015).

In the third stage, the students began writing their role-based reflections on respective role sheets. When they were through with their reflections, they shared the results with the whole team to clarify any inaccuracies or incomplete details. This reflection and discussion served as the catalyst to verbalize and critically crisscross their changed perspectives within the group. The group discussion became a rich resource for critical reflection on their cultures and foreign cultures. The teacher only served as facilitator by providing feedback, language support, and clarification.

In the last stage, students published their discussion results as written on their role sheets. This stage aimed at not only sharing their changed perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes, but also sharing their refashioning of thoughts and attitude with the whole class as well as audience beyond the class. They used any software, such as Canva, to create the posters in the first and second DLCs. The following poster exemplified students' DLC report on British food.



Figure 1. Sample poster on British Food

In addition, they developed a digital storytelling artifact, a short video, in the third and fourth cycle. In these short videos, each role reported their work through the inclusion of texts, pictures, clips and recorded narrations. These multimodal resources were



combined into one video lasting 8 to 10 minutes. Again, they used any software available to them for the video editing. When the videos were done, students were required to share their works in the class with a question-and-answer session summing up their presentation. In addition, the students uploaded their videos in their YouTube channel. One sample video showcased a DLC report on Canadian culture and it was available at <https://unej.id/NdKIQEt>. In the course final project, another group published their report of Korean culture on a YouTube channel at <https://unej.id/STQANWx>.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Research data were collected from students' reflection on their DLC role sheets and focus group discussion (FGD) with the assistance of three teachers of reading courses at the same department. Briefing was conducted prior to the FGD to ensure consistency and mutual understanding of the goal and procedure of FGD. Informed by the holistic approach to intercultural learning, the FGD lensed the students' learning experiences as a process and outcome stemming from these experiences. This allowed ample opportunities to capture students' holistic intercultural development (Lee et al., 2014). Aligned with ICC framework, the discussion centered on the following inquiries:

1. *Savoirs/Knowledge*
  - a. Did the tasks help you to understand the sociocultural interaction and characteristics of other communities?
  - b. From your discussion, have you ever identified a particular stereotype regarding another culture?
2. *Savoir-comprendre /Skills of interpreting and relating*
  - a. Were the tasks helpful to help you understand social or cultural phenomena of other communities?
  - b. What did you learn when you connect and compare your culture and another?
3. *Savoir-apprendre/fair /Skills of discovery and interaction*
  - a. Did you find the tasks in DLC helpful to learn new insights into other cultures?
  - b. Were the tasks helpful to build your communicative competence across cultures?
4. *Savoir-être /Openness and Curiosity*
  - a. After being engaged in DLC, how would you treat cultural stereotypes?
  - b. Did you find your learning experience in DLC significant to raise your interest and curiosity in learning other cultures?
5. *Savoirs'engager/Critical cultural awareness*
  - a. How did your engagement in DLC help you to build the awareness of cultural diversity?
  - b. How did your engagement in DLC help you to build the tolerance to cultural diversity?

The FGD involved eight groups and lasted for 45-60 minutes each group, which meant that 40 students voluntarily took part in the FGD. Each group consisted of five students. One teacher was responsible for interviewing two FGD's in succession. *Bahasa Indonesia* was used throughout the discussion in order to ensure accuracy and clarity. Video recording was employed throughout the discussions, and the students' oral responses were transcribed by each interviewer. After FGD, each interviewer reviewed the data to identify interim codes and themes on the basis of ICC framework and research questions. This independent work was followed by consistent exchanges and comparisons of datasets and analysis results between interviewers.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Data analysis was adapted from Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework of thematic analysis and guided by ICC framework. The analysis procedure involved four different phases: 1) familiarization with data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) identifying and rechecking themes from the codes, and 4) producing final report. Video recordings from FGD were played repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data and accuracy of the data analysis. Trustworthiness was addressed by triangulating data from students' reflection in the role sheet and findings in FGD. This study employed multiple coders upon identifying codes and themes from the datasets.

