Developing Intercultural Competence through the Study of National and World Literature

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Abstract: The growing trend toward globalization creates a unique challenge for educators in preparing their students to function within and respond appropriately to the increasing diversity of the world around them. This paper aims to establish a theoretical-methodological framework for intercultural educational policies and to focus on the potential of literature classes as an integral part of developing intercultural competency. The study builds upon the principles of the intercultural paradigm centered on alterity of M. Abdallah-Pretceille and the integrates established models proposed by P. Batelaan and A. Fantini. A unique context for examining identity and alterity is created through a combination of national literature and the study of world literature. While students learn about their own culture through the study of literature from their own country, they will also be introduced to different cultures through the study of literature from other countries. As students interact with various types of literature, they will develop a greater understanding of the cultural perspectives of others and move beyond simply appreciating the artistry of a literary text to recognising how literature can assist them in breaking down stereotypes and building empathy toward people from other cultures.

Keywords: education; intercultural competence; interactive methods, empathy; otherness

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1. Introduction

In the context of accelerated globalization, increased mobility, and geopolitical restructuring marked by European integration and the social dynamics of the Ukrainian space, cultural diversity has become an institutional reality. Education cannot remain neutral toward this diversity; rather, it must become a proactive factor of interaction and dialogue. In the conditions of contemporary global uncertainty and the unpredictability of life paths, pedagogy as a science is called upon to foster in students an understanding of moral values, a sense of empathy and compassion, respect for the opinions of others, and mutual understanding with representatives of different cultural and ethnic communities worldwide. The teacher, as the primary and experienced source of knowledge transmission, is responsible for introducing students to new educational trends, one of which involves studying interculturalism as a fundamental direction in developing learners' understanding of cultural diversity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Interculturality and Intercultural Education

The increasingly visible cultural diversity in contemporary societies has urged the emergence of the concept of interculturality as the response. In pedagogy, the mentioned approach involves interaction, dialogue, exchange, and mutual understanding. European scholars, including Martine Abdallah-Pretceille, Peter Batelaan, Stanisław Bernat, François Gauthey, and Dominique Xardel, have made significant contributions to the theoretical definition and pedagogical foundation of intercultural education. The analysis of the concepts formulated by these researchers highlights a complex vision centred on the individual, cultural pluralism, communication, and ethical responsibility.

Interculturality is, first and foremost, a fundamental dimension of human relationships rather than a set of competencies limited to pedagogical situations (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2023). In this sense, interculturality becomes an opportunity to encounter other cultures, a means of preventing stereotypes, and a process of decentering and reflexivity. In school, intercultural relationships should be perceived as a formative process in which the student gradually transforms through the recognition of otherness. Thus, intercultural education becomes a continuous construction in which students develop the ability to perceive and interpret cultural

differences. At the same time, intercultural education involves a process of cognitive decentering, that is, moving beyond one's own cultural automatisms in order to see the world through the eyes of others. Reflexivity therefore becomes an essential tool in the development of critical thinking. On the other hand, there exists a certain danger of rigid cultural classifications since intercultural education must promote individualization and avoid identifying students solely based on their cultural belonging (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2023). In this sense, intercultural education becomes a general framework that transforms relationships within the school, communication methods, teaching strategies, and the overall educational climate.

Intercultural education is, in fact, an institutional strategy through which educational systems can integrate the principles of interculturality. One of the most prominent contributors to the development of European manuals on intercultural educational policies is P. Batelaan, who emphasizes equal opportunities, considering that interculturality cannot exist without policies that combat discrimination and social exclusion. The researcher connects interculturality with civic values such as respect for human rights, social responsibility, and active participation in community life. The teaching of intercultural competence is possible through the adaptation of school curriculum, teacher training, the promotion of extracurricular activities, and community involvement. In this case, isolated lessons are insufficient for implementing intertextuality in the educational process. Thus, the school should become a driving force of inclusion, while intercultural education becomes a strategy aimed at preventing the marginalization of ethnic groups and promoting social cohesion (Batelaan, 2003).

