
***The Tiger's Wife* – Promoting Intercultural Understanding**

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Abstract

This paper presents a small case study that recorded developing intercultural understanding amongst advanced EFL students in a high school in Serbia as a result of studying *The Tiger's Wife* by Tea Obreht. The novel deals with the recent Balkan war and captures the mindset of people who live in the Balkans. The novel was studied over three months with a group of eight 17- to 18-year-old students of different nationalities. It provided a starting point for students in the class to come together and re-examine their views and feelings. Because the group was small, the main instructional format was classroom discussion with open-ended prompts. Host country students had stronger views on the war in their region and reacted with more intense emotion compared to their foreign peers. The host country students benefited from sharing their views, and the foreign students were motivated to explore the story through the eyes of their peers. Thus, this work of literature allowed for social constructivist negotiation. This reinforces the premise that learning takes place because of interaction in a group and highlights the potential for literature to act as a bridge for intercultural understanding.

Keywords: literature in language teaching, intercultural understanding, interaction in a group, *The Tiger's Wife*, young adults.

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Literature in English Language Teaching

Developing an appreciation of other cultures and differences is a must in contemporary education. Students need opportunities to examine their perceptions, interpretations and responses to other cultures. Literature can be used to introduce different worlds or to raise questions, and in the process teachers inevitably have to deal with sensitive topics.

There are many benefits of using literature in foreign language teaching. Duff and Maley (1990) provide the three main reasons for its integration. First, literary texts are most often used for linguistic purposes as they expose students to a variety of authentic language and contexts. Students interact with the text, interpret events and discuss opinions with others. Second, they also develop their reading process, extending vocabulary and developing various strategies to anticipate word meaning from the context, or to reconstruct the meaning of the text by applying their own background knowledge (Cook, 1994). In this way, literature provides a necessary springboard for developing communicative competence. Third, literature has a motivational aspect when students read for pleasure. If students find enjoyment in reading, literature becomes a starting point for exploring different perspectives and leads to discussions in order to find others' interpretations, which may lead to developing communicative competence. In this way, a student learns about different worlds, 'achieving a fuller understanding of the foreign culture (the "Other")', but equally important is the fact that he or she gets to know himself/herself better in the process' (Hoff, 2012, p. 32).

Social constructivism is a theory of learning that emphasizes the importance of the social context for cognitive development and stresses that students learn by constructing their own knowledge (Fosnot, 1996). Social interaction impacts learning (Vygotsky, 1986) and it is to be expected that readers, who understand texts differently, will develop language skills further as they exchange their views. Stimulating literary texts allow students to discuss their opinions and to compare their experiences to those of the characters. As students gain new understandings and share them with others, they develop both language and thinking skills. Introducing literature can therefore be considered successful when chosen texts allow for social constructivist negotiation and when instructional activities encourage students to interact with the teacher and with each other. When this is the case, the process will certainly generate an abundance of language learning opportunities.

Although there are advantages in using literature in a foreign language classroom, there are also a number of challenges that teachers may encounter. Paran (2012, p. 480) warns that foreign language teachers are rarely trained to teach literature in their language classes. There is a danger that – unless the texts are graded readers, specifically tailored for a certain language level – students may spend an inordinate amount of time trying to understand the text, and possibly never reach a stage when they read for pleasure. This can be overcome, and literature can be used as a tool for promoting discussion, only if the texts are selected with care. Maley points out that selecting an appropriate text is a crucial factor, ‘texts which tend to be chosen are those that are not too long, not too complex linguistically, not too far removed from the world of the students’ (Maley, 2001, p. 184). This is in line with Collie and Slater’s suggestions (1994, p. 6) that when selecting texts, it has to be considered whether the literary text can stimulate ‘personal involvement [...] by arousing the learners’ interest and providing strong, positive reactions from them.’ Therefore, when choosing the text, the teacher needs to take into account not only the linguistic proficiency of the students, but also their maturity level and interests.

