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## INTERCULTURAL MATERIALS FOR DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ELT: THE CASE OF HIGH-SCHOOL BOOKS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to show how intercultural materials can help in developing intercultural communication competence in English language lessons. It will confirm that the cultural content is present in students' books but what is needed is accurate guidance and paying more attention to conducting the lesson in the right manner. Observations are chosen as a research instrument in this study in order to explain the cultural component of teaching English as a foreign language in a more detailed way. Lesson observations based on action research is a systematic inquiry with the goal of informing practice in a particular situation. It is a tool for teachers to discover what works best in their own classroom situation, occupying a midpoint on a continuum from teacher reflection on one end to traditional appraisal lesson observation on the other. The conclusion tells us that there are many challenges that teachers are faced with when teaching students from different ethnic backgrounds and if the teacher is not familiar with the students' cultural backgrounds, they will be faced with difficulties in giving instructions or meeting their learning needs.

**Key words:** *English language, teaching, intercultural competence, culture, communication.*

### Intercultural Communication Competence in ELT

One of the most important guidelines in contemporary foreign language teaching and learning is to create the necessary conditions in the classroom for students to systematically prepare for a normal and free communication. Other important aspects of this training are knowledge, understanding and acceptance of the foreign culture. According to Anggraini (2015), the cultural and language knowledge are essential for highly effective communication. "This concept emphasizes communication as the primary goal of language learning, sees culture and language as closely linked; recognizes that culture is always present when language is used, sees cultural skills as important as language skills in language learning" (Anggraini, 2015, p. 2). When communication takes place between people of different cultures and they share a common language, things can certainly go wrong. Moreover, speaking the language does not mean that you have the background knowledge that native speakers assume you have. Intercultural communication takes place between nations and governments rather than between individuals and it is quite formal and ritualized. "Since all international business activities involve communication, knowledge of intercultural communication and intercultural business communication is needed" (Chaney & Martin, 2014, p.14). If communication is the process by which people exchange information or express their thoughts

and feelings or ways of sending and receiving information, the process can become very difficult if there is a big difference between the two cultures.

The development of globally competent people with comprehensive education that tomorrow will be productive citizens of the world and will be able to work in groups of different people and in different regions should start from early school age. The school is a specific place for meeting and learning about different cultures and this happens on different levels, whereas two particularly important aspects can be distinguished - content and functional. The educational content, along with the cognitive components, consists of certain values, norms and rules which are decisive for the culture of the ethnic group that has a dominant role in the social structure and therefore can define the educational goals and tasks facing the growing generations of the nation. The main normative documents defining the content of the education are the state educational requirements, the curricula and the textbooks. That is why, according to the *Common European framework of reference for languages*, "the ability to effectively tackle cultural differences inherent in communication becomes more than a competitive advantage in the modern world." (Council of Europe, 2004). This understanding defines the priority of intercultural competence in the concept of key competences for lifelong learning. And this is quite natural in view of the desire to unite the member states - "to achieve greater unity among member states", and this objective is being achieved "by adopting a common approach in the field of culture" (Council of Europe, 2004).

In order to incorporate intercultural communication in the English language classroom, these three things should be considered:

1. If students enter an intercultural classroom, the teachers must guide them and describe the environment and, when this happens, then the learning is learner-centered, engaging, interactive, participatory, and cooperative.

2. A language course concerned with culture broadens its scope from a focus of improving the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking in order to acquire cultural skills – the intercultural learner serves as a mediator b/n different social groups that use different languages and varieties (Corbett, 2003, p 11).

3. If teachers become aware that language skills and knowledge need to be connected to the intercultural competence, students will feel that energy also and show much better results.

That is the reason why intercultural competence is essential in achieving goals at an international level.

### **Lesson observation - That's entertainment: reading comprehension (Close-up, Student's Book for I year)**

The aim of the next lesson we had observed in March in the state municipal school "Jane Sandanski" in Strumica was to read the text, search information in paragraphs and short texts and to answer questions about the text. The class consisted of 27 students who were really interested in the topic of the text since there were interesting pictures in the textbook that provoked them to ask questions and give predictions. The topic of the lesson was connected to music and types of music written by different composers from different countries. The first task was to match some instruments to the countries they come from which lasted about 10 minutes together with the teacher's introduction. What followed was a discussion about the instruments which they see for the first time and each instrument is from a different culture and country in about 5 minutes. In the while-reading phase, the texts were read aloud and afterwards translated into Macedonian language and the grammar-translation method was used. After each text was read and translated, the teacher played music in duration of 3 seconds connected to each text found on the Internet, which brought a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. This phase had a duration of about 15 minutes. The text intended for reading was divided into four parts and each part represented a different country discussing a certain band promoting the culture of their country. The texts involved cultural terms such as social awareness, discrimination, civil servants, hardship and perfectionism. These words served as a tool to discuss different cultures and their struggles. The first country mentioned in the text was Greece and this provoked certain comments about Greeks and our sensitive political

