

EÖTVÖS LORÁND TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM

Bölcsészettudományi Kar

***Using proverbs in the language
classroom for the development of critical
cultural awareness***

*Közmondások felhasználása a nyelvórán a kulturális
tudatosság fejlesztése érdekében*

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1. Introduction

“That’s the secret, that’s how langacultures can be connected, that’s how a person can experience culture. The foreground of differences is organized against the background of similarities. You unravel the ways that you and they are not alike until you find a place where you and they are alike. When you find similarities, when you reach common ground, then you can start work on the bridge to cross the space between you and them.”

(Agar 1994: 72)

In the last decades the notion of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has gradually become an imperative in foreign language teaching. At the heart of ICC, although defined in various ways by different scholars, lies the idea that language teaching should not only focus on the linguistic and communicative equipping of learners but shall also entail a preparation for effective intercultural encounters (Gu et. al. 2012: 205). In other words, ICC aims at turning learners into self-reflective mediators able to create bridges of understanding between people of different cultures (Bochner 1981) through attaining critical cultural awareness, “an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures” (Byram 1997: 63). This ambitious goal has set a great challenge for all members in the cosmos of language learning from educational policy makers through course book writers to teachers.

Consequently, the incorporation of the cultural factor into the language curriculum has been investigated by many scholars in the past years. One of the most decisive approaches in the literature in question sets out from the presumption that language teachers do not have to search far for cultural material: language itself is a cultural product and offers an invaluable field of opportunities to discuss cultural issues. As Enyedi (2000: 109) formulates, teaching a language is not merely preparing learners for the intercultural experience, but “meeting the foreign language is in itself an intercultural experience”. However, in terms of practice, i.e. classroom activities and ways of assessment, the exploration of the linguistic-cultural intertwining, labelled as “langaculture” by Agar (1994), is still in its infancy.

One such relatively little researched area is the use of proverbs. Although there is a growing number of proverb-related studies and initiatives (Litovkina 2000; Skopinskaja 2003; Funk 2004, Mieder 2004, Akbarian 2010; Yellin 2012), English proverbs cannot be considered yet an integral part of TEFL (Hanzén 2009; Gözpınar 2014). **The main premise** of the present paper is that proverbs could be regarded as useful tools in the language

classroom: they are not only cultural-linguistic artefacts encapsulating the folk wisdom of the target culture but can also stimulate students to search their own proverb directory and analyse the similarities and differences – thereby setting out on an “ethnographical field trip”, an experience that can lead towards critical cultural awareness.

Following a short overview of the existing literature on ICC and CCA and the application of proverbs in TEFL, the present paper **aims** to summarize and evaluate the results of a mini case study attempting to testify the above premise. The study comprised of 15-minute “English proverbs” blocks held during the English lessons of a Hungarian secondary school’s 11th grade upper-intermediate class. Through the **method** of in-class observation and the analysis of portfolios as well as pre- and post-study compositions written by students, the study attempts to answer the following **research question**: Have students’ critical cultural awareness developed through the introduction of English proverbs and related discussion about English and Hungarian cultures and if yes, what are the main features of this development? In order to investigate this question, Byram’s critical cultural awareness definition (1997) served as prime criteria during the discussion of the results. The last chapter aims to overview the main conclusions as well as reflect on the limitations of the study and identify some potential future research areas.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and critical cultural awareness (CCA)

2.1.1. Theoretical foundations: The emergence and definitions of ICC and CCA

The last decades in the history of language teaching can be regarded as an exemplary illustration of how a branch of science, in this case the theory and methodology of teaching, evolves through the interaction of different concepts and paradigms. The last 40 years witnessed two consequent shifts in the focus of language teaching (Gu et. al. 2012: 205). Firstly, from the 1960s onward it has been more and more agreed that learning a foreign language is not merely learning the grammar and vocabulary but students shall also possess communicative competence, i.e. the ability to *use* the language appropriately. A vast literature has evolved around this concept, with many possible interpretations and models developed by notable scholars such as Chomsky, Savignon, Widdowson, Canale and Swain (Bagaric 2007).

However, the millennium brought another development in the conceptualization of language learning. With global changes taking place, borders being opened and intercultural interactions booming in number came the realization that communicative competence cannot be regarded a universally applicable scheme: while we may be communicatively competent in one culture, in another cultural milieu the same competence would result in communicational breakdowns. The need to prepare learners for effective intercultural communication gave rise to the notion of “intercultural communicative competence” (Dervin 2010).

The intricately multi-faceted nature of the concept of ICC is well illustrated by the numerous ways it has been approached so far. A number of sophisticated efforts were made in the 1980s to develop, validate and alter the conceptualization and measurement of intercultural competence, but, as Spitzberg and Changnon (2009: 9) formulate, “these efforts typically revealed that although the core concept of adaptability may necessarily underlie the concept of intercultural competence, any comprehensive measure would undoubtedly be multidimensional in nature. The question was *which* dimensions, and *why*”.

The 1990s saw an intensive research of these *whiches* and *whys*, with hundreds of different definitions emerging (Dervin 2010). Byram, one of the most notable scholars of ICC defined the concept as the knowledge, skills and abilities to participate in activities where the

target language is the primary communicative code and in situations where it is the common code for those with different preferred languages (1997). Fantini (2000) defined it as the complex of *abilities* needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself, while in Deardoff's (2011) interpretation ICC entails the set of attitudes, approaches, special behavioral and reflection abilities facilitating integration in intercultural situations. According to Neuliep (2009), ICC consists of four dimensions: knowledge, affective, psychomotor and contextual components.

The above inventory shows great heterogeneity. Nevertheless, there is one characteristic detectable in all of the definitions, namely that the main dimensions in the conceptualization of ICC are knowledge and skills as well as attitudinal and interpretative components. The model that has managed best to integrate all of these dimensions into a comprehensive unit was developed by Byram (1997).

	Skills interpret and relate (<i>savoir comprendre</i>)	
Knowledge of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal (<i>savoirs</i>)	Education political education critical cultural awareness (<i>savoir s'engager</i>)	Attitudes relativising self valuing other (<i>savoir être</i>)
	Skills discover and/or interact (<i>savoir apprendre/faire</i>)	

Figure 1: Byram's model of ICC

(Byram, Michael 1997. *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.

Clevedon. p. 34)

Byram identifies four dimensions or *savoirs*. "Knowledge" means general knowledge of the relevant socio-cultural groups and their significant communicative activities and events, "Skills" comprise interpretation and relating as well as discovery and interaction, while "Attitudes" refer to curiosity and openness. Finally, it can be seen that the model is centred around "Critical cultural awareness". In Byram's opinion, this latter concept is indeed the basis of ICC, because it means "an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures" (Byram 1997: 63). That is, it entails learners' ability to reflect upon what they encounter in their own and other cultures and emphasizes the importance of criticality and comparison (Byram 2008: 128).

Byram's model, and especially the emphasis he placed on "Critical cultural awareness" as the core of ICC, has been backed by many both in academia and educational politics. As for theoretical work, several scholars have emphasized the need for this type of awareness. In Stempleski and Tomalin's view (1993), intercultural awareness is the "sensitivity to the impact of culturally induced behavior on language use and communication" and as such should be central in the development of ICC. Pulverness (1995) emphasizes the same when saying that foreign language teaching should include analysis, comparison and contrast. McKay (2002) also pointed out that learners, after having acquired knowledge about the target language community, need to reflect on their own culture in relation to other cultures and try to establish a relationship between their own and other systems. Notions such as "the sphere of interculturality" (Kramsch 1993) or "the mirror principle" (Woodward 2001) are also examples of this idea.

Byram's model has become politically important as well: his interpretation of ICC was applied during the creation of the Common European Framework of Reference and the Language Portfolio. The goal of attaining ICC and CCA has appeared in the white papers of the Council of Europe and the European Union as well as in national curriculums, while EU initiatives such as the "European Year of Intercultural Dialogue" in 2008 also signalled the growing importance of interculturality. Due to its academic and political emergence, the development of intercultural competence and critical cultural awareness has become an imperative in language teaching.

2.1.2. Practical implications for teaching: CCA in the classroom

In parallel with the gradual acknowledgement of intercultural communicative competence as a key component of foreign language teaching, a lively discussion has developed around the need to adapt teaching materials and assessment methods accordingly. Although Dervin (2010) points out that ICC and CCA-related research remains relatively fragmented, and there is little cross-cutting discussion about methodology, one can nevertheless enumerate some notable suggestions made in recent years in terms of teaching materials.