Reader Response Theory

Reader response theory stresses the importance of union between the reader and the text in which the reader becomes ‘a necessary third party in the author-text-reader relationship’ Roberts (2006, p. 311). When the dialogue between the reader and the text is established, students respond to a text spontaneously and the reading becomes less of a reading comprehension activity. Reading becomes an aesthetic experience, and students have opportunities to ‘reenact nuances, tones, and states of consciousness produced by lived-through images, ideas and events’ (Rosenblatt, 1991, p. 123). Since there is no right or wrong answer, students feel that their answers are important. As readers interact with the text, they find personal connections and the text becomes meaningful on a different level, as ‘a work may mean to a reader what it did not mean to its author’ (Probst, 1994, p. 38). Thus, establishing a connection between the reader and the text is a powerful aspect of literature.

Each reader creates meaning depending on their knowledge, experiences and background. Lazar points out that factors that influence one’s interpretation of the text range ‘from the individual psychology of readers to the social and political milieu in which

they live' (1993, p.11). Having in mind that each reader interprets a text differently, reading has a very personal component and sharing different interpretations leads to new understandings, which is an essential component of reader response theory.

Literature for Promoting Intercultural Understanding

Intercultural understanding is an inseparable component of contemporary education. Allen points out that 'one of the most important roles of an international school is to encourage its privileged students to develop an appreciation of, a respect for, and empathy towards their world' (2000, p. 138), a view that is relevant to any 21st century learning. The first step in intercultural understanding is putting students in the position to experience different cultures. This is aligned with Scholnik, Kol and Abarbanel, who state that 'Without the knowledge and the experience of a culture, that culture could not be understood' (Scholnik, Kol, Abarbanel 2006, p. 13). The next step is empathy towards others' cultures and refraining 'from imposing our categories and values on others but instead learn to reconstruct their frame of reference and see them as they see themselves' (Bredella, 2003, p. 228). Exposure to an intercultural experience and refraining from judgment would hopefully lead to building authentic connections between different worlds.

Understanding different cultures does not happen by chance, and teachers need to systematically look for ways to encourage the process. In foreign language classes, literature has great potential to act as a bridge for intercultural understanding. Carter and Long state that 'literature enables students to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space' (1991, p. 2). One of the ways to ensure students are exposed to cultural breadth is by introducing appropriate literary texts that provide complex cultural input and that challenge students to think about different 'realities'. This is in agreement with Sylvester's claim that when reading a piece of literature, students are given an opportunity 'to step out of a culture-bound process of thinking, learning and viewing the world' (1998, p. 186), thereby gaining intercultural experiences.

Literature could provoke a number of sensitive topics that may be very relevant for students but present dangerous territory for teachers. Gray (2002) discusses the practice adopted by many publishers, namely, including only 'safe' topics in a textbook. He emphasizes that 'ELT practices are neither value free, nor always culturally appropriate'

(2002, p. 151). Avoiding issues that are meaningful for students can make content dull, consisting of 'safe topics that recur again and again' (2002, p. 159). It is important to allow genuine exploration of sensitive topics, but that must be accompanied with emphasis on empathy and mutual respect. Bredella points out that 'being intercultural means to be able to accept the others' beliefs and values, even if we cannot approve of them. Therefore tolerance plays an important role in the intercultural experience' (2003, p. 594). A foreign language classroom becomes an arena in which very different opinions are exchanged and sensitive topics become a 'special kind of test' for intercultural understanding. The willingness to understand others manifests itself in readiness to start a dialogue about controversial issues and to be challenged by different views.

The Tiger's Wife

The Tiger's Wife by Tea Obreht is classified as young adult novel. The plot deals with the conflicts of war but does not take sides. The story is set in unspecified countries that have been badly affected by a war. The names of these countries are not mentioned and their setting is not revealed. However, places and characters have Slavic-sounding names, and a reader will likely infer that the story is set in the Balkans.

The story is told by Natalia, a future doctor who is currently involved in relief work. She travels to deliver medicine and help orphans in a neighboring country. While working with orphans, Natalia receives the news that her grandfather has died. He was suffering from cancer and died trying to get in touch with a 'deathless man' whom he had met several times in the past. The 'deathless man' is a significant character from Balkan folklore who is banished to a life without death. Natalia travels to the place where her grandfather died and tries to recover his belongings. This is a very emotional trip for Natalia, and while she comes to terms with the loss, she remembers the time they spent together and the stories he told her.

