

Intercultural Mirrors. Cultural Identity

Costel Coroban

“Ovidius” University of Constanta, Romania
costel.coroban@365.univ-ovidius.ro

Abstract

Cultural identity is a complex concept which incorporates the aspects of identity that derive from a person’s characteristic linguistic, religious, ethnic, racial and national identity. The purpose of this article is to illustrate the use of an activity for teaching the concept of cultural identity to graduate students at the Ovidius University of Constanta who study English as a second language (ESL). First, the importance of in-depth development of intercultural communication skills for ESL learners is presented. Next, the article describes the research methodology, and the stages of the intercultural communication teaching activity are also presented. Third, the results of the survey which is part of the activity are shown and discussed. Finally, the conclusion of the article presents the advantages of including such didactic activities in ESL classes instead of icebreakers for graduate students.

Key words: intercultural communication, cultural identity, nationality

J.E.L. classification: Z13

1. Introduction

In his seminal study, Edward T. Hall, who is largely considered to be the one of the founders of the academic discipline Intercultural Communication, considers cultural identity responsible for many separations which continue to exist in the modern world. Hall warned that in America there is still racial discrimination and ethnic discrimination while class discrimination can be encountered in Europe (Hall, 1976, p. 231). Therefore, it is important that cultural identity activities are included in ESL classes in order to allow the students to acquire and in-depth understanding of the different inequalities perpetuated through cultural patterns.

2. Theoretical background

Cultural identity has multiple forms. It can manifest itself as gender identity, sexual identity, generational (age) identity, racial and ethnic identity, religious identity, class identity, national identity, regional identity, etc. (Coroban 2020, p. 49). In Baudrillard’s conception, identity is a construct, it does not exist by itself outside a socio-historical-political context. According to the Oxford Reference dictionary, national identity refers to the public image of an imagined community (Oxford Reference 2020).

The activity proposed in this paper deals with national identity, more specifically, it evaluates Romanian students reaction to the way Romanian culture is illustrated in a short documentary video on various personalities of Romanian culture posted by the Romanian Cultural Institute in London on social platforms and by its author on online streaming platforms. In the UK normative identity (that which society considers normal) has manifested itself quite strongly during the BREXIT campaign and there have even been racial hatred attacks on different groups (BBC 2019).

3. Research methodology

The methodology used in this paper includes critical didactic incidents and the quantitative and qualitative analysis of reactions to the short documentary on Romanian culture called *Nicolae Grigorescu | Who Is Romania with Dr Tessa Dunlop | Episode 4*. Critical incidents are short descriptions of situations where intercultural conflict appears (Apedaile and Schill, 2008, p. 7).

By quantitative analysis we refer to assessment of a survey in Google Forms that was sent to the students after the activity and the plotting of graphs in Excel, while qualitative analysis includes a review of the student's spoken reactions to the documentary as well as comments from the online streaming platform where the video is hosted.

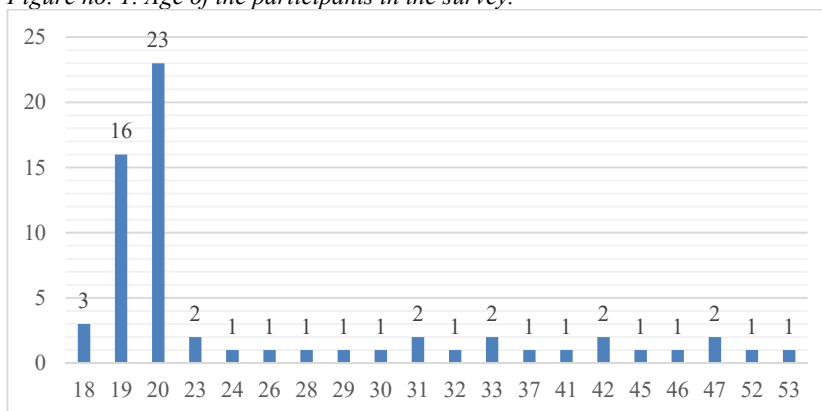
The plan of the proposed activity is given below:

