

Intercultural Communicative Competence and Literary Education in Foreign Language Teaching

Abstract:

This essay aims to demonstrate the potential of literary text for promoting intercultural communicative competence in foreign language teaching. While literary education is often considered irrelevant nowadays, intercultural competence (or plurilingual and pluricultural competence, as it is described in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - CEFR*) is the organizing principle of language *curricula*. However, the reading of literature presupposes the same kind of skills involved in intercultural competence, the same dialogic strategy, the same openness to alterity, the same tolerance of indetermination. Critical intercultural awareness is more than just the action-oriented approach seen in the *CEFR*; it is something that presupposes the ability to deal with more complex demands while maintaining a creative strength that should not be underestimated by any teaching. Literature - that intercultural text, *par excellence* – constitutes a useful methodological resource for intercultural competence that involve on-line communication, as well as new information and communication technologies.

Key words: intercultural pedagogics, intercultural communicative competence

1. Literature and Foreign Language Teaching: the background

Literature's place in foreign language teaching is the product of the complex relationship between theoretical or educational paradigms and social interests, ideological beliefs and the cultural trends of the particular time. The teaching of literature within this context has led to different approaches, which have ranged from the practical to the more educational. Sometimes the literary text has been given a secondary role, while on others its importance has been highlighted, as I have had the opportunity to demonstrate previously (2003).

The use of literature in foreign language teaching and learning can be traced back to the first grammar translation method in the late 19th century, where students'

main task was to translate literary texts into their mother tongue. Despite the advantages of such an exercise, it is no longer possible to attain the same high degree of consensus regarding textual corpus and literary education, as many scholars have come to recognise. According to Gerald Graff, this was only possible because many students were excluded from higher education and “the coherence of the old college curriculum reflected a consensus that Greek, Latin and Christianity, and respectable upper-class social values were the foundations of good education” (Graff 2007, viii).

Inspired by the old methods of teaching Latin and Greek, the first grammar translation method consisted mainly of the translation of texts that were carefully chosen to exemplify great gestures of abnegation and certain kinds of citations that went well with these moral standards, whilst serving the purpose of the linguistic models to be acquired.

After this, language teaching has followed a more practical emphasis, with approaches such as the direct method, audio-visual method and the initial years of the communicative approach, and humanistic education fell into disuse. It was in the late 1990s that the communicative approach gained a new interest in literature. Currently, it is not only functional or utilitarian aspects but also ethical ones that are a pre-requisite in so-called intercultural pedagogy or the hermeneutic of alterity (Bredella 2010).

Although literature has never disappeared completely from language courses, such are the doubts regarding its role that detractors point to a variety of reasons for its non-inclusion: it would be elitist; as an imperialist aspect of the culture, it would be off-putting for students; it would give a false impression of the day-to-day reality of the language and corresponding foreign culture, with these types of texts easily being replaced by others that better match the aims of the language programme.

Such a view is likely to have been influenced by the work of Bourdieu in the 1960s, which showed that the teaching of literature perpetuated inequalities at school. The social devaluation of literature, has led to a number of effects, such as literary programmes being academically marginalised and annexed to cultural studies. If, like Aguiar and Silva believe, this situation is influenced by a challenge to institutionalised academic power, it also demonstrates a certain intellectual, social and political malaise (Aguiar and Silva 2007, 21).

Clearly influenced by Bourdieu, the work of John Guillory (1993) focusses on the issue of literary education as cultural capital unvalued by a technocratic society. If we use this logic, foreign languages should be concerned solely with pragmatic, day-to-day communication and that for specific purposes, where literary text is unlikely to figure.

However, Gerald Graff, who also illustrates the rise and fall of literature in university programmes, takes a more positive view when he emphasises that the reason for this decline is as much the fault of teachers and educators failing to demonstrate the validity of their work to the public at large as it is the incoherence of literary education itself (2007, xii). This argument highlights two important points: which culture or literature to choose and what method should be employed to deal with them in a foreign language classroom.

2. Choosing materials and methodology

The cultural debate in foreign language teaching is far from consensual, while concerns regarding functional communication mean that schoolbooks not only give priority to practical texts that focus on day-to-day cultural behaviour (what Robert Galisson calls minimalist - 1991, 114), but also commonly deal with them in a non-systematic fashion using the following methods: 1) the Frankenstein approach, made up of traditional phenomena and aspects that are detached from the didactic continuum (a fado here, a *vira* dance there, a bullfight here, a *caldo verde* soup there); 2) the 4 Fs approach (folk, festivals, foods and statistical facts); 3) the tourist circuit approach, focussing on places and monuments; 4) the “by the way” approach, which consists of sporadic reading to demonstrate differences in behaviour (Hadley 2001).

