**Presenting Culture-related Materials in the English Classroom: A Cultural Reader on Aboriginal Perspectives in Canada**

Judit Nagy and Mátyás Bánhegyi[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Abstract**: This study describes and introduces the publication entitled *A Cultural Reader on Aboriginal Perspectives in Canada* developed for the facilitation of teaching about Canadian Aboriginal cultures at upper-secondary and university levels. It outlines and explains the theoretical background used for the design of the *Reader*, details the project itself and the project activities leading up to the production of the book, lists the topics and themes addressed in the *Reader*, describes the applied methodological and pedagogical approaches, introduces the accompanying *Teacher’s Notes*, focuses on the use of both the *Reader* and the *Teacher’s Notes* and discusses their dissemination.

**Keywords**: teaching resourse, EFL, cross-disciplinary, Aboriginal

**1 Introduction**

The *A Cultural Reader on Aboriginal Perspectives in Canada* *Project* was conceived as a pioneer project intended to demonstrate that even culturally distant and somewhat neglected aspects of North American culture can be presented in upper primary, secondary and tertiary bachelor-level classrooms. Furthermore, the *Project* is seen as a means of facilitating cultural discourse and cross-cultural learning, also advocated in Canadian contexts by Berrell and Gloet. The approach used in the project was based on Kramsch’s (217) notion that “culture and language are inseparable and constitute one single universe”. Using Kramsch’s theory, the *Reader* was devised so that lesser-known Aboriginal cultural aspects can be brought closer to English-speaking audiences through English as a foreign language. This latter starting point is underscored by Damen, who believes that language is both the means of communication and the mediator of cultural codes and rules. So that this objective can be realised in an effective way in the English classroom, Gochenour and Janeway’s model of culture learning was observed, which advocates the gradual involvement of students in culture-related issues: starting from observation of culture moving towards genuine communication about culture.

Following in the footsteps of the *Canadian-German-Hungarian Cultural Reader*, which came out in 2011 and was edited by the same experts: Judit Nagy (PhD) (Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary), Mátyás Bánhegyi (PhD) (Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary), Dóra Bernhardt (MA, ThM) (Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary) and Albert Rau (MA) (Erzb. St. Ursula-Gymnasium, Brühl, and University of Cologne, Germany, *A Cultural Reader on Aboriginal Perspectives in Canada* targets upper primary and secondary school classes and teachers (grades 7 to 12) as well as university audiences and their instructors. The units in the *Reader* have mainly been prepared by students of North American Studies attending Károli Gáspár University. The *Reader* is made complete with a *Teacher’s Notes* containing hints and tips, keys, sources, background information and websites to consult.

The present study first discusses the project, its theoretical background, and the project activities leading up to the preparation and compilation of *A Cultural Reader on Aboriginal Perspectives in Canada*. Then the paper introduces the *Reader* and the accompanying *Teacher’s Notes* in more detail. Next, it is revealed how and for what purposes the *Reader* can be ideally used, which is followed by a detailed description of the units belonging to the unifying themes of “Challenges of Lifestyle and Native Identity”. Finally, an insight is provided into the dissemination of the project results: the *Reader* and the *Teacher’s Notes*.

**2 Theoretical Background behind the Project**

Apart from the fact that it is taken for granted that modern language teaching, in Byram and Morgan’s, Hinkel’s and Sárosdy et al.’s notion, it is culture-based in its approach, it is indispensable for people in multicultural environments or in environments with massive cultural impacts to master skills of learning about cultural diversity and managing such diversity in their life. With this in mind, the *Reader* facilitates the formation of what Gay terms cultural responsiveness: being able to understand, sympathise and manage other cultures. This is even more so as teaching and learning culture aim at developing a mindset in learners that empowers them to understand their own and others’ cultures, and to be open to other cultures in general. For this, the communicative approach of language teaching provides ample space and learning opportunities, Lange claims. In fact, numerous English as a foreign language (EFL) publications include cultures in their syllabi, nonetheless before the publication of the *Reader* there was no such North American Aboriginal related publication catering for audiences with varied levels of English proficiency that would feature very up-to-date topics reflecting on current readers’ interest (e.g. focus on the Inuit, environment, etc.) directed at upper primary, secondary and university (bachelor) level audiences. The *Reader* intends to fill this gap by offering complex and specialised topics in an easy-to-process manner of presentation still preserving the complexity of the topics discussed.

