

FOCUS-ON-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: LITERARY READING IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The current paper proposes a theoretically based method for the teaching of cultural knowledge through the reading of literature. This method is termed the focus-on-cultural understanding task and involves directing the language learner to focus on the meaning construction processes of a member or members of the target cultural group in addition to the reading of the literary work. This task involves reading a culturally significant literary text, constructing in-class culturally distant understandings of the literary piece and then reading interpretations of the same literacy artifact by members of the target language community. In line with current concepts of culture, it is hoped that this task will lead to a complex understanding of culture and avoid idealized presentations of the foreign culture.

KEY WORDS

Literary reading, cultural understanding, cross-cultural reading.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo propone, a partir de una base teórica, un método para la enseñanza del conocimiento cultural a través de la lectura literaria. Este método se denomina de "tareas centradas en la comprensión cultural", e implica llevar al estudiante de una lengua a centrarse, además de en la lectura de la obra literaria, en los procesos de construcción de significado de uno o varios miembros del grupo cultural correspondiente. Esta tarea implica la lectura de un texto literario culturalmente significativo, la elaboración en clase de inter-

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pretaciones del texto literario culturalmente alejadas y, finalmente, la lectura de interpretaciones del mismo hecho literario hechas por miembros de la comunidad lingüística correspondiente. De acuerdo con la noción actual de cultura, se espera que esta tarea lleve a una comprensión compleja de la cultura y evite una presentación idealizada de la cultura extranjera.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Lectura literaria, comprensión cultural, lectura inter-cultural.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose une méthode pour l'enseignement du savoir culturel par la lecture des textes littéraires, qui a une base théorique. Cette méthode s'appelle tâche de compréhension par la centration sur la culture, et il s'agit d'amener l'étudiant de la langue à se centrer sur le processus de la construction du sens d'un membre ou membres du groupe dont la culture est à apprendre, en addition à la lecture d'une oeuvre de littérature. La tâche inclut la lecture d'un texte littéraire qui a une importance culturelle, la construction dans la classe, avec une distance culturelle, de la signification de ce texte, et puis la lecture des diverses interprétations du même texte par des membres de la communauté dont la culture est à apprendre. En accord avec des notions courantes de la culture, on espère que cette tâche amènera l'étudiant à une compréhension complexe de la culture et elle aidera à éviter une présentation idéalisée des cultures étrangères.

MOTS-CLÉ

Lecture littéraire, compréhension culturelle, lecture à travers les cultures.

Within the framework of applied linguistics, three main arguments have been proposed for the incorporation of literary texts within the second language classroom. The first argument relates to the motivational aspects of reading literature. The essential core of this argument is that reading literature generates enjoyment and personal involvement and thus enhances the language classroom by improving the quality of student motivation for reading (McKay, p. 192). The second argument for the use of literature in the language classroom relates to the psycholinguistic aspects of literary reading. The essential core of this argument is that the linguistic and textual properties of literary texts and the cognitive characteristics of literary reading interact with the second language learning process (Chan, p. 52; Hanauer *Poetry Reading*, p. 2; *Attention*, p. 25, *The Task*, p. 318; McKay, p. 191). For example, as described in a recent paper on the task of poetry reading in the second language classroom (Hanauer *The Task*) poetry directs readers to focus on linguistic form and thus creates a situation in which advanced

readers can extend their understanding of the potential range of uses and meanings of linguistic structures. The third argument, and the issue that will be developed in the current paper, relates to the cultural role of literary reading. The essential core of this argument is that the incorporation of literary reading tasks in the language classroom provides language learners access to cultural knowledge of the target language community (Kramsch, p. 130).

The aim of the current paper is to develop this third argument by proposing a theoretically based principal for the teaching of cultural knowledge through the reading of literature. This principal is termed in this paper as focus-on-cultural understanding and involves directing the language learner to focus on the meaning construction processes of a member or members of the target cultural group. The current paper will first present current conceptions of cultural knowledge and then discuss the role of literature in the development of cultural knowledge. This theoretical backdrop will then be used to develop the focus-on-cultural understanding task.