The grandfather's stories are a crucial element for plot development. The life of Natalia's grandfather spans over several wars, and the stories reveal how the events from one war are related to what happens in those that follow. The reader finds out about a deathless man who is deathless by punishment because he tried to change the fate of the girl he loved. There is also a tiger that escaped from a zoo and tried to survive in the harsh Balkan winter. He is only helped by a deaf-mute girl who suffers abuse by her husband, the

violent butcher Luka. Natalia also remembers her grandfather's stories about his hometown in the mountains and his friendship with the butcher's wife.

Readers familiar with the Balkan mindset will also understand the customs and traditions present in the novel that may otherwise seem shocking. For example, in an old monastery that has been converted into an orphanage, Natalia meets a group of diggers who are searching for the body of their family member abandoned in the vineyard during the war. They cannot have peace until their relative is buried properly, a commonly held belief in the Balkans.

For those who are not familiar with Balkan folklore, similar episodes may be difficult to understand without additional explanations. However, the novel has universal themes that most can relate to; it deals with violence, love and death and shows how war changes the lives of ordinary people.

The Small-Scale Study

Context and Participants

This study took place in an international school in Serbia. In the last two years, students are enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program and in this school, all students are required to study English. English B is a two-year course, and over these two years, students are required to read three literary texts. The only requirement for novel selection is that the piece was originally written in English, which leaves the teacher with the freedom to choose novels written in English that are relevant to the students. I chose *The Tiger's Wife* by Tea Obreht, with the intention that the novel would encourage students to discuss and understand historical events of the region.

The group consisted of eight 17- to 18-year-old students who joined the school at different times. Five of them were girls and three were boys. Four students were Serbian (Students 3, 4, 5 and 6), and four students were internationals (Students 1, 2, 7 and 8): one was Korean, one Italian, one Chinese and one German. Five of the students came to the school from their country's national educational system, and three of them were enrolled in international education before they joined this course. Their English was at the advanced level. The school's mission is to encourage students to think critically, ask questions and share ideas. Students were therefore also expected to respect different opinions, try to understand different cultures and approach discussions in a non-judgmental way. The

students in this English B class were hardworking and very motivated to do well. The classroom atmosphere was positive and conducive to learning.

Text Selection and Time-Scale

The recent Balkan war is not a topic that is often discussed or even mentioned among students. However, there are times when it is clear that students have questions about the history as they live in the region. Their need to discuss it became obvious during a different unit, 'My Identity', at the end of which the culminating assessment task was to prepare and deliver a speech. After studying rhetorical devices and appeals, listening to and analyzing famous speeches, students were asked to write their own speeches. They could choose any school-appropriate topic they wanted. While discussing their options, one student remarked that he wanted to write 'What happened to my family during the war'. I asked him what kind of speech that would be and suggested that it would probably be factual. He disagreed, and said that his talk would have to be very emotional. However, he delivered a speech on a very different topic. When asked why he changed the topic, he explained that he did not think that others would understand what he had to say about the topic. On a different occasion, the topic of the recent war found its way into the class discussion and one of the non-local students commented that she was told the war was connected with religion. When asked if she was interested to find out more about the war, she said that she was, but that she was hesitant to ask questions because she was not sure how her friends would react. Although the student was sensitive to the situation, she wanted to know the points of view of her peers.

These reactions confirmed that some topics could scarcely be discussed, although the school promotes a student-centered classroom and exchange of ideas. In all their classes, students are encouraged to be critical thinkers, but the topic was too uncomfortable. Asking students to talk about something they considered highly sensitive was risky, and I chose *The Tiger's Wife* as a catalyst into these sensitive topics. My intention was that the novel would provide a starting point for the class to come together and re-examine their views. The Serbian students could share their views and this would help them in understanding themselves. Hearing the views of foreign students would also be a step towards allowing Serbian students to explore perceptions that are different from their own. I felt that the Serbian students needed the opportunity to express themselves, and I encouraged them to

share their views in an appropriate but concrete way that would not further 'puzzle' their classmates. On the other hand, I was hoping that that the novel would motivate foreign students to explore regional history through the eyes of their peers, and thereby understand the perspectives of their classmates and potentially develop empathy.

Taking into account the students' reactions and the institution's goal to foster intercultural understanding, this small-scale study was conducted in an attempt to answer the following questions:

- How can this novel prompt discussion on sensitive topics?
- How can classroom experiences encourage students to develop cross-cultural understanding?