Based on Brown’s approach that culture is in fact a way of life presentable to students, for the compilation of the *Reader*, the following project activities were carried out: a) identification of the actual priority topics for the intended audience; b) generating student involvement and participation; c) compilation and selection of raw materials for the *Reader* provided mainly by the students; and d) editing the materials and preparing the *Teacher’s Notes*.

Generating student involvement and participation was a crucial step in the project since it was assumed that North American Studies students would possess more thorough background knowledge necessary for successful project work and that they would be more dedicated to the themes of the *Reader*.

The compilation and selection of student-provided raw materials for the *Reader* was the most painstaking job as the materials finally included in the *Reader* had to be not only culturally accessible for non-specialist audiences but also informative and motivating for all future users. The *Reader* was finalised through the editing phase, during which both the language and the cultural content were refined, and concurrently the *Teacher’s Notes* was prepared. For the *Teacher’s Notes*, thetask description categories in Maley’s(13) *Resource Books for Teachers* series served as a model.

Apart from the above-described cultural and methodological foundations, the other theoretic pillar used for compiling the Reader is closely connected to North American Aboriginal theories. The *Reader* intends to provide an insight into Aboriginals’ worldview as perceived by Cross, who assumes that thoughts and ideas are organized into concepts, concepts are structured into constructs and paradigms, while paradigms through their linkages create worldviews. The *Reader* wishes to provide an introduction into Aboriginals’ cultural heritage by purposefully dissecting their worldview in line with methodologically-founded assumptions.

With respect to North American settings, Gross stresses not only the importance of the development of Aboriginal identity through visioning but also the significance of storytelling for gathering knowledge and realising value-based learning. It is our belief that publishing the *Reader* is a form of visioning, where North American Aboriginals gain more recognition and appreciation in non-American or non-Canadian communities thereby advocating Aboriginal cultural stories and thus providing knowledge and value-based learning for all. The *Reader*, in the editors’ assumption, is perceived as a means of promoting the above.

Accepting and honouring the importance of Simard’s (54) cultural attachment theory, which claims that “the greater the application of cultural attachment strategies the greater the response to cultural restoration processes within a First Nation community”, the Project has also set as an aim the cultural restoration of North American Aboriginals through its own humble means. By making North American Aboriginals’ knowledge and heritage accessible to wider English-speaking audiences, the Project increases the appreciation of Aboriginals’ cultural heritage among non-Aboriginals, which − through the feedback provided by non-Aboriginals − is envisaged to generate even stronger cultural attachment among Aboriginals.

**3 About the Reader in General: Themes and Units**

The International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS) Understanding Canada Program priority topics selected for the project and focalised in the book are: 1) *native diversity,* 2) *challenges of lifestyle,* 3) *native identity,* 4) *native knowledge systems,* 5) *native artistic expression,* and6) *native social issues*. These topics have been chosen as they are peculiar enough to demonstrate the uniqueness and richness of North American Aboriginal culture through EFL, which is also perceived as a means of developing cultural responsiveness. On the other hand, the topics have been selected as they seem to be feasible starting points in classroom environments for understanding the life of North American Aboriginal communities. The *Reader* features 36 units organised around the above unifying themes. Figure 1 shows these themes as they appear in the units.

