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## FOSTERING CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES THROUGH LITERARY SHORT STORIES

### Abstract

The paper presents the methodology and results of a study carried out in an advanced Business English (BE) course at the Faculty of Economics, University of Split, Croatia. The study proposes the inclusion of literary short stories as a means to develop students' cross-cultural communicative competence through the implementation of two constructivist approaches, the Inquiry-based approach and the Transactional approach. The aim of the study was to find answers to the following research questions: (1) what are the students' perceptions of the cross-cultural issues in BE with respect to the study of literary texts; (2) can the selected constructivist approaches to literary texts engage students in the negotiation of meaning while developing their positive attitude towards cross-cultural tolerance; (3) what is the students' perception of the relationship between the constructivist approach to studying literary texts as a means to enhance cross-cultural communicative competence and the perceived effects of the approach. The results of the study reveal a positive correlation between the implementation of constructivist approaches to short literary texts and the students' increased ability to analyse cultural content embedded in the texts as well as to question cultural stereotypes.

99

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### Key words

Business English, cross-cultural communicative competence, literary short stories, constructivist model, inquiry-based approach, transactional approach.

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## Sažetak

Rad predstavlja rezultate istraživanja sprovedenog među studentima III godine Ekonomskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Splitu (Hrvatska) koji pohađaju napredni kurs poslovnog engleskog jezika. Istraživanje se zasniva na primeni konstruktivističkog modela učenja na analizu pripovedaka s ciljem podsticanja međukulturne komunikacione kompetencije studenata. Za potrebe istraživanja odabrana su dva konstruktivistička pristupa – istraživački pristup učenju i transakcioni pristup učenju. Istraživanje je imalo za cilj da odgovori na tri glavna pitanja: (1) kako studenti doživljavaju moguću povezanost međukulturne dimenzije i pripovedaka u nastavi poslovnog engleskog; (2) mogu li konstruktivistički pristupi književnom tekstu motivisati studente na pregovaranje o značenju u procesu razvijanja pozitivnih stavova o međukulturnoj toleranciji; (3) kako studenti doživljavaju povezanost konstruktivističkih pristupa izučavanju književnih tekstova u cilju podsticanja međukulturne komunikacione kompetencije i očekivanih rezultata takvih pristupa. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju na postojanje pozitivne korelacije između primene konstruktivističkih pristupa na kratke književne tekstove i povećane sposobnosti studenata da analiziraju kulturni sadržaj unutar takvih tekstova, kao i da preispituju kulturne stereotipe.

## Ključne reči

poslovni engleski jezik, međukulturna komunikaciona kompetencija, pripovetke, konstruktivistički model učenja, istraživački pristup učenju, transakcioni pristup učenju.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The nature of interactions taking place between native and non-native speakers in the globalised world of business testifies to the fact that the cultural dimension increasingly plays a critical role for successful communication to take place. To that effect, Alfred and Byram (2002) point out that “in any society which expects its education system to prepare people for living in an internationalised culture and globalised economy, the acquisition of cross-cultural competence is clearly desirable” (2002: 351). Cross-cultural communicative competence refers to one’s ability to understand people from different cultures and to engage with them in effective communication. This means that by acquiring specific knowledge, skills and attitudes, one will be able to develop mutual understanding with individuals from different cultures in order to achieve one’s personal and professional goals. For those goals to become attainable in a business context, they need to be addressed

within a wider framework of ESP instruction. The first step in helping ESP students acquire necessary cross-cultural communicative competencies is to enable them to rethink and confront their own cultural beliefs and biases (Bodycott & Walker, 2000) with those of another culture. One of the ways to tackle that delicate issue is to introduce appropriate authentic materials in the ESP classroom. Such materials provide students with a wide array of varied and complex cultural input, reflecting authentic language as it is used in a real life context.

The role of literary texts as an invaluable source of authentic language in an EFL setting is not a novel approach. However, it was only in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty-first century that research into the role of authentic literature in EFL has been gaining momentum (Hall, 2005). Literary texts in EFL have been described as a source of variety and enjoyment (Huda, 2012), as the means of bringing the dimension of attractiveness and effectiveness in English language teaching and as an inherently authentic input for language learning (Shrestha, 2008). However, research (Thom, 2008) also points out the importance of well-planned lessons and skilful and effective teacher monitoring of classroom interaction when introducing literary texts in an EFL setting.

Using appropriate literary texts for achieving specific goals in an EFL classroom is not an easy task. Due to its stylistic complexity as well as its authenticity, literary text lends itself as an invaluable source for developing sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence which constitute the main components of the communicative competence models (Shazu, 2014). Within that discussion, text selection is a 'crucial factor' (Maley, 2001: 184) in making literature a valuable resource for linguistic development. Several elements need to be considered in this process (Collie & Slater, 1994; McRae, 1997), such as the students' linguistic proficiency, their literacy background, their age and level of understanding, and the suitability of the text.

