

Communicating between Cultures: Practical suggestions for acquiring cultural intelligence in C2 through literature and digital technology

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Abstract:

This paper presents some practical ideas in intercultural education in the 21st century foreign language classroom. It summarizes personal experience of teaching English as a foreign language to 17-year-old Bulgarian students by integrating the Teaching through Literature Approach and digital technologies. An attempt will be made to describe useful practices for fostering the acquisition of cultural intelligence in L2 by involving students in exploring, discussing and comparing products, practices and perspectives of the target culture by means of various digital tools and resources. The focus of attention is literature and digital media (films, trailers, video casts, etc.), first, as elements from ‘Big C’ Culture (especially works from the literary canon of the 18th – 19th century British and American literature and their respective film adaptations), and second, as authentic sources of gaining cultural knowledge about elements with a ‘little c’ (styles of communication, verbal and non-verbal language, cultural norms, etc.).

Key words: cultural intelligence, literature, digital technologies.

Introduction

The concept of intercultural education has become popular on the European stage after Michael Byram’s models of cultural competence (CC) and intercultural competence (IC) were adopted by European education policy makers at the beginning of the 21st century. Since that time, a number of organizations like UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Commission, have declared officially its importance and consequently issued declarations and strategies on international or national levels (UNESCO, 2002; Council of Europe, 2000; National Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Bulgaria, 2008 – 2013), have designed programmes and given recommendations (Council of Europe , 2007; UNESCO, 2007). Some EU countries, including Bulgaria, have even gone further to reform their education systems and include intercultural education in the national curricula (Education Act 2016 for pre-school and school education; Executive Order 13 (21. 09. 2016) for Civic, Health, Ecological and Intercultural education). Publishers and course book authors have also started designing activities about students’ own culture and the culture/cultures of the languages studied at school with the aim to raise cultural awareness and develop the learners’ cultural knowledge.

The goal of the present paper is to share personal experience of teaching English as a foreign language to a group of 17-year-old Bulgarian students from the Second English Language School in Sofia, Bulgaria, by integrating the Teaching through Literature Approach and digital technologies. The author focuses on using authentic literary texts (on the syllabus for the 11th grade at schools with intensive classes in English as a foreign language) which belong to the British and American literary canon, and integrating digital media (films, trailers, etc.), to foster the acquisition of cultural intelligence in L2. This is done by involving the students in exploring, discussing and comparing products, practices and perspectives of the target culture by means of various digital tools and resources.

Theoretical observation

How is Culture defined?

For the past fifty years a number of researchers have given suggestions for definitions of culture. The purpose of the present article is not to elaborate on the definitions of the term “culture” or compare and contrast the existing ones; rather, by just mentioning some definitions, to show that culture has become an important issue in the teaching and learning process, without which that process will not be complete, especially in foreign language teaching.

In the 1980s, Halveson’s view on culture being “big C” culture (history, geography, literature, etc. subjects defined as culture) and “little c” culture (less visible elements like religion, language, etc.) became popular [1]. These categories are still applied to culture today, only their scope is broadened: for example, under the “big C” category come art, architecture, music, dances, travelling and tourism, popular culture, etc., while under “little c” category come communication styles, cultural norms, behaviours, beliefs, etc. For other scholars like Kramsch culture is “a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting” [2]. Similar to some extent to Halveson’s categorization of culture is Holló and Lázár’s classification (2000), according to which the elements of culture are grouped into: civilization (history, geography, literature, values, customs, institutions, etc.), behavior and speech patterns (functions, speech acts, body language, ways of socializing), and discourse structures and skills (discourse structures and skills) [3] like logic, figures of speech, linking and connecting ideas, developing and supporting arguments in written and spoken texts).

An interesting description of culture was given by Moran (2001) for whom it is a “cultural phenomenon involves tangible forms or structures (products) that individual members of the culture (persons) use in various interactions (practices) in specific social circumstances and groups (communities) in ways that reflect their values, attitudes and beliefs (perspective)” [4]. His interpretation of culture is very much influenced by the American 3Ps model of culture presented in the *National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project* in 1999. According to them, culture “includes the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products – both tangible and intangible – of a society” [5].

