

# **Interpreting a Fictional Text: An Intercultural Approach**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Bystrov Ya. Interpreting a Fictional Text: An Intercultural Approach.** The article deals with recent studies in the field of intercultural communication that have practical value and the suggestions for designing the syllabus of the course, “Linguocultural Analysis of a Literary Text” for university MA students majoring in English. Interdisciplinary and innovative character of the proposed course intends to cultivate a sociocultural approach as a comparatively new enterprise in a university curriculum in TEFL and has become a topic relevant to current changes in Linguocultural Studies.

**Key words:** linguocultural interpretation of a literary text, language and culture, intercultural approach.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Global transformations which have been taking place in the world since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed, greatly to the formation of a new intercultural paradigm in language learning. The idea of TEFL in the context of dialogue between cultures became of prime importance in modern linguodidactics. Inasmuch as culturological knowledge is considered to be a major prerequisite for understanding fictional texts. It can also serve as one of the sources of information for learners’ adequate perception and comprehension.

Linguocultural capacity of literary works in the methods of TEFL has become an object for contemporary researchers, where a lot of attention has been paid to didactics of literature (Gudkov 2003, Krasnykh 2002, Hui Han 2005, Kramersch 1998, McKay 1997, Nowacka 2002 and others).

The aim of the article is defined by the need to integrate language and culture into teaching English through the process of integral linguocultural analysis of British/American fictional texts that increase the students’ intercultural competence. The facilities should be taken into account to develop an intercultural approach in TEFL and begin an academic dialogue to discuss the challenges faced. The article aims at the following tasks:

- Describing the peculiarities of linguocultural approach as the basis for students’ intercultural background knowledge;

- Defining the tasks of the university course, “Linguocultural analysis of a literary text” in order to shape the all-round development of the students’ sociocultural competence;

- Proposing a practical introduction of the project into the EFL classroom using the activities for reading a culture-specific literary text to improve students’ language/communicative skills.

## **LINGUOCULTURAL ANALYSIS OF A LITERARY TEXT AS AN ENTERPRISE IN THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM IN TEFL**

It is common knowledge that traditions, customs, standards of living, and culturally specific views of the world are all reflected in the language of a particular society. It could be argued then, that to understand the true meaning of a language, you also have to understand the culture and the world view that it expresses and reflects (according to cognitive approach to language study).

The appearance of Linguocultural Studies gave impetus to a new stage of comprehension in the relationship between language and culture as it is introduced in TEFL by means of British/American literature. One of the most acceptable approaches, where special attention is paid to the study of culture, is necessary to single out the linguocultural conception suggested by V. Furmanova. According to her theory, Linguocultural Studies is considered, “the aspect and system of learning foreign languages which reveal the specificity of linguocultural community and integrate linguistic, culturological and sociological aspects as the sum total of background knowledge directed at the formation of intercultural communicative competence: cultural background and cultural modus of behaviour in terms of contrastive approach to studying two or more cultures” (Furmanova 1993, 77).

A literary work is a part of culture and the people representing it, and at the same time, it is a source of culturological competence, which is necessary for broadening the students’ general outlook and forming of their ethic and aesthetic position. A detailed research of a text gives a teacher a chance to increase the level of the students’ communicative competence, where intercultural competence plays an essential part. It presupposes the presence of knowledge about national and cultural peculiarities of the foreign lingual and cultural environment, about the character of thinking, national mentality, the living standards, and the system of values, which are characteristic of the foreign culture, the specific features of mode of life, and relationships in the family they live, etc. In addition, these texts are important because they help to form abilities and skills that perform a kind of a special activity – intercultural communication. Hence, the curriculum for EFL should include an insight into historical and cultural aspects of the relevant

speech community in order to provide students with the background knowledge required to understand and interpret literature of the country being studied.

