

13 Intercultural competence and literature

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Key words

Culture

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Literature

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In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

What is the present status of intercultural education in Austria's school curricula?

How has the shift towards emphasizing IC affected language teaching?

How can teachers promote IC?

What role can literature play in enhancing learners' IC?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

Austria has a greater cultural diversity today than ever before, and, as a result, teachers often find themselves facing increasingly multicultural, multilingual classes, which can sometimes be challenging and need to be managed proactively in order to create an atmosphere of equality and respect within the classroom. If addressed actively, this cultural diversity can be a real asset for all stakeholders as it offers everyone involved opportunities to learn to interact in a global, diverse and ever-changing world. With this in mind, the need for intercultural learning in the EFL classroom could never be more crucial and relevant.

Since 1992, intercultural education has been included in Austria's school curricula as a transversal educational principle, which should be taught across the curriculum, thus showing its relevance and interdisciplinary nature. More recently, curricular guidelines concerning intercultural education were revised in the 'Interkulturelle Bildung – Grundsatzterlass 2017' (BMBWF, 2017). While the formal status of intercultural education remains the same within these new curriculum guidelines, the updated understanding of the concept reflects recent research as well as contemporary pedagogical classroom practices. This includes an acknowledgement of debates surrounding various terminology such as interculturality, transculturality and multiculturalism, which fall under the umbrella term of intercultural education.

Its main goal is to help learners develop an open-minded attitude towards otherness, to raise their awareness of Eurocentric and ethnocentric beliefs and to provide them with the skills to explore different perspectives in today's open, heterogeneous societies.

When discussing intercultural learning in foreign language education, reference must be made to the role of the Council of Europe (CoE) and CEFR (see chapter 5 in this volume). In addition to providing descriptors of the four language skills, namely, speaking, listening, reading and writing, the CEFR “was the first major European policy document to give significant emphasis to the intercultural nature of language learning” (Kelly, 2012, p. 411). In this way, the CEFR made a policy shift from language teaching being about communicative competence to an emphasis on the development of intercultural competence (IC). The CEFR describes the language learner as follows:

The learner of a second or foreign language and culture does not cease to be competent in his or her mother tongue and the associated culture. Nor is the new competence kept entirely separate from the old. The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes *plurilingual* and develops ***interculturality***. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how. They enable the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 43; italics and bold print in the original).

The CEFR also provides teachers with a set of useful descriptors to speak about the IC of their learners. These include the areas of knowledge, skills and attitudes. More recently another skill area has been included in the CEFR Companion Volume (CEFR-CV), namely, mediation, which highlights the collaborative processes of meaning-making (Council of Europe, 2018). Mediation refers to certain characteristics that can enable communication and “is also used to describe a social and cultural process of creating conditions for communication and cooperation, facing and hopefully defusing any delicate situations and tensions that may arise” (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 106).

Concerning Austria's school curricula, the CEFR's understanding of IC has served as the basis for how the concept is seen in the country's current language education policies (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2019). However, regardless of the emphasis placed on the importance of intercultural learning in educational documents such as the

CEFR, Dalton-Puffer et al. (2019) suggest that in everyday practice in EFL classes in Austrian schools, cultural topics and related areas like literature are given less precedence. They attribute this to factors such as the increased heterogeneity of classrooms, which, interestingly, reduces some foreign language teachers' perceived need to spend class time dealing with cultural issues as pupils are experiencing cross-cultural exchanges on a daily basis. Another reason that is often mentioned is the standardized Matura, since many teachers feel pressured to use their class time for developing the competences required to pass the exam (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2019).

Culture in the foreign language classroom

The understanding of culture in language teaching has changed considerably over the years. Viewed historically, Kramsch (2009) suggests that culture has evolved from being seen as a very static concept primarily focusing on the characteristics of nationality to a more flexible understanding of the concept which acknowledges that culture is no longer defined by national borders and history. Regardless of this shift in perspective, Kramsch (2009) also recognizes that these various understandings of culture all have their place in language teaching. For teachers, this means that talking about cultural artefacts, beliefs, values and behaviours of English-speaking countries is still relevant in the language classroom. This understanding of culture can make the complex concept of culture more accessible, especially for younger learners. Knowledge of cultures where English is predominantly spoken is one way of bringing the language experience to life.

