**ENGLISH LITERATURE TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF MITIGATING CULTURE TENSIONS IN LITERARY TEXTS TAUGHT IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS**

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**INTRODUCTION**

While reading diversified English Literature texts in class, I noticed that my students from the international school showed a lack of comprehension and responsiveness in perceiving the culturally distant literary texts, whereas they were able to acquire familiar literary texts with less effort, in less time and with more ease. In this light, I chose this research topic to gain insights with relation to this questionable phenomenon.

Thus, this study is based on the following research questions:

1. What are the tensions faced by the English Literature teacher in handling culturally diverse literary texts?
2. How are these tensions mitigated?

The first objective is to identify the recurring culture tensions in the diverse literary texts being discussed across varying proficiency levels. The second objective of this study is to obtain emic perspective from the English Literature teachers from the international school background.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**TENSIONS DETECTED WHILE HANDLING MULTI-CULTURAL LITERARY TEXTS**

Markham & Latham (1987) conclude that the students showed more cooperation when familiar religious and cultural values were discussed, whereas a sense of resistance and a lack of responsiveness was observable when unfamiliar religious and cultural content was being discussed. Similarly, Tarahorm & Kongkeaw (2014), also point out that the average scores of the students’ comprehension of familiar passages was higher than the ones received when reading unfamiliar passages. Consequently, familiar schematic connections reduce cultural distance when acquiring new language features and related cultural attributes.

In Tsui’s research study, over 70% of a group of 38 teachers considered the features of being “quiet”, “shy” and “unwilling to speak English” as the major challenges they faced ( Tsui 1996 as cited in Cheng, 2000). Cheng (2000) highlights the fact that cultural differences between the east and the west are also a cause of perceived reticence and passivity among Asian students. He also adds that unlike in the western culture, which valorizes individual self-expression, Asian culture generally values collectivism. Wittenbrink’s (1994 as cited in Hilton & Hippel, 1996) stance that when it comes to members from groups that one belongs to , the stereotyping tends to be more negative than when the stereotyped persons are from a group to which one belongs.

For decades, women were believed to be more emotional than men, but Grossman & Wood (1993 as cited in Plant, Hyde, Keltner & Devine, 2000) state that gender stereotyping is actually applied to beliefs regarding the expression of emotion more than to the experience of emotion. To elaborate, the emotional experience of men and women are similar but expressed differently in different cultural settings. Thus, as Yepez (1994 as cited in Johnson & Chang 2012) says that the ‘history of sexism and silencing of women’ creates inequality. Meanwhile, Dee (2006 as cited in Taqi, Al Darwish, Akbar & Al-Gharabali 2015) finds gender to be more than a prominent factor in classroom communication between the classroom practitioner and her/his students, adding that it also defines a ‘gender specific role model’. Dee also says that, students’ performance is higher if the teacher is also of the same gender.

# The above tensions related to cultural differences show us the challenges classroom practitioners have to deal with. Teachers have to engage in instruction by fusing various strategies and tools to overcome these tensions constructively, while also managing classroom time in a way that is productive.

## NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

Constructive teaching is not restricted to one strategy, but numerous strategies are unified to produce efficient results. Anderson (1977 as cited in Shen 2008) perceives that learning acts as an interface between the text and the reader’s world. The students bring into the process internalized memory of cultural information. Keeping this view in mind, it is possible to understand that teachers’ various ‘contextual cues’ enable students to activate schematic memory regarding various personal experiences and historical information in relation to the text.

Baoan (2008 as cited in Luo 2014) says, using popular culture promotes interaction? and classroom practitioners tend to use this medium to link it to discussions of culturally unfamiliar content. Mayer (1989 as cited in Glenberg & Langston 1992) provided a reading passage describing hydraulic brakes along with illustrations. The participants in the study were able to perform well in the problem-solving test as they were able to recall the text easily via the illustrations. To sum up, in adhering to Glenberg & Langston (1992) pictures assist in the construction and effective management of mental models in the working memory. Hockett (1958 as cited in Thirusanku & Yunus 2013) points out even though the lexical borrowings of the donor language do not have an exact match, the borrower tends to derive words and phrases in an attempt to get a similar word. Henn-Reinki (2012 as cited in Vasilachi, 2018) says that trilingual proficiency enables the people to ‘shift identity’ according to situational needs. Similarly, Dewale (2015 as cited in Vasilachi, 2018) identifies multilinguals as ‘chameleons’ adding that just like chameleons, “trilinguals are able to change their colour according to their environment”.

In a nutshell, teachers face numerous challenges which occur in a multilingual Literature classroom. In order to overcome such tensions, these classroom practitioners attempt to fuse various techniques to mitigate culture-based discrimination, prejudices, and racism and to have a positive view of cultural tolerance.

