

Modern Family and Modern Approaches to ICC – Developing Cultural Knowledge with TV Series at *Berufskolleg*

Rosalie Wiechmann

This essay is the result of realizing that the curricula of *Gymnasium* and *Berufskolleg* differ tremendously. Whereas the *Gymnasium* focuses on topics like postcolonialism and Shakespeare, the *Berufskolleg's* curriculum demands knowledge about “the experience of work” and “personal identities and social relationships” (MSB 9). Simultaneously, it lacks cultural topics like India and Nigeria. Considering the topic of social relationships, the television series *Modern Family* would be well suited as an introduction and at the same time support the obligatory examination of “family in literature and film” (13). As intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is one of today’s main aims in the English language classroom, it would be interesting to see how teachers at *Berufskolleg* can comply with the guidelines of the *Bildungsplan*¹ and still achieve ICC. This, and the medium of TV series, leads to the question of whether *Modern Family* offers modern ways of developing ICC. This paper will focus on how ICC can be developed through less cultural topics but through a mandatory

topic like ‘family’. Firstly, the paper will outline what ICC in general denotes and discuss the use of TV series in the English classroom. Secondly, the pilot episode of *Modern Family* will be analyzed in three steps according to knowledge, skills and attitude. Thirdly, the usefulness and suitability of *Modern Family* for developing ICC will be discussed.

ICC and TV Series

The *Kultusministerkonferenz* (KMK) determines the *Bildungsstandards*, which specify the competences students have to reach at certain points in their school education. For English as a Foreign Language for *Allgemeine Hochschulreife* students must, besides other competences, have learned intercultural communicative competence (KMK 19). This means they can understand and act in foreign language contexts and grasp information and meaning from a foreign language text. Furthermore, they can reflect upon these with regard to their own cultural and so-

¹ In this paper the *Bildungsplan Englisch* will only refer to students at *Berufskolleg Soziales und Gesundheit* who are studying to reach *Allgemeine Hochschulreife*.

cietal context (19). ICC denotes “the ability to interact effectively with other people from cultures that we recognize as being different from our own” (Guilherme 297). For this, students have to become intercultural speakers, who are able to mediate between cultures and negotiate between their own social and political identifications and those of others (298). ICC in general consists of critical awareness and reflexivity of one’s own and others’ cultural knowledge as well as tolerance, openness and willingness to accept members of other cultures on their own terms (Grimm 159). ICC builds on three key components, namely knowledge, skills and attitudes (Anton and Hammer 136). The *Bildungsstandards* also focus on them (“Wissen, Einstellungen und Bewusstheit”, KMK 19). Knowledge is defined as knowledge about one’s own and foreign cultures and awareness of culture-dependence in human thinking (Anton and Hammer 136). Skills consist of the ability to interpret and compare issues whereas attitude is concerned with multi-perspective perception and the development of critical tolerance (136). Adelaide Hu describes ICC as the key qualification and most important aim of the foreign language classroom (77). Daniela Anton and Julia Hammer go even further by saying that ICC has a special authorization in the English language class because English, as a lingua franca, offers worldwide contact with other cultures (135). Therefore,

students should learn how to be interculturally competent.

Regarding today’s globalized and digitized world, learners encounter multimodal compositions daily (Viebrock 13), for instance advertisements, Instagram and YouTube. Even the *Bildungsplan Englisch* recommends using films to develop intercultural learning, because they offer an easy access to different perspectives (MSB 8). Concluding, not only is it mandatory to teach film in the English language classroom at *Berufskolleg*, but also film is close to the learners’ world, which means a step towards learner-centered materials. Roswitha Henseler, Stefan Möller and Carola Suhrkamp name several reasons for teaching films: firstly, they are good to enhance learners’ motivation and encourage them to think, react and comment on things they come across in films (15). They offer authentic speech and support the affective-emotional side of foreign language learning, as well as helping to develop imagination (15). Furthermore, films offer insights into other cultures and opportunities to change perspectives (15). And lastly, they foster audiovisual competence as required in the curriculum. They help to develop intercultural competence, especially in terms of empathy and change of perspective, because they make differences between one’s own and foreign-culture ways of life visual and comprehensible.