CULTURE AND THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNER

It is widely recognized within the community of applied linguists that learning a language involves more than just learning to use a set of linguistic structures. The components of language learning that go beyond the acquisition of linguistic structures and the development of the abilities to use these linguistic structures in real time are usually considered and discussed as cultural factors. For example, Brym and Risager in a study of language teachers' knowledge of cultural issues propose that culture consists of four basic categories:

A. culture understood as people's way of life and traditions - how people live in concrete terms, their activities, their ways of living together and so on;

B. culture understood as the objective of structures people live in, the social, political and economic institutions for example;

C. culture understood as the norms or values characterizing people's lives - the ideas people have about their life, behavior, mentality, consciousness and so on;

D. culture understood as valued products or artifacts: as artistic life and artistic products of different kinds, for example literature, music, art and so on." (p. 85).

On a basic level, these types of cultural knowledge fulfill the function of allowing communication with understanding to take place among members of the target community and language learners. Linguistic knowledge provides both the building blocks and structures enabling communication; in broad terms, cultural knowledge provides all the referential knowledge that allows understanding to take place. Without cultural knowledge, the source of all referential understanding is the knowledge the language learner has of her/his own culture. While some referential knowledge may be common to both the language learner and the member of the target language group, there will be many situations in which this is not the case. Cultural knowledge is important in that it provides a basis through which understanding is achieved.

The types of cultural knowledge presented above seem to define culture as explicit knowledge that is to be acquired. Even my own use of the term referential knowledge suggests that cultural knowledge is a form of explicit information base that can be transmitted to foreign language learners. However, as pointed out by Kramsch (p. 205) much of cultural knowledge is actually social construct. In other words, it is not only a matter of acquiring an explicit knowledge base but more importantly an issue of how this knowledge is used in the construction and production of meaning in interaction with members or artifacts from the target culture. One important aspect of social interaction is the processing aspect to cultural knowledge. Cultures develop specific oral and written genres that fulfill particular social functions. Each genre consists of a specific social function, knowledge of the linguistic and textual structures that are used in this genre and knowledge of the way these specific structures are processed in order to construct or produce meaning (Bhatia, p. 13; Freedman & Medway, p. 1 ; Hanauer *Genre-Specific Hypothesis*, p. 65; Kamberelis, p. 120; Swales). Central to learning a foreign culture is learning culturally specific modes of meaning making and meaning production.

A recent approach to literacy pedagogy developed within the conceptual framework of applied linguistics has posited the issue of culturally specific meaning making as a central theoretical and pedagogical concern. The multiliteracy project has widened the concept of literacy and literacy education by focusing on two specific developments and issues: 1) The culturally and linguistically diverse nature of literacy practice - the multiplicity of cultures that exist and interact through a plurality of texts; 2) The increasing variety of different text types and forms that are developing in the world of information and

multimedia technologies (Cope & Kalantzis, p. 9). Central to this approach is the concept “designs of meaning making”. According to the theory of multiliteracy every culture develops its own set of designs of meaning making. These designs are socially embedded and historically constituted. The concept of design of meaning emphasizes the active role of the literacy practitioner and the contextual role of society in providing a series of literacy design options through which the individual can express her/himself. According to this theory, when an individual participates in a literacy act, the cultural context provides the potential conceptual forms and the framework for meaning construction. As described by Cope and Kalantzis “Design is a process in which the individual and the culture are inseparable. The representational resources available to the individual are the stuff of culture... ..Culture is no more and no less than the accumulated and continuing expression of agency; of designing” (p. 203). The multiliteracy project embeds culture deeply within the meaning construction process and sees the various designs of meaning making produced by members of the community as a central defining aspect of the culture of the community. In this context, learning a foreign culture means learning the community’s ways of constructing and producing meaning. This is a much more complex aim than learning explicit knowledge relating to a specific culture. It may also be construed as a problematic aim in that this aspect of learning a foreign culture may come into direct confrontation with the values and meanings that the language learners own culture supports. However, as seen in the brief review above, cultural learning has to include a central emphasis on learning culturally specific ways of making and producing meaning.

LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Broadly speaking literary knowledge consists of three interrelated types of knowledge: knowledge of literary texts, knowledge of ways of reading literature, and knowledge of interpretations of literature. Current conceptions of first language literary pedagogy are conceptualized within the context of reader-response criticism and tend to emphasize personal ways of reading literature and de-emphasize the role of the literary text (Galda & Guice, p. 313; Karolides; Probst). Literary interpretations are considered problematic in that they restrict the students’ ability to create personal interpretations. As stated by Britton “The voice

of the critic must not be allowed to seem the voice of authority; more harm has probably been done to the cause of literature by this means than by any other. It is all too easy for the immature student, feeling his own responses are unacceptable, to disown them and profess instead the opinions of respected critics" (p. 6).

In a recent article by Hanauer (*Revisiting New Criticism*), this position was questioned in relation to empirical evidence that seems to demonstrate that the presentation of well-formed interpretations of literary texts by expert literary readers enhances the students abilities to construct their literary interpretations and does not hinder their interpretive freedom. However, beyond the arguments in relation to first language literary pedagogy, for the study of culture in the foreign language classroom all three types of literary knowledge can play an important role for the development of cultural knowledge. In particular, in the current section, it will be argued that expert interpretations of literary texts are important for the student of a foreign culture and that these interpretations can present a real insight into the way individual meanings are constructed within the target culture.

Acquainting the language learner with the canon of highly valued literary texts is an aim of many language teachers. The argument that can be used to support this position relates to the social role these texts fulfill. Respected and socially embedded literary texts fulfill an important intertextual role within their host cultures. Texts with a cultural history of social significance are constantly referenced in both oral and written texts produced by members of the cultural group. Knowledge of these highly referenced intertextual entities is an important source of cultural knowledge without which the deeper meaning of new texts is lost. In some cases, even the explicit meaning of the text is difficult to explore. An argument of this type has been made by the literary critic Northrop Frye (p. 110) when he claimed that Biblical texts need to learn so as to allow the understanding of many of the literary texts that were written in the tradition of English literature. Of course, for the language teacher the problem still exists of which texts to teach in the language classroom. Within the field of literary studies, the canon wars have left a legacy of undercutting previously accepted literary classics and proposing new ways of constructing the canon of literary texts. The position taken here is that it is important to reflect the choices being made in the culture itself. Changes to the literary curriculum in the target culture need to be reflected in the choices made in the foreign language literary curriculum. Perhaps even more importantly, as

will be discussed below, the criticisms of the accepted canon need to be presented in the foreign language classroom as an aspect of studying the way members of the community understand their own culture.

Beyond the choice of texts that become part of the valued literary canon of a nation, the main site of contention between cultural groups within a national entity relates to the way these texts are understood by various communities. In other words, the designs of meaning making and meaning production that are part of the culture of each group can produce radically different understandings of the literary texts presented within the literary curriculum. Within the United States, the most obvious manifestation of this phenomenon is the request to ban various children's books because they are considered offensive. For example, while one community of readers may view Harry Potter books as a harmless tale of the fictional activities of a young wizard, a Christian fundamentalist reading of these books may understand them as a reincarnation of devil worship. This understanding is not only the result of the content of the books but more importantly the way meaning is constructed in relation to these books. Through a series of intertextual references and analogies, the Harry Potter books can be seen as texts that make witchcraft attractive and an example of the devil's temptation and seduction of young minds.

For the language teacher, culturally specific ways of constructing meaning should be an important aspect of teaching a foreign culture. As argued above, literary texts are important for their centrality to the intertextual nature of cultural communication. However, literary texts are not self-explanatory. Quite the opposite is true. Literary texts tend to be ambiguous and polysemantic. These texts are open to a multiplicity of meaning construction options. One of the main reasons for using a literary text to teach cultural understanding is that it can be understood in a variety of ways. By using literary texts and expert interpretations of these texts in the language classroom, the language teacher can teach the ways that specific individuals and communities understand these texts. In other words, the language teacher can focus in on the culturally specific aspects of the meaning construction process. The argument being proposed here is that literary texts and culturally specific interpretations of these texts should be presented and analyzed within the language classroom.

One of the central arguments against the use of literature in the language classroom has been presented by Edmondson (p. 45) who argues that literature is written from a single individuals perspective and

thus has an unclear relationship with the culture of the whole community. In other words, literature does not represent the culture but rather one individual's perspective of that culture. This in Edmondson's opinion makes literature problematic because the language learner may generalize from the work of literature to the society as a whole. For example, in what way does James Joyce's short story "The Dead" represent Irish culture today; or Walt Whitman's book of poetry "Leaves of Grass" the values and culture of all Americans? It is quite clear that these highly accomplished works of art represent a personal viewpoint at a particular moment and in relation to a specific section of society. It is also clear that to generalize from these works to the whole of a community would present a false picture of that community.