Although some researchers (Kramersch, 2001) claim that teachers are often hesitant to use literary texts in the foreign language classroom, others claim that, nonetheless, literary materials are ideal for promoting meaning negotiation and providing access to cultural knowledge (Gómez Rodríguez, 2012). Meaning negotiation which happens during the interaction with authentic literary texts is also pointed out by McKay (2001), Amer (2003), and Savviduo (2004). Therefore, in order to train ESP learners to achieve a desired level of cross-cultural communicative competence through the study of literary texts, Business English instructors need to carefully combine the selection of literary texts with a suitable methodological approach to tackling this area of authentic language. It has been suggested that using short stories in EFL is an invaluable tool for teaching different aspects of foreign cultures (Thakarar, 2015). Short stories are by their nature intimate, personal explorations of self in a certain cultural environment. As such, they provide a multi-layered and a quite challenging source of complex insights into the intricacies involved in foreign cultures. When they are positioned within a suitable methodological framework, they invite students to go beyond the surface

meaning and explore the underlying symbols and meanings. As suggested by Thakarar (2015), short stories can provide students with an opportunity to self-evaluate their own culturally-determined worldviews and contrast them with those expressed in the story itself.

Considering prior research in the application of the constructivist approaches to using literary texts in an advanced EFL classroom (Gómez Rodríguez, 2012), the aim of this paper is to present an approach to literary texts in a Business English setting which combines two constructivist pedagogical models, the Inquiry-based approach and the Transactional approach. The present study involved an advanced third-year Business English class at the Faculty of Economics, University of Split, Croatia. The aims of the study were: (1) to find out the students' perceptions of the cross-cultural issues in BE with respect to the study of literary texts; (2) to determine the degree to which the selected constructivist approaches to literary texts engage students in the negotiation of meaning while developing their positive attitude towards cross-cultural tolerance; (3) to investigate the students' perception of the relationship between the proposed approach to studying literary texts as a means to enhance cross-cultural communicative competence and the perceived effects of the approach.

## 2. THE SOCIO-CONSTRUCTIVIST MODEL AND LITERARY TEXTS IN ESP

In recent decades constructivism has emerged as a dominant paradigm in education (Kaufman, 2004). Its roots are in the notions of cognitive and social constructivism. Cognitive constructivism is grounded in the work of Piaget (1970) and Piaget and Inhelder (1971) and puts forward cognitive development and individual construction of knowledge. Social constructivism focuses on social construction of knowledge and is underscored in the work of Vygotsky (1978). As suggested by Shi (2013), constructivist-based pedagogy entails construction of knowledge as an integral part of the process of knowledge acquisition. Within the constructivist pedagogical framework all the activities are learner-centred and task-based, students constantly perform hands-on and minds-on tasks which require communication and constant exchange of ideas. Moreover, such activities are purposely designed to disturb students' set values, but also to guide them through the ways to cope with unexpected input and towards re-shaping their personal and cultural values. Although spontaneity is one of the key components in a constructivist-based classroom, well-structured scaffolding is crucial if the teaching process is to be successful (Shi, 2013).

Among many variations in defining the socio-constructivist teaching and learning, there are four generally accepted aspects of constructivist learning (Good & Brophy, 1994): (1) *Learners construct their own meaning*. In order to make knowledge useful in a new situation, students must make an effort to manipulate

and create knowledge to fit their belief system; (2) *New learning builds on prior knowledge*. Students must make connections between old and new information; they must compare, question, and challenge old information and beliefs in order to make progress in learning; (3) *Social interaction enhances learning*. Constructivist learning functions best in social settings in which students have the opportunity to exchange conflicting ideas; group activities provide students with an appropriate setting for learning from their peers; (4) *Authentic tasks enhance meaningful learning*. This means that classroom activities need to be chosen to simulate those that will be encountered in real life.

During a constructivist lesson, students work on the tasks and the instructor intervenes only when guidance is required (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004). Essentially, this means that the instructor presents the problem and lets the students do the work on their own with careful supervision. Such process leads to the multifaceted development of the self (Bean & Moni, 2003) which is, in turn, reflected in the way individuals perceive themselves and the 'otherness' and in the way they accept or reject cultural identifications different from their own. Essentially, the socio-constructivist learning model presumes that the standard classroom procedures are turned upside down whereby no lectures, demonstrations, or presentations are used to facilitate learning. For the purpose of this study two constructivist approaches were selected – the Inquiry-based approach and the Transactional approach, both sharing similar pedagogical concerns.

## 2.1. Inquiry-based approach

The term Inquiry-based learning (Suchman, 1968 as cited in Dewey, 1997) proposes that Inquiry is the active pursuit of meaning involving thought processes that change experience to bits of knowledge. By focusing on concepts such as 'observing', 'theorizing', 'experimenting' or 'theory testing', Suchman suggested that the purpose of each contact with an unfamiliar concept has to be the creation of new theories that would make new experiences less strange and more meaningful. In order to develop their own inquiry skills, students need to be motivated by intrinsic interests (Banchi & Bell, 2008) which motivate them to successfully conduct a specific research study. Based on the framework of levels suggested by Banchi and Bell (2008), at *Level 1* the teacher develops questions and a procedure that guides students through the targeted activities; at *Level 2* students are expected to formulate explanations of their findings and analyse the data they found; *Level 3* is the phase of guided inquiry where students are responsible for designing and following their own procedures and communicate their results. Finally, *Level 4* of the Inquiry framework is dedicated to open reflection about how students followed through with the required procedures and what they gained out of it. The main feature of this methodological approach is that it highlights students' opinions in the classroom. Students are constantly engaged

in a process of asking and answering questions in order to discuss and share personal views, reactions and ideas based on the reading of literary texts. Such a learning outcome cannot easily be achieved with standard EFL textbook reading passages which concentrate almost exclusively on the factual contextual explicitness with hardly any implicit or personal involvement (DiNapoli, 2009).