situation. The next country was the Czech Republic and in the text the Roma people who used hip-hop music to teach tolerance in their schools were mentioned. When some of the Roma heard this, they started discussing folk music and how they make a living of playing that type of music. While searching for information in order to answer the questions, the teacher set 15 minutes for this task and during the task students were engaged in reading and discussing with their partners, speaking about different cultural matters such as the hardships mentioned in the third text which was about Senegal. Here one author who formed a rap group was speaking about the struggles of the Senegalese people. The final text mentioned a Dutch rapper who has a very good reputation as a perfectionist and has won several awards and represents the Netherlands' culture. For homework, students received a very interesting task - to prepare a short paragraph about a Macedonian composer or singer and present it in the following lessons. The materials used for these lessons were the student's book, the music from the Internet and the students were assessed in a formative way.

According to a study about teaching English using songs, "learning through songs may be a good method of vocabulary memorization because lyrics are sung repeatedly, and catchy tunes help to remember them. It needs to be noticed that because of the easy access to music, everyone may benefit from it "(Kuśnierek, 2016). Another pedagogical implication besides vocabulary is of course culture. According to Alberto and Arevalo (2010), songs in ELT facilitate the learning of a language in interesting and effective ways by having access to this form of culture. Songs that touch upon social issues and cultural aspects are appropriate choices because music is close to students, they listen to it every day and the lyrics of each song are available on the Internet. Students can even find explanations of foreign music written in different slangs and this can help them understand a culture.

#### **Lesson observation - Lessons to learn: listening and speaking (Close-up, Student's Book for 1 year)**

The aim of this lesson is to listen and understand short and long dialogues, recognize, summarize, match information connected to the listening task, and finally present opinions, discuss and give suggestions on topics connected to school improvement and school trips. During this lesson observed in the state municipal school "Dimitar Vlahov", the teacher had difficulties in establishing a working atmosphere because it was a period of Easter holidays and students were not so interested to learn. After some interesting tasks, students were finally ready to do the listening task which involved matching information in tables and lasted 10 minutes. Students were supposed to use synonyms of what they hear in order to fill in the missing parts in the table. What followed were longer dialogues about a school trip which involved experiences during trips, the topic of friendships and relationships and, of course, inspiration for new jobs. This task lasted 10 minutes and what followed were some speaking tasks with given questions connected with school such as: which their favorite subject is, which subject is the most difficult one, what they would like to learn in future. Here the students interacted within the groups of 4 students and gave some really honest answers about certain subjects and the difficulties they face. However, some of them were really honest about certain teachers and why they do not like their subjects. Some of the answers were that they do not like the subject and the teacher. In the final task, students were supposed to give suggestions for the improvement of school facilities, so the library was mentioned and some of the students said that they really needed a better library, and this opened a discussion by the end of the lesson. The materials used for this lesson were taken out from the student's book where a lot of pictures could be found. At the end, the teacher had chosen to finish the lesson by playing a video on YouTube using the Internet from which the students could see how the schools are organized in the USA. Their task for homework was to make a comparison of the Macedonian and American educational system in their notebooks for which they will receive a grade, i.e., a summative assessment will be used.

Discussion: Comparing cultures is one of the ways of developing intercultural capabilities. When doing comparisons, the learner focuses on his/her own beliefs, traditions, values, and knowledge and based on that, successfully communicates with people from their own culture

and other cultures and, as Byram (1994) states, learners cannot rid of their own culture and simply step into another. Using the task of comparing what students have noticed from the video about the difference in education makes the students think about diversity, the existence of other cultures and how they feel about other cultures by sharing their own experiences during their school time comparing them to the American people. Finally, this task serves as a tool of interaction on the basis of one's learning and experiences of diversity in order to create personal meanings about one's experiences, communicate those meanings, explore them and reshape them in response to others.

