

An Intercultural Reading Programme (IRP) to Enhance Intercultural Knowledge among Secondary School Students

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Abstract

As a multi ethnic country, Malaysia consists of three major ethnic groups mainly Malays, Chinese, and Indians with unity as its building block. Although education is seen as the best medium for the three major ethnic groups to work together, contemporary research shows that there is lack of intercultural understanding among these three ethnic groups. Therefore, this study focused on a classroom intervention to investigate how Malaysian based English literature can be utilized to promote intercultural understanding among Form Four secondary school students via reading. This qualitative research design study collected data through focus group interviews and journal entry. This research explored intercultural knowledge among Form Four students through the Intercultural Reading Program (IRP). Findings indicate that the IRP intervention improved Form Four students' level of intercultural knowledge. This research puts forward suggestions to the Ministry of Education such as integrating IRP in its secondary schools' English Literature curriculum.

Keywords: intercultural knowledge, Intercultural Reading Program, intercultural understanding, English Literature; reading, secondary school students

1. Introduction

As a multicultural country, the essence of Malaysia's cultural diversity is the unity among its people (Najeemah, 2008). According to Malaysia's Demographic Profile (2014), Malaysia is made up of mainly 50.1% Malays, 22.6% Chinese and 6.7% Indians. Najeemah (2008) suggests that each dominant ethnic group represents different lifestyle patterns that indirectly mirrored different culture, beliefs, values and norms that represent their different level of knowledge and behavior towards their own culture as well as other cultures.

Parallel with the concept of being a country with multi-cultural citizens, the Malaysian government has implemented various missions and visions that facilitate the nation to become a peaceful pluralistic society that allows its people to live harmoniously as Malaysians (Tong & Robertson, 2008). The implementation of various missions and visions are motivated by the ultimatum of nation building and creating national unity between multiple ethnic groups in Malaysia. National unity is one of the main priorities of political and especially educational agendas. As a matter of fact, national unity and integration of different ethnic groups are the foundation of the national education policy of Malaysia (Najeemah, 2008). The people of Malaysia are therefore, expected to build a common identity, shared values, and a sense of belonging as a nation.

1.1 Background to the Study

Malaysia was previously known as Tanah Melayu as the demographic distribution was homogenous. Initially, Tanah Melayu only consisted of a single community, which was known as the Malays. According to the local history, ethnic segregation started to progress in Tanah Melayu during British's colonization in 1726, with their "divide and conquer" policy laid the basis for communal division in the country. Between 1874 until 1957 under British colonial rule, ethnic segregation has changed the nature of the demographic distribution of Tanah Melayu from ethnically homogeneous to a more pluralistic society (Santhiram, 1990). Abd Rashid (2002) added that migration encouraged by the British from India and China during the colonial period influenced the ethnic segregation in the secondary and primary school education.

As a result, to counter the divide and conquer culture cultivated by the colonial power, the present Malaysia's socio-political construct was based on the concept of unity and is premised on the notion of tolerance. According to Bennett (1995), this notion, which is based on an ideology that was designed to manage diversity and plurality illustrates that the society does not only recognize but also respect the nature of plurality as being an important right of mankind. In other words, tolerance entails that members of diverse ethnic groups are allowed to maintain and preserve many of their cultural practices, provided that those practices are necessary for the survival of the society as a whole.

The Malaysian government considers education as an important player in building a society that is cohesive and culturally diverse. Consequently, school is seen as the universal ground for students from different ethnic groups to share their knowledge about their culture with others and gain knowledge of other's cultures. Matveev and Mitler (2004) indicate the concept of gaining knowledge of other's culture as intercultural knowledge. They defined intercultural knowledge as a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics supporting effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts and intercultural skills such as listening, analyzing and relating pieces of information and processing them. In addition, Matveev and Mitler (2004) and Bok (2006) indicated having high level of intercultural knowledge stimulates intercultural understanding in the society.

Through education, students are encouraged to engage with their own and others' cultures in order to build both their sense of belonging and the flexibility to move between their world and the world of others. Thus, it is essential for the students to acquire high level of intercultural competence, which Kalantzis and Cope (2005), defined as knowledge, skills, dispositions and behavior that assist students in developing and reacting with intercultural understanding at schools and in their lives outside schools. Bennett (2008) added that intercultural competence, when applied, allows effective and appropriate interaction in various cultural contexts. Therefore, this study was initiated to investigate the level of intercultural knowledge among Malaysian secondary school students through the intervention of IRP during English literature lessons in Form Four classrooms involving 13 selected national schools in Penang.