Following the imperative that there should be a stronger focus on increasing learners' cultural awareness in the language classroom, many scholars began examining course materials in order to develop them. In her comprehensive study based on questionnaires and interviews made with teachers of English and French from more than 40 countries,

Skopinskaja (2003) found that in terms of interculturality, coursebooks seemed to have both strengths and weaknesses. Among the positive trends she mentioned an increase in attempts to include intercultural activities and to personalize the foreign language learning process by providing opportunities for exchange of views. However, some negative trends were also identified, such as the stereotypical representation of cultures as well as the subordination of the goal of culture teaching to other goals. It is worth examining these two issues in more detail as they shed light on how a theoretically noble initiative can have serious practical difficulties.

The first problem, i.e. what elements of culture should be taught, is frequently discussed nowadays. As Enyedi (2000: 104) points out, it is very difficult to design a curriculum without making broad generalizations, but on the other hand “if we choose the red buses as part of the curriculum, we are unfair in many ways”. Most of the scholars emphasize that the solution to this problem is to deal not only with the explicit, “touristic” elements of culture but also with the more implicit ones, such as attitudes, values and beliefs, because this is the area providing real opportunity for learners to reflect upon their own and on different cultures, that is, to develop their “critical cultural awareness”. Byram and Morgan (as cited in Saluveer 2004: 21) argue for the application of a “spiral curriculum” during which learners progress from a superficial collection of information to a more complex and abstract analysis. Kramsch (1993) and Skopinskaja (2003) emphasize the same when they point out that the role of comparison should be given much more attention, because this is the process through which students will gain access to more diverse ways of seeing the world, as well as a better understanding of their own culture. As Byram and Fleming (1998: 6) point out, the comparative method is very similar to ethnographic activity: learners engage actively in the interpretations of the world and analyse the shared meanings of both their own and foreign cultures by looking for similarities and differences.

Although they also mention that the practical implications of the above are not thoroughly discussed and “teachers are left to make of it what they can”, there has nevertheless been a growing emphasis on the practical side of the question. One of the most considerable works in this area have been done by Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Dithfurt (2007), who attempted to translate Byram’s model into concrete tasks by identifying how each *savoir* could be developed in the classroom. For “Knowledge” they suggested presenting learners facts (for e.g. authentic materials such as films and texts), working with stereotypes in class and inviting guest speakers. “Interpreting and relating skills” shall be developed by tasks that allow careful reading, analysis and interpretation of texts. Dealing

with the “Skills of discovery and interaction” could entail comparing e-mails, carrying out face-to-face and virtual encounter projects, giving out ethnographic observation tasks, negotiating about cultural misunderstandings and applying role-plays. For the development of “Attitudes” they recommend using brainstorming, visual aids, working with texts to create curiosity and interest, using texts written by or about learners from other cultures telling about their lives as well as bringing cultural similarities in the forefront. As for the central element, i.e. “Critical cultural awareness”, they suggested the critical comparison of how different cultures deal with certain topics.

Byram and Cain’s dual project (1998) is a good example of how the above suggestions can be put into practice. It was carried out in the frame of a civilisation/cultural studies course in French and English schools. While the French project units focused on topics such as housing, education, views of democracy, political institutions, multi-ethnicity and sports in the UK, the English dossiers discussed the issues of family, education, work and regional identity. Despite the difference in topics, the two projects set out from a common ground, namely the use of a comparative approach, the special place allocated to the native culture and a stress on the varied nature of the documents. The scholars experimented with a number of techniques enumerated by Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth: with the aim of exploring and developing students’ ability to analyse and relate different cultures to each other, they applied, for example, discussions and role-plays. Although the issue of criteria to establish exact and differentiated levels of competence remained unresolved, the scholars gave account of a positive reception from the part of students.

The other main issue in connection with the actual realization of ICC and CCA development, as it was identified by Skopinskaja before, is that due to the emergence of the requirement of CCA development the scope of the activity of language teachers have suddenly extended: they simultaneously have to face new responsibilities and focus on their “original” task of teaching the language. Because, even with recent developments acknowledged, they are first and foremost teachers of a *language*, who have to concentrate on the development of linguistic and communicative competence.

However, as many scholars have started to point out recently, a resolution to this problem can be if language itself is used as a means of teaching culture, i.e. “using language to learn - whilst learning to use language” (Byram 2008: 129). The idea of relying upon language itself as a cultural artefact has been suggested by several scholars. Kramsch (1998) points out that one of the most prominent roles of language is that it expresses cultural reality: words uttered by people refer to common experience, facts, ideas or events that are part of a

stock of knowledge shared by their community. But looking upon language as an expression of culture is only one side of the coin. According to Whorf (as cited in Kramsch 1998: 86), language “is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather itself is the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock of trade”. In other words, language and culture have an intricate interaction during which they mutually shape each other. This delicate intertwining is what Agar calls “langaculture” (1994: 71) and this is what Enyedi (2000) emphasizes when saying that meeting the foreign language is in itself an intercultural experience.

However, the exploration of the English language from the point of view of ICC and CCA development is still in its infancy. Skopinskaja (2003) suggested the discussion of idiomatic expressions and exploring parallels in different languages, making students aware of different levels of politeness, as well as inspecting newspaper headlines, advertisements, editorials and comics pages. Another notable example is an intercultural communicational textbook called *Mirrors and windows* written by Lázár, Huber-Kriegler and Strange (2003). This course book consists of seven units, each dealing with a different topic. Each unit starts with an introduction, then gives opportunity for students to reflect on their own culture, followed by a “Discovering other cultures” section. The last and for our present discussion most relevant section is “Language work” where students are invited to read and think about how culture is reflected in language through expressions, sayings and proverbs.

2.2. Proverbs as CCA materials

2.2.1. Definitions and the *raison d’être* of using proverbs for CCA development

As we could see, the suggestions in terms of how language could be explored as a means of ICC and CCA development usually reflect on the culture-conditioned expressions of the language, and as such, proverbs are frequently mentioned among the examples. However, pieces of proverb-related theoretical and practical research have been few in number so far.

There are many possible ways of defining and examining proverbs. A general and widely accepted definition was given by Mieder (2004: 3), one the most important proverb researchers of today. In his formulation

A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.

For the purpose of our paper it is worth stopping by two important features of the above definition. First, proverbs communicate collective wisdom, that is, values important for a community. These values are sometimes universal and apply to all cultures while other times they are culture-specific. Second, proverbs are metaphorical expressions, which means that an abstract idea is many times expressed through the use of images taken from the environment of the community. Proverbs are thus multiply rich in cultural sources and can provide a good source of exploration.

As for the *raison d'être* of using proverbs in the language classroom, there are at least three arguments worth enumerating. Firstly, proverbs are good examples of the delicate intertwining of language and culture. When learners meet with proverbs, they get first-hand experience on how language entails culture-conditioned images and culture-specific connotations. In Schultz's view (as cited in Sinicrope, Norris and Watanabe, 2007), the ability to be aware of the culture-specificity of language is a fundamental first step towards intercultural understanding.

Secondly, besides being cultural artefacts themselves, proverbs also offer a good starting point for "digging deeper". Through the transmission of common wisdom, proverbs can give insight into the values held dear by a community. As MacDougall (as cited in Akbarian 2010: 225) points out, "proverbs can provide a snapshot of other cultures, hence allowing for a more thorough understanding of both language and culture". Mieder (2004) emphasizes that investigation should always be done with reservations so as to avoid making sweeping generalizations, but if cautiously formulated statements are coupled with other arguments (for e.g. personal experience, sociological indicators), it is possible to formulate vivid generalizations.

Finally, proverbs do not only provide a basis for cultural discussion but they can also serve as a floor of comparison, of finding similarities and differences. From our point of view, this is the most valuable and interesting aspect of proverbs. We all have the experience that when meeting with foreign proverbs, we automatically and instinctively search our own proverb inventory as well in order to find connecting points. By doing so, we can embark on an ethnographical "field-trip", a tertiary territory where own values and attitudes are just as much investigated as those of the target culture. If students are invited to such ventures, they can share their perceptions and are encouraged "to make a community of meaning" (Christenbury as cited in Yellin, 2012, p. 99). Funk (2004: 1) speaks of a similar experience when she points out that

Speaking about proverbs goes beyond language boundaries: it opens a door to distinct cultures and to multiple aspects of the human spirit. One draws the conclusion that although each culture has its particularities, there is perhaps much more in common than we think. Commentaries like "Ah, you also say or think so?", "This proverb says the same as our proverb X, but in a different way," "I heard my grandfather say that proverb many times when ...," or "This proverb corresponds to our Y," start an open conversation between the students and the teacher and among colleagues, with no fear of making mistakes and in a new relaxed way.