Interculturality as an effective approach in the socialisation involves a certain level of interaction between majority and minority groups that is mostly initiated within a social context marked by migration and cultural pluralism. Intertextuality is a strategy of coexistence grounded in dialogue and symbolic negotiations between cultural groups. For the researcher, intercultural education is based on moral values such as tolerance, solidarity, and responsibility, with the ultimate goal of harmonizing interethnic relations (Bernat, 2006). In relation to traditions, historical conflicts and the process of social integration, intertextuality is examined with the emphasis that education cannot be separated from sociological realities.

Intercultural education consists of tolerance for ambiguity, the ability to adapt to new situations, the management of cultural conflicts, and the rejection of prejudices. Schools must prepare students for a world in which economic, social, and

technological relations are interconnected, as globalization requires individuals capable of managing cultural differences (Gauthey & Xardel, 1990).

Thus, interculturality is:

- a dynamic process, constructed through interaction;

- a complex competence that includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes;

- an ethical dimension based on dialogue and respect for otherness;

- a transversal educational objective that transforms curricula, school relationships, and pedagogical practices;

- a condition for democratic coexistence in a globalized world.

Thus, intercultural education creates an essential foundation for developing and shaping the personality of the modern student as an autonomous, reflective individual that is receptive to diversity and capable of active participation in an open, culturally diverse and democratic society.

2.2. Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is an essential representative of the fundamental dimensions of intercultural education as it reflects an individual's ability to effectively, respectfully, and responsibly with people interact from different cultural backgrounds. The approach mostly involves the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in a way that enables intercultural dialogue and cooperation.

Examining the term "intercultural," it can be stated that in most European countries, terms such as intercultural, cross-cultural, transcultural, multicultural, and ethnocultural are considered equivalent or closely related in meaning.

In specialized literature, intercultural competence is defined as a set of knowledge about cultural norms, traditions, and values, the ability to communicate and interpret the behaviour of others within a cultural context, as well as the sensitivity and empathy necessary to manage differences. Through the development of this competence, the student becomes able to:

- identify and respect cultural diversity;
- negotiate and resolve intercultural conflicts;
- actively participate in intercultural dialogues and collaborate in a multicultural environment;

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• develop one's own cultural identity in an open and flexible manner.

The essential part of intercultural competence includes the ability to understand cultural dilemmas and cultural values of different societies (Hampden-Turner, 2004). The mentioned knowledge allows for effective action in either a professional or social environment that transverse cultural boundaries. Developing cultural competence in contemporary pedagogy is achieved through active and experiential methods (e.g., group projects/cultural exchanges/case studies/activities that stimulate empathy and critical thinking).

Intercultural competence is considered a key component of global citizenship and 21st-century learning, being closely linked to education for tolerance, inclusion, and respect for diversity. Thus, the development of intercultural competence becomes a social necessity, contributing to the construction of a harmonious and integrated society.

The development of intercultural competence involves an individual's ability to understand and respect cultural diversity, as well as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contexts (Rakotomena, 2005). In addition to knowledge about other cultures, it includes positive attitudes, flexibility, and empathy, which enable students to adapt to the cultural norms and values of their interlocutors.

Another approach to intercultural development is based on a processual and strategic dimension. This approach highlights the included knowledge of cultural differences, recognition of communication barriers, and the application of effective strategies for preventing and resolving intercultural conflicts (Rey & Carette, 2012). The major emphasis lies on the importance of learning through experiences, simulations, role-plays, and real intercultural interaction situations.

The development of intercultural competence must focus on both the cognitive and affective aspects of the student. The evolution of intercultural competence involves understanding the perspectives of other cultures, compassion and tolerance, as well as the ability to critically evaluate one's own cultural norms and values (Fly Sainte-Marie, 1997; Feng, 2009). The emphasis is additionally on the reflexive dimension, through which an individual becomes aware of their own cultural prejudices and is capable of overcoming them in intercultural interactions.

