Arab World English Journal

INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327

Making Sense of Texts: EFL Students' Intercultural Competence and Interpretation Depth

Iryna Alyeksyeyeva
Department of English Philology and Intercultural Communication,
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine
Corresponding Author: irene.alexeyeva@gmail.com

Tetyana Chaiuk
Educational and Research Law School,
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine

Iryna Kovalchuk
Department of English Philology and Intercultural Communication,
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine

Elizaveta Galitska
Kyiv Gymnasium #86 "Consul", Kyiv, Ukraine

Abstract
The study is aimed at exploring Master's students' sense-making of various second language (L2) texts and its correlation with interpretation depth and the students' intercultural competence. The significance of this research lies in the fact that it provides an insight on culture-specific issues challenging for advanced and proficient Ukrainian learners of English when they make sense of L2 vocabulary, interactions, public, mass and social media discourse. The study is based on a questionnaire with open-ended questions filled in by forty Ukrainian Master's students. The subjects were asked to interpret several English vocabulary items, idioms, linguistic landscape signs as well as mass media and social media texts. The findings suggest that the students' intercultural competence rests on the information obtained from English textbooks as well as from current mass and social media content. When facing ambiguity or uncertainty, the students tend to show a lack of cultural awareness and resort to first language (L1) assumptions in their sense-making, which may entail a wrong or inaccurate understanding. The students' interpretation of public, mass and social media texts reveals their insufficient background knowledge of L2 culture, which does not lead to inaccuracies in sense-making but prevents comprehensive understanding of messages. The study argues that Master's students majoring in English need to enhance their cultural awareness, to develop their intercultural competence and to be prepared for continuous learning of L2 cultural schemata.
Keywords: cultural schemata, discourse, English language, intercultural competence, language unit, sense-making, text

Introduction

The goals of foreign language teaching become more challenging as students advance in their linguistic mastery. When learners are at the initial stage of the second language (L2) acquisition, teachers aim at equipping them with standard phrases used to cope with recurrent everyday situations. This stage presupposes mastering the language basics. As communicative situations gradually become ever more diverse and complicated, learners start realizing the multiplicity of communicative situations in a foreign language: they become aware that understanding may be culture-bound, i.e., knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is not enough for sense-making. In other words, L2 texts processing requires more than linguistic competence. In fact, learning a foreign language occurs along with the "relativization of what seems to the learner to be the natural language of their own identities and the realization that these are cultural and socially constructed" (Byram 1997, p.3): learners develop the awareness of culture as a factor that impacts on interpretation of L2 texts and, as a result, develop their intercultural competence.

Though the cultural component is becoming part of English language teaching in Ukraine and specialists are studying how culture may be presented in the classroom (see (Korolova & Popova, 2021)), the significance of this research lies in the fact that it attempts to identify culture-specific problem areas that Ukrainian Master's students who major in English may face when dealing with English texts of various types. Awareness of cultural differences, culture-related cognitive and affective lacunas may help teacher and students choose appropriate coping strategies. Thus, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

Question 1: Are English vocabulary items, dialogical texts, linguistic landscape signs, mass and social media texts equally challenging for Ukrainian Master's students' sense-making?

Question 2: How much comprehensive is Ukrainian Master's students' sense-making of culture-specific meanings?

Literature Review

Culture has been defined by many outstanding researchers. According to Sapir (1921), it is "the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives" (p.207). For Goodenough (1957), culture "does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them" (p.36). Culture is not material: it cannot be reduced to some unique food or clothes 'displayed' to learners explicitly; it comprises of 'cultural schemata', i.e., cultural background knowledge gained through membership in a specific group (Ketchum, 2006). Culture is gradually revealed to language learners through exposure to authentic texts (a book, an item of clothing, a conversation, a piece of news, an image (Marsen, 2006).

According to Almujaiwel (2018), Awayed-Bishara (2015), Bin Towairesh (2021), Gómez Rodríguez (2015), FL teaching materials provide culturally new texts that shift or even shape learners' perception and interpretation; they are, therefore, conducive to cultural schemata that cover both 'big C' culture (literature, geography, history, and arts) and 'little c' culture (beliefs, customs, and behavior). Research also shows that texts, lexical items and grammatical constructions of English language teaching (ELT) materials may become a means to actualize cultural and ideological messages. In the ELT classroom, however, culture is still seen by teachers as "a body of factual knowledge" (Bouslama & Benaissi 2018, p.126).

