



Beyond the Text: Using English Prose to Expand Students' Cultural Horizons

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Abstract: Fostering cultural awareness and understanding is an essential component of higher education in today's globalized world. This study explores the potential of English prose as an instrument for expanding cultural horizons among university students. By examining the integration of culturally diverse literary works into the teaching of English prose, the study aimed to evaluate the impact of English prose on students' cultural awareness and competence. Using a descriptive-qualitative approach, data were collected through students' intellectual diaries after reading Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* novel and in-depth interviews from a sample of 37 university students enrolled in an English prose course. The findings revealed that the inclusion of culturally diverse prose significantly enhances students' understanding of different cultures and promotes their critical thinking about cultural issues. Students reported that engaging with literary works from various cultural backgrounds helped them develop empathy and broaden their perspectives on global diversity. This study concludes that English prose can be an effective tool for cultural education since it provides insights into the values, convictions, beliefs, and life experiences of people from various cultural backgrounds. This research highlights the importance of incorporating diverse literary texts into English prose teaching to prepare students for successful interactions in a multicultural world.

Keywords: English prose, cultural awareness, cultural horizons, multicultural world.

1 Introduction

In today's interconnected and rapidly globalizing world, cultural awareness is no longer just an academic pursuit; it is an essential skill for personal and professional success. The ability to understand, appreciate, and navigate different cultures is crucial for fostering empathy, reducing prejudice, and promoting global citizenship. Universities, as institutions that prepare students for the complexities of the world, play a pivotal role in cultivating these skills. One of the most powerful tools at their disposal is literature,

particularly English prose, which offers a unique and profound way to explore and understand the diverse cultures that shape our world (Kusumaningtyas, 2011). Language in literature encompasses more than just words with meaning; it also contains cultural characteristics such as habits, morality, personalities, and traditional values that define a community (Jismulatif, Dahnilyah, Delfi, & Purwanti, 2022).

Literature serves as a mirror to society, reflecting the values, struggles, and triumphs of people across different times and places. Literature reflects society in both positive and negative ways, showing the problems of society and making people realize and change them (Singh, 2022). English prose, with its rich history and global reach, is especially well-suited to this purpose. It includes works from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, offering readers a window into the thoughts, emotions, and traditions of people from various parts of the world. By engaging with English prose, students can broaden their cultural horizons and deepen their understanding of the world around them.

Traditionally, literary education has often focused on the Western canon, emphasizing works that reflect predominantly Western perspectives. Studying literature, especially prose, is not only to understand the content of the story and its literary devices but is also intended to reveal and understand the culture, traditions and thoughts that surround it. This study raises an unusual theme because the story discussed takes place in the Middle East which has a different culture from what we usually read in stories with a Western cultural background. The choice to use novels with different cultural background does not only to enrich students' cultural understanding but also fosters a more nuanced and empathetic worldview.

The Kite Runner novel was written by Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan American author, and published in 2003 (Hosseini, 2023). It explores the themes of friendship, betrayal, and redemption through the lens of Afghan culture and history. The narrative follows Amir, a young boy from Kabul, whose privileged upbringing is contrasted with the struggles of his loyal friend Hassan, a Hazara servant. The central conflict is Amir's internal struggle with guilt and shame after witnessing Hassan's brutal assault and his subsequent betrayal of their friendship. This pivotal moment not only shapes Amir's character but also reflects the broader social and ethnic tensions in Afghanistan, particularly the discrimination faced by the Hazara community at the hands of the Pashtun majority. As Amir navigates his path towards redemption, the novel delves into the lasting impact of childhood experiences and the complexities of familial relationships, ultimately emphasizing the importance of confronting one's past to seek forgiveness and healing. This novel is regarded successful in drawing readers' attention since it exposes political and social ground realities of Afghan society (Aubry, 2020). It used the Soviet Union invasion on Afghanistan as the background and the emergence of Taliban group to wage war against the Russian invasion and defend the land of Afghans (Matta, 2019).

This article aimed to explore how English prose can go beyond mere language instruction to enrich university students' cultural understanding. By employing *The Kite Runner* novel, It examined the deep connection between literature and culture, the use of English prose that enhance students' cultural awareness, and consider the long-term impact on students' cultural competence. Through this exploration, the article seeks to

demonstrate the powerful role that literature can play in expanding students' cultural horizons and preparing them for a diverse and interconnected world. Literature as a subject can develop empathy and offers readers experiences of other lives (Djikić, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013).

