

TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH READING FAIRY TALES

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ART

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2011

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To my daughter Lea

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I thank Dr. Ernst Bury, my High School German teacher. Most of what I know about German language und literature I learned from him, and I still think he should have taught at the university level.

Moreover, I am very thankful for the continuous support I received from the German Department at the University of Florida during my studies, especially from Dr. Sharon DiFino and Dr. Barbara Mennel, who advised this thesis.

In addition, I thank Dr. Nicolas Syrett, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Northern Colorado. After taking his Women's history class, I knew I could do anything in my life, even attend Graduate School. He was also the first to teach me how to write an argument.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Patrick Lee Gensler for all his love and never ending support. He was proofreader, cook, babysitter, dog-walker and most important: he always gave me a hug, when I needed it most. I can not put in words what I owe him.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

L1	Students' first /native language
L2	Students' second language, the target language
SLT	Second language teaching in a classroom environment
SL	Second language, any language learned after the native language
SLA	Second language acquisition

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Art

## TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH READING FAIRY TALES

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May 2011

Chair: Sharon DiFino

Major: German

Successful communication in a foreign language needs more than just words; it requires culture specific knowledge about the processes and thoughts behind the words. Therefore, teaching about the target culture in the foreign language classroom is essential. Yet, integrating more cultural content into the existing curriculum of paced University language courses faces numerous challenges. The aim of this thesis is therefore to show how to teach culture in the German second language (L2) classroom easily and effectively through reading fairy tales. Elaborating on this thesis, I will first take a look at how culture connects to language and why it is particularly important to teach about culture in second language acquisition (SLA). Moreover, I will examine and evaluate different approaches to teaching culture before explaining why reading constitutes the most fruitful method of teaching about culture in SLA. Additionally, I assess possible reading materials regarding their suitability for my purposes. Next, I will elucidate what makes fairy tales an ideal reading text for teaching about culture in SLA before giving concrete examples for classroom implementation and concluding my findings of how to facilitate the students' language learning process by increasing cultural knowledge and understanding through reading fairy tales.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Even though German and American cultures are generally viewed as similar, as both originate from western cultures, shortly after my first semester teaching German at the University of Florida had begun, I realized that there exist more cultural differences between the two populations than I had expected. Moreover, the cultural differences connect to disparities in language, which repeatedly caused problems among the second language learners whom I taught. Consequently, I began looking for a way to integrate more cultural aspects in the course content in order to facilitate the students' language learning.

First, I turned to textbooks for help. However, textbooks frequently neglect existing cultural differences between the native and the target language. Even though second language acquisition (SLA) theory very much emphasizes the importance of teaching culture, most of the available textbooks do not. They focus on grammatical structures and vocabulary, but leave little room for exploring cultural differences between the students' native and the target culture. Therefore, I could not use textbooks for my purposes.

Yet, I encountered the additional problem of limited time during fast-paced courses at the college level that have an already packed curriculum. Common techniques used for teaching cultural concepts such as culture assimilators, culture clusters or culture capsules require a great deal of time. On the other hand, techniques, which prove very time-effective, display often less successful results. Moreover, teaching about culture should be combined with the language learning component. Although it seemed difficult to find a solution to this matter, my research shows there is one: reading fairy tales.

Fairy tales illustrate cultural differences well, because these narratives reveal a great deal about their culture of origin. Furthermore, fairy tales constitute important qualities of an ideal reading text in SLA and consequently do not neglect the language component.

Elaborating on this thesis, in Chapter 2 I will first take a look at how culture connects to language and why it is particularly important to teach about culture in SLA. Moreover, I will examine and evaluate different approaches to teaching culture.

Chapter 3 then introduces and explains why reading constitutes the most fruitful method of teaching about culture in SLA. Additionally, I evaluate possible reading materials regarding their suitability for my purposes.

Next, I will elucidate in Chapter 4 what makes fairy tales an ideal reading text for teaching about culture in SLA before I give examples for classroom implementation in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 then concludes the findings of this master's thesis of how to facilitate the students' language learning process by increasing cultural knowledge and understanding through reading fairy tales in the German second language classroom.

## CHAPTER 2 TEACHING CULTURE

### What Is Culture?

This thesis deals with teaching culture in the German second language (L2) classroom and how to do it best. Yet, before exploring how to do so in the first place, one should first clarify what culture means and how it relates to a second language learning environment. I will thus start off this chapter with giving definitions.

In his book *Teaching Culture: Strategies for Intercultural Communication*, H. Ned Seelye describes culture generally as “everything humans have learned” (22). The scholar is more precise in his 1997 article “*Cultural Goals for Achieving Intercultural Communicative Competence*”:

Culture is a systemic, rather arbitrary, more or less coherent, group-invented, and group-shared creed from the past that defines the shape of ‘reality’ and assigns the sense of worth of things; it is modified by each generation and in response to adaptive pressures; it provides the code that tells people how to behave predictably and acceptably, the cipher that allows them to derive meaning from language and other symbols, the map that supplies the behavioral options for satisfying human needs. (23)

Michael Wendt agrees and points out that culture is a complex matter. He proposes that:

On the one hand, culture is seen as a distinguishable, homogeneous and objectively describable or ‘essentialist’ system. On the other hand, it is understood as dynamically developing events which are consequently only seized as momentary perceptions. (95)

Even though Wendt and Seelye have slightly different views of what constitutes culture, both scholars agree that culture can be different for diverse people at various times.

Moreover, language includes culture specific beliefs of how to process information and/or how to interact in the world. However, language in this context is more than just

words; it relates to the abstract thinking process behind the words. Alvino Fantini explains this as follows:

In linguistic terms, the influence of language on culture and world view is called *language determinism and relativity*; that is, the language we acquire influences the way we construct our model of the world (hence, determinism). And if this is so, other languages convey differing visions of the same world (relativity). (11)

Thus, language influences how we see our world. Moreover, if language instructs how to interact in this world, the connection between culture and second language acquisition reveals itself: the target language instructs how to interact in the target culture. Michael Byram and Peter Grundy thus define culture in second language acquisition (SLA) pragmatically as a / the culture associated being learnt, for which I will supply reasons to teach about in SLA in the following (1).

### **Why Teach Culture?**

Now that I have established a definition and understanding of culture, both in general as well as in the context of second language acquisition, I would like to further address why it is of such crucial importance to integrate culture in an SL course. First, culture is variable across different groups of people and shapes their behavior. Second, language functions as a transmitter in communicating standards for this behavior. Fantini argues that language “in fact, both reflects and affects one’s world view, serving as sort of a road map to how one perceives, interprets and thinks about, and expresses one’s views of the world” (4). As a result every language “is not merely a ‘neutral’ communication system, but a pervasive medium that directly influences every aspect of our lives” (8). Thus, in order to understand a culture, one needs to be able to understand its’ language. However, this is not a one-way street: in order to understand a language, one also needs knowledge about the culture from which it derives. Yet,

learning “about a language is to an extent learning about a culture” (Swiderski, 71) or as Seelye 1997 states

it has become evident that the study of language cannot be divorced from the study of culture, and vice versa. The wherewithal to function in another cultural system requires both prowess in the language and knowledge of the culture. (23)

In order to successfully communicate in the L2, the learner therefore has to study both, language and culture. Riitta Jaatinen thinks in a similar way. She proposes that:

One of the most important goals of foreign language education is to guide students to understand the importance of a language as an expressing and interpreting element in culture and society and realizing and utilizing this to study language as well as possible. (65)

Mastering a language therefore includes more than vocabulary and grammar, it includes the study of culture.

The foreign language teacher has to ensure the students are aware of this fact. Milton Bennett points out that many “students (and some teachers) view language only as a communication tool” (16) which they can approach by directly transferring words from one language to another. This has often proven by research to be a mistaken belief. As outlined above, the study of culture and the study of language cannot be separated from each other. As a result scholars of SL pedagogy widely agree that teaching a SL has to reflect this. Richard Swiderski therefore argues that “ideas about language are ideas about culture, and ideas about culture concretely affect language teaching and language learning” (122). As a result, it is of tremendous importance to teach culture in a foreign language class. Truly understanding the target language requires adequate cultural background knowledge of the target culture, besides knowledge about vocabulary and grammar. According to Bennett, being able to speak and meaningfully communicate also includes mastering “the pragmatic dimensions of

culturally appropriate social judgment and decision making” (20). Moreover, Marcel Danesi emphasizes that recent research on concepts in SLA

is beginning to show that learning a new language is not a simple matter of learning how to articulate new sounds and how to use new word-making patterns to communicate something. It involves, rather, learning how linguistic, nonverbal, and conceptual systems interact. (21)

Danesi also explains what happens when students do not learn about the influence of culture on language. Like Bennett he claims that

students often produce SL messages that are ‘semantically anomalous’ when they attempt to speak or write spontaneously, without some form of guidance. The source of such anomaly is, typically, the unconscious tendency of students to put together SL messages on the basis of NL concepts. (61)

This proves the thesis outlined previously that language determines our relative understanding of the world.

Thus, if one does not have cultural background knowledge and just transfers words, there is the risk of becoming a ‘fluent fool’. Bennett explains a fluent fool is someone who speaks a foreign language well but doesn’t understand the social or philosophical content of that language” (16). As Swiderski points out the ability “to speak a language well is often mistaken for ability to function in a speech community, but speaking ability can be a mechanical skill devoid of cultural competence” (22). The reason for this, as Fantini demonstrates, is that language “communicates, but also excommunicates. That is, it includes only those who share the system; others are excluded” (9). Hence, Danesi argues that communication across cultures

requires a detailed knowledge of appropriate words, phrases, structures, and nonverbal cues that come together cohesively in a script-like fashion to enable a speaker to carry out a successful interaction with another speaker. An infringement of any of the procedural details of this script might lead to a breakdown in communication, confrontation, or social inappropriateness. (13)

Not fulfilling these cultural prerequisites result in the speaker being excluded from communication. Byram and Grundy strongly agree with this. In their 2003 collection they emphasize for example how “culture is encoded in the everyday conceptual metaphors speakers take for granted” (1). Moreover, they prove that these encodings differ across languages. The English idiom ‘I smell a red herring’ translated word by word to German for example does not transfer its meaning. Or, as Claire Kramersch highlights:

in the United States, foreign language learners try to replicate in French or German such untransferrable concepts Anglo-American concepts as: ‘to be in control’, ‘to be committed to’, ‘setting one’s priorities’, ‘creating opportunities’ without even realizing how ideologically laden such phrases are. (43)

Therefore, one cannot assume that simply translating a text from one language to the other captures all the culturally shaped concepts behind the written words, especially when it is a more abstract concept. Carol Morgan and Albane Cain explain that

for learners, language refers not only to observable objects and actions, but to ideas and opinions that need to be deduced and imagined. If we translate this into a foreign language context, for the learner of German the understanding of *Kartoffelsalat* is likely to be much more accessible than the abstract and elusive concept of *Ordnung ist alles* (6)

Understanding therefore depends on the general knowledge of culturally shaped ideas and opinions.

Virginia Samuda and Martin Bygate point out that comprehension always depends on general knowledge: “Since general knowledge is culturally shaped, it differs across cultural backgrounds” (43). Hence, language learners need to be aware of the fact that general knowledge influences culture and constitutes a vital part in the process of language learning. But general knowledge about a culture alone does not prove sufficient. In addition, students must know how to encode and transfer cultural concepts from one language to the other. Randal Holmes states:

that the knowledge of a language's culture is though essential to a full understanding of a language's nuances and meaning. . . . Thus, learning a language should be completed by a sustained and ethnographically structured encounter with the language's culture. (20)

Holmes finds that this structured encounter can best be staged through the area of literacy (explained later in this chapter).

The implication for second language teaching regarding the influence of language on culture and culture on language is that students must gain knowledge of the target culture. Moreover, the student has to learn how the target culture relates to the conceptual systems of the target language to be able to communicate and function in this language. In fact, a great deal of understanding of culture is necessary if one wants to be able to express oneself in the target language on the same level as in the mother tongue.

Aside from teaching effective use of the target language, teaching culture can also help students' avoid cultural conflicts. In *Teaching Culture: Strategies for Intercultural Communication* Seelye claims that

Conflict is present whenever two cultures come into contact. This is often because of a clash of values – a cultural difference in the perception of the appropriate way to satisfy basic physical and psychological needs. (57)

Ulf Schuetze explains in this context that

an intercultural speaker is faced with the difficult task of negotiating between his/her own conventions, beliefs, values and behaviours and those of the group with which s/he associates her/himself (215).