In the first phase, we carefully read the transcripts to obtain a general overview of the data and identify important data for further analysis by referring back to the research questions and questions in FGD. Next, significant data that corresponded to the research questions were coded. At this stage, we exchanged the datasets, while comparing and contrasting the emerging codes. This aimed to prevent different codes for the same phenomenon, or *vice versa*, despite the involvement of multiple coders. In the third phase, the authors began identifying the themes by classifying these codes in reference to the variables in the research questions: the engagement in DLC and the affordances of DLC supportive to ICC development. Byram's ICC framework (1997) guided the identification and evaluation of emerging themes, allowing us to unravel how the students' engagement in DLC corresponded to each dimension of ICC. The students' reflection sheets were examined as a set of authentic learning artifacts to crisscross and acknowledge identified themes.

## **4. Results**

The study portrayed the impacts of DLC on ICC manifested in more comprehensive intercultural knowledge, better culture interpretation, improved skills of discovery, more openness, and more positive attitudes toward interculturality.

### **4.1 The Breadth of Digital Research for Expanding Students' Intercultural Knowledge and Skills**

The students navigated and negotiated numerous resources for their literature circles, including texts, pictures, and videos. With full liberty over DLC, each member

gained stronger interests in cultural learning since they not only did the research to confirm what they had known but also unraveled unknown aspects of target cultures. The following excerpts portray how each role fit into the online research as an avenue to extend their *savoirs* and *savoir apprendre/faire*.

*I used the social media to research culture information. Although I was quite familiar with certain culture, I got even more interested in learning it. I gained a lot from social media when searching for information and current issues about Korea, such as the plastic surgery. (Alan, Investigator, FGD)*

*I had to determine the probing questions to lead the group work, but in so doing I always asked the other members about what culture aspects we would delve into. Of course, my friends had different culture knowledge as well as perspectives, and that helped me to choose what questions our group needed to investigate further through online research. (Beth, Discussion leader, FGD)*

Despite different experience and knowledge, students-led research stimulated their openness and curiosity since the research offered the support to every member so they gained wider cultural knowledge and justified understanding of interculturality. The following voices acknowledged the power of online resources to encourage comparative interpretation on cultures, the element of *savoir comprendre*.

*Japanese cultures have some similarities as the Javanese, in terms of bowing. In Japanese cultures, there are some different degrees of bowing when meeting different people. The pictures and videos helped us to understand the cultures better as we can see how bowing varies across contexts and addressees. Finding the connection among sets of information was challenging since most of the times we found contrasting opinions. To settle differences among group members and texts, we researched more texts and discussed how much certain information was confirmed by the resources. (Charlie, Summarizer, FGD)*

*Connecting the texts and our lives made us curious to learn whether certain cultures can be applied into our life by understanding the differences and similarities between two cultures. For example, we learn Thanks Giving Day. Based on the comparison between western culture and our culture, we know that there is such celebration in our culture, represented in Eid Mubaroq. We celebrate the victory after Ramadhan, while they celebrate Thanks Giving as a means of gratitude. After reading the texts, we are curious if there are some other stuffs related to it and whether we have the same values through such celebration in our cultures. (Donny, Connector, FGD)*

Self-reflection also took place throughout the online research. The students were able to combine their ideas to clarify any doubts about the target cultures. In addition, extensive research into foreign cultures opened their eyes to better respect other cultures.

✓ **The things that is not included in the text**

1. The detail reasons why Canadians have these cultures
  - a. Why Canadians apologize so much and what things that Canadians apologize for? [[www.cbc.ca](http://www.cbc.ca) and [www.matadornetwork.com](http://www.matadornetwork.com)]

This thing happens because they try to avoid the awkwardness between each other. For instance, when they bump to someone else or step on someone's shoes. Next, a national reflex makes Canadians apologize easily because their nation even has created law for chronic apologizers. The last is that saying sorry which is a quick way to dodge conflict. Be quick to apologize and to minimize conflict is a strategy best employed by people working to make their own situation as pleasant as possible, even when they're at the bottom of the hierarchical order. Canadians apologize for bumping to someone else on the street, not opening the door for someone who is behind you, seeing someone as attention, asking a stranger a question, helping someone else out, saying something about the inconvenience, and stepping around someone in a crowded place.

