INTERCULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF LITERARY TEXTS IN GERMAN LANGUAGE TEACHING: POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CULTURAL AND REGIONAL STUDIES COMPETENCE

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Abstract: This paper examines the didactic potential of literary texts in German language teaching, focusing on their role in developing students' intercultural and cultural and regional studies competence. Literary works are considered not merely as materials for vocabulary and grammar practice but as cultural sources reflecting historical memory, everyday life, values, social relationships, traditions, and symbols of German-speaking communities. Drawing on the theoretical approaches of Michael Byram and Claire Kramsch, as well as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the paper discusses how literary interpretation can support cultural awareness, critical reflection, and intercultural communication. It proposes a coherent sequence of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities, together with criteria for selecting texts and assessing learning outcomes. Particular attention is given to the needs of students of international relations, for whom the ability to interpret cultural contexts and communicate across cultural boundaries is professionally significant.

Keywords: German language teaching, literary texts, intercultural competence, cultural and regional studies competence, cultural interpretation, foreign language education, CEFR

The objectives of foreign language education in higher education have gradually expanded beyond the acquisition of grammatical structures, vocabulary, pronunciation, and basic communicative skills. In contemporary academic and professional environments, learners are expected to interpret meaning in context, understand the cultural assumptions underlying communication, recognise different perspectives, and interact appropriately with people whose social and cultural experiences may differ from their own. These expectations are especially relevant to students of international relations, whose future professional activities may involve diplomatic communication, international cooperation, negotiations, cultural exchange, and the analysis of social and political processes. For such learners, proficiency in German is not limited to the ability to construct grammatically correct sentences. It also involves understanding how language functions within particular historical, social, and cultural environments.

The relationship between language and culture is therefore central to the teaching of German as a foreign language. Language expresses and transmits cultural meanings, while cultural knowledge influences how speakers interpret words, gestures, forms of politeness, humour, disagreement, and social behaviour. A learner may understand the literal meaning of an utterance and still misunderstand its communicative intention if the relevant social conventions or cultural references remain unfamiliar. Consequently, language teaching should provide opportunities to explore the contexts in which communication takes place and to develop the ability to interpret meanings that are not always stated explicitly. Literary texts can make a substantial contribution to this process. They represent individual and collective experiences through characters, events, dialogue, settings, and narrative perspectives. In literary works, students encounter descriptions of family relationships, education, professional life, urban and rural environments, social expectations, historical events, traditions, and

everyday practices. These representations offer material for examining how people understand themselves and others within particular cultural settings. Literature can thus connect language learning with cultural interpretation and encourage learners to move from the recognition of linguistic forms to the analysis of the meanings conveyed through them.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the potential of literary texts as a means of developing students' intercultural and cultural and regional studies competence in German language classes. The paper focuses on the pedagogical value of literary interpretation, the selection of appropriate texts, the organisation of classroom activities, and the assessment of learning outcomes. Its central argument is that literary texts become especially valuable when they are integrated into a structured teaching process in which linguistic comprehension is combined with contextual analysis, comparison, discussion, and critical reflection. The theoretical foundation for this approach is provided, first of all, by Michael Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence. Byram argues that successful intercultural communication involves more than linguistic knowledge. It also requires attitudes of curiosity and openness, knowledge of social groups and their practices, skills of interpreting and relating cultural phenomena, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. These dimensions are closely connected: learners need to understand cultural information, interpret it in context, compare it with their own experience, and reflect critically on the values and assumptions involved.[1]

The model is relevant to literary text interpretation because literary works present cultural situations through concrete human experiences. Students can examine how characters communicate, how they respond to social expectations, what values influence their decisions, and how relationships are shaped by historical or social circumstances. Rather than treating cultural information as a list of facts to memorise, learners are encouraged to interpret the perspectives represented in the text. This process can help them understand that cultural practices are meaningful within particular contexts and that individual behaviour should not automatically be regarded as representative of an entire society.

Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey emphasise that the intercultural dimension should be integrated into ordinary language teaching rather than treated as an isolated subject. They recommend learning activities that enable students to compare cultural perspectives, examine their own assumptions, and develop the ability to engage constructively with difference.[2] Literary texts are well suited to this purpose because they provide a shared object of analysis and allow learners to support their interpretations with textual evidence. A discussion of a character's actions, for example, can lead students to consider the influence of age, social position, family expectations, historical circumstances, or personal choice.

Claire Kramsch's work further clarifies the relationship between language, culture, and context. Her approach draws attention to the fact that linguistic forms acquire meaning within social and cultural situations.[3] Expressions of politeness, forms of address, humour, silence, disagreement, and emotional response cannot always be interpreted through their literal meanings alone. They are influenced by the relationships between speakers and by the conventions and expectations that operate in a particular communicative environment. Literary dialogue offers a useful opportunity to examine these features because it places language within a represented social situation.

The pedagogical use of literature has also been discussed by Gillian Lazar, who views literary texts as resources for language development, interpretation, discussion, and personal response.[4] Collie and Slater similarly emphasise the contribution of literature to language learning and cultural exploration.[5] These approaches support the view that literary materials can combine several educational purposes: they expose learners to language in context, stimulate discussion, encourage

independent interpretation, and provide access to cultural perspectives. Nevertheless, the selection and use of literary works must be adapted to students' proficiency levels and learning objectives.

An additional framework is provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The CEFR describes language learning in terms of communicative activities and competences and recognises the importance of sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions of communication.[6] The Companion Volume gives further attention to mediation and plurilingual and pluricultural competence. It highlights the learner's capacity to draw on different linguistic and cultural resources, facilitate understanding, and respond appropriately in situations involving cultural diversity.[7] These principles are relevant to literary interpretation because students are required to mediate between the world represented in a text and their own knowledge and experience. The use of the CEFR framework also encourages teachers to connect classroom activities with observable learning outcomes. Students should not simply be asked whether they liked a story or whether they understood its general meaning. They can be guided to identify cultural references, explain the significance of particular details, compare perspectives, clarify possible misunderstandings, and present an interpretation supported by evidence. Such activities make the development of intercultural competence more explicit and provide a basis for meaningful assessment.

The cultural and regional studies potential of literary texts can be examined through several related dimensions. The historical dimension concerns the period in which a work was written or in which its events take place. References to historical events, social transformations, political circumstances, and changes in everyday life can help students connect literary content with broader developments in German-speaking societies. Teachers may invite learners to identify historical details in the text and consider how these details influence the characters' experiences, opportunities, and relationships. Where necessary, short contextual explanations or supplementary materials can be provided so that learners do not confuse the fictional representation with a complete historical account. The social dimension focuses on relationships between individuals and groups. Literary works may portray family structures, generational differences, educational settings, professional relationships, social expectations, and forms of cooperation or conflict. Students can analyse how social roles influence communication and how characters respond to authority, responsibility, friendship, or disagreement. This type of analysis is particularly useful for learners who need to understand how communication changes according to the relationship between participants and the social situation in which interaction occurs.

The everyday-life dimension introduces learners to ordinary practices and routines. Descriptions of meals, housing, leisure, celebrations, travel, work, and family activities can help students recognise the cultural meanings attached to familiar situations. These details can also become a starting point for comparison. Students may consider which practices are similar in their own environment, which are different, and what explanations might account for these differences. The aim is not to rank cultures or to establish rigid distinctions, but to develop an informed understanding of variation and context. The value dimension concerns beliefs and attitudes represented in a literary work. Students may explore how characters understand family, education, work, personal responsibility, freedom, solidarity, or social participation. However, teachers should make a clear distinction between the values of an individual character, the author's perspective, and broader social attitudes. A literary text is an artistic representation, not a statistical survey or a universal description of a national community. This distinction is essential if literature is to promote critical cultural awareness rather than reinforce stereotypes. The symbolic dimension includes places, objects, traditions, images, and references that carry cultural significance. A particular location may evoke historical memory; an object may represent family continuity; a celebration may express collective

identity; and a recurring image may communicate social or emotional meanings. Students can be encouraged to identify such elements, examine their function in the narrative, and consult reliable contextual sources when additional information is required. In this way, literary interpretation becomes an inquiry into how cultural meanings are created and communicated.

