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Introduction to the Special Issue



Reimagining the Role of Literature in Intercultural Language Education: New Approaches and Future Perspectives

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This special issue of *Intercultural Communication Education* explores the role of literature in intercultural language education in the light of new educational aims and needs. Ever since the “intercultural shift” (Byram, 1997, 2021) in the teaching and learning of languages in the early 1990s, literature, and particularly literature written in a second or foreign language, has been acknowledged as a valuable medium for intercultural explorations. This type of literary encounter has been theorised by a number of scholars (e.g., Bredella, 2006; Hoff, 2016; Matos, 2012; Porto, 2013) and practical aspects related to teaching literature interculturally have been examined by way of empirical evidence elicited from diverse educational contexts (e.g., Burwitz-Melzer, 2003; Gomez, 2012; Heggernes, 2019; Porto, 2014; Nemouchi & Byram, 2019). However, over the course of the past three decades, changing perceptions of text, literacy and communication as well as new trends in intercultural education research have had consequences for how we can and should understand literary reading as a gateway to intercultural learning. For instance, due to the emergence of new Web 2.0 technologies, it has become crucial for educators to promote learners’ ability to interpret different sign systems and media. Correspondingly, multimodal literary texts—i.e., texts which combine two or more semiotic modes to communicate meaning—have gained ground in the language classroom, thereby challenging the prominent status of traditional, script-based literature in this context (Habegger-Conti, 2015). Furthermore, recent theoretical perspectives within the field of intercultural pedagogy research have moved away from an understanding of intercultural competence as the ability to negotiate between two distinct, contrasting cultural points of view—seen as singular, inherently different and tied to a nation or language—in order to take into account more complex aspects of interculturality (Holliday, 2011). This has, for instance, resulted in increasing acceptance of culture and identity as fluid and multifaceted concepts as well as a growing interest in internationalised *lingua franca* practices and conflictual dimensions of intercultural communication

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(Hoff, 2020). Adding to this, the “critical turn” (Dasli & Díaz, 2017) in intercultural communication pedagogy has precipitated a call for teachers to contribute to a more democratic and egalitarian social order when dealing with intercultural matters in educational contexts.

Any attempt to carve out a role for literature in current and future intercultural language education, then, must take into account these developments, which give rise to a number of questions of both a theoretical and practical character. For instance, which implications do they have for how we conceptualise 21st century intercultural literary literacy? How may notions of multimodal text competence, translanguaging and critical interculturality be incorporated into pedagogical approaches to literature? In what ways can classroom encounters with literary texts enhance learners’ understanding of the complexities which govern intercultural communication today? And how may course syllabi, teaching materials and other pedagogical tools be designed with the aim to provide suitable frameworks for classroom practice in this respect? The four articles in this special issue examine these key issues from various vantage points, bringing into play both theoretical and empirical perspectives and addressing pedagogical concerns which have relevance for practitioners at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of language education.

The first article, *Film and the intercultural multimodal reader: Expanding intercultural literary literacy as a theoretical and a pedagogical concept*, written by Hild Elisabeth Hoff and Jena Habegger-Conti, sets out to explore what intercultural reading entails when the text in question relies on a variety of semiotic resources to communicate meaning. With a basis in a specific theoretical construct—the Model of the Intercultural Reader (Hoff, 2016)—the authors present a framework for integrating script-based intercultural reading with new literacies in a classroom setting. By drawing on film as a practical example, their article provides insight into the multiple and often contradictory meanings that lie inherent in the interplay of semiotic modes in this type of text. This interplay, the authors argue, creates a complex message for the intercultural reader to interpret, as it reproduces as well as subverts a number of stereotypical tropes, but it also provides a foundation for examining representations of culture and identity in a comprehensive and nuanced manner. Hoff and Habegger-Conti’s article exemplifies how such explorations may take shape in an upper secondary or undergraduate classroom context, drawing attention to various ways in which students can be helped to navigate the different meaning-bearing elements of a film and critically examine the ideological forces which underpin audio-visual tropes as well as readers’ responses to them.