In addition, one has to consider

the relation between languages and between cultures expressed in particular words and linguistic forms. In other words, learning and speaking a second language means investigating many forms of social identities, those of other groups as well as one's own (215)

Therefore, every time a language learner engages with a target language and culture, a potential conflict is on the rise. In some cases, especially when physically entering the target country, such conflicts can even turn into a culture shock, H. Douglass Brown describes:

Culture shock refers to phenomena ranging from mild irritability to deep psychological panic and crisis. . . . Culture shock is associated with feelings in the learner of estrangement, anger, hostility, indecision, frustration, unhappiness, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, and even physical illness. The person undergoing culture shock views the new world out of resentment, and alternates between being angry at others for not understanding him and being filled with self-pity. (34)

Decreasing culture shock demands a certain degree of cultural awareness, which in turn requires language learners to know about the cultural differences between their own culture and the target culture as these differences impact for example language and/or behavior. Yet, Brown admits that culture shock cannot be prevented at all extend (39). Instead, he emphasizes the role and importance of the foreign language teacher to help students learn to deal with it as best as they can, which includes knowing about cultural differences (39). This knowledge enables learners to deal with frustration, anger and helplessness experienced in the target culture and can help to prevent extreme culture shock.

Also, adequately focused, the learner can also benefit from a cultural conflict.

Claire Kramersch argues that settling a cross-cultural conflict is a process in which the language learner acquires literacy in the L2 by:

expressing personal meanings that may put in question those of the speech community. The language that is being learned can be used both to maintain traditional social practices, and to bring about change in the very practices that brought about this learning. (233)

Cultural conflict can thus have not only negative outcome, but could also lead to something positive in the end.

In summary, teaching about culture and its' differences is essential in the L2 classroom. Only cultural background knowledge enables the learner to fully understand the target language in all its' nuances, allows discovery of cultural differences, and develops the cultural awareness and understanding that is needed in order to function in today's diverse global environment.

### **How to Teach Culture?**

Teaching culture is of great importance for successful second language acquisition. Consequently, culture should not serve simply as a form of content carrier in the communicative approach as Holmes argues, but rather as a carrier of meaning (18). But what constitutes the most effective way to ensure that the teaching of culture is integral to the SL classroom? Specifically, how can this be done in a college classroom setting, a place outside of the community associated with the target language and culture? According to a study conducted by Natalia Yevgenyevna Collins, most students “see immersion as the only way to truly learn the language, but did not seem to believe that was possible to learn cultural contexts of the language outside of the country where it is spoken” (62). While immersion certainly is the best way to learn a language, this does not constitutes a realistic approach for every learner.

It poses a great deal of difficulty to study the target language solely in the target country due to the requirement of immense commitment of time and resources. Therefore, one has to find a way to integrate the target culture in the language learning in the classroom. Scholars dedicated to foreign language pedagogy researched and discussed numerous approaches and techniques regarding this matter in the past. In

the following, I briefly describe various approaches and techniques of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. These can be organized into four categories: lecture, experiential learning and simulation, language-culture exploration through interaction, and reading. Moreover, I will evaluate these methods regarding their suitability for a fast-paced language course that wants to facilitate as many skills at the same time as possible.

## **Lecture**

In straight lecture, the foreign language teacher traditionally presents examples of significant cultural differences between the native and the target culture. As Alice Omaggio Hadley criticizes, the instructor then points out these examples as facts to his or her students in class (347). This approach has been criticized widely in the language pedagogy community. According to Joyce Merrill Valdes, a straight lecture

does provide the students with information but deprives them of the depth of understanding and enjoyment that is derived from class discussions, through the reactions of the students to what they have heard, to what the teacher has said, and to what their classmates have contributed in a cross section of cultural attitudes (145).

Consequently, in a straight lecture students just consume information, without having the chance to reflect about or react to what they have heard. Therefore, the result of such a lecture is an “uni-directional presentation of facts rather than a more relativised understanding of other cultures” (Morgan and Cain, 25). Kramsch argues similarly and emphasizes that representative usage of facts can lead to the misconception of some Germans being “automatically representative of any given German society” (181). Inge Schwerdtfeger likewise criticizes the rigidity of Landeskunde in a German context:

Cultural studies are bound at present by scientific objectivity and, at the same time there are remnants of an imperialistic form a writing about other countries . . . [which] tacitly presupposes that somewhere out there exists the 'right' knowledge about the world. (37)

Seelye gives this approach some credit as it “immediately hits the student of a second culture that things are done differently there” (45). However, this means giving the students information, without letting them reflect about it and Seelye warns that “exotic differences are two-edged swords. They provoke interest but they reinforce the ethnocentricity of the learner” (45). Schuetze agrees with this concept and explains that in this way “learners perceive other individuals or groups in terms of assumptions and stereotypes” (215). Omaggio Hadley goes a step further and claims that by following this approach stereotypes are established rather than diminished (347). She claims that while it might help to point out cultural differences, cultural understanding can not be facilitated through this approach. Rather hostility towards the target culture is the result and thus the teacher must avoid this approach at all costs. Yet, one can argue that the lecture depends on what the instructor makes of it. He or she might not use stereotypes at all. This approach is common as it is not very time consuming and it allows the instructor to determine exactly what should be known about the target culture regarding cultural differences.

Besides straight lectures, this category contains two more formats. First, there is a technique called Culture Capsule. Seelye describes in his 1993 book that a Culture Capsule highlights “one minimal difference between an American and a target custom, along with several illustrative photos or relevant realia” (174). While the language teacher chooses the subject matter of the Culture Capsule, they “are generally prepared outside of class by a student but presented during class time in 5 or 10 minutes at the

end of a period” (174). This allows the students to engage with a topic and to reflect on it, a significant difference compared with a straight lecture.

Then there is the format of Culture Clusters, which derives from the Culture Capsules, and allows exemplifying more complex topics. The format was first invented 1973 at the University of Georgia and consists “of about three illustrated culture capsules that develop related topics, plus one 30-minute classroom simulation that integrates the information contained in the capsules” (177).

In short: lectures about specific cultural differences offer a straightforward way for the instructor to illustrate cultural differences. However, at the same time lecture does not facilitate cultural understanding very well. Unlike an intercultural approach, transferring factual information does not “include a reflection both on the target culture and the native culture” (Kramsch, 205). Frequently used stereotypes that are presented as facts do not mirror real cultural differences and diversity. Instead of creating cultural awareness, ethnocentricity is reinforced this way and sometimes even hostility towards the target culture can arise. Thus, I agree with Omaggio Hadley, Seelye and Schuetze. Lecture is not a successful way to teach culture. It is important to realize that “the most difficult aspect of cultural studies is not learning facts, but learning new ways of seeing” (Shumway, 252).

### **Experiential Learning and Simulation**

In contrast to lectures, numerous exercises exist that aim to create awareness about the connections between language, culture, and world view in an experiential way. One way is by using simulations. For instance, the book *New Ways in Teaching Culture* promotes an exercise, in which the students simulate a cross-cultural entry experience by visiting several imaginative host cultures, each of which has their own

language and culture (Fantini, 47- 51). However, while this exercise might be beneficial in teaching cultural awareness, it neglects the language learning component. On the other hand, the book describes exercises that allow students to investigate components of the target culture through activities with native speakers outside of class (Fantini 53-56). Projects that include native speakers certainly are a good opportunity to practice the target language in combination with cultural exploration. Yet, such projects are generally very difficult to arrange.

The few exercises that emphasize both the language as the cultural component often have another problem: the proficiency level of the learner (Fantini, 93 -95). While the foreign language proficiency level varies, of the 52 exercises described in the book, 35 require at least a higher intermediate or even advanced command of the target language. In addition, they are often very time-consuming. Seldom is there an exercise that can be completed in less than 60 minutes class time.

Therefore only a few of these exercises are really suitable for a fast-paced Beginner German L2 classroom as they are mostly either too time-consuming, too difficult to arrange or target a higher proficiency level.

### **Language-Culture Exploration through Interaction**

Susane Eisenclas and Susan Trevaskes argue that culture “remains for students a vague concept somewhat removed from their own tangible realities” (180).

Consequently, they promote interactive classroom activities which “through their own experience, students can more readily learn to identify and understand the nature of culture” (180). Actively engaging with the other culture therefore helps to understand it. Similarly, Ulf Schuetze claims that one

of the aims of second language learning is to further the understanding of our own culture as well as that of other countries and regions of the world (Kramsch, 1993, 1998) and intercultural exchange is one means of achieving this goal. (217)

Hence, in his interactive classroom, intercultural exchange plays a major role.

Schuetze promotes an online second language course (German/English) to create a virtual learning environment fostering cross-cultural student-student dialogues. In this approach, each student is paired “with a student at the other university to work on the assignments together” (215) and should “discuss key issues and concepts and to engage in a dialogue” (218). The scholar argues that during their work, the students critically reflect on cultural differences and “interact with members of another culture in a virtual environment” (215). Through this intercultural interaction the students learn about the target culture and its’ differences compared to the native culture from a peer. This student to student interaction across cultures frees them from typical stereotypes. The contact with ‘real people’ helps the student to overcome possible previously established assumptions about the members of the target culture. In addition, they practice their language skills.

In summary this approach is one of the most learner-centered. Schuetze explains that when

giving examples or introducing new material the learner chooses what he or she thinks is relevant and representative of the topic discussed; in other words, the learner shows that culture is different. (226)

The approach reveals cultural differences to the students while also addressing other skills, such as comprehension, writing and use of technology. However, major problems of this approach are its challenge to implement and its only partially predictable outcome. Some students participating in Schuetze’s study wrote more, others wrote

less. A number of them discussed the differences in great detail, others hardly touched on the topic. In addition, the language proficiency was not the same for the students in the US and Germany. Problems occurred for the weaker students, who lacked language fluency resulting in limited communication. Therefore, I would not promote this method as a stand-alone approach to teaching culture in the German L2 classroom.

## **Reading**

At this point I would like to draw the attention to one last approach to teaching culture in the L2 classroom, reading. Yet, reading includes more than one format. First one should distinguish between teaching culture through reading in the native language or the target language. For example, Seelye describes reading in the native language about cultural differences between the native and the target culture in culture assimilators, a technique that

provides the student with as many as seventy-five or one hundred episodes of target culture behavior. Each episode describes a “critical incident” of cross cultural interaction that is usually a common occurrence in which an American and a host national interact, a situation one or both find puzzling or conflictful or that they are likely to misinterpret. (162-63)

The student reads a text describing the situation in the native language and then “chooses the correct response from four plausible explanations of the behavior described in the episode” (163). Each answer choice offers feedback. The explanations redirect the students in case of a false choice or illustrate why the answer was right.

Scholars argue that culture assimilators have three advantages compared to other techniques of teaching culture. They are considered “more fun to read; they actively involve the student with a cultural problem; and they have been shown to be more effective in controlled experiments” (163). In addition, “content can be varied to suit the instructor’s purpose” (163). However, the language component is totally neglected and

one does not address language learning skills with this technique. Therefore this approach does not seem to be suitable for a SL course that wants to simultaneously address as many skills as possible.

A different approach to learn about culture through reading is to work with texts in the target language. For instance, Danesi's research indicates that "any meaningful verbal text constructed in a language is tied to some aspect of the cultural conceptual fabric from which it is cut" (58). This argument reflects those I have outlined in the previous chapter by emphasizing how reading in the target language will always communicate something about the target culture. However, according to Bennett teaching culture successfully also always requires to follow a "culture-contrast approach," which highlights the differences between the native and the target culture (20). Such an approach should include informing the students "about how their native language is related to basic values, beliefs, thought patterns, and social action in their own cultures" (20). Moreover, Bennett suggests that students should compare "native language culture patterns to those of the new language-culture" (20). He emphasizes to look "especially for concepts and structures in the new language that do not exist in the native language because they provide keys to shifting experience along lines provided by the acquired culture" (20). A comparative approach thus helps to discover and elucidate how culture influences language and information processing.

While it is difficult to compare such concepts and structures in oral speech, it is less difficult to highlight them in a written text, especially when using cultural contextualization techniques as Danesi promotes. They "provide information that allows students to relate the novel linguistic input to cultural concepts, symbolism, rituals" and

more (58). Therefore, a cultural-contrast approach in combination with written texts promises success in teaching about cultural differences.