The study took place over four months, from November 2015 to February 2016. The students were in the last year of their secondary education and in the second year of the IB Diploma Programme. I taught the students during both years. English lessons took place four times a week, two sessions lasting 80 minutes, and two sessions lasting 50 minutes. The English B curriculum follows the Diploma Programme framework. The units of study were structured around the following areas of exploration: cultural diversity, social relationships, customs and traditions. The unit lasted ten weeks and during that time, all classes were devoted to the exploration of the novel.

Data Collection

The following methods were used to collect information: observations, recordings of group discussions and speaking activities that encouraged students to discuss the content of the novel or its themes, journal entries, students' written responses, an end-of-unit composition and reflections. Three classroom discussions were conducted and recorded. The responses to the questions were transcribed and then analyzed to create categories and seek patterns. Students' comments are written verbatim.

At the beginning of the unit, before students started reading the novel, I introduced the novel, talked about some of its themes and asked students for their initial reaction. I asked students to read two chapters every week. To make the task of reading long chapters manageable, students were given worksheets that accompanied each chapter. Each worksheet had several questions that would prompt the students to think about the events that took place in the story and to reflect on their meaning. During the class, students

would compare their answers and comment on these chapters. I asked probing questions to establish to what extent students were making connections with the plot and themes and what their feelings were about the events that were described in the novel. Students were encouraged to comment on each other's ideas and to contribute to discussions. On several occasions I pointed out to the students that the emphasis of their discussions was on understanding various perspectives. During the unit, students were expected to write responses to quotations from the novel. Some sections of students' responses are used in this study.

Throughout the project, I kept a journal in which I recorded students' comments and their reactions to the tasks and to the feedback they received after they submitted the assignments for marking. I also commented on participation and the classroom atmosphere during the discussions. Journal entries aided in monitoring my own feelings and fears related to the two groups of students, host country students and international students, revealing some aspects of my role in the process.

After the novel was read, the students were asked to prepare a PowerPoint presentation. With their presentations, students had to demonstrate how familiar they were with the story and to refer to the community that was involved in it. The presentations and interaction that would follow were recorded. At the end of the unit of work, the students were instructed to write a letter to the author, in which they should identify two or three episodes from the novel and explain how the stories they read made them reconsider their previously held views. They were also encouraged to indicate if they would recommend the book to others and to give the reasons for this.

Data was collected from a discussion at the end of the unit. During the session, students, together with the teacher, explored the ways in which reading the novel helped them to find out more about each other and in what way the novel and the classroom experiences encouraged them to explore and potentially change their perspectives. They were also asked what they thought about the instructional format of the unit.

Results

Students responded well to the novel, although they complained that the workload was heavy and that they were under pressure to finish each chapter within ten days. Some students could not simply find time to read since they were heavily burdened with

homework from other courses. Despite the amount of work, they thought reading the novel and discussing it was valuable. Some of their comments suggest that they were trying to develop new perspectives, thereby developing intercultural understanding.

Exploring the Context and the Content

Different starting point and reconstructing the frame of reference. The students were at the advanced level, and although the language of the novel was very complex, it did not present a problem. However, the students often could not understand certain aspects of the story due to folklore connections and parallel story lines. Some even complained that their reading experience was like a reading comprehension exercise.

Coming from different contexts and traditions, each student began their opinion exchange from a different starting point. The international students struggled with cultural content that made little sense to them and that led them to the realization that without foundational knowledge and experience of Serbian culture, they often could not understand the story fully. They could not relate to the characters because they could not understand their actions and motivations. When asked why, one of the international students commented, 'Characters do strange things, I could not understand what goes on.' (Transcribed classroom discussion). The frustration that was caused by the lack of background knowledge prompted students to reflect on their confusion.

Complete understanding of the novel is not possible without extensive knowledge of folk stories and tradition specific to the region, which, I believe, prevents the readers not familiar with the culture from comprehending the novel to the full extent. (Student 2, written personal response)

The difficulty this student had in making sense encouraged her to ask clarifying questions about some of the unknown rituals. 'I need to ask you people if I want to know what goes on,' she commented during one class, showing that she did not feel that understanding was out of her reach. The process of making sense eventually made her think how she perceived other cultures including what one needed to be aware of to appreciate different characters.