***Native Diversity***

1. Culture Areas

2. Algonquian Quiz

3. People of the Arctic: the Inuit

4. Safe Travel to Nunavut

5. Iqaluit

***Challenges of Lifestyle***

6. Aboriginal Foods

7. Aboriginal Homes

8. Indigenous Healing Practices

9. Aboriginal People and their Diverse Talents

***Native Identity***

10. Aboriginal Historical Figures

11. Aboriginal Heroes

12. Chapters from Canadian Aboriginal History

13. Fur Trade

14. Aboriginal Inventions

15. Aboriginal Identity

***Native Knowledge Systems***

16. Inuit Beliefs

17. Aboriginal Religious Culture

18. Totem Animals and their Symbolism

19. Totem Poles

20. Totem Poles: Colours and Significance

21. Why and How to Make a Totem Pole?

22. Inuit Hunting Magic

23. Christianity Meets Native Religions

24. Inuit Mythical Figures

***Native Artistic Expression***

25. Legends

26. The Raven and the First Men

27. Shanadithit – A Poem

28. The Red Couch

29. Inuit Stone Carvings

30. Inuit Art

***Native Social Issues***

31. From Grise Fiord to Inuvialuit Regional Corporation

32. Aboriginal Reserves

33. Success Stories

34. Native Land Claims

35. Natives and Natural Resources

36. Indigenous People and the Environment: the Inuit

Figure 1: Table of contents: themes and topics

**4 Methodological and Pedagogical Approaches in the *Reader***

The *Reader* and the *Teacher’s Notes* have been written using the latest methodological and pedagogical methods. The presented units are communicative, content-based and intercultural in their approach and are predominantly characterised by the presence of tasks facilitating individual, cooperative and peer learning. The 36 units in the *Reader* are communicative and they create situations where the exchange of relevant information comes as a natural process within the framework of content-oriented units. The *Reader* is considered intercultural since it strongly builds on culturally familiarising students with the culture of North American Aboriginals and offers ample opportunities for cultural comparison between the culture of the Aboriginals and that of the students. Concerning tasks, the *Reader* features individual, cooperative and peer learning activities through the incorporation of individual, pair and group work tasks and open-ended activities.

The task types of the activities included in the *Reader* have also been devised with the above methodological and pedagogical objectives in mind and thus include: gap-filling, true or false statements, matching and pairing activities, multiple choice, ranking, skimming, scanning, searching for specific information in written texts, oral discussions, finding similarities and differences and tasks requesting students’ own creative intellectual contribution. Some tasks also require students to search for information using diverse online media.

**5 The Teacher’s Notes**

To facilitate the use of the *Reader*, an accompanying *Teacher’s Notes* is also available. It is the teacher’s companion to the *Reader,* and is also broken down into 36 sections corresponding to the 36 *Reader* units. Each section contains a detailed description of the activities in the given unit, a key to the activities as well as further teaching ideas. The detailed description of the activities provides task-related information under the following headings.

Level: it is the level of language proficiency that is required for students to successfully complete the tasks. The level is given in the conventional system of level of proficiency (ranging from beginner to proficiency level) as well as in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (ranging from A1 to C2).

Time: it is the intended and approximate duration of the activity and is given in minutes.

Skills: it provides information on what language skills are practised during the activities in the given unit.

Activity: it provides a concise description of the activities in a unit.

Preparation: it informs the teacher about any preparation (photocopying, etc. and looking up information) necessary prior to using the activities in class.

Procedure: it describes the different stages of each activity and their interrelatedness within the unit containing them.

Extension/variation: it explains and describes easy-to-realise alternatives and/or possible further activities connected to the original activity.

To lessen the teacher’s workload, a key contains the (suggested) solutions to go with the activities of each unit. Additionally, further teaching ideas are provided under the following headings:

Sources: it provides details about the texts and illustrations used in the *Reader*.

Further information: it provides further information and readings related to the topics of the units and/or the ideas under the “extension/variation” heading. This section directs teachers primarily to web-based links or occasionally provides further texts for reading printed in the *Teacher’s Notes*.

**6 Using the Reader**

The *Reader* can be used for language, North American Aboriginal culture and general culture teaching purposes, depending on its in-class presentation. In fact, the publication has several diverse uses, of which the non-exclusive description below presents only some.

The *Reader* makes an ideal supplement to general-purpose English courses at various levels of language proficiency. Since most of the activities are open-ended, they can be solved at the learners’ own language level, which makes the *Reader* an ideal supplement at actually all levels.

In case course contents include teaching and learning specifically about North American Aboriginal culture or about cultures in general including different minorities and ethnicities, the *Reader* will also provide a rich resource. The North American Aboriginal culture presented in the book are also interesting in themselves for general culture-related classes and those courses (also) dealing with various aspects of Canada. Nevertheless, the topics and perspectives put forward in the *Reader* will facilitate thinking about Aboriginal issues in general with respect to one’s own and other countries thus widening students’ view of the world and increasing their skills of managing the cultural diversity surrounding them.

Besides, the Reader also makes a helpful resource book for Canada-related school contests, where the focus is on Aboriginal Canada. The book facilitates students’ and teacher’s preparation for such events and serves as a starting point for gathering some basic information and offers numerous activities and contest tasks.

For illustration of specific North American Aboriginal contents, find below a brief description of Units 8 and 11 and some insight into the corresponding teacher’s notes. (For more detailed information, see the *Reader* and the *Teacher’s Notes* at the website referenced in Section 8.)