This aspect is also pointed out by Gellis (2002) who stresses that Inquiry-based learning facilitates and promotes active acquisition of cultural elements in the foreign language and enables the teacher to create productive learning environment. This type of learning opens up students' minds to cross-cultural experiences and enhances the language learning process while students negotiate meaning during their interaction with authentic literary texts (McKay, 2001). As the study will demonstrate, such interaction inevitably results in students' enhanced empathy and tolerance for diversity.

## 2.2. Transactional approach

This approach was first proposed by Rosenblatt (1995) while Amer (2003) elaborates on it by explaining that the Transactional approach conceives the reading process as a communicative interaction between the reader and the text. Amer suggests that learners need to be given the opportunity to be exposed to cross-cultural experiences through the negotiation of meaning that happens during their interaction with authentic literary texts (2003: 63). In other words, readers relate their past experiences, previous knowledge, beliefs and assumptions to the perspectives outlined by the text while constructing meaning which is the result of this transaction. Thus, meaning is no longer pre-determined but shaped by individuals engaged in a dialogue with one another. Amer also argues that the Transactional approach should become the basis of foreign language teaching today since the teacher is expected to accept "multiple interpretations of the text" rather than just one pre-set interpretation (Amer, 2003: 68). This model provides a humanistic framework for the teaching of literature in an ESP context since literature deals with human life thus revealing real human experience. In light of this, the Transactional approach to the study of literature can act as a means to increase students' awareness of the humane aspect of communication in the cross-cultural context as well as a means to understand different aspects of human behaviour in different cultural backgrounds.

Considering the above said, we point out three main arguments for using short stories through the socio-constructivist paradigm with the aim of fostering students' cross-cultural communicative competence. Firstly, such texts invite readers to view subjectively a certain nation or an ethnic group by portraying specific values, prejudices and stereotypes. Secondly, they offer readers the opportunity to exchange their culturally restricted points of view with the main character in the narrative, or with the narrator telling the story. Thirdly, such



literary texts guide their readers through the reading process by encouraging 'efferent reading' (Rosenblatt, 1995), which intensifies readers' interaction with the text, encourages their predicting abilities, their emotional responses, as well as their ability to form hypotheses during the reading process.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The main goal of this methodological approach, as stated earlier, was to foster Business English students' cross-cultural communicative competence by using literary short stories. With that goal in mind, the selection of stories was guided by the key cross-cultural factor we wanted to target, i.e. a contrast between the dominant, capitalist western cultures and the exploited third-world minority cultures dependent on the dominant western capital.

The study was implemented in the middle of the 2013/14 Spring semester and it was divided into three stages. The first stage started off with the analysis of students' awareness of the cross-cultural dimension of communicating in the Business English settings. This was followed by the second stage of the study in which students were involved in a number of targeted reading and writing tasks connected to the selected short story. In the third stage we focused on recording the students' achievements at writing tasks and on finding out their attitudes towards this form of acquiring cross-cultural knowledge. To this end, two data collection instruments were implemented. In order to compare and contrast the students' writing tasks to the desired cultural objectives of this study we used a purposely designed Framework of research objectives (Table 4). The Framework, containing eight specific cross-cultural objectives, served as a classroom observation log for recording the students' progress throughout the study. In order to find out the students' attitudes towards this methodological approach and its perceived impact on their cross-cultural knowledge, a questionnaire was presented to the students (Table 5). The results of these two data collection instruments are presented in section 4 of this paper.

The study was implemented across two weeks or four forty-five minute classes in addition to the preparatory work set as a homework assignment.

#### **3.1. Participants**

The study involved 25 native speakers of Croatian, third-year students of Economics and Business Studies at the Faculty of Economics, University of Split, Croatia. Prior to the course in Business English 6, in which the study was carried out, the students had attended five semesters of Business English instruction as a part of their undergraduate studies. The English language syllabus they were exposed to in previous BE courses included reading 'authentic' texts in their

textbooks, working on specific language features in those texts guided by targeted exercises, acquiring field-specific terminology and syntactic features of English for Economics and Business. Prior to the present study, the students had not been exposed to any significant discussion on intercultural and cross-cultural issues in international business contexts. Consequently, the students' awareness of key terminology in this study was scarce and had to be dealt with in some depth. Terminology was discussed one week before the work on the short story began. By the time the introductory questionnaire (Table 1) was implemented, the students had already gained enough information about the key concepts and they were able to provide informed answers to the set questions.

### 3.2. Procedure

This paper presents the methodological approach as applied to the short story "The Circuit"<sup>1</sup> by the Mexican writer Francisco Jiménez. Such a choice of short story was determined by the instructor's wish to focus students' attention on the importance of minority voices in the American culture. According to Almerico and Silverman (2008), minority voices are the aesthetic expression of the groups that are outside the socio-political mainstream of a nation and, as such, shed a different light on the official political paradigms of society.