**Lesson observation - National Identity - skills focus p.10 (New Opportunities, Student's Book for IV year)**

This lesson was observed in the State Municipal School "Dimitar Vlahov". The objectives of the lesson are to revise listening strategies by listening to a radio program about Great Britain and learn colloquial expressions. Similarly, to some of the lessons above, this is a task-based cultural lesson in which the intended outcomes were to compare the country they come from with Great Britain. This lesson began by describing the pictures in the student's book with given key words about national identity and then to comment their view of Britain and the British people. The words were translated into Macedonian language because the teacher considered them unfamiliar and needed for the tasks that followed. After that followed the while-listening task which gave some details about Great Britain. The next task was actually an interview with a girl who was speaking about what she likes and dislikes about Britain. In the task, the students were to answer if the statements were true or false in pairs. Here the students communicated with their co-student and checked the answers with the teacher. From this exercise, students could hear what young people in Britain usually do and learn some colloquial expressions for expressing preference. Finally, the discussion part was to make a list of good and bad things about living in their country and share it with everybody. For homework, students needed to describe their country and the people who live in their country in a short essay. For the essay students will receive a grade and they will be assessed in a summative way.

The lesson can be placed in the group of the topic-based approach of teaching culture, and it concentrates on more general and cross-sectional topics which involve various cultural issues. Wiśniewska- Brogowska (2004) confirms that the topic-based approach can provide an oblique yet original encounter with British life and culture. She also states that knowing about the people who use the language, understanding their behaviors, beliefs and customs increases cultural awareness and promotes greater personal interest both in the language and the culture. This lesson deals with some key elements of current British life, such as class, education, health, and the topic-based approach to teaching culture brings life to the class and develops an integrated view of the target culture.

**Lesson observation - Culture: reading, listening and speaking p.26 (Think 2, Student's Book for II year)**

This lesson was also observed in the state municipal school "Nikola Karev" in a classroom which consisted of 33 students. The title of the lesson is "Culture". The objectives of the lesson were to read and listen to a text about a typical day at school for students from different countries, which is a task-based lesson. The intended outcomes were to introduce the students to different educational systems and compare their home-country education system with the ones given in the student's book. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher asked what is a typical school day for each of them, having in mind the pictures in the book. One of the students explained how the day starts for him explaining every activity in detail. After the pre-reading activity that lasted about 10 minutes, they started reading and listening to the text in order to do the tasks that follow. They had vocabulary tasks and reading comprehension questions. After they finished reading and listening, they started doing the activities.

The final phase of the lesson was a discussion in groups where students were about to compare their typical school day with the students from different countries mentioned in the text. They were set to do research about other cultures for homework and again to compare it with their own typical school day; for this, the students will receive a grade, i.e., the summative assessment will be used. From all the activities mentioned above, students could learn more about the educational systems in other countries from simple short texts and further from the research set for their homework. In the Task-based approach, the activities within the lesson are from real communication and the language used enhances the language simply because performing different tasks enriches the usage of the foreign language. According to Lin (2009), within this method the teachers are both instructors and guides, and the learners are both receivers and main agents. This method presents a chance for the students to learn cooperatively and engage their abilities to use the target language in a professional way for real communication.

#### **Lesson observation - Culture corner 1 - The History of Englishp.28 (New Opportunities, Student's Book for IV year)**

This lesson aims at listening to the history of English through which students will have the chance to listen, learn and discuss the details about the History of English language using the audio-lingual method. The intended outcomes are to learn new vocabulary, improve pronunciation and answer questions connected with language. Again, a task-based oriented lesson where the students will be ordering events, answer multiple choice questions and identify different accents were the tasks that the students were supposed to do. The lesson was observed in the state municipal school "Nikola Karev" in a classroom of 28 students.

The materials used for the lesson are the student's book and the audio material from the book, which is actually authentic material used for the lesson. One research in teaching culture in the English classroom confirmed that the authentic materials presented with their original context and with thorough explanations of the historical contexts, help students understand the perspectives and express their opinions and thoughts. But the approach to the material is always essential and students need to use these materials for analysis and not for remembering facts (Listuen, 2017). In this case, students worked in small groups of four during the first task and then in pairs answered the multiple- choice questions. However, since it was the last lesson, students were not so eager to cooperate, and the teacher had difficulties in achieving a good working atmosphere. Half of the students participated and listened to the program, and the other half were hesitant to participate in the activity. The pronunciation part interested the students more since the task was connected with different accents. Finally, the last task was to answer questions about the mother tongue, and, for this, students needed to do some research. So, this task-based activity was set as a homework project which was to be assessed when done. Hutchinson (1992) considers project work as personal where students can write about themselves, their friends and experiences, and this is an engaging and active process. By doing projects and research, students learn by doing and very often they achieve success.

