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## Intercultural Skills, Culture and Literature at the University

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# **Intercultural Skills, Culture and Literature at the University. The Example of the Department of German Language and Literature in the University of Athens**

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## **Abstract**

The transcendence of national identities in recent decades and the diffusion of the cultural context triggered by globalization have resulted in the creation of new identities. This development has resulted in the multicultural structure of many European countries. Foreign language teaching has been geared to the multinational structure of school classes through the development of Intercultural Education. Given, however, that the implementation of the principles of Intercultural Education is dependent on the teachers, who, in turn, must have been initiated in the principles of this scientific field, the University assumes a leading part in providing intercultural education to adults. The aim of this paper is to show how the students of a Greek University can acquire certain skills of intercultural action through the course of Culture and Literature. The development of intercultural skills is based on the anthology „KALIMERHABA”, a trilingual edition including short stories and poems written by Greek, Turkish, and German writers.

Successful interactive situations can be characterized those who allow to the participants to communicate with people from other cultures without prejudices. Thus, in the instruction of language, literature and cultural lessons at the University not only the transmission of historical and cultural data concerning the foreign culture is achieved, but also the transference of intercultural skills, as they entail both a cognitive as well as emotional and factual dimension.

The aim of this paper is to show how the students of a Foreign Language School can acquire certain skills of intercultural action through Culture and Literature Courses. The assumption made in this paper is that the development of intercultural skills is a requisite for future teachers of foreign languages, since foreign language teaching is interwoven with issues of diversity/identity, propagation of cultural elements, and adoption of an intercultural conscience. In my opinion, the development of intercultural skills can be spread even if the students are not in a multicultural environment, but rather in that of Greek Universities, and they can also be taught certain intercultural skills quite effectively with the help of foreign culture and literature teaching.

This paper will draw attention, on a theoretical level, to the philosophy and modern trends of the Course of Culture, which are described as *Landeskunde* in German-speaking literature, where I shall focus on. Already at this point, it should be pointed out that, in recent years, *Landeskunde* is very closely associated with the transmission of intercultural messages.

Secondly, I shall present my own intercultural model for developing intercultural action skills, which is based on German-speaking texts of migrant literature and which I have applied to the students of the School of German Language and Literature in the University of Athens, in the context of the Course of Culture. Evaluation of the entire attempt will be based on some comments on the students' final project, which aimed at analyzing the intercultural elements found in literary texts, given that the degree of identification and thorough examination of intercultural elements is characteristic of the understanding and training of students in action skills. In other words, I think that the contribution of the imaginary dimension of literature may serve as a practical field of intercultural training.

## 1 'Landeskunde': Principles and modern trends

The discipline of 'Landeskunde' (Lüsebrink, 2003) has similarities with the concept of the American Area Studies, Civilisation in France, and German Studies or French Studies in the USA. The discipline of 'Landeskunde', as an integral part of foreign language and literature teaching, began in 1880, with the aim of passing knowledge about a foreign country (Althaus, 1999). Nowadays, it is a branch of German Language Teaching, and also a branch of foreign literatures in Germany and abroad. On an academic level, teaching Culture constitutes either an independent discipline next to Literature and Linguistics, or it appears as an "integrative Landeskunde", i.e., in the course of Culture, subjects taken from other sciences, including History, Sociology, Political Sciences, Cultural Studies etc., are also taught. A similar case is found in the School of German Language and Literature of the University of Athens, which will be examined in the second part of the paper.

What is of interest, however, is the fact that both in the context of Foreign Language Teaching and in the course of Culture in the University, there is a common tendency to associate the contents of the courses with intercultural principles. Actually, in Foreign Language Teaching, renaming of the term 'Landeskunde' into 'Interkulturelles Lernen', i.e., 'intercultural learning', is suggested, since the primary objective is to communicate intercultural principles to the students. (Röttger, 2002)<sup>1</sup>

The primary objective in both cases is propagation of intercultural action skills (Interkulturelle Kompetenzen). Intercultural action skills are called those abilities and skills of students of foreign languages, or, generally, students participating in intercultural meetings, which help students to be initiated to the differences between foreign and familiar culture, be able to identify them in certain cases and develop strategies to understand the particularities of another culture. In a few words, the aim is to achieve the prevention of any intercultural misunderstandings and the smoothest possible intercultural communication. It is true, however, that there is no uniform definition of intercultural action skills. As Lukjantschikowa points out, this term is usually meant as the ability to manage what is "culturally foreign" and successfully communicate with people coming from other cultures. (Lukjantschikowa, 2004) Certainly, one might raise objections here as to what successful communication means, who sets the limits of a successful communication and when communication even with people coming from the same culture is considered successful. However, these are questions constituting the object of another theoretical discussion.

