

# Crossing Borders

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## *Crossing Borders: Using Young Adult Literature to promote intercultural competence in Task-based Learning*

***‘Don’t judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins.’***

*(From Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech)*

Speaking a foreign language can obviously open doors and allow us to see the world through different eyes. After a strong wave of communicative language teaching that mainly focused on speech act and discourse competence, educators around the world are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that being a competent non-native speaker of a foreign language involves more than knowing all of the grammar rules, possessing a wide vocabulary of the respective foreign language and having native to near native fluency (Lázár & al, 2007, p. 5). In line with recommendations of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), they see the ever increasing need for developing their language learners’ intercultural competence in today’s globalized world. In doing so, language learners are not only equipped with the necessary linguistic tools but are also able “to promote mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 3). Literature has long been seen as a rich medium to impart knowledge about cultural issues in the language classroom. The aim of this paper is to show how taking a task-based approach to literature, more specifically young adult literature (YAL), can be used to enhance language learners’ (aged 13 -16) intercultural competence. This paper is divided into two parts. The first part provides a brief theoretical framework while the second part presents tasks which can be used together with YAL to develop teenage learners’ intercultural competence.

## **Defining Culture**

Traditionally the teaching of culture in most school curricula has been associated with literature, arts, music, geography, history and institutions. This understanding of culture is often described as ‘big C’ culture and has played a prominent role in the language classroom due in part to a “clearly identified curriculum of topics to be covered, and textbooks which deal with them” (Tomalin & Stempelski, 1993, p. 7). However, as Seelye (1993, p. 16) observes, “[t]his narrow definition of culture, unfortunately, does not fully prepare a student to understand the wide range of behavior exhibited by other species”. Therefore the teaching of culture must be understood in a broader sense, which in the literature is often referred to as ‘little c culture’. This conception of culture “includes elements that are perhaps less visible and less tangible and have no traditional subjects assigned to them in schools” (Lázár & al, 2007, p. 7). It “is often described as subjective culture, as people’s everyday thinking and behavior, or as the common traditions, practices, and customs of people” (Wintergerst & McVeigh, 2011, p. 8). In this paper, the term culture will be used primarily to mean culturally-induced behaviors, customs and values. The authors have found that a task-based approach to YAL allows them to combine culture and language in the foreign language classroom and thus contribute to developing their language learners’ intercultural competence.

## Intercultural Competence in Language Teaching

Michael Byram's approach to intercultural competence, which is a component of his comprehensive intercultural communicative competence model, has strongly influenced the teaching of culture in the language classroom. It was particularly designed for the purpose of language teaching where "both culture-general and culture-specific dimensions, are equally important" (Risager, 2009, p. 27). The model also lends itself nicely as a set of teaching objectives which can be drawn on in the development of tasks for reading and responding to YAL. Byram's five dimensions of intercultural competence are,

- A. "Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.
- B. Knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.
- C. Skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own.
- D. Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.
- E. Critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries." (Byram, 2000)

These elements of intercultural competence will be referred to again later in this paper when we present various tasks which can be done with YAL to raise teenage learners' intercultural competence.

## Selecting Literature

Since the aim of this paper is to present a task-based approach to using YAL for enhancing young adult language learners' intercultural competence, we will only briefly cite the reasons why this type of literature has been selected. Firstly, teenage novels written in a foreign language present life in unfamiliar environments as experienced by characters that are the same age as the teenage language learners. This experience is often heightened by the fact that most YAL is written from the first person perspective (Wu, 2008). By looking at a world different to their own through the eyes of a young person, teenage language learners are invited to reflect on their own world/culture, which is vital in developing their intercultural competence (Rönqvist & Sell, 1994, p. 129). Secondly, teenage language learners can acquire first hand cultural insights into the cultures of other teenagers that they might otherwise never have the chance to encounter. In this way, YAL can provide them with valuable cultural knowledge and thus expand their understanding of the world. Finally, Rönqvist and Sell (*ibid*: 127) have found that young adults enjoy the 'up-to-date' language used in YAL. Thus teenage readers are also introduced to the contemporary language used by the target culture which provides them with a language "as genuine and undistorted as can be managed in the classroom context" (Collie & Slater, 2000, p. 3). Since language, culture and thought are closely intertwined, according to Kramsch (1998, p. 3), we can say that the language used in YAL "expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality" of the target culture.