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Interplay between Language and Culture

Language and culture are inextricably linked. It is not merely a tool for communication; it is a cultural construct that shapes how individuals perceive and interpret the world. Language is more than just words and rules; it is also connected to cultural norms and cognitive processes. It highlights that understanding cultural contexts is essential for effective language acquisition, reinforcing the idea that language serves as a lens through which individuals view and interpret their experiences (Riley, 2023). Words, phrases, and expressions carry cultural connotations that are often unique to a particular group, reflecting their values, beliefs, and social norms. As such, language is a key component of cultural identity, influencing everything from how people interact with one another to how they understand their place in the world. Moreover, learning about other cultures and developing intercultural communication competences and skills can help facilitate multicultural encounters and can lead to more openness and tolerance towards the significant other (Llie, 2019).

Literature serves as a cultural bridge, connecting readers to experiences and viewpoints that might otherwise remain inaccessible. Literature enabling readers to explore diverse perspectives and narratives from around the world, foster understanding and empathy among people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Gopalakrishnan, 2023). By reading and analyzing prose from different cultures, students can bridge cultural divides, foster empathy and a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. For example, a novel set in a different cultural context allows readers to step close to the characters, experiencing their joys, sorrows, and challenges. This process of empathetic engagement is crucial for developing a nuanced and informed perspective on cultural differences.

English prose, with its vast and varied body of work, provides a rich reflection of diverse cultures. These narratives offer readers a glimpse into the lives, traditions, and struggles of people from different backgrounds, making literature a powerful medium for cultural exploration. Through prose, students can engage with different cultural perspectives, broadening their understanding of the world and the people who inhabit it. Overall, literature has been found to be very effective for making learners sensitive to alternative cultural perspectives (Moecharam, Sari, & Kartika, 2014).

2.2 The Impact of Literature on Cultural Awareness

Literature serves as a powerful vehicle for cultural exploration, allowing students to engage with narratives that reflect the complexities of various societies. Literature has potential to promote cultural awareness since literary texts offer cultural explorations

through embedded cultural contexts, allowing students to experience cultural differences presented in various contexts (Moecharam, Sari, & Kartika, 2014). Studying literature enhances students' ability to observe and interpret diverse cultural values and norms, prompting them to confront their own assumptions about the world. This engagement is crucial in developing cultural awareness, as it encourages students to recognize the significance of cultural contexts in shaping human experiences. Moreover, research indicates that students perceive cultural awareness as an essential aspect of learning English, viewing it as impossible to separate language from culture. This interconnectedness underscores the importance of incorporating culturally relevant texts in English curricula, as it not only enriches language learning but also fosters a deeper understanding of global perspectives.

Cultural awareness is the conscious awareness of the role culture plays in language learning and communication (in both native and foreign languages). In teaching practice, the specifics of cultural awareness are conceptualized and implemented in a variety of ways. However, many approaches agree that a systematic framework for teaching literature, language, and culture together, in which the connection between them is explicitly explored with students, is crucial. The need for students to become aware of the culturally based norms, beliefs, and behaviors of their own culture as well as those of other cultures is also emphasized in concepts of cultural awareness. Furthermore, all share a goal of increased understanding of culture and language leading to successful intercultural communication (Baker, 2012).

Literature studies can further enhance students' cultural awareness by allowing them to compare and contrast different cultural narratives. This approach helps students recognize both the uniqueness and universality of human experiences across cultures. For instance, comparing family dynamics in Indonesian and Afghan literature can reveal both the distinct cultural practices and the common human emotions that underlie family relationships in different parts of the world. Through such comparisons, students gain a more nuanced understanding of how culture influences literature and, in turn, how literature reflects and shapes culture.

3 Method

This study was objected to explore how English prose can go beyond mere language instruction to enrich university students' cultural understanding. The data used in this research was obtained from students' intellectual diaries and in-depth interviews. The intellectual diary is famously known as a reader response journal and was used to obtain students' responses and perceptions after reading *The Kite Runner* novel. The interview data was used to clarify and to know more about the students' responses and perceptions on the cultural issues discussed in the novel.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. According to Maguire & Delahunt (2017), it is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes in qualitative data. There were six stages in doing thematic analysis, they were: (a) familiarization with the data; b) generating initial codes; c) looking for themes; d) reviewing themes; e) naming and defining the themes; and (f) writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.1 Type of Research

This research employs descriptive qualitative type of research. A descriptive method in qualitative research is an approach to analysis where the researcher stays close to the data, uses limited frameworks and interpretation for explaining the data, and catalogues the information into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023)..