A proficient L2 speaker should master a combination of competencies: linguistic competence (Chomsky, 1965), communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) as well as "transcultural communication competence" (Ting-Toomey 1999) or "intercultural communication competence" (Byram, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1996). Thus, foreign language students are viewed nowadays as anthropologists (Furstenberg, 2010), and the objective of a proficiency English course lies in providing learners with the tools to extract cultural information from FL teaching materials and real-life texts. Ways to achieve this are highlighted in, for example, Moeller and Nugent (2014) and Chaouche (2016), who discuss reality-based activities used as culture accessing cues and vocabulary-based tasks as a means to identify a lack of intercultural competence. Al Asadi (2020) describes the WebQuest-based method of teaching writing skills to language learners which enhances their intercultural competence. The hands-on approach may be used for theoretical courses as well. The methodology of teaching English word-formation patterns through linguistic landscape signs is elaborated in (Kweldju, 2021)). Bagui and Adder (2020) explore how much Algerian students perceive English literary text from their native cultural perspective and how their reactions to cultural differences are dealt with and transformed into cultural insights by teachers. Razavi and Gilakjani (2020) point out the correlation between teaching cultural content and learners' reading comprehension" (p.317), which brings the scholars to the

conclusion that "culture is a basic element for learners to learn and understand their surrounding" (p.317). However, there has been no study that could shed light on the correlation between C1 and C2 students' intercultural competence and their interpretation of different types of L2 culture.

Method

The researchers employed the method of an open-ended questionnaire that provides an insight into respondents' reasoning, which makes the study qualitative. Yet, the questionnaire does not exclude elements of the quantitative method, though the small sample (forty students) prevents from making generalizations.

Participants

The research made use of convenience sampling, namely forty Master's students (aged 21 – 23, native speakers of Ukrainian) of the department for English Philology and Cross-Cultural Communication in Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine, who have been enrolled in the two-year *English Communication Studies and Translation – English, Literature, Translation and Two Western European Languages* program. The Master's students majoring in English as a second language make up a peculiar group because besides being C1 and C2 English learners, these students also benefit from theoretical courses in Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, Cognitive Linguistics and Cross-Cultural Communication Theory. These courses enhance their language mastery and facilitate the immersion in L2 culture. Thus, the program is designed so as to equip Master's students with the courses that help navigate interpersonal, corporate, mass, and intercultural communication. At the time (October, 2020), the students were in their first year of the program.

Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of three parts, with the first part focusing on testing the students' awareness and ability to identify and explain culture-specific nuances of English lexemes and idioms.

The second part was designed to examine how much the students' stereotypes influenced their interpretation of dialogue. Lexemes, idioms, and dialogue in the first two parts of the questionnaire were thematically bound to the RELATIONSHIP concept.

The third part of the questionnaire was aimed at examining the students' ability to apply their background cultural knowledge to the interpretation of public signs, mass media and social media texts. The students were asked: 1) to explain meanings encoded in two linguistic landscape items, 2) to make sense of four images from newspapers (two photos of BLM protests and two caricatures related to the coronavirus pandemic), 3) to comment on the message of Gal Gadot's *Imagine* video launched during the lockdown and to suggest possible reasons for audiences' negative feedback.

Research Procedures

The data collection was conducted in a two-hour long session. The students received a questionnaire in Google Classroom. It is important to note that the students were emphatically encouraged to share their thoughts in their answers. They were also informed that the responses would not be assessed or graded in any way.

Results
Making Sense of Culture-Specific Lexemes and Idioms
This part of the questionnaire started with the following questions:
a)   What does *nuclear family* mean in English?
b)   What does *extended family* mean in English?
c)   Which of the two terms is closer to *родина* in Ukrainian and why?

The researchers expected to receive the correct answers from the students whose English level ranges from C1 to C2. The expectations were met: while answers to (a) and (b) were up-to-the-point (e.g., "*a family that consists only of a mother, a father and their children*" and "*two parents, children and all their relatives*"), (c) stimulated more detailed answers that involved both cultural and linguistic information (quotes from the students' answers are given without any changes):

Extended family is closer to the Ukrainian «родина» while nuclear family is more «сім'я». The first one probably derives from the Ukrainian word «рід» that includes all the relatives, distant ones as well and describes the whole "evolution" of the family.