Another approach that focuses on reading in order to teach culture is 'Empathy Through Literature'. This approach was first introduced by the social anthropologist William F. Marquardt. Seelye describes in his 1993 book that the approach aims to enable the students "to experience what it feels to be a member of another culture" (67). In order to achieve this, the learners read literary texts that "increase awareness of the extent to which one's behavior is conditioned by one's culture" (68). According to Seelye, Marquardt sees literature as "ideally suited to developing empathy in the reader since creators of literature receive their basic motivation from a desire to explore the feelings of others and to communicate these feelings to their relationship" (67). However, Seelye illustrates how Marquardt emphasizes that the texts do have to be written in the target language or even "have to relate specifically to the target culture to be effective" (70). He claims that the principle of cross-cultural empathy transfers.

### **Findings**

To summarize, there is a relationship between language and culture, and it is necessary to teach both in the SL classroom. Without knowledge about the culture component, the learner will not fully understand the target language in all its' nuances and cannot communicate functionally.

While there is no longer any doubt about the importance of teaching culture anymore, the question remains how to teach culture in the German L2 classroom. As the previous examples of techniques to teach culture show, there are advantages and disadvantages in the approaches. Some experiential learning or interactive intercultural exchange approaches promise successful results, but require extensive class time, are

difficult to arrange in a classroom setting or cater towards higher language proficiency levels. Others, such as lectures, do not require much time, but are generally less interactive and less successful regarding the results.

However, the approach of teaching culture through reading texts in the target language enables the teacher to foster various language skills on different levels as well as teaching culture. It is both effective and successful, especially in a cultural-contrast approach that highlights cultural differences. Thus, teaching culture through reading appears to be a viable way to increase cultural awareness in the German L2 classroom. In order to further investigate the topic, the next chapter will examine various aspects of reading in a second language, how reading can facilitate teaching culture in the German L2 classroom and possible reading materials in the SLA classroom.

CHAPTER 3  
READING AND CULTURE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (SLA)

**What Reading Means and the Role it Plays in SLA Today**

There are numerous definitions on what reading is, none of which are the same. For instance, Jo Ann Aebersold and Mary Lee Field state “that reading involves *the reader, the text, and the interaction between reader and text*” (5). While this is a very loose definition, it is certainly correct. Elizabeth Bernhardt on the other hand does not stress the interaction of reader and text so much, but instead she emphasizes first and foremost that “reading is a meaning-extracting or meaning-constructing process,” which focuses more on comprehension of a text as product than on reading as a skill or a process (5). Alastair Hugh Urquhart and Cyril Weir illustrate this difference when explain that the reading skill

can be described roughly as a cognitive ability which a person is able to use when interacting with written texts. Thus, unlike comprehension, which can be viewed as the product of reading a particular text, skills are seen as part of the generalized reading process. (88)

Urquhart and Weir therefore distinguish between text comprehension and the cognitive process of reading, even though both components are related. Theorists still argue which of the two components, product or process, are of greater importance in order to gain literacy. This is especially true when it comes to interpretation of encoded information, which I think is very important to think of in a second language (L2) context as I will soon demonstrate. However, I rely on Urquhart’s and Weir’s pragmatic general definition of reading as “the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print” (22). This does not ignore the interaction factor that Aebersold and Field emphasize, but illustrates that reading is a complex process, no matter in what language. Yet, Urquhart and Weir argue that one should consider

reading “a language activity, involving at some levels at least factors specific to a particular language” (34), because “many learners are literate in their L1 but not functionally literate in the L2” (4). Thus, in regard to the L2 situation, scholars emphasize the fact that reading involves processing language (16). As a result it is therefore difficult to tell, “whether L2 reading difficulties are ‘reading’ or ‘language’ problems” (16).

Having established what reading means, I will now consider the role reading plays in SLA today. First and foremost, reading is of the utmost importance for every language learner in order to achieve fluency. According to Stephen Krashen and his Reading Hypothesis,

comprehensible input in the form of reading is the major source of our literacy development, that is, our reading comprehension ability, much of our vocabulary competence, spelling ability, and writing style, and our ability to use complex grammatical constructions. (188)

Since reading is the main component of our ability to use language, it has to be a key element in language learning and teaching.

Day and Bamford argue similarly that reading is important in order to “build vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills, and promote confidence and motivation” (6). Reading therefore is vital for communication via language as a whole. For this reason it is not surprising when Nancy Humbach calls reading “the most enduring of the language skills. Long after a student ceases to study the language, the ability to read will continue to provide a springboard to the renewal of the other skills” (T38). Unfortunately, the connection of reading to the other language skills is often neglected. As Danesi points out, reading regularly functions simply as a vehicle for reading

comprehension exercises, grammar instructions and translation tasks (8). Even though innovative research shows that reading can be utilized in many different and fruitful ways, Danesi believes that reading in the sense of a grammar-translation approach continues to have considerable appeal to teachers. This especially applies to “situations where the primary goal of SL study is the reading of literary texts, as in university language and literature programs” (8). While this might be still true today, I think that times are starting to change, even at university language programs.

Meanwhile most informed language instructors agree on the fact that comprehension cannot be viewed simply as the product of any reading activity. Instead, professionals have at least an idea that comprehension is connected to the individual reader. However, as Urquhart and Weir argue, the fact that “any reading situation comprehension will vary according to the reader’s background knowledge, goals, interaction with the writer” and other factors, is still not considered when theory is put into practice (88). This reflects the findings from Chapter 1 as in order to truly understand a text not written in the native language, one needs the necessary background knowledge, especially the cultural background knowledge.

Lastly, one should not disregard the idea of texts as written language in contrast to spoken language. Reading in SLA therefore also serves to accentuate differences in language. For both, there are differences regarding written and spoken language. For instance, Walter Grauberg points out that “Ethymological relationships between the foreign language and English may appear clearly in print, but not in speech” (193). Therefore reading seems to be a valuable tool in highlighting language differences.

In conclusion, the role of reading in SLA is to process and to interpret information given in a text and therefore to serve as the main source of literacy development. Moreover, reading is a language specific activity. Unfortunately, reading often is equated with simply teaching grammar and vocabulary. While the fact that reading comprehension depends on individual and cultural background knowledge is accepted, it is often not put into teaching practice. However, reading can be of great use for the purpose of highlighting differences in language and culture as the next subchapter will illustrate.

### **How Can Reading Facilitate Teaching Culture?**

Joyce Merrill Valdes argues that there is no need for any more justifications regarding “the usefulness of literature as a medium for teaching culture” (137). She states

It is simply accepted as a given that literature is a viable component of second language programs at the appropriate level and that one of the major functions of literature is to serve as a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written (137).

This assumption builds upon the fact that literature in general expresses culture. For Elizabeth Bernhardt this is also true. She claims that literary texts always

are manifestations of cultures. These manifestations inherently imply socially acquired frames of reference, value systems, the sociopolitical history of the writer, as well as idiosyncratic knowledges and beliefs held between the writer and the implied reader. . . . Therefore, each cultural context will provide a different reading of the text. (10)

Based on this notion of a cultural knowledge transfer through reading, literary texts in general allow students great insight into the target culture. Valdes comes to the same conclusion, based on all genres of literature that lend themselves to study culture in a SLA class. Moreover, she also thinks literature gives the students insight. The reading

leads to a greater understanding and appreciation of the target language and culture (145). The task of the foreign language teacher in this process is

to make clear the values that underlie the behavior of characters and points of view of the authors, not in order for the students to judge these values but to understand them and the literary works that contain them. Comparison to other cultures are not idle, however, as they often result in real consideration of one's own cultural values where blind acceptance has existed before (139).

Pointing out cultural differences in literary texts helps to create greater cultural awareness. The scholars Carol Morgan and Albane Cain argue likewise

It would seem then that the dialogic process of learning a foreign language and culture, where differences are juxtaposed, has the *potential* to encourage pupils to a deeper and higher level of thought, to encourage reflexivity in terms of understanding one's own language, and to reveal language as personally produced occurrence rather than a reified abstraction. (25)

Just as Bernhardt and Valdes suggest, Morgan and Cain also believe that reading can help to reach a deeper cultural awareness and understanding of the target language.

Aebersold and Field would probably agree with his idea. Nevertheless, the scholars argue that not only reading texts reflect culture; culture also reflects modes of reading.

According to them,

International students who come to study in the United States are often surprised at the lengthy reading assignments they receive in a history or literature class; American students abroad are often amazed at the level of detail that is expected from them in university settings. In some cultures comprehension means the ability to explain the grammar and structure of a page of text; in others it means the ability to summarize the thesis and argument of a whole book in a few sentences. These cultural beliefs and attitudes about reading . . . are also transferred to the L2/FL reading process. (31)

Therefore, as Aebersold and Field point out, the many factors that influence reading in an L2/FL also help to teach about cultural differences (23 - 24). For instance,

- attitudes toward text and the purpose of reading

- types of reading skills and strategies used in the L1
- types of reading skills and strategies used or appropriate in the L2/FL
- beliefs about the reading process (use of inference, memorization, nature of comprehension)
- knowledge of text types in the L1 (formal schemata)
- background knowledge (content schemata)

While all of these factors influence reading, background knowledge is of particular interest. When it comes to teaching culture, background knowledge influences the reading process and the reading product, namely reading comprehension.

Christiane Fäcke observes that students in discussions about literary texts often react quite differently (32). This observation underlines her study that focuses on the mental processes of foreign language learners and the forms of intercultural understanding of foreign language literature. The study reveals that autobiographical contexts and the students' culture have a tremendous impact on their mental processes and understanding of literary texts (39). Students establish relationships between their own construction of reality and the aspects in the texts that corresponded with them. Just as their personal constructions of thoughts and ideas vary, the connections to the text vary. As a result the understanding of text differs. Riitta Jaatinen also argues that the autobiographical component of background knowledge is of special importance. She thinks that

in understanding the content of a text written in a foreign language the question is not merely of the reading person's language skills but of his or her autobiographical knowledge of the whole. (69)

This 'whole' contains personal experiences just as much as knowledge about the target culture and includes two aspects: First, the readers' own experience and background

influences the way they approach a text. Second, personal experiences have an impact on the way the readers interact with the text and how they interpret the information received through it. In this context Claire Kramsch argues that to

understand texts, readers draw on prior experience and knowledge. Indeed, much research on reading in a second language has shown the crucial effect on background knowledge on the reading ability of foreign language learners. . . . Called alternately 'frames', 'scripts', or 'schemata', this background knowledge makes it possible to anticipate incoming information, relate it to previous knowledge and thus make global sense of the text as it unfolds. (124)

Based upon this assumption, it is not surprising to find students who lack this kind of background knowledge, to "badly misunderstand the topic, the tone, the genre, or the purpose of the text, or the intentions, goals, and plans of the characters in a fictional text" (125). Therefore, if teaching about culture is the goal, it is essential to teach students also about the reading process, different reading strategies and text genres.

In sum, I outlined above how reading can facilitate learning about culture. I hope to have shown that reading is an excellent way of teaching culture, because literary texts are cultural manifestations and provide original insights into the target culture, which lead to greater understanding and appreciation of the target language and culture. Additionally, reading facilitates teaching about culture, because cultural understanding is influenced by the students' knowledge about the reading process itself. Thus, reading fosters intercultural understanding, especially through comparison of two cultural systems. The only question left to answer is, what reading materials one should use to maximize the results of this process. Therefore, I will discuss and evaluate various reading materials in the following regarding their suitability and effectiveness for teaching culture in the German L2 classroom.

## Possible Reading Materials in the L2 Classroom

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, almost all texts lend themselves to teach culture in the SL classroom. However, authentic material as genuine product of the target culture seems to be the best choice. In particular, when using an authentic text for the same social purpose as in the language community in which it was produced as Claire Kramsch argues (177). Yet, these materials pose a possible challenge, namely that authentic texts are above the proficiency level of the learners, and the “L2/FI language proficiency influences the teacher’s selection of materials for the reading classroom” as Jo Ann Aebersold and Mary Lee Field acknowledge (27). For this reason it is not surprising that foreign language educators frequently do not use authentic texts for beginning and intermediate learners. Nancy Humbach explains this as the problem inherent in the selection of authentic materials. According to her, the level of difficulty of authentic texts is frequently beyond the skill of the student and thus the teacher shy away from material not adapted for the classroom (T38). The use of authentic material in the SL classroom therefore seems to be a vicious circle. On the one hand, especially the beginning and intermediate students need to learn about the target culture to develop literacy in the target language. On the other hand, educators have debated about authentic texts posing a problem for an early proficiency level.