## A sample YAL project: Crossing Borders

The following section describes a sample YAL project carried out with a class of 13 to 14 year old EFL learners in Austria in which a selection of tasks were used in conjunction with YAL to promote intercultural competence. The project was entitled "Crossing Borders" in order to highlight the various borders the young protagonists in the novels must cross on

their journey to discovering their cultural identity. These borders can be understood literally, like neighborhood, country or state borders but can also be interpreted figuratively like linguistic, racial, religious, gender, social, ethnic and educational borders.

The main teaching objectives of this project were:

- to acquire **knowledge** of the lifestyles, problems and practices of the social groups represented in this project;
- to challenge the learners' **attitudes** including their preconceived notions and stereotypes;
- to develop learners' **curiosity** about new cultures and experiences as well as about their own;
- to promote learners' **empathy** towards others;
- to **interpret** the various 'borders' the characters cross on their way to discovering their cultural identity;
- to **critically evaluate** immigration laws in the US as well as in their home country.

The following 5 young adult novels were used in the project and will be referred to in the various tasks presented below. The learners were only required to read one of the books for the project, which they chose based on personal preference. They read their novels prior to completing the tasks.

- Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
- Marina Budhos, *Ask Me No Questions*
- Ann Jaramillo, *La Linea*
- Melissa Schorr, *Goy Crazy*
- Jacqueline Woodson, *If You Come Softly*

Further suggestions of books can be found in the appendix.

## Getting Started

On the first day of the project, the learners were given a copied project-booklet<sup>1</sup> including all 13 tasks which they would be required to do both individually and in small groups. The tasks are presented below. For each given task learner instructions are provided, followed by teachers' observations. Tasks 1-3, 5 and 7 focus on the learners' personal cultural experiences and identity while tasks 4, 6 and 8-13 deal with questions about the book-characters' experiences. By comparing these two perspectives, it was hoped that the learners would gain a better understanding of the personal and cultural 'borders' the protagonists had to overcome in an age-appropriate way.

### Task 1: Who am I? My cultural autobiography

How would you define yourself? Think about things that are especially important to you in how you think about yourself and how you like others to see you. Think of your family background, your country, community, language(s), groups you belong to, activities that are important to you. Write about one page.

**Task 2: My Language-Self – My Cultural-Self** The languages that you speak are an important part of you and your cultural



Figure 1

<sup>1</sup> The booklet can be downloaded from Elisabeth Polzleitner's English Pool at [http://epep.at/?page\\_id=1178](http://epep.at/?page_id=1178) (or enter 'intercultural awareness' into the search box on epep.at)

identity. What languages do you speak? How well and how often do you speak them? In what circumstances and situations do you speak them? Choose a color for each of your languages and decide where in your body they are located. Add more colors and symbols for other aspects of your cultural-self. Do you feel like a typical Austrian? A Boy/Girl Scout?... Where in your body do you want to put these symbols and colors? Label your drawing and be prepared to discuss it in class. (See figure.1)

**Teachers' Observations:** Tasks 1 and 2 were challenging for the learners because for most of them, their social and cultural environments had never been presented in such an explicit way. By making these environments visible and sharing them in the class, many teenage learners noted that their self-concepts were quite different even among the majority who had a local, Austrian background. Task 2, especially, seemed to develop the learners' curiosity about their cultural self. Many commented that being different and finding more than one 'color' in themselves made them feel special and proud rather than embarrassed about their differences.

### Task 3: Intercultural Encounter

You have certainly met people from very different cultures and backgrounds. Think of a specific incident where you had such an intercultural encounter and describe it briefly. Tell us who/where/when... you met the person(s). What was your first impression? How did you feel about it? What did you find out later? (See figure 2)

**Teachers' Observations:** Task 3 required the learners to leave their familiar environments and describe an intercultural encounter. They expressed a wide range of emotions from surprise or fear in the face of strangers to sadness about feeling like outsiders themselves in their texts.

The texts were also discussed in class which provided the learners with a forum to voice their fears and preconceived opinions about strangers as well as misconceptions about different cultures. It could be observed that throughout the discussion, many students began to question their perceptions of other cultures and to display an openness about those different to themselves.