- Make sure to briefly introduce the participants to the concept of cultural identity. This could be done by pointing out how, for instance, when studying English as a second language, they often have to read about British personalities or different aspects of British culture. The learner's curiosity could be elicited by presenting the activity as an example of how the British get to learn about Romanian culture.
- The instructor lets the students know that a critical incident will follow by telling them that next they will have to watch a short video documentary and afterwards they will have to evaluate certain statements regarding what they had seen.
- The instructor plays the video and shares it with the learners or send them a link of the video on the online platform so they can watch it individually. It is better if the teacher can share the video himself.
- After the video has finished playing ask the students whether they enjoyed the documentary, which part of it they liked most, etc. in order to keep them active for the next part of the activity.
- Send the link to the survey to the learners and tell them that they will have to appreciate each statement on a scale from 1 to 5 (Likert scale), where 1 stands for Totally disagree, 2 stands for Mostly disagree, 3 stands for Neutral, 4 stands for Mostly agree and 5 stands for Totally agree. For the video that we have chosen we propose these statements: 1. The documentary portrays our culture in a positive manner, 2. It is very good that the English get to hear about Romanian personalities, 3. It is very good that the English get to hear about European personalities, 4. I appreciate the presenter's effort in pronouncing Romanian words, 5. The documentary illustrates Romanian culture in a manner close to the truth, and 6. I declare myself pleasantly surprised after watching this short documentary.
- After the participants have taken the survey thank them for being part of the activity and assure them that no personal details were stored and that they will be shown the results of the survey during the next class. It is recommended that the instructor uses the same activity with more than one of his learning groups in order to get over 50 answers. Remind the learners that you will only use the results of the survey for scientific purposes.

4. Findings

The questionnaire was applied to 64 health sciences students from the Ovidius University of Constanta. Their age varied from 18 to 53, but most of the students (60.9 % of the total number) were either 19 or 20-year-olds (Figure 1). The fact that most of the participants were very young makes us expect a certain reticence towards representation(s) of Romanian national culture. In a 2018 national psychosociological study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation it was revealed that most Romanian youth, both male and female, would prefer to spend their free time with their friends or listening to music (in the urban areas) or to spend time with their families (in rural areas) (Badescu et al, 2019, p. 50) rather than pursue an activity pertaining to high culture. According to Stijn Daenekindt, high culture is understood as referring to the visual arts, opera, classical music, and literature (Daenekindt, 2018, p. 1).

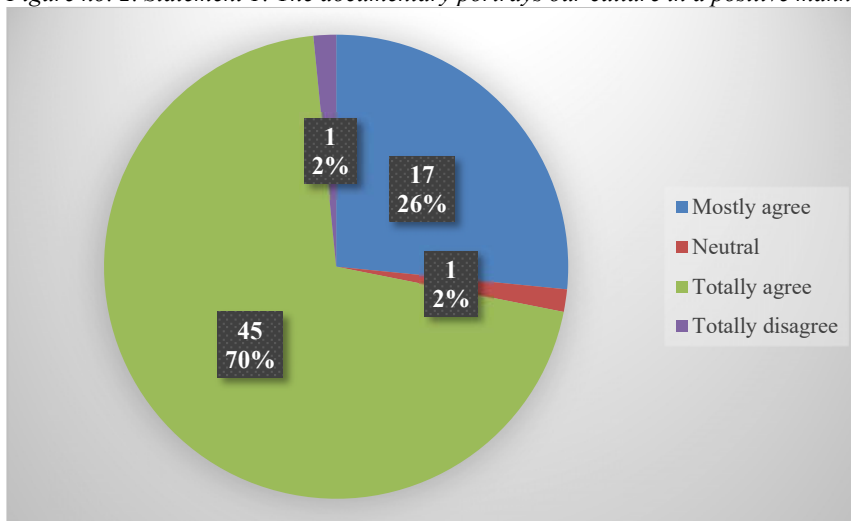
Figure no. 1. Age of the participants in the survey.



Source: Author's own work in Google Forms and Microsoft Excel.

The role of the first statement that the participants were asked to evaluate on a Likert scale from one to five (totally disagree, mostly disagree, neutral, mostly agree, totally agree) was to find out where the students positively or negatively appreciate the way Romanian culture was represented. In this case, the short documentary illustrated the life of the Romanian painter Nicolae Grigorescu (1838-1907), the founder of Romanian modern painting. 96 % of the participants answered either mostly agree or totally agree (Figure 2), which demonstrates a largely positive impact of this short British documentary on the mostly young Romanian watchers.