Qualitative research, in its simplest form, involves using words as data, which collected and analyzed in various ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research was designed to comply with reader response theory which focuses on the analysis of the response of a reader to the text. In this type of research, the reader is regarded as an active agent who imparts real existence to the text and completes its meaning through interpretation (Deshpande, 2018). It used students' intellectual diary or reader response journal as the main data to be analyzed and supported with data from in-depth interviews.

3.2 Research Subjects

There were 37 students from English Literature Study program, English Department, Faculty of Languages and Literature in Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia as subjects for this research. The reason for having them as subjects was based on their diverse background in terms of tribes, ethnicity, and religion. They all enrolled in English Prose course during the even semester of 2023/2024 academic year.

3.3 Research Procedure

This research was started by assigning students to write a personal intellectual diary based on their understanding, perceptions, and conclusions after reading *The Kite Runner* novel. The intellectual diary was used to facilitate students expressing their understanding and responses to the story in the form of reflective essays.

The next step was interviewing students using semi-structured interviews. In this form of interview, the researcher has prepared an interview guide beforehand, but does not strictly follow it, neither in terms of the exact phrasing of questions nor the sequence in which the questions are presented (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The interview was conducted to know further or to clarify the students' responses and perceptions about the novel based on their intellectual diaries.

4 Results and Discussions

The Kite Runner novel by Khaled Hosseini is a moving story about friendship, betrayal, and redemption set against the turbulent history of Afghanistan. The results of this study provide information on how the students understand and perceive some cultural points discussed through the conflict and description within this novel. By employing thematic analysis some central issues were examined based on students' responses. The following are some themes explored by students after reading and discussing *The Kite Runner*:

4.1 Cultural Awareness and Empathy

The majority of students participating in this study stated that they have a limited understanding of Afghan culture and history. Their knowledge was largely confined to brief and superficial information and often shaped by media portrayals that focus on conflict and terrorism concerning the Afghan conflict with the Soviet Union/Russia and the rise of the Taliban. After reading *The Kite Runner*, however, many of them feel a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness towards Afghan culture. The novel intricately weaves cultural practices, social norms, and historical events into its narrative, allowing readers to appreciate the richness and complexity of Afghan life.

Through its rich narrative and detailed depiction of Afghan traditions, festivals, and everyday life, offers a more nuanced view, students report a newfound appreciation for the complexity of Afghan society, recognizing the rich cultural heritage, the significance of social customs, and the profound impact of historical events underlie the novel story. This cultural awareness extends beyond the novel, leading students to seek further knowledge about Afghanistan and similar contexts.

Many students also gave empathy as they read and engaged with the struggles and conflicts of Amir and Hassan, the main characters of the novel. This emotional connection leads to a greater appreciation for the characters' experience, transcending cultural boundaries. For instance, the students express feelings of sorrow and compassion for Hassan whose loyalty and suffering resonate deeply, prompting discussions about the universal nature of friendship and betrayal. This emotional engagement is particularly significant in promoting empathy; by seeing the world through the eyes of the characters, students may develop a deeper understanding of the human condition, especially in the context of cultural and social differences. This emotional connection can foster a more compassionate and empathetic worldview.

4.2 Cultural Identity, Stereotypes, and Social Inequality

Students also explores the notion related to Afghan cultural identity, highlighting the diversity of Afghan society, including ethnic diversity and social stratification identified and stereotyped in Pashtun and Hazaras communities. The novel's depiction of the ethnic and social hierarchies in Afghan society, particularly the discrimination against the Hazara people, offers students valuable insights into issues of social inequality. Students find parallels between Amir's struggles with identity and their own experiences of belonging or alienation. Through character analysis, students articulate feelings of being caught between cultures or grappling with their own identities. This exploration leads to meaningful discussions about the factors that shape cultural identity, including family, tradition, and societal expectations.