1.2 Related Literature

1.2.1 Intercultural Knowledge

Byram (1997) proposed intercultural knowledge to be divided into two categories. Firstly, knowledge regarding social group and their cultures in a person's own country and secondly, knowledge regarding processes and interaction at individual and societal level. Byram's (1997) notion of intercultural knowledge is known as procedural knowledge that involves linguistics and behavior aspects. This notion does not only require a person to know about other cultures, but know how to handle intercultural situations based on their knowledge.

A more comprehensive conceptualization of intercultural knowledge suggested by Judith and Nakayama (2004) is divided into three parts. The first part indicates culture general knowledge that requires a person to become familiar with the patterns and components of certain cultures. Second, self-knowledge culture that needs a person's recognition of their own culture and the way they present it to others of different culture. The last is culture specific knowledge that requires someone's familiarity with the culture in question, including its social norms, values, and history.

Matveev and Miller (2004) suggested that having thorough intercultural knowledge can stimulate intercultural competence in the society. Bennett (2008) further explains that the development of intercultural knowledge suggests a systematic way to classify one's own cultural patterns, getting used to unfamiliar ways of being whether empathically or flexibly as well as comparing and contrasting cultural patterns of others to stimulate intercultural competency in the society.

1.2.2 Reading in English among Secondary School Students

Malaysian Ministry of Education (2010) highlighted that the general aim of English language curriculum for secondary schools is to enable students to communicate effectively, read and respond to texts independently as well as produce well-structured written texts, enjoy and respond to literary work and as an outcome students are able to confidently present the information during classroom learning.

In present days, it is required of Malaysian secondary school students to adhere to the latest syllabus of English Literature component introduced by the Ministry of Education (Kaur, 2002). Specifically, the aim of the literature components in the English language curriculum for secondary school is to enhance and enrich students' English proficiency. There is also the recognition that expands across the curricula. This indicates that literature can also play a more divergent role in promoting nation-building and acts as a unifying agent provided that the

literary work is properly chosen (Kaur & Nooraida, 2014).

Kaur and Nooraida (2014) extended the role of literature at secondary school level in line with the English language curriculum as compared to the objectives set by the Ministry of Education (2010). According to them, literature in the English syllabus encourages the students to develop and enhance their ability to enjoy reading literary works, explore the contribution of literature to human concerns and human relationships, appreciate values which would enhance understanding of themselves and their relationships with others and lastly, understand and respond to literary texts in different forms and from different periods and cultures.

1.2.3 The Development of Intercultural Competence via Reading

The ability of reading in helping readers to construct sociocultural images and in reflecting different ways of experiencing the world with the right literary texts has been widely acknowledged (Rodriguez & Puyal, 2012). Previously, Kramersch (2001) mentioned that students should be exposed to diverse types of reading materials ranging from conventional texts such as newspapers, magazines, and textbooks to literary texts since they offer the opportunity to explore and for the students to encounter cultural representations. Thomlinson and Masuhara (2004) also claimed that exposure to literary texts helps in achieving cultural awareness as literary texts promote reflection on cultural differences, develop understanding of the students' own culture and at the same time facilitates students in enhancing more tolerant and open attitudes towards cultures of others.

In relation to Thomlinson and Masuhara's (2004) argument, intercultural reading can be used as one of the methods to facilitate intercultural learning process. Bradella (2003) stated that intercultural reading contributes to self-reflection and imaginative immersion in otherness among students, hence, fostering intercultural skills to nurture interpersonal and intercultural attitudes among students. Furthermore, Phipps and Gonzales (2004) and Zacharias (2005) pointed out that reading fictional text assists in developing critical self-awareness by engaging both students' cognitive and affective dimensions, which leads to the building of students' intercultural awareness and understanding. In return, there will be improvements in students' intercultural competence or students' ability to adapt to different cultures, people of different origins, which include understanding and knowing the existence of cultural differences and the right ways to apply their existence knowledge as described by Ashwill and Hoang Oanh (2009).

1.2.4 Intercultural Reading Program (IRP)

IRP is a reading program that integrates literary texts embedded with Malaysia's three major ethnic groups' cultural values. The objective of this program which is designed by the researchers is to facilitate the Form Four students in the exploration of the diversity of their multitude local cultures through culturally embedded reading material. In other words, IRP involves a personal interaction with the texts through exchanges with other students and responses that are both critically insightful and percipient with the purpose of exploring the level of their intercultural knowledge.