Besides this, films offer opportunities to develop other competences like film literacy, which partly consists of ICC as well. Film analysis can be broken down into four individual competences, where inter-cultural competence means the ability to reflect upon one's own and foreign cultural phenomena (Blell and Lütge 37). In addition to this, many popular films are produced in English. The *Bildungsplan Englisch* has recognized this and names it as a reason why it is important for students at *Berufskolleg* to learn English. It emphasizes the importance of English for international communication as the English-speaking entertainment-industry has a huge influence. In this entertainment-industry, TV series play an important role as they are part of student life (Henseler and Möller 3). The medium underwent an enormous development in the last 25 years (2) and series like *House of Cards*, *Downton Abbey*, *Sherlock*, *How I Met Your Mother* and *Game of Thrones* illustrate how different genres are popular in society. Although TV series play an enormous role in students' lives, teachers often restrict themselves to feature films, documentaries or short films (Henseler and Möller 3). But with their length of 25 to 45 minutes, TV series would be well-suited for lessons. Moreover, they offer any advantage films provide as well. Current research focuses little on this topic. Marja Zibelius's article *Developing "Intercultural Communicative Competence" with Ae Fond Kiss* offers insight into

the development of ICC through film, and *Fremdsprachlicher Unterricht* focuses on teaching activities with *Modern Family*, but not on its adequacy for developing ICC. In the following section it will be illustrated how *Modern Family* can be used in the English classroom to work with the compulsory topic of 'family' and simultaneously to develop ICC.

Examination of *Modern Family*

To learn about knowledge is not as easy as discussing the other two key components, attitudes and skills, because *Modern Family* is set in a Western culture, which is comparable to Germany to a certain degree. Therefore, there is no obvious foreign culture featured like in *Whale Rider* or *Ae Fond Kiss*. Nonetheless, there are scenes through which knowledge can be developed in the sense of cultural knowledge. Michael Byram deals with knowledge about social groups and their products and processes as well as knowledge of general processes of societal and individual interaction (Grimm 166). The pilot episode displays many scenes in which knowledge can be acquired.

Firstly, the episode deals with different types of family, family structures and their problems. This represents one of the *Bildungsplan's* topics, "personal identities and social relationships" (MSB 13). Through this topic, students should

learn about types of family, different cultures and different times, and the family in literature and the media (13). In the pilot episode students are directly confronted with three different types of family: the traditional one with Claire and Phil who have been married for sixteen years and are parents to Haley, Alex and Luke, the modern same-sex partnership between Cameron and Mitchell and their newly adopted daughter Lily, and also the modern family of Jay with his younger wife Gloria and her son Manny. Already at first glance, the TV series displays knowledge about different types of family which could be used as the foundation for further tasks.

Furthermore, the pilot episode offers insight into prejudices towards same-sex partnerships in America. Mitchell and Cameron have difficulties with people's prejudice that a couple who is adopting a child must be a traditional couple consisting of a mother and a father. If students recognize this prejudice, they have acquired the ability to have knowledge about people's cultural products (Bredella 121), in this case prejudices, and have taken a step towards ICC.

Thirdly, Volkmann states that knowledge also entails students learning about culturally significant elements which are dealt with in the piece of literature (59). Concerning this, *Modern Family* offers knowledge about Spanish accents in the English language and mis-

understandings resulting thereof. Students must gain the knowledge that phrases in a language other than English cannot be translated word by word and therefore may lead to misunderstandings: For example, when Gloria tells Jay "You be the wind in his back, not the spit in his face" which is the word for word translation of a Spanish saying "Voy a ser la brisa en tu espalda, no quien te escupa en la frente". This situation helps students to gain knowledge about the fact that there can be misunderstandings in translating sayings word for word.