Urquhart and Weir also point in the direction of the linguistic difficulty level of selected texts in the L2 classroom. For them, any selected text should not contain a large amount of language that is too difficult for most of the class because

if too difficult, then either the pace of the lesson will be slow, and boredom will set in, or the pace will be too fast, and the learner will not understand enough, and frustration will result. (206)

If the text's difficulty level is too high, the class will have problems. However, scholars also point out that level of difficulty should still be challenging. They refer to educational psychology and its' demand that

the teacher should set tasks that are at a level just beyond that at which the learners are currently capable of functioning, and teach principles that will enable them to make the next step unassisted. Bruner and others have used the term 'laddering' to refer to this process. (207)

Humbach also promotes a difficulty level just above the students' ability:

Reading material in the foreign language classroom should be relevant to students' backgrounds and at an accessible level of difficulty, i.e. at a level of difficulty only slightly above the reading ability of the student. (T38)

This means, if the topic of the text interests the students and the difficulty level is adequate, the "readers are inspired by the fact that they can understand materials designed to be read by native speakers" (T38).

With the understanding that matching linguistic difficulty to learners' proficiency level we can understand why teachers often do not use authentic texts at early levels. While it is important to keep in mind the language proficiency level regarding the choice of reading material, other factors also determine the selection of reading materials in the SL classroom.

Urquhart and Weir claim that using a wide range of materials and selecting texts that deal with the same topic or theme, will result in consolidation and extension of language and language use in a way that serves the general learner (207). In addition, "it is essential that the text should interest the reader" (204).

In sum, adequate texts therefore should be judged according to their intended purpose, the target audience and its' interests, the authenticity of the source, the length of the text, its' lexical range and difficulty, and familiarity with and relevance of the topic,

especially in regards of background knowledge and future relevance for the students. Even when we take into account these factors in our selection of texts, the question remains, how to evaluate texts in regard to teaching about culture.

The next sections therefore examine different possible reading materials and evaluate them for classroom use. Traditionally in foreign language teaching distinguishes between fictional and non-fictional reading. For my theoretical considerations, just as for Aebersold and Field the

technical differences between fiction and nonfiction are not central . . . We can be content with the accepted distinction that nonfiction centers on the presentation of information. Fiction, on the other hand, centers on telling a story, a sequence of imagined events involving (usually) human characters whose emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual experiences in life create empathy or response. (47)

However, the distinction between fictional and nonfictional texts does not seem to be sufficient for the purpose of this thesis. Mainly due to lack of language proficiency, the major sources of reading texts in SLA remain textbooks, which contain both sorts of texts, fictional and non-fictional. Therefore I grouped texts commonly used in the SL classroom into three categories: textbooks, nonfictional texts, and fictional texts.

### **Textbooks**

Textbooks constitute the main source of reading materials for second language learners, and second language pedagogy therefore discusses their use extensively. Criticism focuses particularly on reading. As Urquhart and Weir argue, some years ago one could find L2 textbook passages “containing ‘reading passages’ which seemed to have been included mainly to supply fodder for grammar teaching” (59). These passages are often “specially written to illustrate use of lexis, structures and syntactic features rather than for teaching comprehension” (224). Moreover, “there is often little

obvious relationship between the text and grammar” (257). Appearing somewhat artificial, these texts are thus the exact opposite of the authentic material desired for teaching culture. Kramersch exemplifies this in a case where a German restaurant menu functions to practice adjective endings. According to her, the restaurant management had not intended the menu for such activities, and native customers would not use it for this purpose either when they visit the restaurant. Therefore, such textbook passages do not fulfill the social purpose they were created for in the first place and therefore do not function as authentic literary texts and cultural artifacts. As a result they do not allow “learners insight into the culture from the native speaker’s viewpoint” (Byram, 145).

Besides introducing new grammar, Urquhart and Weir claim “expanding vocabulary knowledge” is a major function of reading passages in L2 textbooks (195), which also reflects my own experience with several German textbooks. As Urquhart and Weir remark, in combination with new vocabulary, many reading textbooks contain practice in such cognitive activities as drawing conclusions, making inferences, and evaluating texts in terms of truth, persuasiveness or beauty (18). However, it is quite difficult to find a textbook that includes any explicit material on decoding or processing information (18). This means that textbooks therefore focus solely on the reading product, not on the reading process, which also constitutes a crucial component of understanding a text and learning about the target culture.

Finally, one experiences the problem of textbooks and their lack of appreciation of plurality and diversity within the target culture. Morgan and Cain explain that a recent study “on stereotypes in German and English foreign-language textbooks reveals the continuing prevalence of stereotypes in textbooks” (26). Naturally, regarding the

teaching about culture and the fostering about cross-cultural understanding, this is not desirable. Yet, as I researched on this topic myself, I found out that problem of prevailing stereotypes also applies to the textbooks *Neue Horizonte* and *Treffpunkt Deutsch*, the most common used German L2 textbooks at the university level.

In conclusion, textbooks likely satisfy the language proficiency level of the target audience, assist teaching grammar and introduce new vocabulary. However, they contain mainly artificial texts, lack information about processing and decoding information and do not contribute towards drawing a diverse picture of the target culture. Consequently, for the purpose of teaching about culture the instructor should prefer other choices.

### **Non-Fictional Reading**

At this point, I would like to emphasize once more the understanding of non-fiction I have previously established, namely that non-fiction centers on informational texts, “such as newspapers, magazines, instructional manuals, and reports” (Aebersold and Field, 47). Compared with fictional texts, teacher often prefer these types of reading materials for two reasons as Day and Bamford point out. First, they are “cheap and widely available” (100). Second, non-fictional texts can be used for every proficiency level. Yet, the scholars admit, newspapers and magazines are a better “resource for intermediate and advanced students” than for lower-level learners (100). Based on my own experience I agree, because beginners struggle with texts that contain too many unknown vocabulary items. Nevertheless, a carefully chosen article can work, especially for teaching culture. As George H. Hughes points out

Many aspects of culture that are not usually found in a textbook are present in the newspaper. . . . Good cultural insights can readily be found in headlines, advertisements, editorials, sports pages, comics, even the

weather report. The humor found on the comic page is especially revealing.  
(167-168)

Students as well as instructors seem to like non-fictional texts. Day and Bramford argue that non-fictional texts appeal to learners as there “is something to interest almost everyone in a newspaper” (101). Moreover, newspaper or magazine articles “tend to be short, which means that readers can quickly get a sense of accomplishment from finishing them”, “a benefit for less proficient second language readers who tire quickly of reading” (100). In addition, non-fictional texts apparently offer easy access and understanding.

However, Walter Grauberg emphasizes in his book that not all students share this point of view. A survey among learners conducted “by Yorios (1971) found that only 34% and 26% respectively found newspapers and magazines easy, whereas fiction and textbooks were considered easy by 65% and 63% of the students. These figures confirm the established popularity of fiction as reading material” (199). Of course one has to be careful in drawing conclusions from only one study. Nevertheless, one should not ignore the fact that for instance only about one quarter of the subjects found magazine articles easy to read.

In sum, I propose non-fictional texts to be a good source for teaching culture, because the authentic material can be used for any proficiency level, is cheap and easy available. However, the majority of students prefer other reading materials, especially fictional texts.

### **Fictional Reading**

Aebersold and Field argue that “Fiction and poetry have been a part of language curricula for many years, fading in and out of popularity in response to new theories and

methods” (156). However, fictional reading never totally disappeared from the L2 classroom, because according to Aebersold and Field, fictional texts

can serve two important functions in the L2/FL classroom: to teach language and to introduce or reinforce human (social, cultural, political, emotional, economic, ect.) themes and issues in the classroom” (47).

Deriving from these functions, the scholars provide a list of reasons to use literary texts in SLA (157-158):

- To promote cultural understanding
- To improve language proficiency
- To give students experience with various text types
- To provide lively, enjoyable, high interest readings
- To personalize the classroom by focusing on human experiences and needs
- To provide an opportunity for reflection and personal growth

All these reasons make fictional reading a good text source in the SL classroom. Yet, Aebersold and Field also argue that “difficult language, complex cultural issues, and the subtle conventions of various genres of fiction may leave students more frustrated than enlightened” (157). Therefore the learners’ proficiency level becomes eventually problematic.

Nevertheless, Stephen Krashen proposes that fictional reading can address this problem. He even argues that fictional reading helps to improve the language proficiency. For him, “light reading, especially fiction, can function as a bridge between conversational and academic language competence” (192). Krashen illustrates that the “reason fiction provides this bridge is that it contains several subgenres (e.g., conversation, description, narration). This variety aids comprehensibility” (195).

Therefore light fiction appears to be the ideal reading material for an advanced beginner or low intermediate course. As a next step, I will briefly discuss various kinds of fiction

and examine them regarding their usefulness for teaching culture in the German L2 classroom.

First, I would like to draw attention to poetry. Valdes reports that many scholars believe the teaching of poetry should be avoided with nonnative speakers. She explains that the “objections are obvious: The syntax is often distorted, the images are elusive, the vocabulary is convoluted, and the meaning is often obscure” (143). While Valdes agrees to these objections, she suggests that poetry still constitutes a formidable teaching material regarding culture comparison (144). However, teaching poetry is challenging. The teacher cannot assume that the students will understand poems easily. In addition, the outcomes of students’ interpretations often vary. Regarding the teaching of culture therefore one should prefer other genres, for instance novels or short stories.

As Valdes points out

The opportunity a novel gives to follow the effects of specific cultural patterns and mores through the lives of the characters over a period of time is invaluable in learning a second culture. (144)

However, Vales also sees advantages in a short story, which is

valuable for almost opposite reasons from the novel: It generally presents a few characters over a short period of time in a situation that encapsulates a cultural attitude, with probably minor cultural values also to be uncovered and discussed. (145)

Compared with a novel, fewer characters in a more detailed situation certainly make text analysis and comprehension easier for students. For this reason, I argue that short-stories allow more room to focus on reading processes than just on reading comprehension compared with novels. At the same time though, students find an equal opportunity to learn about another culture.

In conclusion, one may say that fictional texts offer an excellent source of reading material in foreign language learning. Reading fiction promotes cultural understanding, improves language proficiency allows room for reflection. Light fiction in particular appears to be an ideal reading material for an advanced beginner or low intermediate course. While novels and short-stories likewise lend themselves to learn about culture, short-stories are easier to analyze for the students and therefore allow the teacher and the students to spend more time on learning about reading processes than just on reading comprehension.

### **Results**

In this chapter I clarified the purpose and role of reading in SLA, namely, to process and to interpret information given in a text and therefore to serve as the main source of literacy development. Moreover, I demonstrated that reading can be of great use for the purpose of highlighting differences in language and culture. Texts are cultural manifestations and give original insight into the target culture. Through reading and engaging with authentic texts, learners gain greater understanding and appreciation of the target language and culture. Moreover, reading also facilitates teaching about culture, because the students' knowledge about the reading process itself influences cultural understanding. As a result, reading fosters intercultural understanding, especially by comparing two culture systems.

Next, I explored the area of potential reading materials in the SL classroom. I concluded that textbooks likely satisfy the language proficiency level of the target audience, a major concern in the selection of reading materials. Moreover, textbooks assist in teaching grammar and introducing new vocabulary. However, textbooks contain mainly artificial texts, do not pay attention to processing and decoding

information and do not contribute in drawing a diverse picture of the target culture. For the purpose of teaching about culture they are thus not the best choice.

Non-fictional texts on the other hand appear to be a good source for teaching culture. The authentic material can be used for any proficiency level. In addition, especially newspaper and magazine articles are generally cheap and easy available. However, the majority of students in a study conducted by Grauberg seem to prefer other reading materials, especially fictional texts. As outlined above, fictional texts offer an excellent source of reading material in foreign language learning. Reading fiction promotes cultural understanding, improves language proficiency allows room for reflection. Light fiction in particular appears to be an ideal reading material for an advanced beginner or low intermediate course. While novels and short-stories likewise lend themselves to learn about culture, short-stories are easier to analyze for the students and therefore allow the teacher and the students to spend more time on learning about reading processes than just on reading comprehension.

