

# Cultivating Students' Intercultural Awareness through Literature in Language Teaching

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**Abstract:** Literature in the language teaching can be used to arouse students' intercultural awareness. They are asked through a range of techniques to respond to the unfamiliar experience from different perspectives and to identify and understand aspects of a foreign culture in the literature. The assessment of their understanding is carried out against specific criteria. The paper shows how a literary text can be used to develop an understanding of otherness and how students' intercultural competence can be developed through the literature texts.

**Key words:** literature language teaching intercultural competence

## 1. Introduction

The world is getting smaller and smaller. Improvement in transportation, developments in communication technology and globalization of the economy have made intercultural communication more necessary than ever. Language learning is therefore an important element for intercultural communication. Communicative competence includes not only the linguistic knowledge but also appropriateness. That is, the knowledge when and where to use sentences and to whom (Richards, Platt and Webber, 1985: 49). In this sense, intercultural learning is essential for better communication (Neustupny, 1988).

## 2. Why Students' Intercultural Competence Is Developed?

The purpose should be seen in the light of the need to understand other cultures despite differences. There is a need for greater intercultural competence within Xinjiang. Teachers today work in classrooms with students from different cultures because there are 13 ethnic groups inhabited in Xinjiang. At the same time, the national curriculum requires the teacher to familiarize the students with Chinese culture, as well as to contribute to the understanding of other cultures and of human interaction with nature.

The teachers should thus be able to cultivate students' intercultural competence and instill into the students the will to understand and respect people who are different from what they know. These demands on the teachers require particular skills.

## 3. Why Literature is used to Develop Students' Intercultural Competence?

It is generally accepted that literature is a reflection of society's view, values and beliefs: a reflection of the social, political, cultural development of any society. It reveals people's ideas and dreams in the most creative and imaginative way. Literary works live in time---in the past, at the present, in the future; there is also a certain continuity of time. This continuity can be interpreted in the following way: in the literature of the past we can find

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the roots of the present; in the literature of the future we believe we'll see the traditions of the past. Literature contains and presents both the transition of time and social reality as the agent of change. This motivates the reader to seek for some real truth about time in the literary works and justifies literature texts as reliable, truthful resources of cultural representation.

Literature texts are suitable for developing intercultural communicative competence. Not only do they invite their readers to view subjectively a nation or an ethnic group by portraying specific values, prejudices and stereotypes, but they also offer their audience the chance to exchange their culturally restricted points of view together with the hero or heroine of the narrative, or with the narrator telling his story. Literature texts guide their readers through the reading process focusing their attention not only on actions and characters (Rosenblatt 1982; Bredella, 1996). The 'efferent reading' of texts, a special way of reading fictional texts 'aesthetically' (Rosenblatt, 1981; Bredella, 1996), enables and strengthens the readers' interaction with the text, their predicting abilities, their emotional responses as well as their forming and re-forming of hypotheses during the reading process, all of which are necessary to fill the text with meaning. These ideas, based on concepts of literary receptionist theory, imply that teachers work with a story or poem in class not only on a cognitive level but also on an affective one, offering analytical and creative tasks to arrive at a deeper understanding of the text. Often creative tasks lend themselves to a blend of literary and intercultural objectives, leaving enough space and an 'anxiety-free' zone for the learners in which they can experiment with different perspectives and culturally different points of view as well as compare their own culture to the culture in the text.

#### 4. The Project and Subjects

The project is a small-scale research based on the classroom dealing with English reading class in which there are 45 in-service student teachers studying English as their major and they are in their second year at Xinjiang Educational College. The students range in age from 25-35. Their English proficiency can range from middle to upper intermediate.

Since my project was carried out with student teachers taking their course of English intensive reading, I thought it worth trying to explore the textual level that allows for comparing literature texts and analyzing them as linguistic expressions of a particular culture. The text book I am using this term is *A New English Course Book 3*, in which stories I chose are *Christmas* written by Floyd Dell, an American writer, and Dickens's *Christmas Carol*. In order to expand our comparison, I decided to add another Chinese story *Wishes* written by Luxun, one of the influential writers in China.

The three pieces of literature I had in mind were the following:

a) An excerpt from Floyd Dell's *Christmas* is about how a little boy, who at first had no idea what poverty meant, gradually begins to realize that his family is very poor, how he comes to understand the social and psychological consequences of such a state, and how he grows mature in mind, as it were. The scene of the story is set in the boy's home at Christmas during the hard times.

b) An excerpt from Dickens's *Christmas Carol* describes the Cratchits' Christmas dinner. Bob Cratchit was clerk for Scrooge, stockbroker. Though Cratchit maintained a large family on 15 shillings a week, he had a happier home and spent a merrier Christmas than his master, with all his wealth and selfishness.

c) Luxun's short story *Wishes* is about a Chinese lady whose son was eaten by a wolf just before the Chinese New Year. She was driven mad by telling her son's story to everyone she saw. She wished her son could have been found. Finally she died in the sea of wishes and New Year's firework.

The lessons will be described briefly, emphasizing the teacher's methods, the various tasks and the students' performances, some of which will be analysed in full details to demonstrate the actual intercultural potential of

story and tasks.