Although it was the cultural aspects and context that students struggled with, foreign students were prepared to accept that people do things differently. That readiness is highlighted in the following comment:

There is the part when people talk about potato peels as medicine for fever. And I say to myself that those people are mad. But then, you told me in class that you used potato peels. Confusing, but OK. (Student 7, written personal response)

The Serbian students did not struggle with this aspect of the novel, many points in the story made sense to them. With their knowledge of customs and local traditions, local students guided others and provided necessary information when prompted to do so. One of the foreign students pointed out that the local students could understand the clues easily.

It is amazing how you two understand the stories and what the parrot says – to me it made no sense. I did think, ‘How bizarre’ but now that you have explained, it makes more sense. ... There should be a dictionary at the end of the book. (Student 1, transcribed classroom discussion)

This comment shows that Serbian students had a special role in this process. During the peer interaction, they acted as mediators of cross-cultural learning and had the role of more knowledgeable persons. They assisted others in reconstructing the cultural rules, which governed the behaviour of characters, thus enabling them to understand and evaluate the content. This opportunity for students to talk about different experiences and to learn from each other stresses the significance of the classroom discussion in their intercultural experience.

Although many of the customs were familiar to the Serbian students, they were also on a journey of discovery. One of them pointed out that the novel taught her something new about her nation and culture. She commented that there are some customs, such as burial rituals, that she had never heard of, that her parents and friends had not heard of, suggesting, ‘Maybe they are made up’. It was only after reading the novel that the student

started examining customs in her own culture and realized that she was not familiar with all the rituals that the author described.

Dealing with a challenging topic. It was not only the lack of the knowledge about customs, local traditions and folklore that students found difficult. The theme of war was also challenging and uncomfortable. One student described his experience of reading the novel in a personal response entry as such:

Student 2: Challenging. It was challenging in many ways. Challenging because I did not get it, challenging topic – war is always challenging. The Balkans is challenging. Death is challenging.

Another student also experienced confusion while reading the novel and compared the confusion felt during reading with the war itself.

Student 5: It seems as if someone wanted to create a mosaic that represents the scene, but there is no scene, there is just a bulk of something, I feel things are missing. That is what you have when you think of war, someone wanted something good, and for the sake of something good there was war in the first place. But, along the way, they got carried away, and the final composition does not make any sense. (Excerpt from the end of unit assessment)

These comments show how both students tried to carefully communicate their frustration. Expressing it was a step towards reflecting on the topic that was not easy to include in everyday conversation: trying to ‘find all the pieces of the mosaic’ and to put them in the right place. It was acknowledged that when talking about the past, people were bound to have strong reactions.

Student 7: When the war is mentioned, then there are big words – genocide, or there is a memorial, it is all very negative when you hear about these events. You get a really pessimistic view.

Teacher: Should there be any positive reaction when talking about these events?

Student 7: I do not think there should be positive emotions about the things that happened, but maybe, one should have a more optimistic perspective about building future relationships. Kind of, you say, this is what happened in the past, but we want to solve the problems and not have them in the future.

Student 1: You have to educate your children and tell them. You tell them, this person died, and that person almost died, and this happened, they are going to remember. If you don't, they are going to say 'yeah, yeah' and they are never going to learn. (Transcribed classroom discussion)

This interaction indicates how important it was for the students to talk, at least amongst themselves. Although experiences could be unpleasant, the dialogue itself represented an effort to clarify misunderstandings.

At the end of the unit the students were asked if they thought they knew more about the war after reading the novel and discussing it in class. Their answers indicate that they thought they knew a 'little' more:

Student 1: Yes and no. I learned that there are different reactions to this topic, some people get very emotional, and some people say 'Yeah, yeah... it was ten, fifteen years ago. It is history now.' And for those who were closely attached, it is very emotional. (Transcribed classroom discussion)

Although this student pointed out that he now knew more about the war, he was aware how far he was from understanding. Notably, students did not only develop understanding, they also became aware of their lack of understanding. However, the Serbian students said that the novel did not provide them with anything they did not already know.

The absence of the topic in everyday life was identified by two host country students. Also, they could not see that there was a reason to talk about what happened:

Student 6: It is not the topic that is discussed here in Serbia. When I watch TV, I do not think we discuss it. I mean, it is not forgotten, they do mention it sometimes.