#### **Lesson observation - Culture - Ireland, a nation of storytellers p.54 (Think 3, Student's Book for III year)**

The objectives of the lesson observed in the SMS "Nikola Karev" are to read an article and tell a story at the end of the lesson. The aims are to be achieved by reading and listening to some interesting materials. The lesson begins with a pre-reading task of answering questions connected to the given pictures. What follows is reading and listening that proceeds with answering questions and learning new vocabulary, i.e. task-based activities. In the while-reading phase of the lesson, students answer questions which were previously predicted. Then, in pairs they do the next true or false exercise which is followed by a speaking activity. The next task involves learning new vocabulary highlighted in the text and students need to match the words with their definitions.

In the next phase of the lesson, students put pictures in order and then tell a story. Most of the students found this activity boring and were hesitant to do it. Only a small group of students were active and enthusiastically participated in telling the story from the pictures. At the end of the lesson, students had the chance to hear a story which will further help them write their own story. This task is set for homework and will be assessed in a summative way afterwards. As experienced in the observation of the lesson, very often telling stories to teenagers can be problematic because students consider it childish. According to Malderez (2010), "what matters here is the choice of story, and the task that is set following the story. Useful stories for this age group are ones that promote thinking, and appropriate tasks ones which relate in some way to the learners' concerns".

#### **Lesson observation - UK vs. USA (Focus 4, Student's Book for IV year) p.10**

The main aim of the lesson is to revise comparative structures and the passive voice through texts about the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The objective of the lesson is to be achieved by listening to some interesting materials that compare the life in the USA with the life in the UK. The lesson begins with a pre-listening task of finding pairs of American and British words. What follows is a listening task which proceeds with a discussion about the differences between Britain and the USA. The next task involves revising the comparative and superlative forms through some examples taken from the listening program. This phase of the lesson finishes with doing an exercise of writing sentences again in the context of the culture of the UK and the USA.

In the next phase of the lesson, students compare a table of words and phrases connected to the USA, the UK, and their country. After the table is filled in, students discuss the differences among the three countries. What follows is a very interesting quiz which they fill in in pairs and then listen and check their answers. For homework, students have to find out more trivia facts about the UK and the USA and should write active sentences and transform them into passive ones. As Corbett states:

"The language classroom is a privileged site for intercultural exploration because it affords the time and the space for sustained and reflective encounters with 'otherness'. In turn, intercultural education offers language teaching a new set of contexts, purposes and motivations, namely, to explore other cultures and to mediate when intercultural miscommunication does occur" (p.15)

This lesson observed in SMS "Nikola Karev" was a very good example of intercultural exploration where students can encounter and find out more about a person who has lived in the UK and the USA and through that context learn some very important grammatical structures such as passive and comparison of adjectives. This section should contain a description of the materials used and methods employed in form, which makes the results reproducible, but without detailed description of already known methods. Manuscripts that are related to theoretical studies should contain a subheading theoretical background where the necessary details for verifying the results obtained should be stated.

#### **Conclusion**

From all the observed lessons, it can be concluded that student's books offer a wide variety of cultural lessons and most of the teachers are eager to pursue them and develop in students the needed intercultural communication competence. However, sometimes students are not so eager to cooperate and speak openly about social issues within the activities containing a cultural content. There are many challenges that teachers face when teaching students from different ethnic backgrounds. If teachers are not familiar with their students' cultural backgrounds, they will be faced with difficulties in giving instruction or meeting their learning needs.

Usually, students belonging to the smaller ethnic groups in the country are less integrated in the educational process. They still go through a process of integration, but, unfortunately, there is a need for something more than doing projects of inter-ethnic education which include extra-curricular activities. There is still a need for training in intercultural

communication and multiculturalism in order to fulfill the aims of learning and teaching to both teachers and students. What can be suggested to the teachers who teach students from different ethnic backgrounds is to find materials which are easier and contain the social dimension of integration of the students and also information about different cultures and use specific methods and techniques which are practical and not theoretical. These materials need to be assessed because very often the materials in the students' books can include stereotypes instead of teaching students to understand different cultures. It is essential for students to be further challenged and guided in order to develop critical communicative skills. Moreover, as Byram (1997) suggests, the focus should not be solely on preparing students to communicate without mistakes, but to communicate openly, forging relationships that will allow them to thrive in the foreign cultural context. What is needed is to try to facilitate students to develop intercultural awareness and provide activities where different cultures, values, and behaviors are considered (Byram, 1997).

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