#### 3.2.1. Stage 1: The awareness-raising stage (*Inquiry-based approach in practice*)

This stage opened with a questionnaire designed for diagnostic purposes (see Table 1 and Figure 1). The aim was to find out the students' level of awareness of cross-cultural issues in learning English as a foreign language.

As expected, a large number of students (52%) were either unfamiliar with the key term of this study or were not sure what it stands for. Since the Croatian high school EFL curriculum does not allow for much attention to authentic literary texts, it came as no surprise that majority of students could not make a connection between literary texts and minority cultures. These findings result, quite expectedly, in the fact that students (72%) do not see literary texts as a valuable source of cultural information about English-speaking cultures or minority voices in them. The results are indicative of a lack of authentic literary

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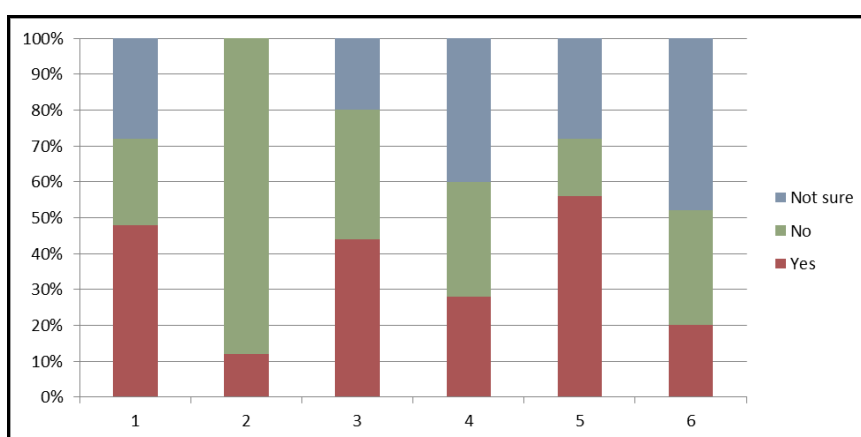
<sup>1</sup> The underlying idea of the story is that even if one comes from an underprivileged social background, they can still achieve great things in life if they apply themselves. Born in Mexico in 1943, Francisco Jiménez grew up in a family of migrant workers in California. Jiménez spent much of his childhood moving around California with no permanent home or regular schooling, yet despite incredible odds he went on to have a distinguished academic career. A graduate of Santa Clara University, he also attended Harvard University and received both a Master's Degree and Ph.D. from Columbia University.



input in Croatian secondary and tertiary English language curricula, particularly in view of the fact that at tertiary level students are entirely focused on mastering a field-specific content in a limited time which, again, does not leave much space for the instructors to work on wider cultural content. The results for question 6 indicate a profound lack of understanding of the possibilities of reading and analysing literary texts in English and they suggest a strong degree of self-centredness, and when it comes to contrasting one's native culture to a foreign one. This result was not surprising considering the structure and the content of the media input students have been exposed to in recent years.

QUESTIONS	ANSWERS NO. OF STUDENTS (%)		
	YES	NO	NOT SURE
1 Do you know what the term 'cross-cultural communicative competence' stands for?	12 (48%)	6 (24%)	7 (28%)
2 Have you ever read an authentic literary text in English in any of the previous English language courses?	3 (12%)	22 (88%)	0 (0%)
3 Do you know what the term 'minority literature' stands for?	11 (44%)	9 (36%)	5 (20%)
4 Do you believe that reading literature in English could provide a realistic picture of English-speaking and non-English-speaking cultures?	7 (28%)	8 (32%)	10 (40%)
5 Do you expect that the study of minority literature will provide you with useful insights into issues such as diversity, global interconnectedness, and human rights?	14 (56%)	4 (16%)	7 (28%)
6 Do you believe that studying literary texts in English can improve your understanding of your own culture and how it relates to other cultures?	5 (20%)	8 (32%)	12 (48%)

**Table 1.** Students' awareness of cross-cultural issues in learning English



**Figure 1.** Students' awareness of cross-cultural issues in learning English – graphic representation

To prepare for the tasks at hand, students were assigned two awareness-raising homework tasks. They were required to:

- do a cross-cultural quiz (*Appendix A*) posted on the institutional Intranet targeting specific areas of cultural difference between the USA and Mexico. This awareness-raising exercise aimed at raising the students' awareness of cultural stereotypes about the two cultures that clash in the analysed short story. Students were presented with the table containing only the headings on the right which comprise elements of cross-cultural communication. The target stereotypes were provided on a separate list. While matching each item to the correct heading in the table, students were prompted to express their views on those stereotypes, to express their agreement or disagreement based on prior knowledge of the two cultures, and to relate these stereotypes to those commonly attached to their own native culture.
- download the short story "The Circuit" from the Intranet and to familiarise themselves with the text<sup>2</sup>. The first challenge they were faced with in contact with the text was the fact that pages of the story were not numbered, leaving the students the task to find out their proper order. The second challenge was that the ending and the title of the story were left out. These would be dealt with in detail in Stage 2 of the study.

To help students deal with this complex task, a Study guide (*Appendix B*) was prepared and uploaded to the Intranet. In the following class, the issues raised were discussed and students' homework assignments were analysed.