Instead, there is coincidence of views regarding the fact that intercultural action skills must convey knowledge, abilities, skills, and views leading to the so-called "intercultural speaker", i.e., the speaker who, under intercultural communication conditions, shows abilities exceeding the ordinary linguistic skills, since this speaker is also able to respond to sociocultural needs. (Gnutzmann, 2006) In particular, the objectives of intercultural action skills cover three levels: they refer to the cognitive, experiential and communicative dimensions. On a cognitive level, the pupils or students must not only acquire classic knowledge about the history and society of a foreign country, but they must also acquire theoretical knowledge about the management of the "Alien", and comparison with foreign mentality. (Antor, 2002) The course of Culture must prepare students for future personal contact with people coming from the foreign culture. (Schinschke, 1995) Especially for the course of Culture taught in the University, the students must develop their critical thinking, in order to realize that any data associated with the society and culture of another country are "fabricated", since the culture

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to such renaming, there is no uniform view, therefore, I shall confine myself to a simple reference. For more information on the conflicting views, see Röttger (2002).

of every country is a social construction consisting of social negotiations and subject to continuous changes. For example, they must be aware of the fact that images regarding the national identity of another country are not *a priori* given facts, but they are rather fabricated depending on the individual sociopolitical conditions. (Antor, 2002) It is true that, what is hidden behind this objective is the effect of Cultural Studies, which promote a wide sense of culture, not only including intellectual and artistic creation, but also the overall expressions of a society, e.g., everyday life and linguistic and cultural habits, in general. (Gehring, 2002)

On an experiential level, certain intercultural attitudes and skills must be developed. The most basic of them are considered to be “Empathy” (Empathie), i.e., to be able to “put yourself in another person’s place, in order to see their problems through their eyes”, (Zografou 1998) and tolerance towards people coming from other cultures and the will to communicate with them. (Röttger, 2002) Another attitude which is often mentioned is the role distance ability (Rollendistanz), i.e., ability to distance yourself from the assumptions of the familiar culture, so that it is met with a critical spirit. This refers to the realization of the fact that one cannot expect from others, “aliens”, to share the same viewpoint with them, that the “Other” may see our world through a different light; as a result, the “Other” may confront our world in a biased way. (Kussler, 2003) Another ability which is closely associated with that is the ability to present the familiar identity, self-perception, (Bechtel, 2003) (Identitätsdarstellung), i.e., to be able to illustrate one’s own world, one’s culturally familiar views to aliens. (Röttger, 2002) Finally, the term ‘Ambiguitätstoleranz’, which, if literally translated, means “tolerance towards double entendre”, is meant as the ability to tolerate contrasts and different expectations, so as to accept foreign views and not react towards foreign elements with fear and repulsion. (Altmayer, 2006)

On a communicative level, certain “intercultural communication skills” must be cultivated, so as to help students, in case they visit the foreign country, to be able to successfully communicate in the foreign language under any circumstances of everyday living, and understand the function of foreign cultural codes. This means they will know, for instance, how many rules of politeness exist, how the native speakers of the other country greet each other and say goodbye, how invitations to celebrations are done, etc. (Antor, 2002)

Another action skill, especially for courses taught in the University, is the combination of understanding of the particularities of both the foreign and the familiar cultures, so that understanding of the foreign culture is primarily based on an understanding of the familiar culture, which requires self-awareness and critical consideration of any familiar assumptions, so that the expressions of the foreign culture are understood. (Altmayer, 2006) In addition, the students must develop the ability to analyze their own culturally defined viewpoint and be able to see the expressions of the foreign culture both from an internal and an external point of view. Seeing from an internal perspective means to be able to enter another person’s thinking, see reality through the other person’s eyes, understand the perceptual system of people coming from another culture. On the other hand, an external perspective asks questions including, “How do I consider the other person’s point of view? Or, “Do I agree with such point of view?” In particular, this means that one does not accept the other terms uncritically, but one rather maintains a critical, distant position toward another culture. (Antor, 2002 and Bechtel, 2003) One might say that this is a “special type” of empathy, where understanding of Another Person is accompanied by awareness of one’s own assumptions.

