

<b>Intercultural Learning through Traditional Folk Stories</b>		<b>Literature</b>
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**Abstract**

The development of monocultural societies into multicultural and intercultural ones and the existence of the culture shock as one of the problems inherent in all societies in the new world order leads us to question the established educational model and promote instead the Intercultural Education as an alternative framework in which educators and mediators can develop a type of learning which engages seriously with the diversity of multicultural societies and directs the foreign language learners to move beyond stereotypes and negotiate and construct meanings in relation to the foreign language and the culture associated with it. We suggest that the mythological stories compiled in the bilingual anthology developed by Kay Livingston and Margarida Morgado (2005) on 'creatures of the sea' which can be found in both Scottish and Portuguese cultural repertoire could set off students' socio-cultural knowledge acquisition since the stories capture the dynamic systems that cultures are and offer multiple ways for the learners to gain greater awareness of their own culture (its dominant meanings, values, beliefs, preferred ways of doing, thinking and representing otherness) and negotiate meaning in the foreign language and culture learning process.

**1. Introduction**

The revolution in social structures has been undoubtedly one of the most significant changes in the new world order. The increasingly frequent and unstoppable migrations have led to the development of monocultural societies, an evolutionary movement that has culminated in the emergence of multicultural and intercultural societies. Based on the approach the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages adopts regarding the concepts of 'multicultural' and 'intercultural', multicultural societies could be described as those which comprise individuals from different ethnic groups who do not establish any kind of interaction among them and intercultural societies, as those in which, even though their members perceive themselves as belonging to different cultures, they interact with one another (Rodrigo, 1999: 19) (Alred, 2003: 27). The intercultural interaction opens the door to the intercultural communication and when this kind of communicative interaction takes place, the phenomenon of culture shock emerges, evidencing the lack of knowledge individuals from these intercultural societies have of cultural differences. This intercultural chaos clearly demonstrates that we should start working on an alternative educational model that could provide the individuals with the necessary skills to overcome personal and/or contextual barriers during the intercultural interaction so that they can communicate effectively and appropriately with one another (Vilà, 2007: 16), in other words, that they communicate interculturally and tactfully enough to be able to avoid the aforementioned culture shock.

That alternative educational framework should be the Intercultural Education. In the context of foreign language teaching, the acquisition of new cultural meanings or the identification of a list of 'culturally-relevant meanings' IS TO BE understood as intercultural learning. This alternative learning process would be expected to help the learners engage seriously with cultural diversity and processes of meaning making and meaning negotiation. The construction of meaning by learners has to be directed if we are AIMING FOR THEM to move beyond the stereotype list. We propose to talk about intercultural learning as a dynamic process of negotiating cultural meanings related to the foreign culture through focusing on stories. The potential of stories to promote

intercultural learning is high because stories capture the dynamic systems that cultures are and offer multiple ways to negotiate meaning. The bilingual anthology of stories developed by Kay Livingston and Margarida Morgado (2005) on 'creatures of the sea' found in Scottish and Portuguese folklore tradition will be strongly recommended as an educational tool in this intercultural learning process since it is EQUIPPED WITH awareness activities that promote intercultural learning in the sense of engaging with a set of specific situations rather than generalities and helping to gain greater awareness of own culture (its dominant meanings, preferred ways of doing, thinking and representing otherness) and the foreign one.

