

# Narrative Matters in Intercultural Learning – contributions from Jerome Bruner

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## Abstract

This article will argue that literary texts, or 'narrative as art form' in Jerome Bruner's phrasing (1986, p.15), can act as a catalyst for intercultural learning. Jerome Bruner, inter alia, has developed concepts that contribute to clarify and account for the inherent connection between the experience of reading literary texts and interculturality. Bruner's view of culture as a forum, a space of negotiation, of interpretation, of (re)creation of meaning, seems most appropriate from an educational perspective informed by intercultural objectives. Intercultural learning is a complex process of (re)negotiating meaning and interaction with literary texts is a powerful means in contributing to this as it offers cultural forms within contextualized settings. As readers realize that products, values and beliefs correspond to social and cultural constructions and that cultural differences come from the way different cultures re-present reality, they become more competent interpreters and readers of our fascinating and problematic world. Our society is markedly heterogeneous. The more conscious the reader is of how his/her actions are culturally determined, the more sharply he/she can assume or oppose them. Ultimately the value of literary texts in this perspective lies in contributing to an appreciation of diversity and to an awareness of realities as created and of interpretation and negotiation as tools to mediate our relations with one another.

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## Keywords:

intercultural; Jerome Bruner; literary texts

## Questions narratives dans l'apprentissage interculturel - Contributions de Jerome Bruner

**Résumé:** Cet article fait valoir que le texte littéraire, ou "narrative comme forme d'art" selon les termes de Jerome Bruner (1986, p. 15), peut agir comme un catalyseur pour l'apprentissage interculturel. Jerome Bruner, entre autres, a développé des concepts qui contribuent à clarifier et à justifier le lien inhérent entre l'expérience de la lecture du texte littéraire et l'interculturalité. Le concept de culture de Bruner comme un *forum*, un espace de négociation, d'interprétation, de (re)création de sens, semble la plus appropriée dans une perspective éducative informée par des objectifs interculturels. L'apprentissage interculturel est un processus complexe de (re)négociation du sens et l'interaction avec le texte littéraire est un puissant moyen d'y contribuer car il offre des formes culturelles contextualisées. Au fur et à mesure que les lecteurs réalisent que produits, valeurs et croyances correspondent à des constructions sociales et culturelles et que les différences culturelles proviennent de la façon dont les différentes cultures représentent la réalité, ils deviennent des interprètes et des lecteurs plus compétents de notre monde fascinant et problématique. Notre société est notoirement hétérogène. Plus le lecteur est conscient de la façon dont ses actions sont déterminées culturellement, plus il / elle sera capable de les assumer ou de s'y opposer. La valeur du texte littéraire selon cette perspective est de contribuer à une appréciation de la diversité et à une prise de conscience de que les réalités sont construites et que l'interprétation et la négociation sont des outils de la médiation de nos relations avec l'autre.

**Mots clés:** interculturel; Jerome Bruner; texte littéraire

## Aspectos de la Narrativa en el Aprendizaje Intercultural – contribuciones de Jerome Bruner

**Resumen:** En este artículo se argumenta que el texto literario, o la 'narrativa como forma de arte' en palabras de Jerome Bruner, puede actuar como catalizador para el aprendizaje inter-cultural. Jerome Bruner, entre otros, ha desarrollado conceptos que contribuyen a clarificar y justificar la relación inherente entre la experiencia de lectura del texto literario y la interculturalidad. El concepto de cultura de Bruner como foro, espacio de negociación, de interpretación, de (re)creación de significados, es muy apropiado a una perspectiva educativa formada por objetivos interculturales. El aprendizaje inter-cultural es un proceso complejo de (re)negociación de significados y la interacción con el texto literario ofrece una contribución inestimable al proporcionar el contacto con formas culturales inscritas en un contexto. A medida que los lectores cobran conciencia de que productos, valores y creencias corresponden a construcciones sociales y culturales y que las diferencias culturales provienen de los diversos modos en que diferentes culturas representan la realidad, se vuelven intérpretes y lectores más competentes del fascinante y problemático mundo en que vivimos. Nuestra sociedad es marcadamente heterogénea. Cuanto más consciente sea el lector del hecho de que sus acciones están determinadas culturalmente, con mayor eficacia podrá asumirlas u oponerse a ellas. El valor del texto literario desde esta perspectiva se basa, principalmente, en su contribución a la apreciación de la diversidad y a la toma de conciencia de que las realidades se construyen, en cuanto la interpretación y la negociación son herramientas que usamos para mediar nuestra relación con los otros.