What is impressive, however, is the fact that, in German-speaking literature, while the three levels of intercultural action skills are identical with the principles of Intercultural Communication, which also includes an emotional, a cognitive and a communicative dimension, there are no references to Intercultural Communication.

By critically considering all these objectives, one may wonder to what degree they may possibly be incorporated into foreign language teaching, since there are several linguistic and practical problems. On the contrary, these objectives seem more feasible in the course of Culture and Literature Teaching in the University, since the students have the linguistic level which will allow them to seek these objectives through suitable exercises.

## **2 Feasibility of the Intercultural Model**

Next, I shall present my own intercultural model for developing intercultural action skills, which aims at creating an “intercultural feeling” (affective domain), which presupposes the elimination of “racism” and cultural bias. (Λιακοπούλου, 2006) Briefly, the propagation of intercultural action skills must help the students handle phenomena related to the multiculturalism of Greek schools.

With regard to the question which method is appropriate for propagating intercultural action skills, I shall present below a model of intercultural training based on literature, which I have applied in the course of Culture Teaching during the fall semester of the academic year 2009/10 to the students of the Department of German Language and Literature in the University of Athens. The course is taught in the latest semesters of studies and is an elective course. In this paper, evaluation of the entire attempt is associated with some comments on the students’ final project, which aimed at analyzing intercultural elements found in literary texts, given that the degree of identification and thorough examination of intercultural elements is characteristic of the understanding and training of students in action skills. I think that, on the one hand, development of intercultural skills is a requisite for future teachers of foreign languages, since foreign language teaching is interwoven with the propagation of cultural elements; on the other hand, it is possible to propagate intercultural action skills through literature, even if the students, as mentioned above, neither live in the foreign country, nor in a multicultural environment, but they rather live in the environment of Greek universities.

For the course of Culture taught to the students of German Language and Literature,<sup>2</sup> I have chosen literary texts dealing with contact with a foreign culture, most of which might be described as texts of migrant literature. Thus, the very content of the texts refer to cultural stereotypes and cultural differences, problems of intercultural understanding of Other Persons, unsuccessful intercultural communication, and attitudes and behaviours. As a whole, these texts give us a fertile ground of intercultural training. In particular, I relied upon „KALIMERHABA” collection, which was issued by Romiosini editions in the year 1992. (Eideneier, 1992) As one can easily conclude from the title, this is a trilingual edition including short stories and poems written by Greek, Turkish, and German writers, while the texts have been translated into the other two languages, respectively. About ten students attended the course and each one of them chose the text he/she worked on. Finally, most students chose Turkish writers.

## **3 Description of the Intercultural Model**

Before I proceed to the sample presentation of certain projects, I shall briefly explain the function of the intercultural model I have applied. Analysis of the literary texts was done on two levels. The first level is purely literary, where the students have detected certain elements

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<sup>2</sup> The results of the empirical study are only selective, since this is not a survey aiming at achieving universal validity, but is rather limited to findings concerning a small sample of students in the context of the seminar.

of literature, e.g., structure, organization of the plot, language, place and time of narration, with the aim of making the students realize that literary texts serve a certain linguistic function and cannot be interpreted like other forms of writing. For brevity, I shall not refer here to any results concerning this level, but I shall rather focus on the second level, which concerns the intercultural model. Thus, the intercultural model consists, as mentioned above, in the pursuit of intercultural elements in literature. According to this model, the intercultural elements which constitute the intercultural potential of a literary work are: 1. The dynamic sense of culture, which is inherent in literary texts; 2. Self-criticism in terms of the image of the “familiar”; 3. Hybridity; and 4. The narrative method of “double view ” (multispectral narration).

