

*Collaborative Lessons in a Cross-Border Space: Learning Each Other's Language,  
Literature and History on the Basis of the CoBLaLT Model*

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**Abstract**

In the paper we propose a new paradigm for teaching literature, language and history in cross-border territories from the point of view of cross-border didactics and cross-curricular collaboration at the higher elementary school level. Based on the CoBLaLT model, we propose interdisciplinary activities for students of two cross-border classes on both sides of the Slovenian-Italian border, who, while studying picture books written in Slovenian, meet via online platforms and live. They get to know each other, learn the languages of other students, experience literature and the art of illustration, and above all experience the complex history of the area where they live.

Keywords: Literature, Language, History, Cross-Border Didactics, CoBLaLT Model, Emotions in the Classroom

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## 1. Introduction

Researchers interpret the inclusion of literature in the teaching of foreign languages mainly in two different ways, and thus also have different understandings of the importance of literature in teaching foreign languages. On the one hand, there are arguments that understand literature primarily as an example of a more demanding use of language, through which the student can learn more complex language forms (cf. McKay, 1982; McKay, 2001), but at the same time does not deal with sociological, literary and cultural-historical, aesthetic, emotional, etc. dimensions of literary creation, which are emphasized by the second type of understanding of the inclusion of literature in the teaching of other/foreign languages. The second type of understanding takes into account the specifics of literary texts and does not present literature only as an example of language use, but also observes its integration into the wider socio-cultural reality. The didactics of literature in the context of the first language also justifies that students acquire language through literature and thereby strengthen their ability to communicate, but on the other hand they also experience literature and expand their knowledge of literature and culture.<sup>1</sup>

Reading literature introduces the reader to the more demanding uses of language, to the possibilities of organization opened up by language, prepares him for the disciplined use of language required by a predetermined linguistic structure, and leads him to learn about the possibilities of symbolic expression (Grosman, 1989, p. 52), which also applies to learning a foreign language. Among other things, students strengthen their reading fluency and pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge, which is emphasized in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (cf. SEJO 2011: 35), while at the same time they learn about spelling and new vocabulary (cf. Khatib et al., 2011). The use of language in literature is complex: here, among other things, we find language games, unconventional uses of language devices, violations of conventions, etc. From the point of view of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, reading literature requires a wider range and greater control of vocabulary and mastery of grammatical correctness at the B2 level and above, as well as developed phonological control when reading literature aloud.

With the emotional turn in literary science, there is an increasing emphasis on the emotional dimensions of literature, for example the emotional effects of literature on readers. This potential of literature was neglected for a long time in the school system in Slovenia as well as in the wider European area as there was a greater emphasis on intellectual aspects and student's knowledge of literature and culture. The emotional aspects of literature are crucial and without this dimension, the understanding of the literature is simplistic. This is also true for understanding wider culture, history and language, therefore in the paper we show the treatment of two picture books that talk about the horrors of war and offer many possibilities for discussing emotions in the classroom. From the point of view of emotional contents, the students also get to know other topics in the field of literature, history, fine arts and knowledge of a foreign language. Students are therefore emotionally connected to these contents, they understand them more deeply and are motivated for further learning.

The didactics of literature in primary and secondary schools in Slovenia and Italy is mostly rooted in nationally based literary histories, which represents a problem in increasingly

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<sup>1</sup> An example is the principles for teaching a foreign language proposed by the Modern Languages Association (MLA) in the document *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World* (MLA 2007), which encourage continuous teaching of language, literature and culture and emphasize direct contact students with various texts, including literary ones.

diverse classes with pupils and students from ethnically mixed and immigrant families (Toroš, 2019). This is problematic especially in border areas such as the Slovenian-Italian border, where the European Union has led to the greatest changes in recent decades. In the past, this space was the scene of many horrors of the First and Second World War: from the Soča Front to fascism. In modern times, in this region Slovenians are a minority in Italy and Italians are a minority in Slovenia. We propose an interdisciplinary reading of picture books dealing with the sensitive topic of the First World War exploring the possibilities of teaching literature in connection to (foreign) languages following the model of cross-border teaching CoBLaLT – which represents an innovative methodological framework for primary Neighbouring Language teaching and learning in border regions. The model was first introduced by Irina Moira Cavaion and is based on social integrative principles and network based language teaching. The paper presents the possibilities of dealing with the problematic topic of war through the medium of picture books, namely from the point of view of cross-border literary didactics, which supports the teaching of literature in cross-border spaces and develops the competences of historical thinking and understanding the context (Toroš, 2022). We propose the picture book by author Lucija Stepančič and illustrator Damijan Stepančič *Anton!*, which describes the shocking and multifaceted experience of interpersonal violence. We show why subjective, complex and realistic representations of war, such as we find in the discussed picture book, are important for the cross-border space.