Intercultural reading as a concept according to Bradella (2003), Mendoza and Reese (2001) and Phipps and Gonzales (2004), enables the students to broaden their cultural horizons and allows them to adopt multiple beliefs and attitudes in keeping themselves updated with intercultural values and lifestyle. Garza (2008) indicated that it is mutually beneficial for students with culture being learned and students who are learning new culture to embrace the differences in culture based on the knowledge obtained via reading. Therefore, intercultural reading is envisioned to be an empowering tool to educate Malaysian secondary school students about various cultures in Malaysia. Indirectly, intercultural reading facilitates the positive transformation of the students' level of intercultural knowledge.

1.2.5 Related Research

Past research studies concerning intercultural issues in national schools in Malaysia has resulted in different feedback and conclusions by researchers (Balakrishnan, 2009; Jamil & Santhiram, 2012; Rahimah, 1998; Sufean, 1993). Furthermore, past research have not focused on the use of English literary text integrated with cultural values of the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia. Focusing on national curricular related research, in achieving the objective of constructing unity within classroom learning environment among secondary school students, a research on different aspects to measure students' intercultural competence was conducted. Findings from a research conducted by Balakrishnan (2009) among Moral Education students showed that there is a gap between syllabus and how students approach real life moral dilemmas. In Balakrishnan's (2009) research, one of the discussed issues was students of Moral Education wants to be heard, included, and be a part of the syllabus that touches their mind, heart and action.

Another research was conducted by Seman and Ahmad (2011) to determine the effect of teaching and learning of

History as a subject in schools with regards to national integration in the multicultural society in Malaysia with multicultural students that consist of Malays, Chinese and Indians from two different schools in Selangor, Malaysia as respondents. The findings of the study proved that the cultural understandings, racial tolerance, and Malaysian identity perspectives showed a high correlation with national integration. The implication of the study is that a multicultural based approach to history in schools was positively accepted among multiracial students. Thus, it is concluded from the research that History as a subject could be adopted to promote unity in classroom learning and eventually achieve the nation's "One Malaysia" vision.

The results from other studies that are related to national curricular subjects and syllabus, on the other hand, provide negative results in promoting unity among secondary school students in Malaysia. Based on a research to investigate patterns of social interaction between different ethnic groups in secondary schools in Malaysia through questionnaires (Najeemah, 2006), it was concluded that students did not treat other students of different ethnic groups equally, and some even showed negative attitude towards each other.

Besides that, students always prefer to have their friends from the same ethnic groups compared to others from different ethnic groups when asking for help and for discussions. The findings suggested that when students from different cultural backgrounds are being put under one roof, the tendency to differentiate and polarize is very high. An earlier study by Wan (1983) involving the Malay and Chinese communities in schools also indicated similar results. The findings show that the integration level among Chinese and Malays communities based on social and cultural understanding is still at lower level.

2. Objectives of the Research

This research aims to explore intercultural knowledge among Form Four secondary school students. The exploration of the intercultural knowledge among Form Four secondary school students was conducted through an intervention, The Intercultural Reading Program during the English Literature lessons. The intervention involved the use of a Malaysian based literary text.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The present research study is set within a qualitative research paradigm in order to investigate the level of intercultural knowledge of Malaysian secondary school students during post-IRP stage. IRP is a reading program that is specifically developed for the purpose of this research study. Throughout twelve weeks of IRP, four short stories were introduced to the Form Four students with the help of 13 English teachers from 13 selected schools during English lessons in their respective school. Respondents were required to do journal entry based on questions related to the stories. The questions were prepared and provided by the researchers. The journal entry was done by the students at the end of the discussion of each short story. At the end of IRP, a selected group of three to four students from different ethnic background were invited to participate in the focus group interview through purposive random sampling technique. The respondents were interviewed via focus group interview by the researcher at their respective school according to the time specified by the participating teacher. Essentially this research study consisted of Phase One until Phase Three with each phase guided by different objectives.

3.2 Research Procedures

3.2.1 Phase One

Phase one included the development of the journal entry questions and focus group interview guidelines. The next stage involved the selection of the participating Malaysian secondary schools. Initially, 20 schools around Penang were approached through school principals after obtaining consents from the Ministry of Education and the Penang State Education Department.