These dimensions should not be taught as separate lists of facts. They are interconnected within the literary text and become meaningful through interpretation. A family conversation, for instance, may simultaneously reveal generational relationships, forms of politeness, everyday routines, and differing values. The teacher's task is to guide students towards these connections while ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in the text and, where appropriate, supported by contextual information.

For classroom practice, work with a literary text can be organised into three interrelated stages: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. This sequence provides a clear structure while allowing teachers to adapt activities to the linguistic level, age, interests, and academic specialisation of the learners. The stages should not be understood as a rigid formula; rather, they represent a progression from preparation and comprehension to interpretation and independent reflection. At the pre-reading stage, the teacher prepares students for the linguistic and cultural content of the text. Learners may be introduced to the author, the historical period, the geographical setting, or the social situation represented in the work. The title, illustrations, or a short extract can be used to activate prior knowledge and encourage predictions. Students may discuss what they already know about the topic and identify questions they would like the text to answer. For example, before reading a passage about family traditions in a German-speaking community, students can discuss the role of family celebrations in their own cultural environment and formulate questions about similarities and differences they might encounter.

The pre-reading stage should also address linguistic accessibility. Teachers may introduce essential vocabulary, explain a small number of culturally specific expressions, and clarify references that are necessary for understanding the text. It is not advisable to explain every unfamiliar word in advance, since learners should also develop strategies for inferring meaning from context. The amount of preparation should be proportionate to the difficulty of the material: too little support may prevent comprehension, whereas excessive explanation may remove the need for independent reading and interpretation.

During the while-reading stage, students first establish the general meaning of the text and then examine selected details. They identify the main characters, events, setting, and central conflict, after which they focus on linguistic and cultural features. The teacher may ask learners to underline forms of address, expressions of politeness, references to traditions, descriptions of social roles, or details connected with historical and regional realities. Students can also distinguish between information stated directly and meanings that must be inferred from the context. This distinction helps them develop careful reading habits and avoid unsupported conclusions. Questions at this stage should progress from comprehension to interpretation. Students may be asked who is speaking, what happens, and where the action takes place before considering why a character behaves in a particular way or what a specific expression reveals about the relationship between speakers. They can identify evidence in the text that supports their interpretation and consider whether alternative explanations are possible. Such questions develop reading comprehension while introducing the analytical procedures required for intercultural understanding.

The post-reading stage transforms comprehension into communication, comparison, and reflection. Students can discuss the values represented in the text, compare cultural practices, prepare a short presentation, write a reflective response, or participate in a role-play based on a situation from

the literary work. They may also rewrite a dialogue from another character's perspective or suggest how a conflict could be resolved in a different social context. These activities encourage learners to use German actively while considering how cultural assumptions influence interpretation and interaction.

Comparative activities require particular care. Students should be encouraged to identify both similarities and differences without describing one culture as inherently better, more modern, or more developed than another. A useful comparative task asks learners to explain the context of a practice, identify the evidence available in the text, and acknowledge that practices vary within societies. This approach supports a more nuanced understanding of culture and reduces the risk of replacing one stereotype with another.

The educational effectiveness of this methodology depends substantially on the selection of literary materials. The first criterion is linguistic accessibility. The vocabulary, grammatical structures, sentence length, and narrative complexity should correspond to the learners' proficiency level. At elementary levels, teachers may use adapted short stories, brief narrative passages, or carefully selected extracts. Intermediate and advanced learners can work with more complex texts, including those that contain implicit meanings, historical references, and stylistic features. Adaptation should preserve the cultural and interpretative value of the material as far as possible.

The second criterion is cultural relevance. A text should offer meaningful opportunities to explore social practices, historical experiences, regional contexts, cultural symbols, or interpersonal relationships. Cultural relevance does not mean that every text must explicitly describe national traditions. A literary work about an ordinary conversation, a family disagreement, or a personal decision may provide rich material for examining social expectations and communicative conventions.

