

USING FILMS FOR INTERCULTURAL TRAINING AT THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Micaela TAULEAN,
PhD, Associate professor,
USARB, Balti, Moldova

Articolul descrie unul dintre aspectele învățării comunicării interculturale la orele de limba engleză în instituțiile de învățământ superior - utilizarea filmelor sau fragmentelor din filme artistice pentru dezvoltarea abilităților comunicative în limba engleză și pentru a facilita învățarea comunicării interculturale. Autorul articolului demonstrează cum filmul „My big fat Greek wedding” poate fi integrat în cursul orei de limbă pentru studenți universitari.

Cuvinte cheie: *competență comunicativă, comunicare interculturală, dialog intercultural, identitatea culturală, stereotipuri*

As English is an international language students from different countries all over the world are trying to know it better. So, in the world of modern technologies a lot of teachers always find something new in order to make their lessons more successful. As a matter of fact, learning the English language is a complex undertaking. As with learning any language, non-native speakers have to navigate a river of vocabulary, grammatical exceptions and language nuances. The task of learning English is even more complex for non-native speakers who move to an English speaking country and are immediately immersed in the language.

Culture, according to one definition, is the values, traditions, customs, art, and institutions shared by a group of people who are unified by nationality, ethnicity, religion, or language. The language teaching profession's interest in cross-cultural communication has increased during the past few decades. According to Kramersch, this development is due to political, educational, and ideological factors; even though politicians might feel that learning a foreign language will solve socioeconomic problems, educators think that for that to happen a language course must contain legitimate cultural content. Kramersch thinks that in the future the language teacher will be defined "not only as the impresario of a certain linguistic performance, but as the catalyst for an ever-widening critical cultural competence" (Kramersch 1995: 90).

The ability to speak a language, and consequently the evaluation of the level of language skills, is inextricably linked with understanding the history, culture, and customs of the people speaking this language. The cultural ethnolinguistic concept of foreign language teaching presupposes not taking the communicative approach and purely communicative competence as the objective of training to extremes. It would be more precise to speak of communicative orientation of the learning process. Intercultural competence comes to the fore. In other words, foreign language teaching becomes intercultural teaching, learning how to understand the foreigner, aimed at overcoming xenophobia and existing stereotypes.

Intercultural topics that show how people from different backgrounds

communicate and interact are becoming more prominent in language teaching. The contemporary models of communicative competence show that there is much more to learning a language, and they include the vital component of cultural knowledge and awareness. In other words, to learn a language well usually requires knowing something about the culture of that language. Communication that lacks appropriate cultural content often results in humorous incidents, or worse, is the source of serious miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Using movies can be an entertaining and motivating tool also for learners with different skill level. Movies provide the learners with real-life language input, which may be difficult to receive otherwise in a non-English-speaking environment. According to Allan (Allan 1985: 48-65) films actually get students to talk and they can be a stimulus to genuine communication in the classroom by bringing out different opinions within the group. Sufen emphasizes that films are considered an insightful means of teaching, since they reflect people's way of life in terms of variety, contemporaneity and authenticity. The realistic verbal communication also helps the students to pick up the language more spontaneously (Sufen 2006).

Language teachers can benefit from the treasure trove of films that deal with subjects like immigration, xenophobia, adjusting to a new culture, or the dilemmas faced when one belongs to two cultures. Although films cannot substitute for actual interaction with members of other cultures, they can provide useful preparation for those encounters by fostering understanding and developing sensitivity. Intercultural contact through films enables students to understand other people's actions and to have empathy with members of minority groups. Films also vividly represent intercultural misunderstandings and the roots of racism.

Although the importance of film is generally acknowledged, states Cardon, a more difficult feat is finding descriptions of "specific films or specific approaches to use in teaching about culture" (Cardon 2010:152). Nowadays using films has become popular and integral part of the teaching activity, even in the one-to-one system. The BBC programs offer a lot of good ideas, i.e. recording episodes of popular serials, or selected short programs. These recordings can be used for practicing in the four skills and students enjoy them very much. Watching films combined with well

prepared “before watching” and “after watching” tasks - including vocabulary building and making a grammar review. It is much more attractive and exciting, than getting into touch with the “dry and boring” course matters.

There is a wide variety of films with intercultural themes, and the teacher must consult reviews or see the movie firsthand to determine if it is appropriate for the desired lesson: *El Norte* (Illegal Immigration, Guatemalan culture/US culture), *Lost in translation* (culture shock, American culture/Japanese culture), *My big fat Greek wedding* (assimilation, Anglo American culture/Greek American culture), *The Gods must be crazy* (outline of culture, Australian Aboriginal culture/European culture), *The Mission* (colonialism, Spanish colonial culture/ Indigenous culture), etc.

Here are some practical ideas how the film *My big fat Greek wedding* can be used to teach intercultural communication to language students (B1-B2 levels).

1) *Plot summary*

This film is a sweet look at the American immigrant family, and specifically, the tension that has existed between many immigrant parents who want their children to marry a person from their own ethnic background, and those children who find partners from elsewhere in the great American “melting pot.” Specifically, it is the story of Toula, a 30 year old woman who lives with her Greek parents in their comfortable Chicago home, but who is sad and lost, in part because she thinks she’s too old and unattractive to ever find a husband.

2) *Vocabulary practice:*

A. *While the pretty girls got to go to **brownies**, I had to go to Greek school.*

A popular organization for girls who are still too young to be part of the “Girl Scouts,” which is the largest club of girls in the US.