**Palabras clave:** inter-cultural; Jerome Bruner; texto literario

## Aspectos da Narrativa na Aprendizagem Intercultural – contributos de Jerome Bruner

**Resumo:** Neste artigo argumenta-se que o texto literário, ou a 'narrativa como forma de arte' nos termos de Jerome Bruner (1986, p.15), pode actuar como um catalizador para a aprendizagem inter-cultural. Jerome Bruner, entre outros, desenvolveu conceitos que contribuem para clarificar e justificar a relação inerente entre a experiência de leitura do texto literário e a interculturalidade. O conceito de cultura de Bruner como um forum, um espaço de negociação, de interpretação, de (re)criação de significados, é muito apropriado numa perspectiva educacional informada por objetivos interculturais. A aprendizagem inter-cultural é um processo complexo de (re)negociação de significados e a interação com o texto literário um contributo inestimável ao proporcionar o contacto com formas culturais inscritas num contexto. À medida que os leitores se apercebem que produtos, valores e crenças correspondem a construções sociais e culturais e que as diferenças culturais provêm dos diferentes modos como diferentes culturas representam a realidade, tornam-se intérpretes e leitores mais competentes do mundo fascinante e problemático em que vivemos. A nossa sociedade é marcadamente heterogénea. Quanto mais consciente o leitor estiver do facto de que as suas acções são influenciadas culturalmente, mais eficazmente poderá assumi-las ou contestá-las. O valor do texto literário nesta perspectiva, baseia-se, essencialmente, na contribuição para a apreciação da diversidade e consciencialização de que as realidades são construídas e a interpretação e a negociação ferramentas que usamos para mediar a relação com os outros.

**Palavras chave:** inter-cultural; Jerome Bruner; texto literário

## Introduction

One of Jerome Bruner's often cited French authors is André Gide. At the turn of the century, Gide (1900) wrote the following passage on the power that literature performs on readers:

*J'ai lu ce livre; et après l'avoir lu je l'ai fermé; je l'ai remis sur ce rayon de ma bibliothèque, - mais dans ce livre il y avait telle parole que je ne peux pas oublier. Elle est descendue en moi si avant, que je ne la distingue plus de moi-même. Désormais je ne suis plus comme si je ne l'avais pas connue. - Que j'oublie le livre où j'ai lu cette parole: que j'oublie même que je l'ai lue; ne me souviennne d'elle que d'une manière imparfaite - n'importe! Je ne peux plus redevenir celui que j'étais avant de l'avoir lue - Comment expliquer sa puissance? (Gide, 1900, p.19).*

More than a century after these words were written, this remains a valid and compelling question. How can we explain the power that literature brings about in its readers? How are readers changed as a result? In his attempt to answer his own question, Gide focuses on self-awareness. In a mirror-like manner literary texts would reveal the reader a part of him/herself that had remained unknown till then. It will, however, be the entry into a foreign, unfamiliar world that makes the process of self-awareness possible. This in turn will generate change: "Désormais je ne suis plus comme si je ne l'avais pas connue".

Literary texts direct readers to two different spaces simultaneously, the social, historical, cultural space of the text and the readers' subjective inner space of emotions and experiences. As readers interact with the text, negotiate meanings and explore the deepest layers of their selves they are transformed. These ingredients, self-awareness, transformation, negotiating the unfamiliar, amongst others, will help to explain how literary texts may turn out to be a favourable space for intercultural learning. I will argue that literary texts, or 'narrative as art form' in Jerome Bruner's phrasing (1986, p.15), can act as a catalyst for intercultural learning. Jerome Bruner, inter alia, has developed concepts that contribute to clarify and account for the inherent connection between the experience of reading literary texts and interculturality. As reading implies a meeting with the culturally unknown, it challenges our assumptions and beliefs, compelling us to reconsider them from different perspectives.