## 2. Intercultural Education

The origin of many of the problems that threaten the continuity and stability of the new world order lies primarily in the rupture between society and education. From the moment that societies evolve and become more complex, formal education becomes the tool each ethnic group makes use of to ensure uniformity and cohesion of the group, through the transmission of certain knowledge that can not be genetically inherited but acquired through socialization (Cruz and Delgado, 2008: 45) and which contributes to the establishment of a distinctive social ethnic identity (Ferrer, 1993: 215). That knowledge has been anthropologically defined as 'culture' and it includes the norms, values, beliefs, behaviour patterns, etc. (Bueno, 1995: 362) that perpetuate the content and social structure of the ethnic group and by means of which the members of that distinctive group acquire a 'savoir faire' and a 'savoir être' with others (Vez, Guillén y Alario, 2002: 122). There are two strands to that socio-cultural knowledge exchange process depending on the nature and the directions it presents. The first strand relates to an exchange that takes place within the group and that follows a vertical course, that is, from parents to children (Prevosti, 1993: 310). It is then called a process of enculturation and it is through this unconscious exchange of socio-cultural information that children get in contact with the so-called children's culture (i.e. stories, songs, games, etc.). These elements will enable them to build a 'world' and develop some cultural defence strategies with which they will understand, structure and make sense of the world around them, reducing the psychic impact real difficulties may cause them (Aguirre, 1993: 221) (Ferrer, 1993: 216). The second strand responds to an exchange of socio-cultural knowledge among members of different ethnic groups that follows a horizontal course, that is, there is no genetic connection between the person who transmits the information and the person who receives it (Prevosti, 1993: 310). This conscious and voluntary process of socio-cultural knowledge acquisition is known as acculturation (Aguirre, 1993: 320). Etymologically the word is formed from the Latin preposition 'ad' which means union, contact or closeness, and 'culture' in the sense of all the achievements and lifestyles of a group and in this sense it must be understood, as intercultural contact (Juliano, 1993: 5).

The rupture we were referring to at the beginning of this article occurs when the intercultural society does not take into account, or completely ignores, the lack of appropriate socio-cultural knowledge its members have, as well as the fact that even if they have any that may be distorted by stereotypes (MCERL, 2002: 100) and the devastating effect it all has upon the natural course and harmony of this type of societies.

We believe that intercultural societies must become aware of the social and cultural differences a multicultural society generates and in the context of an Intercultural Education, use formal education to acculturate learners in the foreign language acquisition process and help them, differentiate between the characteristics of their own cultural identity and the cultural characteristics of other ethnic groups and, in doing so, acknowledge that the acquisition of other norms, values, beliefs, behaviour patterns, etc., constitutes the first step towards a socio-cultural integration and a peaceful coexistence. Thus intercultural education becomes the framework for a kind of formal instruction based on the acquisition of a range of skills and abilities, such as those that the Intercultural Competence is composed of, being the socio-cultural knowledge one component

along with the attitudes of curiosity and openness, interpretation and relationship skills, discovery and interaction skills, critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997: 49-54), a tolerance for ambiguity, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, respect for otherness and empathy.

As an educational frame which could provide fertile soil for an enriched methodology of formal education, Intercultural Education is expected to respond to a number of objectives. First it should awaken a cultural curiosity in the foreign language learners so that this evolves into an interest in acquiring a more detailed knowledge of the culture related to the foreign language (Durant, 2003: 32). Secondly, it has to help the learners to understand why they see the world the way they see it, becoming aware of their own cultural identity and realizing that vision is the result of the unconscious learning process of enculturation all individuals undergo in their lives. moreover, in teaching training programs, it should aim to make the educators realize that their future learner's opinions, ideas, the conception of other people's view of the world and their ways of thinking and doing, may be deeply embedded and unconsciously held and based or distorted by stereotypical information they may have previously acquired and by means of which they try to make sense of the unknown. Therefore, the aim of Intercultural Education is not only to help the learner to understand and value others but also to understand and value themselves as pieces of a larger cultural entity. Thirdly, Intercultural Education should help the learners to question the validity given to their own cultural system. This would open and expand their minds, predispose them to the conscious learning process of acculturation and to the voluntary reconstruction of their own cultural identity in harmony with other members of the intercultural society they belong to, which is the first step in the acquisition of an intercultural citizenship which would become a kind of passport that would facilitate the individual his transit through the foreign culture.

We strongly believe that multicultural and intercultural societies and formal education must coexist and cooperate within the realm of Intercultural Education in order for the breach between them to be finally repaired.

### **3. Intercultural Education and Children's Books**

Some stories written for children are a recognizable representation of places, activities or institutions, while others seem to ignore historical context or realistic detail. While the former reinforce familiarity and a sense of proximity, the latter may appear unfamiliar. Stories are narratives constructed to connect people to a reality and they use social, linguistic and literary codes shared by a learning community. Stories as other elements of the children's culture help them define themselves and the universe and that a web of myths is broadcast and passed from one generation to another. Sea stories are not different.