In this sense, proverbs can orientate learners towards the requirement of becoming an intercultural speaker, i.e. a person who “has a knowledge of one or, preferably, more cultures and social identities and has a capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not yet been prepared directly” (Byram and Fleming 1998: 8).

2.2.2. Proverbs in TEFL

The potential role of proverbs in language teaching has been pointed out by several scholars, such as Skopinskaja (2003), Mieder (2004), Funk (2004), Akbarian (2010) and Yellin (2012). However, at present proverbs cannot be regarded an integral part of teaching English as a foreign language. Hanzén (2007: 22) carried out a piece of research of English textbooks used in the Swedish school system and concluded that “proverbs do occur in both textbooks and in teaching but they do not occur as frequently as other kinds of expressions, e.g. idioms and phrasal verbs”. A study compiled by Gözpinar (2014: 612) among 84 Turkish and Georgian teachers of English revealed a similar conclusion:

Proverbs are found to be given insufficient place in input provided for learners in language classrooms or mostly used as time-fillers. When we check our class course books, we see that proverbs are a small part of language teaching and the materials used in language classrooms ignore proverbs and don't provide exercises for learning them.

At the same time, however, both Hanzén and Gözpinar emphasize that teachers do show an interest towards the application of proverbs in the classroom. Although activities are few in number so far, it is worth taking a snapshot of some interesting and inspiring initiatives. In his

study, Akbarian (2010) worked out the scheme of 10 different sample activities with proverbs: finding equivalents for English proverbs; detecting cross-cultural similarities and differences in proverbs; compiling proverbs around themes; categorizing proverbs as abstract, specific or folklore; tracking down the origin of proverbs; grouping proverbs around the elements of nature; mapping proverbs onto situations; doing scavenger hunts for proverbs in the media; comparing proverbs in the foreign language and completing incomplete proverbs.

Litovkina's exemplary work (2000), as Mieder (2004: 147-8) points out, is intended primarily for Hungarian students, but could be easily adapted for other language learners as well. Her book introduces students to 450 Anglo-American proverbs through presenting them in authentic contexts and applying them in a series of activities that can help learners discover the proverbs' meaning and usage. Another possible application was suggested by Luo (2007), who recommends using proverbs as a means of lead-in. Yellin (2012) has compiled a collection of intercultural proverbs and worked out different ways of applying them: students could be introduced to proverbs through oral and written tasks such as rephrasing pieces, analysing different culturally derived proverbs, using proverbs in the heading of journal entries or expressing proverbs through individual creativity in poetry, prose, music or art.

The intercultural textbook 'Mirrors and windows' (Lázár, Huber-Kriegler and Strange 2003) also aims to explore proverbs in a systematic way. Out of the seven units three contain tasks in the "Language work" section specifically geared towards proverbs: in unit one ("Rock around the clock") students are asked to collect time-related proverbs, in unit three ("Conversation...and silence") they can reflect on whether there is a general wisdom throughout cultures that people talk too much, while unit six ("Bringing up a baby") presents students with an illustrious spectrum of child-related proverbs in different cultures. Finally, it is also worth mentioning an activity file developed by Jonckheere (2007). The folder is made up of two parts: a card game and an activity with Brueghel's painting 'proverbs'. The card game consists of 18 proverbs with their equivalents in 16 different languages and is aimed at encouraging learners to find links between cultures and languages, discussing what makes them different or similar and why. The second part involves searching for, unravelling and discussing the more than 100 Flemish proverbs concealed in Brueghel's painting.

Having taken a snapshot of some exemplary initiatives of recent years, one can detect at least two important features. Firstly, these recommendations all try to go beyond the traditional use of proverbs and explore their potential in developing critical cultural awareness. Jonckheere (2007: 1) sees the biggest advantage of proverbs in their ability to "stimulate reflection of languages and cultures in general and on the long term to develop

plurilingual and pluricultural competence”. Yellin (2012: 100) expresses the same when pointing out that

Students can use critical thinking to analyze these proverbs and understand basic cultural values as well as cross-cultural applications. Educators might challenge students to decode messages and understand why a particular proverb is culture-bound by understanding the people and their cultural norms.

Secondly, while they are similar in terms of their theoretical premise, they offer *different ways* of exploration. Although this variety might indicate the lack of a systematic methodology, it could also be looked upon as an asset. As Akbarian (2010: 236) emphasizes:

It is hoped that the form of activities illustrated here will raise language teachers’ awareness of options available to them, encourage them to experiment with alternative approaches, and take an active role in their own teaching of proverbial expressions. Once equipped with options, teachers can confidently take steps towards raising the consciousness of the learners in this respect. However, studies of experimental nature in different languages are needed to provide empirical data to shed more light on the area.

The research presented and analysed in the next sections attempts to add an element to the collection of studies of such “experimental nature”. Partly relying on the methodology-related suggestions detailed above, partly continuing a proverb-related piece of research of the writer of this paper, the following study aims to examine how dealing with proverbs during the first 15 minutes of every second English lesson for four weeks can exert an influence on learners’ critical cultural awareness.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research aim and research questions

The present study aimed at investigating whether the introduction of English proverbs and related discussion about English and Hungarian cultures contributed to the development of learners' critical cultural awareness. The formulation of the research questions was based on Byram's (1997) CCA definition. According to the author, CCA is the "ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries". In detail it involves the following three sub-abilities:

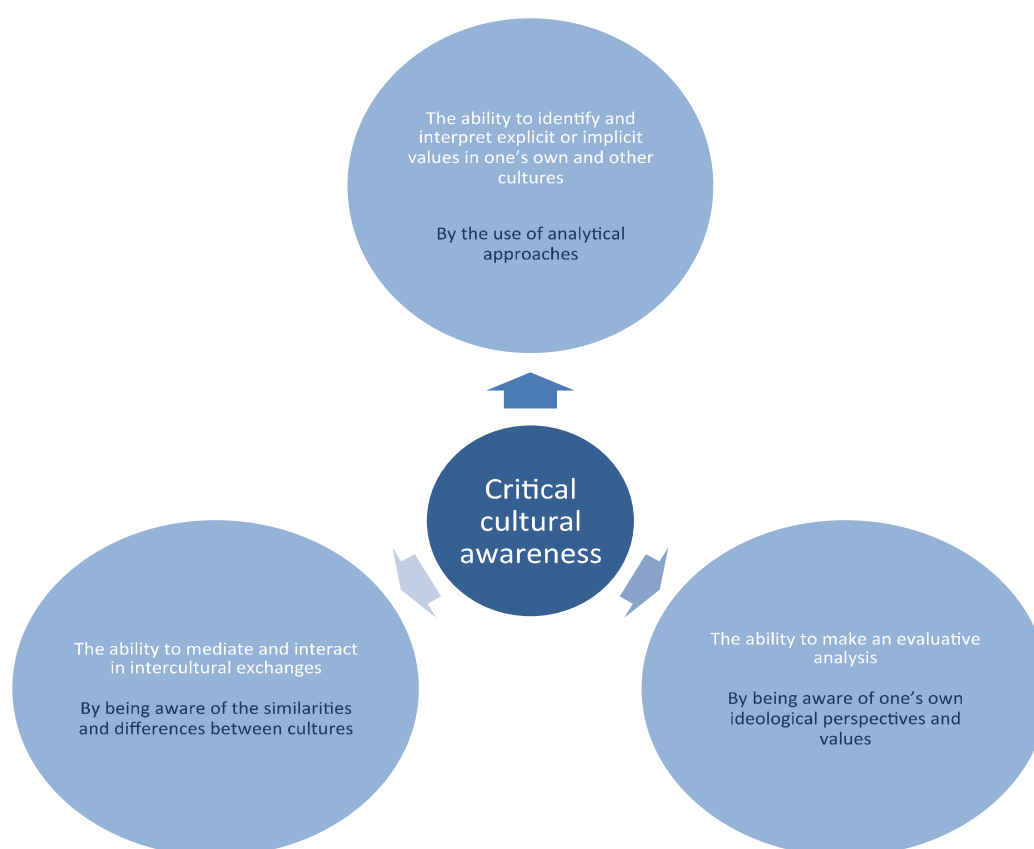


Figure 2: The three elements of Byram's CCA model

In the light of the above, the following research questions were formulated: (1) During the discussion about proverbs, what analytical approaches were used, if any, by learners to place a document or event in context and to demonstrate the ideology involved? This means first and foremost, that students are aware of using stereotypes while talking about a culture in

general and formulate their statements accordingly. (2) Did learners' awareness of their own ideological perspectives and values appear? If yes, how? Did they mention explicit examples from their own culture? (3) Did students analyse the similarities and differences between the two cultures? If yes, how?