Intercultural competence is defined as an integrated combination of knowledge, attitudes, and skills, essential for effective and constructive communication with representatives of other cultures. Byram (1997) identifies four fundamental dimensions:

- cultural knowledge,
- intercultural attitudes (curiosity, openness, tolerance),
- skills of interpretation and intercultural interaction,
- critical-reflective awareness of one's own culture and the cultures of others.

The development of intercultural competence cannot be viewed outside its educational and formative dimension. To foster the capacity for intercultural adaptation and collaboration, it is important to emphasize the role of continuous learning and direct experience (Fantini, 2007). Fantini, in particular, distinguishes between implicit intercultural competence (acquired through direct experience) and explicit intercultural competence (acquired through formal and methodical instruction).

Promoting dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation in international and multicultural settings requires intercultural competency that is linked to the ethical and civic dimensions. The characteristics of an interculturally competent person are following: this person is able to manage conflicts, negotiate cultural meanings and promote understanding between different communities (Aubret, 2003).

Table 2. The main dimensions of intercultural competence:

Author(s)	Dimensions / Main Elements	Key Observations and Characteristics
M. Rakotomena	Cultural knowledge; Positive attitudes; Flexibility; Empathy	Emphasis on understanding and respecting cultural diversity; adapting one's behavior according to the interlocutor's culture
B. Rey, V. Carette	Processual; Strategic; Knowledge of cultural differences; Conflict prevention	Importance of strategies for effective communication and preventing misunderstandings; experimental and practical methods
A. Fly Sainte-Marie, F. Trompenaars	Cognitive; Affective; Reflexive	Understanding the perspectives of other cultures; tolerance; overcoming cultural prejudices; critical awareness of one's own culture
A. Feng, M. Byram, M. Fleming	Intercultural attitudes; Interpretation skills; Critical-reflexive awareness	Clear structure across four dimensions; focus on knowledge, empathy, and reflective thinking
A. E. Fantini	Educational; Direct experience; Implicit and explicit competence	Development through experience and training; distinction between competence acquired through practice and that through formal instruction
J. Aubret, P. Gilbert	Ethical; Civic; Conflict management; Negotiation of cultural meanings	Emphasis on dialogue, mutual respect, and intercultural cooperation; competence as a tool for social integration and multiculturalism

In Table 1, the main elements of intercultural development are highlighted, converging on the idea that for modern education, intercultural competence primarily involves a complex set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, enabling the student to interact effectively, responsibly, and empathetically in a multicultural environment. This includes cognitive, affective, procedural, reflective, and ethical dimensions, all of which are essential for shaping a personality capable of functioning successfully in contemporary social contexts.

3. The Role of Literature in Intercultural Education

The concept of teaching development emphasizes the need for a qualitative renewal of educational content and the assurance of a continuous process for the formation and development of a harmonious and creative student personality. The core of intercultural education targets precisely the students' ability to change their attitudes, behaviour, and knowledge through interaction with characters from other cultures. At the same time, approaching literary texts from an intercultural perspective aims to foster openness, flexibility, and a positive attitude toward the "foreigner", the willingness to question one's own prejudices when encountering other cultural codes, and the building of a deeper connection both with one's own identity and with the universality of human experience.

The intercultural approach transforms literature into an interdisciplinary bridge. The teacher is no longer merely a transmitter of information but a facilitator who uses literature to shape adaptable citizens. The key lies in the perspective adopted, which requires a strategic re-reading. Thus, the literature class ceases to be merely an exercise in grammatical or aesthetic analysis and becomes a true laboratory of cultural intelligence. We no longer read just to "check off" a bibliography, but to train empathy and flexibility in the face of the unknown.

In this sense, rather than adding new material, we explore existing texts through a fresh lens focused on the identity/otherness binomial. This method seeks to refine critical thinking, that is, to identify how the "other" is portrayed in the text; synthesize values by discovering the common points that unite seemingly divergent cultures; and open up the work itself, leveraging the text as a living structure capable of responding to the challenges of contemporary society.

