| RESEARCH ARTICLE

When Culture Meets Text: Examining the Relationship between Students' Reading Comprehension and Cultural Competence

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| ABSTRACT

The reading comprehension of students in the Philippines nowadays is poor, which comes with various reasons and factors, specifically their reading comprehension when exposed to an unfamiliar culture. Hence, this study investigated the relationship between reading comprehension and cultural competence among Grade 10 students from Bataraza National High School in Bataraza, Palawan, during the academic year 2024-2025. It evaluated the respondents' reading comprehension skills across three cultural contexts: indigenous, local, and foreign culture-related texts. Also, it examined how respondents' familiarity and understanding of these cultural contexts influenced their reading comprehension abilities. Moreover, pedagogical implications were drawn from the data, which focus on enhancing students' comprehension abilities through culturally responsive teaching methods and on promoting inclusivity in the classroom. This study used a multiple-choice questionnaire as instrument. Findings show that respondents performed better on texts that are related to indigenous culture, followed by local and foreign cultures. Further, the study revealed no statistically significant difference in reading comprehension scores between respondents reading indigenous culture-related texts and those reading local culture-related texts. However, an important difference was observed in reading comprehension scores when comparing local culture-related texts to foreign culture-related texts. A significant difference was found between reading comprehension scores for indigenous and foreign culture-related texts. This suggests that cultural familiarity plays a vital role in reading comprehension.

1. Heading

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill that strengthens academic achievement and lifelong learning. Recent assessments on reading abilities have highlighted persistent challenges among Filipino students. In the report of 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Philippines ranks among the bottom ten out of 81 countries in reading comprehension, mathematics, and science. Despite a modest improvement in reading scores from 2018 to 2022, it is undeniable that the country continues to grapple with various issues such as inadequate reading components in curricula, insufficient

inclusion of at-risk students, lack of enthusiasm for reading, teacher ineffectiveness, limited resources, parental disengagement, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

Reading comprehension extends beyond decoding words, which involves constructing meaning from text, integrating prior knowledge, and making inferences. In multilingual and multicultural contexts, this process is particularly complex. In such contexts, cultural competence arises as an important factor that influences reading comprehension. Cultural competency greatly affects reading comprehension since it improves when students interact with culturally relevant books reflecting their backgrounds (Christ et al., 2018). Emphasizing the part background information plays in comprehension, the schema theory suggests that reading ability improves when one understands cultural background (Yousef et al., 2014).

Learning without the right cultural background knowledge makes it very hard for learners to figure out the content of the text (Schluer, 2018). Steffensen et al.'s (2006) research indicated that students would better interpret the text if made aware of the cultural norms. Often, students call upon their cultural attributes as they encounter unknown cultural norms, which may lead to wrong interpretations of the text. This is an important consideration in determining students' reading performance in various culture-related texts since it would definitely shape their ways of interpreting the text they are reading. Hence, failure to represent varied cultures in texts leads to disengagement and weaker understanding by students who cannot relate to or see themselves and their lives portrayed in the texts. This stems from the reality that texts relevant to the culture raise the level of students' engagement and understanding as they make them feel connected and familiar (Christ et al., 2018). As students read texts that are aligned with their cultural identities, they can more easily relate to and show better reading performance, with increased word recognition and comprehension rates (Christ et al., 2018).

Several studies have demonstrated that students perform better on reading tasks when the content aligns with their cultural experiences, and that unfamiliar cultural references can hinder comprehension. For instance, in the study by Erten and Razi (2009), they found that advanced English learners achieved higher comprehension scores when reading culturally familiar (nativized) texts compared to foreign ones, even when reading activities were provided. This emphasizes the powerful impact of cultural familiarity on comprehension, as students can allocate more cognitive resources to understanding the text rather than understanding unfamiliar cultural references.