In my opinion, the second definition [extended family] *is closer to родина in Ukrainian, because, in spite of current tendency, in Ukraine a lot of families still celebrate holidays in the family circle, with all the relatives we have. A lot of grandparents help their children to care of grandsons and granddaughters, many of them live together and share everyday life. In my family we have strong relationships with grandparents and aunts, and even cousins. We usually try to help each other or just to communicate occasionally.*

Another set of lexical items to comment on contained the following lexical items:

a) A starter marriage
b) A stormy relationship
c) One's significant other

(a) and (c) proved to be challenging. One may assume that *nuclear* and *extended family* are mentioned in ELT materials; *stormy relationship* is metaphorical and quite transparent. *Starter marriage* as a concept is, however, not part of Ukrainian culture, which remains rather traditional and views marriage as a long-term/life-long relationship between a man and a woman. So, nine students did not come up with any explanation of a *starter marriage*, 23 participants got involved in a 'guessing game', each of them arriving with a varying degree of accuracy to the actual meaning:

new marriage? (not sure)
a couple that has just married, I guess
No idea, probably something connected with the first marriage

Only eight students gave the correct definition without any markers of uncertainty (*first unsuccessful marriage that does not last long; the first marriage of a person*), yet these answers cannot be considered exhaustive, since they miss out on several significant details related to social and material aspects this phenomenon incorporates:

Exclusively refers to a couple's initial marriage, probably at age 24 or less, involving partners with little income and assets. May or may not end with children; will likely not end with more assets than when it began. One or more of the partners may have an advanced degree at the time of divorce. Subsequent marriages are usually to partners higher up the socio-economic scale. (Starter Marriage, n. d.)

One's significant other is a circumlocution for a spouse, a life partner or a lover used colloquially to keep marital status, relationship status, gender identity or sexual orientation unspecified. It is noteworthy that though avoiding discriminatory language is an official trend in Ukrainian mass media and political discourse, Ukrainians still hold traditionalist views on relationships. In addition, this collocation does not typically appear in EFL textbooks, so some students failed to define it, and either admitted their ignorance (*I don't know*) or offered a fallacious definition:

one defines the other? (not sure)

It's the first time I stumbled upon this idiom. Perhaps, it implies the relationship in the couple where one partner is more authoritative than the other.

Yet, 36 out of the 40 respondents managed to give the correct definition:
somebody with whom a person has a romantic relationship in which there is a perspective
a person with whom one is in a serious romantic relationship
I guess it is similar to sayings like "one's second half" in our countries, if you get what I mean.

The third set of questions required commenting on the meaning of the following sayings:
a) Blood is thicker than water.
b) Two shorten the road.
c) Good walls make good neighbors.

(a) means that "family connections are always more important than other types of relationship" (Cambridge

Dictionary, n.d.) and is paralleled by an equivalent Ukrainian saying (*кров не вода*, literally *blood is not water*) built on the same metaphor. It is not surprising that the students had no difficulty offering the correct definition.

(b) comes from Irish and is based on the road metaphor to suggest that "companionship makes life better" (Phelan, 2016). This saying proved to be less transparent to the students: two admitted the failure to make sense of it; the rest of the answers were more or less correct, e.g.,

it is always good to have a companion, a soulmate
being together is easier to do anything, to live.

Some students focused primarily on the companion's help in an activity rather than the mere presence of a companion:

two people together can achieve something faster than on their own
it is better to do some difficult job with a friend/partner than alone.

Interpreting (c), which relates to the English concept of privacy, five failed to make sense of the incorporated metaphor and stated this blatantly. 25 respondents, however, decoded the message:

privacy is something that we should value and makes us cherish one another
you need to respect the privacy of other people
you will get along better with people if you stay out of each other's business.

Ten students used their background knowledge, which resulted in misinterpretation of the metaphor. The example below shows that a student relies on the background knowledge about social segregation in the USA to make sense of the saying:

I guess it means that if you buy a good expensive house in a nice district, your neighbors will be successful and intelligent people, not some random folk from ghettos. I heard it is so in the USA.

Two answers show the misinterpretation of the adjective *good*: in the saying, *good* means *secure, ensuring privacy,* while the students interpret the *good* as a synonym of *moral, benevolent:*

It is important to be a good person yourself and this will help you to attract good people into your life.
When you do something good for your neighboring person it also benefits yourself.

Making Sense of a Dialogical Text

As our experience of teaching the Communication Studies course shows, one of the most challenging tasks for students is to realize that their interpretation of interactions in L2 may be fallacious because they arrive at precipitous conclusions grounded on their L1 cultural stereotypes. Yet, these intuitive and hasty inferences provide researchers with ample material that contains the examples of stereotypical thinking and cultural schemata.

The questionnaire offered the students an excerpt from a dialogue where a participant's gender identity is not self-evident. The students' interpretation, therefore, sheds light onto their gender stereotypes and onto their awareness of the impact stereotypes have on perception and interpretation.