If it is no longer possible to achieve the consensus of the 1960s in relation to what culture and literature should be taught (which was due mainly to the fact that most of the population were detached from education), and if there is some truth in the belief that the implicit cultural aspects necessary for communication are more closely bound up with the culture of the masses rather than to “culture”, per se (in other words, connected to the rest of human life and not only the best of human life), then one has to consider that focussing all content on the everyday elements may not be enough. This option may well be demotivating for the learners, who have to deal with trivial situations similar to those they encounter in their daily lives.

On the contrary, this difference removes a person from their daily existence, as pointed out by Galisson (1997, 147), “opening up the possibility of the possible, making the strange familiar, broadening the individual’s horizons» (id, 145). Iser uses the same logic when he refers to the potential of contact with alterity as a means of overcoming the confines of space and time (1996, 298).

This is why young people should be given the opportunity to transcend their environment and the time they live in via contact with other lives from another time and

place. If the annulment of history is the annulment of self (Meschonnic), so is the annulment of alterity, because the I is defined in relation to the Other.

One also has to bear in mind that the value of a text may be disproportionate to the attention it is given in a language class, raising the issue that the text should be worthy of the time dedicated to it.

The use of literature in a foreign language class boasts a number of advantages, which I will list.

Linguistically-speaking, literature is porous, according to Bronckart (1997), which means that it offers a wide variety of textual genre that involve different styles, tones and levels of difficulty. This means it is worth using when learning a language at any stage, not only reserved for the highest levels, which has been common practice. Many literary texts possess great linguistic simplicity, making them suitable for all levels.

There are also communicative and methodological advantages to using literary texts: because they are open to a wide range of different interpretations and reactions, these multiple aspects can encourage genuine interaction, which is very difficult to achieve within the confines of the classroom. Effective foreign language teaching creates situations where authentic communication and expressions occur and literary text can easily provide real interaction in the classroom. Verbalising experience and experiencing words encourages real communication to talk about texts and the relationship we establish with them, which has much to do with the equally important aspect of motivation.

From this perspective, it has to be said that literary texts have an effect on their readers because they are not trivial. If carefully chosen, they provide common themes that encourage interaction between people from different cultures and stimulate reflection. Literature helps balance the acquisition of fluency and linguistic skill; however, most of all, when it regains its place in the classroom, so too do the aesthetic and emotional aspects of the language or what Susan Sontag calls “erotic of art” (1990, 7).

The danger of interpretation becoming a mere ritual, and making no sense to students, is greater when communication with the text is reduced to applying theoretical principles and identifying objective features of the text. This overly technical approach or gratuitous use of theoretical tools often impedes real communication with the work in question. Literature is only relevant to the extent it matters to its readers and involves them.

In terms of intercultural education and citizenship, literary texts have the added advantage of being anti-dogmatic and non-judgemental. Here, they differ from the more

focussed cultural discourses and those related to civic education. As demonstrated by deconstructionist philosophers, and Geoffrey Hartman in particular, the very notion of non-determination so characteristic of literary work, is essentially anti-dogmatic. It is here that he believes literature is superior to the cultural discourse that views culture as something instrumental, i.e., as means of social education. In contrast, the literary text is unbiased and does not offer single, moralist solutions or the use of words for a particular purpose (Hartman, 1997, 63).

3. Intercultural communicative competence as the general goal

In the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), which was published by the European Council (2001), in the areas of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, the “learning to be” and “learning to live together” dimensions are a concern.

To this end, plurilingual and pluricultural competence is defined in the *CEFR* as the ability to use various languages to communicate at different levels, as well as having varied experience of a number of cultures, which includes an educational dimension:

It can be claimed, moreover, that while the knowledge of one foreign language and culture does not always lead to going beyond what may be ethnocentric in relation to the ‘native’ language and culture, and may even have the opposite effect (it is not uncommon for the learning of **one** language and contact with **one** foreign culture to reinforce stereotypes and preconceived ideas rather than reduce them), a knowledge of several languages is more likely to achieve this, while at the same time enriching the potential for learning. (European Council 2001, 134).