A significant example in achieving the objectives of intercultural education is Mircea Eliade's novel *Maitreyi* (*Bengal nights* in English translation). This novel represents one of the most important literary works of Romanian interwar prose, highlighting

the encounter between two civilizations: the European, rationalist, and the deeply spiritual Indian. The author's autobiographical experience during his stay in India becomes both literary material and an opportunity for intercultural analysis. At the centre of the novel is an impossible love story, set against a backdrop that presents an aspect of the complex Eastern culture, which shapes the characters, their values, and the narrative conflict.

The study of this novel in school represents an authentic example of intercultural education through which students become acquainted with and understand the main elements of Indian culture by exploring the social, spiritual, aesthetic, and symbolic components that shape the universe of the novel.

The novel beginning presents India as a form of distinct otherness. Allan, a representative of the European order and Western straightforwardness, perceives the Indian culture as a somewhat mysterious and unpredictable place. The novel portrays India in times of a rapid historical and political change. For Allan, the narrator-protagonist, Indian culture represents an unknown and fascinating horizon, yet one that is also difficult to understand. This subjective perspective establishes the tone of the encounter between two worlds.

In the novel, we witness a display in which tradition and modernity converge within Indian society. Eliade captures a point in the history of India, when, under the influence of British colonization, it attempts to combine ancient traditions with Western modernization. In this case, Narendra Sen's family is a representation of dual belonging of the society: westernized because of their education and social status, yet true to their background being deeply rooted in Hindu religious and cultural traditions. This duality highlights the situation in colonial India, oscillating between adopting Western trends or preserving traditions.

Mircea Eliade points out the existing contrast between European and Indian cultures, while the process of westernization has become visible among certain social groups in Calcutta, particularly among the "Eurasians". The new stratum of society, situated within European and Indian identity space, yet not belonging fully to neither of them, often attempts to adopt Western customs in hopes of gaining the prestige associated with modernity and colonial culture.

On the other hand, the novel presents the family of Narendra Sen, who studied in Edinburgh and is inflexible when it comes to preserving Bengali traditions and cultural norms. Although educated in a Western academic environment and fully

familiar with the values of European modernity, Narendra Sen does not deny his origins; on the contrary, he reaffirms them with an almost ritualistic rigor.

In the novel, the Indian family operates on the basis of traditional principles: respect for authority, generational hierarchy, and clearly defined social roles. Eliade constructs the Sen family home as a microcosm of Bengali culture. Narendra Sen's house displays a cultural space of strict norms regulating the behaviour of young girls, visits, communication, and etiquette. Allan observes the family discipline with astonishment: "In this house, every step was heard, every gesture was observed". The domestic space plays a ceremonial role: there are rules governing the movement of young women, the separation of areas within the house, and the ritualization of everyday activities. Thus, the home becomes a space of moral supervision and social control.

Cultural differences are evident in the text through exotic descriptions and ethnographic details, through which Eliade introduces the reader to a world of fragrances, fabrics, sounds, and rituals. The Sen family house, the gardens, the streets of Calcutta, and the atmosphere of the suburbs create an exotic universe that gradually captivates the narrator's perception.

Even the meaning of love in Indian culture is associated with a spiritual destiny and cosmic continuity. Maitreyi perceives her relationship with Allan in terms of "karma" and bonds from previous lives, which gives love a sacred dimension. This perspective contradicts Allan's rationalism, displaying the cultural differences that characters have to face in their relationship. For the rational mind of the European, accustomed to a completely different social behaviour, the refined and deep sensuality and the complexity of the Asian spiritual world remain imperceptible.

Studying the novel *Maitreyi* by Mircea Eliade provides a complex framework for incorporating in the education the development of students' literary, intercultural and hermeneutic competences. The work with the novel combines autobiographical confession, identity analysis, Eastern philosophy, and anthropological observation. The novel presents a multifaceted record of cultural contact, thus it enables the usage of a variety of didactic and interactive teaching strategies to facilitate a profound understanding of the Indian culture.