### Task 4: Start reading your book:

The topic of our reading project is **CROSSING BORDERS**. In each of the books you will find characters who are **crossing borders**. Some of them have moved to a new country or

culture, others have moved to a new school or neighborhood and find themselves in a different ethnic, social or religious group. We will explore how the characters deal with these difficult situations. Mark all the instances where the main character in your book crosses any "borders". Use the table below to record your findings.



Figure 2

**Teachers' Observations:** In this task the learners had to identify the various borders that the characters in their books crossed and evaluate how those characters felt every time they found themselves in a new place. Many learners noted that the characters felt unwanted and like outsiders; they suffered from some kind of discrimination.

### Tasks 5 and 6: Hopes and Dreams

**My hopes and dreams:** Each of the following key words appears in your book. Before you start reading, jot down what they mean to you, give an example from your life or say how they make you feel. Write down as many ideas and keywords as possible.

<b>Hope</b>	<b>Dreams</b>	<b>Stranger</b>	<b>Beauty</b>
<b>To be ignored</b>	<b>Secret</b>	<b>Truth</b>	<b>Loneliness</b>

**My main character's hopes and dreams:** Then collect your character's views on these topics. Make a note of when the words come up in your book—again looking for examples and how the characters felt. Use key words and write down the page number where you found them.

**Teachers' Observations:** In tasks 5 and 6 the learners compared several key concepts in the novels with their own personal views and experiences. It was observed that the students often noticed a big difference between their own rather 'comfortable' lives where dreams can come true and hopes can be fulfilled and the difficult lives of the book characters, who struggle with feelings of loneliness and unfulfilled dreams. When discussing the task in class, the teenagers often expressed feelings of empathy with the protagonists and wondered why they had to struggle so hard to be integrated into their given environments/societies. The learners seemed to like the fact that even in adverse situations, the characters did not surrender.

### Tasks 7 and 8: Stereotype Detectives

#### What I know, think and have heard about...

Quickly write down your first thoughts about Americans, Canadians, Native Americans, Mexicans and people from Bangladesh.

**Stereotype Detectives:** Every culture creates stereotypes about other cultures. The books you have read contain many examples of both positive and negative stereotypes. Chart the stereotypes that you find throughout the book. Try to find both positive and negative ones for each topic. Don't forget to write down where you found the examples.

**Teachers' Observations:** Tasks 7 and 8 dealt with the topic of stereotypes and required the learners to compare their own stereotypes with those presented in the novels. We observed that both tasks encouraged the learners to call into question stereotypes they had and it was often commented on how easily people in general are influenced by them.

### Task 9: My culture – their culture

In task 9 the students were asked to compare cultures in a Venn diagram (figure 3).

**Teachers' Observations:** The most interesting outcome of this activity was that almost all of the students found that irrespective of their differences, they all shared the same hopes and dreams with their protagonists. For

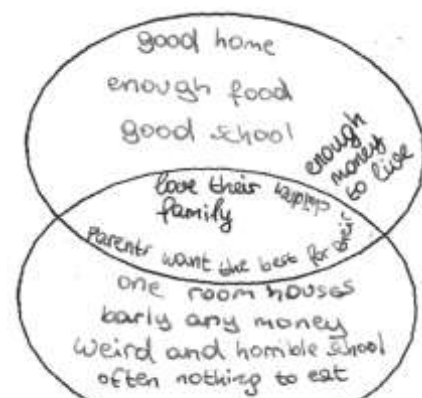


Figure 3: My culture - their culture

example, they want to be safe, have a family as well as good friends whom they can trust.

### Task 10: Story Pie

Make a list of 8 important events in your story. Then put them in the correct order and write them into the 8 pieces of the pie. Write the title of the story in the middle. (Figure 4)

**Teachers' Observations:** The 'story pie' was used as a scaffold for summarizing the plots of the novels. This structure helped the learners to pick out the main events in the novels whereby making transparent the most important borders which the characters had to cross.