An intercultural emphasis is justified to broaden horizons and achieve objectives related to the pursuit of tolerance of what is different and why the Other acts in a particular way, including such concepts as “intercultural competence”, “intercultural communicative competence” or “intercultural critical awareness” (Byram 2009).

Here, I will not focus on whether or not the CEFR is able to conciliate a practical approach - training communicative skills, as described in chapter 2 of the document, and which presupposes undertaking communicative tasks in a variety of social

situations (merely functional communication) – with the educational and civic dimension, as stated in chapter 1:

To promote methods of modern language teaching which will strengthen independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility. (European Council 2001, 4)

For example, if we think about the different cultures within a culture, such as those connected to age and professional groups, we can say that all communication is intercultural communication and if we accept that, if communication is about not presuming, then teaching literature should be the teaching of alterity. In addition to this, the literary text establishes multiple dialogic links with other texts (literary or otherwise) from other times and places and other ways of explaining the world with its social conflicts or designs, making the literary text an intercultural text, *par excellence*. However, literature seems to be absent from proposals that intend to best develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC), as well as being missing from the majority of educational debates.

In recent years, there have been practical proposals with viable and interesting frameworks for basing teaching on cultural themes, whilst fostering ICC.

One I find particularly interesting is the one developed by Holliday, Hyde and Kullman in *Intercultural Communication* (2010), which brings together theoretical reflection, thoughtful tasks and illustrative materials on three major themes: “identity”, “othering” and “representation”. These three major themes can serve as the basis for designing a framework for the development of ICC. The first one explores how people construct their own identities. The second looks in more detail at the forces which prevent people from seeing others as they really are, assuming that all emphasis should be on understanding the self rather than in essentialist categories of the other. The last theme of “representation” takes a macro view of how society constructs cultural representations, paying special attention to the figures of foreigner or refugee. However, this proposal scarcely covers the cognitive, procedural and experiential skills (knowing how to do and to know how to react and adapt on the basis of previous knowledge) and ignores literary texts completely.

If what has been said thus far is the starting point for emphasising the importance of literature in the foreign language classroom, both in terms of developing communication skills and individual education, what remains is outlining the best way to achieve these two aims.

4. Overcoming some difficulties

Teaching effective communication with literary texts is no straightforward task for a teacher. I will illustrate this with two examples I observed when undertaking a previous empirical study (2003).

The first issue has to do with the classroom situation transforming normal literary communication, which is free and devoid of consequences (normally, the decision to read a poem or novel is made by the reader, who does not have to do anything after reading), into a social act regulated by conventions, where students have to prove themselves academically and sincerity is not always easy.

As such, our students apply their contextual knowledge (essentially about authors, trends, stylistic features and theoretical tools) without becoming involved, without making any personal assessment or relating to the text in any way; in other words, without really communicating with it. However, it is possible to help them give personal value to the text, as I have already suggested elsewhere (2010, 78-79).

The second issue has to do with irritability regarding the alterity (otherness) of the work that impedes good communication. Literature is verbal language that, when being decoded, involves knowledge of the language it is written in; however, lacking that knowledge is often not the main communicative obstacle. The irritation that foreign and even native students can feel towards literature can lead to rejection.

However, if the fact that literary text being different can be a problem for a certain kind of very literal, symbolism-averse reader, it is also a good starting point. Indeed, I am convinced that repeated contact with difference, alterity or the relationship established with the Other (other words, other expressions or other worlds) boast great pedagogical potential.

In the words of Geoffrey Hartman (borrowed from German communication theory, where the importance of consensus pits Habermas against Lyotard), literature is a non-communicative provocation (Hartman 1997, 131) and the non-determination, openness to uncertainty and acceptance of ambiguity required when reading literary works, if of undeniable pedagogical value when it comes to contact between cultures and the mediation of conflict that is given such importance in foreign language teaching nowadays, are not always so well accepted when students want certainties, exact guidance and interpretive solutions. Literature plays an undeniably pedagogical role as it forces the reader, not only to deal with uncertainty, but also to make a judgement that is free of constraints and an awareness that can be used in other contexts, as so well illustrated by the work of Martha Nussbaum (see 2010, in particular).

5. Choose your route' (s) through literature(s) in language class

In order to achieve this educational objective and cumulatively be able to improve communicative skills, methodologically-speaking, it is necessary to create situations that not only facilitate the student's personal response but that constitute genuine communication and not just academic exercises.

