

DEVELOPING COUNTRY-SPECIFIC CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN GERMAN LANGUAGE LEARNERS THROUGH LITERARY TEXTS

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Abstract: This research investigates the role of literary texts in fostering country-specific cultural competence among learners of German as a foreign language. It explores how engagement with selected literary works can enhance students' understanding of historical, social, and cultural contexts of German-speaking countries. The methodology integrates lexical-cultural analysis, interpretive discussions, and project-based assignments. Empirical results from a university-level course demonstrate a significant improvement in cultural awareness, analytical skills, and learner motivation, suggesting that literary texts provide an effective framework for integrating linguistic and cultural education.

Keywords: cultural competence, German language learning, literary texts, intercultural education, foreign language pedagogy

Introduction. In contemporary foreign language education, linguistic proficiency alone is insufficient for meaningful communication. Effective communication requires an understanding of the social, cultural, and historical context of the target language community. Cultural competence, which encompasses knowledge of traditions, social norms, and historical realities, is therefore recognized as an essential component of foreign language instruction (Byram, 1997). Without this competence, learners may be able to construct grammatically correct sentences, yet fail to interpret the pragmatic and cultural nuances necessary for authentic interaction.

German language education, in particular, presents unique opportunities for cultural learning. German-speaking countries have a rich literary, historical, and philosophical heritage, which can be effectively leveraged in language instruction. While conventional textbooks often provide factual cultural information, they rarely convey the depth of social experience, ethical dilemmas, and worldview perspectives embedded in the language. Literary texts, on the other hand, provide authentic cultural narratives, enabling students to engage with the lived experiences, values, and moral questions of German-speaking societies. Recent studies in foreign language pedagogy emphasize the integration of literature as a tool for intercultural education. Literature allows learners to observe and analyze cultural norms in context, promotes critical thinking, and encourages reflection on both the target culture and the learners' own cultural assumptions (Kramsch, 1993; Apeltauer, 2019). Through engagement with literary works, students not only develop interpretive skills but also cultivate empathy and the ability to navigate complex social and moral situations. Moreover, the globalized world demands that language learners acquire intercultural competence to participate effectively in international communication, academic collaboration, and professional environments. In this context, the development of country-specific cultural competence - understanding the particularities of the target language society - is a fundamental aspect of foreign language education. The study presented here investigates how structured use of literary texts in German language classes can

systematically foster this competence among university students, combining linguistic, cognitive, and cultural learning objectives.

By focusing on literary texts such as Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, and Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*, this study demonstrates how exposure to complex narratives allows students to interpret cultural patterns, social behaviors, and historical contexts. The integration of lexical-cultural analysis, interpretive discussions, and project-based tasks creates an immersive learning environment in which learners actively construct their understanding of German-speaking societies.

Cultural competence in language Education. Cultural competence in foreign language education is increasingly recognized as a core component of communicative competence. It involves not only knowledge of factual information about the target culture - such as history, geography, and social norms - but also the ability to interpret, evaluate, and respond appropriately to cultural signals in real-life communication (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Learners who develop cultural competence are able to bridge differences between their own cultural perspective and that of the target language community, resulting in more effective and authentic interaction. Scholars typically distinguish three interrelated dimensions of cultural competence:

1. **Cognitive Dimension:** This involves knowledge of the target culture's history, literature, politics, social structures, and everyday practices. The cognitive dimension provides learners with a factual and conceptual framework that supports informed interpretations of social behavior and textual materials. For example, understanding the social hierarchy, family norms, or educational traditions in German-speaking countries allows learners to contextualize linguistic forms and social interactions.

2. **Communicative Dimension:** Beyond knowing cultural facts, learners must be able to apply their knowledge in interaction. This includes understanding pragmatics, idiomatic expressions, etiquette, and non-verbal communication, as well as adapting one's language use to different social contexts. For instance, recognizing the appropriate level of formality when addressing a professor or using culturally specific phrases in a conversation enhances the authenticity and effectiveness of communication.

