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**DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE  
THROUGH FILMS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM**

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**Rezumat:** Prezenta lucrare își propune să exploreze și să dezvăluie posibile modalități de exploatare a unui film în limba engleză pentru a dezvolta competențele lingvistice și interculturale ale studenților, precum și motivația acestora. De asemenea, sunt prezentate câteva activități care pot fi aplicate în timpul procesului de învățare a limbii engleze pentru creșterea competenței interculturale prin vizionarea filmelor în limba țintă.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** competența interculturală, limba țintă, sarcini bazate pe film, film artistic, empatie, stereotipuri, prejudecăți, asimilare

The main aim of learning English as a foreign language is to develop communicative competence, which includes not only the ability to communicate in English orally and in written form, but also the ability to participate in a cultural dialogue, i.e. knowledge of someone's own culture and that of the target language. The most favourable conditions for the realisation of all the learning objectives are provided when the lessons are organised in a language environment. The use of feature films in the learning process contributes to this objective. Even using episodes from feature films at the EFL lessons immerse students into situations where they become familiar with life styles and realities of the country of the target language, they can draw the social situation for gaining cultural knowledge, the language practice, facial expressions, gestures and intercultural study.

The language teaching profession's interest in intercultural communication has increased during the past few decades. According to Kramsch (1995), 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, 1995, p. 90). Foreign language teaching becomes intercultural teaching, learning how to understand the foreigner, aimed at overcoming xenophobia and existing stereotypes. Topics with intercultural content when we can see interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds are becoming more prominent in language teaching. The up-to-date models of communicative competence show that there is more to learning a foreign language, and they include the vital component of cultural knowledge and awareness. In other words, to learn a foreign language well requires knowing something about the culture of the target language. Humorous intercultural incidents might happen when communication lacks appropriate cultural content, or worse, it can be the source of serious misunderstandings.

The concept of *intercultural competence* described by Byram (2006) has refocused the goal of language education with culture integrated into language study. The use of the term *intercultural* reflects the view that EFL learners have to gain insight into both: their own and the foreign culture (Kramersch, 1993). Intercultural competence emphasizes the mediation between different cultures, the ability to look at oneself from an “external” perspective, analyze and adapt one’s own behaviours, values and beliefs (Byram and Zarate, 1997). An interculturally competent learner therefore displays a range of affective, behavioural and cognitive capacities (Byram, 2006, p.22–26): *attitudes/affective capacities* (acknowledgement of the identities of others, respect for otherness, tolerance for ambiguity, empathy); *behaviour* (flexibility, communicative awareness); *cognitive capacities* (knowledge, knowledge discovery, interpreting and relating, critical cultural awareness). The successful process of studies requires the following skills and competences of a student:

- “*sociocultural knowledge*” (CEFR<sup>1</sup>, 2001,p. 102): student’s knowledge of the society and culture he is currently studying in, as well as basic understanding of cultures of other students in a group. This knowledge may help to establish rapport and foster student’s learning processes and make him establish appropriate interpersonal relations with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/16802fc1bf>

lecturers and other students, taking into consideration that other lecturers' and students' cultural or religious values, beliefs and attitudes can differ from his values and beliefs;

- “*intercultural awareness*” or “*intercultural competence*” (CEFR, 2001,p. 102) – his prior sociocultural experience and knowledge, relation between culture of a student and other group-mates as well as ‘*intercultural skills*’ and ‘*know-how*’ (savoir-faire) (CEFR, 2001,p. 104) – student’s ability to bring his/her culture and cultures to the audience (Drozdova, Taulean, 2022, p.31-32).

The advantages of teaching English as a foreign language on the basis of feature films, the selection of videos and the methodology of working with them are described in the works of such scholars as Baratta&Jones, Allan, Champoux, Smith, Sufen, Roell, Yuksel&Tanriverdi etc. The use of films in foreign language teaching is based on the main methodological principle, i.e. the principle of visibility. According to Rivers (1991) “*all audiovisual materials have positive contributions to language learning as long as they are used at the right time, in the right place. In language learning and teaching process, learners use their eyes as well as their ears; but their eyes are basic in* (Rivers, 1991, p.330-340). Film or small episodes from the films create a learning environment as close as possible to the language environment and reproduce the speech situation by audio and visual means. Visual presentation helps the learners better understand and remember both factual information and purely linguistic features of speech in a certain context. Using films can be motivating tool for language learners. Films provide the learners with real-life language input, which may be difficult to receive otherwise in a non-English-speaking environment. The realistic verbal communication also helps the students to pick up the language more spontaneously. The film stimulates students to communicate in a foreign language and to engage them in learning, research and creative activities.