## METHODOLOGY

An ethnographic research design was adopted because this approach identifies and underlines the Literature teachers’ individual perceptions and insights into the cultural gaps which are produced in relation to the setting which is under study. I, myself am an English Literature teacher for the senior section classes for 2 years in this school. I chose this school because I had access to the school, teachers and to the students and this assisted me in applying an ethnographic design easily. This school consisted only of Islamic students. Whereas the teachers were from a diversified socio-cultural and ethnic background. As a result, I was able to observe how diverse people negotiated the cultural understanding with students. The participants were chosen from both secondary and senior sections for classroom observation. I choose three English literature teachers as the participants and each of these participants was interviewed once for approximately 45-60 minutes. All three participants had tertiary educational backgrounds and were from diverse age groups, genders and economic background. I relied on semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, reflective journal entries and an overview of the reading material and textbooks whenever necessary to collect and compile firsthand data. Thus, triangulation of these ethnographic tools ensures the authenticity and validity of the research outcomes.

## DATA ANALYSIS

**TENSIONS CAUSED IN TEACHING CULTURALLY ALIEN CONTENT**

Clara says that drawing from culturally similar concepts leads to positive language transfer whereas, unfamiliar cultural elements leads to negative transfer. In an interview she says, “I mean when you speak about love and romance, they feel that we are teaching something very wrong.”

Here, the teacher shares her teaching experience in relation to the themes such as ‘love’ and ‘romance’ from the Shakespearean drama *Romeo and Juliet*. She says that discussion of such texts in the classroom setting creates a ‘cultural shock’ among the students. The students’ views are even shared by many parents, who are often opposed to discussing sexual matters in class. As a result, Clara in her interviews says on how she had to skip the explanation to the

culturally taboo sections in the drama *Romeo and Juliet*. This limited the holistic meaning of the text and becomes a hurdle to perceive the text. In another instance, Clara says that, she would confirm the Islamic meaning of the word ‘Evil One’ after clarifying it with the Christian teacher. This shows the teacher’s insufficient knowledge in multi religious concepts and depicts her inability to discuss the content in depth and the explanation was sketchy. Notably, even the school management did not welcome the discussion of other religious concepts in the classroom.

Bhagya criticizes that the materialistic mind set which is a characteristic of modern society ‘killing’ humanistic values. Consequently, Bhagya, attempts to skip discussions of human feelings and emotions in depth. In contrast, when Clara was discussing the prose text “The Wave,” which is an autobiographical experience of the Tsunami which struck Sri Lanka in 2004, students shared their emotions by extending their support by touching hands or by words of support. This indicated that though the teachers perceived the students to be lacking in emotional responsiveness it is clear through classroom observations that the students did show a high degree of emotional response to familiar experiences discussed in the Literature classrooms. During her interview Bhagya, perceived the Islamic community in a stereotypical light as follows; “they would just keep blank: they just stare blankly at you because that bond is restricted (.)”. Here, she tries to justify that ‘they’, the Islamic community, lack explicit expressiveness of human emotions, feelings and bonds; she tries to apply her individual opinions to the students and generalize it and apply it to the whole Muslim community.

Clara, who is from an Islamic background, invokes an Islamic cultural point of view to express how women are restricted by the Muslim culture and how they are meted unequal treatment. In response, a student used the first-person plural pronoun ‘our’ to refer to women from the Sammandurai geographical area. This shows how students identify with their geo- specific cultural practices. The male students showed resistance to the concept of working women in their religious context, as they felt threatened. Clara, however, views it as a freedom and a right of women. Clara seemed to approach feminist themes cautiously when teaching male students and avoided discussing these themes with male students. She did not take into account individual differences in opinions, beliefs and viewpoints among the male students, whereas Askar, the male teacher, did not emphasize gender related themes at all during class. This may be because literary texts such as *The Twilight of the Crane, The Bear*, and *The Nightingale and the Rose* discussed negative attitudes to females but not to male characters. This shows gender bias which was not only visible in the target culture but also existed in students’ and teachers’ minds and it created a type of cold war between the two genders to establish who is dominant and who is submissive.

## HOW THE TENSIONS HAVE BEEN MITIGATED

The cultural gaps can sometimes be negotiated by applying intra-cultural negotiating techniques or negotiating techniques influenced by collectivism. These negotiation strategies must be time sensitive and cost effective to match teachers’ requirements and students’ needs, efficiently.