However, the shift in perspective also means that teachers need to go beyond the knowledge level and consider the role of English as a global lingua franca in today's world. In other words, teachers need to consider more than a fixed language and cultural context if they want their language learners to succeed in the various communicative situations they may find themselves in. This viewpoint is also reflected in the CEFR-CV's recent inclusion of mediation, which addresses skills such as facilitating pluricultural space, acting as an intermediary in informal situations and adapting language accordingly.

IC in the foreign language classroom

When considering the intercultural dimension of language teaching, teachers can refer to the CEFR descriptors as well as to a wide selection of models designed to help educators in setting their teaching objectives. Perhaps the most widely used and accessible model at the moment is the one proposed by Byram (1997) which he

revisited in 2021 by providing a more geo-political understanding of intercultural competence. Byram's (1997) model of IC was designed primarily for classroom use and refers specifically to the CEFR. It includes five main competences and more detailed sub-competences. The latter describe and clarify the main competences for both teachers and learners, thus allowing teachers to focus on individual aspects of intercultural learning. In addition, the model can be used as a tool for assessment where progress in individual competences and their sub-competences can be evaluated. For a list of sub-competences see Byram's (1997) seminal work: *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*.

Below is a list of the five main components of IC:

- Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own;
- Knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction;
- Skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own;
- Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices, and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction;
- Critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (Byram, 2000, p. 9).

An advantage of working with Byram's (1997) model in the language classroom is that it provides language teachers with a set of teaching objectives which can inform their teaching and guide their assessment of learners' IC. One criticism of Byram's model is that its focus is more on national cultures in contrast to a more transcultural and global understanding of culture. However, it was designed for language teachers who, in many cases, are still "working within a tradition that focuses on national cultures" (Byram, 2009, p. 330). When looking at many foreign language coursebooks, it becomes clear that emphasis is often placed on certain aspects of the target culture language or even the given culture, whereas there is less focus on facilitating skills that learners will need when communicating cross-

culturally. This is where teachers will need to supplement teaching materials in order to provide their learners with strategies required when using English in various settings.

Another model worth mentioning which advances the CoE's plurilingual agenda is *FREPA: A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures. Competences and Resources* (Candelier et al., 2012). FREPA was designed to further the language education policies of the CoE as it considers the development of language learners' plurilingualism and IC as its main aims. Like the CEFR and Byram's (1997) model, it is composed of a number of competences and descriptors and can be used to inform teaching objectives as well as materials design. An advantage of the framework is that it is very comprehensive and covers global competences (see chapter 12 in this volume) as well as the dimensions of knowledge, attitudes and skills, taking both plurilingual and intercultural competence of language learners into account. A complete list of the descriptors for the respective resources presented in the FREPA framework can be found at: <http://www.ecml.at/tabid/277/PublicationID/82/Default.aspx>.

Admittedly, the descriptors are quite detailed in order to ensure comprehensiveness; however, their explicitness can help teachers and teacher educators formulate their objectives for both curriculum design and classroom use. For example, the section 'attitudes' is subdivided into six sections which are further organized into additional sub-sections. One subsection under attitudes is 'curiosity' which has four subsections such as curiosity about a multilingual/multicultural environment, curiosity about discovering how one's own language(s) and culture(s) work, interest in discovering other perspectives of interpretation of familiar / unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own culture (language) and in other cultures (languages) / cultural (linguistic) practices and interest in understanding what happens in intercultural and plurilingual interactions. Therefore, it almost goes without saying that teachers working with the FREPA framework will have to choose a limited number of descriptors that seem to be relevant for their specific classrooms.