The dialogue occurs between a mother and her daughter, who has a baby, Kate. The daughter left for a night out and asked her mother to take care of Kate. The daughter returns home later than expected and has an argument with her irritated mother:

"I drove home at high speed, the roads clear of rush-hour traffic because it was so late.
Mum was tightlipped and suspicious when I arrived.
'What kind of time do you call this?' she demanded.
'Sorry,' I gasped. 'I lost track of time.'
'I've fed Kate,' she told me.
'Thanks, Mum.'
'Five times.'
'Thanks, Mum.'
'And I've changed her.'
'Thanks, Mum.'
'Three times.'
'Thanks, Mum.'

'I hope you're grateful.'
'Oh, I am, Mum.'
'She's not my child, you know.'
'I know, Mum.'
'My childrearing days are over.'
'I know, Mum.'

Then she was really suspicious. Why was I being so nice? Hurriedly, I raised my voice at her. 'She's your flesh and blood too, you know,' I told her" (Keyes, 2005, pp.223-224).

The students' task was to comment on the relationship between the participants and the subject of their conversation.

While the baby-sitting context was identified correctly by all the forty students, only ten showed awareness that the narrator's gender identity is ambiguous:
*A dialogue takes place between a mother and **her daughter or son**, who have left their mother to look after their child. The mother is very indignant that **he/she** was not at home all day and she had to sit with the child all day.*
*The participants are a mother and **her son or daughter**. Mother is dissatisfied with the behavior of her **son/daughter**. She doesn't like the fact that she has to look after her granddaughter.*

Another ten participants decided that the dialogue occurs between a mother and a son:
*The participants are mom and **her son**. This dialogue [is] about **a son** who arrived home late while his mother was watching her granddaughter.*
*The dialogue is about **a young, probably divorced man**, and his mom, who is taking care of his child while he's at work till the late night.*

Twenty students, however, wrote that
*[i]t's a dialogue between **two women: a mother and a daughter**. The last one has a newborn baby and is back home at late hours. Grandmother (mum in dialogue) is furious about having to look after the baby while her daughter is hanging out somewhere.*

Though this interpretation coincides with the actual situation in the story, the dialogue does not provide any clue for this interpretation.

Making Sense of Linguistic Landscape Signs
The students were asked to comment on the meanings of the two signboards and the means employed to deliver them:
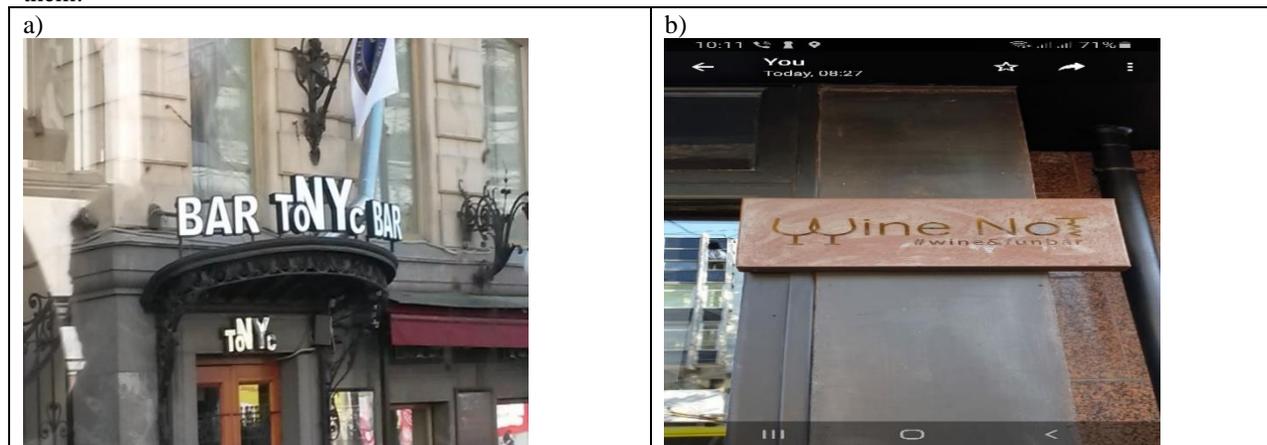
a)

b)

Figure 1. Signboards of eateries offered in the questionnaire

All students recognized the NY (New York) reference in (a), which catches the eye at once:
Frankly speaking, I don't see any concrete coding in this photo besides the NYC name.

Few (three out of forty) were able to discern the word 'tonic':
This bar can offer drinks with tonic that is a key ingredient for all sorts of drinks.
Tonic is a specific kind of water typically used for some alcohol cocktails.

None, however, related tonic as a usual ingredient for cocktails to New York City, known for its cocktail culture (A (Brief) History of the Cocktail, n.d.).

