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INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN READING FOREIGN LITERATURE

One of the greatest sources of difficulty for foreign language students reading contemporary British literature is their lack of target culture knowledge. Unfamiliar cultural background, cultural words, cultural coherence of the discourse can impede understanding of the text and discourage the reader. How can we motivate to read and encourage our students to respond critically to cultural texts? Students reading foreign fiction are assumed to participate in an intercultural encounter. It requires both affective and cognitive engagement. Therefore, developing the habit to dialogue with the text, the author and other readers seems a promising, effective classroom alternative to answering traditional comprehension questions.

1. The construction of knowledge and text interpretation

Contemporary theories of learning emphasise the importance of encouraging students' active involvement in the process. The main assumption of social constructivism or interactionism is based on the idea of constructing personal knowledge by interacting with the environment. Engaging the student cognitively and emotionally is considered the prerequisite for effective learning in the so called experiential approach. Teaching reading, that is making sense of the text, is believed to involve activating the student individually, as well as taking into account the sociocultural context of the process (Wallace 2005: 21; Fenner 2001: 39).

The focus on the reader / learner active role in interpreting texts can be found in both literary theories and applied linguistics. Reader-oriented theories, such as reader-response theory or Bakhtin's dialogics, consider the role of the reader central to the process of literature reading and interpreting. Similarly, foreign language reading theory has been dominated by the view that reading is an in-

teractive process, a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text, leading to interpretation (Grabe in Carrell et al. 1993: 56; Wallace 2005: 21).

Foreign literature gives unique access to the target culture representatives' ways of living and thinking. By dramatising its cultural content fiction engages the readers, making them reflect on their own culture and identity (Fenner 2001: 39). In his narrative theory Bakhtin claimed that to think about other people "means to talk with them" (as cited in Guerin et al. 1992: 307). Consequently, foreign literature reader's attempts to understand fictional characters may be considered an opportunity for a genuine intercultural dialogue.

2. Critical reading and intercultural competence

The dialogic nature of learning and reading should be highlighted in the discussion related to developing intercultural competence of a foreign language student. Comprising certain knowledge, attitudes and skills, intercultural competence (IC) is believed to facilitate all types of intercultural encounters, including reading cultural text, e.g. foreign literature. Michael Byram's well-known model of IC, features another component called critical cultural awareness. It requires the student's ability "to identify and interpret implicit and explicit values in the text by placing the text in context", and "to evaluate the text on the basis of explicit perspectives and criteria" (Byram 1997: 63–64, 101). Critical observers and interpreters of cultural phenomena (including texts) should not refrain from expressing their views, assuming they can provide convincing arguments to support their judgement.

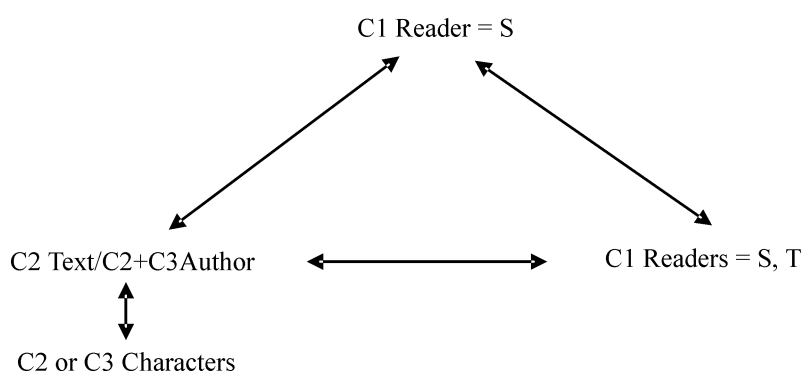
Critical readers, as described by Wallace (2005: 42), are capable of critiquing not only the logic and argument in texts, but also "the ideological assumptions underpinning them", as well as their own opinions, trying "to gain some overall distance on their interpretations and the likely reasons for them". Critical reading expects individuals to make both "cognitive and critical links to their own lives", but emphasises even more that in the classroom context "texts are jointly interpreted through talk around text" (Wallace 2005: 42–43).

