

Kunešová, K. (2020). The Teaching of Interculturality through Literature: New Challenges. *Revista Electrónica Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado*, 23(1), 21-31.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6018/reifop.408741>

The Teaching of Interculturality through Literature: New Challenges

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Abstract

The teaching of literature in secondary schools in the Czech Republic (note that this is in the course of Czech literature courses and taught in Czech) contributes in a relevant way to open to young people new worlds. It works starting from the treasury of the world thought, Homer's *Odyssey* for example through Shakespearean drama and Goethe's *Faust*, to the novels by Balzac or by Zola, to the twentieth century authors who engaged in the humanist cause by unveiling the hidden facets of human existence. The purpose of our reflection on intercultural topics is first of all to analyze the contribution of reading to the level of knowledge, then to propose the possibilities of using literary texts to demonstrate how much the dialogue between cultures is included in the works themselves, and finally, to consider which contemporary literary texts on a world scale could enrich in a relevant way the choice of books recommended to young Czechs. The conclusion will be a synthesis trying to compare the situation of Czech students to that of young Frenchmen, for example. It will also highlight the role of translation not only in teaching literature, but in knowing the Other.

Key words

Literature; humanism; interculturality; dialogue; enrichment

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La Enseñanza de la Interculturalidad a través de la Literatura: Nuevos Retos

Resumen

La enseñanza de la literatura en las escuelas secundarias de la República Checa, contribuye de manera relevante a ofrecer nuevas perspectivas educativas a los jóvenes checos. En tal sentido, esta enseñanza funciona como atesoran en el mundo, desde la Odisea de Homero, por ejemplo, a través del drama Shakesperiano y Fausto de Goethe, a las novelas de Balzac o de Zola, a los autores del siglo XX que se dedicaron a la causa humanista desvelando las facetas ocultas de la existencia humana. El propósito de nuestra reflexión sobre temas interculturales es, en primer lugar, analizar la contribución de la lectura al nivel de conocimiento, proponer la posibilidad de utilizar textos literarios para demostrar hasta qué punto el diálogo entre culturas, está incluido en las propias obras, y, por último, considerar qué textos literarios contemporáneos a escala mundial podrían enriquecer de manera relevante la selección de libros recomendados a los jóvenes checos. La conclusión será una síntesis tratando de comparar la situación de los estudiantes checos con la de los jóvenes franceses. También se resalta el papel de la traducción no sólo en la enseñanza de la literatura, sino en el conocimiento del Otro.

Palabras clave

Literatura; humanismo; interculturalidad; diálogo; enriquecimiento

Introduction

Our study is divided into three parts. At first, we look at the concept of interculturality and interculturality. Then we approach the field of literature as a source of interculturality to end with a reflection on the youth literature and its role in intercultural learning, especially in the teaching of FLE (French Foreign Language). We ask ourselves how to deepen the perception and experience of otherness, what practices develop the meaning of intercultural and what methods to adopt to include it in language teaching.

The Notion of Culture: Intercultural and Interculturality

What is interculturality? The beginnings of cultural studies date back to the 1980s, closely related to postcolonial literature or migrant literature. Expressions, such as intercultural or intercultural, also emerge in the 1980s, according to the Larousse Encyclopedia: "It is a question of going beyond the stereotypes attached to the vision of others, foreigners,

considered as populations without culture worthy of the name or, on the contrary, cultural and racial particularities too marked”¹.

Understanding and making others understand what they have in common and different, beyond language and in their habits of thinking and acting, has become the subject of many reflections and discussions. Recent books include for example that entitled *Forty Years of Intercultural in France*, a tribute to Louis Porcher by Dominique Groux and Fabrice Barthélémy (Groux, Barthélémy, 2016), analyzed by Sébastien Langevin in his article-interview “The intercultural remains too often a catch-all educational concept” (Langevin, 2018). He explains that the concept of intercultural was used for the first time by Louis Porcher in 1974 concerning the schooling of migrant children in France, therefore on the fringe of the field of French as a foreign language. But to learn a foreign language means to confront the other and its culture. There are questions, such as what place to give to culture (formerly civilization – in French contexts) in the teaching of a language, which culture and which practices to favor. It is undeniable that interculturality also belongs to the field of FLE because it is about learning another culture. Paola Bertocchini (Bertocchini, Costanzo, 2018) says that teachers are thus confronted with issues that affect anthropology, history or psychology because it is a permanent interaction between what is known, familiar and personal, and what is new, foreign. Language acquisition is related to the reflection on the understanding of the world, according to the opinions of the researchers, such as Anne Godard (Godard, 2015).