Sign (b) proved to be more transparent for interpretation, the most exhaustive comment being
The "w" looks like two wine glasses, the "t" looks like a corkscrew. Because of the "t" being blended and phonetic similarity, the collocation resembles a phrase "Why not?" as if inviting the customer for a glass of wine, since he/she themselves may think that there is no substantial reason to refuse.

Detailed results are given in the table1:
Table 1. *Meaningful elements of linguistic landscape signs and their recognizability*

Number of students*	Component explicated	Example
30	"Wine NoT" alludes to *Why not?*	*I guess, this signboard means "why not drink wine?"*
19	"W" is styled so as to stand for two wine glasses	*Two wine glasses are used to intertwine with each other and represent the letter "W". This is a great idea as you don't need to read the whole signboard to understand that you can have a drink there.*
6	"T" is styled so as to look like a corkscrew	*The first letter W is written in the shape of two wineglasses and the last letter (T) of the second word is written in the shape of a corkscrew.*
1	The signboard reads "Wine No1"	*The pun in the slogan is used. "Wine no 1" can also be read as "why not?". It encourages people to come in and drink wine.*

* The total is 56 (more than the number of respondents) because the students tended to mention more than one element of the signboard in their answers.

Thus, the students focused their attention on the verbal component of the sign that draws on the phonetic similarity with the *why not?* phrase; visuals attracted less attention, especially if they occur in the final position, which is the 'T' in the righthand part of the sign (probably because both the English and the Ukrainians read from left to right).

Making Sense of Mass Media Texts
The next question of the questionnaire contained two mass media images related to Black Lives Matter protests that caught the public eye in 2020. The students were asked to comment on the characters, their actions, the message of the images as well as to indicate the elements that they used as cues for interpretation.

Figure 2. Mass media images offered in the questionnaire

Most students (except four) successfully decoded the context and the sense of the newspaper photos (a) and (b). To interpret (a), the students paid attention mainly to the verbal component (the inscription on the monument and the graffiti) and then the protesting gestures of the people in the photo. Yet, the accuracy and depth of explanations varied. Here are the examples of the correct, but superficial answers (these make up the majority of the interpretations (36 out of 40):

In the picture we see peaceful protesters who stand against racism. We can understand it by their pose and the writing on the monument.
The way people are standing indicates that they support Black Lives Matter Movement. However, I don't know why they are standing in front of Churchill.

Four students showed profound background knowledge that helped them to go deeper in their explanations, e.g.,
BLM protesters deface the statue of Winston Churchill in London, trying to draw the government's attention both to the racial problem at hand (police killing of George Floyd in the USA) and hypocrisy supported by the monument (Winston Churchill was indeed a racist and stood behind several war crimes, but this part of his biography is mostly ignored). The location is easy to guess by the buildings in the background. This act is probably a part of a big anti-racism demonstration.

(b) was more manageable due to the Black-Lives-Matter slogans on the participants' T-shirts, e.g.,
I don't know the person on the second picture, perhaps it is in the USA, something connected to Afroamericans and racism. There are signs on the t-shirts of the people.

In fact, a challenge for sense-making in (b) was the historical figure of General Robert E. Lee, whose monument was defaced by the BLM activists. Only two students were familiar with the commander of the Confederate States Army and used the background information in their comments:
...the location is the USA. I am not sure who is portrayed there, but it is probably Robert E. Lee, who was a confederate and a slave owner. The protesters are trying to express their hurt over the fact that the government ignores their issues, and instead commemorates racist historical figures.

If I'm not mistaken it is The Robert Lee Monument in Virginia that has become a center of the demonstration. According to the slogans of the T-shirt of one man No justice No peace Black lives matter, we can understand that this picture also refers to George Floyd protests.

Making Sense of Internet Memes
The Internet memes chosen for the questionnaire related to the coronavirus, the phenomenon that shook up the world in 2020. (c) stands for the virus itself and is known as *Corona-chan/Wuhan-chan* (only one student used *Corona-chan* in the answer), while (d) uses the *Corona-chan* character wearing the Trump-style wig to encode criticism of Donald Trump's reluctance to adopt restricting policies to stop the spread of the virus.