Taking all this into consideration, I agree with Seelye who concludes that “literature affords the best tool to teach about the life of the people” (16) and Aebersold and Field who argue that “literary texts may well be the best materials to use in class” (158). For the particular purpose of teaching culture in a Beginner and/ or Low Intermediate level language course though, I argue that light fiction is the best material. While researching for this project, I came across a variety of fictional reading suggestions in light literature. However, one genre seems to be especially useful regarding the purpose of teaching culture through reading and will be discussed in the following chapter: fairy tales. In order to provide evidence for my thesis, I will first

explain what fairy tales are, and what makes them such an excellent type of reading material for second language learners. Next, I will demonstrate how they can be perfectly utilized for teaching about culture and create cultural awareness, especially in the German L2 classroom.

CHAPTER 4  
TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH READING FAIRY TALES IN THE GERMAN  
SECOND LANGUAGE (L2) CLASSROOM

**The Fairy Tale as Folk Narrative**

Before exploring what makes fairy tales an excellent source for teaching culture in the German L2 classroom, one should take a quick look at what defines a fairy tale. Steven Swann Jones claims that fairy tales are “one of the most well-known, most loved, and most influential genres of literatures” (1). One will hardly find anyone in the world who has not heard of fairy tales. In fact, the word ‘heard’ in this context is to be understood literally. Fairy tales are of an oral origin as Swann Jones mentions (1). Eric Taylor likewise characterizes the fairy tale as a certain type of “traditional story that has been passed on by word of mouth” (4). These traditional stories are commonly understood as folk narratives, and, as Swann Jones explains, consist of three major forms: myth, legend, and folktale (8). While myth and legend concentrate on immortal or extraordinary protagonists, the folktale as an entertaining narrative uses “common, ordinary people as protagonists to reveal the desires and foibles of human nature” (8). The fairy tale as a subcategory of the folktale also does likewise. However, whereas folktales depict life in realistic terms

fairy tales depict magical or marvelous events or phenomena as a valid part of human experience. The very name of the genre is drawn from this essential characteristic: they are fairy tales because they depict the wondrous magic of the fairy realm. (9)

Despite their name, fairy tales do not always include fairies, nor do the tales deal exclusively with magic realms. After all, fairy tales as part of the folktale family still portray ordinary people and human nature. In particular, they portray individuals facing “the typical challenges of life” as Swann Jones points out (11). In fact, the magical in the

narratives merely serves as a “metaphoric dramatization of the thoughts and feelings audience members may harbor about their daily lives and the problems they face” (11). Additionally, the fantastic element emerges from the conscious and unconscious desires and fears of society (16). As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, exactly this metaphoric dramatization of everyday life events make fairy tales excellent material to teach about cultural differences.

However, the problems the protagonists have to overcome in the fairy tale are far from metaphoric. Poverty, jealousy or separations - themes often found in fairy tales - are very serious and realistic subject matter. Yet, the major differences between fairy tales and reality are the problem solving strategies and of course the happy ending. Consequently, Swann Jones argues that the “successful solving of a dilemma facing the protagonist is essential to the plot of the fairy tale” (17). Moreover, the scholar claims that the happy ending is such a basic and important aspect of the genre, that it constitutes a definitional feature of the fairy tale (17).

In sum, a fairy tale is a story in which an ordinary protagonist has to overcome a realistic problem with unique and often magical problem solving strategies in order to live happily ever after. For the remainder of the chapter, I will investigate the usefulness of fairy tales in general as reading and teaching material in the German L2 classroom, before ultimately turning to the connection of fairy tales and culture at the end of the chapter.

### **The Fairy Tale as Reading Text in Second Language Acquisition**

Eric Taylor, a scholar committed to research on teaching English as a second language, focused on research on folktales in SLA. His book *Using Folktales* illustrates very well how folk- and fairy tales provide an excellent source for teaching English as a

second language. However, his arguments are valid for the German L2 classroom as well. Taylor argues that folk- and fairy tales

have many special characteristics that make them exceptionally good for language teaching. Their frequent repetitions make them excellent for reinforcing new vocabulary and grammar. Many have natural rhythmic qualities that are useful for working on stress, rhythm, and intonation in pronunciation. And the cultural elements of folktales help both bridge common ground between cultures and bring out cultural differences – developing cultural awareness that is essential if we are to learn to think in another language and understand the people who speak it. (3)

According to these findings, fairy tales appear to be a particularly productive teaching material in SLA and an ideal reading text for teaching about culture and raising cultural awareness. Nonetheless, to provide ample evidence of the suitability of fairy tales as reading materials in SLA, one should quickly recall the main characteristics of an ideal L2 reading text. According to my findings in Chapter 2, an ideal reading text is

- an authentic text written for native speakers that fulfills the same social purpose in the SL classroom as in the country of its' origin, and gives valid insight into the target culture
- a short fictional text that offers light, enjoyable reading
- a text that centers on a topic of interest for the reader, preferably a topic the reader is already familiar with and that deals with human experiences and needs
- a text that provides an opportunity for reflection and personal growth
- a text that includes more detailed situations to make textual analysis easier for the reader
- a text that is cheap and easily available
- a text that improves the learners' language proficiency, but with a difficulty level that is adequate for the learners' abilities: challenging yet easily comprehensible
- a text that lends itself to various teaching approaches and activity formats, which allow different reading strategies for different reading purposes

In the following, I show how the fairy tale fulfills all these criteria.

First, let me begin with the fairy tale as authentic text in the sense I previously established, since it was written for native speakers in the target language in the target culture. Its' social purpose was to entertain, but also to educate, as evidenced by the works, collected and edited by the Brothers' Grimm. In the modern classroom, the teacher can read fairy tales with the students for similar purposes, which makes the traditional fairy tale authentic in language and use. Moreover, it enables the reader to gain insight into and facilitate learning about the target culture as I will further outline later in this chapter. In addition, fairy tales were created for children and young adults. The original target group thus equals the age group of most SL learners.

Secondly, the fairy tale is a short fictional text that offers light, enjoyable reading. Hence, Day and Bramford and other scholars promote the use of children's books and stories, such as fairy tales in SLA. They state that

The major assets of these books are relatively easy language, attractive layout, big print, and appealing illustrations. Equally important is their length: They are usually short enough to be finished in 15 minutes or so. Although language can be colloquial, the illustrations help comprehension. (98)

Attractive layout, easy language and the short length make fairy tales definitely a light, enjoyable reading experience, while the topics appeal very much to children and young adults. Swann Jones further explains that

most of the psychological themes underlying fairy tales involve the concerns of young people . . . The stories frequently depict the feelings or attitudes of the protagonists (with whom the audiences are presumably identifying) toward parents, siblings, and prospective mates. (19)

This means that tales center on topics that the student readers are familiar with and that are of personal importance and interest to them.

Moreover, the human needs or problems reworked in fairy tales are often identical with the needs and problems of the readers. For instance, rivalries among siblings or disputes with guardians are themes that most children and young adults have experienced themselves at one point or another. Therefore, students easily relate to the protagonists and the main problem of the narrative, which enables the learners to compare and contrast themselves and their personal situation to the protagonists' response to encountered difficulties. Thus, the tales also lend themselves for providing an opportunity for reflection and personal growth.

Furthermore, fairy tales fulfill the criterion of displaying mainly detailed situations in the narrative. Because fairy tales consist of short narratives, the reader is able to concentrate on very particular situations or move from one particular situation in the narrative to the next. Fairy tales often summarize action or time in between situations in just a sentence, and then focus on another detailed situation. For example, in the fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" almost 100 years are summarized in two sentences.

Encountering short, focused depictions in a narrative rather long, exhaustive texts makes reading more attractive and text analysis more comprehensible, especially for beginning readers in a second language. Fairy tales also meet the requirements of ideal reading texts by being cheap and easily available, especially through free online resources, such as the *Projekt Gutenberg-DE*®, or Google books®.

However, improving the learners' language proficiency remains the main goal in SLA, and in order to do so, an adequate difficulty level of reading material plays a crucial role. Based on Taylors' research, which has found that certain characteristics typical in folk narratives present relatively easy access to reading and comprehension, I

will next evaluate fairy tales for a Beginner or Intermediate level German course in terms of difficulty level.

First and foremost, fairy tales usually build on a limited, concrete vocabulary in order to express mainly concrete ideas. Taylor reveals that in each of these narratives one can trace everyday life items or at least words “that you can see, feel, taste, touch, and smell” (13). As the scholar puts it, fairy tales are thus “accessible to students with limited language abilities” (3). In addition, similarly to Day and Bramford, Taylor also argues that illustrations provide support and context for the text. However, he takes this argument further and claims illustrations can serve as an aid when it comes to teaching new vocabulary. Therefore, the scholar emphasizes fairy tales “are very good for general vocabulary building” (13).

Taylor also states that compared with other literary texts, the tales are “easier to understand than other types of literature” due to their oral origin (3). For example, fairy tales often contain refrains, which help the listeners to follow the story line more easily. These refrains are also especially useful in second language learning, according to Taylor:

The repetitions help language learners in several ways. Repetition is important in helping new vocabulary stick in the mind. Repetition also gives students many examples of a particular grammatical form and context. (10)

As repetition can help students remember vocabulary and grammatical forms, Taylor correctly claims that such repetition fosters fluency as well by helping students to become more automatic in their recognition and use of language.

Furthermore, Taylor highlights that fairy tales “tend to have simple grammar. Sentences tend to be short. Simple past and present tenses are common. Subordinate clauses are not very common” (13). Thus, the simple grammar style serves as an aid in

making the text easy to understand, particularly for beginning students with only limited knowledge of tenses and complex sentence structures. Therefore, fairy tales indeed present a very balanced difficulty level in terms of grammar and, as outlined before in terms of vocabulary. Consequently, fairy tales fulfill this requirement of an ideal reading text in SLA as well, in particular for a beginner or intermediate level course.

Last but not least, I would like to address fairy tales in the context of diverse modes of instruction. As Taylor stresses, fairy tales “fit well with the growing emphasis on content-based instruction and with communicative approaches that focus on teaching language while communicating meaning” (3). Fast-paced beginner and intermediate German courses cannot afford to address only selected skills. Instead, the goals are to integrate and combine as many skills, content and context as possible. While not all narrative forms are equally suitable to address all four skills through various approaches in the German L2 classroom, fairy tales offer ample opportunity to practice listening, speaking, reading and writing. Naturally, the narratives can address the skills separately, but fairy tales “make it easy to integrate any or all of the skills” as Taylor claims (17). Moreover, the tales serve not only as carrier of content, but also of meaning.

Additionally, the scholar reveals that “folktales are especially useful for developing cognitive and academic skills” as they often require the students to compare, contrast, and evaluate (3). While developing cognitive and academic skills is desirable on all grade levels, in a university setting this feature of fairy tales is especially important. Students are expected to move quickly from a beginner language level to an advanced language level, which requires not only higher language proficiency, but also more

sophisticated cognitive skills. Moreover, fairy tales are of great use particularly in a multilevel classroom, for instance in an Intermediate course where one often finds a broad range of language proficiency among individual students. There fairy tales offer a great variety of potential classroom activities to address a diverse student body.

In sum, one finds fairy tales to be exceptional reading texts and teaching materials in SLA. Fairy tales fulfill all criteria regarding an ideal reading text, as being authentic, short fictional texts for enjoyable, light reading. Moreover, fairy tales provide topics of personal interest that permit reflection, personal growth, and most important improve the learners' language proficiency. Learners are neither overwhelmed nor bored by vocabulary and grammatical structures. Additionally, one can integrate fairy tales in any content and communicative approach and address all four language skills, while at the same time also fostering cognitive and academic skills. In a beginner or intermediate German course, and compared to other authentic reading material, fairy tales constitute superior. However, fairy tales also connect in particular ways to the target culture, which I will subsequently explore.

### **The Fairy Tale and Teaching about Culture in SLA**

In the following I draw on the findings of scholars regarding literary and psychological interpretations of fairy tales, which I then relate to the results to Seelye's central goals in teaching about culture to further elaborate on my thesis that fairy tales represent successful mediators of cultural understanding in the German L2 classroom,. In addition, I will address Taylor's findings regarding fairy tales as literary texts in the foreign language classroom.