From a multicultural viewpoint, this problem of false generalization goes beyond the role reading of literature in the language classroom. This is a central problem of all attempts to teach a culture to a group of language learners. Cultures are not monolithic unitary units. Cultures are composed of a multitude of individuals who have varying cultural and cross-cultural affinities. Rather than a single set of shared cultural meanings, current views of culture propose multiple sets of cultural meanings within any given national entity. It is a simple fact that most nations are multicultural entities that incorporate different ethnic, religious, economic and ideological communities. Accordingly, it is equally problematic for a language learner to generalize about a culture based on a history book written for members of the cultural group or from a literary novel. Both, I would claim, are written from a specific perspective that does not represent the whole culture.

The solution to the problem raised by Edmondson and a central principal of way culture should be taught being proposed in this paper, is that the teaching culture should involve the presentation of multiple individual viewpoints. Rather than avoiding individuals I am suggesting that we embrace the individual viewpoint while recognizing that it is an individual viewpoint. Literature is a valuable source of cultural knowledge precisely because it does present a personal interpretation of the life and values as the author of the literary work experiences them. If this individual viewpoint is augmented by different culturally specific interpretations of the same piece of literature, then the language learner has a much better chance of constructing a deep understanding of the complex nature of the foreign culture. Rather than stereotypical cultural knowledge based on generalizations or a false generalization based on an individual viewpoint expressed in a specif-

ic literary work, the language learner is exposed to the literary work and the different ways members of the target culture understand this piece. The individual viewpoint must be presented within a context of multiple viewpoints so as to avoid false generalization and to enable the construction of a multifaceted view of the foreign culture.

This approach to the teaching of cultural knowledge through the presentation of multiple viewpoints can also help the language teacher to contend with an additional problem of teaching a foreign culture. Kramsch (p. 207) in a discussion of the use of literature for teaching cultural knowledge points out that language learners approach the foreign culture from within the conceptual context of their own imagined conceptions of both their own and the foreign culture. In other words, the language learner has a series of preconceived generalizations that relate to their own cultures understanding of themselves and of the target culture. Among the multiple view points that need to be presented in the language classroom, the teacher should also include the student's own culturally specific view of the foreign culture. Essentially, the language teacher needs to view the students own understandings of the literary work under discussion as a form of culturally specific meaning construction and a good tool for comparison with other culturally specific ways of constructing meaning.

TEACHING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Although the current paper does not aim at presenting a comprehensive overview of the teaching methods that are useful for advancing cultural knowledge, the discussion in the previous section does emphasize the importance of one aspect of teaching a foreign culture. This aspect can be summarized as *the importance for the language learner of being exposed to various interpretations of cultural phenomena by members of the cultural community*. Within qualitative research, this is termed as presenting the "insiders viewpoint" and is one of the central justifications of a qualitative approach to knowledge generation. Maxwell summarizes this position nicely when he points out that qualitative research is best suited for answering "questions about the meaning of events and activities to the people involved in these" (p. 59). Learning about a foreign culture can be seen as a qualitative research design in which the main research question is how would specific events, actions and cultural artifacts be understood by a member (or members)

of the target language community. In other words, it is my contention that part of the educational process of learning a foreign culture must involve a confrontation between culturally embedded and culturally distant interpretations of culturally valued events, actions and artifacts. In relation to literature, this would involve constructing in-class culturally distant understandings of the literary piece and then confronting interpretations of the same literacy artifact by members of the target language community. The aim of this task is to focus on the way meaning is constructed by the language learner and the comparison of this to the way meaning is constructed by different members of the cultural group. This principle of cultural learning would have the value of constructing a situation in which the language learner is directed to focus attention on the meaning making process of the target language group while formulating an understanding of their own culturally specific meaning making process. In other words, this is a task which focuses on the cultural aspects of the meaning making process. This is essentially the task of focus-on-cultural understanding.