Teacher: Do you mention it to your classmates who are not from Serbia?

Student 6: If they want, they could ask. But they already have the answers, it seems.

Student 4: To be honest, I don't think that knowing what happened would change anything. (Transcribed classroom discussion)

This last interaction shows how local Serbian students were more challenged by the context than the content itself. Host country students felt that their classmates judged them and had preconceived ideas. At the same time, international students needed and asked for explanations. They had no knowledge about the history of the region and its traditions while host country students could not see that anyone would not be familiar with it. Therefore, the discussion about the novel allowed them to exchange questions and to check each other's views.

Responses to the Novel

Students made connections with the text on several levels, not just through class discussions, but also by recording personal responses in journal entries.

Finding personal connections. Students' previous experiences impacted the way they interpreted the text. The author mentions the importance of one's name in the war-struck areas and points out how a name can be a give-away.

Your name tells what culture you come from. A lot of people judge people from other countries if their names are not what they are used [sic]. There is absurdity of judging people by their ethnicity, name or religion [...]. They were born into a country with war, a decision they did not make. (Student 1, written personal response)

This international student wrote about her experience of living in Serbia and how her name was the first point people would pass judgments on and offer cultural clichés. The comment suggests that the student was aware of many clichés and readiness to judge others who were different.

The Serbian students reflected a lot on stories that describe traditions. When asked about the sources of their knowledge, they answered that they mostly know from their parents and grandparents. Both comments hint at how important the oral tradition is and the role that ancestors have in passing it on.

For us, the new generations, the stories that we hear from our parents, grandparents or older people in general have a big influence on how we see certain things [...] like Natalia learned about the war from her grandfather.
(Student 3, transcribed classroom discussion)

One of the traditions in Serbia is that older family members inspire and contribute to the decisions of their descendants. We see that in the book through the relationship between Natalia and her grandfather. We all have strong relationships with the members of our family. (Student 4, written personal response)

Although the situation that some students came from was very different from the situation in the novel, their comments indicated that they were trying to find connections. When discussing the reasons that divide people in the novel, the Korean student commented,

Like in Korea, we have a divide. The same is in former Yugoslavia. (Student 2, transcribed classroom discussion)

It was easier for this student to make a connection once he had found some similarities with his own life experience. This also showed that the novel was a tool to help students find commonalities among different cultures and to understand them better.

Questions for the author. Although the focus of the unit was on opening avenues for discussion, students inevitably evaluated the novel and expressed their concerns about its content. Several students were concerned that someone who did not live in the area throughout the conflict, and was not part of it, could attempt to write about it.

Why did she choose to write about the events which occurred in Balkans, especially considering that she had not lived in this region for a long period of time? (Student 5, transcribed classroom discussion)

Students reacted differently to the author's attitude towards the topic. Two students appreciated that the author remained, as they observed, emotionally neutral while others were bothered by the author's lack of emotions.

Student 5: I appreciate the fact that the novel presents no judgment and mostly remains neutral towards the disputes in the Balkan Peninsula.

Student 1: The author did not show strong opinions and did not judge and that is good.

Student 4: It would be better if she showed her opinion. She was too careful not to think and not to feel. We are left only with a story. But if she showed her opinion, there would be hatred and she did not want that. (Transcribed classroom discussion)

The following exchange illustrates that there was also a concern that there were not many war scenes in the novel.

Student 6: The book is about war, but there is not much of it.

Teacher: Do you think there should be more war scenes?

Student 6: I don't like the fact that the war is not visible throughout the whole book. I feel cheated. (Transcribed classroom discussion)

The important aspect of discussions was the readiness to think critically about the novel and to question the author's intentions. Although students appreciated the author's

attempt to stay neutral and nonjudgmental, they also found it uncomfortable that the stance of the writer was not made more explicit. The Serbian students would not readily discuss the topic and did not have much to say to their classmates who expected to hear from them about the topic. On the other hand, they expected and wanted to be given more war scenes by the author. They also had difficulties accepting that the topic would not provoke strong emotions in everyone due to their own cultural framework.