For the sake of precision, it is appropriate to distinguish intercultural and interculturality. Intercultural as adjective describes a particular mode of interaction and interrelations that occur when different cultures come into contact as well as by all the changes and transformations that result. Interculturality is a set of psychic, relational, group, and institutional processes, generated by the interactions of cultures, in a relationship of reciprocal exchanges and in a perspective of safeguarding a relative cultural identity of the partners in relation. All of these relationships are rooted in the notion of culture that is defined at the level of human society as “a set of material and ideological phenomena that characterize an ethnic group or a nation, a civilization, as opposed to another group or Another nation.”² It is pertinent to note that these groups or communities are not necessarily represented by foreigners, as Michel Boiron (Boiron, 2018) asserts, but may be social or generational.

Prejudices caused by belonging to one community vis-à-vis the other appear from time immemorial. In 1952, Claude Lévi-Strauss mentioned the error of comparing human societies on the basis of the characteristics of Western civilization:

¹ « Il s'agit de dépasser les stéréotypes attachés à la vision des autres, des étrangers, considérés comme des populations sans culture digne de ce nom ou, au contraire, aux particularismes culturels et raciaux trop

marqués. » In : Encyclopédie Larousse. Online:

<https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/divers/interculturalit%C3%A9/178843> (21/10/2019).

² « Un ensemble des phénomènes matériels et idéologiques qui caractérisent un groupe ethnique ou une nation, une civilisation, par opposition à un autre groupe ou à une autre nation. » In: Dictionnaire Larousse. Online: <https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/culture/21072> (21/10/2019).

If the criterion had been the degree of ability to triumph over the most hostile geographical environments, there is little doubt that the Eskimos on the one hand, the Bedouins on the other, would win the prize. India has, better than any other civilization, developed a philosophico-religious system, and China, a kind of life, capable of reducing the psychological consequences of a demographic imbalance. Thirteen centuries ago, Islam formulated a theory of the solidarity of all forms of human life [...]. We know what a prominent place this prophetic vision has allowed the Arabs to occupy in the intellectual life of the Middle Ages. The West, master of the machines, testifies of very elementary knowledge on the use and the resources of this supreme machine which is the human body. In this domain, on the contrary, as in the connected one, relations between the physical and the moral, the East and the Far East possess on it an advance of several millennia; they produced these vast theoretical and practical sums which are the yoga of India, the techniques of the Chinese breath or visceral gymnastics of the old Maori. (Lévi-Strauss, 1987)³

In this text as well as in subsequent texts, Lévi-Strauss establishes the unity of man expressing openly the universality of the human mind. Although the differences between civilizations exist, he emphasizes the universal character of the man in seeking what bind the different cultures together.

In her essay *Aliens to ourselves*, Julia Kristeva (Kristeva, 1988)⁴, reflects on the status of the foreigner in society from Antiquity. The hostilities provoked by the difference of the barbarians vis-à-vis the Greek or Roman citizens were eclipsed, thanks to Christianity, by the identifications to otherness. It is in this new relationship towards the other, one of the major values of this religion, that the roots of tolerance must be sought: in the rationalist and emotional approach at the same time. It can be expressed as “understand and identify”. Empathy is the art of feeling the other, showing compassion for someone, in other words having pity. Today, the sense of charity has not disappeared because Christian values continue far beyond the circles of believers. The figure of the gift adopts new aspects.

The Foreigner: Literature as a Source of Intercultural Relations

Almost all young Czechs who have passed their baccalaureate claim to have read *The Stranger*, the novel in which Albert Camus presents a character who understands his existence only in the face of death. The stranger for others, he is also for oneself.

³ « Si le critère retenu avait été le degré d'aptitude à triompher des milieux géographiques les plus hostiles, il n'y a guère de doute que les Eskimos d'une part, les Bédouins de l'autre, emporteraient la palme. L'Inde a su, mieux qu'aucune autre civilisation, élaborer un système philosophico-religieux, et la Chine, un genre de vie, capables de réduire les conséquences psychologiques d'un déséquilibre démographique. Il y a déjà treize siècles, l'Islam a formulé une théorie de la solidarité de toutes les formes de la vie humaine [...]. On sait quelle place prééminente cette vision prophétique a permis aux Arabes d'occuper dans la vie intellectuelle du moyen âge. L'Occident, maître des machines, témoigne de connaissances très élémentaires sur l'utilisation et les ressources de cette suprême machine qu'est le corps humain. Dans ce domaine au contraire, comme dans celui, connexe, des rapports entre le physique et le moral, l'Orient et l'Extrême-Orient possèdent sur lui une avance de plusieurs millénaires ; ils ont produit ces vastes sommes théoriques et pratiques que sont le yoga de l'Inde, les techniques du souffle chinoises ou la gymnastique viscérale des anciens Maoris. » In: Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Race et histoire*. Paris: Denoël, 1987, p. 49.