The theme of the sea not only connects the two European cultures but offers the possibility of promoting intercultural education. Stories of the sea are frequently stories about an 'Other' whom keeps to his/her own tradition, habits and otherness and whose strangeness is difficult to accept. Sea stories are often about local discrimination, inclusion and exclusion or disparagement. In addition, they can be about boundary crossing and its implications for people and places.

Young people are not passive onlookers. They engage in making meaning of their daily lives and it is suggested that reading can contribute to a supportive learning environment and challenge social, cultural, racial, religious and political biases as well as disability and gender stereotypes. It is widely accepted that reading can impact significantly on the child's worldview and that early confrontation with cultures that are different from his/her own can provide an awareness of anti-discriminatory processes. Nowadays, it is commonly taken for granted that environments which appear to be socially and culturally value-free or neutral are in reality not so, and it is also believed that schools, educators and children should work together to build a positive, anti-discriminatory ethos.

The bilingual anthology of stories developed by Kay Livingston and Margarida Morgado (2005) provides teachers with a resource that can challenge a range of views and assumptions. It offers a way of dealing with the complex and often abstract ideas of intercultural education through the use of children's fiction. The ideas are based on the notion that myth is a powerful catalyst to encourage children to think in abstract ways about concrete issues. This selection includes extracts from five Portuguese and five Scottish stories which not only enable issues relating to prejudice, tolerance, and stereotypical views to be explored, but also provide an opportunity for the development of a critical cultural awareness.

The narrative pages were selected with the aim of extending and supporting the social and cultural development of children in their foreign language learning process. They explicitly attempt to challenge discriminatory views and help them to recognize and understand a diversity of beliefs, attitudes, social and cultural traditions, as well as encouraging the development of mutual respect and tolerance towards 'the other'. Each of these stories, separately or in conjunction with others, offers insights into the difficulties and benefits of coming into contact with a different culture. They may encourage a particular sense of national identity and homogeneity, or embody those values and characteristics that a particular learning community considers of value. But the stories are not intended to be ideal models of intercultural relations as they are presented as narrative spaces for the development of a critical attitude to representation of otherness, misinterpretation, stereotyping and simplification. With the invaluable help of mediators and educators they are intended to be meaningful reading experiences which present alternative ways of reflecting on the meeting of cultures and in the perception of the readers, contributing to the development of an Intercultural Competence. They also seek to engage children with fictional environments that directly address the social and cultural contexts of contemporary Scotland and Portugal, introducing them to the Portuguese, English and Scottish languages and ways of seeing and living or experiencing their reality.

The selection begins with a common structure, presenting a Section 1 which contains extracts from each of the ten stories selected. A summary of each story is given first both in English and Portuguese, followed by a commentary linking the story to intercultural education ideas. Section 2 provides pedagogical suggestions to work with the extracts in five separate units. The units cover intercultural education topics such as gender stereotyping, different cultures, otherness, conflict and conflict resolution and intercultural interactions as the sense of community. At the end of the anthology suggestions for further reading are presented under the name of most of the topics already mentioned. The final section provides details about the sources of this work and related bibliography.

Each extract is taken from a children's book of fiction. The stories selected and the activities that derived from them are intended for being used with children ranging from 10 – 14 years in the contexts of intercultural education and English as a second language. The stories are all related to the theme of the sea, which serves as common ground and as the starting point for reflection on Scottish and Portuguese cultures.

#### **4. Creatures from the Sea in Scottish and Portuguese Cultures**

The bilingual anthology of mythological stories we have been suggesting as a classroom tool for the implementation of an intercultural teaching and learning process revolves around the figure of a certain type of sea creatures known as selkies. The word 'selkie' is said to derive from the Old English word 'seolh' which means 'seal'. We strongly believe that the concept of mythology represents a double source of interest for educators and mediators. On the one hand, it displays a sparkling catalogue of creatures that have been captivating the attention of readers all around the world for ages and on the other hand, as appealing as those mythological creatures may be, their essence, that is, the reason that sparked off their creation seems to be equally intriguing and captivating.