Throughout the research, instances of the above-mentioned questions were taken record of.

3.2. Participants

The study was carried out during my short teaching practice at ELTE Radnóti Miklós Practice School in November 2014. The group consisted of 22 11th graders of upper-intermediate English knowledge. On the basis of the lessons I visited before my practice teaching as well as on the schools' general reputation of having students of high intelligence and academic performance, I considered the carrying out of the research justified for at least two reasons. Firstly, I assumed that the students' already high-level English knowledge made it possible to hold genuine discussions about abstract topics such interculturality. Secondly, I presumed that the majority of these students would most probably face intercultural situations later in life so the development of critical cultural awareness shall be relevant for them.

3.3. Teaching material

3.3.1. Topics

The study was integrated into the 15-hour teaching practice, out of which 6 lessons contained a 15-minute time slot dedicated to English proverbs.

The selection of proverbs was based upon my BA thesis in which I collected English proverbs according to the cultural values expressed in them.¹ The criterion I relied upon was the categorization identified by English anthropologist Kate Fox in her work *Watching the English*, one of the most comprehensive analyses of English traits. In her book Fox attempts to identify the “commonalities in rules governing English behaviour” (2004: 2) by defining

¹ In that paper, I attempted to compile and investigate a small set of proverbs to exemplify how they reveal certain aspects of English culture. The proverbs were collected from *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (2003) and The Phrase Finder (<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/proverbs.html>), an online database that was started as an academic project at Sheffield Hallam University and now has a collection of 2000 English proverbs together with their origins.

ten characteristics of Englishness.² During my analysis six of Fox's ten characteristics were found to be reflected in the 60 proverbs investigated: Privacy, Courtesy, Empiricism, Moderation, Pessimism and Fair Play. In the present research I dedicated every second lesson to each characteristic and the proverbs related to it.

3.3.2. Activities

During the working out of the activities, I relied on the suggested ideas presented in the previous chapter. Following Litovkina's (2000) advice, proverbs were presented in some of their possible contexts instead of being introduced in isolation. Following the examples of Lázár (2003), Jonckheere (2007), Akbarian (2010) and Yellin (2012), activities were designed to focus on the connotations of proverbs, the possible equivalents in students' L1 as well as on the comparison of the proverbs and their communicated ideas in the L1 and the target language.

I dedicated the first 15 minutes of every second lesson to each characteristic and the proverbs related to them. Students were first presented the phenomenon with the help of short authentic videos, pictures or texts. Then came the presentation of the proverbs followed by a discussion about their meaning, the possible Hungarian equivalents as well as the similarities and differences between the two cultures related to the characteristic in question. Finally, students were asked to apply the proverbs in context through acting situations out, writing short articles/diary entries with proverb titles or by making anti-proverbs.

For the sake of systematic record, a semi-pre-made mini-portfolio was designed for students, divided into sections according to the topics. The topics and the proverbs were printed on the portfolio, while space was left for students to jot down the meaning of the proverbs. Furthermore, throughout the research students were encouraged to record any appearance in the media of the issues or proverbs discussed. At the end of each section, space was also left for students to make note of any cultural behaviour they noticed and felt that now could understand.

² Fox groups the characteristics into three main clusters deriving from a core trait. In her view the core characteristic of the English is a "social dis-ease", i.e. a certain shyness and awkwardness in social encounters, which both leads to the infamous "English hooliganism" and to the Englishmen's obsession with privacy. The three clusters around the social dis-ease are termed "reflexes", "outlooks" and "values". The reflexes contain "moderation", "hypocrisy" and "humour". The outlooks entail "pessimism", "class-consciousness" and a common sense "empiricism". The cluster of values contains "fair play", "courtesy" and "modesty" (Fox 2004: 400-14).

3.4. Method of data collection and analysis

As many scholars, such as Deardorff (2011) and Gu, Meng & Li (2012) point out, the methodology of collecting and analysing data related to CCA is in its infancy. As Deardorff (2011: 74) formulates, the complexity of the concept itself makes several ways possible to use:

there is unfortunately no silver bullet regarding an assessment tool; given the complexity of this concept, it would be challenging—if not impossible—for one tool to measure an individual's intercultural competence.

It is suggested that studies should be of multiperspective nature (Deardorff 2011; Gu, Meng & Li 2012), should initiate critical reflections and observe overall performance (Deardorff 2011) and could base evaluation on portfolios (Byram 2005; Deardorff 2011). On the basis of these recommendations, the present study relied on three main methods of data collection. (1) In order to assess change in participants' attitudes, students were asked to write a composition titled "The English" both before the teaching of proverbs and at the end of the research. In order to avoid influencing them, no further criteria were given about the form or the content; it was up to them how much they write and how they approach the question. (2) The mini-portfolio detailed above served as the main source of information to detect students' activity in its process. The portfolio was partly designed following the "Language Biography" templates published by the Council of Europe. These templates facilitate "the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress" (Council of Europe 2003): the "Further observations" and the "Cultural attitudes and behaviour I have noticed and can now understand" sections were loaned from the aforementioned template. (3) Finally, throughout the research, continuous observation of students' in-class performance took place.

The portfolios, compositions and in-class performance were analysed through the search for the appearance of the three concepts formulated in the research questions: analytical approaches (giving apt definitions, looking behind stereotypes), showing awareness of own culture (reflecting on one's own culture) and the comparison between the two cultures (mentioning similarities and differences). Besides looking for instances of the above three CCA elements, any other identifiable pattern in students' oral and written performance were also taken note of and analysed.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The first composition

Students were asked to write the first composition before any discussion of the proverbs took place. The main aim of this composition was to take a snapshot of how students think of the English without any previous analysis and to check what elements of critical cultural awareness appear in their compositions if no guidelines are provided for them.

As for the use of analytical approach, **students showed a very high level of analytical thinking**. Almost all students explicitly stated that they are aware of the fact that they rely on stereotypes when talking about a nation as a whole. Since this element of CCA was highly prevalent in students' writing, it is worth going into detail about the main characteristics of this phenomenon.

Firstly, half of the compositions started or ended with the statement that talking about a nation inevitably involves relying on stereotypes. One student wrote: *"We can't talk about any nation in general. The English nation is not an exception. What we can do is to collect stereotypes."*³ Another student explained a similar idea, and went on to identify the possible sources of stereotypes: *"The stereotypes which I have of them is caused by their history (what I know about it) and mostly by movies, but these prejudices don't live in me (or anyone) strongly."*

Secondly, besides stating the fact of using stereotypes, many students expressed their opinion of it too. While a few students explained that they dislike stereotypes and try to avoid using them, the majority said that stereotypes are useful aids if they are used with reservations. As one student explained: *"In my opinion, stereotypes facilitate people to adjudge others, and they are very important in making the first impression. On the other hand, stereotypes can be really misleading, and for those others can have advantages but also drawbacks as well."* It seems as if students have just taken Mieder's advice (2004: 137):

Care must be taken when looking at proverbs as expressing aspects of a certain worldview or mentality of a people that no stereotypical conclusions about a so-called national character are drawn. (...) Nevertheless, the frequent use of certain proverbs in a particular culture could be used together with other social and cultural indicators to formulate valid generalizations.

³ All sentences from students' compositions are quoted word by word. For a few examples of the compositions and portfolios see Appendices 2, 3 and 4.