### 3.2.2. Stage 2: 'Getting into the story' ( *Transactional approach in practice* )

In this stage of the study, students were required to relate their personal experiences and opinions to the experience of the main character in the story. For this purpose, they had to complete two writing tasks.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Circuit" is a story about a family of Mexican migrant workers who are illegally working on different harvest sites in the American South. Since they move very often, after each harvest is completed, all their belongings can fit into a ramshackle car, with a huge cooking pot strapped on top of it. The story is told in the first person by Panchito, the second eldest child of the Family. Through the eyes of a child, he describes his life torn between changing different harvest sites and equally swiftly changing schools. Always a stranger, as a non-native speaker, Panchito is regularly rejected by other school children and this deepens his sense of isolation and loneliness. A glimmer of hope for a better life appears when an English teacher from the school he is currently attending offers to teach him how to play the trumpet so he can join the school orchestra.

*Writing task 1*

Students were asked to provide their own endings for the story and to suggest a title for the story. This task was assigned as a pair work 90-minute class activity. Table 2 contains the sample of four endings and matching titles produced by four pairs of students.

PROPOSED ENDINGS	PROPOSED TITLE
<b>(A):</b> As Panchito gets off the bus, he tells his mother and father about the kind teacher at school. His parents are so happy about him that they decide to remain in the area and to try and find alternative jobs so they don't have to move so often. His father and brother succeed in finding a more permanent position and Panchito manages to remain in school. He does well, learns to play the trumpet and even gets an offer to join the school orchestra. Unfortunately, due to a sudden disease that hits cotton fields the family has to leave the area in search of another employment elsewhere. Panchito is suffering for having to leave another school, but he climbs into his father's old car with tears in his eyes.	"Life goes on"
<b>(B):</b> Panchito never tells his parents about the situation with the teacher who offered help with his English and with learning to play trumpet. He is afraid that his parents will try to stay in town because of him. He knows that there are no jobs for them in that town and that they will probably have problems with the locals because they are illegal immigrants. He believes that it is much wiser not to stay in one place for a long time, so he decides not to mention anything to his mother and father.	"Back on the road"
<b>(C):</b> Panchito's father suddenly gets ill but they can't afford the hospital and he dies very soon. Panchito and his brother Roberto have to quit school and earn enough money to provide for the whole family. Panchito never goes back to school again and ends up doing the same job as his late father did. After his mother dies of hard work and exhaustion, Panchito and his brother take the family back to Mexico. With some money they managed to put aside, they buy an old farm and start a new life there. They swear never to go back to America.	"Life-changing events"
<b>(D):</b> One day, when Panchito returns home from school, he realises that his family had moved on and left him behind. He finds a touching note, written by his father, explaining the reason behind their decision. The note said that they could not bear to see him unhappy because of constant moving and changing schools, and they had made provisions for him to be taken in by a local couple who felt sorry for the boy. Since they did not have children of their own, they adopted Panchito. Although he was always sad that he was left behind by his family, Panchito had a happy childhood, and had everything the other children had.	"A fresh start"

**Table 2.** Summary of the students' written work – alternative endings for the short story and proposed titles

When compared to the numbered items in the Framework of research objectives (Table 4), it is evident that *Ending A* demonstrates that the principal cultural conflict of the story had been recognised and worked into the solution (objectives achieved: 2, 6, and 7). This ending shows authors' feeling for the climactic end typical for the short story. Reference to the boy's feelings shows a successful shifting of perspective and empathy for the boy. *Ending B* demonstrates even stronger consideration for culturally determined behaviour than the previous one.

The shifting of cultural perspective from one's own to the fictional character's is successful. The title "Back on the road" suggests a strong empathy for the boy (objectives achieved: 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7). *Ending C* shows a somewhat unrealistic ending, considering the family's financial situation. However, it does show empathy and understanding towards the family's struggles and, by mentioning the children's decision never to return to the US, correctly pinpoints the cultural conflicts present in the text. This ending did not consider the possibility of Panchito following a school career which proves that these students have managed to relate the cultural reality of illegal immigrants in today's globalised world to this specific experience (objectives achieved: 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8). *Ending D* seems far-fetched and unrealistic. Here, students did not consider the rest of the story which does not contain any indication of such a turn at the end. This ending, as well as the matching title, focuses solely on Panchito's faith, neglecting the rest of the characters. In spite of that, cross-cultural objectives 1, 4, 5, and 6 were achieved.

Following this task, the actual title and ending of the story were revealed which prompted another lively class discussion during which students' written work was compared to the actual text. Students were motivated to explain their work and relate it to the original work since, by that point, they felt a strong bond with the story and its characters and they argued their point convincingly.

### Writing task 2

This task required even more creative effort from students since they were asked to write an entire scene to fit somewhere into the story. They worked in groups of three or four and they were given freedom as to the choice of characters in the scene. For the purpose of illustrating students' achievement two samples of written work are presented in Table 3 below.

#### SAMPLE 1

Parents are having a conversation about Panchito's future

*Mother:* We should have stayed there. It wasn't so bad. Panchito could go to school. Be happy.

*Father:* We can't allow him to go to school. It's a waste of time. We need the money. Of he likes it, he will never want to go back to the field.

*Mother:* But he could have a better life than we have. He is only a child, he deserves a chance to get good education. He deserves a better future. It's not fair to keep him in the field. It's too hard for him.