This interpretation of culture is closest to the author’s understanding and will be used further as a model for performing various activities in the foreign language classroom. Moran’s five-dimensional approach to culture (practices, products, perspectives, persons, and communities) can be traced in another approach adopted by the American Council on The Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), namely designing *World-Readiness Standards for learning languages*. These standards are structured around five “C” goal areas – Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities, each of which is essential for preparing learners as efficient communicators in a global world. Probably a definition that summarizes best everything written is the one given by UNESCO in the Conceptual and Operational Framework issued on intercultural competences. Drawing on previous official documents (*Declaration on Cultural Policies*, 1982 and *Universal declaration on cultural diversity*, 2001), UNESCO interpret culture as a “set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group, encompassing all the ways of being in that society; at a minimum, including art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs” [6].

In spite of their continuous efforts worldwide, social scientists have not come to an agreement yet regarding which of the multiple definitions to adopt. On the one hand, this fact gives opportunities for further research. On the other hand, it makes the situation for teachers more challenging, since they are often at a crossroads wondering which particular element of C2 to teach or what strategies and tools to use.

Is Culture linked to language?

Although the above mentioned experts look at culture from different perspectives, they all are unanimous in their opinion that an important element of culture is communication between different social groups. A means of communication between us, humans, is language in its two forms – verbal and non-verbal language. That’s why it is not surprising that for some scholars the two concepts of culture and language are synonymous (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) [7], while for others culture is always embedded into the context of learning a language (Nault 2006) [8]. In other words, teaching a language is not possible without teaching culture - they go hand in hand. The idea of their interrelation is stated in official documents like the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*. “Because language is the primary vehicle for expressing cultural perspectives and participating in social practices, the study of a language provides opportunities for students to develop insights in a culture that are available in no other way. In reality, then, the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through that language” [9]. Another example of that close relationship can be seen in Brown’s work *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*: “A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one can not separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.” [10]

Models of cultural learning in the foreign language classroom

The most popular model, consisting of four elements (language awareness, cultural awareness, cultural experience and language learning), was designed by Byram (1997) in late 1980s and early 1990s and was further developed as a model of intercultural competence [11]. An important feature of Byram’s model (1989) is the opportunity given to language learners to reflect on their native language and culture through their experience with the target language and culture [12].

Another model of learning a culture/cultures has been developed in the USA in the National Standards Project in the late 1990s. The relationship between the three components of culture in this cultural framework is presented in the form of a triangle. This is done with the intention to show clearly how “the products and practices are derived from the philosophical perspectives that form the world view of a cultural group” [13].

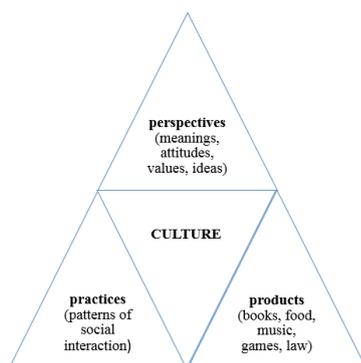


Figure 1: Modified 3 Ps model of culture from National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999, p. 47

Everything produced by representatives of one culture is considered a cultural product; these products can be tangible (examples from all arts like buildings, sculptures, paintings, literature, etc.) and intangible creations (language, music, dance, folklore, traditions, etc.). Under cultural practices come the various patterns of behavior and ways of interaction of the members of a

given society. The term cultural perspectives stands for attitudes, popular beliefs, ideas, values, etc. that members of L2 culture have of the surrounding world.

This new approach to teaching culture has shifted the focus from only learning about products and practices in C2 (C vs c) to another level of understanding, i.e. a deeper look at the values, belief and attitudes of the world that members of that culture hold. This is a challenge to both teachers and learners since perspectives are intangible [14] and usually they are rarely included in course books. One way to solve that problem is using *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (1996, 2006) and their revised version *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (ACTFL 2013) [15]. ACTFL Culture standards facilitate the process of understanding the link between the products and perspectives, and the practices and perspectives of C2. It is this interrelationship between the 3Ps that assists learners in understanding of the target culture better. Despite not being central to foreign language learning, culture plays a vital role in language acquisition. As one of the 5 Cs in the framework of the World-Readiness Standards, it is interrelated with communication and comparisons. To be able to communicate effectively, i.e. to possess good cultural competences, students need to develop insight into the nature of both L2 and C2. They study examples of the language to look into and explain the products - perspectives link or practices – perspectives link, they also make comparisons between the target culture and their own culture (C2/C1) (World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, ACTFL, 2013) [16]

Why use the 3Ps model and the Standards in the Bulgarian context?