In addition to considering which intercultural competences teachers want to develop in their learners, they also need to take into consideration that intercultural learning is a process that each learner will experience differently. Like in language learning, learners will most likely work at their own pace and may require more time to understand and acquire certain aspects of IC. These aspects are reflected in the learning aims of teaching resources available for developing IC which offer a wide selection of activities that appeal to different learners' needs and styles of

learning (see suggestions for further reading at the end of this chapter). The selection of activities includes icebreakers, games, ranking tasks, experiential activities, case studies, critical incidents, role plays, various forms of media and simulations which can be done with different age groups and group sizes in order to cater to learners' individual needs. Interestingly, one point that they all have in common is that the activities end by giving learners the opportunity to reflect on what they take away from the tasks. This final step is crucial, as learners are required to reflect on what they have learned and thus become more aware of cultural aspects in their lives.

Using Literature to enhance IC in the foreign language classroom

There are many reasons to incorporate literature into the language classroom. Literature

- helps to develop the skill of reading,
- is a comprehensible form of input for language acquisition,
- can be used to provide good models for written English (genre/text type),
- can serve as a source for teachers to focus on language in context (grammar, vocabulary, paragraphing, cohesion, etc.),
- can be used to introduce topics and themes and
- can contribute to forming a community of learning in which learners share their reading experiences and thus together discover the pleasure of reading.

While this list is by no means exhaustive, it does show the potential that literature has in language learning as it can be used by teachers to achieve many teaching objectives.

Another reason for using literature in the language classroom is that it can also help to develop learners' IC. Literary texts can provide learners with knowledge about other cultures. Additionally, working with literature can help learners gain insights into their own culture(s) by reflecting on aspects presented in the texts and referring them back to the learners' own culture(s). Discussing different viewpoints with others who have read the same text can help learners call into question beliefs and assumptions they unconsciously hold. Helping learners to reflect on their world views is an important step in developing IC. Learners can also experience another world vicariously which otherwise might remain remote for them. Finally, reading literature in a foreign language can help facilitate learners' interpretative skills when they are required to relay what a text means to them, thus enhancing their mediation skills.

Various types of literature can be used for the purpose of promoting intercultural learning, including poems, short stories and novels. The same can be said for the type of genre. Teachers' decisions will be made primarily based on the objectives they want to achieve as well as learners' language level and interests, amongst other points to consider. However, one type of literature has proven to be very suitable in connection with developing the IC of learners in the EFL classroom, namely, multi-cultural literature. More specifically, multi-cultural literature that deals with the immigrant experience is recommended as the characters often face challenges when interacting with members of the new culture they are living in and/or members of different cultures who they come in contact with. For this reason, this type of multi-cultural literature can provide contextual situations in which learners can become aware of and analyse cultural diversity. While such literature may lead to highlighting more differences and misunderstandings between people with different cultural backgrounds, which teachers need to consider in order to avoid reinforcing stereotypes, it also provides a voice to the people who are represented in it. Thus, it gives learners insights into situations they may not be familiar with. For an example of a multi-cultural reading project designed for classroom use, see Practical Applications at the end of this chapter.

When choosing multi-cultural literature for classroom use, teachers will have to consider the complexity and language level of the books. In most cases, books which are defined as Young Adult Literature (YAL) will be more appropriate. For Blasingame (2007), YAL has four main characteristics; it

- has characters and issues young readers can identify with; those issues and characters are treated in a way that does not invalidate, minimize, or devalue them.
- is framed in language that young readers can understand.
- emphasizes plot above everything else.
- is written for an audience of young adults (p. 11).

Blasingame's (2007) definition of YAL presents the main features of this type of literature and at the same time also highlights its merits for classroom use. In most cases, it can be seen as literature that speaks to young adult learners as it presents their worlds in a mode of communication they understand and with them as the target audience in mind. For this reason, actions, experiences and views presented in the literature will most likely not seem remote to learners, but be perceived as something they can identify with on at least one level. Perhaps most importantly, YAL may be a way to show learners that reading and literature can be pleasurable.