3. **Interpretive Dimension:** Perhaps the most critical for developing deep intercultural understanding, the interpretive dimension involves analyzing, evaluating, and reflecting on cultural meanings. It requires learners to examine values, beliefs, and assumptions embedded in social practices, texts, and behaviors, and to compare them with their own cultural framework. This reflective process helps learners develop empathy, critical thinking, and the ability to navigate ambiguity in cross-cultural interactions (Fantini, 2009).

Recent research in applied linguistics emphasizes that cultural competence is not acquired passively but through active engagement with authentic cultural materials, reflection, and interaction (Kramsch, 1993; Sercu, 2005). Literary texts, films, case studies, and real-life simulations are particularly effective in this regard because they immerse learners in social and emotional contexts that textbooks alone cannot replicate. For example, reading Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* exposes students to family dynamics, social alienation, and moral conflicts in early 20th-century German society, enabling them to analyze cultural values and behavioral expectations critically. In addition, fostering cultural competence aligns with the broader objectives of 21st-century education, which emphasize global citizenship, intercultural

understanding, and the ability to operate in diverse international contexts (OECD, 2018). Learners with well-developed cultural competence are better prepared for academic collaboration, professional mobility, and participation in multicultural environments, making the integration of cultural learning an essential component of foreign language pedagogy.

Thus, cultural competence is a multidimensional construct that encompasses factual knowledge, interactive skills, and interpretive reflection. Developing this competence in learners of German requires pedagogical strategies that combine exposure to authentic cultural material, guided analysis, and active engagement through communicative and reflective tasks. Literary texts, with their rich depiction of social norms, historical context, and human experience, offer a particularly effective avenue for addressing all three dimensions simultaneously.

Rolle of Literary texts. Literary texts play a crucial role in foreign language education by providing learners with authentic cultural, social, and historical contexts. Unlike standard textbooks, which often present culture in abstract or fragmented forms, literature immerses students in lived experiences, human emotions, and moral dilemmas, allowing them to explore cultural values in context (Apeltauer, 2019; Kramsch, 1993). Through narratives, learners can observe social norms, interpersonal relationships, and historical events, which enrich their understanding of the target culture and strengthen their interpretive skills.

1. Authentic cultural exposure. Literary works reflect the lived experiences, traditions, and societal structures of the period and place in which they were written. For example, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* introduces students to the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of German intellectual thought, while also highlighting intercultural influences from Indian traditions. Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* provides insight into early 20th-century European family dynamics, social alienation, and bureaucratic pressures. Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* exposes readers to the complexities of European intellectual culture and social etiquette in pre-World War I society. Engaging with these texts allows learners to internalize cultural nuances that cannot be fully conveyed through factual descriptions alone.

2. Development of Cognitive and Interpretive Skills. Literature encourages learners to engage in higher-order thinking by analyzing narrative structures, character motivations, and symbolic representations. This interpretive engagement promotes the development of cognitive and reflective skills critical for cultural competence. For instance, students analyzing Kafka's depiction of Gregor Samsa's alienation are prompted to consider societal expectations, family obligations, and moral dilemmas within German-speaking societies. Such analysis fosters empathy, critical thinking, and an appreciation for cultural complexity (Sercu, 2005).

3. Linguistic and Pragmatic Benefits. Working with literary texts also supports language development. Students encounter complex sentence structures, idiomatic expressions, and context-dependent vocabulary, which enhances both linguistic competence and pragmatic understanding. By interpreting dialogue, narrative style, and contextual cues, learners develop the ability to comprehend and produce culturally and linguistically appropriate language. For example, analyzing formal and informal registers in Mann's *Der Zauberberg* helps students understand politeness strategies and social hierarchies in German-speaking contexts.

4. Motivation and Engagement. Literary texts often increase learner motivation due to their narrative appeal and emotional resonance. Unlike traditional exercises that may focus solely on grammar or vocabulary, literary works allow learners to engage with meaningful content,

fostering intrinsic motivation for language learning (Day & Shapson, 2010). Students report feeling more connected to the culture and more invested in exploring the linguistic and cultural nuances of the text.