The second article, *The role of literature in intercultural language education: Designing a higher education language course to challenge sentimental biopower*, written by Melina Porto and Michalinos Zembylas, focuses on the affective and biopolitical dimensions of literature. Whereas emotion has traditionally been regarded as a crucial component of both literary reading and intercultural learning processes (see e.g., Byram, 1997, 2021; Rosenblatt, 1994), Porto and Zembylas address the pedagogical risks associated with letting classroom discourses on interculturality be governed by sentimentality, arguing that this may be detrimental to students’ critical thinking skills and lead to superficial learning processes. Drawing on affect theory and critical pedagogy theory, their article discusses how the risk of sentimentality may be reduced through course design, as illustrated by an English language course in an Argentinian higher education setting which revolves around literary texts carrying trauma-related content, that is, depictions of human suffering. Against this background, the article considers general implications for re-orienting the design of course syllabi and teaching materials with the aim to cultivate profound “hope, solidarity and compassionate action” (p. 90) through students’ “de-sentimentalised” interactions with foreign language literature.

By positioning intercultural literature education as a potential catalyst for social justice-oriented civic engagement, Porto and Zembylas’ article reflects ideas that align with a critical interculturality

paradigm. Indeed, all four of the articles which are included in this special issue pay attention to notions of ideology and power as inherent aspects of the literary encounter, thereby shedding light on how criticality features as a crucial component of the intercultural reader's competence. Nayr Correya Ibrahim's article, *Examining a Northern Sámi-Norwegian dual language picturebook in English language education through a critical translanguaging-transcultural lens*, tackles this issue by theorising literature as a medium for challenging the monolingual-monocultural bias which has tended to dominate the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. Focusing on a literary genre which has rarely been used in this context, the non-English, dual language picturebook, Ibrahim's article delineates why and how this type of text may provide a point of departure for exploring links between interculturality and multilingualism in the primary level English classroom. The author relies on an analysis of a Sámi-Norwegian picturebook to argue that English may serve as a mediating language which enables young learners to access the text through translanguaging activities and their critical questioning of essentialist notions of language and culture.

The fourth and final article, written by Esther Schat, Ewout van der Knaap and Rick de Graaff, also adopts a critical interculturality perspective on literary reading. In *Reconceptualizing critical cultural awareness for the context of FL literature education: The development of an assessment rubric for the secondary level*, the authors posit that previous definitions of critical cultural awareness (CCA) do not adequately capture the specific type of criticality which is needed in encounters with literature. In response to this limitation at the theoretical level as well as a general lack of assessment instruments in intercultural education, Schat et al. present a rubric of concrete criteria which can be used by teachers as a guideline for assessing students' critical reasoning about and evaluation of literary texts. As this rubric was developed on the basis of categories which emerged out of the authors' analysis of a selection of book reports written by students, its practical applicability might be limited to a specific educational context (the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language in Dutch upper secondary school) and literary genre (migrant literature). However, the study also carries general implications for pedagogical practice by illuminating how these empirically grounded categories incorporate aspects of learning associated with critical interculturality and literary reading theories, thereby moving beyond previous conceptualisations of CCA. Thus, Schat et al.'s investigation of student texts illuminates "literary CCA" as a distinctive learning objective and provides insight into how this objective may be operationalised in the intercultural language classroom.

Such attention to practical-pedagogical concerns is a common strength of the four articles included in this special issue: Not only do they add new dimensions to existing theorisations of the intercultural encounter with literature, but they also concretise how teachers can take these reconceptualisations and new perspectives into account when planning and guiding students' engagement with literary texts. As such, the current volume will hopefully become a useful resource for practitioners who wish to align their approaches to literature teaching with new aims and needs which have come to take center stage in 21st century intercultural language education.

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