### 1. Culture

Bruner<sup>1</sup> shares with anthropology, for instance with Geertz, a concept of culture as an ambiguous text constantly in need of interpretation by the participants. Therefore, the cultural dimension manifest in literary texts does not

mean to merely identify descriptive cultural content but instead to meet the strange familiarity of alterity. This implies a move away from a concept of culture as mere cultural products and cultural rules of behaviour<sup>2</sup> to "(...) the idea of culture as implicit and only semiconnected knowledge of the world from which, through negotiation, people arrive at satisfactory ways of acting in given contexts" (1986, p.65). As Phipps and Gonzalez (2004, p.45) claim, culture is now understood as a verb or an adjective rather than a noun which reifies. It is precisely this dynamic, implicit and often invisible behaviour of culture that is taken into account in intercultural studies, very much in the sense here detailed by Bruner: "The most general implication is that a culture is constantly in process of being recreated as it is interpreted and renegotiated by its members. In this view, a culture is as much a *forum* for negotiating and renegotiating meaning and for explicating action as it is a set of rules or specifications for action" (1986, p.123).

In this negotiation process the mutual use of a language is of central importance in understanding cultural otherness. Bruner has addressed this by referring to the "two-faced" nature of language since "(...) it serves the double function of being both a mode of communication and a medium for representing the world about which it is communicating" (1986, p.131). This argument plays a foundational part when considered in the context of foreign language education.

## 2. The language-culture relationship

The assumption that language and culture belong to a single universe is shared by scholars whose professional interests range from anthropology (e.g. Attinasi and Friedrich) to modern languages (e.g. Phipps and Gonzalez), pedagogy (e.g. Byram) and literature (e.g. Bredella, Delanoy).

Jerome Bruner shares this premise: "(...) - language – can never be neutral, (...) it imposes a point of view not only about the world to which it refers but toward the use of mind in respect of this world. Language necessarily imposes a perspective in which things are viewed and a stance toward what we view" (Bruner, 1986, p.121). This aspect becomes particularly relevant for the area of foreign language learning, for example, making it therefore difficult to conceive of a lingua franca without consideration of the inherent cultural dimension of languages (comprehending historical and symbolic facets).

In intercultural studies language and culture are not viewed as separate entities but interact at several levels. Metaphors may serve as an example of the language-culture interface. Cultural key words, as suggested by Byram, may also reveal how cultural meaning may be attached in a particularly intense way to

some terms. Holme explains how the formulation of conceptual metaphor and the consequent construction of abstract thought are the product of the mutual influence of language and culture. *Metaphors we Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) is a well known reference in developing the argument that languages influence the speakers to view the world differently according to the metaphors used: "Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people" (1980, p.3). The language-culture relationship is therefore dynamic; language shapes reality and is shaped by it.

At the root of intercultural education there is the belief that learning a foreign language implies effectively understanding the socio-cultural values, beliefs and attitudes that are inscribed in a language. This also means that the aim of intercultural education is not so much the teaching and learning of linguistic and cultural content (declarative knowledge) but rather the negotiation of identities cultivating a better understanding of cultural otherness (procedural knowledge). As Byram reminds, people from different cultures not only speak different languages, they inhabit different worlds: they select and interpret information from their environment differently. Phipps and Gonzalez, who coined the term *linguaging* applied to the process of learning modern languages as learning to live with cultural otherness, argue that cultural life is not a "revealed truth but a dynamic process and practice" and that the search is "... for the relationships, encounters and changes that are the foundation of the engagement with the social that we understand by culture" (Phipps and Gonzalez, 2004, p.51).

It follows that Bruner's view of culture as a *forum*, a space of negotiation, of interpretation, of (re)creation of meaning, seems most appropriate from an educational perspective informed by intercultural objectives. Literary texts have a role to play here and are found to be able to act as a catalyst for intercultural learning while addressing the complexities of cultural identity in a globalized world.