The integration of the CAT method learning, which aims to develop students' intercultural competence and understanding during class activities are best to be combined with Problem-Based learning to stimulate critical thinking, empathy and the ability to argue. Within the class discussions of the question whether the love between Maitreyi and Allan was a form of transcendence or an inevitable cultural

conflict, students develop the sense of tolerance and compromise. Further interactive methods include creating glossaries of Indian terms (dharma, karma) or writing reflective essays for developing autonomy, analytical thinking and understanding of the characters' motivation that is shaped in their cultural code. The analysis of Narendra Sen's family as a model of hybridization of the cultural and modern identities is efficient through case study method that allows high school student to develop the comprehension of internal conflict of the family since the father has received his education in the West and is preparing his daughter to become a philosopher, which is a violation of the traditional role of a female in society, while, on the other hand, Narendra Sen strictly preserves traditional Bengali norms in his household.

The discussion of the novel *Maitreyi* in class offers a well-structured framework for studying cultural differences, which surround key areas mentioned that are the traditional family and hierarchy, the status of women in society and household, spirituality within Hindu culture that is maintained through karma and rituals, and the complex symbolism of art and etiquette. With the inclusion of reflective journal writing and portfolio method, students are taught to develop a cultural empathy and attention to meanings of the touch, clothing and the spatial organisation within the Bengali household. Understanding these details, from architecture to gastronomy, helps students realize that cultural identity influences every aspect of the characters' lives.

The role of the novel in the educational settings supports the process of developing intercultural competence through a direct confrontation of the cultural mentalities of the rational West represented by Allan and the spiritual East shown by Maitreyi. The idea of love not being possible because of the cultural barrier, fear of separation, personal incompatibility and the confirmation of the otherness show completely different introspection and understanding of the narrative.

4. Conclusion

In the context of educational reforms, intercultural education is becoming a tool for European integration and personal development, preparing students to act effectively in a multicultural and globalized society. Intercultural competence refers to effective and responsible behaviour in relationships between representatives of different cultures and is closely linked to the concept of intercultural dialogue, the success of which depends on the level of competence of the parties involved.

Intercultural competence is sometimes equated with intercultural communicative competence. However, intercultural competence is a broader concept, as intercultural communicative competence mainly refers to personal qualities such as the ability to connect and listen attentively, a positive attitude toward communication with representatives of other cultures, the demonstration of flexibility in relationships, and the willingness to learn about the characteristics of other cultures. By contrast, the development of intercultural competence involves understanding the perspectives of other cultures, as well as compassion and tolerance. The evolution of intercultural competence transforms the student, providing the necessary tools to navigate a complex social environment, reducing the risk of conflict and social isolation. By simultaneously cultivating cognitive understanding, affective empathy, and tolerance, the school succeeds in forming informed citizens capable of valuing diversity as one of the greatest assets of the contemporary world.

Mircea Eliade's novel *Maitreyi* presents complementary aspects of the encounter between cultures. The novel is a classic study of cultural shock and failed initiation. It shows students how difficult it is to truly understand the Other. Even through love, penetrating the mystery of another culture, which is represented by the spiritual Orient, from the perspective of a European, the rational Occident, remains incomplete and often destined to fail. The novel illustrates the way exoticism leads us to pursue an idealized or subjective vision of the "Other", prompting students to reflect on how we describe foreign cultures. The study of the novel implies that the role of literature lies in reflecting on cultural distance in order to unite people of different ethnic backgrounds.

The study of the novel in school should go beyond traditional literary analysis. By using active teaching strategies such as debates, case studies, and role-playing, the novel is transformed from a work of fiction into a powerful educational tool for social awareness and the development of civic competencies. These methods provide students not only with knowledge about the text but also with the ability to critically reflect on the diversity of ideas and approaches to overcoming cultural barriers.

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