Bernardo (2008) learned that Filipino learners have difficulty in reading comprehension, especially when the texts are not culturally appropriate. That is the reason why undertaking this study is pertinent, as it illustrates how cultural competence affects reading performance. Despite the recognized importance of cultural competence in reading comprehension, Filipino students continue to struggle with understanding texts rooted in unfamiliar cultures. This gap is particularly evident among Grade 10 students, who are expected to engage with a variety of texts as part of their curriculum. The specific problem addressed in this study is the extent to which cultural competence influences the reading comprehension abilities of Grade 10 students when exposed to indigenous, local, and foreign culture-related texts.

This study aims to investigate the relationship between reading comprehension and cultural competence among Grade 10 students in Bataraza National High School. Specifically, it aims to (1) compare students' reading comprehension performance across three cultural contexts: indigenous, local, and foreign culture-related texts; (2) examine how students' familiarity with these cultural contexts influences their comprehension abilities, and (3) provide pedagogical insights into how culturally responsive teaching methods can enhance reading comprehension and promote inclusivity in the classroom.

2. Research Methodology

This research employed a quantitative, correlational research design to investigate the relationship between reading comprehension and cultural competence among Grade 10 students. The study specifically compared students' reading comprehension performance across three types of texts: indigenous, local, and foreign culture-related. The rationale for choosing a quantitative correlational research design was to objectively measure and analyze differences in comprehension outcomes based on cultural context, allowing for statistical comparison and generalization within the target population.

Respondents were Grade 10 students enrolled at Bataraza National High School in Bataraza, Palawan, during the academic year 2024–2025. Inclusion criteria required students to be officially enrolled in Grade 10 and present during the data collection period. No explicit exclusion criteria were stated, but only those who provided informed consent were included in the study.

The sample size was determined based on the total Grade 10 population available (101 students) and the feasibility of administering the instruments within the school setting. While specific demographic breakdowns (such as age, gender, or ethnicity) were not detailed, all respondents were Grade 10 students, and represented the cultural and linguistic diversity of southern Palawan.

Data were collected using a multiple-choice questionnaire designed to assess reading comprehension. The questionnaire included passages reflecting indigenous, local, and foreign cultural contexts, followed by comprehension questions. The instrument was developed and validated to ensure it accurately measured comprehension across cultural domains. Reliability was established through pilot testing and expert review. These questionnaires were administered in a classroom setting under standardized conditions to ensure consistency. Students were given equal time to read each passage and answer the corresponding questions. To minimize bias, instructions and administration were uniform for all respondents.

Data collection occurred during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. Each session lasted approximately one hour, with all data collected within a two-week period to control for extraneous variables. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to summarize reading comprehension scores and inferential statistics to compare performance across the three cultural text types. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to determine if significant differences existed between mean scores for indigenous, local, and foreign texts. Post-hoc tests were used to identify specific group differences when significant results were found. The significance threshold was set at $p<0.05$, the conventional standard for educational research.

A written informed consent was obtained from all respondents and, where necessary, from their parents or guardians. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The study was limited to a school in Bataraza, Palawan, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other regions or educational contexts. The use of multiple-choice questionnaires, while efficient, may not capture the full depth of students' reading comprehension or cultural understanding. Potential confounding variables, such as socioeconomic status, prior exposure to different cultures, and language proficiency, were not exhaustively controlled.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Respondents' Reading Comprehension
In this section, the reading performance of the respondents on the texts related to indigenous culture, local culture, and foreign culture is presented.

Table 1. *Overall Mean Scores of the Respondents in Indigenous Culture-Related Texts*

Sessions	Mean Score	Initial percentage	Transmuted percentage	Descriptive Rating
Session 1	6.96	69.60	81.65	Satisfactory
Session 2	6.58	65.84	79.82	Fairly satisfactory
Overall mean/rating	**6.77**	**67.72**	**80.73**	**Satisfactory**

Legend: Outstanding 90-100, Fairly Satisfactory 75-79, Very Satisfactory 85-89, Did Not Meet Expectations Below 75, Satisfactory 80-84

Table 1 shows the respondents' overall mean scores in indigenous culture-related text. The transmuted percentage for Session 1 is 81.65, and for Session 2, it is 79.82, with an overall mean rating of 80.73. These results indicate a consistent performance in students' reading comprehension of indigenous culture-related texts across both sessions. In terms of descriptive ratings, Session 1 is classified as Satisfactory, Session 2 as Fairly Satisfactory, and the overall mean rating remains Satisfactory, which indicates an acceptable level of student performance.