⁴ Kristeva, J. (1988). *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*. Paris : Fayard. Voir aussi <http://kristeva.fr/reflexions-sur-l-etranger.html>

Literature represents a domain of otherness. The reader is brought into a world he does not know by discovering the feelings and ideas that would be hidden from him if he lived only his ordinary life. In Czech schools, children and young people learn about works of Czech literature as well as foreign literature. They are invited to read a certain number of books according to the lists of recommended works, established by their teachers, which represents a practice comparable to that found in France or in other countries. The so-called classical literature offers dozens of works that are worthy of being read as well as mentioned as a source of interculturality.

In *The Odyssey*, Homer accompanies his wandering hero across the seas and meeting different characters of himself, dangerous, wicked, magical, kindly. *The Odyssey*, which has become a model and inspiration for many subsequent works, has become an odyssey, an allegory of the real world. Comparing with Comenius' famous proto-novel, *The Labyrinth of the World and Heart Paradise*, we find similarities. The encounter with the other seems to be the basis of both texts, in which the main character proves his ability to follow a goal: the search for the homeland for one and the quest for truth and happiness for the other. Reunion is only possible after an experience of the world and contact with otherness. Comenius, the great Czech pedagogue whose work is world-wide, is a representative of pansophism. His idea of "pansophy" is based on the requirement of teaching everything to everyone (Comenius, 1992). The role of education and teaching is unavoidable, it is only through knowledge that man can improve his life and become better. The teachers' task is to show their students the way to their own. Pansophy therefore includes not only knowledge, but also ethics. In any case, Comenius's view of the world and humanity concords, thanks to pansophy philosophy, with many of Lévi-Strauss's ideas about universalism.

Literature is a domain not only of intertextual but also intercultural relations. *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo's famous novel, translated into many languages, also inspired musicians, playwrights and filmmakers elsewhere than in France. The audience who sits at theatrical performances of the musical musical⁵ or watches its film version⁶ lives an intercultural experience. It is thus obvious that the great works of the so-called world literature are addressed to the readers or the spectators independently of their mother tongue and their culture of origin. Whether in French in Paris, or in Czech in Prague, or in English in London, the impression can be strong and the message of the novel is understandable to all.

⁵ Claude-Michel Schönberg (music), Alain Boublil and Jean-Marc Natel (original French lyrics), and Herbert Kretzmer (English lyrics). The original French musical premiered in Paris in 1980 with direction by Robert Hossein. Its English-language adaptation by producer Cameron Mackintosh was on programme in London from October 1985 to July 2019, making it the longest-running musical in the West End and the second longest-running musical in the world.

⁶ Musical drama film, 2012, directed by Tom Hooper and scripted by William Nicholson, Alain Boublil, who wrote the original French lyrics, Claude-Michel Schönberg, who wrote the music, and Herbert Kretzmer, who wrote the English lyrics.

The reading programs of Czech and French high school students are comparable in several points: not only *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo or the novels of Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Zola or Maupassant are proposed, in which it is often disguised otherness, hidden behind social classes. The twentieth century literature in both countries appears on the list, represented for example by *Anne Frank's Diary*, an authentic confession of a Jewish girl, or *Animal Farm*, an allegorical novel by George Orwell, two works whose theme reflects the ideological conflicts of the time. Although neither genre nor plot can seem similar, it is obvious that the suppression of a part of the population, because of its difference, leads to suffering and hatred.

Thanks to a long tradition of translation, all the great works of world literature are accessible to Czech pupils, while in the opposite case, Czech literature can not participate in this introductory intercultural competition because of the linguistic barrier (the language is understandable only to the limited number of specialists or amateurs). Let us note, however, that allegorical alterity is the basis of the novel *The War of Salamanders*⁷ (1935, translated into French in 1960) by the Czech author Karel Capek, who describes an imaginary intercultural struggle which expresses his opposition against Nazi ideology. He evokes another otherness, no less dangerous, in his play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*⁸, giving humanity the word "robot" that has become international. The message of the play is as relevant as that of the previous novel, an exception within the reach of all thanks to translations, even recent editions in France or some other countries.