Figure 2. A reflection by an investigator

Figure 2 portrays how technology sparks investigator's curiosity and helps to form novel understanding on Canadian cultures. Not only does he understand the context of apology but he also reveals the motives as to why Canadians apologize in many occasions. To conclude, the integration of technology afforded the opportunity to delve into, compare, and reflect on varied culture aspects, leading to stronger interest in and awareness of cultural diversities. The online research and resultant discussion stimulate the students' *savoirs* as the initial catalyst to developing their openness and curiosity, *savoir apprendre/faire*. Eventually, these cognitive and attitudinal gains develop more balanced interpretation of target cultures, which represents the crux of *savoirs comprendre*.

#### 4.2 Encouraging Shared Reflection to Foster Comparative Interpretation and Positive Attitudes

The comparative interpretation shared among group members opened the path for richer reflections. Engaged in the discourse of cultural uniqueness, they began to develop empathy toward diversities, instead of taking negative prejudice on another culture. Laden with the affectivity of intercultural learning, this phase marks fine match with the *savoir apprendre/faire*. The following connector acknowledged how shared reading leads to stronger interest in the comparison and reflection on cultures.

*Being a connector guides me to connect the text with my life experience and also invite the other members to share the link between our lives and the text. Such role helps us to discover different sides of certain culture previously unknown to both me and my friends. As I need to find the link between the text and group members' experience, we gain richer understanding through the culture comparison. (Earl, Connector, FGD)*

The following discussion leader and connector reported the comparative interpretation. Group discussion shed lights on the unknown parts of foreign cultures and further stimulated the students' cognitive flexibility as they eventually deployed others'

viewpoints and critically evaluated the values, belief, and practices between cultures. Joint interpretive comparison and discovery played essential roles as the catalyst to *savoir*, *savoir apprendre/faire*, and *savoir comprendre* before the students developed stronger awareness and empathy toward other cultures.

*After the research, we discover more interesting sides of the cultures, such as how they eat, why they don't sit on a pillow, and etiquette. One example is burping, which is impolite in Javanese cultures. By contrast, it indicates respect in Japanese. (Frank, Discussion Leader, FGD)*

*When we have learnt certain sociocultural properties of a foreign culture, we become interested in reflecting on our own cultures to understand if we have the same sociocultural properties. With every group member bringing different knowledge and experience, the shared reflection on home and foreign cultures also helps us to better understand who we are. (Giselle, Connector, FGD)*

The comparison among cultures enabled viewing the world's from someone else's point of view. This is evident in the following comment by Discussion Leader, which highlighted the consciousness-raising, comparative interpretation, and criticality.

*The more I got involved in the literature circles, the more I liked to learn about Korean culture. One example was how they put off their shoes. They were so disciplined about such matter, which otherwise would be trivial to other cultures. In fact, we, Indonesian, will simply pay no attention to that. To me, they are the most discipline people, even among the Asians. (Beth, Discussion leader, FGD)*

Shared comparison and reflection clarify cultural misunderstanding with regard to different cultural systems. The connector below exemplifies how culturally-laden inferential system, rather than mere discourse on linguistic properties, marks cultural discrepancies. Engaging in literature circles triggers students to view a cultural entity beyond mere linguistic or semiotic system and encourages them to challenge their taken-for-granted cultural knowledge.

*In Indonesia, OK (with two fingers) is acceptable, but in other countries it means the other way around. Another example is like nodding. In our country nodding means "yes", but not in India. By knowing such differences, we can better communicate with foreigners in that we are aware of their cultures and respect differences. (Harry, Connector, FGD)*

Ojigi is a culture that originates from Japan, this culture is a way to greet or pay respect by bending a few degrees as needed. Ojigi has existed since time immemorial in the Japanese dynasty. Ojigi is widely used by nobles and also towards the people to their kings. Ojigi needs to be done right because the difference in doing Ojigi is seen from how big the angle is in doing Ojigi, because the way Ojigi for older people is different from Ojigi for the same age. Ojigi is one of the most unique Japanese cultures because the way they greet or respect their parents is very different from the general. Ojigi made the Japanese people look more polite than other countries.

In doing Ojigi how much shrinkage produced when bending has a difference, because Ojigi to parents is different from Ojigi to peers. In doing Ojigi, we need to pay attention to the rules that exist and need to be considered for whom we bow. Because Ojigi is one of the unique activities in Japan because the Ojigi is not only used for respect but is also used to give greetings.