This whole aspect of knowledge about misunderstandings is closely connected to skills of discovery. For example, students must have discovered that Gloria has an accent and then identify her accent as a Spanish one. In this regard, students learn about the cultural phenomenon of foreign accents in the English language and how they differ from the Standard American English, which relates to Nancy Grimm's "students know of social background and possible solutions of cultural phenomena" (167). As mentioned above, this is already connected to skills, which will be analyzed further.

One way to develop skills for intercultural competence is through critical incidents, which are mini events offering an illustrative example of an intercultural conflict (Volkmann 56). A critical incident in terms of behavior

could be detected when Mitchell reacts angrily to a woman's comment about "the baby with the cream puffs" (Loyd and Levitan, 00:03:41-00:03:88). Students could be asked to identify why Mitchell is reacting in that way and what the woman meant by saying "cream puffs". The critical incident is that Mitchell misunderstands cream puffs for an insult, as it describes a gay white man, and hence holds a speech to defend him and Cameron, although the woman really meant the cream puffs which Cameron was holding for Lily. By analyzing this scene, students would become aware of people's stereotypical thinking about gay relationships and through this, students would learn to recognize people's ethnocentric views (Bredella 59). This leads to another point Lothar Bredella mentions regarding skills, in that it helps students to develop the ability to discover new knowledge about a culture (122), as cream puff is in the English language a homonym and can either denote a white gay man or a French pastry with sweet filling. Students could think about creative ways or interventions (Bredella 122) to deal with the misunderstanding that cream puffs are not meant as an insult against Mitchell and Cameron.

Furthermore, Grimm describes skills in terms of students being able to relate to problems and challenges presented to them and handling them creatively and by considering several perspectives (167). Mitchell has a problem

with telling his family the important news that he and Cameron adopted a baby (Loyd and Levitan, 00:17:06-00:21:91). Concerning this, students could be asked how they would have acted in Mitchell's situation and how they would have shared the news. Students could also share their own experiences from similar situations and how they handled them. By doing this, they accomplish Grimm's aim of developing creative and cooperative ways to tackle problems and take a step towards becoming an intercultural communicative learner.

Attitude as the third aspect of ICC has an enormous impact on students. Grimm describes attitude in terms of ICC as follows: students are motivated to find out more about the target culture and the issues presented and they are consciously aware of their own and other approaches to defining the cultural phenomenon and ready to compare them (167). He also states that students are open to other cultures and show respect to diversity and ambiguity; they also develop empathy (167). In *Modern Family*, students can develop empathy by empathizing with Manny and his passionate way of doing things he is convinced of, like declaring his love to an older girl. In contrast to this stands Jay's sober mind of being realistic about Manni's odds. Here students have a possibility to compare the two approaches. They could formulate their own opinion about why they

would rather agree with Manni's or Jay's way and explain their reasons for their opinion. In this way, students would formulate their attitude towards this topic and simultaneously their product would be made measurable. Furthermore, students should be aware of approaches, their own and those of others, to defining culture and be ready to compare them as well as to develop a critical awareness of their own cultural conditioning (Volkmann 59). Students could develop this by comparing Gloria's way of cheering, which is exuberant, emotional and noisy, and their own way of cheering to realize differences and learn something about their own way of behaving and how this could be influenced through them living in Germany. Concluding, the TV series offers many opportunities to discuss students' attitudes, knowledge and skills.

***Modern Family's* Suitability to Develop ICC in the Classroom**

The overall outcome of the analysis is that the TV series *Modern Family* certainly offers many scenes through which aspects of ICC can be developed. It offers opportunities to develop the basic principles of ICC, while complying with the *Bildungsplan* although cultural topics are hardly represented. Therefore, *Modern Family* offers a new way of dealing with intercultural competence and serves as helpful for students at *Berufskolleg*, who otherwise would not

have the same chances to develop ICC like students from *Gymnasium*. Simultaneously, material which deals with TV series would be close to students' world and therefore student-oriented and motivational.

