

Crossing Borders. Raising Cultural Awareness of Students in Pedagogy by Applying the Interdisciplinary Approach to Analyse Conceptual Metaphors in O. Henry's Short Story "The Last Leaf"

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Abstract: *This article presents a model for raising students' cultural awareness in teaching Bulgarian and English languages through interdisciplinary analysis and discussion of conceptual metaphors in O. Henry's short story "The Last Leaf". Initially, it defines and discusses three main concepts. The first is the interdisciplinary method. The latter integrates knowledge and techniques from multiple disciplines and is applied for a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the discussed topics and analysis of their interrelationships. The design of the students' activities and discussions finds ground in the Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence, suggested by Diana Bebenova-Nikolova. Another theory that the article uses is the theory of conceptual metaphors, first presented by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, which explores metaphors not simply as a decorative tool in language but as a conceptual tool for structuring, restructuring, and even creating reality. Following these stepping stones, the article describes applying an in-depth holistic and interdisciplinary approach to some conceptual metaphors from the story "The Last Leaf" to raise the intercultural sensitivity hand-in-hand with the language competency of pre-teachers in English. The described practice shows how some literary texts can be used to cross borders and communicate cultural issues metaphorically.*

Keywords: *conceptual metaphor; intercultural competence; interdisciplinary approach;*

Introduction

Teaching languages, mainly Bulgarian and English, has increasingly embraced interdisciplinary approaches to foster cultural awareness among students. This article proposes a model for analysing conceptual metaphors within O. Henry's short story "The Last Leaf" to achieve this objective. Interdisciplinary methodology and integrating insights from various disciplines are necessary to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of cultural nuances embedded within literary texts. In his article "Interdisciplinarity of literature: A pedagogical perspective", Boukhatem defines interdisciplinarity "as the interaction between different disciplines and the use of their various perspectives and parameters in an integrative approach for a better understanding of literature" (Boukhatem 2). Furthermore, to identify and discuss author's themes and issues cannot be

tackled with only one field of knowledge. Boukhatem recommends the usage of “a range of disciplines such as History, Psychology, Sociology, Ethnography, Politics, Linguistics and even exact sciences whenever needed” (Boukhatem 3).

Drawing on Diana Bebenova-Nikolova's Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Bebenova-Nikolova 57), this study advocates for an integrated approach that intertwines language instruction with cultural exploration and interdisciplinary approach. Moreover, it delves into George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff, Johnson 1980) and emphasises their significance in shaping perceptions and realities. Through the lens of these theories, the article explains how a holistic, interdisciplinary framework can enhance intercultural sensitivity and language proficiency among pre-teachers of English.

The model the author developed and applied to raise students' cultural awareness is illustrated in Figure 1. As the model indicates, the conceptual framework for effectively 'crossing borders' is grounded in three fundamental concepts. These concepts shape and balance its academic essence and serve as a compass for its practical applicability. This configuration (a triangulation) comprises three key elements or nodes: the interdisciplinary approach, the Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence, and the theory of Conceptual Metaphors. From the outset, it is crucial to emphasise that this framework has recently been implemented in the Pedagogy of teaching programs for students studying in both Bulgarian and English languages at Silistra Branch of Ruse University 'Angel Kanchev'. A comprehensive evaluation of its impact is in progress, and definitive results are still pending.

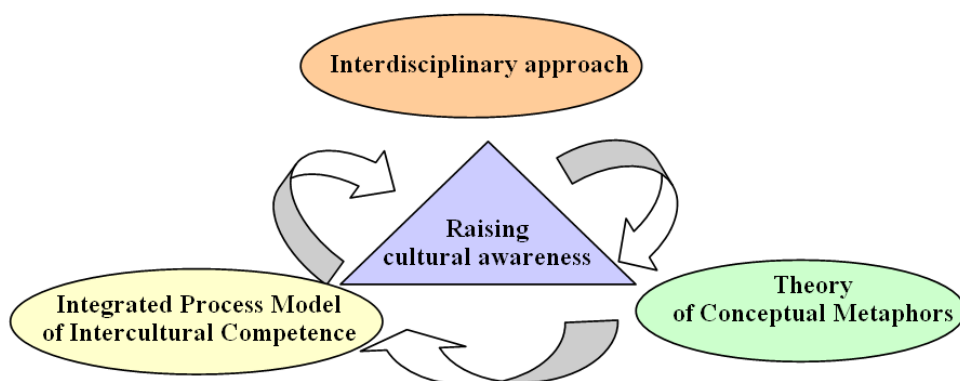


Figure 1 Conceptual framework developed by Bebenova-Nikolova

The initial node

The initial node within this triangular Model in Figure 1 is the interdisciplinary approach to analysing literary texts. This approach integrates knowledge and techniques from multiple disciplines and is applied to achieve a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the discussed topics and analysis of their interrelationships (Newell 8).