Concerning multi-cultural YAL, a wide selection of excellent books has been published in more recent years so that teachers will easily find appropriate books for any age group and reading level.

As addressed above, using multi-cultural YAL can be an ideal way to develop learners' awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity and thus develop an atmosphere of respect and appreciation towards other cultures. When reading this type of literature, learners dive into an unknown world where they can identify with characters and walk in their shoes for a while. Thus, a reading project involving multi-cultural literature gives them the opportunity to learn to switch perspectives and look at the world from a different point of view. By decentering their own perspectives, learners can slowly allow themselves to challenge their beliefs, develop more open-minded attitudes, and thus develop a space of interculturality in their minds.

The following steps should be considered when developing a reading project to promote learners' IC.

1. Choosing the books:

When choosing books for an intercultural reading project, learners' age, reading level and previous reading experiences need to be considered. The novels should not be too challenging on the language level and not too long. Offering a choice of books rather than one class reader, which all learners have to read, usually improves learners' motivation and gives them a sense of empowerment. In addition, it will give them the opportunity to compare the different experiences and perspectives presented in the books and thus widen their horizons. Working with one book only does not allow this. Examples of popular multicultural YAL can be found online. A good source to start with is: <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/ya-multicultural>.

The choice of books should also include a diverse range of protagonists. This will make it easier for the learners to identify with the main characters and their problems. If the learners can really identify with the main characters and feel their pain and pleasure, this will enhance intercultural learning.

2. Timeframe:

A typical timeframe for an intercultural reading project is two to three weeks, including a session of presentations. Unfortunately, some teachers may feel that they cannot afford to spend time on reading projects because they have to cover all the units in the coursebook. Knowing how much students can learn from a reading project can help teachers put the coursebook aside for a while and spend time on an intercultural reading project instead.

3. Choosing a focus:

In order to get the most from an intercultural reading project, it is necessary to focus on two to three main teaching objectives. Byram's (1997) model or FREPA are excellent starting points where teachers can find appropriate objectives for their target group. With a clear goal in mind, teachers can then start planning a number of pre-, while- and post-reading tasks that will guide learners in their reading and help them reach these objectives.

Practical applications

The following two examples of intercultural reading projects show a variety of tasks that can easily be modified for different books and target groups.

Example 1:

Goals: learners will acquire knowledge of the lifestyles, issues and practices of the social groups represented in the books; learners' attitudes including their preconceived notions and stereotypes will be challenged; learners' curiosity about new cultures and experiences as well as about their own will be developed and learners' empathy towards others will be promoted

Activity: Crossing Borders – intercultural reading project based on a set of young adult novels (Schumm Fauster & Pölzleitner, 2013)

Literary input:

In the project, learners choose from a selection of young adult novels in which at least two cultures are represented by the protagonists. In all of these novels the protagonists have to cross borders on their journey to discovering their cultural identity. They cross borders, such as national, cultural, racial, religious, gender, social and/or ethnic borders, and in the process share their experiences with the readers.

Here is a selection of books that are appropriate for an intercultural reading project:

Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

Linda Crew, *Children of the River*

Marina Budhos, *Ask Me No Questions*

Sharon Flake, *The Skin I'm In*

Moritz Gleitzman, *Boy Overboard*

Ann Jaramillo, *La Linea*

Gloria Miklowitz, *The War Between the Classes*

Abdel-Fattah Randa, *The Lines We Cross*

Melissa Schorr, *Goy Crazy*

Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give*

Jacqueline Woodson, *If you Come Softly*

Rationale: Learners compare their own experiences and practices with those of the protagonists and explore differences and similarities between their cultures, thus giving learners new insights not only into other cultures but also into their own as they are required to reflect on both. In the process, learners' openness towards others may also be promoted.

Pre-knowledge: some understanding of various aspects of culture

Level: Learners should have at least CEFR B1 in order to be able to read and enjoy the books chosen.