Based on the didactic model of teaching and learning literature in an area where several languages are in contact, i.e. of the CoBLaLT model (Cavaion, 2020), we present a proposal for the didactic treatment of the mentioned picture books in the classes of the last elementary school triad (age approx. 9-14 years). The model proposes new teaching methods and highlights the importance of making language teaching research a collaborative process between a scientific and professional community (Cavaion, 2022). The connection between the two classes is established at the beginning and at the end of the process via online platforms, and the students also meet in live workshops. The aim is to learn neighboring languages in the community<sup>2</sup> but also to foster cross-curricular collaboration between different school subjects that deal with first and second languages, literature, culture and history. The proposal for considering picture books therefore covers cross-border classes of students in Italy and Slovenia who are learning Slovenian or Italian and are able to communicate in both languages. Moreover, we are developing the intercultural ability that includes understanding multifaceted identities and avoiding stereotypes, but also means intercultural attitude, which is reflected in the curiosity and openness of the teacher and student to new things, knowledge of their own and other cultures, the ability to interpret them and a critical approach to different cultures (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002).

## **2. The Emotional Dimension of Learning in the Classroom Experiencing Literature**

The proposed picture book is suitable for teenagers due to their problematic subject matter, as they are attracted to literary works that depict problematic topics such as death, and, as Alenka Žbogar (2010, p. 427) states, "they experience the world more complex and less idealistically, which coincides with the psychological structure of this age period: increased interest in mutual relationships, deepening into new experiences, desire to understand the

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<sup>2</sup> A foreign language is a language that is not the official language of a certain country, so a neighboring language is also a foreign language at the same time, but we define it more specifically. Neighboring languages are languages that have the status of a second language both in the curriculum and in the environment where the students live (Čok 2021: 8). In the cross-border Slovenian-Italian area, Slovenian and Italian are the so-called i. neighboring languages.

surroundings and evaluate the value system of others". They look for stories and, on a symbolic level, the meaning of life, a deeper, inner meaning, constants, values, beliefs, ideals and authentic role models, examples for imitation and morally worthy realizations (Blažić, 2010, p. 23). In order to give young readers a stories that will represent a challenge and arouse emotions in them, we chose the topic of war, which is presented in both picture books from the point of view of the personal story of ordinary soldiers.

In the picture book *Anton!* by Lucija Stepančič and Damijan Stepančič, which takes place in 1917, we read the story of Anton, a 19-year-old soldier who was sent by the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the Soča front during the First World War. He received a letter at the front saying that his mother had died. One night towards the end of winter, there was an unusual calm, the cold subsided and everyone was asleep, when Anton suddenly saw his mother. She called her son Anton and lured him out of the trench, after which a grenade explosion suddenly rang out behind his back, which was fatal for all of his friends. After that Anton never saw his mother again. The picture is stylistically condensed and use artistic language (cf. Haramija & Batič, 2013, p. 25–26), with different levels of meaning the story addresses both children and adults (cf. Blažić, 2006, p. 668–669). The narrative is concise, the sentences are often short. The two soldiers are focalizers of the narrative, namely the work *Anton!* is structured in the form of a walk from the military shelter in half-sleep, following the soldier's gaze and following the soldier's mother. With a subjective view of the events through the eyes of the central characters, the story deepens the sense of direct experience and personal participation of the characters. This is the source of the reader's empathetic response, filling the empty spaces in the text with emotional content, which also affects his view of his own environment. The whirlwind of war is shown from the point of view of a simple young man, emphasizing the incomprehensibility and crudeness of the events and the cruelty of sudden death. In the picture book *Anton!* we find references to the experience of war in other soldiers, many of whom were already deceased. With this, the representation of war expands from an individual's perception to a collective event that also includes the opposing army.