According to the National Standards for teaching and learning English as a FL in the 11th grade at schools with intensive classes during the first year of instruction, teachers are required to use Language through Literature Approach to develop their students' communicative competence further, i.e. use literature to teach all language skills, grammar, vocabulary and culture. And since reading and discussing literature in the classroom is not always appreciated by teenagers, experts like Carter and Long advise to shift the focus from literary analysis and using complicated meta language (teacher-centred approach to literature), to a student-centred approach where teachers allow their students to explore for themselves and “make their own judgements and to refine and develop their techniques for doing so” [17]. Others (Collie and Slater, 1987) suggest focusing on communication [18] – using various techniques (discussions, questionnaires, rope play, visual presentations, creative writing, etc.) to interpret the text, to share opinions, discuss and compare personal experiences, etc. In other words, to use a piece of literature to become more competent in the language, because literature is the perfect example of the link between culture and language – the one cannot exist without the other. According to the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages [19], being an authentic material, a literary text is an excellent source from which students gain knowledge not only about the studied language but about its culture (C2); without knowledge about the latter, a learner's language competence is incomplete, because he does not have enough cultural intelligence to become an efficient communicator in the target language. A literary text raises students' cultural awareness of their own as well as the target culture; it facilitates students' understanding of various cultural practices. As tangible products of a culture, literary texts can be traced for instances of cultural practices, the knowledge of “what to do when and where” [20], although they are fictional by nature/design. Students can find examples of the way characters speak and behave, or the language they use. Besides that, students can discover what the characters like or dislike, what they fear or value, what they believe in. All of these help to build up a student's cultural intelligence.

Technology and culture

The question of integrating the latest technologies in education in order to promote research and implement good teaching practices has been bothering the mind of politicians and experts in the field on international level (UNESCO, OECD and the European Commission) for more than a decade and they have produced strategies like the EU Digital Agenda 2020. Along with them, national agencies, educational organizations and institutes have designed programs or issued documents in which they recommended the integration of technologies in the different sectors of education. One such example is the Technology Standards (TESOL), another is the Bulgarian National strategy for implementing IT in education and science (2014 – 2020). The issue became so popular that scholars started to think about developing models to assess the use of new technologies. That is how the RAT, SAMR and TPACK models, for example, appeared. Besides this, researches have been carried out to validate the usefulness of integrating technology in education and to ensure students' success, increase their analytical skills and confidence. (Rogers, 1995) [21], (Osman & Ebenezer, 2007) [22].

According to ACTFL, 'technology can and should be used by language educators to enhance language instruction, practice, and assessment' [23].

Nowadays many teachers have started exploring technology with the intention to engage students in their classrooms. For language teachers, new technology present a better opportunity to gain knowledge of both the studied language and its culture and build up on cultural intelligence.

According to Lee (2009), one of the greatest advantages of using technology for educational purposes is that it 'provided authentic communication in an interactive environment that facilitates the teaching of culture' [24]. For Moore (2006) the fact that there are a great deal of resources and materials online, gives teachers the opportunity to exploit digital media in order to make learning about the target culture more enjoyable and understandable. [25]

Technology in teaching culture through literature

Taking into consideration that the literature on the syllabus for 11th grade belongs to the literary canon of 19th century British and American literature, it is obvious that the communication in the foreign language classroom is across centuries (Standards for Foreign Language Learning Executive Summary, ACTFL) and is meant to be done by means of reading pieces of literature. Taken together, these facts – communication across centuries and reading authentic texts in L2, make language learning through literature an extremely challenging process for most students. Summarizing the results from a survey conducted with 32 seventeen-year-old students from Second English Language School at the end of the course, the author found out that the main reasons for the students' lack of motivation to participate in the classroom had to do with the choice of texts; the learners found the texts in the course book too difficult to read and comprehend, or the plot too boring for their taste and the themes far away from their own reality. The students' lack of motivation to read and gain knowledge about L2 and C2 reflected on the teaching instruction as well. Since traditional methods did not seem to be working at all, the author had to change the teaching strategies so that students were involved into the learning process.