3.2.2. Phase Two

A total of 292 Form Four students from 13 schools took part in the study. A Form Four class from each of the participating schools was selected and took part in the second phase of this research. During the first meeting between the respondents and the participating English teacher during English lesson, respondents were briefed about the IRP and the teachers distributed the students' consent form. Respondents were also given the reader titled 'Ripples' that consists of four selected short stories that respondents read and discussed throughout the twelve weeks of IRP in this phase. After the guided discussion of each short story, respondents were required to answer the journal entry questions. At the end of the IRP or during post-IRP stage, the participating Form Four teachers were required to select a group of three to four students via random purposive sampling to be interviewed in focus group interview by the researcher. The interview took place at their respective school

according to the time scheduled by the researcher as agreed by the participating teachers. Each interview session lasted for about 20 to 30 minutes.

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Ripples

The first instrument, which is the reader titled Ripples was written by Shih Li Kow and was published by Silverfish Books Sdn. Bhd. in 2008. Ripples, which consists of 25 short stories was shortlisted for 2009 Frank O'Connor Short Story Awards (Shih-Li Kow, 2008). Four short stories from Ripples were used for the IRP.

Table 1. Short stories

Story 1: One Thing at a Time	Story 2: Deep Fried Devil
Value Acculturation: Interracial Harmony	Value Acculturation: Interracial Harmony
Topic: Interracial Marriage	Topic: Traditional Food Customs
Story 3: Courting of Cik Zahirah	Story 4: The Prize
Value Acculturation: Intercultural Values	Value Acculturation: Intercultural Values
Topic: Cultural Beliefs	Topic: Religious Beliefs

The selection of the short stories were limited to four due to time constraint as IRP was held during English period and the participating teachers had to integrate the IRP intervention with the daily teaching of English language. All participating teachers and respondents were expected to finish reading each story and the teacher guided the discussion after the completion of each story.

3.3.2 Journal Entry

Another instrument used for this study is journal entry. Students were required to provide opinions based on two open ended questions per story in the form of journal entry. The open-questions are related to the short stories. Journal entry activity took place at the end of discussion of each story. The questions were formed to elicit opinions from the respondents on the cultural values in the stories. Respondents were required to provide their opinions in about 50 words per journal question per story. The participating teacher ensured that that the respondents updated their journals fortnightly. The journals were collected by the researcher at the end of the intervention.

According to Neuman (2000), the advantages of using open ended questions are that respondents are allowed to give as much information as possible; respondents do not have to be limited to yes and no answer and respondents are free to express themselves. As for journal entry questions, students were allowed to answer the questions outside class hours as they were required to update their journals from time to time based on their knowledge, perceptions and opinions.

3.3.3 Focus Group Interview (FGI)

FGI were conducted among the respondents who agreed to participate in the research. A range of three to four students were selected by the English teacher involved in the IRP from each school via random sampling to be interviewed by the researcher. This approach of collecting data is due to the assumption that people are an important source of information about themselves, their experiences, knowledge, opinions, beliefs, feelings, and the issues that affect their lives (Best, 2006).

A set of open ended questions which is the interview guide related to cultural issues based on the short stories was prepared by the researchers for the interview. Preparation of the interview guide was aided by the related literature in the area. A total of six questions were prepared and the questioning was done in a systematic and consistent manner with the respondents. The semi-structured interview with the students was held after the completion of IRP and each session lasted for 20 to 30 minutes. The interviews were scheduled outside class hours at their respective school compounds. The interview slots were confirmed by the teachers involved. FGI was used as a part of the instruments in this research study as it has the advantage of revealing the major themes (Krueger, 1994).

Although the students were guided by the questions prepared by the researchers, students were given the opportunity to share their personal thoughts and opinions that were not discussed during the discussion in

classroom with other classmates. The students were also welcomed to share their personal experience on cultural related issues. The interviews were audio recorded and the researcher did the transcription immediately after each interview. The transcriptions were analyzed using Atlas.ti 7.0, the qualitative data analysis software.

3.4 Data Analysis

Phase three is data analysis phase. ATLAS.ti version 7.0 was used to analyze the data and the adapted Intercultural Competence Value Rubric by Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2009) as shown in Table 1 was used to measure the level of Intercultural Knowledge among the respondents. ‘Poor’ and ‘Average’ category indicates low level of intercultural knowledge whereas ‘Good’ and ‘Advanced’ category indicates high level of intercultural knowledge.