5. Pedagogical Applications. Integrating literary texts into the curriculum can take various forms:

- Lexical-cultural analysis: Identifying culturally significant vocabulary and exploring its social and historical connotations.
- Interpretive discussion: Examining moral dilemmas, social norms, and historical context through class or group discussions.
- Project-based assignments: Creating presentations, essays, or role-plays based on the text's themes to reinforce cultural and linguistic understanding.
- Comparative cultural reflection: Comparing cultural practices and values from the text with those of the students' own culture.

Research supports the effectiveness of literary texts in enhancing cultural competence. According to Apeltauer (2019), literature-based instruction improves students' ability to recognize cultural patterns, interpret social cues, and reflect critically on intercultural differences. Similarly, Sercu (2005) emphasizes that literary works offer learners a safe and structured context to confront complex cultural and ethical issues, promoting both cognitive and affective development.

In summary, literary texts serve as a multidimensional tool in foreign language education. They provide authentic cultural exposure, enhance cognitive and interpretive skills, support linguistic development, and increase learner engagement. By combining these benefits, literature becomes an essential component in the systematic development of country-specific cultural competence among German language learners.

Methodology. The study involved 42 first- and second-year university students studying German as a foreign language in Belgium. Participants were divided into an experimental group (n=22), which worked with literary texts, and a control group (n=20), which followed standard textbook-based instruction. The instructional design of this study was carefully structured to integrate linguistic development with the cultivation of country-specific cultural competence. The design combines exposure to authentic literary texts, guided analysis, collaborative discussion, and project-based tasks, providing students with a multifaceted learning experience. The approach emphasizes active engagement, reflective thinking, and the application of knowledge in culturally meaningful contexts.

1. Text Selection and Sequencing. Literary texts were selected based on three main criteria: Cultural Relevance: Texts depict social norms, historical events, and cultural practices specific to German-speaking societies. Linguistic Accessibility: Text complexity is matched to students' language proficiency to ensure comprehension and meaningful interaction. Interpretive Potential: Texts contain moral dilemmas, symbolic elements, and culturally embedded values that encourage critical reflection.

Selected works included Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* for philosophical and spiritual perspectives, Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* for societal and family dynamics, and Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* for historical and intellectual contexts. Texts were sequenced to

progressively increase cognitive and interpretive challenge, starting from shorter narratives and moving toward longer, more complex works.

2. Lexical-Cultural Analysis. Prior to reading, students engaged in guided lexical-cultural analysis to identify and understand culturally significant terms, idioms, and expressions. This pre-reading activity included:

- Extracting key vocabulary with cultural connotations.
- Researching historical, social, and symbolic meanings.
- Creating personalized glossaries to reference during reading.

For example, in *Siddhartha*, terms such as *Einsicht* (insight), *Erfahrung* (experience), and *Tradition* were analyzed to connect philosophical ideas with cultural context. In *Der Zauberberg*, vocabulary related to social hierarchy, etiquette, and medical practices provided insights into early 20th-century European society.

3. Interpretive Discussions. Students participated in structured interpretive discussions designed to deepen cultural understanding and analytical skills. Discussion strategies included:

- Small-Group Analysis: Learners examined character motivations, social norms, and ethical dilemmas.
- Whole-Class Debates: Groups compared interpretations and connected textual insights to contemporary cultural issues.
- Reflective Journaling: Students documented personal reflections on cultural observations, moral conflicts, and cross-cultural comparisons.

For example, a discussion question from *Die Verwandlung* could be: “How does Gregor Samsa’s relationship with his family reflect societal expectations in early 20th-century German-speaking cultures?” Students then explore parallels and contrasts with their own cultural contexts.