Procedure

After choosing one of the novels the students receive a package of pre-, while-, and post-reading tasks that guide them through the project.

Below is a selection of tasks that can be used with any book in order to enhance intercultural learning:

1. Learners compare their hopes and dreams with those of the main characters by filling out a chart in which they note how they view life and how the main characters do. This activity can help learners to realize that young people all over the world share very similar dreams of being safe, having a loving family and friends they can trust.
2. Learners collect all the stereotypes about the protagonists' cultures that they have come across while reading their respective novel. After reading their chosen book, they compare their own list with the stereotypes mentioned in the novels and discuss these with the class. This task can help learners to question their own stereotypes and encourages them to focus on similarities rather than differences.
3. Venn diagrams are often used for comparison as they allow learners to note similarities as well as differences. In this reading project, Venn diagrams are used to help learner compare their local culture with the protagonists' cultural practices. What is interesting about this activity is that learners often note that they have many

important aspects in common with the protagonists (e.g., the importance of family) and aspects of their life that are less important (e.g., dinner times) are the ones that are placed in the spaces that they do not share.

4. Towards the end of the project, learners can work with discussion prompt cards and short role-plays where they explore the protagonists' perspectives more intimately. In the role-play situations learners put themselves in someone else's shoes and experience the situations from a different perspective. For example, learners imagine that one of the protagonists has moved to their town and joined their class. The learners wonder how these new students would be accepted and integrated – or what it would be like to invite one of them to their family as an exchange student. In all these cases the students are personally and emotionally involved and have the chance to consider these situations in a safe environment.

5. At the end of the reading project, each reading group presents their novel to the class. The main aim of these group presentations is to help learners to see the wider picture by comparing and discussing the different characters' experiences. Moreover, these presentations can motivate learners to read another book that seems interesting to them.

A more detailed description of the project has been published in *Modern English Teacher* (Schumm Fauster & Pölzleitner, 2013). The project materials and steps can also be downloaded from www.epep.at/crossing-borders.

Example 2:

Goals: learners will be prepared for an exchange trip abroad at every stage of the experience; learners' awareness of cultural differences between their home culture and the culture in their host country and host family will be enhanced; learners' understanding of the various layers of 'culture' (surface culture, deep culture) and their influence on human behaviour (universal / cultural / personal dimensions of behaviour) will be developed

Activity: intercultural reading project – Eric's intercultural experiences (Pölzleitner & Schumm Fauster, 2017)

Literary Input:

The project is based on the picture book *Eric* by Shaun Tan (2010). In Tan's story an extra-terrestrial exchange student visits a family and surprises them with his unexpected behavior and questions. He seems very inquisitive, asking questions which may seem odd to those who have become blind to the patterns of everyday life. Tan's stories do not usually give any answers, but they encourage the readers to ask

lots of questions. The story of Eric raises the question of how culture shapes our perception and our behaviour. It encourages us to reflect on our everyday practices and redefine what is 'normal'. Tan invites the reader to explore the area of 'deep culture', the invisible strings that guide us.

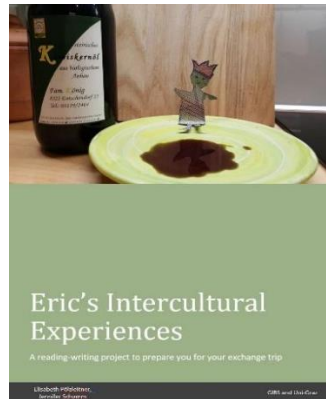


Figure 1: Student tasks for the project

Rationale: Class trips abroad are very popular in Austria and have a fixed place in most schools. Even if it is not realistic to believe that a 10-day trip will dramatically improve learners' language skills, these trips can be highly motivating for learners and they can contribute strongly to promoting their IC. This reading project helps facilitate learners' IC.