Finally, many students mentioned that one can best describe a culture if they have personal contact with its members. As the author of the above quotation continued: *“I can only adjudge those few English people that I have met and we have spent some time together (that is about 15 people).”* Another student wrote: *“In conclusion, we might know some stereotypes, but that’s not enough for knowing an English man truly, at least we have to start a conversation with them personally”*. One student concluded that *“we could only express our opinion if we have lived in a country before and met with the people every day.”*

Based on the above data, it can be said that the first element of critical cultural awareness, i.e. the use of analytical approach was already highly developed among students. The appearance of the second and third elements, however, was much less typical. **Reflection on the own culture** appeared only in the composition of two students. One student started the composition by reflecting on Hungarian stereotypical images: *“Hungarians. I bet, plenty of things crossed your mind, by hearing this word. It can be pepper, gulash, Budapest, chimney cake and lots of other things.”* There was one student who not only reflected on the Hungarian culture but also **made a comparison between the two cultures**, and attempted to identify the source of the difference as well. This again indicates a developed analytical skill:

As the way I see, people from England are much more helpful and kinder, than people here, in Hungary. I’ve been to the UK quite a lot of times, and as I experienced, strangers on the streets are really nice and friendly. It’s probably because England is a multinational country, with colorful population, and it’s also a popular place for tourists. Therefore people are open-minded and helpful – as I mentioned, because they are used to the tourists.

There are **two more interesting features** that emerged during the analysis of the compositions. Firstly, students seemed enthusiastic in sharing their ideas: although no criteria were given in terms of the length of the composition, almost all students wrote one or even two pages and were keen on telling their opinion. Secondly, it was also interesting to see that students approached the issue of Englishness through both explicit and implicit cultural elements. As the figure indicates below, the iconic London image was just as popular as more implicit cultural phenomena like politeness or national pride.

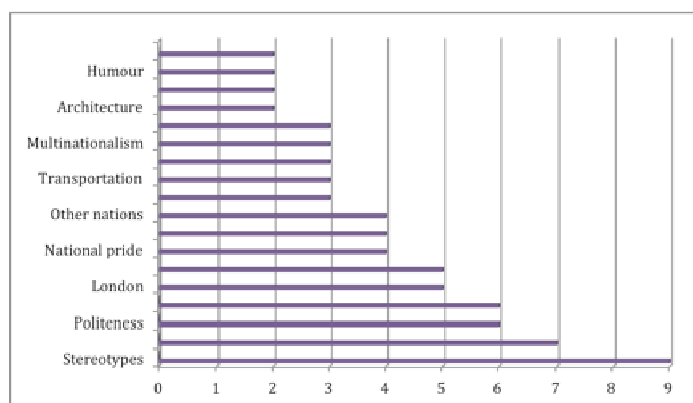


Figure 3: The most frequent topics in students' first composition

I could draw two important conclusions from these compositions, which were useful for planning the proverb blocks as well. Firstly, I could see that students were already very well aware of the pitfalls of using stereotypes and seemed to be cautious in making overarching statements. This prompted me towards handling generalizations carefully during our discussion of proverbs. Secondly, the lack of appearance of the further elements of critical cultural awareness, i.e. the reflection on the own culture and the comparison of cultures suggested that during the research I shall mainly focus on eliciting student activity in these two areas.

4.2. Observations about students' in-class participation

The proverb blocks were held in the first 15 minutes of every second lesson, during which students were first presented the phenomenon with the help of short authentic videos, pictures or texts. Then came the discussion of the proverbs during which focus was placed on connotations, possible Hungarian equivalents as well as the similarities and differences between the two cultures in terms of the topic in question. Finally, in order to practice applying the proverbs in context, students were asked to use them in different activities such as role-plays or writing tasks (for e.g. composing advertisements with proverb titles).

As for the **use of analytical approach**, just like in the case of the first composition, students showed a high awareness of the fact that cultures are described through stereotypes. Comments such as *"It is very difficult to talk about a culture generally"*; *"each and every person is different"* or *"it is dangerous to generalize"* indicated that students set off on the exploration of proverbs with an already developed analytical attitude.

Showing awareness of the own culture varied considerably according to the topic being discussed. Out of the six issues that were dealt with during the research, the topic of courtesy, moderation, pessimism and fair play proved to be the areas where students were most inclined to reflect on the Hungarian culture. During the discussion of courtesy, for example, students were eager to share their personal experience of intercultural misunderstandings that resulted from the different interpretations of politeness. One student explained the difference between how people react to the question “How do you do?” in the English and Hungarian culture. As for the topic of moderation, the Hungarian proverb “Jobb ma egy veréb, mint holnap egy tűzok” came up, and one student pointed out that Hungarians tend to express the idea of moderation by loaning images from the wildlife while the English usually express this idea by alluding to money (“A penny saved is a penny earned”). The topic of pessimism also motivated students to reflect on the Hungarian society: while they agreed that Hungarians generally tend to be pessimistic, many students expressed that this mentality is changing and their generation considers itself more optimistic than its predecessors. The topic generating the most intensive discussion proved to be fair play. Many students were eager to join the conversation. First we interpreted the term in general and agreed that it means equal opportunity to succeed, then students were asked how they see the realization of this issue in Hungary. A vivid discussion developed during which many students expressed their disappointment over fair play not being respected enough in the Hungarian society. They supported their arguments by mentioning concrete phenomena, a student, for example, pointed out corruption and cheating as the prime obstacles of fair play.

The comparison of the two cultures was much less typical than the first two elements of CCA. Even if students were asked to identify some similarities and differences, there were two usual answers: they either said that they do not know or that they do not think that the two cultures are different. However, even if they thought the two cultures were similar, they could not really come up with arguments to prove it. The only exception was the topic of fair play discussed above, in the case of which students seemed to have a strong standpoint both in terms of the English and Hungarian aspects. Many students expressed their respect towards the English culture for holding the value of fair play important and voiced their wish that Hungary would follow this example.

It is worth enumerating **the most important lessons** that were learnt from students’ in-class performance. Firstly, while during the discussion of most topics students continuously demonstrated an analytical approach and from time to time reflected on their own culture as well, the comparison of the collected ideas did not take place in such an elaborated form. That

is, while the analytical and self-reflective aspects of critical cultural awareness did appear, there shall be much more focus in the future on the development and practice of comparative skills.

Secondly, student activity varied considerably according to the topic that was being discussed: while the topic of courtesy or fair play seemed to generate lively discussions, the topic of privacy or empiricism did not prove to be stimulating enough for students to reflect on their own culture and make comparisons. Students seemed to contribute much more intensively if they had personal experience to share or when the presentation of the issue took place in a humorous way. For example, the topic of courtesy was introduced by an advertisement of the British bank HSBC wittily portraying the intercultural differences between table manners. Students seemed to enjoy the video very much and were eager to take part in the follow-up discussion and activities. In the case of the topic of privacy, however, the issue was introduced through a reading task, and the proverb block proved to be less successful. When the topic of pessimism was discussed and students were asked to apply the proverbs in role-plays, humour again proved to be a good stimulator: students enjoyed coming up with and acting out funny dialogues. As for the topic of fair play, the success of this proverb block can be traced back to the fact that students had personal experience that they were willing to share: as they felt personally concerned by this issue, they had many comments to make. To sum up, humour and personalization seemed to be the most important motivating factors for in-class activity.

Finally, one of the most important conclusions is that 15 minutes is a very short time to hold a coherent and efficient proverb block. Presenting the issue, developing genuine discussion about it including all the three elements of CCA, i.e. analysis, self-reflection and comparison, and finally applying the proverbs in context could take up a whole 45-minute lesson. However, time constraint was a natural issue since the proverb block constituted an extra material besides the compulsory course book unit that had to be covered during the short teaching practice.⁴ Nevertheless, in order to make lessons coherent and unified, the topics of the proverb blocks were designed in a way so as to make them serve as a lead-in to the topic of the lesson as well. The topic of privacy, for example, was connected to the topic of “Breaking the silence”, moderation was an introduction to the topic of “Affluenza” (a phenomenon describing the unnecessary accumulation of material wealth), pessimism was discussed before heading on to the topic of the disadvantages and future of capitalism, while

⁴ During the teaching practice the covered material was Unit 3 of the course book *New English File Advanced*, written by Clive Oxenden – Christina Latham-Koenig and published by Oxford University Press in 2010.

fair play introduced the topic of Women's World Banking, an initiative aiming to provide women around the world equal chances of financial self-support. As it is going to be pointed out later, in their portfolios and second compositions many students included examples from these course book materials to explain and analyse the proverbs and the issues related to them.