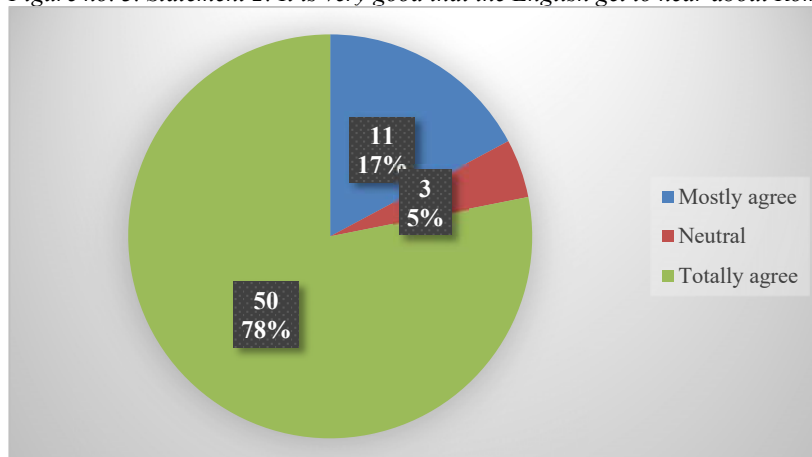
Figure no. 2. Statement 1: The documentary portrays our culture in a positive manner.



Source: Author's own work in Google Forms and Microsoft Excel.

With the second statement we aimed to determine to what extent the students consider that the British public ought to be informed more often about Romanian personalities (Figure 3). This question was posed in the context of a discussion where the learners acknowledged that, as part of the process of learning English as a Second Language, they often had to read about British personalities or various elements of British culture. 95 % of the respondents agreed to the statement either totally or to a great extent, and only three (5 %) of them gave a neutral answer, which indicates a humbler view towards their own culture, i.e. they did not feel the need to assert their national identity.

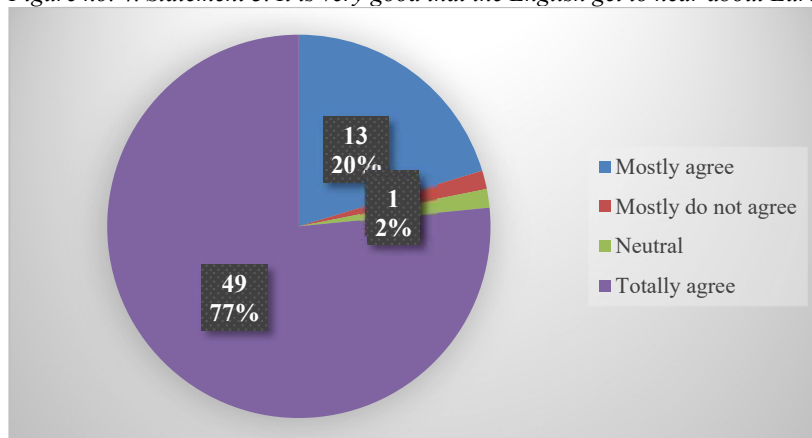
Figure no. 3. Statement 2: It is very good that the English get to hear about Romanian personalities.



Source: Author's own work in Google Forms and Microsoft Excel.

We intended to investigate to what extent the students positively appreciated the statement *The British public should learn more about European personalities* (Figure 4) in order to compare this to the answers to the previous statement. The purpose of replacing Romanian personalities with European personalities in the questionnaire was to attempt to understand the difference between the way young Romanian students assert their national identity versus how they proclaim their European identity in the post-Brexit climate. A research expectation would be that Romanians would not shy away from affirming their European identity, given the fact that, among the European Union members, according to an Eurobarometer survey, Romania ranks 10th in the population's positive expectations towards the future of the EU, with a score of 69 % optimistic prospects (Euronews 2019). Overall, the participant's reaction to this statement was slightly more positive than to the previous one (97 %), a result which corroborates our assumption.

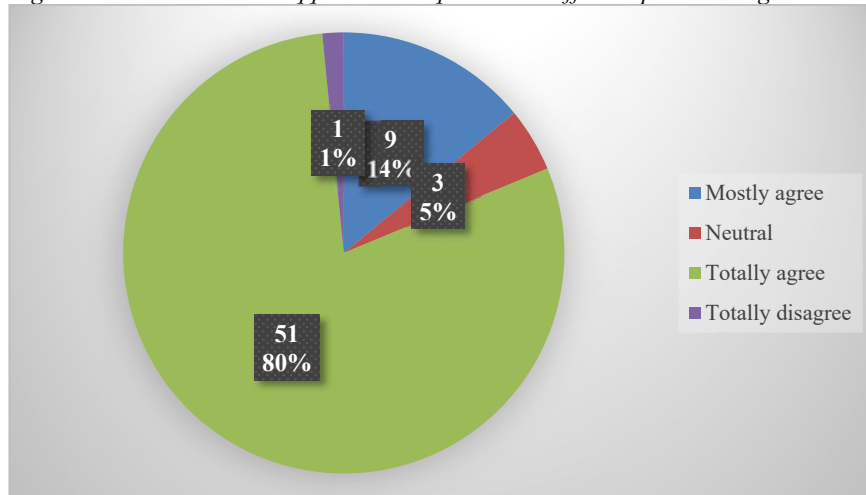
Figure no. 4. Statement 3. It is very good that the English get to hear about European personalities.