Pre-knowledge: basic knowledge of cultures included in project; at least CEFR A2/B1 in the language which is spoken in the host country of the class trip

Level: CEFR A2/B1 and above. The project can be used for any international class trip, irrespective of the target language. In our example the students went to Spain, France and Russia. Most tasks were completed in English (a language in which learners are highly proficient), some basic tasks were done in the target language (the language spoken in the host country).

Procedure

In part 1, learners read the very short picture book *Eric* and then work with a project booklet containing about 15 tasks. These tasks encourage the learners to look at their own everyday practices and compare them to the practices of their host family. The learners are introduced to the concept of the 'cultural iceberg' (the idea that only certain aspects of a given culture are visible, e.g., artifacts, while the majority

are invisible, e.g., beliefs) and explore different levels of culture by filling in their personal cultural iceberg as well as the cultural iceberg based on their experiences in their host country. In a further step, learners compare these experiences with their classmates and learn to understand the personal, cultural and universal dimensions of human behaviour. Thus, several stereotypes can be discussed and resolved.



Figure 2: Cultural Iceberg for Spain

Part 2 of the project consists of a story writing activity where the learners create their own Eric figure and take photos of Eric in interesting ‘cultural’ situations, both at home and in the host country. The learners then write a sequel to the original storybook where they describe Eric’s cultural experiences in both places.

The project has been tried out in several classes and has always led to very interesting discussions about culture and cultural identity. All project materials including the handouts for the learners and examples of learner products can be downloaded from: www.epep.at/eric and are free for classroom use.



Figure 3: Eric drinking his morning coffee

Activities and questions for reflection

- 1.** Look at a chapter in a coursebook that you are using now or have used. What aspects of culture are addressed? How are they addressed? Is there anything that you would add in order to develop these aspects further?
- 2.** Refer to Byram's model or FREPA and design a lesson plan in which your objective is to enhance learners' intercultural competence. What are your objectives? What classroom activities will you use to achieve them?
- 3.** To what extent do you already integrate dimensions of intercultural competence into your language teaching?
- 4.** Make a list of books or other literary texts (e.g., poems, short stories, picture books) that you use with your learners. Reflect on what aspects of intercultural competence can be addressed when working with those literary texts.

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Suggestions for further reading:

Berardo, K., & Deardorff, K. D. (Eds.). (2012). *Building Cultural Competence: Innovative Activities and Models*. Stylus.

This is a hands-on book that provides teachers with a selection of activities as well as models which they can take into the language classroom. Each activity is designed to develop a number of intercultural competences.

Duff, A., & Maley, A. (2007). *Literature*. Oxford University Press.

This is a practical book that provides teachers with various ideas on how they can incorporate all types of literature into the language classroom. It has a strong language focus.

Paran, A., & Robinson, P. (2016). *Literature*. Oxford University Press.

This book considers various literary genres and provides teachers with insights into how to incorporate them into the language classroom.

Wintergerst, A., & McVeigh, J. (2011). *Tips for teaching culture. Practical Approaches to Intercultural Communication*. Pearson Longman.

This book provides a good overview of different ways teachers can address cultural issues in the classroom. It provides copiable materials as well as short theoretical explanations which support the practical nature of the book.

This link provides a list of the descriptors used in FREPA: <http://carap.ecml.at/Components/2Listofdescriptors/tabid/2662/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

Commentary on reflection questions

1. Depending on the chapter/book teachers look at, this question will have different answers. This question should, however, prompt teachers to think about what aspects of culture/IC are actually covered in the coursebooks they work with and where they might see the need to supplement them with additional materials.

2. As with the question above, this one will be answered differently by different teachers. What is important is that teachers familiarize themselves with both models and consider how they might help them in integrating the intercultural dimension into their classrooms. The models also show how many activities that teachers already do with their pupils can be slightly modified to allow for opportunities of intercultural learning.

3. to 4. Your answers to these reflection questions will depend on your personal teaching experience and context. The point of these questions is to encourage reflection on including IC in your teaching.