Table 2. Intercultural Competence Value Rubric by Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2009)

	Poor 1-5	Average 6-10	Good 11-15	Advanced 16-20
Knowledge Cultural self-awareness	Shows minimal awareness of own cultural rules and biases	Identifies own cultural rules and biases	Recognizes new perspectives about own cultural rules and biases	Articulates insights into own cultural rules and biases.
Knowledge Cultural worldview	Demonstrates surface understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.	Demonstrates partial understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.	Demonstrates adequate understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.	Demonstrates sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.
Behavior Empathy	Views the experience of others but does so through own cultural worldview.	Identifies components of other cultural perspectives but responds in all situations with own worldview.	Recognizes intellectual and emotional dimensions of more than one worldview and sometimes uses more than one worldview in interactions.	Interprets intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview and demonstrates ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group.
Behavior Verbal and non verbal	Has a minimal level of understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication; is unable to negotiate	Identifies some cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication and is aware that misunderstandings	Recognizes and participates in cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication and begins to negotiate	Articulates a complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal

communication	a	shared	can occur based on	a	shared	communication
	understanding		those differences	understanding		
			but is still unable to	based on those		
			negotiate a shared	differences.		
			understanding.			

4. Results

4.1 Results from Journal Entry

Based on the journal entry findings, five themes identified are exposure, awareness, understanding, unity, and cultural inheritance. According to the journal entries, IRP provides a platform for the respondents to learn more about their own culture and cultures of others as well as their religions. Respondents admitted that such exposures were gained from the reading activity that involves cultural exchange among them during the post reading activities. Respondents suggested that through reading and discussing the stories, they were able to get better exposure on intercultural issues such as interracial marriage, which respondents found important in avoiding intercultural conflict in the future.

“Interracial marriage is like uniting two kinds of people with different backgrounds and culture. It’s great that two kinds of people can share unique things together from food, customs and culture.” [S2R6]

“Interracial marriages allow us to learn more about other cultures and their religions.” [S11R1]

Besides that, IRP was able to highlight the sensitive issues involving intercultural elements in the stories. Through the short stories, the respondents such as S9R4 were able to express their concern on intercultural awareness and the consequences of misinterpreting the messages by other respondents. Adding to that, respondents were able to justify their opinions on the cultural related matter whenever there was any confusion on cultural related issue among them.

“I should not live with my partner before marriages as for my religion and moral, it would be impossible for me.” [S2R1]

“I think some people are vegetarian due to traditions. Such ethical motivations have been codified under various religious beliefs.” [S13R4]

“I realised that all religion take ‘halal’ and ‘haram’ issues seriously and forbid their followers from betting and gambling.” [S3R27]

It was also identified that even though respondents were from different cultural backgrounds and the cultural differences addressed in the short stories were apparent, respondents were still able to understand the differences and expressed their opinions and views on tolerating the differences during the post reading stage.

“Certain cultures or religions forbid gambling and bets while others do not because each religion or cultures has their own manners.” [S5R5]

“Some people are vegetarianism because their religion might be Taoism and make them feel calm and peaceful.” [S9R6]

“In my opinion of buying cooked food prepared by other races is good. We can taste the food prepared by the other race, but for Muslims the food needs to be ‘halal’. Other than that, the food should be clean and delicious.” [S9R30]

Besides that, respondents were able to elaborate more on their understanding towards certain cultural practices.

According to S2R6, vegetarian practices are a part of religious practices such as in Buddhism. S11R9 continued with further elaboration on reasons behind certain religious practices such as vegetarianism. If an individual is vegetarian, it symbolically refers to repaying of sins or as gratitude and to avoid from committing sins such as killing.

S8R1 stated that IRP is a good opportunity for them to grow closer to friends of other races. Through the reading and discussion of short stories, respondents admitted to learning about other cultures as well as their beliefs. Furthermore, S9R8 elaborated that one of the stories introduced in IRP encourages people of different cultures to work together to protect the country, Malaysia from being overpowered by foreigners. Through this story, S9R8 was able to conclude that Malaysians should unite to protect the country instead of fighting against each other based on differences such as race, culture, and religion.