Source: Author's own work in Google Forms and Microsoft Excel.

The purpose of the fourth statement (Figure 5) was to assess the learner's reaction to the difficulties faced by the British documentary host when pronouncing some Romanian names and phrases such as Nicolae Grigorescu, Barbu Știrbei, Doamne ferește!, Mihai scăpând stindardul or Atacul de la Smârdan. We would expect the students to meet the presenter's effort with surprise and appreciation, given the fact that this choice of names and phrases are not the easiest ones to pronounce for someone who has not had contact with the Romanian language before. This supposition is mostly confirmed as 94 % of the respondents greatly appreciated the documentary hosts' pronunciation, while three people gave a neutral answer, and one person gave a negative appreciation.

Figure no.5. Statement 4: I appreciate the presenter's effort in pronouncing Romanian words.

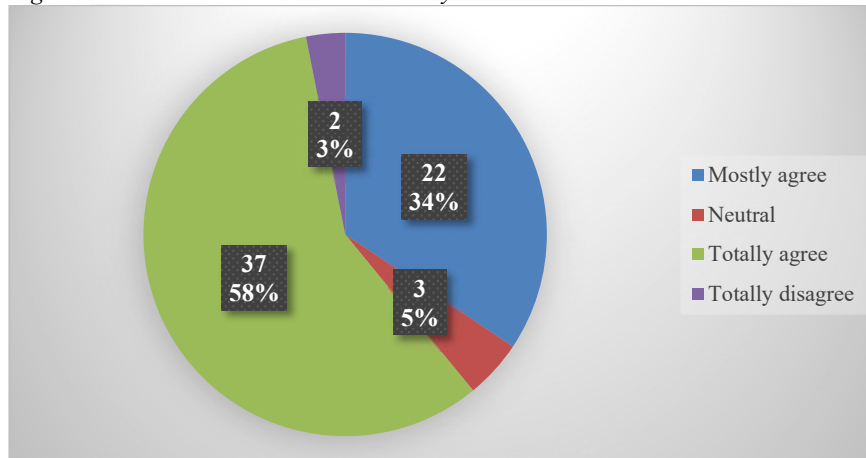


Source: Author's own work in Google Forms and Microsoft Excel.

With the fifth statement the intention was to challenge the participant to decide whether the way Romanian culture is illustrated in the short documentary matches his/her own representation of his/her own national culture (Figure 6). Similarly, in the article *Representation and Reality in the Study of Culture*, Bowling and Stromberg pose the question whether every attempt to understand the speech of the Other are blocked by cultural differences and differences in belief (Bowling and Stromberg, 1997, p. 123). The challenging part of this statements consists in the fact that each person has the tendency to view his own culture (in-group) in a subjective manner and it is very difficult for somebody outside that culture (out-group) to perceive it in a similar manner.

We hypothesize that since the depiction of Romanian culture is largely positive in the documentary (with a few negative remarks such as Nicolae Grigorescu's disappointment with the Romanian political class and the need for him to study and accomplish himself in Paris), this will correlate mostly positively with the student's reaction. The results show that only three students expressed neutrality to the statement and two did not agree to it. Still, in the case of this statement less students answered Totally agree in comparison with other statements, which is probably an indicator of the difficulty of deciding whether a cultural representation can actually be compared to what each individual consider to be his true national cultural. Indeed, cultural representation(s) can hardly be evaluated as either true or false.

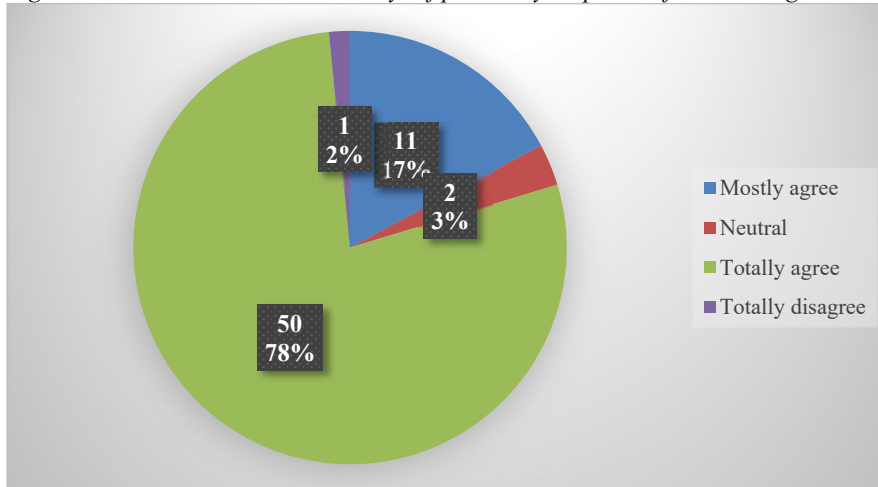
Figure no. 6. Statement 5: The documentary illustrates Romanian culture in a manner close to the truth.