Figure 3. Internet memes offered in the questionnaire

The students easily identified (c) as a representation of the virus. They primarily used the verbal components of the image as prompts and only some of the respondents (23 out of 40) also mentioned visuals:

*To be honest I don't really understand the intent behind this picture, what I can guess is this cartoon is impersonating the corona virus, and how vicious it is, judging from **the bubble text**…*
*I can assume it is a personification of a coronavirus (**the beer is a hint**). "**I will suffocate your lungs**" – the virus causes pneumonia and often patients cannot breathe on their own, they are connected to a ventilator.*
*The picture sends us the message to what extent Corona virus is dangerous and what it can do to our lungs. Here pun is used: the shortened name of Coronavirus is **Corona**, which is **the name of beer**. What is more, the girl's hair is bunched up in **two buns, which look like the coronavirus's moleculas**.*

(d) turned out to be less transparent for interpretation. Four students failed to write anything at all to comment on the meme. 32 students, who recognized Trump's hairstyle but did not follow Trump's actions at the beginning of the pandemic, managed to make sense of the meme only partially: some wrote that the meme is related to the USA or Trump, yet could not be more specific:

*[d] showcases the development of **COVID-19 situation in the US**. People widely protested against quarantine regime and broke the rules of social distancing. Moreover, (...) this anti-quarantine movement was not appropriately controlled by the government, contributing to the rising amount of infected people.*
*I think this picture can relate to the presidential election **in the USA**.*
*The message that the picture communicates is not quite clear to me. This is due to the fact that I'm not really into politics. Perhaps, this is somehow connected with **Trump's positive test for the virus**.*

Only four students had the background knowledge of President Trump's initial views on the pandemic and his wariness of any restricting policies aimed at curbing the virus:
*A caricature of **Trump's statement about the non-existence of the virus**.*
*Anime-coronavirus wearing Trump's wig insists on people leaving their homes. It refers to **the actions of Donald Trump during the pandemic of Covid-19**.*

Making Sense of Social Media (YouTube) Texts
The last text in the questionnaire tested the students' cultural knowledge that comprises both information on the 20th-century English-language pop culture and its actualization during the coronavirus outbreak.

The students were asked to follow the link to the YouTube project by Gal Gadot (bgcyclops, 2020), who invited other celebrities to sing *Imagine*, the famous song written by John Lennon in 1971. The respondents were asked the following questions:

a) What do you know about the song?
b) What message did Gal Gadot and her friends intend to deliver?
c) The audience vehemently condemned the video for a number of reasons. What, in your opinion, were the reasons?
It should be noted that the answers received to (c) can only partly be considered valid for the research because, since the students watched the video individually on YouTube, five of them wrote that they got interested and had a look through viewers' comments, which undoubtedly influenced the students' feedback.
Table 2 contains the quantitative data on the student's answers about their background knowledge.

Table 2. *Answers to the question about prior knowledge of the song*

Answer	I have never heard this song	This song was written by John Lennon	I heard this song for the first time in the viral video where it was played by a trumpeter on an Italian balcony during the lockdown
Number of students	22	11	7

Table 3 displays the students' interpretation of Gadot's intended message.

Table 3. *Answers to the question about the message of Gadot's video*

Answer	to cheer the fans up	to bring people together	to support people and reach out
Number of students	21	11	8

 Table 4 offers quantitative data on the students' understanding of the audience's negativity.
Table 4. *Answers to the question about reasons for criticism of the video*

Answer	callousness and acceptance of social inequality	celebrities' hypocrisy	celebrities' wrong choice of supportive actions	poor quality of singing and video
Number of students	20	10	6	4

The examples of the students' comments on audiences' criticism are below:

(1) Callousness and acceptance of social inequality: *I believe that it is somewhat offensive to the people who were impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak the most – people who lost all their sources of income, who can barely afford their living and those who must serve the country as "front-line workers". There is no way that listed people can listen to the wealthy billionaires (...) sing the lines "imagine no possessions" from their mansions. Considering all this, the message "we are all in this together" expressed by Gal Gadot rings incredibly false and hypocritical, because – not really. Some people have it much worse.*

(2) Celebrities' hypocrisy: *The video was criticized because it was of no use and everyone started saying that it was just PR from the stars / These are celebrities having a lot of money and great houses but wishing for the opposite or pretending they understand ordinary people.*

(3) Celebrities' wrong choice of supportive actions: *They could easily donate to any of the charities that work to help those affected or in need, or try and promote wearing masks, or just use their platforms a bit more wisely and much more direct than just signing a song via video on YouTube.*

(4) Poor quality of singing and video: *I think they were criticized for their singing skills (because sometimes it was hard to listen to).*

Discussion
The students' responses to the questionnaire show that the depth of their interpretation of L2 items varies: the students' comments on individual English lexical items from the thematic field RELATIONSHIPS reveal the role of ELT materials that introduce learners to some cultural specifics of interpersonal relations. The comparative questions in the questionnaire enable the students to show their ability to see similarities and differences between 'equivalent' English and Ukrainian lexemes. Yet, no ELT textbook contains the entire set of lexical items from a thematic field. In the current research, the set of the 'missing' lexemes was represented by *starter marriage* and *one's significant other*. *Starter marriage* verbalizes a concept foreign to the students' L1 culture. *One's significant other* is used to comply with communicative norms that are not typical of the students' speech communities; it is part of 'inclusive language' employed to avoid references to stereotypes and preconceptions that may offend or demean people. The students' interpretation of unfamiliar vocabulary relies on their L1 cultural assumptions.