To exemplify the teaching method I am proposing, let me present an example. In a study of cross-cultural reading (Hanauer & Waksman, *Cross-cultural reading*), Jewish Israeli students and Christian Israeli participants were asked to read and comprehend parables from the New Testament. The present example relates to the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25, pp. 1-13).

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out too meet him!’

“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out’.

“No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

“But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

“Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’

“But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you’.

“Therefore, keep watch because you do not know the day or the hour.

After reading this text, one Jewish Israeli participant wrote the following understanding of the parable.

“The wise virgins are people who plan their future actions. The foolish virgins are people who are impulsive and don’t plan any future actions. The oil lamps are a means through which finding a bridegroom can be planned. The final aim is marriage and night is the time of marriage. When the door closes, this means that a chance has been missed. When they cry out ‘Sir! Sir! Open the door’ - this is their sadness at having missed an opportunity. When the bridegroom says “I don’t know you”, he is contending with their failure to succeed”.

This Jewish Israeli reader was only presented with the parable and asked to interpret it. As can be seen, this interpretation is based on an understanding of the narrative as a form of fable. The basic structure of the design of meaning for the fable involves integrating the main action and the outcome of the fable narrative (Dorfman & Brewer, p. 108; Hanauer & Waksman, *Role of Explicit Moral Points*, p. 121). As argued by Dorfman & Brewer (p. 108) fables are understood within the context of a just world concept in which positive actions are rewarded and negative actions are punished. In this case the Jewish Israeli reader has added a series of inferences that describe the wise virgins as people who have the positive trait of planning ahead and describe the foolish virgins as people who do not have this trait but rather have the negative trait of impulsiveness. In accordance with the scheme of the fable, this reader sees the positive human trait of planning as being rewarded by marriage to the bridegroom. At the same time, the negative trait of being impulsive is seen as being punished with failure to marry the bridegroom and subsequent disappointment and sadness. This use of inference and theme integration is directly in line with the way fables are understood. For this Jewish Israeli reader this is a moral tale about the importance of planning if you want to achieve your goals.

In the Hanauer & Waksman study (*Cross-cultural Reading*) the Parable of the Ten Virgins was also read by Christian Israeli expert readers. One of the Christian Israeli participants wrote the following understanding of the parable:

“The Bridegroom is Jesus the Messiah and the virgins are his people (followers). The ones who kept oil in their jars had a close relationship with him while the others did not feel a need for this. The Messiah will come at a time when no one expects it (midnight) and only those that are close to him will be ready to enjoy his presence. Moral point: Hold on to the worthwhile things in life, a living relationship with the Creator”.

In this case, the reader of the parable is a active member of a Christian Church community and a participant in the Church’s weekly Bible study group directed by the local pastor. The reader is in other words, a cultural insider and somewhat of an expert in relation to this particular text. As can be seen in this understanding of the parable, a very different meaning making process was used than that of the culturally distant Jewish Israeli reader. The basic design of meaning used by this reader is one of allegorical reading. The narrative of the virgins and the bridegroom is reconstituted as the narrative of Jesus Christ and his followers and a parable that explains the desired relationship to God. In this allegorical retelling of the narrative, the meaning assigned to the concept of wise is the construction and preservation of a close relationship with God. This relationship has to be sustained all the time because one cannot know when God will return. For this Christian Israeli reader the moral point of this parable is that one must constantly be vigilant about one’s love of God and make sure that this relationship is constantly alive.

A comparison of the two readings of the Parable of the Ten Virgins presented here show a large disparity between the comprehension process of each reader. Both readers used culturally established designs of meaning. The Jewish Israeli reader used a fable design to construct meaning and reached an understanding of the parable, which emphasized the importance of planning. The Christian Israeli reader used an allegorical design to construct meaning and reached an understanding that one must be constantly vigilant about one’s love of God. The differences between these two individual readings are a result of the use of two different designs of meaning that led to the production of two different understandings of the text.

Within the context of using literature for the study of a foreign culture, the language teacher should aim at constructing a situation in which the language learner acquires an understanding of the way members of the target culture understand the text that is being read. The

focus-on-cultural understanding task involves presenting the original literary text and then creating a situation in which the language learner's understanding of the text is considered in the light of a cultural insiders' understanding(s) of the text. The aim is not to override and denigrate the language learners understanding but rather to show how it is different from that of members of the target cultural group. Through comparison, it may be possible to help the language learner to focus on the way members of the target cultural group construct meaning. This task aims at allowing the language learner to gain an understanding of the culturally specific meaning making processes.