Many observations could be made on the basis of students' in-class performance. However, the majority of the data in terms of students' CCA development came from the written performance. The next subchapters aim to analyse the portfolios and the second compositions.

4.3. The portfolios

As it was explained before, the portfolio was designed to help students take notes and reflect on their own learning process. Students were encouraged to fill in the portfolio both during the proverb blocks as well as outside the classroom. Before turning to the analysis of the main results, it is worth presenting the most important features of the portfolio.

As for the structure⁵, the following sections were included: after the presentation of proverbs, place was left for students to take notes about the meaning of proverbs, how they experience the appearance of the issue in life (through the questions What I see, What I think, What I feel) and whether they know of Hungarian equivalents. They were also asked to write about the similarities or differences they see between the two cultures, and finally to jot down any cultural attitudes and behaviour that they had found strange but now felt that could understand better. Thus, the proverb portfolios served both as notebooks for in-class activity as well as study journals in which students could write comments any time during the four-week research. They could also consult their notes when writing the second composition about the English. The portfolios were collected together with the compositions at the end of the short teaching practice.

During the research students were not checked whether they fill out the portfolios or which parts they fill out, because the study was interested in finding out which sections students concentrate on the most without being given any specific instruction. The results, as we are going to see, are telling in this respect.

The portfolios were designed in a way that all three elements of critical cultural awareness could be activated while filling it out. Writing about the meaning of proverbs and jotting down observations about the issues in question could shed light on students' analytical

⁵ See Appendix 1.

skills, while collecting Hungarian equivalents, and analyzing similarities and differences between the two cultures could activate awareness of own culture as well as comparative thinking. In the following these three elements as well as some other identifiable patterns are going to be analyzed.

4.3.1. The use of analytical skills

As it was expected on the basis of the first compositions and the in-class activity, **students showed a developed use of analytical skills in several aspects.** Firstly, when formulating the meaning of proverbs, students gave well-constructed definitions, which proved that they understood the message of proverbs. For example, for proverbs related to empiricism, the following definition was given by a student: *“It means more if you practice and experience things than just read or think about them.”* Another student wrote: *“Experiencing things should be the way we learn things.”*

Secondly, just like in the first compositions, students showed awareness of thinking through stereotypes, and many times formulated their sentences accordingly: expressions such as “tend to be”, “usually”, “might” all point to the fact students were cautious when making generalizations about nations. In connection with fair play, one student wrote: *“I think it’s true for most people in and around the world. Most people try to be fair.”* In terms of pessimism, a student answered the “What I think” question in the Observations section by stating that *“I think it is not as bad as these proverb make it look like. Hopefully, Englishman are more optimistic.”* Another student wrote in terms of privacy: *“I think this is an exaggeration, because not only English people think this way.”*

Thirdly, students collected interesting observations about the issues in questions, which proved that they indeed took time to think through the issue and its possible manifestations in everyday life. In terms of empiricism, for example, a student connected this value to his observation that *“the English have always been clever and innovator in history”* and wrote that *“English universities are all famous and they are respected”*. As for courtesy, standing in queues was one of the most popular examples mentioned by students.

Finally, and in connection with the previous point, it is worth pointing out that students many times not only looked for general examples but recalled personal experience as well. In connection with empiricism, a girl wrote: *“Our teacher always says that we should do all the tasks from the book. I already know that he was right because when I do the tasks that he gives I can do my best on the tests.”* In terms of pessimism and breaking promises, one student explained that *“I can always rely on my English friend.”* This sentence proves the

activation of analytical skills in two ways: the student looked for first-hand experience and when he found that it is in contrast with the general idea of English people pessimistically expecting the worst in terms of promises, he did not hesitate to refute it on the basis of his personal experience. Finally, it is worth quoting the words of a student who wrote the following in terms of privacy in the “Cultural attitudes and behaviour I have noticed and can now understand” section:

In Devon, people usually plant a hedge around their fields and put a fence as well, so no one can enter, which makes walking very difficult. And there are also hedges on the sides of the road. This is very dangerous for drivers, but a symbol of Devon.

This student demonstrated the understanding of the importance of privacy by searching for an English phenomenon that could be traced back to this value and then connecting it to a personal experience. This sentence is an example of how a student can write about a cultural attitude or behaviour that he had found strange but felt that now could understand.

4.3.2. Awareness of own culture and comparing the two cultures

Both during the in-class discussion as well as in the proverb portfolios guiding questions were given to stimulate students to think about their own cultures and compare the cultures in terms of the issue being discussed. As it was detailed previously, the second and third elements of critical cultural awareness were only scarcely activated during the in-class activity. **When it came to written performance, students were more willing to share their ideas in terms of the Hungarian culture, but similarly to the case of oral performance, the last two fields of CCA were much less activated than analytical thinking.** It is worth going into detail about some aspects of this phenomenon.

As it was pointed out, students were told to fill out as many parts of the portfolio as they could, but it was up to them which sections they dedicate the most attention to. Almost all students gave the definitions of proverbs and mentioned some phenomena they observed. The majority of students gave some Hungarian equivalents, too, and some even indicated that they had made some research at home to find Hungarian proverbs with similar message to the English ones.

However, when it came to the analysis of the Hungarian proverbs, students tended to write short sentences, and seemed less abundant in their words than in the case of writing about English proverbs. A student mentioned that “*We like our neighbours but we like to keep*

distance”, while another one said that “*Sorry, I don’t know*”. In terms of Hungarian pessimism, one student wrote the following: “*Being pessimistic is a strong stereotype, despite that, it’s hard to find proverbs connected to pessimism.*”

The comparison of the two cultures was not frequent either. What most students did was stay on a linguistic level and compare the proverbs in question: “*The first two proverbs say the same as the English ones*”, “*In the English expressions there are a lot of abstracted expressions, in the Hungarian ones they use concepts.*”, “*I can’t find any similarity between these proverbs*”.

If students tried to dig deeper and compare the English and Hungarian manifestations of the issue in question, their comparative analysis included short comments such as: “*We are more jealous*”, “*The English are more distancing and rigid*”, “*We agree with English people that knowledge and practice is important*”, “*We want to save money but instead of working we are hoping*”, “*Neither of us trust in promises*”.

However, there were a few exceptions when students did elaborate on the similarities and differences in a detailed fashion. One student wrote, for example: “*I think Hungarian proverbs accept knowledge more than English ones but both of them concentrates on getting physical experience.*” The same student wrote in terms of pessimism: “*All the nations – even English or Hungarian – have their pessimistic proverbs. It’s because bad things happen to everyone. There’s no man on the world who haven’t suffered anything bad yet.*” It is worth quoting a paragraph in its full length, because it illustrates well how a student managed to compare the two cultures in terms of pessimism through a personal experience:

People in Hungary are pessimistic. I have a friend who was learning at the USA and she always tell us about her adventure and how strange was America at the first time. The first example she gave us, was that the usual USA question, ‘How are you?’. There they answer like ‘Great!’ and they are so positive. On the other hand, in Hungary we’re always like “Oh, I’m so tired and I have a big test tomorrow.” Which is not so good, I think.

4.3.3. Other emerging patterns

Finally, it is worth having a look at **some other patterns** that were identified during the analysis of the portfolios. Firstly, it was interesting to see how students found connecting points between the topics. They frequently tried to relate the issue in question to the other subjects of the portfolio, to the topics of the English course book or even to other subjects,

such as Hungarian literature. The value of fair play was connected by some students to the value of courtesy. A student wrote the following about the manifestation of fair play: *“These are I think closely related with the second topic in the portfolio. English are nice”*.

As the course book topic “Affluenza” was introduced by proverbs related to moderation, many students dealt with this specific theme in their portfolio. One student wrote about how the consumer society does not respect the value of moderation, while another student explained that *“In this running world, which suffers from affluenza, it’s a real worth if someone can be content with things they already have and don’t want to get everything.”*

Since we discussed the topic of fair play before listening to a course book interview with the vice-president of Women’s World Banking, a girl later wrote in the portfolio that *“There are many people who are really ambitious about fair play and they try to make the world a better place. For example, there’s the Bank for women which tries to give financial help so women can have the same opportunities and treatment as men.”*

It was also very interesting to see how several students connected the topic of privacy to social media and privacy issues. I visited one Hungarian literature lesson of the class, the topic of which was publicity and the importance of protecting one’s privacy, so I think the popularity of this topic might be at least partly traced back to the fact that it was discussed in another lesson as well. As one student explained in the “Observations” section of the privacy chapter: *“Privacy isn’t always as secret as it should be. I don’t know how exactly it works, but I’m sure that lot of websites got my personal data.”* Another student wrote: *“Social media websites destroy some parts of privacy.”*

Secondly, and in connection with the previous point, some students looked for connections between the topics being discussed and its manifestations in other cultures besides the English and the Hungarian one. In terms of the topic of moderation, for example, both Canadians and the Asian cultures were mentioned.