Figure 4

### Task 11: Constellations

First make a list of all the characters that you can remember in your book. Then choose a fitting button from your teacher's collection to represent each character. Discuss which of your characters get along well and are close to each other, and which of the characters are 'on the other side'. Find a fitting place for each of the characters on this sheet. Then draw their positions on the sheet and label your diagram. (Figure 5)

**Teachers' Observations:** In this activity the learners designed sociograms showing the relationships among the characters of their novel. After completing this activity, many learners noted that friendships and strong relationships developed irrespective of the characters' cultural backgrounds. In fact, some of the closest friends in the novels were from different ethnic groups.



Figure 5

### Task 12: Group Discussions

Work with the **discussion cards** provided by your teacher. Discuss each topic in detail. After each activity write a few sentences about your discussion into your project booklet.

**People to People**

Imagine the characters of your book came to Graz for a student-exchange program.

**A:** Which of the characters would you like to invite to stay with you in your home for a few days?

**B:** Who would be your last choice? Why?

Discuss this in your group.

**Put yourself in someone else's shoes**

The characters in your book have had to make many decisions. Do you agree with all of them? Find a few examples of

**A:** Decisions you agree with.

**B:** Things you would have done differently.

**New kid at our school**

The main character of your book has just moved into town and is now a student at our school. Will he or she fit in? How are the other students going to welcome him/her? Are his/her tastes, hobbies, ideas different from "ours"?

What tips for a good start would you give him/her?

Figure 6

**Teachers' Observations:** In this task, the learners were given eight discussion prompt cards which required them to consider their own cultural standpoints and compare them with

the main characters in their books. This often meant that they had to explain why they would react in a certain way thus being required to question their attitudes and value systems. The discussion prompts have been adapted from Laura Robb's *Fabulous Discussion Prompt Cards* (Robb, 2001). Figure 6 shows three of the cards we used.

### Task 13: Novel Museums

For the Novel Museum (Filkins & Szabos, 1984) imagine that the characters in your book were REAL people. Our town wants to make their stories public and has, therefore, dedicated a whole room in the museum to these people and their stories. There they show real artifacts from your characters' lives. These objects are presented nicely in showcases and on tables around the room. Each of the objects has a label explaining



Figure 7

the importance of the item, where it is from and what role it played. In your museum display you might show some of the following things:

Maps, short newspaper articles about what happened to your characters, diary pages, letters, objects they used during their adventures, photos, clothes they were wearing, favorite items of your characters..... or any other things that play an important role.

**Teachers' Observations:** This was the final task of the 'Crossing Borders' project. By picking relevant items and explaining their importance for the characters, the learners showed that they had not only gained knowledge about the respective cultures in their novels but also understanding for why the characters acted in certain ways based on cultural assumptions. This final task seemed to draw together all of the various cultural aspects which had been written about and discussed in the previous tasks.

### Conclusion

Taking a task-based approach to YAL in order to enhance teenage learners' intercultural competence proved to be an effective approach on many levels. Not only did the type of literature satisfy the language learners' reading needs but due to the variety of tasks, they could consider (inter)cultural concepts on many different levels. In the tasks that required them to compare their personal situations and attitudes with those of the characters', they had the opportunity to reflect on their personal assumptions and question the underlying values and beliefs. In the book-related tasks, the language learners had to come to terms with cultures and experiences which were often new for them and show their understanding of them. As the tasks could be done individually as well as in small groups, the learners could work at their own pace and thus spend more time on those they found particularly challenging, interesting, informative etc. Classroom discussions and the final presentation also provided the learners with a forum to express their thoughts about intercultural issues and discover how others view these aspects. Finally, the flexibility of this approach meant that the tasks did not have to be done in a prescribed order and could be completed both as homework as well as class work. This aspect seemed to add to the enjoyment of the project

since there was no pressure to finish the tasks due to any constraints. In conclusion, the 'Crossing Borders' project provided the teenage learners with many opportunities to discover, learn about and discuss (inter)cultural issues. We hope that by sharing this project, we have provided some useful approaches to developing teenage learners' intercultural competence.

## Appendix

Other books that would be suitable for this project are:

- Randa Abdel-Fattah, ***Ten Things I Hate About Me***
- Sandra Cisneros, ***The House on Mango Street***
- Sharon Creech, ***Walk Two Moons***
- Linda Crew, ***Children of the River***
- Donald R. Gallo (ed.), ***First Crossing. Stories about Teen Immigrants***
- Francisco Jiménez, ***The Circuit***
- An Na, ***A Step from Heaven***

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