However, what does ‘dynamic sense of culture’ mean in the first place? As a first criterion, I have chosen to use the concept of dynamic culture, since it constitutes a component of intercultural discourse, because, without any understanding of the concept of dynamic culture, the intercultural development of societies cannot be understood. Culture is a dynamic social procedure, a heterogeneous and ever-changing field “due to the large variety of social experiences, roles and relations that constitute social life”. (Paschalidis, 1999) Besides, it is no coincidence that, in the didactic dimension of Cultural Studies, a widened sense of culture is used, which includes a culture of everyday life with the corresponding linguistic and cultural habits so that, in the form of explicit topics, the students may come into contact with a wide variety of topics (Gehring, 2002). The concept of dynamic culture, as used in this model, uses a widened sense of culture according to Cultural Studies, while enriching it with the dynamic sense of culture, which recognizes a constant change in cultural codes. Generation gap is a very typical example of the further development of cultural codes (Blioumi, 2002). Likewise, development and enrichment of cultural codes with new cultural codes leads to their intercultural development.

The second intercultural element is self-criticism in terms of the image of the familiar. Thus, the question asked is whether there is self-criticism in the work by primary narrator and the other characters. Through self-criticism, some familiar cultural codes and views are reviewed or reexamined. (Görling, 1997) Self-criticism: In the context of Teaching of Intercultural Understanding, the contribution of literary texts is to be underlined. Literary texts are of great assistance in intercultural understanding, since they allow the recognition of pluralistic views and a change in perspective through their fictional composition (Volkman, 2002). In this intercultural model, I have chosen to use the criterion of Self-criticism, since understanding of the other person goes hand in hand with understanding of the familiar element. Development of the ability to view both familiar and foreign cultural codes is of paramount importance. The primary learning objectives of such change in perspectives are to understand the familiar cultural codes, acquire knowledge on other people’s stereotypes, develop communicational strategies, and acquire the ability to manage conflicts. Consequently, the criterion of Self-criticism is the basis of individual learning objectives; therefore, it has been included in my intercultural model.

The third element is hybridity. Hybridity refers to both the collective and personal identity and expresses forms of cultural mixing as a whole. (Nieragden, 1999) In the case of second or third-generation immigrants, the ethnic identity is found between the influence of the country of origin and the influence of the host country. Since hybridity is a very modern social development, the contribution of literature is of great importance, because it gives substance to a new social phenomenon through the narrative universe and facilitates students to identify it. A typical example of it is the short story of Emine Sevgi Özdamar entitled “Der Hof im Spiegel” (The Courtyard in the Mirror, 2001), where the leading character puts there mirrors in her apartment and, when she talks on the phone with her mother in Turkey, she describes the reflections she sees. In essence, these are mirrors where both Germans and Turks appear,

while the distances cease to be a factor, because what is distant comes ‘closer’ through the mirrors (Honnef-Becker 214).

Finally, the fourth intercultural element refers to the narrative method of ‘double view’, i.e., whether the foreign and the familiar elements are presented through different perspectives. Is the view of the familiar predominant, or is the attempt to present the viewpoint of the Other Person also seen? (Wierlacher/Wiedemann U.) As it is easily understood, this element is related to the third one. The difference is that a change in both perspectives is detected in the interpretative practice. The learning objective is to develop empathy, i.e., to understand the perspective of the other person. ‘Empathy’ and ‘compassion’ are similar concepts: while in empathy our own value criteria are eliminated, in compassion they are activated. Thus, when one understands the attitudes and behaviours of people which seem to be incomprehensible in the first place, our rejection may possibly be turned into compassion; therefore, the ability to feel empathy is very important in cases of intercultural communication (Bredella 2007, 39).

I have chosen these elements aiming, mainly, at achieving an experiential approach to literary texts, since I believe that especially the experiential approach can help develop intercultural attitudes among the students. It is obvious that the latter element of “double view” aims at developing empathy, through the second element of self-criticism in terms of the image of the familiar, the ability to present the familiar identity (Identitätsdarstellung), while, through the use of the first and the third elements, i.e., the dynamic sense of culture and hybridity, certain terms and principles of Cultural Studies are transferred to the model. Therefore, the objective is for the model to respond to very modern trends of Culture Teaching (Landeskunde) and apply them to Greek reality.