Thirdly, students showed a high tendency to reflect on their personal experience. The most popular topics were sports, friends, exams or visits made to other countries. One student, for example, expressed his opinion about fair play by recalling a personal memory:

Fair Play can be taught. I used to row and participate in competition when I was younger. What I noticed is when I was racing with ‘professional’ rowers, all of them was fair. But when I played with non-sportsmen they cheated usually. I think society can teach people to fair-play. This is why we have those proverbs.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that many students tended to make evaluative comments. There were some that expressed judgements of other nations: *“We should have a middle line between the USA’s fake positiveness and the Hungarian pessimism”*, *“Protecting your privacy and being cold about it is a bad thing and I don’t like it.”* These comments indicate that students shall be given more assistance in how they can formulate opinion of other nations without making strong judgements. Nevertheless, the majority of the evaluative comments were not condemnatory in nature but expressed wishes about how the world could be improved: *“We all should be more polite”*, *“People really should be more optimistic”*, *“Optimism improves the chances of achieving goals”*, courtesy *“could make the world a better place”*. These comments demonstrate that students found an important ‘common denominator’ between cultures by looking at the discussed values as universal guidelines that could be followed by everyone irrespective of the culture they come from.

4.4. The second compositions

In the final composition students were asked to write another essay about the English on the basis of what they have learnt during the four weeks. Again, no guidelines were given so as not to influence students’ way of interpretation. The results revealed interesting patterns.

Firstly, one of the most striking features was that **comparison between cultures was a decisive element of the compositions**. Analysis of the target culture and reflection on the own culture did appear, but usually together with the comparison of the cultures. The following quotation, for example, illustrates how a student analysed English proverbs and compared them to Hungarian ones by acknowledging a Hungarian standpoint:

Well, another interesting thing, what I learned about English, that they have proverbs. OK, I expected, that not only Hungarian have these things, but for me it was quite a folk thing, so I just couldn’t imagine an English lord in the 16th century while he is saying these wise sentences. For me, it was a thing which is said by old men in the village (I imagine a Hungarian one), who has no idea, what he is talking about, but only repeats himself, and everyone believes, he’s really wise (perhaps he is).

Secondly, **the comparison took place in various forms**. While some students reflected on the cultural differences they have learned about (*“You showed us these proverbs which gave us a chance to get to know with the English culture better and see how ours is different from it”*), the majority of students reflected on the similarities they have found. Many students

did not explicitly state this, but by writing about the values discussed as universal and general ideas they gave evidence of regarding them to be cross-cultural phenomena. One student, for example, wrote about how fair play is appreciated in sports and business, and concluded his composition by saying that *“As these examples are showing, fair-play is a really important thing in our life nowadays.”* Another student concluded her composition by stating that there are really important thoughts behind proverbs and *“everyone should follow them”*. On the other hand, some other students explicitly stated the similarity they have discovered, like in the following quotation:

Moreover, English people not only have proverbs, but they are quite similar to Hungarian ones. For me, this means, that people are people and they have the same problems and ideological questions no matter where they live.

Finally, there were **some other results** that could be identified in the compositions. Firstly, just as in the case of the first compositions, students showed an enthusiasm in written communication, many of them wrote one or two pages. Secondly, this time they wrote only about the values we discussed during the research, that is, they focused solely on implicit elements of the English culture. Thirdly, fair play seemed to be the most popular topic among students, which might be partly traced back to the issue's success during the in-class activity. Many students mentioned this value in their compositions, and one student actually dedicated the whole composition to this specific topic. Another student emphasized the importance of fair play by stating that:

Proverbs about fair play show the people that they should always be fair to everybody, which is true and it really is important that people have the same rights and same possibilities no matter what colour is their skin, what they believe in, or what gender are they.

Like in the portfolios, students expressed wishes in their compositions, too, suggesting that the values discussed could be looked upon as norms that everyone should follow.

Some students reflected on the linguistic aspects of proverbs too. They explained that proverbs can be good stylistic means and can also *“improve understanding”*. Some students mentioned that they had not known what is meant by a proverb previously, but *“after a few classes I finally have an idea what a proverb is”*. Another student explained that *“the English use some strange sentences in their speeches, now I know, that these are called proverbs”*.

Before turning to the discussion of the main conclusions, it is worth having an overview of the results:

		First compositions	In-class performance	Portfolios	Second compositions
C C A	Analytical approach	High-level analytical thinking: - Showing awareness of using stereotypes - Seeing the advantages and disadvantages of stereotypes - Emphasizing the importance of first-hand experience Example: <i>"In conclusion, we might know some stereotypes, but that's not enough for knowing an English man truly, at least we have to start a conversation with them personally."</i>	High-level analytical thinking: - Showing awareness of using stereotypes Example: <i>"It is very difficult to talk about a culture generally."</i>	High-level analytical thinking: - Well-constructed proverb definitions - Showing awareness of using stereotypes - Making many observations - Recalling personal experience Example: <i>"the English have always been clever and innovator in history"</i>	Analysis appeared together with comparison
	Reflection on own culture	Not typical, only in the composition of two students Example: <i>"Hungarians. I bet, plenty of things crossed your mind, by hearing this word. It can be pepper, gulash, Budapest, chimney cake and lots of other things."</i>	Varied considerably according to the topic being discussed	Many students provided Hungarian equivalents of English proverbs Analysis of Hungarian proverbs took place in the form of short sentences Example: <i>"We like our neighbours but we like to keep distance"</i>	Reflection on own culture appeared together with comparison
	Comparison	Not typical, only in the composition of one student	Not typical	Stayed on a linguistic level or appeared in the form of short sentences	Comparison between cultures was a decisive element of the compositions

		Example: <i>“As the way I see, people from England are much more helpful and kinder, than people here, in Hungary.”</i>		There were some exceptions when elaborate analyses took place Example: <i>“All the nations – even English or Hungarian – have their pessimistic proverbs. It’s because bad things happen to everyone. There’s no man on the world who haven’t suffered anything bad yet.”</i>	Comparison took place in various forms (focus on differences or similarities, similarities either explicitly stated or implied by analysing the values as universal guidelines) Example: <i>“Moreover, English people not only have proverbs, but they are quite similar to Hungarian ones. For me, this means, that people are people and they have the same problems and ideological questions no matter where they live.”</i>
Other identifiable patterns	Enthusiasm in writing (1-2 pages)	Enthusiasm less typical than in writing	Students found connecting points between the topics, course book materials, other subjects and cultures	Enthusiasm in writing (1-2 pages)	
	Mentioning both explicit and implicit cultural elements	Personalization and humour were the main motivating factors	Reflection on personal experience	Mentioning only implicit cultural phenomena	
		Fair play was an exceptionally successful topic	Evaluative comments, wishes	Fair play was an exceptionally successful topic	
		15 minutes is a very short time to hold a coherent and efficient proverb block	Considering the discussed values to be universal guidelines	Evaluative comments, wishes	
				Considering the discussed values to be universal guidelines	
				Reflection on the linguistic aspects of proverbs	

Table 1: Summary of the main results

5. Conclusions

5.1. Main results

The present paper aimed to investigate whether students' critical cultural awareness can develop through the introduction of English proverbs and related discussion about English and Hungarian cultures, and if yes, what are the main features of this development. In order to explore this question, the study analysed students' oral and written performance by looking for instances of the three elements of CCA: use of analytical skills, reflection on the own culture and comparison of the two cultures.

The four-week research period offered a rich source of information in this respect. If we compare the results of the first compositions to those of the in-class activity, the portfolios, and especially the second compositions, it can be stated that **there has been an identifiable development in students' critical cultural awareness**. While in their first compositions students demonstrated the use of already highly developed analytical skills, reflection on the own culture and the comparison of the two cultures only appeared in one or two cases. However, through the help of directed questions posed during the in-class discussions as well as in the portfolios, students were invited to investigate proverbs and related issues not only from an English perspective but also in terms of the Hungarian culture and the differences and similarities between the two nations.