### 3. Literary texts and interculturality

There is an inherent connection between reading literary texts and being intercultural.<sup>3</sup> The term 'intercultural' has been used in many different contexts<sup>4</sup> and not necessarily always in the same sense. It becomes pertinent to clarify its use as "(...) the capacity to reflect on the relationships among groups and the experience of those relationships. It is both the awareness of experiencing otherness and the ability to analyse the experience and act upon the insights into self and other which the analysis brings" (Alred, Byram & Fleming, 2003, p.4).

Thus, in the case of the literary text in particular, meaning is not *in* the language but rather is constantly negotiated and derived from specific contexts. This context includes what is outside and inside the minds of readers. In this sense we may realize that literary texts are found at the intersection of different spaces: the recreated fictional space of the Other, of the unfamiliar and the readers' own personal, subjective space of emotions, values and beliefs. The cultural identities of readers play, therefore, an essential role in the interaction, or better 'transaction' (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.xvi), with literary texts. Rosenblatt's choice of the term 'transaction' (that she acknowledges having borrowed from John Dewey) clarifies the type of interaction between reader and text: "*Transaction* (...) permits emphasis on the to-and-fro, spiralling, nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text in the making of meaning" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.xvi). Cultural identities and personal identities are not static and monolithic but rather dynamic, creative and in the process of becoming.

#### 4. Meaning

Meaning is mutually created through communication in both cases – literature and culture – and interlocutors are socially and culturally contexted.<sup>5</sup> In other words, intercultural learning is a complex process of (re)negotiating meaning and interaction with literary texts is a powerful means in contributing to this as it offers cultural forms within contextualized settings.

In a way, all meaning is a form of translation and when it comes to literary meaning, a reader can interpret a text in various ways, even in various ways simultaneously. Therefore, meaning is underdetermined and ambiguous because it is a culturally mediated phenomenon. Since texts require readers as active agents, meaning is always within a process of *becoming*. Bruner used the expression "biology of meaning", recognizing that meaning depends upon "an *interpretant* - a representation of the world in terms of which the sign-referent relationship is mediated" (Bruner, 2002, p.69).

In terms of cultural meaning, one can say that 'culture' itself may be treated as a 'text' that cultural actors 'read' for their own guidance. The intercultural perspective is again informed by an anthropological view: "Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape" (Geertz, 1993, p.21). This also implies that just as with literary readings and interpretations, the process is never to be completed in the sense of arriving at a definitive conclusion.

All relationships (the one between a literary text and a reader included) imply the continual (re)negotiation of meaning. Therefore, social realities are

subjectively constructed and are therefore intrinsically tied to one's perceptions of the world. Understanding what is said does not always mean to understand what is meant. As a result language is one of the key means through which cultural meanings are built and negotiated.

## **5. Context**

The basic premise is that language-and-culture are two concepts interplaying at several levels and meaningful when governed by a particular context. Bakhtin, an author so concerned with the immense plurality of experience, manifest in what has been termed "other-voicedness" (Holquist, 2002, p.xvi), insists on the primacy of context over text, as in his concept of 'heteroglossia'. The foreign culture is treated as a specific meaningful context, and so is language since, as Bruner above states, languages are inseparable from worldviews and from the actual viewers' subjectivity. In this sense, what we know is always relative to a point of view and gaining awareness of our own perspectives allows for open-mindedness, to consider and negotiate differences in world-views (Bruner, 2002). Moreover, Bruner clarifies that negotiating difference does not imply forcing the cultural actor, or reader in the current perspective, to abandon his/her own cultural formation or identitary values: "I take open-mindedness to be a willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without loss of commitment towards one's own values" (Bruner, 2002, p.30).

In my opinion, the contextualization factor assists the reader in taking into account the complex relations between the social and the individual being. While the individual may be seen as belonging to a larger group, he/she still preserves some independence that can be expressed at several levels such as the intellectual, the moral, the ethical or the political. Therefore, as social theory demonstrates, the social formation of individuals does not entirely shape the members of a group. Moreover, the concept of culture, even if used in the sense of a larger group's nationality, is not a fixed entity but is instead in a constant dialectic process adjusting and changing.