*Father:* School can't feed hungry mouths. It's no use, he won't go back there. I need him to work with me and Roberto.

*Mother:* But if he gets good education he can become an American citizen one day. He can find a good job, have a decent life. He can even earn more money that you ever will with picking cotton.

*Father:* He will never have a good life here. He is just a poor Mexican boy. Even the children at school make fun of him because of his accent and the tone of his skin. His faith is being here with us.

*Mother:* He will be so sad, again.

SAMPLE 2
<p>Panchito and his brother Roberto</p> <p><i>Roberto:</i> Why are you so sad, Panchito?</p> <p><i>Panchito:</i> I'm sad because we are leaving again and I have to quit school. I hate that! I've just made a new friend there.</p> <p><i>Roberto:</i> A new friend? Who is he, are you in the same class?</p> <p><i>Panchito:</i> No, he is a teacher at school. He teaches me English and he is nice to me. He said he would teach me how to play the trumpet.</p> <p><i>Roberto:</i> Panchito, English is not so important for you. We are Mexican, it's not our language. You see that we can find work even if we don't speak English.</p> <p><i>Panchito:</i> I know, mother and father don't need it but I want to do something else, I don't want to pick cotton all my life. I want to be an American one day, a real American, to live in a big house and have money. I want to speak English like all the other children at school.</p> <p><i>Roberto:</i> You have your family, we love you very much. Come to me when you need a friend. They will never accept you.</p>

**Table 3.** New scenes written by students (group work)

As evident from Sample 1, students decided to write a scene that includes Panchito's parents. By this time in the study, students had already developed strong empathy for Panchito and his problems and they obviously felt the need to assume a 'parental' role. Students portrayed Panchito's father as a pragmatic man and head of the family who does not approve of his son's wish for proper education. His mother, by contrast, hopes for a better life for her sons and she seems to be devising a plan to persuade her husband to allow the boy to go to school. This shows that students clearly fulfilled all of the cultural objectives set forth by the Framework of research objectives. From the second sample we see that students opted for an imaginary conversation between Panchito and his elder brother Roberto. Roberto's feelings about their way of life are revealed to some extent, showing the creative writing potential of this group. His part of the dialogue shows an insight into the socio-cultural aspect of his family's status of illegal immigrants in the US. Roberto is aware that his labour provides for a great deal of the family's income. Here Panchito points out that the knowledge of English could help him later in life which verifies the fact that the students successfully dealt with the target cultural objectives listed in Table 4 below.

The students' recognition of the importance of learning English is a crucial cultural step forward achieved by this task since they realised a strong sociological potential of learning English in order to integrate well into an English-speaking society. Both ideas constructed in this dialogue not only reflect the awareness of the central immigration conflict in the story, but also students' cross-cultural awareness. The written tasks produced by students are evidence of their awareness of the impact of one's own cultural attitudes on the way they relate to other cultures, accept other cultures and communicate with other cultures.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During this research two data collection instruments were implemented: a) direct observations in class following the Framework of research objectives (Table 4); and b) survey in the form of a questionnaire (Table 5).

Classroom observation notes were taken in order to obtain a sample of descriptive information about different stages of the study. The aim was to find out whether a certain cultural objective had been reached, i.e. whether students had demonstrated that the work on the literary text resulted in the understanding and the acquisition of cross-cultural competences (1-8).

GOALS OF THE STUDY	OUTCOMES OF CLASSROOM OBSERVATION
1 Identify elements from a foreign culture in the literary text	During classwork, the students can name these elements and relate them to the target culture; they can provide the rationale for their decisions.
2 Identify a conflict between cultures in the literary text and determine its causes	The students are able to identify and explain the cultural conflicts present in the text and to reflect upon the roots of those conflicts.
3 Identify national/racial stereotypes and culturally based prejudice in the text	The students can determine the behaviours of the characters that had been influenced by national/racial stereotypes, prejudices and overgeneralisations based on the lack of knowledge about other culture.
4 Express their views and opinions about cultural elements present in the text	The students are able to identify and compare various culturally determined behaviours of characters in the text; they also attempt to explain the reasons behind certain characters' attitudes and compare them to their own in similar situations.
5 Compare their own culturally determined attitudes with those of their colleagues	Although the students disagreed on some points raised by the cultural conflicts and behaviours based on national stereotypes, they tried to explain the reasons underlying their attitudes which, in turn, contributed to their group bonding.
6 Provide alternative endings/scenes for the target text by demonstrating empathy and understanding for the fictional characters	When asked to try and provide a short alternative ending for the story/scene for the target text, and to do the task in groups of three, they managed to set aside their individual opinions and to consider other team members' views and suggestions; at this stage they demonstrated the ability to accept and understand other people's reasons for certain decisions and to reach a common goal.
7 Speak from an insider's perspective while developing alternative endings and additional scenes for the target text	In this phase of work, there were difficulties since some students found it difficult to open up towards a foreign (in this case Mexican) culture and to assume a role of an insider; however, they managed to overcome these obstacles by referring primarily to the emotions guiding the actions of characters in the story; such more 'personal' approach proved to be the easiest way to form a correlation between the actual characters and themselves in a similar situation.