Also known as silkies or selchies, these figures are conceived as MYTHOLOGICAL beings embedded in Scottish folklore as well as in others such as the Portuguese one. They have been portrayed as creatures which are able to live as seals in the sea or as humans on land. To transform themselves from seals into humans, they simply need to drop or shed temporarily their skin. This shape shifting is thought to respond to an inner desire or an attraction to the unknown that drives female selkies to willingly marry a human husband or to enjoy human customs such as dancing on the beach, and male selkies to seduce dissatisfied human wives who are hopelessly waiting for their fishermen husbands.

As for the reasons that justify the appearance of these sea creatures, their origin is said to have been traced back to real life facts such as the existence of untreatable physiological conditions that related to some abnormalities in newly born children or the recurrent presence of hereditary malformations, in particular a hereditary horn that grows between the fingers making human hands resemble flippers. Physical facts such as the misidentification of Finnish women due to their sealskin clothing or the resemblance between the skin of the seals and the jet black hair of the shipwrecked Spaniards who may have been washed ashore (Silver, 2000: 47) can also be considered another reason. Finally, even the deep-seated superstition about the supernatural formation of these sea creatures from the souls of drowned people has also been given as a plausible reason behind the existence of these sea creatures.

An interesting aspect in these mythological stories lies in the type of relationship that is established between humans and selkies. In most cases female selkies are portrayed as excellent wives which explains why human men would take advantage of any temporary shape shifting to steal the skin from them thus preventing them from regaining their seal form and forcing them to marry them and giving birth to human babies. When the relationship reflects an act of coercion, female selkies seem to embark themselves on an emotional quest for the stolen skin which allows them to return to their true home with their selkie husband and sons. Unlike this, there are stories in which the established bond between both beings reflects an act of love as, for example, in the story of the fisherman who, against his selkie wife's advice, set sail dangerously late one day to find himself later on trapped fighting for his life. Facing the prospect of the loss of her husband and a solitary life ashore, the female selkie, in an act of unselfish love, saves him even though she is well aware of the fact that this means she cannot recover her human form or continue living a human life happily ever after.

## 5. Conclusion

GE have suggested Intercultural Education as the ideal framework for a type of enriched formal education which can contribute decisively to the inclusion of the cultural aspect in the foreign language teaching and learning programs. Teachers, educators and mediators should join forces to help learners acculturate voluntarily and consciously so that they can become socio-culturally aware of who they are and who the 'others' are and which values, beliefs, behaviour patterns, vision of the world, etc., they respond to and, at the same time, to direct their meaning construction process. Then induce the learners to question the validity of their own cultural system and invite them to reconstruct their own cultural identity to develop or acquire an intercultural citizenship that will enable them to interact appropriately within the limits of their intercultural society.

In order for such an intercultural status to be achieved, it has been suggested in these pages the use of mythological stories taken from the Portuguese and Scottish cultural repertoire as material for the new formal education process in the context of an Intercultural Education to provide the children, the learners being acculturated, with an imaginary landscape that embodies particular values, beliefs, ways of thinking and doing and ways of seeing and using the foreign language that native speakers of that language recognize as their own and use to talk about themselves and define themselves in the world. This new information promotes

intercultural learning in foreign language teaching contexts by helping the learners engage with a set of specific situations and gain awareness of the foreign world, and gain awareness of themselves in comparison to others.

In the selected mythological stories the sea is a metaphor for the unknown, simultaneously dangerous and attractive. Male and female selkies incarnate the western myth of seductiveness and the encounters between them and humans represent the tensions of cultures that meet in different ways: migration from land to sea or the other way around. These encounters may be considered as beneficial as an act of love or as threatening as an act of coercion. The tensions related to intercultural living may be solved in harmony, in despair, in separation or violent death. Initially, learners may be under the impression that belonging simultaneously to two cultures may be heartbreaking and impossible. However, this idea challenges their enculturated vision of the world and encourages them to progressively acknowledge and assimilate aspects of a different cultural system that lead to the reconstruction of their own cultural identity, paving the way from multicultural societies to intercultural ones. Intercultural Education will provide an appropriate framework for all this to become a part of the foreign language and culture teaching and learning processes in the context of intercultural societies in the new world order.

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