3. Intercultural dialogue in a reading class – the study

In order to investigate the possibility of an intercultural dialogue in a monocultural reading class, I conducted a small-scale study with a group of foreign language teacher training college students. Below I will present a sequence of activities designed to promote dialogue in reading foreign fiction and I will discuss my observations of students' reactions as critical readers.

3.1. Participants of the dialogue

Different types of dialogic interaction that may have been observed in my reading class resulted from the fact that the actual participants of the encounters between the reader (C1) and the literary text included: its fictional characters, the author, the culture(s) they represented (C2, C3), and other readers (C1). As Fenner (2001: 26) emphasizes the authenticity of this kind of classroom communication can be achieved thanks to the fact that the reader's interpretation may be challenged by other participants of the process, i.e. the students and the teacher, with their equal status as readers and lack of preempts answers. The number of opportunities for an intercultural dialogue in a monocultural advanced reading class is illustrated by the following diagram:



3.2. Investigated issues

My study was expected to provide answers to the following questions:

Will the students find the designed tasks manageable and motivating to enter any kind of the dialogue with the cultural literary text? Will the language or unfamiliar cultural background pose difficulty in completing the tasks?

Will the tasks help the students engage affectively in reading? Will they identify with the heroine, understand the cultural context, and dialogue with the text? Will it help them to see their own experience from another perspective and reflect on it?

Will the students engaged in an intercultural dialogue with the text read critically? What evidence of their cognitive engagement will be found in the recorded samples? Will they reveal, for instance, the students' ability to:

- Be critical, analytical, inquisitive, refrain from taking things for granted and making sweeping statements.
- Look from different angles, listen to different voices, stay unbiased, make balanced statements.

- Choose arguments carefully, look for evidence in the text, make references to the text and other participants of the dialogue?

3.3. Procedure

The sequence of activities conducted on different occasions included the following:

Reader's Diary – an internal dialogue of the reader with...?

The students were to read a contemporary British novel of their choice. While reading they were to write several diary entries (at least three paragraphs: having read the 1st page, the last page, and in the middle of reading the book). They were told that at some point the teacher and their group mates would have access to their diary entries. Having collected the students' work I asked a feedback question that was answered in writing: *Do you think the fact that you knew that your comments on the book would be read by others affected the way you were reading?*

Dialogue with the literary text – a dialogue with the author, main character, and another reader

The students were to read an extract from Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1994).¹ The author, a British writer of Indian origin, made a 10 year old Meena from a Sikh family settled in the Midlands of the 60s, the heroine and narrator of her novel.

Having read the text the students were to write a question or comment addressed to:

- a. The author. *What would you like Meera Syal to clarify / explain to you?*
- b. The main character. *Give her advice; share your personal experience with the heroine.*
- c. A group mate. *Share your impressions / understanding / interpretation of an issue you find particularly important to discuss with other readers.*

Next, the students were to exchange their notes and write new comments on each other's responses to questions 1–3.

Group discussion on 'interculturality' of the analysed literary text

The discussion focused on the following issues:

- Would you call *Anita and Me* an intercultural text? Why?
- What are the main points made by the author in the analysed extract?
- What makes reading this kind of text difficult for you?

¹ Introduced to me by Dr. Ruth Cherrington at the British Council workshop in 2007.

3.4. Results

Reader's Diary – *an internal dialogue of the reader with...?*

Most students (16/45) admitted that the task of writing several diary entries made them read “more carefully,” “come back to the more interesting passages,” “put more thought into it,” as well as making them “more conscious of the content and their own impressions” and “more informed on the book and the author.” However, some of them confessed they had to “force themselves to find in the text something to write about.”

Individual comments included: “looking for things that may be interesting for the reader of their diary,” “reading more critically” or “analytically,” “considering how to interpret things in the context of their background cultural knowledge,” “thinking of the structure, form, and style of the novel,” as well as “trying to identify with the character more, trying to put oneself in her position.” One student even chose the book “in the view of commenting on it.”

Nevertheless, a large number of respondents (15) gave a negative answer declaring they read only “for themselves,” and “fortunately with much interest.” Additionally, some students explained that they “did not think who would read it, but having read the extract considered what to write,” “tried to choose extracts to comment on that would be easier, less time consuming and not too personal,” “filtered thoughts and feelings before putting them down,” and “selected the words.”