Encouraging students and facilitating the cultivation of knowledge, insights, problem-solving skills, self-confidence, and a love for learning are shared aspirations among educators in the classroom. “Their goal is to integrate the insights of the disciplines into a more comprehensive understanding of the complex situation, one that best fits all available empirical evidence” (Newell 8).

According to Kic-Drgas “interdisciplinary approach in foreign language teaching is tightly linked to the needs of potential learners” (Kic-Drgas 75). The cited author states that an interdisciplinary approach to language learning contributes to the improvement of several cognitive abilities, among which she points out:

- enabling learners to access subject-specific vehicular language terminology;
- preparing them for future studies and working life;
- advancing learners’ cognitive development (ability to think in different languages can have a positive effect on content learning). (Kic-Drgas 75).

Boukhatem discusses the application of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding literary texts (Boukhatem 3-5). He concludes that this method “avoids a narrow labelling based on exclusion. It deconstructs the idea of autonomy in interpretation, criticism or even teaching” (Boukhatem 5-6). This approach even impacts the relationship between a teacher and a student. When applying the interdisciplinary approach, educational practitioners should provide students with enough perspectives “to set them free and to liberate their productive and innovative potential” (Boukhatem 5-6).

Based on that, we might conclude that implementing the interdisciplinary approach when teaching English and English literature to pre-teachers enhances cognitive abilities and translates into specific program-level learning outcomes.

The second node

Bebenova-Nikolova describes the second node, the Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Bebenova-Nikolova 57), and presents it in Figure 2.

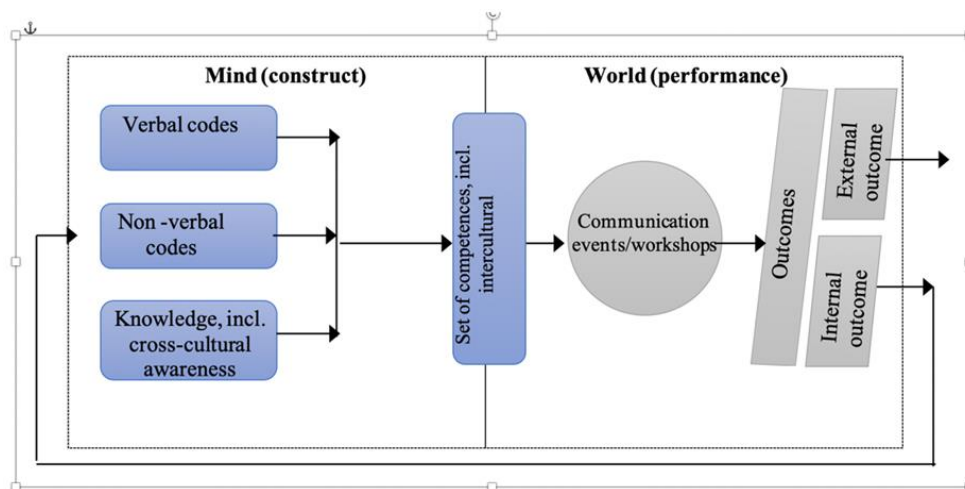


Figure 2 - Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence developed by Bebenova-Nikolova

It is used to design exercises on English literary texts to cultivate essential competencies. The learning process starts with participation in communication events and workshops where students collaborate to share, discuss, and present their insights. The teacher evaluates the external outcomes, but internal outcomes accumulate in the human mind, thus acknowledging its multilevel nature. In order to enrich cross-cultural knowledge and awareness in students learning English as a second language, it becomes essential to employ the interdisciplinary method in analysing English literary texts and to adhere to a specific lesson architecture to ensure the development of the whole set of competencies. We applied the Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence, as described by Bebenova-Nikolova (Bebenova-Nikolova 57) to design exercises in analytical reading and stylistics analysis based on the following reasons:

Firstly, our current education environment supposes interaction among students from different cultures or ethnic groups or of mixed origin, and therefore, it should be considered multicultural. In our University, such groups of students are involved in subject matters in English as a Lingua Franca, which frames the communication process as intercultural, and all principles on intercultural competence development are applicable.

