What does a Belgian-American « literary scholar » know about intercultural competence?

I was a little anxious about answering this question when I was first approached about participating in this event. There are 2 typical responses from a language professor, trained in literary studies when asked about intercultural competence. The first is that, as a language professor, trained in literary studies, everything I do in the classroom automatically qualifies as cultural (both big and little "c"). The other reaction is a deep fear that the seemingly innocent words « intercultural competence » are, in fact, part of some hideously complicated jargon beyond the reaches of my disciplines and that I, in fact, know nothing of this concept. I was, then relieved to note in the literature I got my hands on, that there exists great elasticity in the definition of this competence. And that I could, somewhat plausibly, claim some familiarity with the teaching of this animal.

It would be an error, of course, for literary scholars to think that simply by teaching literature in another language, we can automatically instill intercultural competence in our students. It is important to decide on intercultural competence as a learning objective, to make this objective clear to the students (as Kara suggested) and to adjust our teaching to enhance this goal.

Students of French at Webster these days are no longer drawn to the language primarily through its literature. It is far more common to find students motivated by a passion for international relations, human rights, voice studies or by non-academic interests like travel or family connections. In our department’s recently rearticulated mission, therefore, literary competence has become secondary to intercultural competence. But literature retains an important role in furthering cultural objectives. After all most of the faculty teaching language and culture were themselves trained in literary programs and improved their linguistic and cultural competence in great part through the exploration of literature from across the world.

Briefly then, I believe that literature, and literature taught as literature and not just as examples of authentic language texts prepares students to successfully communicate interculturally. This is achieved by teaching students cultural information, but also , and I will concentrate on this today, by developing their attitudes, skills and strategies for communicating with someone from another culture.
The simple gesture of picking up the book and beginning to read requires a curiosity on the part of the student and a willingness to engage in an exchange (forget for a moment that that curiosity and willingness are strongly motivated by the professor’s syllabus and gradebook).

Communicating with an author through text also requires a language that is, to a certain extent, shared. Literary encounters can thus push students to seek multiple and implicit meanings behind each word and to question the effect of syntax on meaning. Understanding that meaning encompasses more than the direct translation of words, is of course, a basic tenet of intercultural studies as well.

Kara spoke to us of the importance of establishing a relationship in intercultural encounters. Implicit in every literary text is a relationship between an author and a reader. Detecting that voice (or those voices) and seeing how perspective affects the narrative is at once the foundation of literary and cultural analysis. Ideally, a student enters into this literary relationship, ready to temporarily suspend judgment. For both the literary and the non-literary intercultural encounter, this openness is essential. In neither, however, must it remain permanent, fixing the student in an absolute cultural relativism. After reading, the student will analyze the text, and this will inevitably involve some form of judgment. In the literary classroom, students almost always begin this criticism with a comment on the characters (pity the professor who attempts to teach texts without characters!). Students want to be able to identify with characters, failing to do so could result in a rejection of the text. Here again, the intervention of the instructor to nuance students’ literary analysis can simultaneously further their intercultural competence. Why has this all-important identification with the characters failed? Did the student unwittingly misconstrue a character’s attitude? Balk before an unfamiliar emotion? Feel uncomfortable with a character’s decision? Was the character’s way of expressing himself/herself off-putting to the student and why? Did the narrator of the text present him/her in such a way that the student was predisposed to dislike the character? And when, indeed, the characters are meant to be repulsive to us, what values do we share with the author and her/his culture that ensure that we do despise the villain?

Trying to identify with a particular literary character in a course I’m teaching this semester, one of my students regretted that he could not be reading from a vantage point other than that of an American or of a Frenchman. Just by imagining the advantages of assuming some distance from his own cultural paradigm, he was, in fact, on his way to assuming a "third place" between cultures. The instructor, too,
often assumes that “third place.” S/he can model a kind of biculturalism by detecting and pointing out students’ false assumptions of similarity or stereotypes. Since the instructor can intercede when the author-student relationship cools or breaks down, the intercultural exchange becomes more of a conversation than a dialogue.

The professor’s role, however, is not to tell the students what the text means, but to enable them to construct meaning themselves through the text. Claire Kramsch reminds us, however, that this does not imply that students are free to create any meaning¹. By correcting false cultural or linguistic assumptions or excessively ethnocentric interpretations, the professor stands in for the culturally other interlocutor, the author, who is not present to respond. The instructor’s ultimate goal is to instill culturally sensitive reading skills in the students who will then be better prepared, on their own, to negotiate future interactions with cultural others, both through text and direct conversation.

Of course, literature has shortcomings as a tool for teaching cultural competence. Literary language may not resemble oral communication at all, say in certain esoteric poems. Nor does written literature offer a dialogue in real time. Different too is the control students retain over the exchange, able to stop reading or resume reading when they feel like it. And finally, students lack a real and personal engagement with the author.

The fact that literary language is not “typical” language does not have to be seen as a problem, though. The reading of a literary text offers the novice cultural explorer, not only an authentic, but also a more individualized expression of the target language, as Kramsch notes². This can help students recognize and learn to overcome one of the primary recognized obstacles of intercultural communication: anxiety. Students who have never been exposed to language beyond the primarily learner-oriented versions in the language classroom, often experience difficulty in exchanges with non-academic natives who speak with personal idiosyncrasies and unpredictable vocabulary. A student in such an encounter may feel surprise, frustration, and dismay at this unconventional use of language. In the literary classroom the instructor can hopefully transform these negative feelings into a lesson on the skills and strategies necessary to recreate meaning out of complex, unfamiliar language. Yes, the world is brought ever closer to us, as Kara

² Kramsch 130-131.
indicated. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we are more exposed to otherness. Very often we can choose how and when and whom we encounter beyond our cultural context. Increasingly people can pick to interact only with those just like them (in whatever way their Facebook page defines this). The confrontation with otherness through world literature can therefore usefully and relatively painlessly expose students to less familiar encounters.

If we see the reading of literature as practicing intercultural communication (emphasizing the development of the understanding aspect), the absence of an immediate response from a culturally distinct interlocutor, does not have to invalidate the experience. Not only does the staggered interaction between author and reader lower the aforementioned student anxiety, it also lessens the likelihood that the student reader will make hasty assumptions or react with unguarded ethnocentrism, responses that can quickly sabotage intercultural exchanges. An encounter where the student has time to reflect upon his/her reaction is conducive to deeper self-examination and affords the student the priceless luxury of rereading before jumping to any conclusions. All of these advantages promise a positive experience for the intercultural novice. The ability of the student to control the relationship, although unrealistic, also builds confidence for future exchanges. And thoughtfully designed writing assignments can provide initial training in responding and engaging more actively in an intercultural exchange. Through written responses to the literary text, students seek a perspective that respects the text while also giving expression to their own cultural beliefs and values.

Ultimately, to achieve intercultural competence, students must confront risk and directly engage with an other. And when students take that step, and find themselves face to face with someone from a distinct cultural context, their familiarity with literature will provide one more gift towards intercultural competence—something to talk about.