Askar was teaching the reading extract titled “My first day at school”. While dealing with this western poetical text, at first the teacher recounted his own personal experience of his first day at school. I noticed a wave of enthusiasm among the students as the students used this opportunity to produce authentic, oral answers. A similar outcome could be seen when Bhagya was discussing about her own experience of public speech. This process bridges the gap between the known and the unknown. An extract from the interview of Askar, strengthens the evidence for this claim as he says, “I use my own experience”. The use of personal experiences, emotions and feelings helps student readers to emotionally connect to the otherwise alien text. Bhagya adds that such personal stories would make the Literature learning experience “more fun”

Clara was explaining the word ‘emancipation’ in relation to the drama *The Bear,* she discussed about the Chinese women who have freed themselves from foot-binding, women from Russia who have changed their ideology of ‘widowhood’. The teacher links various cultural concepts to showcase how some extreme practices and reactionary views have been eradicated with time. Moreover, the teacher, being a woman, discusses such themes with

passion. In another instance, Clara discussed the women’s status during Georgian times, referring to the classic novel *Pride and Prejudice* and expressed how during the time of King George III, women’s rights were curbed. She emphasizes on how women at the time were sought after only for their outer appearance and not for their inherent qualities and values. Such usage of historical information while describing the literary text helps the students move from what they already know to the accommodation of new reading content in their schema. The same historical information can be recalled whenever similar ideologies and concepts are analyzed in another context. Bhagya says, “I named a few movies such as *Oliver Twist, Titanic* and *Harry Potter* which contained visuals of Victorian and Edwardian attire. The students were immediately able to recall scenes with dresses from the movies”. This top-down processing strategy immediately engaged the interest of the young students who are accustomed to watching well-known English movies. They connected to the abstract ideologies and the context of bygone times without much effort.

Bhagya, while explaining the reading extract “The story about the guinea and copper pennies”, came across the term ‘Jerusalem’. She shared the importance of Jerusalem to both Christianity and Islam. In a similar manner, Clara while discussing the novel *The Vendor of Sweets* explores how Jagan was in the habit of consuming Margosa flowers fried in ghee once a week. She then drew parallels to the food ‘Vadagam,’ a preparation made of Margosa flowers and consumed by Jaffna Tamils. Here, Clara, who is a teacher from an Islamic background, makes a connection between the food described in the Indian novel and the food habits of Sri Lankan Tamils from Jaffna. In another language- related instance, Clara, discussed the similar ideological beliefs between Hinduism and Buddhism and the rebirth concept. In her interview, she also says that; “soul theory we don’t have it in our religion, so it’s for us to make them understand so it’s up to us to explain those kinds of things”.

Bhagya, while teaching the story titled “The Strange Adventures of Penny,” initially drew a mind map. Instantly, the students used the mind map as a guide to produce positive feedback. She also expressed the following views: “I usually use the classroom as I handle visual learners so then I identify videos that are linked to that particular lesson, if not, I would tell them to draw ::: I draw sometimes, I make it fun ……”. Bhagya strongly believes that the choice of teaching aids must be determined based on individual students’ needs and she recommends the visual aids as an alternative to lengthy classroom explanations and discussions. They saved time, and the students were able to retain the content effectively.

Askar used the Sinhala word ‘*Ankurayak*’ to refer to ‘offshoots’, he also added the Arabic word ‘Nana’ to connect with the English expression ‘brother’. This usage of terms which are common in the Islamic students’ colloquial language made a bridge to the content being discussed. Consequently, a hitherto alien text became a more familiar one by infusing culturally and religiously familiar terms and a new language context was internalized and became more reader friendly. To conclude, teachers can overcome the various challenges faced in the Literature classroom by making use of the varied resources which are available to them. These resources include students’ personal experiences which are intrinsic resources, in comparison to external sources such as the usage of pictures and mind maps. A plethora of information is available and needs to be sorted and selected carefully to meet the requirements of students and the syllabus.

## CONCLUSION

In order to overcome various tensions, the teachers infused multiple strategies to minimize such differences and to effectively convey the culturally alienated reading content. Strategies such as sharing personal experiences and historical information to draw parallels between different contexts, using popular cultural aspects such as movie scenes, literary work and songs in order to make students connect and perceive the unfamiliar content easily and applying visual aid that enables students to visualize the unfamiliar content were used. Thus, classroom practitioners selected the teaching strategies which can be applicable and is effective in promoting target language and cultural capital simultaneously. Interestingly, the teachers’ identities affected their teaching. Additionally, the teachers’ preconceived notions also adversely affected the learning process. Through my observations I noticed that the

teachers tried to accommodate the “alien” by engaging in open ended discussions and exchanged their opinions and beliefs with the students to negotiate the various cultural differences. In such situations, the Islamic teacher attempted to avoid or skip other religious content in detail by addressing it as ‘haram’ or as adversely affecting their home culture’s honor. In contrast, the other non-Islamic teacher strongly felt distressed and threatened. Here, I would like to point out that, management’s and parents’ intervention and prevention of certain themes which they labelled as ‘Haram’ had an impact on the English Literature teaching-learning process negatively.

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