Besides those advantages of TV series, *Modern Family* also offers several opportunities to develop and foster ICC. Concerning attitude, TV series can increase motivation and as they are supporting the affective-emotional side of learning (Henseler, Möller and Suhrkamp 15), it is easier to develop an attitude towards the TV series and its topic than towards a factual text. Furthermore, it fosters the imaginative competence and students' competence for the "suspension of disbelief" (Diehr and Suhrkamp 29) and helps students to empathize with characters and to draw a comparison to their own life. In *Modern Family*, students can for example develop empathy by comparing different ways of dealing with issues, by realizing that TV series offer situations in which they can learn to deal with people's prejudices and by developing a critical awareness of their own cultural conditioning. *Modern Family* also offers scenes in which knowledge can be developed, for example knowledge about family types, people's prejudices, people's dealing with prejudices and about culturally significant elements like, for instance, the Spanish accent. Skills are rather easy to develop with *Modern Family* because due to its nature of being a

mockumentary and comedy program, it offers many situational misunderstandings. Although these are for the purpose of comedy, they help students to detect critical incidents because they are more obvious and striking.

However, one has to keep in mind that although TV series can indeed give examples of foreign cultures, they are not an illustration of reality (Henseler, Möller and Suhrkamp 19), as they are fiction and a piece of art. Therefore, teachers must raise students' awareness of TV series' manipulative aspect and promote their critical awareness. Secondly, although *Modern Family* is certainly a good example to develop cultural knowledge, it draws a very stereotypical picture. For example, Gloria and Manni seem to serve only for a comparison between cultures. Moreover, Cameron and Mitchell are reduced to their gay relationship and serve for comedy aspects like Mitchell's speech on the airplane. Summarizing, one can say, that *Modern Family* is suitable for teaching when only interculturality is regarded. But due to its stereotypical aspects it lacks opportunities to develop transculturality. Werner Delano, who supports the idea of transculturality, rejects the idea of binary cultures and emphasizes the interconnectedness of cultures in a globalized world (233). As *Modern Family* rather portrays binary cultures, for example through juxtaposition of Colombian and American character traits or gay and traditional

families, it is not perfectly suited for teaching in today's world.

Nonetheless, one must say that, despite those disadvantages, the TV series offers many benefits for students. Taking both sides into account, one can say that working with TV series in a classroom can foster the competence to resist the influence and suggestive power of films, so that students can become critical and competent viewers. Furthermore, it is very helpful to develop cultural knowledge at a school where cultural topics are rarely represented in the *Bildungsplan*. One should not overlook the downsides of *Modern Family's* intercultural potential but be creative in ways of analyzing the TV series. Transculturality could also be made the subject of discussion, for example by analyzing Manni and the different Colombian aspects he displays and simultaneously his American attitude.

Modern Family certainly offers modern ways to achieve ICC, because the medium of TV series is rather new and little current research focuses on it, such as *Fremdsprachlicher Unterricht* (vol. 147, 2017). Most research on audio-visual competence is focused on feature films, although their length of 90 minutes is a huge disadvantage for teaching in class. Moreover, TV series focus on current societal and political issues and as they offer easy access to current topics and are still student-centered

materials, they are well suited for teaching. The second reason why *Modern Family* provides modern ways to learn ICC, is that it offers ways of developing intercultural knowledge without focusing on culturally heavy topics (in a *Ae Fond Kiss* or *Bend it Like Beckham* style) and rather deals with topics students are

interested in. The topic of family will certainly interest students at *Berufskolleg Gesundheit und Soziales*, because they deliberately chose this track of education with its focus on social and health issues. Therefore, one can conclude that *Modern Family* is suitable for the English classroom and functions as a modern way to develop ICC.

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