Designed for intermediate and upper-intermediate learners of English, Unit 8 (*Aboriginal Healing Practices*) opens with a general reading in the form of a guided gapped text on Native American healing practices, which can serve as a starting point to revise students’ already existing knowledge on the subject or to elicit their expectations. (In addition, the *Teacher’s Notes* offers a related exercise on the main differences between North American Native and Western medical practice.) The introductory task is followed by an information gap activity on the career of two North American healers, David Gehue, and Robin Tekwelus Youngblood. To ensure a balance of language skills, both texts present a use-of-English task. Furthermore, in the *Teacher’s Notes*, corresponding questions facilitate both the comprehension and the sharing of the text. The last activity of the unit features Aboriginal healing-related objects to be matched with brief descriptions of their cultural context and images depicting them. Students can extend the collection presented on the task sheet by conducting their own research on the Internet, which can be summarized in an in-class presentation.

Unit 11 (*Aboriginal Heroes*) presents famous North American Aboriginal heroes. After completing the lead-in task on Aboriginal historical figures’ “speaking names,” students are to decide whether the statements also displayed above (Activity 2) are true or false. The aim of this activity is to get students to investigate the historical fact content of short texts, and correct the false information, thereby also facilitating critical thinking. The unit closes with a reading comprehension task with open-ended questions on Dekanahwideh, the Peacemaker. This task simultaneously offers an opportunity for learners to practice past tense verb forms and demonstrating their history-related vocabulary.

**7 Cultural Reader and General English Coursebook in One**

As the above two units also demonstrate, resulting from a conscious and systematic planning, every activity in the *Reader* serves multiple purposes. The designed materials combine actual knowledge contents on North American Aboriginals and some general language use-related focus (lexis, grammar, etc.) of a regular English course-book. In addition, the tasks included ensure multiple-skill language practice. Moreover, many of the presented activities build on the modern language learner’s active use of the Internet.

As for the North American Aboriginal content included, the publication supplements the traditional aspects of North American Aboriginal Studies with modern and topical issues such as *Aboriginal People and their Diverse Talents* (Unit 9), *Aboriginal Inventions* (Unit 14), *Aboriginal Identity* (Unit 15), *Success Stories* (Unit 33), *Natives and Natural Resources* (Unit 35), *Indigenous People and the Environment* (Unit 36). Therefore, the book can be used both as a cultural resource and a general English coursebook.

**8 Dissemination and Accessibility**

The dissemination of the project results was carried out through online access to the *Reader* and the *Teacher’s Notes*, teacher training sessions, conference presentations and the incorporation of the project materials into training programmes. Both the *Reader* and the *Teacher’s Notes* are downloadable from the website of the International Relations page of Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary: http://www.kre.hu/btk/index.php/nemzetkoezi-kapcsolatok and the Virtual Sources Site of the Association for Canadian Studies in the German Speaking Countries: [www.education-canada.de](http://www.education-canada.de).

To facilitate better use of the *Reader*, international teacher training sessions were organised in Hungary. On March 9th, 2012, a teacher training session entitled “Introducing *A Cultural Reader on Aboriginal Perspectives in Canada*” was held as an event of the conference entitled *Indigenous Perspectives in North America* organised by Károli University. The teacher training session was supported by Károli University and the Budapest-based National Library of Foreign Literatures.

Several conference presentations in Germany and Hungary focused on introducing the *Reader* to diverse audiences. One such conference presentation was delivered at the German Canadianists’ annual Association for Canadian Studies in the German-speaking Countries (GKS) conference in Grainau on February 26th, 2012. The *Reader* was also introduced at the annual meeting of Hungarian Canadianists organised by the Canadian Embassy in Budapest on January 30th, 2012.

Last but not least, the *Reader* is also envisaged to be incorporated in a number of training programmes. It has become a mentor teacher training program component and a focus of further special teacher training events for a wider audience at the Faculty of Humanities of Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary including the ‘Inuit Thematic Day’ held on 22 November, 2013.

**9 Conclusion**

The study introduced the project and the project activities leading up to the preparation and compilation of *A Cultural Reader on Aboriginal Perspectives in Canada*. This was followed by a description of the *Reader* and the accompanying *Teacher’s Notes*. Then the different uses of the *Reader* were discussed to be followed by the presentation of the activities of the “Challenges of Lifestyle and Native Identity” unifying themes, which served as a practical representation of the underlying methodological principles. Finally, the dissemination of the *Reader* and the accompanying *Teacher’s Notes* were examined.

Hopefully, it has been shown that the *Reader* is a valuable teaching resource pack for any teacher and student interested in learning about North American Aboriginal cultures through English as a foreign language.

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