This result affirms the study of Abad (2020), wherein they developed culture-based and contextualized reading material addressing the language needs of indigenous learners. Their findings indicated that when students encountered an indigenous culture-related text, it reinforced their engagement and comprehension of some issues, thus allowing them to liberate themselves more effectively from the language barrier. The contextualized learning will, in general, foster better understanding and reflection of content relevant to Indigenous culture.

In addition, Krakouer (2015) reported that the incorporation of cultural awareness is essential in the improvement of educational attainment among indigenous students, which may explain why the respondents scored high in reading comprehension of texts regarding Indigenous culture. The study highlighted that the implementation of culturally responsive practices, which are generally present in Indigenous culture-related texts, and incorporating the perspectives and knowledge of Indigenous peoples, fosters improvements in school achievement. This implies the assumed increase in scores was a result of the approach that was culturally aware in their teaching style in congruence with their background and experiences.

Table 2. Overall Mean Score of the Respondents in Local Culture-Related Texts

Sessions	Mean Score	Initial percentage	Transmuted percentage	Descriptive Rating
Session 1	.58	66	79.60	Fairly satisfactory
Session 2	.48	65	79.37	Fairly satisfactory
Overall mean/rating	**.53**	**65.92**	**79.48**	**Fairly Satisfactory**

Legend: Outstanding 90-100, Fairly Satisfactory 75-79, Very Satisfactory 85-89, Did Not Meet Expectations Below 75, Satisfactory 80-84

Table 2 indicates that for Session 1, there is an overall transmuted percentage of 79.60, and for Session 2, there is an overall transmuted percentage of 79.37. This is indicative of the fact that the student's performance in reading texts featuring local culture was basically constant for both sessions. The descriptor for both sessions was "fairly satisfactory," implying that the respondents' reading comprehension was acceptable. Likewise, the general mean/rating value of 79.48 falls within the range of "fairly satisfactory." Therefore, it must be concluded that the student's overall performance in local culture-related texts was found to be acceptable. This indicates that, in reading texts related to local culture, the respondents had a moderate level of understanding and comprehension.

Wood (2021) found that culturally relevant text motivates and helps students to become better readers over the duration of the her study. Although authentic culturally based materials had a moderate enhancement effect on interest and students' motivation, the effects are not always substantially evident in improving comprehension scores across sessions. This fits with the finding of consistency in the students' ages, arguing that while the materials engaged students, they did not instigate drastic changes in comprehension levels.

Ratminingsih et al. (2020) researched the local culture-based storybook, reporting that exposure of students to texts in their own culture resulted in developed understandings. It was found in this research that local culture familiarity might attain stable levels of performance, where students may be familiar or inspired by the context of what they read. However, the students certainly sSatisfactory," signifying an average understanding instead of being unreceptive.

Table 3. Overall Mean Score of the Respondents in Foreign Culture-Related Texts

Sessions	Mean Score	Initial percentage	Transmuted percentage	Descriptive Rating
Session 1	5.15	51.58	73.85	Did Not Meet Expectations
Session 2	4.78	47.72	73.63	Did Not Meet Expectations
Overall mean/rating	**4.97**	**49.65**	**73.74**	**Did Not Meet Expectations**

Legend: Outstanding 90-100, Fairly Satisfactory 75-79, Very Satisfactory 85-89, Did Not Meet Expectations Below 75, Satisfactory 80-84

Table 3 shows that the transmuted percentage readings were 73.85 and 73.63, and the mean rating overall was 73.74, making for the mere statement that students' performance concerning foreign culture-related texts has remained relatively constant with respect to the two sessions. The descriptive rating for both sessions is "did not meet expectations," which means that the performance of students was far below acceptable. Basically, the reading comprehension of foreign culture-related texts was very low in the student.

