



IO3/Pedagogical Tool  
Development:  
Five-Step Module for  
Teaching Literature,  
Language and Culture  
in the FL Classroom

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## GENERAL BACKGROUND

The five-step model is a didactic method developed for teaching short literary texts, specifically short (or very short) stories in FL teaching. The general motivation for the project was that - in our own Belgian context, but also elsewhere in Europe – literary texts have largely disappeared from the language curriculum, which has led to a decline in reading skills and a decrease in cultural knowledge. As the new companion volume to the CEFR for Languages also shows, literary texts are crucial instruments in the language class, to teach critical reading skills, intercultural competences, and literary mediation as well as to foster reading motivation and increase reading fluency. Yet, language teachers often lack the didactic tools and methods for using literary texts in the language classroom in a way that indeed fosters these different skills.

The five-step model therefore offers an integrated approach to language and literature teaching, which combines the *use* of literary texts in the development of communicational skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing) with the *study* of literary texts as open and multi-layered textual constructs. Three dimensions of dialogue are central to the five-step model. Through a self-questioning dialogic approach, students' personal engagement with and interpretation of the literary text are stimulated (dialogue with the text), then further developed into a multi-perspectival understanding of the text through a discussion-based approach (dialogue with others about the text). Finally, intercultural competence is fostered as a dialogue between the text and the contexts of author and readers (dialogue text and its contexts).

The model has been developed in particular for the use of short narrative texts for a number of reasons. Short stories seem ideally suited as they exist in different levels of linguistic complexity and can therefore be used in different FL contexts. Unlike fragments or abridged versions of longer fiction, moreover, short stories are complete literary texts, which allow for an affectively engaged reading as well as a full-fledged literary interpretation. Still, the five-step model could also be used for poetry, creative non-fiction or longer fictional forms.

## FIVE-STEPS MODEL<sup>1</sup>

### *Step 1: Individual reading*

A customary practice in FL is to preface the reading of a literary text with pre-reading exercises that introduce the theme, provide background for the author, or practice relevant vocabulary. While these pre-reading exercises are a good way to lower the threshold of a new text, they have the disadvantage of steering interpretation in a specific direction, hence curtailing the individual reader's

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<sup>1</sup> See slide presentation 1.

affective and associative personal response to the text. In our first step, therefore, we simply ask students to read the story attentively and to note down any questions that occur spontaneously while reading. It is important to emphasise that all questions are welcome: questions that relate to vocabulary issues or lack of comprehension, questions that come from curiosity about the plot development or characters, but also questions that stem from surprise, disagreement or confusion.

### *Step 2: Reading in pairs*

Students are asked to go through the story again in pairs, exchanging and discussing the questions they had formulated. Some plot-related questions may already have been answered at the end of the reading, while questions about text comprehension can be settled with the help of a dictionary. Other questions will find no easy answer in either a dictionary or the text itself and hence merit further discussion. From these questions, every student chooses one 'crucial' question: an open question that seems important for the overall interpretation of the story. The students hand in their crucial question at the end of the class.

### *Step 3: Class discussion*

The teacher moderates a class discussion in the target language starting from the students' crucial questions. The discussion is geared towards an exchange and exploration of the different responses, perspectives and interpretations the students bring to the text. The aim is not to arrive at a single, correct or consensual, interpretation, but rather to "read for complexity", to explore the multiple levels of meaning of the story. Differences in view need not be resolved: they are prompts to explore the ambiguities in the text as well as the different perspectives the students bring to the text. In this way, the dialogic discussion seeks to develop the different components of literary reading (or literary mediation): students learn to formulate their personal perspectives on the story, to build an interpretation on the basis of the text's rhetorical, generic and narrative characteristics, and to bring together personal response and interpretation into a text-based evaluation. After the discussion, students note down a response to the crucial question they had formulated.

### *Step 4: Research work*

The students engage in inquiry-based learning with a view to further exploring contextual and cultural aspects of the text (e.g. the author's background, the cultural or historical context, intercultural references, or the social topics addressed). The students work in small groups to explore one particular aspect on the basis of a few websites that have been provided by the teacher. They try to relate the information they find to the story, guided by the question: Does this information add to your interpretation of the text? If so, how? After the research, the groups are reassembled so that students can tell their new group members

about the insights and information found in the research work. Students make notes with an eye to the productive assignments they will choose in the next step.

### *Step 5: Productive assignment*

The assignments work toward a synthesis, reflection or transfer of what has been learnt in the previous steps and also allow students to exercise their writing skills. Possible assignments are (a) writing a 'reading guide' that annotates difficult words but also integrates the different literary, historical, cultural, and thematic aspects investigated throughout the module; (b) preparing such a reading guide for another story (e.g. by the same author or dealing with similar themes); (c) writing a reflection on the evolution of one's personal understanding of the story throughout the module, following the question: In what way have the discussion and research work changed your interpretation of the story?; (d) rewriting the story from a different perspective (e.g. in a different historical period, social context or from the perspective of a different character); and (e) comparing the story to a representation of a comparable theme in another medium (e.g. music or visual art). All assignments can be uploaded on a shared space which allows for peer evaluation as part of the assessment.