In a foreign language class or multicultural class, literary work should be undertaken focussing on the language of the text itself, and not confused with the task of explaining the text, based on a history of literature and theories of literary text. This traditional exercise should be replaced by reading.

Lyrical forms can be a vehicle for learning language, involving the exploration of graphic aspects, such as spatial elements and punctuation, acoustic, morphosyntactic and semantic elements, as well as connotations. Lyrical text, when taking forms that are often found in common language and part of a country's collective imagery, is also a vehicle for cultural learning.

Emblematic expressions, connotations and traditional heritage made up of proverbs, maxims and sayings provide the opportunity for interesting work¹.

Narratives offer other opportunities for reflection. The characters' choices can be discussed (for example, Huck's decision to break the law and help a slave escape in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) and any gaps plugged. Writing letters that are mentioned but not actually reproduced in the text or preparing the defence for crimes committed (for example, Piggy's murder in William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*) help young people put themselves in other people's shoes. Certain literary works facilitate discussion of social phenomena, as demonstrated by "Lessons from literature" (2009).

In order to involve students more and achieve authentic communication, it is important to use methods that explore their creativity and employ a strategy that places the texts within a broad social framework, beyond the classroom.

What is new in psychological research regarding creativity is that creative potential (which everyone has, regardless of gender, ethnic group or age) can be developed by the appropriate pedagogical approach.

¹ Work on traditional stories and proverbs in multicultural classes at a school in Seixal can be found in Oliveira and Sequeira (2012). Examples of common sense and codes of conduct in the different languages and cultures of those present formed the basis of exercises for rewriting and critical analysis of how relevant proverbs are nowadays and a study of sexist views.

According to Morais (2001, 74), a creative personality boasts independence, self-confidence, resilience, a liking for complexity, curiosity, a sense of humour, an aesthetic sense and a personal attachment to work.

To achieve this, risk-taking should be encouraged, limiting the consequences of any failure, while encouraging reflection on what students would like to know more about. It means allowing students to have fun and play with new ideas (irony and humour, albeit sometimes veiled, are often found in literary works and should be exploited). Students should also be encouraged to experiment and assess their own work. I believe it is very useful to engage in activities that can develop the ability to think in terms of possibility and improvement, exploring the consequences of unlikely, unusual and visionary events or thinking about the real results of unreal hypotheses or vice-versa²;

Morais (2001) and Craft (2000) suggest a number of strategies to stimulate creativity, from which I have selected the following:

1) Proposing new ways of doing or presenting things (Is there another way of finding the answer to this problem? Could this story end in a different way? What could have happened if the other side had won?);

2) Helping young people discover their passions and interests, giving them the chance to discover different forms of expression and encouraging them to explore unresolved issues: using open questions like “why?” and “how?” promotes research and flexibility of thought;

3) Putting the students in another position or making them put themselves in another situation. This can be done by rewriting stories from a different point of view or narrating possible events with a new identity, taking on a more unusual role, like someone who is blind, paralysed or autistic, like in the case of the main character in Mark Haddon’s book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003).

New technology provides interactive tasks where the students are the ones producing, thus making it easier for them to take risks, allowing manipulation and

² Many literary works explore this process, like Alfred Hitchcock’s film *The Birds* (based on a story by Daphne du Maurier with the same name), which begins with the unlikely hypothesis of all the world’s birds attacking people. In the same way, Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* starts like this: “One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug.” The rest of the tale deals with the practical consequences this transformation has on the character’s family life. One of the stories in Ian McEwan’s *The Daydreamer* features a vanishing cream, narrating the consequences of such a discovery. It is possible to ask a student what they would most like to see disappear and create a story around this.

experimentation, applying the principles of idea-generation, adapting, modifying, substituting, rearranging and combining. By encouraging production in a number of areas, students can better develop their interests via collaborative learning and wider dissemination of texts in social media.

Young people can be encouraged to participate in reading clubs, web directories, getting involved in blogs and using applications like WebQuest and Podcast for teaching literature³. Preparing, producing and dramatizing texts to put on-line are other options. Youtube videos that re-examine classic texts can be discussed and new versions proposed. There are a number of school versions of Kafka's famous parable "Before the Law" on Youtube (for example, "Before the Law" - 2007 and "Diante da lei" - 2009).

These are just some of the ways to rediscover the value of literary imagination through personal appropriation rather than conventional school interaction and technical analysis. Teaching literature (any literature in any language, whether translated or not) has to focus, in the words of Eduardo Lourenço, on human situations and the language that describes them (Lourenço 1994, 35). It should not be the celebration of past heritage but rather an intercultural meeting place of men with other men, in which the future is built via a critical (intercultural) awareness. Hopefully, a future that is not "post-human".