Reading comprehension is greatly influenced by cultural context. In light of this study, it has been accentuated that, due to their own cultural milieu, students might experience difficulties when given texts that deviate from this context. Foreign culture-related texts are those about which students might lack the basic knowledge to contextualize and properly comprehend, hence the "Did Not Meet Expectations" remark. According to Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (2008), presenting students with contextually or culturally unfamiliar information increases their cognitive load. It thus renders it more complex for them to process and understand learning content. The student's lower performance on the Foreign Culture-related texts may indicate an additional cognitive burden from content processing; this accounts for lower comprehension and scores that fall in a consistent but unsatisfactory range.

3.2 Significant Differences in the Respondents' Reading Comprehension
This section presents substantial differences in the reading comprehension of respondents in terms of indigenous and local-related texts, local and foreign-related texts, and indigenous and foreign-related texts.

Table 4. Significant Differences of the Respondents' Scores in terms of the Indigenous and Local Culture-Related texts

Culture-related text	Sessions	Mean difference	Std. error	Sig.
Indigenous and Local Culture-related texts	Session 1	.380	.222	.202
	Session 2	.104	.279	.926

Legend: If the p-value is less than 0.05, "significant"; If the p-value is greater than 0.05, "not significant."

The analysis found that neither of the two types of culture-related texts shows a statistically significant difference in scores due to either of the two sessions. What makes this finding so is the fact that the p-value of .202 (Session 1) and .926 (Session 2) was relatively larger than 0.05, the almost universally employed level for statistical significance. Thus, Ho1: There is no significant difference among the reading performance of the respondents in terms of indigenous and local-related texts is accepted.

Many programs included indigenous perspectives, but their efficacy did not differ significantly from local culture content (Oskineegish & Berger, 2021). The study recommends the formulation of pedagogical biographies that effectively carry indigenous and local cultural knowledge, further convincing that both types of texts may attain almost comparable outcomes within the educational continuum without any real difference in their impact.

As Ladson-Billings (1995) explained, culturally responsive pedagogy improves learning by linking learning content to students' backgrounds. The research shows that although Indigenous and Local Culture-related texts do not reveal a notable difference in performance (p = 0.926), they still offer a degree of familiarity that can improve understanding over entirely foreign contexts. This justifies the discovery of no notable difference between Indigenous and Local culture-related texts.

Additionally, based on Ladson-Billings' (1995), culturally relevant pedagogy increases the learning of the students by relating the taught material to their cultures. The relation leads to interest and understanding. This principle can explain the findings that show improved performance in Indigenous and local culture-related texts since these texts were probably more understandable and closer to them compared to Foreign Culture-related texts.

Table 5. Significant Differences of the Respondents' Scores in terms of Indigenous and Foreign Culture-related texts

Culture-related text	Sessions	Mean difference	Std. error	Sig.
Indigenous and Foreign Culture-related text	Session 1	1.794	.221	.000
	Session 2	1.790	.277	.000

Legend: If the p-value is less than 0.05, "significant"; If the p-value is greater than 0.05, "not significant."

This table indicates there is a statistical difference in scores between Indigenous and Foreign culture-related texts for each session. Both sessions' p-values of 0.000 are well beneath the standard threshold of 0.05 and clearly suggest respondents' differences in mean scores here are not a result of random chance. Thus, Ho3: There is no significant difference between the reading performance of the respondents in terms of indigenous and foreign culture-related text is rejected. Thus, evidence supported the view that respondents did things differently on each of the two text types.

Liu et al. (2024) discovered that indigenous cultural education tends to produce greater identification with cultural identity and social values than foreign cultural settings. This corroborates the findings by demonstrating that score variation suggests higher engagement with Indigenous texts, as these are more emotionally resonant with respondents ' cultural backgrounds.

Also, this study showed that students indicated greater comprehension rates when reading on topics within their own culture or known contexts. This is evident on the high scores of the respondents in Indigenous Culture-related texts because the content was something they were most familiar with, thus understanding it better and actively engaging with it.