Compared to the text of picture book, Damijan Stepančič's illustrations are emotionally expressive. The combination of two levels of communication, both verbal and visual (cf. Haramija & Batič, 2013, p. 26), gives the work as a whole a distinct emotional charge. Illustrations are drawn in yellow-black tones reminiscent of vintage photographs. The picture book clearly guides the reader's gaze along the path of the protagonist, who moves throughout the book. The realistic emphasis is visible above all on the faces of the soldiers, who are tired and suffering, which deepens the narrative of the events in the text in the direction of personal experience. The depiction of war is realistic and not idealized, illustrations show the fear and shock of soldiers – and stimulate class discussion on the experience of war by the different characters in the story. The focus in the illustrations of the discussed picture book is wider than in the text, as the images not only capture the protagonist's point of view, but also give a broader view of what is happening. Damijan Stepančič (2014, p. 72) describes his last illustration after the explosion in the picture book *Anton!* with the following words: "dead, torn, naked, unworthy of the name of man lie comrades, scattered on the muddy field, in the craters dug up by shells in the past days. It's like falling into already dug graves..."

The problematic thematization of war in the discussed picture book raises questions for the reader about human suffering, the story offers a shocking and multifaceted experience of violence and cruelty. The dead have a name and identity, the soldiers have emotions and

personalities. The visual-textual representations of the central characters in the discussed picture books focus on their experience of the war, which they try to portray "authentically, with all seriousness" (Stepančič, 2014, p. 69).

### **3. Learning Each Other's Language, Literature and History on the Basis of the CoBLaLT Model**

In the following, we present a proposal for a didactic treatment of the picture books of Lucija and Damijan Stepančič. At the same time, we answer the questions of what role literature can play in the modern teaching of neighboring languages and why the two selected picture books are suitable for cross-border didactics of Slovenian as a foreign language.

#### **3.1 The Role of Literature in the Modern Teaching of Neighboring Languages**

Modern approaches continuously teach language, literature and culture and highlight the student's direct contact with texts, including literary ones. Reading literature "introduces the reader to more demanding uses of language, to the possibilities of organization opened up by language, prepares him for the disciplined use of language required by a predetermined linguistic structure, and leads him to learn about the possibilities of symbolic expression" (Grosman, 1989, p. 52). Among other things, students strengthen reading fluency and pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge (cf. SEJO, 2011, p. 35), while at the same time learning about spelling, new vocabulary and unconventional use of language. We agree with Lazar (1996) that contact with literature, which brings with it certain emotional content and thus attracts the reader, can help to learn a foreign language because readers have a personal relationship with literary texts or they connect emotionally with the foreign language to a greater extent. Literature brings confrontation, stimulation and provocation, raises questions or offers more answers to questions, and touches us, because it "moves our emotions, our beliefs fall into crisis, reorients our beliefs" (Falcetto, 2014, p. 56), which is especially important in border areas where neighboring languages meet, which are often the languages of painful memories (Raasch, 2002, p. 17 in Cavaion, 2020, p. 18). Among other things, literature allows young readers to broaden their perception of different people and events, and thereby also better understand their own personality and events in their lives (Nodelman, 2003, p. 27–28).

#### **3.2 The Emotional and Experiential Aspects of Literary Reading in Class**

Contemporary literary studies are often based on the emotional dimension of the reception of literature, which in the past was mostly neglected. They highlight the awareness that literature, including youth literature, is not only a set of information that the reader accepts, but also provides an experience that includes the subjective participation of the recipient. Literature is therefore not just a set of information that the reader accepts, but also an experience that includes the subjective participation of the reader.<sup>3</sup>

In researching the emotional and experiential aspects of literary reading, an important concept is the so called embodiment of knowledge, which explains that the distinction

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<sup>3</sup> This is also shown in the picture books, i.e. a special book format, which combines text and illustration into a single whole; The picture book therefore has three semantic components: the text, the illustrations and the content-design relationship between the text and the illustration. This relationship is called interaction, because the text affects the understanding of the meaning of the illustrations and vice versa, the illustration changes or complements the meaning of the text (Haramija & Batič, 2013, 23).