Here came the idea to integrate new technologies into the foreign language classroom, namely digital media and some useful virtual tools for resource sharing (YouTube), for communication (Seesaw blog) and utilities (Storybird).

The main reason behind using digital technology is that the students, as representatives of the Z generation, are familiar with it – they have grown up with it and consider it user-friendly; they can't imagine living without it. That is why it is comparatively easy to engage students with tasks which require the use of new technologies. Another reason is the greatest advantage of digital media – the combination of visual and verbal component, which facilitates the process

of comprehending information. Next comes the possibility for digital media to be distributed online to every corner of the world at any time. Furthermore, the resources used, i.e. film adaptations of a literary work on the syllabus, can be easily reached through channels like YouTube without any subscriptions, codes, etc., which makes these resources Open Educational Resources (OER). Moreover, since just specific excerpts from the different film adaptations are used (excerpts corresponding to the very chapter from the literary work included in the course book), they are relatively short and perfectly fit a 40-minute lesson. Besides that, each excerpt can be played again and again depending on the students' needs. On the downside is the quality of the film, which is not always guaranteed, and the possibility to have a poor Internet connection.

However, digital media is a great tool to be integrated in the 21st century classroom, especially when we teach a language through literature with a Capital 'L'. What we can do is first, select a few film adaptations of the same literary work done over the years, and second, make an attempt to analyse the excerpts by using some of the basic cinematographic techniques like choice of shots, mise-en-scene, dialogues, sound, lighting. On the one hand, having the opportunity to see excerpts from different film adaptations, the students will be able not only to enrich their vocabulary on the theme of film making, but also comment on the director's choice of some of the abovementioned elements of the film and interpret the emotions the director wanted to evoke in the audience. On the other hand, by watching the very same scene filmed, the students are bombarded with visual illustrations of cultural practices of the characters on the screen, which otherwise they find difficult to detect while reading. While watching, students can try to relate some of the practices of the target culture with the beliefs, values, etc. of the characters and compare/contrast these with their perspectives from their own culture. With these, students add to their cultural intelligence in the target language.

Cultural activities to teach language through literature

Teaching culture is not done separately from teaching the language, it goes hand in hand. Besides that it is done in the context of literature – a literary text is a source for raising students' language and cultural awareness and gaining knowledge about the language and its cultural products, practices and perspectives. This is done by means of first, integrating digital technologies, and second, some of the techniques suggested by Carter and Long (1991) [26] and Collie and Slater (1987) [27] for interpreting, sharing experience, comparing/contrasting, creative writing, etc.

The practical suggestions for building students' cultural intelligence are designed around *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Oscar Wilde, particularly the Interrogation scene in which Lady Bracknell questions Jack. The 3Ps model has been applied to discuss cultural products, practices and perspectives in Victorian society. This has been visually presented in Figure 2.

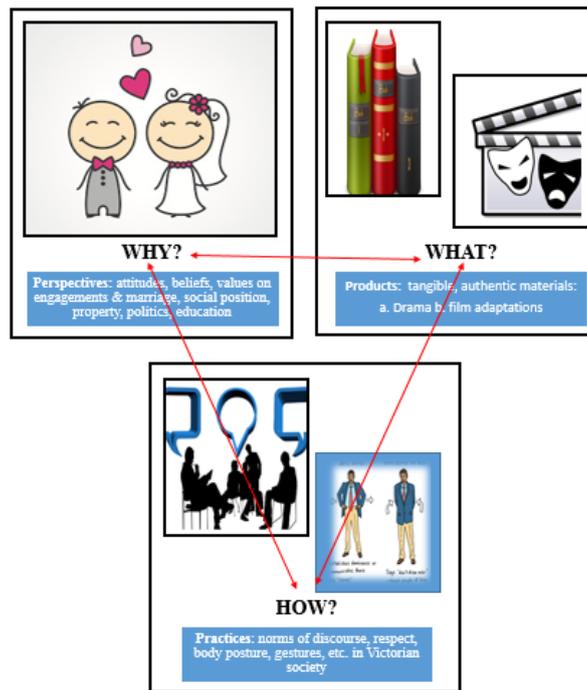


Figure 2. 3Ps of Culture: Products, practices, perspectives in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by O. Wilde. (Modelled on Culture Triangle, National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999, p. 47)