## **6. The value of literary texts in intercultural perspective**

Literature often depicts the tensions and the interaction between collective and personal identity. Being able to problematize this complex relationship produces complex impressions in the reader. Therefore individuals and social types emerge in their contextual complexity and are not reduced to fixed categories or generalizations.

Literature enables the study of the complexity and variability of human relationships. This involves the reader in actively interpreting relationships while

capturing the dynamism and inherent mutability manifest in cultural forms. Therefore individuals and social types emerge in their contextual complexity and are not reduced to isolated or fixed categories that are already the result of a particular study. This 'openness' allows the reader to constantly and creatively update meaning formation. Texts are seen as an open-ended negotiation of meaning derived from a certain context. Through reading literary texts and creating imaginary worlds, readers facilitate change, making it possible to formulate alternatives and imagine possibilities, challenging social and cultural conventions and beliefs.

As several authors point out, fiction is a lie but what it simulates can communicate the experience of living virtually a certain reality.<sup>6</sup> Bredella and Delanoy note that "Art defamiliarizes our everyday experience but its aim is not to separate us from the world but to renew our relationship with it" (Bredella & Delanoy, 1996, p.xiii). In fact, literature has the power to defamiliarize our cultural assumptions, making the familiar strange, and contributes to raising awareness of reality as a construction, in an anthropological perspective. Bruner has called this process "to subjunctivize": "I have used the term "to subjunctivize", to render the world less fixed, less banal, more susceptible to recreation. Literature subjunctivizes, makes strange, renders the obvious less so, the unknowable less so as well, matters of value more open to reason and intuition" (Bruner, 1986, p.159).

Bruner further explains this process by describing three features of narratives: *presupposition*, implying the creation of implicit rather than explicit meanings; *subjectification*, meaning the depiction of reality through the consciousness of protagonists in the story; *multiple perspective*, standing for observing the world through a set of prisms. These three features together succeed in *subjunctivizing reality* (Bruner, 1986, pp.25-26) which therefore seems to present significant advantages in terms of intercultural experience through literary texts. *Presupposition* may be said to require interpretation as a tool to infer and elaborate or construct meanings. Readers need to challenge the boundaries of their world knowledge to be able to contend with gaps, ambiguities, uncertainty and pay attention to details so that eventually they build meanings. These skills are, naturally, needed in an intercultural experience. Interpretation is, in fact, a central operation in our lives and literature offers an unlimited source of the process of interpreting, which is crucial, in Iser's words: "Interpretation, then, is a never-ending process of directing ourselves in the world, and literature provides an exemplary form of this process in that it is a reaction to the world accompanying its ever-changing situations. (...) Man is an interpreting animal, and in this respect literature is an integral feature of our makeup (Iser, 1993, pp.209-210). Bruner corroborates this view: "Once one



takes the view that a culture itself comprises an ambiguous text that is constantly in need of interpretation by those who participate in it, then the constitutive role of language in creating social reality becomes a topic of practical concern" (Bruner, 1986, p.122).

*Subjectification* is a process made available through the power of imagination. It favours decentring as the reader temporarily adopts a different consciousness. Consequently, as Bruner also underlined, literary texts affect readers (1986, p.4). As readers live through a fictional experience, they develop feelings of empathy and identification to the point of the experience becoming part of the reader, as in Gide's account above.

The literary experience provides the opportunity to help readers think, feel and reflect on their emotional involvement. As the experience of reading literary texts invites the reader to live temporarily through a different context, the experience of living in this secondary world under unfamiliar values, attitudes and beliefs promotes reflection. The reflective process occurs within a context constructed through the interaction of the reader with the text thus contributing to complexify the experience of otherness and is able to generate transformation and self-awareness.

Multiple perspectivism or the ability to consider different, unconventional points of view on a certain situation is a natural consequence of the readers' immersion in an imagined world and another relevant contribution to the intercultural operation of decentring. The intercultural and educational value of appreciating another's viewpoints and of relativising one's own cultural perspectives seems apparent.