The Kite Runner serves as a powerful tool in challenging and deconstructing stereotypes about the Middle East and its people. Many students enter the reading experience with preconceived notions about Afghanistan, often shaped by dominant media narratives that focus on violence and extremism. The novel, however, presents a more multifaceted portrayal of Afghan life and the varied experiences of its people. Students come away from the novel with a more critical understanding of how stereotypes are formed and perpetuated, and how literature can play a role in breaking down these

simplistic views. drawing parallels to similar issues in their own societies. The exploration of these themes in *The Kite Runner* might inspire students to engage more deeply with issues of inequality, both in their local communities and on a global scale

4.3 Social Justice and Human Rights

The novel's depiction of social injustices, particularly regarding women's rights and the impact of war, serves as a catalyst for discussions about social justice. Students frequently express a newfound awareness of these issues, prompting them to engage critically with contemporary social challenges. Many students report feeling inspired to take action in their communities after reflecting on the injustices portrayed in the novel. This engagement can manifest in various forms, from volunteering to advocating for social change, demonstrating the powerful impact literature can have on fostering social responsibility.

The novel's exploration of the impact of war, political turmoil, and the refugee experience resonates with students, prompting them to learn more about these issues. Many students reported that the novel has inspired them to become more engaged with global events, particularly those related to human rights, conflict, and displacement. This increased interest in global issues can lead to a more informed and active engagement with the world, as students seek to understand and address the challenges faced by people in different parts of the world.

4.4 Moral and Ethical Dilemma

The novel is rich in moral and ethical dilemmas, which serve as a catalyst for students' self-reflection. The choices made by characters, particularly Amir's early betrayal of Hassan, invite students to grapple with questions of right and wrong, loyalty, and the possibility of redemption. These discussions often extend beyond the classroom, as students apply the novel's ethical questions to their own lives. The novel's exploration of complex moral issues encourages students to think critically about their values and the consequences of their actions, fostering a deeper understanding of ethical behavior in a complex world.

The themes of guilt, redemption, and forgiveness are central to the narrative and reflect both personal and cultural dimensions. Students often analyze how these themes are portrayed through Amir's journey, highlighting the cultural implications of honor and shame in Afghan society. Discussions around these themes encourage students to reflect on their own values and experiences. Many students reported that the novel prompts them to consider the importance of forgiveness in their lives, leading to personal revelations about their relationships and responsibilities. This introspection can foster a more nuanced understanding of moral complexities in their own cultural contexts.

4.5 Cross-Cultural Understanding and Personal Reflection

By comparing their own cultural backgrounds with the Afghan culture depicted in the novel, students gained insights into cross-cultural differences and similarities. This

comparative analysis fosters a more nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics. Students expressed a greater appreciation for the complexities of cultural adaptation and the challenges faced by individuals navigating multiple cultural identities. This understanding led to more meaningful interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds. Students found personal connections to the novel's characters and their experiences. The emotional weight of the narrative encourages students to reflect on their own lives, relationships, and the concept of loyalty. Through personal reflection, they articulated how the novel has shaped their views on family dynamics and friendships. This introspective process not only enhances their understanding of the narrative but also deepens their emotional intelligence.

The novel's exploration of themes such as identity, loyalty, and forgiveness also led to significant personal growth among students. Many students reported that reading *The Kite Runner* has broadened their horizons, making them more open-minded and empathetic towards people from different cultural backgrounds. The novel challenges students to think beyond their immediate experiences and to consider the broader human experience, particularly in the context of suffering, resilience, and the quest for redemption. This personal growth may manifest in students becoming more reflective, compassionate, and socially conscious individuals.

5 Conclusion

This research underscores the profound impact of English prose on expanding students' cultural horizons. By engaging with Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, students not only develop a deeper understanding of various cultural contexts, particularly Afghan culture, but also cultivate essential skills in empathy, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. The result of this study highlighted the significance of incorporating culturally relevant texts into English prose course, as this approach fosters a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of global perspectives. Moreover, the role of global literature in promoting cross-cultural empathy and understanding is particularly noteworthy. By exposing students to narratives from different regions and cultures, we equip them with the tools necessary to navigate a multicultural society with respect and tolerance.

The implications of the research are multifaceted and far-reaching in which the teachers should prioritize the inclusion of diverse texts in teaching to ensure that students receive a well-rounded education that reflects the complexities of our globalized world, and education policymakers should recognize the importance of cultural education in shaping future generations of global citizens. By collectively embracing this approach, we can create a more empathetic and culturally aware society, where individuals are equipped to engage constructively with diverse perspectives and contribute positively to global dialogue. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that literature remains a powerful catalyst for cultural expansion and understanding, and its continued integration into educational frameworks is essential for fostering a more harmonious and inclusive world.

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