Ojigi has similarities with Javanese culture, the two cultures both have different levels according to the functions of the implementation carried out. In the language of Java, the use of languages with different levels is called "unggah unggah boso"

Figure 3. A Reflection by A Summarizer

Figure 3 exemplifies how the summarizer puts forward numerous ideas from shared comparative interpretation on Japanese *Ojigi* (bowing) and Javanese *Unggah-ungguh boso* (maintaining politeness through language). The group discussed Japanese *Ojigi* and eventually compared and interpreted the meaning of two distinct cultures.

The students revealed unknown sides of target cultures and were intrigued to discover more culture diversities, which again signifies the endeavour toward the *savoir* and *savoir apprendre/faire*. The output of such critical reading was the awareness of cultural diversities and the willingness to decenter from one's own cultural spectacles. Comparative interpretation not only helped the students to evaluate values, believes, and practices of cultural diversities, but also encouraged consciousness-raising to understand their own cultures better. Being open, supportive, and collaborative played crucial role in helping the students to gain new insights and skills to decenter from their own cultural spectacles, while at the same time view target culture from its unique angle. These cognitive and metacognitive processes fundamentally set the bedrock to developing positive attitudes toward diversity.

#### 4.3 Critical Cultural Awareness in Technology-enhanced Transactional Readings

In our study, criticality was manifest at two levels: propositions, ideas, and theories; and internal world (Porto & Byram, 2015). The first level was concerned with the content knowledge established through DLC. The second level was depicted in the self- and shared critical reflection on home and foreign cultures.

At the first level, the exposure to abundant online texts opened the path to discursive collaboration on intercultural learning, wherein students researched texts and shared the insights and perspectives on cultural diversities. The following excerpt portrays how online research empowers shared comparative interpretation. Such enterprise stimulates the

awareness of and openness to diversities as the core to *savoir comprendre* and *savoir apprendre/faire*.

*This role helped us to know that some cultures had similarities. For example, we realized that China had certain martial arts, just like Indonesia (pencak silat). So, this opened our eyes that we could actually embrace foreign cultures into our daily life in our cultures. (Irish, Investigator, FGD)*

*The comparison (on Asian cultures) helped us to learn more about the cultures by finding more information. May be some cultures are similar. Say, we are Asian so we know that some countries have nearly the same cultures, but that is not always the case. Sometimes, some cultures are so much difference in that some things can be viewed as polite from one culture perspective, yet impolite from another. (Joe, Investigator, FGD)*

The summarizer's comments below demonstrated that not only did he conduct online research and summarize the whole discussion, but he also served as the gatekeeper for the collective understanding. This led to the intercultural comparisons through relativist view among members, as shown in the excerpt below.

*Finding the connection among sets of information was challenging due to contrasting information and voices from each role, yet this helped us to learn new things more deeply. Therefore, we researched more resources and discussed how much certain information was confirmed by the resources we had. In our group, we think that western cultures always have different norms (more liberal cultures), unlike what we have in Javanese cultures which tend to be very strict or polite. In Java, everything we wear or say will always attract comments from others, making us aware of what is right or wrong. (Charlie, Summarizer, FGD)*

Another comment by a connector portrayed the awareness of her home cultures, prejudices, and stereotypes. This level of criticality acknowledged the decentring from one's own cultural spectacles. The comparative interpretation encouraged her to develop the comfort of viewing her own values, beliefs, and practices, from foreign culture's perspectives.

*We realized that Indonesian people are more introvert than those in different countries. Not every Indonesian is open minded, especially those in remote areas. They will tend to be more left behind, compared to urban people as they can be more open to differences. Most Indonesian people still rely much on their cultures, such as norms on clothing. We tend to be much concerned with what others say, eventually preventing us to show who we are. In foreign culture, people are open to comments. Indonesian people always think that they are right when given comments or criticism. (Hillary, Connector, FGD)*

In congruence, the following student acting as discussion leader demonstrated novel propositions on American cultures and further embraced foreign perspective on freedom to view cultural phenomenon in her home country. Driven by the novel understanding and the act of de-centring, she further embarked on critical evaluation on his own culture.