The focus placed on the second and third elements of CCA became most apparent in students' second compositions, where it was actually the comparative aspect that appeared to be the most frequent element. This can be regarded a positive outcome, especially if it is taken into account that comparison is thought to be the dimension where intercultural understanding can be most comprehensively realized. As Byram and Fleming point out (1998: 4):

It is the comparison of own and other cultures which begins to help learners to perceive and cope with difference. It provides them with the basis for successful interaction with members of another cultural group, not just the means of exchanging information.

Jonckheere denominates the following questions to be the most important ones students shall ask themselves when investigating proverbs: (2007: 19): 'How aware am I of my own language?', 'Of other languages?', 'Did I expect proverbs to be so different/similar in other languages/cultures?', 'Why are they different/similar?'. It can be stated that students,

who started the project with already developed analytical skills, did ask themselves the above questions while writing the portfolios and the second compositions, and thus enlarged their repertoire of interpreting a cultural phenomena by self-reflective and comparative skills.

Having acknowledged that students' critical cultural awareness did develop to a certain extent during the four-week research, we shall have a closer look at **the most important features of this development.**

(1) Students proved to be much more enthusiastic in sharing their views in written form than in oral communication. During the in-class proverb blocks students activated their analytical skills much more often than the skills of self-reflection and comparison, and even when the last two elements of CCA were used, the intensity of the contribution varied according to the topic. Except for the especially successful case of fair play, students were not really willing to go into detailed discussions about intercultural differences. This problem can be at least partly traced back to the fact that 15 minutes is a very short time to hold genuine discussions about proverbs. However, if guiding questions are designed better, i.e. geared towards personalization or humour (these aspects seemed to be the prime stimulating factors), students are willing to contribute even in a short time. On the other hand, students' written performance was much richer and balanced, most students wrote one- or two-page compositions and were abundant in their words when filling out the portfolio, too.

(2) Although it can be regarded a success that self-reflective and comparative ideas appeared in the portfolios and especially increased in number in the second compositions, it is important to point out that they were not as delicately elaborated as students' already existing analytical approach. Although there were instances of detailed argumentations, self-reflection and comparison typically appeared in short sentences lacking support or just stayed on a linguistic level and focused on the comparison of vocabulary and style.

One possible reason behind this can be the fact that students are not accustomed to talking about the Hungarian culture in an English lesson and they seemed surprised to be invited to share ideas about their native culture. This experience corresponds to what Byram and Fleming constituted about the novelty of bringing self-reflection into the language classroom (1998: 4): "This is a major innovation (...), because language teaching is for the first time is explicitly stated to have what might be called a 'reflexive impact', a focus on learners' own culture and not just a view outwards to other cultures."

Furthermore, another reason might be that the Hungarian background material, i.e. the collection of corresponding proverbs and the explanatory analyses were not as developed and

coherent as the English material – it was the English proverb collection and Kate Fox's observations that were used as the starting point of discussion, while the Hungarian side of the question was primarily based on general knowledge.

(3) It is also worth drawing attention to some other positive outcomes that accompanied the development of CCA. Firstly, by dealing with proverbs for four weeks, students examined the English language from a linguistic point of view: they learnt what a proverb is, how the English language uses rhymes and got acquainted with some archaic English expressions. If we agree with Schultz (as cited in Sinicrope, Norris & Watanabe 2007: 46-7) that being aware of the “culture-conditioned images and culture-specific connotations” of a language is an indicator of intercultural understanding, the enrichment of students' inventory of English proverbs can itself be considered an advantageous outcome.

Secondly, by focusing on implicit cultural elements, students also practiced the interpretation of complex phenomena. The fact that implicit cultural elements were much more prevalent in the second compositions than in the first ones can imply that students spent considerable time on abstract thinking during the four weeks of the research. In Byram and Morgan's view (as cited in Saluveer 2004: 21), students should encounter a culture through the “spiral curriculum”, during which they progress from a superficial collection of information to a more complex and abstract analysis – in this aspect, proverbs can offer a gradual initiation into the more implicit spheres of a culture.

Thirdly, the proverb blocks seemed to serve well as lead-ins, too. Both in the portfolios and the second compositions students tended to relate the issues to the course book materials, which can be looked upon as a testimony that they attempted to integrate the proverbs and the related topics into their knowledge set. This result is in agreement with Luo's argument (2007) that proverbs applied as lead-ins can help the consolidation of knowledge.

Finally, many students expressed that they enjoyed filling out the portfolio because they could follow their own learning process. This experience corresponds to the general view that portfolios increase learner autonomy by encouraging learners “to be independent, to think about themselves and to assess themselves” (Little & Perclová 2001: 19).

All in all, students' oral and written activity demonstrated their willingness and competence to take part in an ethnographical field trip. While many points can be refined in the future, the enthusiasm and contribution shown by students is a testimony that there is justification for bringing proverbs into the classroom. In the last subchapter we shall take a look at some possible steps that could be taken in the future to improve the efficiency of proverb-related activities as well as outline some possible paths for future research.

5.2. Lessons for the future and further research ideas

As the above conclusions reveal, the efficiency of developing students' self-reflective and comparative skills could be increased in several ways.

(1) It would be very useful to carry out a contrastive analysis of English and Hungarian proverbs and the cultural values they express. Teachers could apply it as a theoretical inventory on the basis of which discussion questions and activities could be designed. Tasks more specifically geared towards the Hungarian and intercultural aspects could then in turn provide students with more incentives for self-reflection and comparison.

(2) Personalization and humour proved to be good motivating factors for student activity. The six topics and related activities shall be thought over from the point of view of how they could be connected to personal experience or witty illustrations. Although it was pointed out that students understood abstract implicit cultural phenomena well, concretizing the issues by asking students to mention personal examples or to think of funny intercultural misunderstandings can further help the interpretation and discussion of the topics.

(3) As for in-class activities, more consideration shall be given to how the issues could be presented, to what exact guiding questions could be used to moderate discussion and to how students' understanding of the proverbs could be checked. As for the first point, humorous audiovisual inputs seemed to be the most motivating introductions for students, so a database of such material could be developed. Guiding questions could be designed on the basis of the contrastive analysis mentioned before. In terms of checking students' understanding of proverbs, role-plays proved to be the most successful tasks, so it might be worth developing a little scenario collection for each and every topic.

(4) As for the written performance, students seemed to be very enthusiastic in sharing their ideas in a written form. Both the compositions and the portfolios contained several precious ideas, which indicate that further writing tasks could be developed in order to give floor to students' views.

(5) It shall also be pointed out that the present research was carried out in a class where students had an upper-intermediate English knowledge. Both the teaching material and the activities were designed for a group of students with high-level language knowledge and a certain amount of life experience (students were 17-18 years old). However, proverbs could also be discussed with younger students of lower level of English. If the proverbs, background materials and tasks are tailored according to the competencies of the students in question, proverbs could be useful teaching tools for other age groups as well.

The present research attempted to add an element to the existing repertoire of experimental studies on using proverbs in the language classroom for CCA development. By building up a mini proverb curriculum and trying it out during a four-week period, many pieces of valuable information could be collected on how sentences of the collective wisdom of the folk can be used to motivate students to think about Others, about Us and the bridge between the two. It is worth re-quoting a sentence from a student's second composition:

English people not only have proverbs, but they are quite similar to Hungarian ones. For me, this means, that people are people and they have the same problems and ideological questions no matter where they live.

While there are many areas where further refinement is needed, student contributions such as the above sentence offer evidence of the premise that there is a rationale behind using proverbs in the language classroom. As Zarate and Byram (as cited in Byram and Fleming 1998: 8) formulate, helping students become intercultural speakers can be a new purpose of language teaching. In the authors' view, intercultural speakers are "able to establish a relationship between their own and the other cultures, to mediate and explain difference – and ultimately to accept that difference and see the common humanity beneath it." If we decide to go along with this recently formulated objective of language teaching, proverbs with their rich inventory of potentials can be of great help in our endeavour.

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A "References", "Appendices" és "Summary in Hungarian" fejezetek a pályamunkához mellékelt kiegészítő dokumentumban találhatóak.