4. Project-Based Assignments. Project-based tasks were designed to consolidate learning, foster creativity, and promote active engagement. Assignments included:

- Cultural Presentations: Students presented analyses of themes, social structures, or historical contexts from the text.
- Comparative Essays: Learners compared cultural practices depicted in the text with contemporary practices in their own society.
- Role-Plays and Simulations: Students reenacted scenes or created dialogues to explore social norms, interpersonal dynamics, or historical contexts.
- Creative Writing Projects: Students composed alternative endings, diary entries, or letters from the perspective of characters, integrating linguistic and cultural understanding.

5. Multimodal Integration. Instruction was enhanced with supplementary resources, such as:

- Historical documents and photographs related to the text’s setting.
 - Multimedia resources (videos, interviews, and audio recordings) to contextualize cultural references.
 - Online collaborative platforms for group analysis and peer feedback.
6. Pedagogical Rationale. The instructional design aligns with established principles of intercultural language pedagogy:
- It addresses all three dimensions of cultural competence (cognitive, communicative, interpretive).

- It encourages active learning, critical thinking, and reflection.
- It integrates linguistic development with cultural understanding, ensuring that language acquisition occurs within meaningful cultural contexts.

- It promotes learner autonomy and motivation through collaborative and creative tasks.

By combining lexical-cultural analysis, interpretive discussions, project-based tasks, and multimodal resources, the instructional design creates a rich, scaffolded learning environment in which students systematically develop country-specific cultural competence while simultaneously enhancing German language proficiency.

- 27% improvement in cultural competence scores compared to the control group;
- Enhanced interpretive and analytical skills when working with literary texts;
- Increased motivation and engagement, as reported in reflective surveys.

Students emphasized that literary texts allowed them to visualize cultural contexts, empathize with characters, and compare historical norms with modern societal values. The findings indicate that literary texts are effective in developing country-specific cultural competence among German language learners. Compared to conventional textbook instruction, literature-based teaching promotes deeper engagement, reflective thinking, and communicative practice. Project-based activities reinforce the integration of language learning with cultural understanding, promoting skills such as critical analysis, empathy, and intercultural awareness. Challenges include the need for careful text selection to match proficiency levels and teacher guidance for navigating complex historical or philosophical concepts.

Conclusion. The findings of this study demonstrate that integrating literary texts into German language instruction significantly enhances the development of country-specific cultural competence among university students. By engaging with authentic narratives, learners gain insight into the historical, social, and moral dimensions of German-speaking societies, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural norms, values, and practices. The structured methodology - combining lexical-cultural analysis, interpretive discussions, and project-based assignments - proved effective in simultaneously promoting linguistic proficiency, cognitive engagement, and intercultural awareness. The study highlights several key outcomes. First, students exhibited measurable improvement in cultural competence, demonstrating increased ability to interpret cultural signals, analyze social dynamics, and reflect critically on ethical and historical issues. Second, literary-based instruction enhanced learner motivation and engagement, providing meaningful contexts in which language and culture were intertwined. Third, the pedagogical approach supported the development of transferable skills, including critical thinking, empathy, and cross-cultural communication, which are essential in contemporary globalized educational and professional environments.

However, successful implementation requires careful consideration of text selection, proficiency levels, and pedagogical scaffolding. Teachers must provide guidance for interpreting complex cultural and philosophical content and facilitate discussions that promote reflection and intercultural comparison. This study also suggests avenues for further research. Longitudinal studies could investigate the sustained impact of literary-based instruction on cultural competence development. Additionally, integrating digital resources, multimedia, and intercultural exchange programs could further enrich the learning experience. Finally, comparative studies across different foreign languages and cultural contexts would contribute to

a broader understanding of literature's role in fostering intercultural competence. In conclusion, literary texts represent a powerful tool for developing country-specific cultural competence in German language learners. By providing authentic cultural contexts, promoting interpretive thinking, and integrating language learning with cultural reflection, literature-based pedagogy equips students with the skills necessary to navigate complex social environments, engage empathetically with diverse perspectives, and participate effectively in an interconnected world.

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