*I found surprising fact about American cultures. We do know that they are great country and liberal one, which sometimes implies so much freedom among its citizens. However, that is not true. One's freedom is limited by others' interest. This is important to have such convention in our country, as in the case in social media where people are inclined to make any comments on anything at all. But, I am afraid that there will be so much resistance, from certain group, on that limitation. (Kingsley, Discussion Leader, FGD)*

The following reflection by a connector further corroborates how technology empowers transactional reading and reflective evaluation as he, having learnt and accepted values from foreign perspective, develops empathy toward social phenomena in his country.

**Some connections I have found between text and my life or experience.**  
The text is about American culture, especially the famous culture of the United States of America, and I think there is a connection between the parts of the text. According to searching on the internet, that country declared their Independence on 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1776 after a long war against the United Kingdom in 1775 – 1783, they finally got their independence. The things that we can get from their history is we have to be a free people (has the right for freedom) to decide our fate. Besides, we have to unite our nation in order to get better opportunity in the future. And then the Thanksgiving which is a culture to share feast through the family or community in USA. We know that in Indonesia there are lots of people who live as a beggar, I think it is a good idea to help them with sharing our wealth with them like in America. It shows that we still have humanity to help each other. Besides, we can create an activity to unite our family because as we know that in Indonesia there are many families who cannot gather.

Figure 4. A Reflection by Connector

The textual, pictorial, and multimodal resources scaffold students' criticality as they were fostered to deconstruct and further refine their viewpoints and understanding. Following Porto (2013), the findings in this section confirm that consciousness-raising, comparative interpretation, critical reflexivity, critical thinking skills, and critical intercultural awareness were in place when students partook in DLC.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Intercultural Learning through Digital Literature circles

DLC offers the unlimited resources and opportunities to obtain relevant texts through the digital research as the initial resource for their intercultural learning. This helps to develop resourceful and ambient zone for shared reflection, since students always bring with them their prior intercultural values, beliefs, practices, prejudices, and stereotypes. As students make explicit their different and even contrastive views and attitudes, they become exposed and aware of uniqueness of cultural diversities,



eventually allowing them to see cultures from different perspectives (Byram, 1997). Attending to Borghetti (2013), the inquiry-driven discourse to expand their intercultural knowledge finely taps upon *savoir* (knowledge), as the outset of their intercultural development. This is evident in Alan's experience as Investigator, highlighting the values of "social media when searching for information and current issues about Korea".

Another facet of the intercultural learning is comparative interpretation, bridged by self- and shared reflection. Earl, a Connector, accounts for her role in drawing the link between the text and group members' experience as the launchpad to "richer understanding through the culture comparison". Having the access to abundant digital resources, students gain more flexible intercultural understanding and the ability to deploy complex combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to decentre from their own cultural perspectives (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; Ribeiro, 2016). The findings are in line with Byram (1997) in that the students' reflections confirm the essential of knowledge and understanding as the catalyst to scaffolding new perspectives and new critical awareness. In addition, the entire cognitive, metacognitive, and affective undertaking in DLC resonates Porto's work (2018) proposing the conceptualization of intercultural citizenship as a pedagogical framework geared to deep intercultural learning. DLC is congruent with intercultural citizenship pedagogy in that both highlight how all *savoirs* are engaged throughout an authentic, rich discourse on interculturality.

In addition, the students become intrigued not only by other cultures, but also by the culture comparisons therefrom. Developing wider propositions regarding other cultures and tolerance, the students embark on critical evaluation on not only other cultures but also their own (Batunan et al., 2024). Engaged in culturally rich discourses, students can therefore see themselves through wider viewpoints as a social agent in the world full of sociocultural diversities. Congruent with Byram's *savoirs engager*, this metacritical awareness is also involved in the intercultural consciousness as this awareness calls forth the ability to continuously reconceptualise one's subjectivity and identity. With the first and second level of criticality being achieved, the students also touch upon the highest level, manifest in the reconceptualization of ideas. In harmony with Piątkowska (2015), DLC has been proven to be an apt pedagogical avenue toward developing ICC in EFL setting as it affords reflective and critical discourse on interculturality. DLC taps upon all four essential *savoirs* conceptualized in intercultural communicative approach to learning both language and cultures, rather than merely grappling with cultural comparisons and communicative tasks within monolithic view on a given mainstream community.