Dialogue with the literary text – *a dialogue with the author, main character, and another reader*

50% of the students claimed they did not understand the task or had nothing to write about.

17% of the collected written feedback revealed that the students engaged only in the dialogue with the text.

33% of the written feedback provided examples of the students dialoguing with the text and with each other.

- a. In their questions or comments addressed to the author of the text the students:
 - questioned the credibility of the story
 - asked her to explain the meaning of words typical of Indian culture
 - asked about her opinion on Anglo-Indian relations
 - asked about her personal experience
 - asked her to compare with other ‘colonial’ writers such as Kipling and Forster

Samples of the dialogue between the students² showed that they e.g.:

- attempted to be exhaustive and just in their interpretations
 - S: *Why is food so important in this book?*
 - R: *There seems to be a constant struggle for belonging somewhere. The food may symbolise longing for home and reconciliation to one's destiny (but I do not want to overinterpret ☺).*
 - R: *The food serves as a starting point to a deeper discussion on the differences between the Punjabi and the British and the first and second generation of immigrants.*
 - helped each other to understand Meena and speculated about her future
 - S: *Her attitude towards English women is based on prejudices of her mother and on her new discoveries. She is in the process of feeling what it is like to be an English girl.*
 - R: *She's one of those people who are prone to lose their cultural identity in the new environment.*
 - trying to explain specific cultural issues demonstrated ignorance of the cultural background
 - S: *Why didn't you choose e.g. the Jamaican minority for your novel?*
 - R: *Because Indian culture is strongly connected with British history, people lack knowledge about this issue and it is really worth writing about.*
 - S: *What exactly is the role of women in the Indian culture?*
 - R: *Indian women are very popular among teachers and other professionals.*
 - exchanged conflicting views
 - S: *The feelings of the mother seem somewhat illogical to me.*
 - R: *I am able to understand the reaction of the mother.*
 - assumed the author's point of view
 - S: *Why on earth does the girl have to know how to cook?! Is it only a girl who is responsible for running the household?!*
 - R: *I felt that I had to do it because it's a part of our culture.*
 - R: *I hope that British people do find my book amusing. ... they will look differently, with more understanding, at Indian people living in the UK.*
- b. In their questions or comments addressed to the main character the students:
- gave pieces of advice concerning her personality, identity problems, or gender roles
 - recognised Meena's emotions as their own from the past
 - argued with the character

² S = student's question or comment on the text

R = student's response to a given S

Samples of the dialogue between the students showed that they e.g.:

- discussed the question of Meena losing her cultural identity
 - S: *Could she combine two cultures without feeling confusion or homelessness?*
 - R: *Millions of immigrants combined it successfully.*
 - R: *She is likely to lose her distinct cultural identity.*
 - R: *I agree that Meena should get more acquainted with her own culture instead of noting the things that she doesn't understand. More intuition, not logic is needed.*
- gave her advice and assumed the heroine's point of view
 - S: *If I were you I would like to learn as much as possible about the culture I come from.*
 - R: *It's not that I am not interested in my home country, but cooking itself.*
 - S: *I would have learned Punjabi.*
 - R: *What for? We lived in England...*
 - S: *Assimilate with the British culture but stay true to your roots and carry on tradition. ... You are special.*
 - R: *It's not easy. I feel torn apart. ... Especially when you are a teenager.*
 - S: *You should take advantage of the possibility to learn useful skill such as cooking.*
 - R: *I do not approve of such a model of family, in which a woman's role is only to cook.*

- c. In their questions or comments addressed to other group mates the students:
- raised the issue of "the difficulties with assimilation," "children being born between the culture of their parents and the country where they live"
 - pointed out to the way the differences between the two cultures are described
 - focused on the heroine's "cravings" connected with achieving a certain status in society
 - emphasised that the adolescent heroine "going through a period of defiance of authority and custom ... is questioning her heritage"

Samples of the dialogue between the students showed that they e.g.:

- offered another interpretation
 - S: *The author is talking about the role of food in Indian culture. They take pride in the way they cook.*
 - R: *It was mentioned because traditional food reminds those immigrants of their home country and what they are missing.*
 - R: *I wouldn't really say that the mother doesn't want to adapt to the British lifestyle. To me, she's more like a woman who wants to preserve her identity and Indian background, which is quite different from rejecting the British culture.*