between the emotional and cognitive dimensions of reading literature is not justified. The modern model of cognition no longer corresponds to the traditional separation between mind and emotions or between mind and body, since all cognition is embodied, and the mentioned aspects are intertwined in the so called embodied simulation (Gallese & Caruana, 2016, 397-398). Research on literature from the perspective of neuroscience deals with the interpretation of an individual's response to the content of a literary work as a physical and emotional, not just an intellectual, phenomenon. They showed that the samples or representations that are stored in memory are of a multimodal nature. Words or object representations are organized in the brain as distributed neural assemblies. When receiving literary texts, different aspects of the reader's experience – physical, emotional and intellectual – are not only activated simultaneously, but are interconnected. As Herman (2008, p. 138) points out, cognitive literary science sheds light on how the "emotional part" of reading literary works is the foundation, as well as a condition for its "rational part". One of the justifications for why the emotional aspect is a fundamental part of reading literature originated in the field of cognitive psychology, namely the theory that human thoughts are structured as a narrative. Cultural psychology expert Jerome Bruner (1997, p. 53–55) argues in his monograph *The culture of education* that people structure their knowledge and findings in the form of a narrative, and this is how an individual's identity and his place in culture are formed. Bruner defends the opinion that the purpose of school is not only to convey information to students and to arrange knowledge into categories, but that school is an opportunity for students to make sense of the world around them and to enter their own cultural environment, which is realized through narrative. Patrik Colm Hogan (2011) argues that emotions are closely related to storytelling, which is an universal way of understanding and reflecting on our world and life. The structure of stories is thus a systematic product of the human emotional system, which is also crucial for understanding literary narratives. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum (2004, p. 290–291) explains that emotions are also structured in the form of a narrative, explaining the privileged role of art in helping people understand themselves.

### **3.3 The CoBLaLT Didactic Model and the Role of Picture Books in Cross-Border Meetings of Children**

The CoBLaLT model refers to the learning of neighborhood languages in primary schools in border regions and is based on the establishment of systematic cross-border contacts (Čok, 2021, p. 64). According to this model, the discussion of picture books is placed in the cross-border Slovenian-Italian community, and its goal is for students to strengthen their experience and understanding of the history of their shared space through mutual contacts. The use of the CoBLaLT model that we propose follows the research of Irina M. Cavaion, which covered two elementary school classes, one from Slovenia and one from Italy, where students learn the language of the neighboring country - i.e. the class from Italy learned Slovenian, and the class from Slovenia learned Italian (cf. Cavaion, 2020, p. 134). The CoBLaLT model highlights the relationships between students who correspond through online tools and socialize in real life, while encouraging their motivation for intercultural learning of neighboring languages (cf. Cavaion, 2020). This type of activity of intercultural school meetings comes from the so-called pedagogy of visits and exchanges. Their goal is to increase motivation and encourage the development of intercultural sensitivity and create opportunities to speak and learn the neighboring language through (cross-border) participation of teenagers in a multilingual environment (Cavaion, 2020, p. 39). When devising this strategy, Irina M. Cavaion started from the possibilities offered by the contacts of students from two linguistically and ethnically different groups, "who, despite their geographical proximity, do not meet and who could be heavily burdened by unresolved social

inter-ethnic relations from the past" (Cavaion, 2020, p. 40). Cross-border intergroup contacts affect the exchange of attitudes and changes in the students' value system, the author argues, which is why she advocates joint activities of students (Cavaion 2020).

The selected picture books are highly emotionally expressive, so they offer an experience of otherness, which deepens in the environment of cross-border contact between students (cf. Cavaion, 2020, p. 63). The texts of the picture books are short and stylistically refined, which is why even students whose first language is not Slovenian or Italian but are learning this language will understand them. By encouraging the students to talk about work with their peers in Italian, even students whose first language is Slovenian will strengthen their ability to communicate in the neighboring language. Although, as Ana Toroš (2022, p. 342) states, literature dealing with cross-border topics can be "burdened with national stereotypes and prejudices, self-images and heteroimages, which can complicate the teaching of literature in ethnically heterogeneous classes", the common confrontation of students with both sides of the border with problematic topics motivationally.