“Even though Malaysians have their differences, at the end of the day they will still need to unite in order to prevent their culture from being stolen.” [S9R9]

Respondents were fully aware that certain cultural practices were inherited from the ancestors or it has been practiced by the family over the years. S9R19 stated that being a vegetarian was associated with following the tradition of their religion that has been practiced by the family. However, S2R7 added that other than following the religion and its traditions, there were also vegetarians that follow the family’s eating routines.

Another cultural practice that was highlighted through one of the short stories was the black magic practice. Majority of the respondents’ (S2R12, S11R22, and S1R24) indicated their knowledge of black magic practice was based on the information passed down from one generation to another. Respondent S9R19 also mentioned that the older generation’s beliefs were able to influence the future generations’ beliefs.

“They don’t believe in the existence of God. They learn from their ancestors.” [S2R4]
“Black magic is something that is passed in generations. Like a tradition.” [S2R12]

4.2 Results from Focus Group Interview (FGI)

Five themes emerged from the findings obtained based on the FGI with 42 respondents. The themes are sensitivity, understanding, awareness, acquisition of knowledge and sharing of knowledge. Based on the FGI conducted among among 42 respondents from 13 secondary schools, they suggested that apart from gaining new intercultural knowledge from the short stories, their knowledge of other cultures helped them to improve their sensitivity at the same time. This was shown when respondents agreed that knowing about other customs and traditions help them to avoid saying or doing things that can offend or hurt others. S1R1 further elaborated that having the knowledge about other cultures helps him to understand their culture and at the same time the newly learned knowledge can be used correctly in addressing sensitive issues such as food restrictions in different religions. For example, Muslims are restricted from eating pork and Hindus are not allowed to eat beef due to religious reasons.

“I learn more about other culture so I learn more about what to do and what to say to not to offend them or anything.” [S1R1]

“We get to know more about their culture so we will be like offer them something like some food, so we make sure that we know what we should give and what we should not do.” [S1R2]

Majority of the respondents were well aware of their own cultural restrictions or any practices or activities that are not permissible in their own culture. Respondents were well aware that gambling activities are forbidden for Muslims and when they were confronted with such issues in one of the short stories, titled ‘The Prize’, respondents were found to be firm regarding their beliefs, knowledge and practices that are not permissible according to their culture.

“I just feel like, my belief my religion says that gambling is not the right thing to do and it is not from... emm it is against my belief. I think you can get or earn money from other source.” [S6R2]

Through intercultural reading and classroom discussions, S3R2 agreed that IRP gives better insights of other cultures and it help him and his classmates to understand other cultures better. At the same time, IRP facilitates in improving relationships and build stronger bonds between respondent and other classmates. Besides that, respondents also suggested that understanding different cultures is associated with their level of intercultural knowledge. According to S1R1, studying about each other's' cultures helped in building bonds among respondents as everyone was able to reach equal understanding of each other's' cultures. S2R1, however, argued that lack of intercultural understanding among the classmates caused him to receive negative responses from them. Due to cultural differences and lack of intercultural knowledge among the classmates, the respondent admitted that validation of opinions and facts were required in order to build intercultural understanding among them during classroom discussions. Other than that, respondents also admitted that IRP has helped respondents to acquire new knowledge of their own culture concurrently.

"I've learnt more about my own culture like the hungry ghost festivals because I normally don't... especially it involves dead people since my family isn't that religious so yeah, after reading that story I get to know more about that." [S3R1]

Apart from that, respondents also confirmed that IRP helped in providing them with better insights of other cultures and the short stories were found to be very helpful in terms of learning and acquiring knowledge involving cultural related issues among them.

"Well, it does deepen our knowledge in knowing about other culture and other people considering since birth at home, all I learn is mostly my own culture. So, going out talking to my friends of other races, or other religions can say give good insights of how they think, what they do every day." [S12R3]

FGI findings reported that throughout the IRP, classroom discussion has been one of the mediums for the respondents to interact with each other in terms of exchanging views, opinions and in learning new knowledge about other cultures. This was agreed by all the respondents during the FGI.

"Everyone has different opinions so, yeah if we share our opinions, we get more knowledge." [S3R4]

"We get to know more about different races and we can share about our culture as well." [S7R3]

5. Discussion

Overall, the level of intercultural knowledge of the students improved over time throughout the twelve weeks of the IRP intervention that was conducted during English lesson in 13 secondary schools with the assistance from 13 participating English teachers. The findings indicate knowledge of history, social taboos, language, world views and others are included in the content of competence that an individual must have for both 'home' and 'other' culture in measuring one's intercultural competence (Allport, 1979).