### **CHALLENGES IN INTEGRATING THE AUTHENTIC LITERARY TEXTS IN TEFL**

Recently the linguodidactic priorities in TEFL have moved towards intercultural problems. What follows is a student who is engaged in interpreting fiction and also gets acquainted with the artistic world view of the writer/poet and the type of his/her language consciousness. TEFL teachers should be aware of a certain problem and how to handle it. In the language classroom, educators will deal with culture on a national level as well as an intercultural level. Thus, the analysis of a literary text should not be reduced to merely traditional linguistic commentary (stylistic devices, expressive means, imagery, plot, and composition). The tasks, which have to be solved during linguocultural analysis are much more broad. They depend upon the learning material for conducting classes. For example, fictional texts aim at the realization of the main principles of linguocultural education, the essence of which lies in the fact that language study should also be accompanied by learning the culture of the people representing it (Galskova, Gez 2004, 12).

Besides, as mentioned above every writer has a distinctive voice. And, it is important for a non-native reader to be able to hear the individual voice of the writer in order to interpret the message of the fictional text and perceive the gentle reverberations of meaning, the ingenious symbols to be explored, decoded, and analyzed; and define their literary value. It is difficult for a foreign reader to recognize all allusions and historic cultural references familiar to the native user of English. We must not underestimate the value of cultural, historical, and linguistic commentaries as helpful instruments of grasping the content and the message of a literary work. In addition, it is important to select themes that should be highly relevant to students.

Literature offers several benefits to ESL classes. As McKay puts it (1997, 191), “the advantage of using literature to develop language use is that literature presents language in discourse and develops an awareness of language use”. Literary texts offer a variety of genuine structures, vocabulary, styles, and register. They show the reader what sort of language (in terms of both semantics and syntax) would be appropriate in a given context.

From a methodological point of view, literature opens enormous possibilities for interpretation and discussion. It gives the teacher a chance to incorporate into a class curriculum pre-reading, while-reading, and after-reading activities designed especially for a chosen text. To the extent that students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their reading proficiency through a set of well-designed activities to maintain students’ interest and involvement: making

predictions, writing essays, drawing character sketches, or deducing situations from contextual clues.

The most important thing remains is that an examination of a foreign culture, using authentic literary texts as better means of conveying culture-specific information, may increase students' understanding of that culture, and perhaps spur their own imaginative writing. By all means, an interaction with a literary text depends on a reader's familiarity with the cultural assumptions in it. It is important that students understand these assumptions. As Allen (1975, 111) advocates that, "Literature is a facet of culture. Its significance can be best understood in terms of its culture, and its purpose is meaningful only when the assumptions it is based on are understood and accepted".

It is generally accepted that literature is a reflection of society's view, values, and beliefs: a reflection of the social, political, and cultural development of any society. It reveals people's ideas and dreams in the most creative and imaginative way.

Literature texts are suitable for developing intercultural communicative competence. Not only do they invite their readers to subjectively view 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 the readers' attention not only on actions and characters. The "efferent reading" of texts is a special way of reading fictional texts "aesthetically". It enables and strengthens the readers' interaction with the text through predicting abilities, through emotional responses, as well as through forming and re-forming hypotheses while reading; all of which are necessary to fill the text with meaning. These ideas 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 linguocultural background of the text. Often creative tasks lend themselves to a blend of literary and intercultural objectives, leaving enough space for the learners where 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 (Hui Han 2005, 74).

Thus, literature in TEFL in its present context tends to emphasize its role in improving communicative competence and create awareness in students on the culture and society of the relevant country.

## PROCEDURES FOR CULTURE-ORIENTED ANALYSIS

The shift of the students' attention from the purely linguistic analysis of the text to a more culture-oriented analysis is of paramount importance. Accordingly, the emphasis is placed on "the contrast with the students' known 'home' literature and culture rather than 'establish literary and cultural parameters, especially where the difference between the learners' own culture and the target culture is large" (Durant 1977, 20).