The proposed activities offer both students and teachers a space that is not burdened by curricular requirements that separate the learning of the first and second language, history and literature into the framework of individual school subjects (for example Slovene as mother tongue, History, Italian as second language). The activities offer a different perspective on the content that students learn, as the primary activity is personal contact between them: students communicate with their peers, socialize and make friends. On the other hand, due to the strong emotional charge of both picture books, the starting point of the activities is emotional, which again represents a departure from established school practice, which emphasizes the primary aspect of acquiring knowledge. Students are invited to metacognitively reflect on the information they receive at school and through various media. Based on the example of a war theme presented through the eyes of simple and vulnerable individuals, the students can critically evaluate other historical information they encounter. The students learn that it is important to consider the point of view of the information given and the answer to the question of who is speaking and what is being communicated. This is the potential of literary works that tell subjective stories when compared to "objective" narratives of history.

The activities are derived from the CoBLaLT model (Cavaion, 2020, p. 244-252) and aimed at establishing interpersonal contacts between students both via online tools and in person. In the first week the teachers of the two included classes from Italy and Slovenia present the project to the students and make them aware of contacts before the meetings via an online platform. In this session the teacher prepares the students for an oral self-presentation at the first meeting, preferably in the second, neighbouring language (i.e. Slovenian or Italian). In the second week of the activity a video conference with the entire class takes place, where students meet for the first time and introduce themselves to each other, where they can choose between a presentation in the school's teaching language or neighborhood language. This is followed by conversations in the online chat room between pairs of children from each of the classes and the task of preparing an oral description of the new peers the students have met and their presentation. After this session the students keep in touch with each other by posting short personal texts on the blog and exchanging e-mails for the purpose of deepening acquaintance between them. The next session is a preparations for a live class meeting on the topic of the two picture books by Lucija Stepančič and Damijan Stepančič. The first aloud reading of the two picture books in each of the classes is followed by an individual silent reading. Then it's time for students to express their reactions in the neighbouring language. The first aloud reading of the two picture books in each of the classes

is followed by an individual silent reading. This is followed by the teacher's presentation of the basic facts about the historical time in which the two picture books are placed. For homework, the students collect different types of material about the First World War, which the teacher checks in class at the following session and which will be used in the reunion of the two classes. At the next session the live meeting of the two classes takes place. The teacher reads the literary works again and the students present their impressions to each other. This is followed by a historical contextualization of the events based on the material prepared by the students through independent work. Based on the material collected and presented by the students, the teacher summarizes the central framework of the war context. They conclude with the joint creation of a poster summarizing the historical events during the First World War in the area of present-day Primorska in Slovenia, or Friuli-Julian landscape in Italy. After the presentation of the posters, it is time to reflect on historical events from the point of view of the experiences of literary characters and the reflection of history through the eyes of small people, victims of war. Classroom reflection involves collecting students' impressions of the first lesson after the exchange, while provoking discussion about what they have learned. Students are encouraged to keep in touch with the other class on the project blog by sharing their impressions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Since the picture book generated a certain social environment with its cultural, social and political influences, the students can experience these aspects through them, and with the problematic topic of war in the cross-border area, they can gain a deeper understanding of the common history and gain sensitivity to the suffering of the little people that the picture book brings to the students. Students learn about the history and cultural history of the area and the literary system of the neighboring language, which they acquire, and, according to Rahimi (2014), literature can also make them aware of discrimination and power hierarchies in society. Based on the discussed picture books, students can learn about the consequences of social pressures on individual soldiers and their families. It is important that they encounter the topic of war not only from the point of view of historical data, but also from the personal stories and experiences of individuals of that time, which in addition to language ability also strengthens empathy. Here, among other things, we highlight expressions of interpersonal solidarity between the otherwise warring actors of the war, as well as the narration of the literarized history of space through the eyes of simple individuals. On the other hand, through problematic questions and independent research of historical facts, students acquire complex knowledge about past events in the area where they live. Literature is therefore not only a means on the basis of which an individual gets additional confirmation of his beliefs and values of his own culture, but in this way the student takes on a perspective from which he can judge different beliefs and values that he encounters in literary works when learning about (literary) history cross-border area. This means that the reader recognizes his own political-cultural environment and assumptions that he is able to change (cf. Johnston, 2000). From the point of view of social constructivism, students' contact with literature also has the potential of social movements. Reading the discussed picture books represents a new experience that enables cross-border classes to discuss challenging historical topics from the point of view of universal feelings with which they can identify, and on this basis, they strengthen their knowledge of the history of the common space.



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