Findings on the respondents' level of intercultural knowledge on cultural self-awareness show that respondents' level of intercultural knowledge was high based on the adapted Intercultural Competence Value Rubric by Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2009). The high level of intercultural knowledge of cultural self-awareness was due to ample exposure that respondents received mainly from their parents and based on their background knowledge of their own customs and traditions that they have been practicing their whole life. This was complemented by the IRP intervention. Thus, this leads to a balance exploration and application as suggested by Savicky (2008) in building intercultural knowledge.

According to the findings, IRP provided the ground to recognize new perspectives about one's own cultural rules and biases. IRP allowed the respondents to accept opinions from others on intercultural knowledge that are new to them and at the same time to address issues in their own cultural rules and biases when comparing their cultures with others during classroom discussions. The level of respondents' intercultural knowledge on cultural worldview were found to be low as the results obtained in FGI indicates that respondents were only able to demonstrate partial understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, communication style, beliefs and practices. Some of the respondents were found to be very reticent in expressing their thoughts and opinions about other cultures, thus causing them to keep their thoughts to themselves without justifications and validation of their intercultural knowledge of other cultures. Besides that, most of the respondents can hardly give reasoning on others' cultural values, beliefs, and practices

and their knowledge on other cultures' values, beliefs, and practices was limited. Thus, respondents' level of intercultural knowledge on cultural worldview fell under 'Average' category as categorized by the Intercultural Competence Value Rubric by Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2009).

Having sufficient intercultural knowledge allows the building of cultural awareness and consequently augment their understanding about their own culture as well as cultures of others. These insights were proven aligned with Bennett's (2008) theory that suggested the development of intercultural knowledge proposes a systematic way to classify one's own cultural patterns, getting used to being whether empathically or flexibly as well as comparing and contrasting cultural patterns of others. This was supported by Oregon State University Student Affairs Assessment Council (2010) that becoming proficient in intercultural knowledge is a continuous learning process and students may encounter different levels of intercultural knowledge throughout their lives as according to experiences and intercultural exposures.

The findings imply that the integration of the acquisition of intercultural knowledge throughout IRP and sharing of intercultural knowledge via classroom discussion during post-IRP stage helped in addressing sensitive issues among friends of different cultures. Therefore, the Ministry of Education should take into account these findings to use Malaysian based literature to promote intercultural competence among the multicultural society. Employing literature based on these three races will help the students in exploring and learning about other cultures and at the same time, improving the level of intercultural knowledge.

Positive feedback on IRP's role suggest that it provides a new platform for respondents to learn about other cultures and acts as a new instrument to facilitate respondents' improvement in their relationships with individuals of different ethnics. Besides, previous research that highlighted intercultural related issues only focuses on tertiary education (Ramlee, Norzaini, Faridah, Abdul, & Maimun, 2009). The current research indicates the lack of exposure towards other cultures and the lack of channels for the respondents to apply their intercultural knowledge of other cultures in real life situations, leading to low levels of intercultural knowledge of cultural worldview at secondary school level. Therefore, emphasize on the integration of cultural elements through Malaysian based literary text is crucial should be introduced early among school going students.

The level of respondents' intercultural knowledge based on students' journal entries indicated high level of intercultural knowledge on both highlighted aspects; cultural self-awareness and cultural worldview. The entire procedure of IRP elevated students' awareness of their own intercultural knowledge development, as well as intercultural knowledge of their surroundings, and of their classmates. Such positive developments strengthen the bond between the students and indirectly promote peace, harmony, and unity among them. The data obtained confirmed Garza's (2008) conclusion, that embracing differences based on intercultural knowledge obtained through intercultural reading benefits not only students whose cultures are being taught but also students who are learning new culture.

6. Conclusion

Malaysia is a country with great diversity, and that diversity should become an opportunity for greater tolerance among its citizens for greater unity and tolerance. Thus, through appropriate medium, such as the intervention of IRP in Malaysian secondary schools' classroom, one of Malaysia's major educational goals to inculcate and nurture national consciousness through fostering common ideas, values, aspirations and loyalties will be successful. This will ensure the molding of national unity and national identity in a multi-ethnic society (Khader, 2012) can be successfully fulfilled. In summary, the proposed IRP should be considered as a long term platform for educational success in improving intercultural relations among secondary school students.

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