First, I demonstrate why fairy tales are a literary genre best suited to teaching about culture. Jack Zipes, a scholar devoted to researching on fairy tales, argues that in

the past fairy tales often enabled children “to become their own decisionmakers and creators” (11) and to “set up ‘civilized’ standards of behavior” (34). He claims that folk narratives, such as fairy tales, unconsciously established these so-called civilized standards by communicating and reinforcing socially accepted and desired ways of behavior in children. In this context, Swann Jones remarks:

In addition to offering psychological instruction, fairy tales frequently depict and inculcate social values. They promote marriage and the paternal family structure as the dominant cultural institutions. They depict roles and behavior patterns considered socially appropriate for each gender and for each age group. They encourage industry and moral virtue (such as the following the golden rule) as routes to securing material and financial success. (20)

Taylor likewise suggests that the moral or ethical quality embedded in numerous folktales puts forth specific role expectations and underlying cultural patterns of behavior, especially as the characters in the narratives clearly demonstrate particular moral qualities (11). Consequently, fairy tales serve to teach about values in many societies (11).

Indeed, the key features of fairy tales, namely implied role expectations and underlying cultural patterns, portray culturally embedded values exceptionally well. Through which the reader can gain valuable cultural insight and create further cultural awareness. For instance, Seelye demands that teaching about a specific culture should always include recognizing role expectations and other social skills variables such as age, sex, social class, religion, ethnicity, and place of residence of the given cultures’ members, as these factors affect the way people speak and behave (xiii). Learning and knowing about factors influential to cultural-specific language and behavior are essential in the L2 classroom and lead to cultural-specific background knowledge and greater cultural awareness, the two main goals of teaching about culture outlined chapter one.

Additionally, Taylor proposes that understanding that people generally act the way they do because they are using options their society allows for satisfying basic physical and psychological needs, and that cultural patterns are interrelated, are also central aspects of teaching about culture (xiii). According to him, fairy tales highlight these aspects in a unique way as

despite their outwardly simple appearance, folktales address themes and issues that are profound and significant for all ages. Folktales raise important social questions: What is our duty toward the elderly? Toward the poor? Toward our parents? . . . They are filled with hopes and dreams and sorrows and pains that all of us share. (15)

Hence, fairy tales always represent the specific belief system and taste of the audience for which they have been created and their literary analysis provide useful information regarding role expectations and underlying cultural patterns of behavior. Moreover, fairy tales reveal important physical and psychological needs as well as significant social questions for a specific culture, which helps tremendously in detecting encoded meaning in the texts and creating cultural knowledge necessary in order to achieve fluency and avoid misinterpretations in the second language. Reading and analyzing fairy tales enables students in the L2 classroom to draw conclusions about a particular society's standards of socially accepted and desired behavior.

As Swann Jones emphasizes, Zipes argues from a sociohistorical perspective and “does not look at a specific ethnic community, but rather analyzes the tales in the context of national and cultural preoccupations”, which helps in regard to teaching the target culture in SLA (135). Seeley agrees and therefore explicitly promotes analyzing the tales in terms of national origin in the foreign language classroom. He believes that reading and analyzing folk narratives allows to “illuminate some of the important cultural themes that underlie a country's thought and action” (19), which consequently enables

the learners to draw conclusions on the target culture, especially following a comparative approach. Swann Jones points out

fairy tales, or versions of fairy tales, that are popular in one ethnic community or nation may be differentiated from those popular in another community or nation. These distinctions are reflected not only in the language and stylistic preferences, but also in the selection of motifs used to tell the stories as well as the social customs and cultural perspectives reflected. (28)

Therefore, fairy tales highlight differences between the native and the target culture.

Taylor suggests that the “social, moral, and relational themes that lie behind the stories tend to rise above local cultures” (16). While fairy tales present commonalities across cultures or convey similar information, they also display a great deal of cultural differences. For example, specific cultures have very different ways of arranging material, or even of deciding what materials to include (9). Yet, differences do not solely occur on the content level. Applying a ‘compare-and-contrast-approach’ to fairy tales in the L2 classroom helps students to become aware of patterns and structures in the target language, that might not exist in their native language. Consequently, the differences help students to discover and understand how culture influences language.

At the same time though, Taylor emphasizes that when it comes to telling stories, folk narratives, such as fairy tales, always appear to have certain elements in common, for instance a time-ordered structure. The stories all

do the same thing: tell about events in the order they happened. . . . Since folktales use a structure that is familiar to everyone, they are more readily understandable than many other types of literature. (9)

This means, although some elements in folktales are culturally distinctive, some are common to all cultures that produce fairy tales, and thus easier to understand for the student reader, a quality that makes fairy tales again very attractive as teaching material

in SLA. The teacher can utilize specific elements to highlight cultural differences in a comparative approach, while the structure of the narrative itself does not pose another challenge for the students. Taylor explains:

Some common elements in folktales help to build bridges between cultures, helping us to relate to speakers of other languages. Other elements in folktales draw attention to our differences, showing us things we need to learn to understand the thoughts behind the language we are learning. (16)

Thus, exposing language learners to fairy tales not only assists in direct language practice, but also “helps fill important gaps in nonnative background knowledge and improve understanding of various idioms and figures of speech” as Taylor remarks (16).

For example, students might not understand the German idiom *Pech haben*, which literally translates ‘to have tar’, but really means ‘to have bad luck’. However, after reading the fairy tale “Frau Holle” in which the evil protagonist in the end gets covered in tar instead of gold, students can understand the everyday conceptual metaphor. This supports Seelye’s central aim in teaching about culture that effective communication requires discovering the culturally conditioned images that are evoked in the minds of people when they think, act, and react to the world around them (xiii). As Seeley illustrates, folklore—which includes the fairy tale—is superior in literary writing when it comes to mirroring the attitudes of large groups, especially regarding likes and dislikes (19). However, fairy tales do not only answer questions, such as what are typical foods or how does one settle a disagreement, as Taylor remarks (17). Instead, the “very durability of folktales, proverbs, slurs, and jests is an indication of the validity they have for a given people” (19). This underscores that even though fairy tales are not new, they are still valid resources for cultural patterns and attitudes.

In addition, Seelye believes that the approach of teaching culture through reading folk narratives has another advantage compared with other ways of teaching culture, as it is especially suitable for teachers. In his book *Teaching Culture*, Seelye refers to the works of Genelle Morain and J. Dale Miller, who claim that

folklore offers a logical bridge to service language teachers trained in literary analysis who are interested in getting closer to an anthropological understanding of culture but who are not equipped by disposition or background to deal with the empirical orientations of the social scientist. (18-19)

Although the studies of Morain and Miller concentrate on examples from French folklore narratives, their findings are intriguing and applicable to the German L2 classroom, too. The German L2 teacher, as any other foreign language instructor, is no expert in teaching about cultures *per se*, however his or her training in literary analysis helps to read fairy tales as cultural artifacts and he or she can help the students discover the values and perspectives underlying the narrative.

Nonetheless, fairy tales appear to be not only beneficial to instructors when teaching about culture, but also to students in learning about culture. Seeley emphasized in his book *Teaching Culture* that teaching about culture should first and foremost cultivate curiosity about another culture and empathy toward its members (xiii). As Taylor points out in his research, many “students find folktales very interesting. This gives folktales a potentially high intrinsic motivation level” (134). Fairy tales center on topics familiar to learners and of personal importance and interest. Based on this notion of familiarity and being able to identify with the protagonists of the story, the students easily cultivate empathy for the members of the target culture through reading fairy tales.

Lastly, Seelye believes teaching about culture has to include the ability to evaluate the strength of a generalization about the target culture from textual evidence, and to locate and organize information about the target culture (xiii). In contrast to lectures, which often reinforce stereotypes, reading and analyzing fairy tales enables the students to discover on their own which culturally embedded values lend themselves to generalization and which do not. In order to further investigate this matter, I will elucidate in the subsequent part of this chapter the specifics of German fairy tales.

### **Teaching Culture through Reading Fairy Tales: The German Case**

When thinking German fairy tales, the fairy tales collected by the brothers Grimm most likely come to mind, although Zipes highlights in his book *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* that Germany claims a great number of contemporary fairy tale authors, such as Hans Joachim Gelberg, Janosch, or Max von der Grün, to name just a few (241-46). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, fairy tales always represent the specific belief system and taste of the audience for which they have been created. Therefore, the classical German fairy tales represents a belief system specific to Germany and shaped through the brothers Grimm about 200 years ago, while a more contemporary narrative by Janosch embeds cultural themes inherent in present-day Germany. Consequently, 'the' German fairy tale as such does not exist. The language teacher's duty is thus to draw the students' attention to this important aspect when evaluating the strength of a generalization about German culture drawn from literary analysis of a particular fairy tale.

With this in mind, I will take a closer look at the Grimm fairy tales and what can be concluded from them about German culture. First, these tales existed before the Brother's Grimm collected and stylistically altered the texts for their purposes, namely to

“give the Germans a national identity and unify the people around a Germanic tradition which was based on plebeian values of honesty, courage, fidelity, purity, etc.” as Jack Zipes emphasizes in his book *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (91). Therefore, the Grimm’s fairy tales contain instructional and moral messages according to “a great catalogue of virtues of children’s behavior” in order to primarily produce good German citizens, as Lutz Röhrich argues (14). For the purpose of teaching about culture in the German L2 classroom, these lend themselves to comparison with the depiction of an ideal citizen in the student’s native culture, but also to the image of the model citizen in current Germany, which is not the same than 200 years ago.

Yet, the tales are also a warning and a reminder for children that the world is full of dangers. Röhrich identifies reoccurring themes, such as “suffering, maltreatment, poverty, sickness, hunger, abandonment” as well as brutality and cruelty (32). Nevertheless, fairy tales assure children is that one can survive in this terrible world if one lives up to the desired moral standards of Christian society and “that it is not always injustice and violence that wins” (208). Not surprisingly, in fairy tales commonly also “the consequences of disobedience are demonstrated” (46). The Grimm’s wanted to communicate that ignoring the moral values and making the wrong choices ultimately results in disaster. Hence, the Grimm’s fairy tales have an educational function just as any other fairy tale, but stress to make the right decisions in life and to find one’s place in the world based on a certain set of Christian moral values. As religious beliefs are an important aspect of teaching about the target culture, literary analysis and interpretations of Grimm fairy tales definitely allow students to draw conclusions about

German culture in this context. However, the fact that present-day Germany is home to many other religious groups should not be neglected when drawing generalizations about German culture and religious beliefs.

Despite the communication of Christian values and beliefs, the Grimm fairy tales often show gruesome scenes of violent child abuse, serial or ritual killings, hunger and deprivation. It is therefore not totally unforeseen when Zipes reveals in his book *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* that after World War II the Grimm fairy tales served to a certain degree as an explanation “why the Germans had committed such atrocious acts as those discovered in the concentration camps” (231). From today’s perspective this is particularly interesting and lends itself to further classroom discussion. Would the learners more than 60 years after the end of the war agree with this explanation? Regardless of a modern interpretation, Zipes’ theory underscores that fairy tales always connect culture and world view. The idea of fairy tales being responsible for the cruelties of the Germans during WWII itself is an opinion shaped by culture at a particular historical moment.

Role expectations constitute another example of opinions in fairy tales that are shaped by culture. As Swann Jones explains, Ruth B. Bottigheimer was one of the first scholars to point out, how the Grimm’s altered previously existing versions of the tales they collected by deleting “dialogue from good female characters and giving it instead to male characters, evil female characters, or the narrator, thus reinforcing a cultural belief in the value of silent women” (138-39). The way the Grimm fairy tales depict women reveals a great deal about women and their intended role in German society at the time. In the narratives one can clearly identify the female protagonists as an obedient,

helpless, but beautiful and pure creature, tied to the private sphere of the house. As soon as the girls or women leave this safe sphere and enter the outside world, disaster happens and only a strong male can rescue them. In contrast, feminist German fairy tales produced after 1968 show an entirely different picture, as Zipes points out in his book *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (240). For this reason, generalizations about women and their role in present-day Germany have to reflect this. However, reading the Grimm fairy tales can serve as an ideal springboard towards a deeper analysis of women in German society.