ISSUES OF IMPLEMENTATION

As summarized in the previous section the focus-on-cultural understanding task creates a situation in which the language learner is presented with a culturally embedded literary text and interpretations of this text by members of the target cultural group. The language learner is required to produce her/his own meaning as well as addressing the meanings produced by cultural insiders. It is hoped that this educational situation will construct a learning environment that will allow the language learner to focus on culturally specific meaning construction processes and thus acquire a deeper understanding of the complexities of the culture being studied. In implementing the focus-on-cultural understanding task, the following issues of implementation should be taken into consideration:

(a) *Respecting the Language Learner's Understanding:* In a task of this kind in which expert insider interpretations are used side by side with the language learners interpretations, it is very important that the language teacher act respectfully to the way the students' construct meaning in relation to the text. The aim is not to make the language learner accept the target groups understanding of the text. The expert interpretation is not to be considered a norm that the language learner is supposed to memorize or copy. The aim of having expert insider interpretations in the language classroom is to allow discussion to develop over the differences in constructing meaning and understanding between the language learners and the target cultural group. The language learners' understandings are to be seen as an examples of cultural specific meaning construction tasks. These ways of understanding can then be compared to that of members of the cultural group.

(b) *Choosing Culturally Embedded Literary Texts*: the focus-on-cultural understanding task is best suited to those texts that evolved and are deeply embedded within the target culture. Texts of this kind have a long history of intertextual reference and culturally specific interpretation. The importance of these texts is that they allow the in-depth discussion of culturally specific meanings. The texts chosen for this task should be considered important within the target culture. Of special interest for this task might be texts that are considered controversial within the target culture. Presentation and discussion of the different ways a piece of literature is evaluated and understood by different cultural group or specific individuals is crucial for an understanding of the complexities of the target culture. It should be remembered that the aim of language teaching is to present the target culture with its complexities and not to present a sanitized, and idealized concept of the target culture.

(c) *Focus on Socially Embedded Multiple Meanings*: the focus-on-cultural understanding task aims at providing the language learner with the opportunity of observing and experiencing the meaning construction processes of members of the target cultural group. Accordingly, the language teacher needs to focus on those aspects of the task which involve culturally specific meaning construction. It is important that the language teacher bring into the classroom multiple viewpoints in relation to the literary work being discussed. This multiple viewpoints may differ in relation to the designs of meaning used, the specific understanding that is proposed and the ideological position that is taken. All of these aspects provide an interesting source of information for understanding the target culture in a more complex manner. Through the differences in cultural interpretation of the literary work, the complexities of the target culture can be discussed.

(d) *Constructing a Supportive Environment*: in order for the focus-on-cultural understanding task to be successful, the language teacher needs to make sure that the classroom environment is supportive and open. The socially embedded texts used for this task are to be presented as sites in which and through which meaning construction will be discussed. They are not testing sites with the language learner being evaluated in relation to how close their understandings are to those of the target group. The environment has to support the language learners understanding of the literary piece and to look at the culturally specific meanings as a options for discussing different ways of understanding that could appear within the target culture. The central aspect of the

task is the evaluation of the differences between processes of meaning construction by members of different cultural groups. This can only be achieved if the environment supports multiple interpretations and open questions relating to the difference between understandings of distant and close cultural groups.

FINAL REMARKS

The main aim of this paper was to present a new task that can be used for the teaching of a foreign culture through the reading of literature. The central aspect of this task is the presentation and discussion of multiple interpretations of the literary work by members of the target culture and comparison of these to the understandings of the language learner. This task is based on the understanding that cultures are complex entities that include multiple ways of constructing meaning by different ethnic, religious and ideological communities. As opposed to current practices within first language literary pedagogy, the current proposal sees great importance in using expert interpretations of literary texts in that these allow multiple viewpoints and understandings to emerge in the language classroom. This task can be used to help language learners to construct complex understandings of the target culture and to acquire an understanding of the designs of meaning that are present within the target culture. In this way, it is hoped that the language learner will gain a more sophisticated understanding of culture and avoid idealized presentations of the foreign culture.

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