## TEACHING MODULES

On the basis of this five-step model, various teaching modules have been developed for FL teaching of French, English, German, Italian and Spanish. These modules offer the literary texts, background information for the teachers, a slide presentation to be used in the classroom, the websites required for the research work (step 4) and extra material for the assignments (step 5). These materials, always in the target language, can be found here:

<https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/outreach/tenl/korte-verhalen-in-de-talenklas/lesmodules/lesmodules>

## TRY-OUT<sup>2</sup>

Having developed the five-step approach and concrete teaching materials in the autumn of 2021, we invited 17 secondary school teachers to test the model in their English, French and, to a lesser extent, Italian and Spanish classes in the early months of 2022. The method was evaluated through a questionnaire (for the 360 students who had participated) and a questionnaire plus feedback interviews with the teachers. As a result, the five-step model received further tweaking as

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<sup>2</sup> See slide presentation 2 [Giessen training event].

well as recommendations for classroom use, which I will briefly discuss below. First, however, I will briefly present the five steps of the approach.

The evaluation by teachers and students of the five-step model highlighted a few concerns that caused us to formulate some recommendations for future implementation in the classroom. First, though the lesson series received an overall positive evaluation with regard to increasing the students' reading engagement as well as their literary and intercultural competences, the first three steps were rated most highly. This confirms the value of dialogic approaches to the development of literary understanding. Second, some teachers lamented the lack of control they had over the outcome of the research work; others judged the task too difficult for their student group. In such cases, the inquiry-based small-group approach can also be substituted by a class discussion of one of the contexts of the story by means of an informative text. Although the absence of one interpretation to be studied and reproduced was perceived as liberating by many, some students registered an uncertainty about the questions in step 1, while some teachers were uneasy with the lack of clear direction of the discussion in step 3. It is true that the five-step model, following the precepts of dialogic education, requires the teachers and students to relinquish some control over the course and outcome of the class in the interest of an open discussion and collaborative exploration. Yet, the different steps become more familiar and predictable with practice. It is therefore recommended to repeat the same five-step approach, with different texts, throughout the schoolyear. Finally, the participants noted the necessity of carefully adapting both text-choice and five-step model to the language level and needs of the student group. In that light, some teachers may allow the group-discussions in steps 3 and 4 to be conducted in the first rather than the target language.

### **CROSS-CURRICULAR TEACHING: LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, HISTORY<sup>3</sup>**

Learning about the history of a country and its people is of course also part of the cultural knowledge and intercultural competences FL students have to acquire. As literature allows one to experience historical events 'from the inside out', seeing them through the eyes of character, literary texts can enliven the instruction of historical facts, thereby encouraging both personal engagement and intercultural mediation. This calls again for an integrated approach to FL teaching where language, literature and culture, including history, can complement and reinforce one another. Such an approach can be found in the five-step model, which can easily be adapted to put greater emphasis on history. Two kinds of stories can be used for this purpose: stories written and set in a past era, and historical short fiction, which tells of past events from the perspective of the present. Although older texts are not always suited to being read without help,

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<sup>3</sup> See slide presentation 3 [Athens training event].

as required in the first step of our five-step approach, late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century texts are suitable for more advanced language learner. By focusing steps 4 and 5 on historical knowledge and skills, the five-step model can very well be used for cross-curricular teaching.

The aims of contemporary history education indeed dovetail very nicely with the aims of the five-step model. By focusing on the historical context of the stories in step 4, the students do not just gain historical knowledge, they also develop historical thinking skills, as they independently and critically process information about the past. Moreover, steps 1 and 2 of the five-step model serve to stimulate “historical empathy”, i.e. “the skill to re-enact the thought of a historical agent in one’s mind or the ability to view the world as it was seen by the people in the past without imposing today’s values on the past” (Yilmaz 2007). Such an empathetic and nuanced understanding of history will allow students to better draw lessons from the past for the present and the future, without however losing sight of its complexities and contradictions. Finally, by talking about the texts in step 3, the students gain “historical critical literacy”, i.e. “the ability to gain a deep understanding of historical events and processes through active engagement with historical texts” (Seixas and Morton 2013).

Specific modules have been developed for this cross-curricular approach around Irish short stories, by Emma Donoghue, Liam O’Flaherty and Mary O’Donnell. They can also be found here:

<https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/outreach/tenl/korte-verhalen-in-de-talenklas/lesmodules/lesmodules>.

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## REFERENCE LIST

- Seixas, Peter and Tom Morton. 2013. *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts*. Nelson Education.
- Yilmaz, Kaya. 2007. “Historical Empathy and Its Implications for Classroom Practices in Schools.” *History Teacher* 40(3): 331-338.