The students' interpretation of sayings demonstrates that sense-making is efficient if the students' native language offers the equivalent or draws on a similar metaphor. In the latter case, students deduce the meaning of a saying correctly. Yet, if an idiom focuses on a concept which does not exist in students' native culture (e.g., 'privacy'), students primarily draw on the knowledge of their native culture when inferring its meaning.

Making sense of interaction between family members caused less uncertainty and doubts among students, probably due to the familiar setting and assumed universality of family relations and roles. The students were lulled into complacency and tended to extrapolate their cultural stereotypes without being aware that the text offered an

information gap and that they filled it in at their discretion. Thus, since in Ukrainian culture it is primarily mothers who take care of children, in case the childminder's gender is not specified as male, the students' interpretation drew on the 'by-default' assumption.

The students' sense-making of texts from public, mass and social media discourse shows that they have accumulated sufficient background knowledge to make sense of present-day texts from these domains: the Master's students noticed components and their interrelation in multimodal texts, recognized the general message, and showed rather profound knowledge of the current events. Yet, they missed out on the elements that require more profound culture-specific background knowledge, e.g., associating New York with cocktail culture, correlating events or personalities from the past with current political and social trends in L2 culture. Cognitive lacunas prevented the students from the comprehensive understanding of texts built on intertextuality such as Gadot's *Imagine* project, which illustrates the fact that, when transferred to a new signifying system, old texts require re-articulation of the ethic (Kristeva, 1980): Lennon's message was received favorably by the public in 1971, but the same message delivered by celebrities in 2020 sparkled negative reactions. Yet, the students identified correctly the causes of the project's failure, which shows their social and emotional intelligence. Thus, the Master's students' interpretation of L2 mass and social media texts was overall accurate but incomplete: the students recognized and made sense of the message in general but failed to see deeper layers rooted in the culture of L2 community. When having difficulties interpreting a text, the students relied on their L1 cultural stereotypes and assumptions.

Conclusion

The exploratory research approaches the development of Master's students' intercultural competence through examining their sense-making of different types of L2 items, which determines the originality of the study. The analysis has revealed the following regularities in the subjects' interpretation of English vocabulary, interpersonal interactions, public, mass and social media texts. Lexemes introduced in ELT materials pose no difficulty for the students and, when encouraged, the students have no difficulty explaining their culture-specific features. Yet, the interpretation accuracy decreases considerably and L1 influence strengthens if the English language unit verbalizes a culture-specific concept absent from textbooks or draws on a metaphor foreign to the students' native culture. A similar process is registered for dialogical texts, whose interpretation follows 'by-default' sense-making: the students are not aware of their cultural bias and rely on stereotypes of Ukrainian culture when making sense of interpersonal interaction. Linguistic landscape signs and texts from mass media and social media do not pose a challenge to interpreting in general because the students follow ongoing events in the L2 community. Yet, the students do not have sufficient L2 culture-specific background knowledge and, therefore, their understanding of a text message lacks depth. Thus, teaching L2 to Master's students who major in English should be focused on enhancing their cultural awareness and intercultural competence as well as prepare them for the permanent development of the latter.

Recommendation

The results of the study suggest that EFL teachers of Master's students majoring in English should (1) make students aware of their L1 cultural schemata and help them develop a critical attitude to their precipitous judgments, (2) teach them to approach every text as a phenomenon made up of many meaningful components (images, lexemes) and many layers of meanings, and (3) make it a student's habit to discover L2 culture on their own.

About the Authors:
Iryna O. Alyeksyeyeva is an Associate Professor of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine, delivers lectures in *Communication Studies* and *Cross-Cultural Communication* and focuses on the problem of culture-language-communication correlation in her works.
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3109-0331.

Tetyana A. Chaiuk, an Associate Professor of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine, explores the problem of cross-cultural communication and culture-language-communication correlation, with the results of her studies presented in her articles.
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/ 0000-0001-5318-688X.

Iryna V. Kovalchuk, an Assistant Professor at the Department of English Philology and Cross-Cultural Communication of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine, teaches courses on *General English, Business English,* and *Communication Strategies*.
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4740-4139.

Elizaveta A. Galitska defended her Ph.D. paper in Linguistics at the National Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv in 2019. She teaches high school advanced students at Gymnasium # 86 "Consul" in Kyiv, Ukraine, paying special attention to the cross-cultural aspect of studies.
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0859-1322.