<p>8 Compare and contrast the cultural elements present in their alternative written pieces with those in the model text and comment on the similarities/differences observed; explain the influence of their own cultural origin in the writing task</p>	<p>Considering that this was the most demanding challenge within the study, the students did surprisingly well; not only did they show their creative side and the ability to work in small groups, but they also found it easy to provide the rationale behind the scenes they produced. When asked to relate their own culturally determined attitudes to those of the characters in the story, students were able to reflect even on the downsides of their own cultural backgrounds in different cultural settings.</p>
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**Table 4.** Framework of research objectives and the observed outcomes

The second set of data was obtained by the questionnaire presented one week after the work on the story had been completed. The aim was to find out students' attitudes on the methodological procedure implemented and its perceived impact on their cross-cultural competences.

I PART QUESTIONS ABOUT THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH	ANSWERS NO. OF STUDENTS (%)		
	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT SURE
1 The Study guide for reading the short story is a useful tool for enhancing critical thinking and for motivating students for class discussion.	21 (84%)	1 (4%)	3 (12%)
2 Activities in Stage 1 were appropriate for preparing students for dealing with cultural issues in a literary text.	23 (92%)	2 (8%)	0 (0%)
3 Writing activities in Stage 2 were motivating and their level of difficulty was appropriate for my language level.	16 (64%)	6 (24%)	3 (12%)
4 This approach to literature encouraged me to reconsider my attitudes towards the role of literature in learning a foreign language.	16 (64%)	1 (4%)	8 (32%)
5 Using literature in this way encourages weaker and less confident students to participate in discussions.	17 (68%)	5 (20%)	3 (12%)
6 This approach to literature motivates me to read short stories to improve my English.	14 (56%)	3 (12%)	8 (32%)
7 With this approach I learned how to read 'between the lines' and this encourages me to read literature in English for my own pleasure.	15 (60%)	4 (16%)	6 (24%)

II PART QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF THE STUDY ON CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE	ANSWERS NO. OF STUDENTS (%)		
	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT SURE
1 The implemented approach to the story provided plenty of cultural information about the two cultures.	19 (76%)	2 (8%)	4 (16%)
2 The implemented approach enabled me to gain a realistic image of two different cultures.	15 (60%)	4 (16%)	6 (24%)
3 The implemented approach made us aware of possible cultural tensions that can happen between two different cultures.	21 (84%)	0 (0%)	4 (16%)
4 The implemented approach puts emphasis on commonalities and bonds as well as differences between different cultures.	18 (72%)	3 (12%)	4 (16%)
5 This sort of approach to literature contributes to building a culturally pluralistic classroom environment which promotes respect and acceptance of diversity.	20 (80%)	0 (0%)	5 (20%)
6 Comparing different cultural attitudes through literature helps me become a 'citizen of the world'.	19 (76%)	3 (12%)	3 (12%)
7 This approach to literary texts helps me understand cross-cultural issues such as racial prejudice, ethnic prejudice, and national and cultural stereotypes.	22 (88%)	1 (4%)	2 (8%)
8 Studying literature with this approach encourages respect, understanding and courtesy towards people who come from cultures different from my own.	20 (80%)	1 (4%)	4 (16%)

**Table 5.** Questionnaire on students' attitudes to the methodological approach and its perceived outcomes

Considering the results outlined in the framework of research objectives, introducing short literary texts in a Business English curriculum is both beneficial and necessary for fostering students' cross-cultural competences. Having in mind that ESP teaching nowadays focuses its attention on discipline-specific language content, curricular divergence of this kind represents an almost revolutionary change in standard ESP practice. Positive reactions observed in the students'

questionnaire imply that they are open towards different methodologies and that they are willing to engage in active reading of literary texts. When compared, the students' creative achievements and their perception of the methodological approach implemented during the study, listed in the first part of the questionnaire (Table 5), indicate that the achieved cross-cultural communication skills are positively correlated to the type of methodological support they were provided with in the course of the study. Furthermore, the fact that the students were able to produce new 'literary' text on their own from a literary input, which is an entirely new practice to the students at the Faculty of Economics, can be directly correlated to the fact that majority of them found the activities motivating and appropriate for their language level (64%). Additionally, 56% of the students stated that, as a direct result of this approach to cultural content, they feel motivated to further pursue reading short stories in English to improve their vocabulary, and that they feel encouraged to read literature for their own pleasure. In the context of Business English, affective strategies are considered extremely relevant tools for achieving successful cross-cultural communication. However, attitudes, which account for a third of the total spectrum of cross-cultural competences outlined earlier in the paper, are clearly the weakest link in Business English courses. This is evident from the students' answers to questions 1-8 in the second part of the survey (Table 5). Based on the students' answers, we can conclude that the socio-constructivist approach to literature positively influences their attitudes to cultural content present in English literary texts.

The socio-constructivist approach combined with the use of short literary texts resulted in enhanced understanding of intricate cultural clashes that can happen between two entirely different cultures. Furthermore, the results prove that by offering students an alternative view of complex cultural issues that they have to deal with in international settings, we are not only helping them gain in-depth knowledge about a foreign culture, but we are also fostering specific skills needed for effective communication in international business contexts. Thus, students are encouraged to reconsider the *attitudes* towards a foreign culture and to be more receptive towards 'otherness' or towards cultural norms different from their own. We consider this the greatest benefit of the proposed methodological approach because that aspect of Business English teaching is the one we find hardest to tackle in the Business English setting.