Source: Author's own work in Google Forms and Microsoft Excel.

Finally, statement six aimed to measure the participant’s overall reaction to watching the documentary (Figure 7). The result was highly positive, with 78 % of the learners totally agreeing to the statement and 17 % mostly agreeing. On the whole, most of the students considered themselves pleasantly surprised after seeing how Nicolae Grigorescu is portrayed as one of the most important Romanian and European painters in Dr. Tessa Dunlop’s series *Who is Romania?*. This corroborates with the reactions to the documentary on the on-line streaming platform where it is available, where Romanian users left comments such as *You're doing a great job, please keep on doing it!*, or *Mulțumesc mult pentru aceste video, sunt o româncă care trăiește departe de țara ei de inimă și aceste video mă rememorează ce minunată este patria mea* [Thank you so much for this video, I am a Romanian living away from her heart’s country and this video reminds me how wonderful my fatherland is], or *Bravo Tessa ! Salutări din...Scotland!!! From Bathgate with love* [Well done, Tessa! Greetings from...Scotland!!!].

Figure no. 7. Statement 6: *I declare myself pleasantly surprised after watching this short documentary.*



Source: Author’s own work in Google Forms and Microsoft Excel.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this brief study titled *Intercultural mirrors* was to analyze the reactions of Romanian graduate students in the ESL class to representation(s) of the Romanian culture (in this case, a short British documentary film by Dr. Tessa Dunlop on the great achievements of the modernist painter Nicolae Grigorescu). The main hypothesis was that although the participants were surprised by how the British portray a part of Romanian culture, they would not view their national culture in an extremely positive manner since they are very young adults, who according to recent psychosociological studies, would prefer to spend their free time with their friends and family or engaging in activities related to popular culture. The findings prove that the learners appreciated the representation of their own culture in a positive manner to a great extent. Our explanation for this results is the fact that the construction of self-identity is stronger in a context where comparison is made possible through the definition of oneself in relation to the Other. Likewise, according to Schalk, acknowledging the existence of the Other allows one to recognize himself/herself and is an important part of how modern people build their own identity (Schalk, 2011, p. 197),

6. References

- Apedaile, Sarah, Lenina Schill. 2008. "Critical Incidents for Intercultural Communication An Interactive Tool for Developing Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills. Facilitator and Activity Guide." NorQuest College Website. Pdf document. [Accessed 11 September 2019].
- BBC. 19 June 2019. "Brexit 'major influence' in racism and hate crime rise". Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-48692863> [Accessed 16.11.2020]

- Bădescu Gabriel, Daniel Sandu, Daniela Angi, Carmen Greab, „Studiu despre tinerii din România 2018/2019 [Study about the Romanian Youth]”. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/15294.pdf> [Accessed 10 November 2020]
- Bowlin, John R., and Peter G. Stromberg. 1997. Representation and Reality in the Study of Culture. *American Anthropologist* New Series 99, no. 1: 123-34.
- Coroban Costel, 2020. *Comunicare interculturală* [Intercultural communication]. Iași: Editura Pim.
- Daenekindt, Stijn. High Culture. in: George Ritzer and Chris Rojek, eds. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329632573_High_Culture [Accessed 10 November 2020]
- Dunlop, Tessa. 30 October 2020. “Nicolae Grigorescu | Who Is Romania with Dr Tessa Dunlop | Episode 4”. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYfWdr-YnPI&ab_channel=TessaDunlop [Accessed 1 November 2020]
- Hall, Edward T. 1976. *Beyond Culture*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Schalk, Sami. (2011). Self, Other and Other-Self: Going Beyond the Self/Other Binary in Contemporary Consciousness. *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 2, 1: p. 197-210.
- “Trust in the EU at its highest in five years, new poll shows”, 06.08.2019. *Euronews*. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/06/trust-in-eu-at-its-highest-in-five-years-new-poll-shows> [Accessed 10 November 2020]
- Oxford Reference. 2020. “National identity”. Available at: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100224230> [Accessed 16 November 2020].