#### **4 Application of the Intercultural Model**

Preparation: In the first lesson, the theoretical foundations of issues related to intercultural skills were given in the form of lectures and discussions in plenary. Thus, the concepts of ‘stereotypes’, ‘integration’, and ‘assimilation’, were discussed. Dealing with these concepts was necessary in order to help the students familiarize themselves with more complex concepts, including “dynamic culture” and ‘interculturalism’, more smoothly. Subsequently, two hours were dedicated in the presentation of the intercultural model including relevant literary examples of German-speaking authors of different nationalities, because we would focus more on Turkish and Greek authors in the following lessons.

Learning objectives: The learning objectives of the preparatory phase, on a cognitive level, are to communicate knowledge on intercultural scientific discourses and prepare the ground for interpretative training through literary texts. Without any understanding of the basic concepts of the model by the students, application of the model and, consequently, development of intercultural skills through literature cannot be achieved. It is to be noted that in modern “Landeskunde”, knowledge communication is not only meant as traditional knowledge of Geography, History, etc., but it also includes theoretical knowledge on the trading of alterity (Antor 2002, 143).

So, let us examine how the students have initially detected and interpreted the first element, which refers to the dynamic sense of culture.

Student “A” has chosen the short story entitled “My Sevda (My Love)”, written by the Turkish writer Hülya Erdogan. This is short story where the Turkish narrator remembers her big love with a Greek man, who has decisively contributed to the eradication of the negative image she had had for Greek people until then. The student cites the following passage:

“How good, how close friends you have been... You have nothing to do with the image I had had of men in my mind. Please forgive me for my fears. How good you have been! [...] The type of “enemy standing behind the door and sharpening his knife”, as we were taught in the history class” is gone. It has collapsed and disappeared”. (p. 631)<sup>3</sup>

As the student rightly notes, here we can see a dynamic sense of culture, since the narrator sets ethnic stereotypes aside and approaches Greek people with no essentialistic ideas, according to which a nation has identical features in the course of time.

On the contrary, the student detects a static sense of culture in the part where she describes Cretan people: «Oh, I have forgotten to tell you, about a ... Cretan... love... Well, one of these honest, clear hearts, like all Cretans, which fill you with trust...” (p. 631). Here, the student rightly detects, once again, that this is a static sense of culture inserted in the text, since the comparison “like all Cretans” is a stereotype. The student underlines that, although this is a positive view, here we can see a stereotype. Certainly, she does not analyze why this is a stereotype, she does not identify the generalization attributed to all Cretans through the stereotype, and does not further analyze why the stereotype constitutes a static sense of culture, since, through the stereotype, culture is not considered a dynamic social procedure with features changing in the course of time. Nevertheless, I think that the student has detected that there is a static sense of culture hidden behind a positive stereotype for Greeks. In an overall assessment of the students’ projects, I can say that the students have rightly detected both the dynamic and the static sense of culture, although the analysis has not always been comprehensive.

The second element is self-criticism in terms of the image of the familiar. Student “B” has chosen the short story written by the Turkish writer Sinasi Dikmen, who is well-known in Germany, entitled “In Greece, passing”, which deals with the passage of a family of Turkish immigrants in Germany from Greece. The short story fluently renders the common stereotypes of a Turkish father for Greece and the impressions of the family from Greece. In her interpretation, the student rightly comments on the fact that the element of self-criticism is profound, since sarcasm is latent in the entire text with regard to the comments of the family. Practically, well-known stereotypes towards Greek people are recorded, so that the Turkish reader may be guided to their critical analysis. Self-criticism is also detected by student “A” in individual words. For example, in the short story “My Sevda (My Love)”, the narrator points out: “So, this is how my love for Giaouris’ son’ started. The latter expression, i.e., Giaouris’ (Greek man’s) son is put into quotation marks and – as the student rightly points out – the quotation marks denote the distance that the narrator takes from the word’s content, which renders the negative nuance of unfaithful Greeks. In broad outline, even the element of self-criticism has not caused any difficulties to the students, who detected it in various forms in individual words, in the entire text, or in certain passages.