Instructional Format

Paran points out that 'the way literature is taught can contribute to general language development' (2012, p. 455), and one reason for introducing literature in a language acquisition course is to help students work on improving language skills. I used a number of communicative language teaching activities such as: opinion gap, composing a letter to the author, predicting what comes next and developing metaphors for certain parts of the story or characters (for example, comparing this war to a mosaic). However, the activities that were used throughout the unit were not necessarily oriented towards language development. They were designed to provide students with the opportunities to explore the plot, the way the author developed themes and characters as well as to express their views, to respond to the text, to interact with others, and to share their perceptions. The activities promoted interaction and thinking skills and ultimately contributed to improving language performance of the students, since language was used as a tool for thinking and communicating in class.

It was challenging for me to facilitate reader response activities. I found it difficult to stay neutral while encouraging students to make connections with the text and their context. Since I was from the local context, it often meant that I would have to refrain from offering my opinion and explaining some aspects of the story. I tried not to position myself as an authority figure of knowledge but to encourage host country students to be the source of knowledge and international students to learn about the context by asking questions about Serbian culture and tradition. My role became primarily to encourage positive interchange.

Students in this class generally liked discussing their ideas. Although the content of the novel was not always easy for them, they were all actively involved in discussions. However, it was evident that the whole unit did not only encourage students to read more,

but to become more reflective towards both everyday life situations and controversial topics. Discussions supported their thinking, initiated further questioning and invited different opinions. This allowed them to explore and reflect on their attitudes and to attempt to clarify those of others. When I introduced this unit, I believed that talking about the topics that emerged from the novel would lead to an acceptance of differences. I also hoped that students would re-examine their perspectives and gain new ones. However, there is another equally important dimension: the initiating of the discussion and students' willingness to take part in it and talk about the issues was a success in itself. That is what happened throughout the unit: the novel provoked a search for understanding, which led to situations where students did not pay attention to language, but used it to talk about complex issues that mattered to them. Therefore, providing the framework for a forum and opening up the topic is one of the unit's achievements.

Conclusions

Language and culture are inextricably connected. When students are confronted with a foreign culture, they start comparing that culture with their own and then reflecting on both. This often leads to a new understanding that another culture may be different, but that 'different' does not mean 'wrong'. In this study, literature acted as a bridge between different cultures and the dialogue about the recent Balkan war was a step towards developing intercultural understanding. The story originally created confusion, but eventually it proved to be a tool either for exploring a world that is different from the one with which students were familiar or for understanding their own world better.

Choosing appropriate literary works is the key for student engagement. The choice may depend on the proficiency level of the learners, but that does not mean that literature can only be integrated in upper intermediate and advanced classes. If literature is a source of enjoyment or the catalyst for understanding circumstances that we would not normally be able to comprehend, then it could be used at any level provided that the appropriate text has been selected (see, for example, Bland & Lütge, 2013; Bland, 2013). Although teachers have the responsibility for choosing appropriate texts for the proficiency level and interests of their students, consulting their students about the choice of texts could also provide additional reading motivation for students.

Providing a suitable instructional format plays an important part in the successful incorporation of literature in a foreign language classroom. By organizing appropriate activities that promote discussion, teachers assist students in being active readers, and in participating actively in the learning process. To understand the story, students ask questions, use their background knowledge, and negotiate meaning. Teachers should be prepared to allow students to express opinions and even to be negative about different aspects of the literary work. When they interact with each other and with the text, they connect the text with their own experience and that is a step towards intercultural understanding and, importantly, a way to promote critical thinking through language.

The Tiger's Wife provided the context for opinion exchange. Talking about the plot and characters allowed students to engage in experiences that led to their consideration of different points of view. Both foreign and host country students appeared to have gained new insights and became aware that problems may arise without knowledge of cultures in multicultural settings, which was the case in this study. The questions that international students asked point to their genuine need and desire to expand their knowledge about the region. The answers that they were given by their host country peers indicate that they were prepared to offer explanations and answers that they might be reluctant to give in different situations and settings, as literature provided them with an opportunity to do this.

Literature in foreign language teaching has many uses and should not be restricted to reading comprehension exercises. Not only the aesthetic aspect of literature but also the opportunities that it creates for students' learning different perspectives should be taken into account when choosing literary pieces. In order to equip teachers with necessary skills, using literature in a foreign language classroom should be taught systematically in pre-service courses. Also, there needs to be professional development opportunities for practicing teachers who want to include literature in their instructional repertoire, as this can be of great benefit to all students.

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