References
A (Brief) History of the Cocktail. (n.d.). Available at https://vinepair.com/spirits-101/history-of-the-cocktail/
Al Asadi, S.S. (2020). Intercultural Awareness and Writing through the Use of WebQuest: Iraqi Students at Al-Awsat Technical University as a Case Study. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on CALL (6)*. 379-393.
    DOI:https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call6.25
Almujaiwel, S. (2018). Culture and Interculture in Saudi EFL Textbooks: A Corpus-Based Analysis. *Journal of Asia TEFL, 15*(2), 414-428. Doi: 10.18823/asiatefl.2018.15.2.10.414
Awayed-Bishara, M. (2015). Analyzing the cultural content of materials used for teaching English to high school speakers of Arabic in Israel. *Discourse & Society, 26*(5), 517-542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926515581154
Bagui, H., & Adder, F. Z. (2020). Promoting Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence through English Literary Texts: Students' Attitudes and Teachers' Challenges. *Arab World English Journal*, *11* (2) 85-93.
    DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no2.7
Bgcyclops. (2020, March 19). *Gal Gadot singing Imagine with other stars* [Video]. YouTube. Available at
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQK32bwvRuI
Bin Towairesh, A. A. (2021). EFL Students' Awareness of Culture-Specific Words and Concepts: The Challenges and Opportunities for Students in a Saudi Undergraduate English Program. *Arab World English Journal, 12*(3), 3-15. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol12no3.1
Blood is thicker than water. (n. d.). In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Available at
    https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ru/%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%8C/%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9/blood-is-thicker-than-water
Bouslama, A., & Benaissi, F. B. (2018). Intercultural Competence in ELT Contexts: A Study of EFL Teachers' Perceptions. *Arab World English Journal, 9*(4), 122-135. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no4.8\
Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
Chaouche, M. (2016). Incorporating Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL Classes. *ASELS Annual Conference Proceedings* (pp. 32-42). Mohammed V University of Rabat, Morocco. Available at
    https://awej.org/images/conferences/Aselesproceccdingsmorocco2016/aselsproceedings2016.pdf
Chen, G., & Starosta, W. J. (1996). Intercultural communication competence: A synthesis. In B. Burleson (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 19* (pp. 353-383). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Furstenberg, G. (2010). A dynamic, web-based methodology for developing intercultural understanding. *Proceedings of the 3rd international conference on intercultural collaboration* (pp. 49-58). Available at https://www.academia.edu/21955457/A_dynamic_web-based_methodology_for_developing_intercultural_understanding
Gómez Rodríguez, L. F. (2015). The Cultural Content in EFL Textbooks and What Teachers Need to Do about It. *Profile Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, 17*(2), 167-187. Doi: 10.15446/profile.v17n2.44272
Goodenough, W.H. (1957). Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics. In P. L. Garvin (Ed.), *Report on the 7th Annual Round Table Meeting in Linguistics and Language* Study (pp. 109-173). Washington DC: Georgetown University.
Hymes, D.H. (1972). On Communicative Competence In J.B. Pride & J. Holmes (eds), *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings* (pp. 269-293). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Ketchum, E. M. (2006). The cultural baggage of second language reading: An approach to understanding. *Foreign Language Annals, 39*(1), 22-42. DOI: 10.1111/j.1944-9720.2006.tb02247.x
Keyes, M. (2005). *Watermelon*. London: Arrow.

Korolova, T. M., & Popova, O. V. (2021). Intercultural Activities in Teaching Foreign Languages: Modern Ukrainian Dimension. *Arab World English Journal, 12*(3) 432-449. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol12no3.30

Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Language and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kweldju, S. (2021). Incorporating linguistic landscape into English word-formation task in an English morphology course**.** *Teflin Journal, 32*(1), 29-49. http://dx.doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v32i1/29-49.

Marsen, S. (2006). *Communication Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moeller, A.K., & Nugent, K. (2014). Building intercultural competence in the language classroom. In S. Dhonau (Ed.) *Unlock the Gateway to Communication, pp.1-18*, Eau Clarie, WI: Crown Prints. Available at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/161

Phelan, K. (2016). *An Introduction to the Irish Language in 6 Idioms*. Available at https://theculturetrip.com/europe/ireland/articles/an-introduction-to-the-irish-language-in-6-idioms/

Razavi, M., & Gilakjani, A. P. (2020). The effect of teaching cultural content on intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. *TEFLIN Journal, 31*(2), 302-321. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v31i2/302-321

Sapir, E. (1921). *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Starter Marriage. (n. d.). In *Urban Dictionary*. Available at https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=starter%20marriage

Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. New York: The Guilford Press.