On the contrary, the element which has caused some difficulties to the students is hybridity. Student “C”, who has chosen the short story written by Dido Sotiriou, entitled “History of a woman”, detects the element of hybridity, i.e., cultural mixing, in the following passage: “I saw all friends of my father who visited him at home, I saw his friendship with Talat Bey who, as I was informed later on, became a dreadful pasha. I was afraid that Talat Bey would turn my mother into a Turk” (p. 561). The student detects hybridity into the contacts between Greeks and Turks. It is clear, however, that this is not a case of composition of cultural elements and creation of a new identity as a result of such composition. This is just a case of coexistence of two cultures, briefly, a case of multicultural coexistence. Certainly, the

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<sup>3</sup> Hereunder, all references to the pages of the collection will be given right after the passages in parentheses. The students have written their projects in German. In order to meet the needs of this paper, I have relied upon the corresponding translations of the book into Greek.



innermost fears of the narrator about her mother becoming a Turk rather suggest the idea of cultural assimilation.

Finally, the fourth intercultural element refers to the narrative method of double view, i.e., whether the foreign and the familiar elements are presented through different perspectives: Does the view of the familiar prevail, or is an attempt to present the viewpoint of Another Person also seen?

Student “D” has chosen the short story written by Yücel Feyzioğlu, entitled “Brothers by blood”, which describes the trip of a Turkish family in Greece and their contacts with Greeks during the trip. The student detects double view in a dialogue with a Greek who was expelled from Constantinople.

“In 1964, we were expelled from Turkey, says uncle Vassilis. I was 39 years old then. I had been working for twenty whole years as an accountant in the company. We used to have our homes, our neighbours and our friends. We were deprived of everything. We came here along with our children and a saddle-bag [...] Our homeland is always in front of our eyes. We have never managed to go there, not even once.

Our eyes are filled with tears:

- We can't go there either, uncle Vassili, we can't go there either” (p. 183)

The student thinks that this is a case of double view, because there is a similarity of experiences, since dissident Turks are not allowed to visit their country. This does not constitute, however, a case of double view. There is no change in narrative perspective, and first-person narrative is prevailing in the answer of the Turk. For example, there is no point revealing the view of the Greeks of Turks, or even an attempt to explain the way Greek treat Turks. Plainly, the entire text praises Greeks, since the narrator has a marked philhellenic attitude, which is already seen in the story's title “Brothers by blood”, which refers to Greeks.

On the contrary, student “D” rightly points out that there is no double view in the short story written by Sakis Porichis, entitled “The loan”. The perspective of the Greeks is prevailing in the entire text and there is no point showing what the Turkish leading character thinks; therefore, the view through which the myth is rendered is one-sided.

We must underline here, however, that literary texts applying double view are rare, and the students have simply managed to ascertain its inexistence.

Broadly speaking, the students have quite rightly approached the first two elements, but they have had difficulties in approaching the last two elements. In my opinion, this is due to the fact that, on the one hand, hybridity is new term easily detected in the third or fourth generation of immigrants and, as it is known, the phenomenon of migration is quite recent; as a result, this social development is not clearly visible yet. On the other hand, “double view” is a difficult attitude, which is not often represented in literature and its detection and culture require great effort. On the contrary, the quite easy detection of the dynamic sense of culture and self-criticism prove, in my opinion, that intercultural training is feasible even in the absence of a multicultural environment: although this was the first time that the students came into contact with the above-mentioned terms, after their theoretical comprehension, they have managed to identify them and place them, up to a certain degree, in the imaginary dimension of literature. In conclusion, I think that the model is applicable and brings the students in contact with crucial intercultural principles. The degree to which they contribute, however, to a change in attitude, or to the creation of intercultural attitudes, which will accompany the future teachers henceforth, depends on each person individually.

Although the students did not detect all elements of the model, on the whole, a primary learning objective was achieved: through literature, they have managed to overcome the

stereotypic image for Turkey and Turks and develop a critical attitude towards both familiar and foreign cultural codes beyond the historical knowledge acquired in school. A number of real historical events have provided the impetus to detect a number of similarities and differences between the two nations. Through the help of the model, the students have consciously set aside their own assumptions for Turkey and have made an effort to understand the other person's 'view'. Besides, it is no coincidence that a student noted in the end of the semester: "We did not know that the Turks like us".

Finally, from a pedagogic point of view, the model might be completed with active exercises, so as to establish whether the playful treatment of migrant literature might contribute to the further strengthening of intercultural principles. In addition, a further research field, which is of great interest, would be to associate Intercultural Communication with the intercultural model, with the aim of further developing the communication skills of the students, since my model practically constitutes an analysis of intercultural communication.

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