## 5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The study presented in this paper aimed at introducing the possibility of implementing two socio-constructivist methodological approaches to literary short stories for the purpose of fostering Business English students' cross-cultural communicative competences. Three important pedagogical goals were achieved by the study. Firstly, it pointed out the fact that in a BE setting, where students are

still, to a large extent, subject to passive input from instructors, implementation of a socio-constructivist model of learning helps students become more actively involved in knowledge acquisition, knowledge creation and creative discussion which they often shy away from. Secondly, it determined that the implementation of literary texts as a medium for acquiring cross-cultural knowledge and skills can be beneficial for BE students particularly when we consider the fact that they normally do not have prior experience with constructivist approaches to literature and that they have strong misconceptions about the literary texts as a possible instruction tool. Finally, this pedagogical approach enhanced students' meta-cognitive strategies since it enabled them to take control of the learning process and monitor their own understanding of the tasks at hand.

The socio-constructivist theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Novak, 1998), when implemented to literary texts, enables students to work on problem-solving tasks, manipulate information, express personal views, defend a point of view, analyse socially constructed truths, and address conclusions from the literary works they study. As far as the cross-cultural communicative competences are concerned, this methodological framework opens up numerous possibilities for students. First, it trains them to identify cultural issues in a literary text. Second, it fosters their interacting with the characters in the text from their own culturally-determined point of view. Finally, it develops students' ability to tackle prejudices based on racial and national stereotypes by appreciating and accepting aesthetic manifestations set forth by individuals coming from different cultural backgrounds.

This study has determined that reading a fictional text in a foreign language, forming hypotheses about it, and, finally, producing new scenes for the text develops students' awareness of their culturally determined values and misconceptions which inform their knowledge and attitudes about other cultures. The process of exploration and contrasting of one's own culture and self, which students went through in the course of the study, enabled them to acquire a higher degree of openness to cultural diversity and, thus, enhanced their cross-cultural communicative competence. To sum up, pushing beyond the limits of the prescribed ESP curriculum is not only advisable but expected in the globalised teaching paradigm. We hope that pedagogical benefits gained from this study will enable the proposed methodology to find its way into more Business English courses in the future

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### Appendix A

Cross-cultural investigation on the cultural stereotypes in the USA and Mexico  
(Adapted from *Management in two cultures. Bridging the gap between US and Mexico* [Kras, 2006]).

COMMON CULTURAL STEREOTYPES ABOUT THE USA AND MEXICO		
Country	Mexico	USA
<b>Family</b>	Family is the first priority. Children are celebrated and sheltered. Wife fulfils domestic role. Mobility is limited.	Family is usually second to work. Children often minimally parented; are independent. Wife often fulfils dual roles. Mobility quite common.
<b>Religion</b>	Long Roman Catholic tradition. Fatalistic outlook. "As God wills."	Mixed religions. "Master of own life" outlook.
<b>Education</b>	Memorization. Emphasis on theoretical. Rigid, broad curriculum.	Analytical approach. Emphasis on the practical. Narrow, in-depth specialization.
<b>Nationalism</b>	Very nationalistic. Proud of long history and traditions. Reluctant to settle outside Mexico.	Very patriotic. Proud of "American way of life." Assumes everyone shares his/her materialistic values.



<b>Personal sensitivity</b>	Difficulty separating work and personal relationships. Sensitive to differences of opinion. Fears loss of face, especially publicly.	Separates work from emotions/personal relationships. Sensitivity seen as weakness. Tough business front. Has difficulty with subtlety.
<b>Etiquette</b>	“Old world” formality. Etiquette and manners seen as measure of breeding.	Formality often sacrificed for efficiency. “Let’s get to the point” approach.
<b>Personal appearance</b>	Dress and grooming are status symbols.	Appearance is secondary to performance.
<b>Status</b>	Title and position more important than money in eyes of society.	Money is main status measure and is reward for achievement.
<b>Aesthetics</b>	Aesthetic side of life is important even at work.	No time for “useless frills”.
<b>Ethics</b>	Truth is tempered by need for diplomacy. Truth is a relative concept.	Direct Yes/No answers given and expected. Truth seen as absolute value.

### *Appendix B*

<b>STUDY GUIDE FOR THE SHORT STORY “THE CIRCUIT” BY FRANCISCO JIMENEZ</b>	
1	In the first part of the story, the writer uses a number of words and expressions with negative connotation to describe the environment in which Panchito lives. Identify those expressions and think about how they relate to the context of the story.
2	In what way did the fact that Panchito’s father did not speak English influence the possibility of his children’s inclusion into the American society?
3	How would you comment on Panchito’s ambivalent feelings about finally starting the school year, which he was looking forward to, when he avoids looking at his older brother across the table at breakfast? Do you think that older children in immigrant were discriminated for not being able to go to school and for being forced to do hard physical labour?
4	How would you explain the fact that, after a month at school, Panchito’s best friend is his English teacher, Mr. Lema? Do you think that the boy’s social background is a drawback in this context or does he choose not to get close to the other children for fear of having to leave again soon?
5	Do Panchito’s expectations regarding his position in the American society change throughout the whole story? For better or for worse? Support your answer.