Using the appropriate video materials at English lessons is aimed at helping EFL learners get oriented both in language use and intercultural interactions. Such lessons and the activities after watching video materials are intended to improve EFL learners’ communicative language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Linguistic competence is an

integral part of communicative competence, as it ensures communication at the level of identification of concepts, associations and images that arise in the process of communication. Language teachers can use episodes from the films that deal with such subjects like acculturation, xenophobia, cultural diffusion, assimilation, adjusting to a new culture, in order to raise students' intercultural awareness. There are many films that deal with intercultural issues<sup>2</sup>:

a) *East Side Sushi* (2014), An immigrant single mother disenfranchised by her regular life decides to take a chance working at a Japanese restaurant and realises her dreams to become a sushi chef to provide a better future to her family.

b) *Arranged* (2007), Arranged centers on the friendship between an Orthodox Jewish woman and a Muslim woman who meet as first-year teachers at a public school in Brooklyn.

c) *Alma gitana* (1996), A young man who wants to become a professional dancer falls in love with a gypsy girl and gets in conflict with her totally different cultural background. But love can overcome these differences.

d) *Journey to Portugal* (2011), Maria, a Ukrainian doctor, comes to Portugal to spend a year with Greco, her husband who is also a doctor. At her arrival at Faro airport she is the only person from Kiev approached by agents of Immigration and Customs that lead her to a room of interrogation, without any explanations. All this happens because the authorities suspect that something illegal should be behind her travelling, since she is from Eastern Europe and her husband is Senegalese.

e) *My big fat Greek wedding* (2002), A young Greek 30 year old woman Toula Portokalos falls in love with a non-Greek and struggles to get her family to accept him while she comes to terms with her heritage and cultural identity.

Nowadays using films has become popular and integral part of the teaching activity, even in the one-to-one system. Using videos in the English class is a very helpful and stimulating method to motivate our students to get the most of the lesson. Compared with other teaching tools:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://bestsimilar.com/tag/2487-cross-cultural-relations>

audio tapes, textbooks, and the basic blackboard, video is a relatively new option for the language teacher (Sitailo, Taulean, 2012, p.59).

To use a film as a powerful tool during teaching and learning activities, “*preparation*” is one of the main ways to make it more meaningful before applying several other ways to encourage students to become active learners. Harmer (2006) state about several techniques that can be applied when using videos in EFL classrooms, such as: *Viewing techniques (Fast Forward, Silent Viewing, Freezing Framing, Partial Viewing)* and *Listening (and mixed) techniques (Picture less listening, picture of speech)*. Çakir (2006) also adds several other ways; *Active Viewing, Freezing Framing and Predictions, Silent vision, Sound on and Vision off Activity, Repetition and Role-Play, reproductive activities, Dubbing Activity, and FollowUp Activity*.

In the pre-viewing activities the teacher might draw students’ attention to various phrases or word-combinations in certain episodes from the film, for example: *Niko, be careful. She has a very mean punch. I want to drive. You’re driving me crazy! Was that a biker fight or a nose job?* (from “My Big Fat Greek Wedding”).

Problem-based discussion in the post-viewing phase provides a strong basis for the development of oral and written language skills. The teacher can use round-table discussions on reducing cultural stereotypes, oral reviews of a film or so called “field-trip” to visit real places but only in the films. For example:

- Observe parent-child interactions – a) *What did Toula’s father mean when he said, “My daughter is marrying into a family that is dry – like toast.”?* B) *Speak about Toula’s family/ Ian’s family. What relationship did Toula have with her brothers and sisters? How does your family compare to Toula’s? What about compared to Ian’s?*
- Observe male-female interactions – *What did Toula and Ian like about each other? What did they like about each other’s families? What did they misunderstand about each other’s families? What is the perfect age for marriage? How do you feel about cross-cultural marriages?*
- Observe intercultural misunderstanding – Comment the words of Toula’s father: *“There’re two kinds of people: Greek and everybody else who with they were Greeks”*.

Pair-work or work in small groups can enhance students' interest and confidence, explore their stereotypes and prejudices about other people, and confront the different cultural values. For example: *Compare and contrast Toula's and Ian's family in the areas of visible/ hidden cultures. Compare and contrast the communication style of Toula's and Ian's family in terms of direct and indirect communication.*

The EFL learners should be guided by teachers towards developing their intercultural competence, knowledge and awareness and should be provided with learning materials: pre-, while-, post-watching tasks and activities, role-playing situations aiming to challenge students' stereotypes and prejudice about other people and cultural minorities, to raise curiosity and empathy with other peoples' cultures, to analyse the attitudes towards people from different cultural or social groups.

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