As can be seen, the Culture triangle is comprised of three components. To trace the relationship between them, digital media and free resources are used. The students complete Worksheet 1 individually before they participate in the group discussion. Thus:

- Cultural products correspond to the question ‘What?’; two types of tangible products in the present context – a play and a film, both of which are authentic sources of information about Victorian society;
- Cultural practices correspond to the question ‘How?’; represent Victorian norms of discourse, address and respect; the use of body language (gestures and non-verbal forms of communication); socially appropriate behavior in dating, getting engaged, interviewing eligible young men;
- Cultural perspectives correspond to the question ‘Why?’; present attitudes, beliefs and values in Victorian society on social position/rank, property, education, politics, marriage;

Relating products to perspectives: students use the language as a means of communication to investigate, explain and compare/contrast the in-law interrogation scene from three different film adaptations of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (the 1952 version, the 1986 version and the 2002 version), all of which can be found on YouTube. Working in pairs or small groups, students reflect on C2 culture by making comparisons between the target culture and their own culture (see Worksheet 1).

Relating Practices to perspectives: again students use the language for communicating meaning with the purpose to look into the practices used by the characters in the interrogation scene and connect them with their values, beliefs on rank, property, education and marriage in Victorian society. In pairs, students compare and contrast the studied culture and their own in order to reflect on C2. (see Worksheet 1)

To round off the learning experience, the students are asked to write a modern interpretation of the same in-law interrogation scene (220- 250 words), post it on a Storybird blog and comment on peer work (see Appendix 1).

The screenshot shows a Storybird blog post titled "The Importance of Being Earnest". The post features a green background with a woman in a yellow dress holding a fan. The text is a modern adaptation of the play's in-law interrogation scene. The post includes several paragraphs of text, an illustration of a man and a woman sitting on a sofa, and another illustration of a woman sitting at a desk. The right side of the screenshot shows the Storybird interface, including the word count (251 words), status (Published), and various settings like grading and challenge options.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Modern adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

As the two lovebirds (Jack and Gwend) are in their own little world there is a sudden interruption. The door of the apartment flies open and Mrs. Bracknell (Gwend's mother) comes in with an angry expression, looking as if someone destroyed her favorite Gucci bag. She couldn't believe the scene in front of her: finding her daughter in the poorer side of the city and on top of that in the arms of a stranger she claims to be engaged to.

Gwend opposes her mother meddling in the decision of marrying Jack but there is no use. After all, her mother is always the one to take decisions. Gwend picks her things and leaves behind one very furious looking Mrs. Bracknell and an awkwardly standing Jack.

Things don't look good at all but the tension in the room rises as Mrs. Bracknell takes out her phone and sits down expectantly.

She states that she won't give her daughter to just anyone if he isn't perfectly suitable for her. Then starts the interrogation.

Poor Jack answers all kinds of questions about his social status, income, the car he drives as well as the brand of clothes he wears. His future doesn't look so hopefully but till the moment his parents come up in the conversation. His explanation of not knowing them and the rudeness he only has relations to doesn't warm Mrs. Bracknell's cold-hearted personality.

This pretty much puts an end to their small talk and Jack's good qualities are forgotten by Mrs. Bracknell as she leaves, wishing him a good day.

Content: 251 words
 Status: Published
 View chapter on site
 Started: Dec 2, 2017
 Updated: Dec 2, 2017
 Published: Dec 2, 2017
 Unpublish story
 Change assignment:
 The Importance of Being Earnest
 Add to Challenge:
 Grading:
 A+ Or numeric (1-100)
 Submit Grades are displayed privately. Students are notified when graded.
 Your notes:
 Useless work!!!
 Save Note

Conclusion

Learning a foreign language has never been an easy task even for the most ambitious learners since to become an efficient communicator it is not enough to have good knowledge of the grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation; a learner should possess cultural intelligence in the studied language, which will enable them to participate in different social communities. Effective teaching strategies can help surmount this barrier. One good example is integrating new technologies in teaching a language through literature for accumulating knowledge in C2 and acquiring cultural intelligence, a step towards building cultural competences in the target language. The suggestions given in the article can be applied to any literary text or group of teenage students who follow an intensive course in learning a foreign language.

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