#### 4.1 The intercultural objectives for this lesson

Writers on the subject have found it difficult to define intercultural objectives for the foreign language classroom clearly and unambiguously, though numerous attempts in this direction have been published. Ten years ago, Knapp/Knapp-Potthoff (1990) published one of the first lists of intercultural objectives, which led to a vivid discussion about which has priority, linguistic and discourse competence or sociolinguistic aims and political awareness (Edmondson/House, 1998; Hu, 1999). The most important and comprehensive model is, however, the catalogue of objectives referring to the assessment and evaluation of pupils' Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997). Based on a model of FLT that provides students with linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competences, Byram suggests that the learner should become an intercultural speaker instead of aiming at a near-native capacity (Byram 1997, 1998; Kramersch, 1998) and arrives at a catalogue of objectives that includes skills, attitudes, knowledge and educational factors in teaching intercultural competence. Yet, his model is an all-encompassing one that cannot be easily fit into most Chinese school curricula. Singling out some of its parts, however, would deprive the model of its consistency.

Other attempts to assess intercultural learning aim at the description of special methods of teaching intercultural communication, like, for example, ethnographic projects (Byram and Cain, 1998; Barro, Jordan and Roberts, 1998), lessons based on informative texts or other authentic material (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993) and lessons based on the teaching of literature (Bredella, 1997; Schewe, 1998; Schinschke, 1995). In most cases, however, the formulation of objectives remains somewhat vague (Bredella 1997; Nü nning 1997; Seletzky 1996) , leaving teachers at a loss as to what to expect from their learners, how to structure their lessons and how to assess their students' achievements. The following intercultural objectives for literature-based EFL lessons have been tested during my empirical work, which involved 24 lessons .The objectives aim at a combination of abstract criteria--- as can be found in publications like Byram (1997: 57) --- with objectively observable behaviour. Thus, a teacher can verify and assess the learners' attempts to solve various tasks. In most classes, a meta-phase at the end of a teaching unit allows learners to look back on and discuss their own progress and their learning process in the field of intercultural learning. As far as possible, my definitions of objectives include observable behaviour, i.e. learners' actions, answers, texts, etc. It cannot be avoided that these intercultural objectives often overlap with educational or linguistic ones, which is, however, irrelevant in this article.

#### 4.2 Objectives of these lessons

The learners can:

- (1) identify and recognise elements from foreign cultures in the literary texts;
- (2) identify a conflict/misunderstanding between cultures in the literary texts;
- (3) understand the fictional characters in the literary texts;
- (4) express their feelings about the fictional characters;
- (5) compare their own culturally determined opinions and attitudes towards the texts and its fictional characters with that of other learners in the class (Uygur nationalities, one of the major ethnic groups in Xinjiang);

My objective was not the comparison of the literary texts as classic texts. It was rather to compare the images and characters the writers used in describing Christmas as a symbol of a particular culture. My intention was to shift the students' attention from the purely linguistic analysis of the text to a more culture-oriented analysis. Accordingly, I wanted to place the emphasis on the contrast with the students' known 'home' literature and culture rather than 'establish literary and cultural parameters, especially where the difference between the learner's own culture and the target culture is large' (Durant, 1977: 20).

The students worked in groups of five or six. They were asked to read each text quickly under the guidance

of my pre-leading questions. At the same time, for the sake of clarity and timesaving, I advised them to compare the images and the characters used in the description of the texts, which were then presented orally. After their reading and lively discussion, the students found out a great number of similar images of Christmas in two English excerpts, such as Christmas fire, Christmas tree, the cold Christmas weather, the description of poor and rich characters in three texts though there is no symbol of Christmas in Luxun's story. The students noticed that the story began with wish and ended in wish. The development of details of the story had a close relation with the character of Xianglinsao. From the texts the students concluded that the three texts deal with the same universal topic of social poverty that becomes even sharper at times of celebration. The English texts reflect the social events most profoundly and at the same time it is the most religious and most 'Christian' and spiritual. However the Chinese story *Wish* is about the bitter life of Xianglinsao. In fact, it is a sharp contrast of happiness of the rich and bitterness of the poor.

It is not easy to establish general procedures of comparing and contrasting method in cultural studies. Still, this method can inspire intercultural interest in the students by raising their own cultural awareness and using it as a basis for intercultural communication. The possibility of fulfilling some of the aims of the cultural dimension in language teaching as stated by Byram and Risager (1999), namely:

- Giving students an understanding of their own cultural identity;
- Developing their ability to see similarities and differences among cultures;
- Helping students to acquire an interested and critical attitude towards cultural/social issues;
- Breaking down prejudices and developing students' tolerance;
- Making language teaching more motivating.

This part of project proved that literary texts could be used as a successful tool in the teaching of English in the dimension of cultural learning. And literary texts could provide a good basis for developing the cultural skills of the students and achieving the ultimate goal of culture teaching--- the skill for 'reading' another culture, 'interpreting' what they have read and 'understanding' it.

In recent times many discussions about the relationship between language and culture are non-stopped. It is no doubt that culture and language learning are inseparable and essential as the goal of modern language learning (Kramsch, 1993,1998), (Lo Bianco, Liddicoat & Crozet, 2000), (Byram, 1998). Language only has meaning when understood within its cultural context, with that context illuminated by the basic beliefs and values at the core of the society. But how to integrate language teaching with culture teaching is still at the stage of exploration. The introduction of a cultural component into language class, I think, can promote students' curiosity about target culture and raise awareness of their own culture. This does not impede students' language acquisition; on the contrary, it can provide a meaningful context for language learning, thus enhancing motivation. The method I used was the skill-based approach: students observed, analyzed and made conclusions based on their prior knowledge of their own culture and comparing and contrasting it with the target culture.

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(Edited by Zhilu Lv, Hua Zhou and Wendy)