## **5.2 The Affordances of Digital Literature circles**

The development of students' intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes does not solely emerge within their micro-perspective of individual students but also comes to surface from shared reflection through their macro-perspective. The technological and the socioconstructivist affordances of literature circles play major part in that students'

engagement amplifies their autonomy, shared meaning-making, and criticality (Thein et al., 2011).

From technological perspectives, the digital research empowers intercultural learning. Since the nature of intercultural learning alludes to the development and transformation of cultural values, beliefs, and practices, gaining multiple insights into cultural diversities is fundamental to establishing propositions and ideas (Byram, 1997). Regardless of different knowledge and perspectives, students have the opportunity to make meaningful contributions to group discussion through student-initiated readings (Ferdiansyah et al., 2020). It has been widely acknowledged that multiliteracies, which forges intertextuality among multimodal texts (Lee et al., 2019), helps students to interpret phenomena using the insights and views grounded within wide array of resources. The technology-aided literacy is in harmony with criticality in that the former encourages EFL learners to obtain a critical perspective and genuine understanding of the world, rather than merely reporting facts on a target culture (Ribeiro, 2016). In relation to students' initial knowledge, beliefs, and attitude toward a given culture, technological affordance plays pivotal element in engaging the learners not only in authentic learning community, but also through shared reflection and embodied learning experiences (Porto, 2015).

The socioconstructivist affordances of DLC scaffold students' critical thinking, interdependence and awareness, and engagement. This concurs with previous research highlighting the power of literature circles on positive emotion (Imamyartha et al., 2021), learners' critical thinking (Thein et al., 2011), interdependence and awareness (McCall, 2010), and engagement (McElvain, 2010). These properties have been found to enhance intercultural learning, awareness, and the openness to diversities. DLC, embedded with transactional process, stimulates students' intercultural flexibility, awareness, and openness to cultural diversities (Piątkowska, 2015). Behind such collaborative discourse on intercultural learning lies meaning-making process negotiated among readers, and this supports individual growth by meaning-making process and the full potential of human being by connecting students' lives and sociocultural phenomena. In this study, Giselle, a Connector, appreciated the possibility of "bringing different knowledge and experience into the shared reflection on home and foreign cultures."

Both affordances acknowledge the potential of Transactional Reading theory to enrich the pedagogical foundations of intercultural learning (Escudero, 2013). This theory contributes to scaffolding students' intercultural subjectivity by triggering the reflection on culturally-rooted voices and bringing about changes in their intercultural knowledge, belief, awareness, and openness. Complying with Byram et al's., (1997) pedagogical framework for interculturality, DLC provides ambient arena for open discussions on individual gaps regarding a given culture, from which students gain the liberty to share and appropriate their judgment and stereotypes.

## 6. Conclusion

The study aims at portraying EFL students' voices on their intercultural learning through literature circles and the development of their intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The findings portray how each role in DLC contributes to the development of students' intercultural competence. The instructional structure has touched upon the development of students' intercultural knowledge and skills through the digital research, the discursive space for self- and shared reflection on one's own cultures and cultural diversities, and the positive attitudes as well as beliefs toward cultural diversities. The students partake in transactional reading with different yet related spectacles to initiate, control, monitor, and expand their intercultural learning. Discussion and reflection on cultures have enabled multiperspective thinking in that everyone demonstrates the willingness and the ability to view themselves and others from different cultural perspectives. The study suggests that the educational benefits of literature circles are not limited to the breadth of digital research but also the shared intercultural readings. Another implication is that DLC represents one avenue to combine language teaching (instrumental purpose) and culture learning (educational purpose) due to the impact on students' intercultural knowledge, multiperspectivity and criticality. One limitation to our study lies in the thin data generated from FGD, therefore posing challenges to more in-depth reflection on intercultural learning and the research generalizability across EFL settings. The transfer of research into larger settings through survey and the deployment of quasi-experimental research are believed to generate more fine-tuned understanding of how DLC engages EFL learners in intercultural learning.

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