Bibliography:

Água, A. L. F. 2010. *A comunicação com textos literários e as tecnologias de informação e comunicação na web 2.0*. Lisboa: Universidade Aberta (Master's dissertation available at: <http://repositorioaberto.uab.pt/bitstream/10400.2/1984/1/Ana%20Agua.pdf>)

Aguar e Silva, V. 2007. Horizontes de uma nova interdisciplinaridade entre os estudos literários e os estudos linguísticos. In *Atas da Conferência Internacional sobre o Ensino do Português*, ed. Ministério da educação / Direção Geral de Desenvolvimento Curricular, 19-32. Lisboa: Ministério da Educação.

Byram, M. 2009. Intercultural Competence in Foreign Languages. In *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, ed. Darla Deardorff, 321-332. Los Angeles / London / New Delhi / Singapore / Washington DC: Sage Publications.

Bredella, L. 2010. *Das Verstehen des Anderen. Kulturwissenschaftliche und literaturdidaktische Studien*. Tübingen: Narr.

³ Ana Lúcia Água is responsible for examples of good practice in her use of ICT on Web 2.0 for literature teaching at school (2010).

- Bronckart, J. P. 1997. Le texte comme lieu d` articulation de la didactique de la langue et de la didactique de la littérature. In *Didactica de la Lengua y de la Literatura para una Sociedad Plurilingüe del Siglo XXI*, Minutes from IV International Congress of the Spanish Society for Language and Literature Teaching, ed. José Cantero et al. 13-23. Barcelona: University of Barcelona.
- European Council. 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. In: www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf (1-11-2013)
- Craft, A. 2000. *Creativity across the primary curriculum – framing and developing practice*. London: Routledge.
- Galisson, R. 1997. Problématique de l` éducation et de la communication interculturelles en milieu scolaire européen. In *ÉLA-Études de Linguistique Appliquée* 106, April-June: 141-160.
- Golding, W. 1954. *The Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Graff, G. 2007. *Professing Literature. An institutional History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1st edition: 1987).
- Guillory, J. 1993. *Cultural Capital: the Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Haddon, M. 2003. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. New York: Random House.
- Hadley, A. 2001. *Teaching Language in Context*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle (1st ed.: 1986).
- Hartman, G. 1997. *The Fateful Question of Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Holliday, A., Martin Hyde and John Kullman. 2010. *Intercultural Communication*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Iser, W. 1996. The emergence of a cross-cultural discourse. In *The Translatability of Cultures*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, 245-264. Stanford / California: Stanford Univ. Press.
- Kafka, F. 2007. *Die Verwandlung*. Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag (1st edition: 1915) E-book available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22367/22367-h/22367-h.htm> (accessed on 9-4-2012)
- Lourenço, E. 1994. *O canto do signo. Existência e literatura*. Lisboa: Presença.
- McEwan, I. 1994. *The Daydreamer*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Morais, M. F. 2001. *Definição e avaliação da criatividade*. Braga: Instituto de Educação e Psicologia da Universidade do Minho.

Nussbaum, M. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy needs the Humanities*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Oliveira, Dulce and Rosa Maria Sequeira. 2012. *A interculturalidade na escola e as narrativas de expressão oral*. Lisboa: Difel.

Sequeira, Rosa Maria. 2003. *O Poder e o Desejo: o ensino da literatura a estrangeiros na universidade*. Lisboa: Ministério da Educação.

2010. *Comunicar bem. Práticas e estruturas comunicativas*. Lisboa: Fonte da palavra.

2012 (vide Oliveira)

Sontag, S. 1990. *Against Interpretation*. New York / London / Toronto / Sydney / Auckland: Anchor Books (1st ed.: 1966).

Twain, M. 1884. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Available in:
<http://www.americanliterature.com/Twain/TheAdventuresofHuckleberryFinn/TheAdventuresofHuckleberryFinn.html>
(accessed on 9/4/2012)

Video-recordings:

Lessons from Literature. 2009. In www.lessonsfromliterature.org/ (1-11-2013)

Before the Law. 2007. In:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V96JFsvTom4&feature=related>
(accessed on 8/4/2013)

Diante da lei. 2009. In:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5uz_PuTyUY&feature=related
(accessed on 8/4/2013)