Secondly, the Integrated Process Model considers competence development an ongoing cycle, resulting in internal (subjectively measured) and external (objectively measured) outcomes (Bebenova-Nikolova 57). Such a concept makes the Model extremely applicable to the evaluation requirements because the results can be measured and discussed with the students, and the education process continues. As they worked in teams to develop their research topics, they could present and discuss their findings and conclusions with the Professor by following the Model. After external assessment and self-evaluation, they could continue their work.

Thirdly, such an approach accepts that competence as a unique feature could be viewed as part of the mindset/construct and as a way of behaviour/performance (Bebenova-Nikolova 57), which relates to the dualistic nature of communication. Using this Model, we organised diversified educational activities to enable the teams of participants to complete their research and improve the desired competencies.

We applied this model to design self-study sessions and team-based workshops. The tutor pre-defined instructions on the English text's literary analysis and comprehension exercises to assist the students. The learners had to explore the text in the following steps.

1. Analyse Figurative Language and Explore Non-literal Interpretations:

As Greere and Zdrenghea state “non-literal meaning is considered to be the sharply distinguished complement of literal meaning” (Greere, Zdrenghea 30). The authors agree that it is associated with the utterance and the speaker (rather than the sentence), and it is non-conventional, non-compositional and indirect. Therefore, for students in ESL, English literary texts may produce difficulties in understanding, mainly when the author uses plenty of figurative devices like O. Henry. On the other hand, Greere and Zdrenghea state that “non-literal meaning is dependent on literal meaning” (Greere, Zdrenghea 30), which indicates that literal meaning should be clear enough to the readers so that they can suggest non-literal meaning.

Following these considerations, the students were instructed to delve into figurative language, like similes and metaphors, and explore how it directly links one thing with another for symbolic or poetic effect. Then, they had to investigate phrases or descriptions that carry deeper meanings beyond their surface. They would consider alternative interpretations, such as how the ivy vine may symbolise more than just a plant.

2. Examine Character Perspectives and Context: The students had to delve into how characters interpret and perceive elements in the story. They had to find context elements and discuss how the specific character interprets them to reveal symbolic meanings, such as Johnsy's interpretation of the significance of the last leaf. They were instructed to also pay attention to the

context in which certain words or phrases are used to find clues about metaphorical submeanings.

3. Identify Symbolism and Explore Cultural or Historical Context: At this stage, students had to spot recurring symbols or hints throughout the text, often used metaphorically to represent abstract concepts. Elements like the ivy vine, the last leaf, and the Bay of Naples can be symbolic and carry metaphorical significance. Therefore, the learners had to consider the cultural and historical context in which the story was written. O. Henry's use of particular metaphors was influenced by the cultural and artistic trends of the time, and students had to search for additional layers of meaning. At this last stage, an interdisciplinary approach was applied to build up cross-cultural knowledge and awareness, according to the Integrated Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Bebenova-Nikolova 57).

The third node

The third key element in our framework is the theory of conceptual metaphors, a theoretical perspective initially formulated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (Lakoff, Johnson 1980).

In general, as Fecioru points out, “at the level of the text, the metaphor connects two representative worlds, two fields of the ontological experience, confronting the author with the reader (from a social, cultural and empiric perspective), beyond the prerogatives of the figure of speech” (Fecioru 1260).

According to Lakoff & Johnson, cited by Meyers (Meyers 309), “metaphor is a matter of thought because it shapes our way of thinking and acting, which they call our conceptual system.

Furthermore, Meyers claims that “a conceptual metaphor enables the understanding of an idea or a concept in terms of another” (Meyers 309).

Kövecses suggests another definition, close to the previous one:

“A conceptual metaphor is a systematic set of correspondences between two domains of experience” (Kövecses 21). This is what “understanding one domain in terms of another” means, and further uses the term “mapping” for “correspondence”.

To sum up, the theory of conceptual metaphors goes beyond perceiving metaphors as mere linguistic elements; instead, it positions them as conceptual tools that can structure, reshape, and even construct our understanding of reality. Lakoff and Johnson assert that metaphors are not merely ornamental elements in language but robust constructs that actively shape and generate our perception of the world. In their view, these metaphors serve as cognitive tools, allowing us to grasp abstract concepts by grounding them in concrete, tangible experiences.

Then, there is the question of how conceptual blending should be presented. Fecioru (Fecioru 1261) exemplifies several approaches, among which the ‘cognitive space’ suggested by Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen, where metaphorical blending should be “considered as an extension of cross-domain mapping” (Fecioru 1261).