It is not easy to establish general procedures of comparing and contrasting methods 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 aims of the cultural dimension in language teaching are related to the following (Hui Han 2005, 76).

- 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.

However, when introducing cultural orientation classes we should take into consideration two kinds of ideas. The first one is connected with the very process of reading and the second one with class management. The criteria for designing such a reading program can be as follows (Nowacka 2002, 65):

- Setting course objectives,
- Selecting texts,
- Designing reading activities.

The objectives and the selection of texts have partly been discussed. The third issue requires more intense involvement and embraces pre-reading, while-reading, and after-reading activities and linguocultural commentary.

The warm-up and pre-reading activities are designed not only to arouse learners' interest in the reading material but also to overcome language difficulties (both lexical and grammatical). Here, also belongs a glossary containing items and idioms which are relevant for an adequate understanding of a text, which students haven't come across before in their language practice. Learning vocabulary is carried out with the help of definitions in which the meaning and contextual usage of a word is given.

While-reading activities include exercises such as "Find in the text the sentences related to ...", "Find in the text the equivalents in your mother tongue ...", "Translate the following into ..." etc. These vocabulary activities are important for a better understanding of the text. They make the process of understanding easier, specifying textual implications (or subtext), helping to

compare the facts and single out the necessary details, and enlightening the author's position. For example, the activities help students predict the contents of the text, or the author's intention and message as a whole.

Special attention should be given to the translation activities whilst doing various activities. Translation aims at searching interlingual equivalents that reveal the accurate word-meaning in the context. At the same time, it makes the reader bear in mind that the word sense in the text is not autonomous; it depends entirely on the context (both in the original and translation).

After-reading activities ("Give the answers to the questions ...", "Say why ...", "Your opinion on ...", "Discuss the following ...", "Write an essay on one of the subjects", etc.) are designed not only for checking a deep and accurate understanding of the reading material in a broad extralinguistic cultural context but also at providing a creative usage of the text under study.

The final stage of the discussion is how to learn linguocultural commentaries designed at improving students' cross-cultural competence. According to European standards and requirements, the linguocultural commentaries acquire a great significance in the optimization of classroom activities. They form in the students the idea about the specific features of mentality, national character, ideals, morals, and the elements of foreign standards of living. The commentaries are given on the basis of specific items of the text, and then they make the reader go out of its limits, covering broader cultural reality than represented in the text in order to find out to what extent it influences the text.

Thus, the assignments offered are problematic and creative. They are directed not only at the adoption or mastering of the phenomena of a certain culture, but also at the cultivation of the students' skills to think analytically. The student must uphold his/her point of view, consider the facts comprehensively, and without prejudices avoid groundless general conclusions as well as be culturally tolerable and sensitive.

## **CONCLUSION**

In recent years the discussion as to the correlation between language and culture are still currently relevant. No doubt language and culture constitute the content of modern linguodidactics because language will acquire significance until it turns out in the context of culture (Furmanova 1993, 89). The introduction of the cultural component into the methods of teaching English will be able to provide the meaningfulness of the process of learning and make it motivating for the students and the experts in the field of intercultural communication.

Besides, reorientation of the process of training the students-philologists centered on intercultural competences with the focus on enhancing language skills will give an opportunity to realize contemporary needs of the essence and purpose of a course syllabus, "Linguocultural analysis of a literary text". This research comes from the position of transforming the national education by integrating the conditions of European processes. In order to improve the training of specialists in English philology in higher educational establishments, there arises a need to further strengthen the dynamics of applying intercultural communication theory to TEFL and elaborate on the common international curricula.

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 is to promote students' curiosity about target culture and raise awareness of their own culture. As Hui Han (2005, 76) rightly points out "this does not impede students' language acquisition; on the contrary, it can provide a meaningful context for language learning, thus enhancing motivation". The skill-based approach where the students observe, analyze, and make conclusions is based on their prior knowledge of their own culture and can be compared and contrasted with the target culture.

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