The common idea that different readers will produce different perceptions of the same text is not a disadvantage. Translation illustrates this well as no text is understood at a single level. The fact that readers are in culturally different positions may, in fact, enrich the readings of texts with a new sensitivity. Readers need to bring their frames of reference to build meanings in the text and construct a virtual world of their own. One of the steps in preparing learners to confront another culture interculturally is to direct their look towards themselves. Self-awareness is a necessary stage in promoting de-centring from one's culture, a key feature of interculturality. Moreover, the literary experience entails tolerance of uncertainty and dealing with ambiguity.

As some authors have underlined (e.g. Iser and Bredella) reading literary texts involves detachment, taking a moment to stand back from involvement and reflect on that same participation in the text. The tension between involvement and detachment is decisive, meaning that the reader becomes simultaneously participant and observer (Bredella). Aesthetic reading (emphasising the dynamic per-

sonal interaction between text and reader) contains a reflective element: literary texts draw upon the reader's experiences to challenge them: "When we talk about the process of distancing oneself from one's thoughts, reflecting better to gain perspectives, does this not imply something about the knower?" (1986, p.129).

To this aspect Bredella adds that the literary text itself also questions established beliefs and values thus promoting a critical evaluation. The tension between experience and reflection parallels involvement and detachment in aesthetic experience. In doing so readers may become critical of one's cultural values, beliefs and practices.

## Conclusion

Contemporary societies are markedly heterogeneous. The more conscious the reader is of how his/her actions are culturally determined, the more sharply he/she can accept or resist them. As readers realize that values and beliefs correspond to social constructions and that cultural differences come from the way different cultures re-present reality, they become more competent interpreters and readers of our fascinating and problematic world. The pedagogical and educational value of this process is noteworthy from the standpoint of intercultural learning and justifies the need for more empirical research on the actual experience of intercultural learning through literature. More recently, Warner and Gramling, for example, propose a new model for second language literature teaching that aims at exploring literature as a form of social practice, and the authors underline "This is perhaps one of the most powerful lessons at the higher levels of foreign language study: recognizing that one's angle on the world (or a text) is not commonsensical or truthful. Advanced language learners are not just incrementally honing their proficiency; they are accessing and inhabiting new frameworks of conceptualization as well" (Warner & Gramling, 2011, p.64).

I agree with Bruner as he speaks of "personal transmutation," "(...) making the meaning in the text one's own meaning as a reader" (1986, p.153). From an intercultural perspective this represents a fundamental operation: the reader incorporates the meaning of an unfamiliar reality in him/herself, very much in the same sense that Gide indicated above, "je ne la distingue plus de moi-même". This is a strong idea illustrating how through literary texts readers can investigate who they are and who they might become.

To sum up, I read in Bruner's words a central aim for intercultural education through literary texts: "(...) to create in the young an appreciation of the fact that many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meanings by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other" (Bruner, 1986, p.149).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bruner's support of a constructivist philosophy is significant for the concept of intercultural-ity at use: "We know the world in different ways, from different stances, and each of the ways in which we know it produces different structures or representations, or, indeed, realities" (1986, p.109). The literary text favours decentring, a central operation in becoming intercultural, since reading implies a reconstruction of realities by the reader who will adopt different perspectives.
- <sup>2</sup> . It should be added that intercultural competence does not demand a full, integral knowledge of the foreign culture. Intercultural learning is lifelong learning and does not aim, unlike language teaching, at cultural learning as a finished process.
- <sup>3</sup> . This conjunction has been explored in Matos.
- <sup>4</sup> . See, for example, Dearthoff.
- <sup>5</sup> . "... culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described" (Geertz 14). Therefore 'culture' and cultural representations should be examined with an emphasis on the contexts in which meanings are constructed and negotiated. This is a most important argument for the use of literary texts.
- <sup>6</sup> . Abdallah-Pretceille and Porcher observe how the term 'realism' as a literary device is but a means of illustrating the world. Literary realism does not correspond with any type of reality and readers should be aware that the text should not be used as a mere descriptive document of reality. Therefore, the referential dimension in the literary text remains polysemic and subject to interpretation. Bruner contributes to this view stating that "... in most human interaction, "realities" are the results of prolonged and intricate processes of construction and negotiation deeply imbedded in the culture" (Acts of Meaning 24).

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