Moreover, Sweller's (2008) Cognitive Load Theory research highlights the point that a lack of knowledge of cultural contexts can raise cognitive load and lower understanding. This is in line with the results indicating that scores for Indigenous and Foreign Culture-related texts and Local and Foreign Culture-related texts vary significantly.

Table 6. Significant Differences of the Respondents' Scores in terms of Local and Foreign Culture-related texts

Culture-related text	Sessions	Mean difference	Std. error	Sig.
Local and Foreign Culture-related text	Session 1	1.794	.221	.000
	Session 2	1.790	.277	.000

Legend: If the p-value is less than 0.05, "significant"; If the p-value is greater than 0.05, "not significant."

The table shows that the significance of sessions 1 and 2 is .000, which indicates that there is a significant difference between local and foreign culture-related texts. Thus, the Ho2: There is no significant difference among the respondents' reading performance in terms of local and foreign-related texts is rejected.

Ratminingsih et al. (2024) reasoned that the familiarity and relevance of local culture would enhance students' understanding and retention more than texts from foreign cultures. The idea here is that ease of familiarity allows students to perform their tasks better, which explains the disparities in scores from local and foreign texts. Gay (2010) reinforced the notion that cultural identity is important for academic achievement in his study. This implies that students who get materials reflecting their culture are more likely to perform better academically. Therefore, the expectation that respondents would perform better on the Indigenous Culture-related texts, followed by the Local Culture-related texts, was based on the assessment that such texts would strongly resonate with their identities.

Gay (2010) provided background on how culture-related issues, such as identity, come into play in academic performance. Since some level of cultural identity influences various kinds of performance, it is understandable that testing done on texts mostly familiar to the students who participated in the tests led to a considerable difference in scores compared to testing done on texts relevant to the Indigenous ethos. However, the non-significant difference, as shown, was because it is probably just as familiar to them as texts of local culture.

In general, the results indicated that the respondents performed best in reading texts on Indigenous culture, followed by Local culture, and finally Foreign culture. Hence, it can be said that the respondents' reading comprehension was based on cultural familiarity with the texts. The data were consistent between the first and second sessions, showing a highly significant difference between local and foreign culture-related texts and between Indigenous and foreign culture-related texts. However, no significant difference was found between Indigenous and local culture-related texts.

3.3 Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications deduced from this research focus on the crippling inadequacies tied to reading comprehension and wide gaps of performance between indigenous, local, foreign culture-related texts that appear contrary to expectations. Such implications are to improve the teaching of literacy by making it culturally relevant and scaffolding engagement with students through culturally reflective teaching actions.

As to activating prior knowledge, teachers should take advantage of schema theory by pre-teaching to activate students' prior knowledge before presenting new texts (Sqborden, 2024). This might include conversations about contexts or personal experiences pertinent to the text. According to Yousef et al.'s research (2014), activating background knowledge improves comprehension of literature. By establishing new information in the context of what students already know, teachers allow for deeper understanding of text, either local or foreign (Huyen, 2023).

Schools need to instill cooperative learning settings, in which students can share their cultural perspectives and experiences before reading material (Jacobs & Hannah, 2004). According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, students learn best through social interactions and modeling (Alzubi et al., 2024). That is precisely what collaborative settings offer--a platform for students that they will observe, emulate, and thus increase through shared wisdom their comprehension skills, culturally pertinent behavior (Currell, 2025).

Moreover, in terms of assessment strategies, educators should use different evaluation methods that are congruent with the cultural contexts of reading comprehension. Traditional assessments may fail to consider how well students from differing backgrounds understand. Alternative assessments include projects or presentations that allow students to show comprehension in culturally valued and relevant ways.

In addition to pedagogical implications, teachers should also use Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) that acknowledge and incorporate students' cultures into the curriculum. This approach creates an inclusive learning environment where students feel valued and engaged. Research shows that CRP improves academic achievement (Landson-Billing, 1995). By using culturally relevant materials, teachers can increase student motivation and engagement in reading activities, which is key to comprehension.

