

# Cultural Studies in Language Teaching

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## *Abstract*

*The process of effective teaching a foreign language includes also cultural studies. In learning another language students are exposed to, and inevitably learn something, about other societies and their cultural practices. Language is a part of nation's culture., so we cannot acquire a foreign language without learning its culture. But what is culture and what culture to teach?*

## **1. Why teach cultural studies?**

Many English teachers ask a question: Is it really important to teach British, American or English speaking countries studies? Does it really help students understand the language better? Here is the answer of Alan C. McLean concerning the problem of teaching British studies: "Why teach British culture to students of English? Isn't English supposed to be an international language, unattached to any single country or way of life? Yes, but learning about how a foreign culture works brings your own culture into perspective. 'What should they know of England who only England know?' as Kipling has it. We teach our students about British life and culture in order to have them examine their own." (A.C. McLean 1993/94: 23)

Before developing the topic referring to the function of culture in a foreign language teaching, the term culture should perhaps be more clearly specified. Generally, it could be defined as various customs, values, typical behaviour, attitudes and the overall approach regarding the way of life reflected in movies, songs, fashion, literature and numerous products of art, but also in everyday use of the particular language, e.g. recognised proverbs, common idiomatic expressions or phrases which are characteristic for certain members of society and which significantly differentiate these people according to their age, level and specific area of education, as well as their position in the society, etc. Anthropologists define culture as the whole way of life of a people or group. So in this content culture includes all the social practices that bound people together but also distinguish them from others.

The issue of culture being a part of the classroom setting in two complementary viewpoints is discussed by Tavares and Cavalcanti who point out that "culture is not only present in the classroom setting but also in the language that is being taught" (Tavares, Cavalcanti 1966 : 18). Culture and language are thus interrelated and language is used as the main medium through which culture is expressed. We can therefore agree that bringing cultural studies of English speaking countries closer to students will help them to better understand the language, its background and usage. And vice versa. Better understanding of the language will help the students to accept a foreign culture and also their own culture. Apart from this, by teaching and learning any cultural studies at a foreign language lesson we do not include the whole term of cultural learning. With regard to culture in the English language teaching and learning some authors distinguish between British studies, which focuses mainly on information about Britain, and cultural awareness, which focuses on the difference between cultures. As Tomalin suggests, we need to create in our students awareness and tolerance of other people's culture, greater awareness of their own culture and also to support the student's own ability to explain his or her own cultural viewpoint. In other words, cultural awareness is understood as a more general term which is superior to the term cultural studies. Therefore, by teaching British, American or Slovak cultural studies we try to educate a person as a cultural being. Valdes (1994: 2) says that most people are not aware of

themselves as cultural beings, products of their own environments. In practice, culture is a phenomenon which is always original and typical for a particular nation. As it has already been stated above, most people do not think consciously about their culture, they simply live and behave as other people in their society do. The issue becomes topical when they are confronted with people from another culture and it can cause various misunderstandings and sometimes problems. The original inhabitants may have negative feelings and prejudices towards the 'strangers'. For example, the co-existence of the native Slovaks with the Roma minority or immigrants in Slovakia. These groups do not understand each other and feel the opposite group does not behave 'correctly'. I strongly believe that once they realize they are products of their culture, they are more willing to accept that the others are not 'wrong' only different.

## 2. What topics to teach?

Different authors have different suggestions concerning the question what kind of information should be taught at the lessons of a foreign language, but generally, all of them suggest examining more or less the same topics, depending on the language level of the students, which are proposed by Byram and Morgan (1994: 51). According to them, the content of cultural learning should cover the following areas of study:

- *social identity and social groups*: groups within the nation-state which are the basis for other than national identity, including social class, regional identity, ethnic minority, professional identity, and which illustrate the complexity of individuals' social identities and of national society (the issue of national identity is dealt with under 'stereotypes');
- *social interaction*: conventions of verbal and non-verbal behaviour in social interaction at different levels of familiarity, as outsider and insider within social groups;
- *belief and behaviour*: routine and taken for granted actions within a social group – national or sub-national – and the moral and religious beliefs which are embodied within them; secondly, routines of behaviour taken from daily life which are not seen as significant markers of the identity of the group;
- *socio-political institutions*: institutions of the state – and the values and meanings they embody – which characterize the state and its citizens and which constitute a framework for ordinary, routine life within the national and sub-national groups; provision for health care, for law and order, for social security, for local government, etc.;
- *socialization and the life-cycle*: institutions of socialization – families, schools, employment, religion, military service – and the ceremonies which mark passage through stages of social life; representation of divergent practices in different social groups as well as national auto-stereotypes of expectations and shared interpretations;
- *national history*: periods and events, historical and contemporary, which are significant in the constitution of the nation and its identity – both actually significant and, not necessarily identical, perceived as such by its members;
- *national geography*: geographical factors within the national boundaries which are significant in members' perception of their country; other factors which are information (known but not significant to members) essential to outsiders in intercultural communication;
- *national culture heritage*: cultural artifacts perceived to be emblems and embodiments of national culture from past and present, in particular those which are 'known' to