The third criterion is educational and interpretative value. Texts should stimulate questions and allow learners to develop more than one plausible interpretation. Works that contain recognisable social situations, contrasting perspectives, or meaningful dilemmas can encourage discussion and critical reflection. The fourth criterion is relevance to students' interests and academic needs. For students of international relations, literary passages dealing with identity, migration, historical memory, social change, intercultural encounters, and communication across social boundaries may be particularly productive.

The fifth criterion concerns cultural diversity and representativeness. German-speaking societies should not be presented as homogeneous communities with a single set of values or practices. Teachers should, where appropriate, include texts reflecting differences between regions, generations, social groups, and individual experiences. They should also explain that a literary character's behaviour cannot be generalised to all members of a national or linguistic community. This principle is important for maintaining academic accuracy and for developing students' ability to question broad cultural assumptions.

Assessment should reflect the integrated nature of the learning objectives. Tests of vocabulary and grammar remain useful, but they cannot by themselves demonstrate whether students have developed the ability to interpret cultural meanings. Assessment should therefore include several indicators: comprehension of the text, recognition and explanation of cultural references, comparison of perspectives, critical awareness of stereotypes, argumentation supported by textual evidence, and respectful participation in intercultural discussion. These indicators can be assessed through written interpretations, oral presentations, group discussions, comparative tables, reflective journals, and project work. A student's response should be evaluated not according to whether it reproduces a predetermined judgement about a culture, but according to the quality of reasoning, the relevance of

textual evidence, the recognition of context, and the ability to consider alternative perspectives. A simple assessment rubric can distinguish between basic identification of cultural details, contextual explanation, comparative interpretation, and critical reflection.

For students of international relations, literary text analysis can also be connected with broader professional competencies. The ability to identify implicit meanings, interpret different perspectives, recognise the influence of social context, and formulate balanced arguments is relevant to intercultural communication. Literary works cannot replace specialised materials on diplomacy, history, or international affairs; nevertheless, they can complement such materials by providing insight into individual experience and the human dimensions of social and cultural processes.

A practical lesson may focus on social relationships and communication in a German-speaking environment. Before reading, students discuss how people address teachers, colleagues, friends, and older relatives in their own communities. While reading, they identify forms of address, expressions of politeness, disagreement, and emotional response. After reading, they compare the interaction represented in the text with familiar communication practices and discuss whether the characters' behaviour can be explained by their social roles, personal characteristics, or the particular situation. The final task may require students to write a short interpretation supported by examples from the text. This sequence integrates language practice, cultural analysis, and reasoned communication.

The teacher's role in this process is that of a facilitator of interpretation. The teacher selects suitable materials, provides necessary linguistic and contextual support, formulates questions, and creates an environment in which students can express different interpretations respectfully. At the same time, the teacher should insist on evidence-based discussion: claims about the text must be supported by textual details, while claims about historical or cultural contexts should be checked against reliable sources. This distinction helps learners understand the difference between literary interpretation and factual cultural information.

Literary texts have significant potential in German language teaching because they connect the development of linguistic competence with the interpretation of cultural and social realities. Through literary works, students encounter representations of historical experience, everyday practices, social relationships, values, and cultural symbols. When these materials are used systematically, they can support not only reading comprehension and vocabulary development but also cultural awareness, critical reflection, and the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries. The theoretical approaches of Byram and Kramsch, together with the principles of the CEFR and its Companion Volume, provide a basis for understanding literary interpretation as an important component of intercultural language education. The methodological sequence discussed in this paper—pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading—allows teachers to guide learners from the activation of prior knowledge and textual comprehension to contextual interpretation, comparison, and independent reflection. The effectiveness of this process depends on the careful selection of texts, the alignment of tasks with students' language proficiency and academic needs, and the use of assessment criteria that value evidence-based interpretation.

The integration of literary texts is particularly relevant for students of international relations, as it creates opportunities to examine cultural perspectives and develop communication skills that may be useful in future professional contexts. At the same time, literary representations should not be treated as universal descriptions of German-speaking societies. Students need to recognise cultural diversity, distinguish individual perspectives from generalisations, and support their conclusions with textual and contextual evidence. In this way, literary texts can become an effective resource for developing intercultural and cultural and regional studies competence in German language classes.

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