In the context of "The Last Leaf" by O. Henry, applying the theory of conceptual metaphors involves identifying instances where language goes beyond its literal interpretation. Also, following Brisard's conclusions of how to decipher metaphors (Brisard 36), we adopt the concept that “metaphor is not seen as a semantic object with a real correlate in the mental lexicon, but rather as a type of event that may trigger different processing strategies, depending on the architecture of the brain” (Brisard 36).

In his article “Applied interdisciplinary research – a critical realist perspective”, Danermark has identified five essential steps in the interdisciplinary research process: “an initial planning phase; a disciplinary phase; a teamwork phase characterised by cross-disciplinary understanding; and a transdisciplinary phase that includes the most fundamental aspect of interdisciplinary research” (Danermark13-14). Lastly, the final phase is when the researcher gains a holistic understanding of the involved structures and mechanisms (Danermark13-14).

Therefore, following this five-step process, after planning how to work on the literary texts, the students teamed up in four based on their subject interests and knowledge. Then, while working in groups, they were instructed by the tutor to think beyond the symbolic meaning of the words and delve into the images they built to find more profound, symbolic, or abstract meanings related to the author’s messages. This instruction proved essential for discovering the underlying metaphorical use in the narrative. When dissecting the text and identifying the author’s intentions, the students could pinpoint where the linguistic devices used by O. Henry take a symbolic dimension, offering readers symbolic or abstract layers of meaning embedded in the story. Finally, they demonstrated a holistic understanding of many of O. Henry’s conceptual metaphors at the last stage of their interdisciplinary research projects.

From this point on, the article delves into a detailed presentation of how a thorough, comprehensive, and interdisciplinary approach to certain conceptual metaphors was implemented. These literary elements were selected and interpreted based on their contribution to the story’s main themes and issues:

- the power of art and culture
- sacrifice and friendship
- significance of art and creativity during hard times.

The Story

"The Last Leaf" narrates the story of two artists, Johnsy and Sue, who share an apartment in Greenwich Village and standard artistic views and tastes. The plot turns unexpectedly when Johnsy surrenders to a severe strike of pneumonia. She firmly believes that the duration of her life is related to the last remaining leaf on a vine visible from her window. Sue tries her best to provide care and encouragement, but Johnsy's health deteriorates, and her spirits wane.

Conceptual metaphors related to art and culture

The first group of conceptual metaphors, identified by one of the student teams, leads to the significance of art, starting with examples from the story related with Japanese art. The participants had to explore the topic by doing online research on how Japanese art and crafts penetrated the United States (and Europe) in the early 20th century when the author wrote the story. Having explored different Internet sources on the topic, the students presented and discussed their findings about Japanese culture and cultural exchange with Europe and the USA. Japanese art and crafts, including woodblock prints, ceramics, and textiles, became popular among American collectors and consumers after the mid-to-late 19th century, which trend was depicted by O. Henry for his short story.

The students contextualised the metaphors by embedding the facts and ideas in the story's cultural, historical, or ideological fabric. The students were encouraged to use the interdisciplinary approach to connect the literary work with the "Arts and Artistic Techniques" discipline and explore cultural themes, thus expanding their cultural knowledge and sensitivity. Then, they grouped several cultural metaphors related to the ivy vine outside Johnsy's window and the vine leaves.

In many cultures, vines are symbols of growth, renewal, and vitality, as they grow easily and spread quickly. At the story's beginning, the vine represents a symbol of life and hope for Johnsy as she watches the leaves fall, convincing herself that she will die when the last leaf falls. However, as the narrative unfolds, the vine becomes more complex and ambiguous, representing life's fragility and human resilience. The students explored how the author depicts the vine and its leaves:

It was the last one on the vine. Still dark green near its stem, with serrated edges tinted with the yellow of dissolution and decay, it hung bravely from the branch some twenty feet above the ground. (O. Henry 16)

By applying the interdisciplinary approach to this conceptual metaphor, related to the issue of art and nature longevity, they interpreted the described image as an element of Japanese art called "ukiyo-e," a woodblock print style popular in Japan from the 17th to the 19th century. Ukiyo-e artists often use images of natural elements like leaves and flowers in their works, landscapes, and scenes from everyday life. The leaf that Johnsy focuses on represents the beauty and wonder of nature and serves as a symbol of hope in the face of illness and constraints. At the same time, this metaphor can be used to learn more about Japanese culture and painting.