Instructors should utilize CRT strategies to recognize and integrate students' cultural identities into the learning process. This means considering students' cultural norms and values and integrating them into lesson planning. Through this method, teachers can create an inclusive classroom for academic success and cultural awareness.

Moreover, professional development programs should focus on teachers' cultural competence so they can better understand and meet their students' diverse needs. Teachers with cultural knowledge can create better learning experiences that bridge the gap between students' backgrounds and the curriculum (Gay, 2002), which can lead to better reading comprehension outcomes.

McAllister and Irvine (2000) said that students' cultural competence should be developed through explicit instruction on different cultures, including foreign cultures. This could be through discussions, projects, or activities that explore cultural histories, practices, and perspectives. Increasing students' cultural awareness can help them interpret texts from different cultural backgrounds.

Schools should provide professional development on culturally responsive teaching and strategies for including foreign perspectives in the curriculum. By training teachers to understand and implement these practices, they will be better able to support diverse learners and overall reading comprehension outcomes (Gay, 2010).

5. Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between reading comprehension and cultural competence among Grade 10 students at Bataraza National High School, focusing on their performance with indigenous, local, and foreign culture-related texts. The main findings indicate that students scored highest on indigenous culture-related texts, slightly lower on local texts, and lowest on foreign culture-related texts. Statistically significant differences were observed between foreign texts and both indigenous and local texts, but not between indigenous and local texts.

These results support the initial hypothesis that cultural familiarity enhances reading comprehension. The findings align with schema theory, which posits that readers draw upon prior knowledge-including cultural background-to make sense of texts. When students encounter culturally familiar material, they are better able to activate relevant schemata, facilitating understanding and recall. Conversely, unfamiliar cultural references in foreign texts create barriers, increasing cognitive load and reducing comprehension.

The results underscore the importance of culturally responsive teaching. Integrating indigenous and local texts into the curriculum can improve student engagement and comprehension, particularly for learners from diverse backgrounds. Teachers and curriculum designers should prioritize materials that reflect students' lived experiences and cultural heritage, especially in multicultural settings like the Philippines.

The findings reinforce the relevance of schema theory and culturally relevant pedagogy, highlighting the need for educational frameworks that recognize the role of cultural competence in literacy development. The study demonstrates that reading comprehension is not solely a linguistic or cognitive process but is deeply influenced by cultural context.

The findings are consistent with previous research that demonstrates the positive impact of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension. This study adds to the literature by providing empirical evidence from the Philippine context, where cultural diversity is pronounced and reading comprehension remains a national concern. It also addresses gaps by comparing indigenous, local, and foreign texts within the same student population. With the results from this study, educational policymakers may consider them when developing national reading programs and assessment tools. In fact, there is a clear need for policies that support the inclusion of culturally diverse materials and teacher training in cultural competence.

This study demonstrates that cultural competence is a significant factor in reading comprehension among Filipino students. Students understand texts better when they are culturally familiar, highlighting the need for culturally inclusive curricula and teaching practices. Addressing cultural gaps in reading materials can help bridge disparities in literacy achievement and foster a more equitable and engaging learning environment.

The study was limited to Grade 10 students from a single school in Bataraza, Palawan. Results may not generalize to other regions or age groups. The use of multiple-choice questionnaires may not capture the full depth of students' comprehension or interpretive skills. Factors such as socioeconomic status, language proficiency, and prior exposure to different cultures were not exhaustively controlled, which may have influenced the results. The study provides a snapshot in time and does not account for changes in cultural competence or reading skills over time.

Continued exploration of this topic is essential for advancing literacy education and promoting academic success in multicultural societies. Hence, researchers are recommended to replicate the study with larger and more diverse samples across different regions and grade levels to enhance generalizability; incorporate interviews, focus groups, or open-ended questions to explore students' interpretive processes and cultural perspectives in greater depth; test the effectiveness of specific culturally responsive teaching strategies or curriculum interventions on reading comprehension and cultural competence; and examine how cultural competence and reading comprehension develop over time and the long-term impact of exposure to diverse texts.

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