In literary reading programs in the two countries, France and the Czech Republic, which we have compared, it is possible to note a lack of literature of the second half of the 20th and 21st centuries. It is obvious that the choice is difficult among the hundreds of books whose market is flooded each year, which reflect the current world, anchored in cultural and ideological differences. In the Czech Republic, the choice stops, for most high schools, in the 1960s. As for the world literature, everything depends on the fact that it is not possible to include a work that does not have been translated into Czech. However, there are books that could be read in the intercultural debate, such as Nancy Huston's⁹ novel, *Lignes de Faille* de 2006 (the English text is appeared under the title *Fault Lines* a little later¹⁰) which was translated almost immediately into Czech (Huston, 2008). The novel is a story whose refined narrative uses the retrograde chronology of family members in the United States, Germany, Israel and Canada. Otherness is represented from the historical angle (the story

⁷ Paris: Editeurs français réunis, 1960. *War with the Newts*, also translated as *War with the Salamanders*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1937. Its author characterized it as a current novel: "I wrote my salamanders because it was to the man and the threats that weighed on him that I thought." The novel testifies to his knowledge of men and their faults.

⁸ The play was written in 1920, premiered in Prague in 1921, and first performed in New York in 1922. It gained worldwide acclaim for its author and popularized the word "robot". The revolt of robots results in the end of humanity with a hope that they will evolve and create a new society on Earth. Translated into French in 1924.

⁹ French author of Canadian English origin (she writes in both languages).

¹⁰ The Text Publishing Company, Australia, 2007; London: Atlantic Books, 2008.

begins during the Second World War), but also as omnipresent in today's society where it is confused with the lost and found identity. School programs should be open to contemporary literary production. This being said, we realize the importance of translations and translators, thanks to which the literary field of some countries becomes the space of the true dialogue of cultures.

As an example, we could mention the notorious adventure novel: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719. The story told by the character himself in the first person, takes place on a desert island where Robinson, during his stay of twenty-eight, meets a native, Friday. At the end of the novel, both leave the island to continue living in European society. It would be interesting to see with the young students-readers the parallels, but especially the differences which oppose this novel to its French rewriting of 1971, *Friday or the Wild Life*¹¹ of Michel Tournier, whose characters separate at the end and that which remains on the island, is Robinson. A third text could complete this image of otherness and human relationships in a situation of total isolation: it is the novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954) of the English author, William Golding. Otherness being represented on two levels, that of ethnicity and ethics, the three texts raise many questions that can lead to an updating of the key ideas that constitute their messages.

Youth Literature in Teaching Foreign Languages (French Foreign Language-FLE)

It is not by chance that we are moving towards linguistic otherness. Our field, the teaching of FLE, usually uses literary texts in French textbooks. However, excerpts from the texts of classical literature, which are there, do not always present an ideal subject for the teaching of the language. According to our opinion, it is the literature of youth, sector a little underestimated, which can serve us by its simple character and accessible to the readers who do not master the language well yet. The literary texts intended for the youth serve not only to learn the language, but also as an opening to another world. Francophone literature is a field of interculturality by excellence. In fact, the relationship between different cultures has resulted, for example in Canada, in radical changes related to the notion of interculturality because there they prefer to talk about transculturality.

Québec's children's and youth literature is an inexhaustible source of stories that can be used by FLE teachers. The image of the other, as seen in literary texts published in the last decades of the twentieth century, was analyzed in detail by Suzanne Pouliot (Pouliot, 1994) in the 1990s, but we would like to present some recent examples. We are convinced that youth literature is at home in the teaching of FLE, where it can be a living material. The story of an experience or an event can draw the student's attention through its emotional power, it is then a field conducive to grammar exercises with the aim of learning linguistic strategies that lead to the writing texts, improving the written expression of students. The analysis of relatively simple stories because they are intended for children, may have

¹¹ Tournier, M. (2005). *Vendredi ou la Vie sauvage*. (1971). Paris: Gallimard.

another contribution: to realize the stylistic processes, which make the text respect the logic of causality and the organization of temporal relations.

A literary text has a great advantage over simple exercises or fun activities. It represents a story, a complexity of the lived experience. This character can arouse students' interest and motivate them to work with the language. It is finally possible to consider a production of the texts of students who, thanks to their imagination, pursue the proposed theme by identifying with the heroes.