O. Henry uses vivid and detailed strokes to convey the beauty of the leaves, such as phrases like “ragged gipsy of a tree that it came from” and “the way it clung to its stem despite the wind and rain” (O. Henry 16). These descriptions evoke a sense of gratitude and admiration for the natural world, which is also a common theme in ukiyo-e art, as the students highlighted based on their research. The ivy vine symbolises life and hope, gradually evolving into a symbol of resilience.

Another memorable image identified by the students is the Japanese paper napkin that Sue uses to wipe her tears after the doctor's visit: “After the doctor had gone, Sue went into the workroom and cried a Japanese napkin to a pulp.” The fashion of Japanese paper and its prints emerged in the late 19th century in France and is associated with names like Degas, Van Gogh, Lautrec, Manet, and others. Thus, contextualising this image taught the students about Impressionism and related artists.

Apart from being fashionable among artistic circles in the early 20th century, the original product is thin, transparent, and satin-finished, making it highly durable and absorbent. These characteristics explain why the artist Sue chooses such a napkin, transforming it into a soaked mass from her tears. This cultural metaphor also presents the significance of art and creativity during hard times, Japanese culture's beauty and artistry, and the importance of preserving these traditions. Mr. Behrman's final work, namely the vine leaf, further represents the power of art to inspire hope and resilience in difficult times.

This is how an interdisciplinary approach can connect literary work with the discipline of Arts and Artistic Techniques', encourage theme exploration, and thus expand the learners' cultural knowledge and sensitivity.

Another group of students delved into the theme of art and creativity, mainly focusing on the metaphor of “Michael Angelo's Moses beard” used to describe the character Behrman in the story. They observed that this metaphor directly links to Renaissance art, explicitly invoking the renowned Italian artist Michelangelo, who was celebrated for masterpieces like the sculpture of Moses. This reference prompted the students to explore Internet resources to study this artwork and its location.

Old Behrman was a painter who lived on the ground floor beneath them. He was past sixty and had a Michael Angelo's Moses beard curling down from the head of a satyr along with the body of an imp. (O. Henry 15)

The image of the elderly artist is forever associated with his long, flowing, white beard, which is very similar to the beard depicted in Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses. However, the reality of his life is that he struggles to make ends meet, working as a commercial artist and posing as a model for other artists instead of creating his great works of art. This metaphor first helps create a vivid and memorable image of Behrman in the reader's mind, allowing for clear visualisation. Second, it connects Behrman with the great artistic traditions of Western culture, suggesting that he is a figure with artistic genius and creative power. And finally, it shows that Behrman is a figure of wisdom and authority, much like the biblical figure of Moses, despite his artistic failures.

The story's ending convinces us that Behrman's talent and creativity are partially recovered. Even though he does not create his works of art as he envisioned, he still uses his artistic skills to help others, like Sue and Johnsy, by drawing 'the last leaf' that gives hope to Johnsy. In doing so, he saves her life but loses his own. In this case, the conceptual metaphor further strengthens the theme of art and culture as a source of inspiration and hope for the characters. An artist may not achieve fame and wealth, but their talents and creativity can profoundly influence the lives of others.

During their discussion, the students also recalled and examined the Renaissance period in Italy, characterised by a revival of classical art and a strong emphasis on humanism. This cultural context mirrors the portrayal of Behrman in the story. The interdisciplinary approach employed in this analysis enhances students' comprehension of art and fosters their imagination and creativity while bolstering their competencies in the field. Ultimately, it underscores the enduring influence of Renaissance artists on our cultural imagination.

Conceptual metaphors related to history and geography

Firstly, a reader would eventually encounter conceptual metaphors related to history and geography. One such metaphor is using the old neighbourhood of Greenwich Village as the narrative's setting, symbolising community and history.

When applying the interdisciplinary approach, the students engaged in the following activities:

Firstly, they analysed the topographical elements in the story, specifically focusing on the depiction of Greenwich Village as the setting and the reference to the attic spaces as "Dutch." The process involved examining how these metaphors symbolised elements of history and geography within the narrative. To delve deeper, the students traced the historical context of Greenwich Village, uncovering its origins as a small village outside of New York, founded by Dutch colonists in the early 17th century. They explored how the town evolved into a vibrant residential and cultural hub by the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The students analysed the symbolic use of "Dutch" in describing the attics, considering how this term might reflect the spaces' architectural style and historical connections. They speculated on the specific architectural features associated with Dutch design. By employing an interdisciplinary lens, they connected the use of "Dutch" to evoke a sense of old-world charm and history, aligning it with the European heritage of the neighbourhood's early residents. This interpretation considered the cultural significance embedded in the metaphor. The students extended their analysis to the broader discipline of history, exploring the implications of these metaphors in understanding immigration waves in the United States. They critically considered the historical context and its impact on the story's themes. Throughout this interdisciplinary exploration, students were encouraged to ask questions and delve into nuanced aspects of the text. This process not only expanded their competence in critical thinking but also contributed to improving their language and literacy skills.