As outlined beforehand, fairy tales lend themselves very much to 'compare-and-contrast' approaches of cultures regarding different underlying cultural patterns, behavior, values, physical and psychological needs of society as well as differences in language structures and use. Nonetheless, fairy tales also support revealing information about developments in entertainment over centuries, in particular through the different modes of fairy tale presentation. At the time the Brothers' Grimm first published their collection of fairy tales, it was common for children to have a personal storyteller. In modern society often a non-personal medium such as television takes over the position of the narrator. According to Röhrich "Television has clearly been accepted as a storyteller and has almost completely replaced reading, being read to and live narration" (5). However, studies show that children still prefer to have a fairy tale

told by living person who is physically present. Fairy tales told on radio, television, CD or telephone are never a full substitute for the living narrator. Although they might be very convenient for a busy mother, they do not give the same opportunity to interrupt, to ask questions, or, when it gets frightening or exiting, to cuddle up a little bit closer. The electronic media thus communicate the excitement and exhilaration of the action in the fairy tales, without however at the same time conveying the feeling of warmth and security. (209)

This suggests that children who enjoy the classical version of Grimm's "Aschenputtel" being read to them still feel more secure and protected compared to the children who watch a motion picture on television. Additionally, children that have the chance to ask questions or interrupt the story are actively engaged in a dialogue instead of being a passive consumer who does not get the chance to question. Questions have been raised whether children who passively watch the TV version are less likely to critically question a story, while children who listen to a fairy tale might be more active and critical in their thinking. To further investigate this matter, more research needs to be conducted before any correlation between uncritical versus critical thinking and the mode of presentation of fairy tales is certain. But it is food for thought, for researchers as well as for students in the German L2 classroom.

Additionally, the students can compare the format and adaptation of fairy tales encountered by them and their German peers, who apparently still are more acquainted with the literary Brother Grimm version than any other adaptation of fairy tales. A press release of the Gruner + Jahr publishing house in February 2010 shows that a compilation of the most-loved classical fairy tales edited and published by the well-known German parenting journal *Eltern* sold a record high of more than 100,000 books from October 2009 to January 2010. Even though in Germany, too, the consumption of modern fairy tale adaptations for the screen is probably on the rise, these figures indicate that Germans still prefer to read classical fairy tales to their children.

In contrast, the majority of American youngsters seem to encounter only the Disney adaptations that they either watched on television or read as an illustrated book. While it is still questionable, what the exact difference in outcome is between having a

fairy tale story read aloud to children and having it shown to them on television, the differences between the Grimm version and Disney in function and content reveal much about cultural differences between Germans and Americans.

While the classical German fairy tale focuses more on an instructional and moral message for surviving everyday life, Zipes suggests in his book *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry* that the main purpose of the Disney movies is to entertain and to forget about harsh reality (4). Moreover, Disney adaptations put less or no emphasis on justice in the end or obedience to moral standards, even though Disney fairy tales also include a set of moral values, similar to the ones found in Grimm fairy tales (Röhrich 212-13). Maria Tatar shows with her research that children who grow up listening to classical fairy tales are more likely to be obedient than those who do not. The scholar explains that fairy tales as method of “socialization produces ‘docile bodies’ that subject themselves to self-discipline and productive labors” (235). On the other hand, children, who regardless of their behavior expect forgiveness in the end, have trouble accepting consequences for their actions in real life. While these findings are still subject to academic discourse, they can serve nevertheless as basis for fruitful classroom discussions.

In sum, reading fairy tales in the German L2 classroom provides an excellent way for students to gain insight into German culture, whether from a past perspective through reading classical Grimm fairy tales or from a modern perspective through reading more contemporary authors of the same genre. In addition, comparing and contrasting the tales’ cultural elements with the students’ native culture allows drawing conclusions about cultural differences. Moreover, by following a ‘compare-and-contrast’

approach, the students become aware of differences in the content of fairy tales and regarding developments in presentation of fairy tales over time and within a national context.

### **Teaching Culture through Reading Fairy Tales: An Overview**

Without question, the foreign language teacher has the duty to teach about the target culture and as I showed in Chapter 2, teaching culture through literature is an excellent way to do it. Since teachers are trained in literary analysis, reading and analyzing literature is thus something they are familiar with and that is already part of the established curriculum in foreign language learning. As I demonstrated in this chapter, fairy tales not only fulfill all the criteria of an ideal reading material in SLA, but also lend themselves very well to combining literary analysis with teaching about culture in the German L2 classroom. Whether contemporary tales or classical Grimm versions, the narratives always connect German language, culture and world view, while leaving enough room for exploring and evaluating culturally shaped ideas from numerous angles.

Therefore, I elaborated my thesis of reading fairy tales as an ideal way of teaching about culture. I would like to conclude this chapter with a quote by Steven Swann Jones. The scholar states

Whether we read the plots, characters, motifs, and the basically symbolic style as conveying cultural values, sexist strictures, psychological proclivities, or philosophical paradigms, the point is that they are telling us something, many things, and it is incumbent upon us as audience members and as students of the fairy tale as a genre to attempt to decipher the ideas and concerns imbedded in the narrative semiology of these memorable, enduring, and appealing stories. (140)

Indeed, fairy tales can be read in many different ways. However, as I outlined in this chapter, the tales always tell the audience something about the culture from which they

originate from and help closing gaps in cultural understanding in the foreign language classroom. The next chapter will focus on how the tales aid teaching about culture in the Intermediate German L2 classroom in practice and give various ideas for classroom implementation.

## CHAPTER 5 IDEAS FOR CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION

### **Teaching Approach**

Claire Kramersch suggests avoiding teacher constructed messages while reading narratives in the second language (L2) classroom. Instead, instructors should use the story-line of narratives as a springboard for oral or written communicative activities, which can exploit the cultural information found (106). Consequently, the following ideas for classroom implementation reflect her approach and center on, but are not limited to, analytical reading involving 'compare-and-contrast' exercises, discussion activities, composing original tales, and responses to stories on a personal level. While it is possible to integrate these exercises into an advanced beginner course, I propose that the exercises are best suited for Intermediate learners, who have already mastered the necessary grammar and vocabulary. This leaves room for more sophisticated tasks, such as critical evaluation or free writing. For less advanced students, one finds simplified versions of fairy tales or texts with glossaries, which allow even beginners at a lower proficiency level to engage with the texts.

### **Grimm's 'Aschenputtel' vs. Disney's 'Cinderella'**

The first instance of implementing teaching culture through reading fairy tales compares classical German fairy tales to the adapted Disney versions of the same stories, which facilitates American students of German to gain a greater awareness of cultural differences. One fairy tale that lends itself in particular to such cultural comparison, and which can be worked on at any language proficiency level, is the classical German fairy tale 'Aschenputtel' and its' Disney adaptation 'Cinderella'.

However, the instructor could choose 'Schneewittchen' and 'Snow White' for the same purpose.

### **Pre-Reading Activities for 'Aschenputtel'**

According to Jo Ann Aebersold and Mary Lee Field, every reader approaches a text with both individualized and culturally shaped expectations. Yet, in order to achieve the same goals through reading a text, the class has to establish shared expectations for a given work *before* the reading begins (162).

Consequently, the instructor should start the unit with a brainstorming activity of what students already know about fairy tales and the fairy tale genre: What narrative makes it a fairy tale? Where do they usually take place? What kind of characters appear? What themes occur? What fairy tales do the students know? There are numerous possibilities of activating students' topical background knowledge that can lead to identifying typical elements of the narrative, motifs, and structure of fairy tales. Depending on time and teaching style, the students either explore these elements by themselves or get prepared handouts. In addition to structural background knowledge, the teacher should provide a list of the most important new vocabulary items that appear in the text.

Another potential pre-reading activity consists of collecting facts on the stories and the Brothers' Grimm. While this constitutes an excellent group activity in class, for which the teacher provides the material, such as books, an encyclopedia, and/ or websites for internet research, students can also work on this individually at home.

After these general pre-reading activities, the time has come to set the mood for 'Aschenputtel' in particular by showing pictures of 'Aschenputtel', other topic related images, and / or by writing cues on the board, for example *Stiefmutter*, *Stiefschwester*,

*Prinz, Schuh.* At the end of the pre-reading activities the students should know that they are going to read 'Aschenputtel' by the Brothers' Grimm next.

### **Reading 'Aschenputtel' With or Without a Glossary or Dictionary**

The next step is reading 'Aschenputtel', which allows reading the German version either as hard copy text or online. Reading it online has the advantage that students can use a glossary or dictionary, which enables them to look up unknown vocabulary quick and easy. Yet, the print version is more practical for the students to work on in classrooms that do not provide computer access for every student.

Depending on what skills the teacher wants to practice in class, he or she can choose between several possibilities of reading the text in class, ranging from silent reading by students to reading out loud entirely by the teacher. I recommend students should have the chance to at least once read the whole tale in silence before working on it together with the teacher, as this represents a more authentic reading mode. However, Claire Kramsch argues that at least "the opening lines, or the first paragraph of the narrative should be read (and re-read) together in class" (140).

Therefore, I suggest the instructor first presents the whole text to the class on a big screen and lets the students individually read it in silence, before reading and re-reading it together with the class divided into smaller parts. Consequently, the instructor should turn off the screen after the initial phase of individual reading and hand out the text physically not as a whole but rather divided into two or more parts. This way everyone gets the chance to read the text first in a more natural manner. By not having the complete text available when working on specific passages, this format focuses all students' attention on the same details, instead of allowing faster students to read ahead. Then the instructor reads aloud the first part and students concentrate on his or

her pronunciation, before students re-read the text in class themselves for content.

Later the teacher hands out the remaining parts, either at once or over time, depending on the emphasis of the post-reading activities.

### **Post-Reading Activities**

At this point, the focus should be mainly on students understanding the content of 'Aschenputtel'. Thus, post-reading activities should include summarizing the content, answering questions, and / or 'fill-in-the-gap exercises' to name just a small number of possible formats to secure students' knowledge of the characters, the plot, where and when the action takes place, how the tale ends, and what moral the tale advances. A possible homework assignment could be writing a summary of the text in the students' own words. However, only after the teacher has ensured that students fully comprehend the content, can he or she move to analytical discussion questions, such as whether the tale was what the students expected it to be, the students' general attitude towards the text, and what they felt while reading it.

The instructor should collect and note the students' answers to these questions on the board to visualize and organize their collective responses, which in return can aid students to write a short essay, in which they explain their personal point of view on the discussion questions and in which they also support or oppose other student's opinions. Yet, the instructor also has the choice to assign activities including more creative writing, such as letting the students re-write the narrative according to their own likings or transfer the tale into modern times and American society, for example how the students think 'Aschenputtel' could live and act in the U.S. today. After collecting these works, the instructor should pick some examples in order to read and analyse them in class, which constitutes a good opportunity to identify elements of the students' native

culture in the new narratives and how these elements relate to and reflect cultural differences.

### **Watch Excerpts of the Disney Movie in German**

Following the reading of the classical Grimm version of 'Aschenputtel' and the post-reading activities, the teacher should center on the Disney adaptation next. He or she can either download German-speaking excerpts of the Disney movie 'Cinderella' from online sources, such as youtube.de, or use a German version of the movie to show it in class. The main focus of this exercise is to refresh the memory of the students regarding the film, in order to later highlight the differences between the Grimm version and the Disney adaptation. Hence, it is important to choose scenes that differ in content from 'Aschenputtel', for example the opening song when the protagonist gets up or when the Fairy Godmother appears.

However, listening to the sound without the pictures as a first step brings an interesting twist compared to simply showing the movie. Not only does it foster students' listening comprehension, but this approach also offers the students a different perspective for later conclusions about the Disney adaptation, especially regarding the importance of sound and singing.

### **Compare and contrast 'Aschenputtel' and 'Cinderella'**

After watching the movie, the time has come for students to compare and contrast the two versions of the tale. The instructor collects the students' responses on the board, which makes a 'compare-and-contrast' exercise easier for students, especially for visual learners. The following chart is an example of such a comparison between the traditional Grimm version and the Disney adaptation, which highlights the similarities and differences in terms of content side by side.

	<b>Grimm Version</b>	<b>Disney Version</b>
<b>Conflict with stepmother and stepsister</b>	yes	yes
<b>Appearance</b>	<i>Aschenputtel</i> is dirty	<i>Cinderella</i> looks very clean and nice
<b>Funny elements</b>	no	yes
<b>Christian values</b>	yes	yes
<b>Blood and violence</b>	yes	no
<b>Good is rewarded</b>	yes	yes
<b>Evil is punished</b>	yes	no

Figure 4-1. Comparison chart Grimm vs. Disney

As a potential homework assignment the instructor then can assign writing a summary of the comparison.