B. *Our house was **modeled after** the **Parthenon**, complete with **Corinthian columns** and guarded by statues of the Gods.*

If a building is “modeled after” another one, it’s made to look similar to it. The “Parthenon” is a famous structure that was built in Ancient Greece, in Athens. “Corinthian columns” refer to thick white posts that were used to make buildings in Corinthian society, which was part of ancient Greece.

C. *Astronomy, philosophy and Democracy!* -**Bravo**, very good.

An Italian word used in English to express great pleasure after a musical or acting performance. People often scream “bravo!” while applauding.

D. *“Listen up, ugly Turk. You’re not kidnapping me!”*

It’s worth noting that historically, Turkey and Greece have fought many wars and there is often tension between the two cultures.

E. *Man, you’re **tough**. - I’m giving a test on Hamlet, but I give fair warning.*

In this case, if a person is “tough,” they are mean or even scary. “Hamlet” is a famous play by Shakespeare, and if a person gives you “fair warning,” they tell you of the possible dangers so that you can prepare.

F. *Actually, I wasn’t in education. First, I was **pre-law**.*

An academic specialization that university students take if they eventually want to go to law school (Classes are taken in such subjects as logic and political science).

G. *Greeks marry Greeks **to breed** more Greeks, to be loud, breeding Greek eaters.*

“To breed” is a scientific word meaning to reproduce or have children.

3) **Pre-view discussion:**

1. Are you married or engaged? If so, explain how you met your partner. If not, explain how you think you **will** meet your future partner.
2. How much of a role did/will your family play in the selection and/or approval of your mate?
3. Do you think your family is typical of most people in your culture with regard to ideas about courtship and marriage? In what ways are **your** ideas about dating and marriage similar to or different from your family’s ideas?

4. **Describing the main character:**

Characteristic or Event + example from film	Costa – Toula’s father
1. Obsession	
2. Attitude about Women	
3. Ideas about Family (including family of origin)	
4. Attitudes about Living in America and Allegiance to Native Culture	
5. Relationship to Food	
6. Personality	

5. *While-view tasks:*

Toula meets Ian at the restaurant

- What happened at the restaurant?
- Who was at the restaurant?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?

Toula meets Ian again at the travel agency

- What happened at the travel agency?
- Who was at the travel agency?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- What happened at the meeting?

Toula's family meets Ian's family

- Who was at the meeting?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?

Toula and Ian get married

- What happened at the marriage?
- Who was at the marriage?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?

6. *Pair-work or group-work activities:*

Group 1) Compare and contrast Toula's and Ian's family in the areas of visible culture.

Group 2) Compare and contrast Toula's and Ian's family in the areas of hidden culture.

Group 3) Compare and contrast the communication style of Toula's and Ian's family in terms of direct versus indirect communication.

Group 4) Compare and contrast the communication style of Toula's and Ian's family in terms of emotional expression.

Group 5) Compare and contrast the communication style of Toula's and Ian's family in terms of low versus high context communication.

7. *Questions for class discussion:*

1. This movie seems to be about Greek-American culture; In fact, is it really about all kinds of ethnic Americans? How so?

2. If you were Ian, would you have agreed to join another church in order to marry Toula?
3. How does your family compare to Toula's? What about compared to Ian's?
4. Has the United States largely succeeded in creating a great "melting pot" (in which people from all cultures have blended together), or is it more like a "salad bowl" (in which people from different cultures stick to their own groups)?
5. Did you like this movie? Why or why not?

We'd like to highlight several students' ideas about interracial marriages, cultural diversity, accepting differences, misunderstandings and language barriers.

"In this film we see how people learn to trust and respect each other, how they built their relationship. It is about understanding and indulgence".

"This film is about different cultures and heritages. No matter who you are and where you came from. One of the greatest feelings joins people. In fact, this film is about all kinds of ethnic Americans, as it treats the differences between immigrants' ethnic backgrounds and those of natives".

The question about being in Ian's shoes provoked different and interesting answers.

"If I were Ian, I would have agreed to join another church in order to marry Toula because the matrimonial bliss and her family's acceptance depended on it".

"I consider that if you truly love a person, you will do everything for him/her. You can join another church, adopt another culture, and move next door to her family because of love".

"As for me, I would not join another church in order to get a permission to marry the man I love. I think that a woman sacrifices much while getting married. It is the man's business to settle such conflicts. So, if a man loves a woman, he won't ask her to change her religion, he will do everything by himself".

"If I were Ian and I did not imagine my life without Toula, then I would agree to join another church in order to marry her, because this seemed to be the only way to convince her father to accept the marriage".

As for comparing the families, the students were full of proper experience.

“My family is a mixture of Toula’s and Ian’s. My mother resembles Toula’s mother and my father resembles Ian’s father. My mother likes to cook and she always like her biggest duty – to feed everyone around her. She is very sociable and open-hearted woman. My father, on contrary, is more rational and conservative person”.

“My family is like Toula’s family. We prefer to come together on different holidays and celebrate them in a big, loud company. I have got many relatives – uncles, aunts, nephews, grandparents. It is funny and marvelous when all members of my dearest family meet together”.

Integrating language teaching and culture is a must today for EFL classes. Culture may significantly contribute to the learner's linguistic, cognitive and social development. Introducing films that deal with intercultural misunderstanding, various traditions and customs, different patterns of behaviour will help students to understand specific differences between their own culture and the other cultures. Using such films can help us lead our students to real intercultural life, to greater reflection about particular people and cultures, to broaden their cultural competence and to improve the learning of English.

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