Additionally, they examined the metaphor of the "Bay of Naples" and its geographic significance. They got involved in a virtual exploration of the location, considering its cultural connotations and recognising how it inspired Johnsy in the narrative. The students recognised the symbolic portrayal of the Bay of Naples and its association with Italy's rich artistic heritage. This connection between art, geography, and culture resonated with the story's broader theme of art's healing and transformative power.

Conceptual metaphors related to mathematics

While examining Johnsy, the doctor uses two metaphors that employ mathematical formulas to illustrate the seriousness of the patient's condition. "She has one chance in - let us say, ten" and "But whenever my patient begins to count the carriages in her funeral procession, I subtract 50 per cent from the curative power of medicines."

These two metaphors demonstrate that the patient's worldview and thinking are crucial to recovery. By using mathematical language, the doctor can express these concepts in a precise and memorable manner, emphasising the importance of the patient's mental state in the healing process.

In addition, mathematical metaphors can convey that medical treatment is not solely based on scientific formulas or objective measures but is also influenced by the circumstances and subjective experiences of the patient. This implies that medicine is not a universal solution and that the doctor must consider the patient's emotional and psychological well-being and physical health.

General Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Application

1. Interdisciplinary Approach for Cultural Awareness:

Our exercises and experience demonstrate that students can better understand complex subjects if educational practitioners embrace an interdisciplinary approach. This approach encourages cross-disciplinary connections and helps students see the interconnectedness of knowledge. In the context of cultural awareness, this approach allows students to simultaneously explore various facets of culture, such as art, history, geography, and language. This can lead to a more profound appreciation of how culture influences literature and vice versa.

2. Cultural Context Exploration: Delving into the cultural context of literary works can open up new dimensions of understanding. Students who explore a text's historical, societal, and ideological influences gain a deeper appreciation for the job and develop critical thinking skills. This exploration helps students recognise how cultural contexts shape characters, themes, and metaphors within a story, making them more culturally sensitive and aware.

This conclusion coincides with Musolff's research into the relationship between metaphor production and reception on the one hand and cultural context on the other. In his article "Metaphor Interpretation and Cultural Linguistics", he hypothesises that "metaphors are intrinsic to cultural cognition and if speakers and hearers in inter-cultural communication fail to realise their integration in diverse cultural schemas and world views, metaphors can lead to subtle but far-reaching misunderstandings (Musolff 47).

3. Intercultural Competence Development: Embracing an interdisciplinary approach not only enhances subject knowledge but also fosters the development of intercultural competence. Students engage in cross-disciplinary exploration of cultural contexts and are exposed to diverse perspectives and worldviews. This exposure nurtures empathy, tolerance, and the ability to navigate cultural differences effectively. As students learn to appreciate and respect various cultural backgrounds, they become better equipped to engage in intercultural communication and collaboration, a valuable skill in today's globalised world.

4. Holistic Competence Development: Education should aim to develop individual competencies beyond subject-specific knowledge. An

interdisciplinary, culturally aware approach can contribute to students' holistic competence development. They learn about a particular subject and enhance skills like critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. These competencies prepare them for the challenges of our ever-changing world, equipping them to engage effectively in various academic and cultural contexts.

The article provides a valuable blueprint for educators and institutions looking to enhance cultural awareness, critical thinking, and competence development through an interdisciplinary approach. These general conclusions and recommendations can serve as a foundation for designing effective teaching methodologies and curricula that cross borders between academic disciplines.

Following all the conclusions, it becomes evident that analysing conceptual metaphors by applying the interdisciplinary approach to raise students' cross-cultural awareness could be used to expand all eight competencies, suggested by the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment”, published by the Council of Europe. Kövecses adds to this by stating that Conceptual Metaphor Theory “will continue to play a vital role in the development of cognitive linguistics as a general study of language” (Kövecses 35).

Finally, the article demonstrates that literary texts can communicate themes such as art, history, civic education, and even mathematics when the boundaries between academic disciplines are overcome.

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