Lastly, students should think about possible differences regarding the purpose of ‘Aschenputtel’ and ‘Cinderella’, for instance that of education towards an ideal citizen versus entertainment. Is it a coincidence that ‘Cinderella’ sings all the time or has funny animal friends and if not, how does this relate to the purpose of Disney’s adaptation? Moreover, the different modes of presentation are open to discussion. As written assignment students could compare their attitude towards classical fairy tales before and after the analysis and argue whether or not they would read Grimm fairy tales to their own children. Moreover, the students could write an essay about what cultural embedded values one finds in the Disney adaptations versus the Grimm version.

## **Freedom and Self-Responsibility in Childhood: 'Rotkäppchen', 'Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein' and the 'Soccer Mom'**

One major cultural difference in growing up in the United States versus in Germany is the different degree of freedom children experience in their childhood and the self-responsibility involved. While a great number of American school-aged children seem to be under permanent supervision and control by their mothers, German mothers grant their offspring more freedom and time on their own. For example, in the U.S. it is more common than not, that mothers drive their children from one place to the next; no matter whether it is to school, or to visit friends. School-aged German children on the other hand frequently use public transportation by themselves to get around, whether before or after school. Consequently, in Germany it is perfectly normal for a first grader to walk to school or take the bike, even if that includes crossing intersections, while in the U.S. this is unthinkable.

Additionally, in the U.S. children spend their afternoons regularly in organized group activities supervised by adults, ranging from after-school-care at their schools to soccer practice or girl scouts / boy scouts. In Germany on the other hand, organized after-school-care is still not widely available. Thus, children spend their afternoons either at home or in the immediate neighborhood. Yet, in these settings the youngsters often find less supervision than their American peers. German mothers expect the children to behave in a responsible manner towards themselves as well as towards others and their surroundings. Accordingly, children in Germany experience a higher degree of freedom and self-responsibility than their peers in the U.S., a cultural difference that the instructor can emphasize by utilizing the two fairy tales

‘Rotkäppchen’ and ‘Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein’, which both contain unsupervised youngsters and serve as an ideal springboard to the topic.

### **Pre-Reading Activities for ‘Rotkäppchen’**

In addition to the universal pre-reading activities outlined above, such as a fairy tale vocabulary handout and general introduction to the genre, the instructor could start this unit by talking about how the students used to get around as children. Moreover, the discussion should touch on the modes of transportation students’ used. Did they walk or take the bus to school or to visit friends? At what age did they ride their bike to school?

Next, the instructor should inquire how the students’ usually spent their afternoons during their childhood and whether they were sometimes unsupervised. Did they ever visit a friend or relative, who lived further away all by themselves? What rules had been set-up when doing so? After having students answer these questions, the instructor can show a picture of ‘Rotkäppchen’ to re-activate the students’ background knowledge of the tale. Another possibility of preparing the group for reading ‘Rotkäppchen’ is to write cues on the board, like *Mädchen, Wolf, Wald, Großmutter, Jäger*.

### **Reading ‘Rotkäppchen’ With or Without a Glossary or Dictionary**

There are several options for reading the German version of ‘Rotkäppchen’, either as hard copy text or online. However, as I explained above, in either case it is important to read at least the first part together in class in such a manner that best suits the skills the teacher wants to practice during class.

### **Post-Reading Activities**

Besides the above outlined post-reading activities, such as summarizing or answering questions about the content, the teacher should emphasize with this

narrative that the little girl walked all by herself through the dark woods in order to visit her grandmother. Questions to reflect on are for example, whether or not it would be possible for 'Rotkäppchen' to walk to her grandmother in modern U.S. or how she would possibly get there. In the past, I did this exercise with two groups of Beginner German students and one group of Intermediate students. While answering these questions, all groups agreed on that 'Rotkäppchen' probably would not go by herself. Students named such as the potential danger of the child being kidnapped or getting lost. Instead, students thought 'Rotkäppchen' would probably have a 'Soccer Mom', which refers to a mother dedicated to drive her children around in the afternoons.

Students were frequently surprised to learn that there is no German translation for this expression, which underscores different cultural practices of children getting around embedded in language. In addition, the given reasons display potential cultural differences to the target culture and are open to discussion with the learners.

As a possible homework assignment and depending on the proficiency level of the group, the instructor can assign students either to discuss the underlying fears of society critically when it comes to children walking around unsupervised, to re-write the narrative with an alternative ending or to transfer the tale into modern times and American society.

For example, how the students would place 'Rotkäppchen' in the U.S. today. After collecting these works, the instructor should pick a number of examples in order to read and analyze them in class, which constitutes a good opportunity to identify elements inherent in the students' native culture in the new narratives and how these elements relate to and reflect cultural differences. Additionally, the instructor can refer to already

existing local American adaptations of the tale, for instance *'Petit Rouge. A Cajun Red Riding Hood'*, where the story is located in the swamps of Louisiana or the adaptation 'The Little Girl and the Wolf' by James Thurber, in which Little Red Riding Hood shoots the wolf with an automatic gun.

### **'Compare-and-Contrast' Modes of Transportation**

Next, the instructor should take a look at the transportation situation of children in Germany today. Naturally, at the time the Grimms collected the tales walking was the most popular mode of getting around as people did not have cars. Yet, in modern Germany it is still common for children to walk by themselves, especially to school. The teacher can illustrate this with examples, such as the city of Griesheim near Frankfurt, where according to Irene Bräuninger the town officials even invested in playground-like equipment on sidewalks to make the way to and from school more fun for the children. As resources the teacher can use either an online video on the topic or read Bräuninger's article online, both provided by the ZDF Mediathek.

Following the input on how children get to school in Germany, the class then should 'compare-and-contrast' the different practiced modes of transportation between Germany and the US, and how this relates to freedom and self-responsibility. A possible writing assignment could be a short essay, in which the students take position regarding the different modes of transportation for children and their advantages and disadvantages. This can also include dealing with the fear of kidnapping and accidents and students should state why or why not they would let their future children walk to school or a friend's house all by themselves.

### **Pre-Reading Activities for ‘Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein’**

As the students are already familiar with fairy tales at this point of the unit, the teacher simply has to set the mood for ‘Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein’, which is a tale less known in the US. Therefore, students’ most likely do not have any previous background knowledge regarding the tale’s content. Instead of showing pictures and giving cues, the instructor thus has to prepare the group for the content in a different way. For instance, he or she asks whether or not the students sometimes spent the afternoons unsupervised at home during their childhood. Were there rules in such a case, for example never open the door and let strangers in the house? These initial questions and collecting the students’ responses function not only as an introduction to the fairy tale, but also to relate the unknown tale to the students own life in order to generate a personal interest for the topic.

### **Reading ‘Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein’**

Just like ‘Rotkäppchen’ the instructor next reads ‘Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein’ with the students in class. Yet, in this fairy tale one finds more characters with speaking parts compared to ‘Rotkäppchen’. Consequently, the tale lends itself to a greater extent to be read aloud with divided roles.

### **Post-Reading Activities**

After ensuring students understood the content of the text, post-reading activities dealing with this narrative should focus on the fact that the mother goat left the children unattended at home. While there are numerous approaches to the tale, one possible starting point for discussion could be under what circumstances American mothers would leave their children unattended at home. My past students often related unattended and unsupervised children with a lower socio-economic background.

Interestingly, students subsequently associated the goat with a single mother that can not afford childcare, which illustrates in an extraordinary manner how implied role expectations and cultural pattern—in this case the American—influence the perception of a narrative. However, the instructor could provide statistics about childcare and/ or single mothers in modern Germany, but also indicate how these topics were perceived at the time the Brothers' Grimm collected this fairy tale. Was the social status of a single mother different 200 years ago? What childcare options were there?

In addition, students suggested that American mothers leaving their children alone would be bad mothers neglecting the primary duty of motherhood: caring for their offspring, protecting them from the dangers of the outside world and spending time with them, especially 'quality time', another term that has no German expression. Here the teacher has once more the opportunity to point out, how these culturally embedded values influence the way readers perceive and understand a text.

Yet, the emphasis of this unit is on freedom and self-responsibility in childhood. Thus, the instructor should highlight the warnings of the goat regarding the wolf's intentions and possible disguises. In the narrative freedom is linked to the responsibility of using this freedom in a responsible manner. The consequences of not acting responsible are devastating. Students should reflect on what American mothers practice in order to prepare and protect their youngsters from the dangerous outside world. What are similarities and differences to the narrative? German mothers today still commonly refer to 'Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein' as a warning, when they leave their children at home. What do the students think about that? A productive assignment for the students could be to let them transfer the fairy tale into modern American society,

potentially with a different ending. Similarly to 'Rotkäppchen', the instructor should collect these works, and chose a number of examples in order to read and analyse them in class regarding typical elements of the students' native culture in the new narratives and how these elements relate to and reflect cultural differences.

### **Effects of Differences in Transportation and Parental Control**

Lastly, students should think about the purpose of 'Rotkäppchen' and 'Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein', principally as education towards self-responsibility, but also to display obedience to authority. Do the students believe in a relationship between reading fairy tales and a greater degree of self-responsibility in children or are fairy tales simply a different form of parental control? In addition, the different degrees of freedom and self-responsibility during childhood in the U.S. and Germany, which constitute the core of this unit, are open to classroom discussion. A writing assignment could be an essay, in which students take a position to the questions above.

In another, more general writing assignment students' could also compare their attitude towards fairy tales before and after this unit. This should include whether or not and if with what purpose the students would read fairy tales to their own future children.

### **Outlook**

In this chapter, I gave concrete examples of how fairy tales connect to culture, world view, and language. All ideas for implementation follow Kramsch's approach to sensitize the students to the experience thematized by the narratives, mainly through personalized questions, writing activities, or parallel texts (140). Actively engaging with the narrative in such a manner fosters understanding the text's underlying elements of thought. Yet, taking a look at the narrative from a personal point of view in combination with recurring 'compare-and-contrast' activities makes it easier for the students to

critically reflect on the topic, which is essential for personal growth and developing cultural awareness and understanding .

Additionally, the exercises I chose leave ample room for exploring and evaluating culturally shaped ideas inherent in the students' native culture. For instance, concepts such as the American 'Soccer Mom', and the lack of this term in the German language illustrate how cultural embedded ideas relate to and reflect cultural differences. This applies also to the perception of texts, exemplarily shown by the goat as poor single mother. While the Grimm's probably did not think of the character this way, it would be interesting to find out, whether students in Germany today identify and interpret the character like their American peers.

Yet, the ideas for implementation in this chapter represent only a small number of possibilities of facilitating teaching about culture in the German L2 classroom. However, I hope to have demonstrated that fairy tales constitute a valuable teaching material in gaining cultural background knowledge, closing gaps in understanding and raising cultural awareness.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

In Chapter 2 I demonstrated how language pre-eminently embodies the values and meanings of a culture. Moreover, I explained the necessity to teach both of these concepts in the second language classroom as without knowledge about the culture component, the learner cannot communicate functionally. After evaluating different approaches to teaching culture, I concluded that teaching culture through reading appears to be a viable way to increase cultural awareness in the foreign language classroom.

Thereafter, I clarified in Chapter 3 the purpose and role of reading in second language acquisition (SLA) and demonstrated that reading can be of great use for the purpose of highlighting differences in language and culture. Furthermore, I investigated possible reading materials in SLA and evaluated their suitability regarding teaching about culture.

My findings in Chapter 4 show that fairy tales not only fulfill all the criteria of an ideal reading material in SLA, but that they also lend themselves very well to combining literary analysis with teaching about culture in the German Second Language (L2) classroom. Whether contemporary tales or classical Grimm versions, the narratives always connect German language, culture, and world view, making cultural differences visible to foreign language learners. Consequently, fairy tales help to build socio-cultural awareness of the target language, which constitutes extremely important in avoiding misunderstandings.

I agree with Claire Kramersch when she argues in the *European Journal of Education* “what language learners have to acquire is less an understanding of one

other national group than an understanding of ‘difference’ per se” (350). Yet, reading fairy tales connects the reader not only with the target culture, but also allows a fresh perspective on the students’ native culture. Therefore, the ideas for implementation I provided in Chapter 5 underscore similarities and differences between the students’ native language and culture compared to German language and culture. Yet, the exercises allow ample room for critical reflection, which help to build a greater awareness of cultural differences per se.

In summary, reading fairy tales connects insights drawn from both languages and cultures and facilitates teaching about culture in order to create intercultural competence and understanding, which in turn fosters the language learning process.

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