- reassured each other about their interpretations
- answered each other's questions with the quotes from the text
S: *Does food play an important role in Indian culture? If so, why?*
R: *Food was not just something to fill a hole, it was soul food.*
- did not get discouraged with the difficulties
R: *I think my mere knowledge of the Punjabi culture would not obstruct the understanding of the novel. It is not difficult to infer the meaning from the context.*

Group discussion on 'interculturality' of the literary text

The students perceived the text as intercultural for several reasons including presented aspects of different cultures and vocabulary referring to different traditions. The novel provided an opportunity for the English and Indian cultures to meet. Last but not least, one of the students made the point concerning the reader's individual choice to focus on the similarities between cultures, therefore deciding on an intercultural reading of the text.

The main cultural issues identified in the extract included: search for cultural identity, problems of different generations of immigrants, difficulty with living between cultures, assimilation, and keeping traditions. The students found it easier to sympathise with the Indian point of view for two reasons: Indian identity of the narrator and considering "feeling foreign" is very much part of Polish experience.

The readers admitted that for Polish college students it is difficult to identify with a multicultural society, although "one can see racism and multiculturalism on TV." Lack of familiarity with Indian culture was not an obstacle, however, unfamiliar culinary vocabulary was considered "disturbing" to the reading. According to the students, to share the author's sociocultural knowledge would help to understand, and even more importantly, to "imagine and feel what you are reading about."

4. Implications for teaching

The study proved that the majority of the students found the designed tasks manageable and were motivated to enter the dialogue with the cultural literary text. The language or unfamiliar cultural background did not pose much difficulty in completing the tasks. On the other hand, almost 50% of the group refused to participate in the activities designed for reading *Anita and Me*. They might have found the idea of dialoguing with the text too odd, artificial or difficult. Only one third of the readers engaged in the dialogue with one another in the written form. One can hope for better results, after making the students familiar with an interactive approach to reading by giving them more opportunities to dialogue with the text and each other in class.

Those students who did engage in an intercultural dialogue with the text, both affectively and cognitively, demonstrated their ability to read critically. They particularly tried to be analytical and inquisitive, look from different angles and find evidence for their arguments in the text. They felt much more comfortable, though, to challenge the text rather than each other, at least in writing.

While conducting the study I chose to limit my role to a mere provider of texts and task instructions. Trying to enhance reflection on the text and on students' experience I strove against imposing my views or manipulating with interpretations. The question concerning the nature of teacher's intervention still remains open: how to avoid the dangers of either indoctrination or cultural relativism? The matter is delicate and needs to be treated with responsibility. As Wallace (2005: 18) puts it, "we mediate in the establishment of learner identities."

Last but not least, the issue that requires further investigation concerns the teacher's decision how much metalanguage should be pre-taught to facilitate critical classroom discourse. In order to help promote critical intercultural dialogue in reading literature it seems essential to solve the question of the quality and extent of teacher's contribution.

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Streszczenie

Dialog interkulturowy podczas czytania literatury w języku obcym

Bariera kulturowa jest jednym z problemów, jakie utrudniają studentom odbiór współczesnych obcojęzycznych tekstów literackich. Brak znajomości tła kulturowego lub słów i zwrotów nacechowanych kulturowo może utrudniać interpretację tekstu i w konsekwencji zniechęcić nawet zaawansowanych językowo czytelników, jakimi są studenci filologii. Jak motywować do czytania takich tekstów? Jak kształtować umiejętność krytycznego odbioru tekstów kulturowych? Punktem wyjścia jest założenie, że czytając literaturę obcojęzyczną stajemy się aktywnymi uczestnikami spotkania międzykulturowego. W tej roli niezbędne jest zarówno zaangażowanie emocjonalne, jak i racjonalna argumentacja. Wydaje się zatem, że ćwiczenia służące rozwijaniu nawyku dialogowania z tekstem, jego autorem, a także z innymi czytelnikami, są obiecującą alternatywą dla typowych zadań, polegających na odpowiadaniu na pytania sprawdzające stopień rozumienia tekstu.