Stories for young people are often written in the first person or in the form of a newspaper. The quasi-authentic style of the diary or the letters exchanged by the characters characterizes Michèle Marineau's novel, *La route de Chlifa* (Marineau, 1992), the story of a Lebanese teenager who finds himself in a Canadian school after fleeing Lebanon during the war. The boy's feelings towards Quebec society are at first very hostile because of a horrible experience he has had in Lebanon. He finally integrates into the community of young people, among other things through the change of mutual relations with his classmates, he accepts the new country as a country of adoption where he himself is accepted without reservations. It is a book already translated into several languages for its humanist message, the text is however very well used in a series of courses of FLE for its literary qualities. It is possible to work the temporality or spaciality of the text as well as the portraits of the characters by proposing them as subjects of the writing.

To balance our French-speaking choice, let us quote a more recent English novel, which deals with another alterity: Junior is the main character of the story that he narrates himself in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2008). He is an Indian boy who was raised in a reservation. After leaving it, it must face many problems in the majority society in the United States. It is not surprising that the novel has become bestseller not only in America. An immediate translation in French (under the title which expresses a little the circumstances of the life of the young Indian among whites) *The first one who cries has lost*¹² proves its exceptionally successful reception by the public of the young people. The novel is written in a spirit of humor because its author wanted to share with the readers his own experiences.

The author, who has not only been a part of Quebec's youth literature because of his contagious optimism, is Dany Laferrière, whose albums for the little ones could serve as a basis for teaching French as a foreign language. The narrator is a ten-year-old boy who tells the story of the author's Haitian childhood with his beloved grandmother. The sincerity of the expression marries remarkably with the illustrations that impress with tropical colors and vivacity, representing an otherness that is worth discovering by a young reader¹³.

There are many foreigners who appear in works of Quebec youth literature representing another culture. Sylvain Trudel intended his very short book *The King who came from the*

¹² *Le premier qui pleure a perdu*. (2008). Paris : Albin Michel.

¹³ Laferrière, Dany. *La fête des morts*. (2010). Montréal : Editions de la Bagnole. Laferrière, Dany. (2014). *L'odeur du café*. Montréal : Soulières éditeur. (Czech translation (2018). *Vune kavy*. Prague : Argo).

End of the World (1997)¹⁴ to small children who read their "first novels". It explains the intercultural through a simple story told by a little boy whose family welcomes for the holidays a Ukrainian child from the Chernobyl region. The narrator and his sister learn a lot during Oleg's stay. They seem to mature through experience with this stranger and realize their identity.

The authors of recent years often present native people whose culture no longer opposes the culture of the majority society, but becomes a source of inspiration. This is the message of Michel Noël's novel *In Search of the End of the World*¹⁵, the story of an Amerindian among the Inuit, or that of Gilles Dubois, *The Infernal Journey*¹⁶ whose main characters are two young Amerindians who flee to Canada.

Anglophone characters appear in the Quebec milieu, for example as a reminiscence of the time of New France in the novel by Hervé Gagnon *A Thousand Golden Ecus*¹⁷. Another historical novel, Maryse Rouy's *The Wooden Goat*¹⁸, tells the story of an Irish boy who arrives alone in Quebec while his entire family became a victim of the typhus epidemic on the journey between Europe and America. Traditionally bearers of hostilities in Quebec literature, these characters are presented from a new angle, that of empathy and sympathy. In FLE teaching, this circumstance can also highlight the differences between Francophone and Anglophone culture and the paths that lead to their erasure.

Conclusion

The literature represents an initiatory path to the other and can serve as a gateway to another culture. It would be desirable for teachers to use texts that are often translated into their language, to guide today's young people in the chaotic world of information and media.

In our opinion, children's and youth literature is an important means in the process of learning a foreign language. By learning another language, one becomes again a little "child", trying to build the first sentences. It is precisely this art of construction, creation of a simple text that can be appreciated in stories intended for children. Learners follow a developing plot that reveals grammatical and stylistic structures. Literary works represent specific worlds, which, however, imitate the real world, as such, they can teach not only structures, but also ideas.

¹⁴ Trudel, S. (2002). *Le roi qui venait du bout de monde*. (1997). Montréal: Courte échelle.

¹⁵ Noël, M. (2012). *A la recherche du bout du monde*. Montréal: Hurtubise.

¹⁶ Dubois, G. (2011). *Le voyage infernal*. Montréal: L'Interligne.

¹⁷ Gagnon, H. (2013). *Mille écus d'or*. Montréal: Hurtubise.

¹⁸ Rouy, M. (2007). *La chèvre de bois*. Montréal: Hurtubise.

We return finally to universalism and pansophy: only the educated child can understand the world. Literature should not fail in its role in this teaching. Eliminating literature would mean cutting off the roots of humanity.

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