members of the nation – e.g. Shakespeare in Britain, the Impressionists in France – through their inclusion in curricula of formal education; and also contemporary classics, not all of which have reached the school curriculum and some of which may be transient but significant, created by television and other media – e.g. Agatha Christie in Britain;

- *stereotypes and national identity*: for example, German and English notions of what is ‘typically’ German and English national identity; the origins of the notions – historical and contemporary – and comparisons among them, symbols of national identities and stereotypes and their meanings, e.g. famous monuments and people.

### **3. Slovak cultural studies in foreign language teaching**

In my opinion, this body of information about English speaking countries, or other countries when teaching another foreign language, is more or less included in the English lessons at our schools. And I believe that similar information about Slovakia should also be included and discussed, to some extent at least, during these lessons as well. What is more, the same authors, Byram and Morgan (1994: 52) mention two complementary principles which can be applied also to Slovak cultural studies. They claim that learners are outsiders to a group and need the knowledge and behaviour which will allow them to interact successfully with insiders. They also argue that it is the perceptions and knowledge of insiders about their own culture which frame the selection and the perspective from which the content is presented. Speaking about the situation in this country, on the one hand, the information we want our students to be able to present can help foreigners to interact with Slovaks. On the other hand, both Slovak teachers and students as ‘insiders’ have an opportunity to think of their culture and to select the perspective from which the information can be presented.

As Slovakia is a part of the multicultural world, one of the ways how to build cultural awareness of our student is, as I have already mentioned, including Slovak cultural studies in the English language teaching. It can be done separately, teaching it as an independent topic or by the means of comparison with other English speaking countries, which is a more usual way. Byram, Morgan, Valdes and other well-known experts stress comparison as a central method in language and culture teaching as their research has shown that both learners and teachers do compare and contrast, especially when talking about a foreign culture. In discussions with our secondary school teachers of English we learned that many of them in certain situations, for instance when talking about Christmas in Great Britain, try to encourage their students to compare it with the Slovak one. Unfortunately, most textbooks used in Slovakia do not include any information about this country as there is no national textbook of English available yet. Due to the lack of the material regarding Slovakia in the textbooks, the teachers have to work very hard and prepare the topics on their own as at most schools Slovakia is one of the topics for the school-leaving exam. Although at our schools are taught many humanity subjects where students can get information about their home country, when they are to speak about history, geography, culture and so on, they have certain problems mainly with vocabulary and grammar structures and they are not able to use the knowledge they have acquired in the Slovak language. In my opinion, this is partly due to the fact that our English teachers do not use the inter-disciplinary approach very much. That is another reason, besides already above mentioned, why I would suggest including the Slovak cultural studies in the English language teaching in our schools.

Although our faculty, Faculty of Humanities and Natural Sciences, Prešov University, is basically a teacher training faculty, considering the new situation of our country after entering the European Union in 2004, we have prepared a new study programme at our department of English language and literature. It is called English language and culture and is

aimed at providing the students not only with the language but also cultural studies of English speaking countries and Slovak studies have also been included in this programme as its integral part. At the lectures I give students a short survey of Slovak history, starting with the settlement of Slovakia, then we speak about the Great Moravian Empire, Hungarian kingdom and Tartar- Turkish invasions. The next topics are Hussaites, the Habsburgs, Enlightenment, the Slovak national movement and the period of strong national oppression, World War I, The Czechoslovak Republic, the Slovak State during World War II and after World War Two period which includes life in the former socialist Czechoslovakia, November 1989 and Slovakia today. The programme of seminars covers the topics that are usually discussed in cultural studies teaching – geography of Slovakia, national economy, labour and welfare, the system of government, political system, mass-media, education, cultural life, sports and recreation, Slovakia and the European Union and important Slovaks. These topics are prepared by the students themselves and where appropriate we compare them, and historical topics as well, with the information they have acquired at the previous lessons on the English speaking countries as I agree with Tavares and Cavalcanti who express a demand that “the need to increase students’ awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own”, should be done by the means of comparison among cultures with respect that these comparisons must not be over- or underestimating any of the cultures but should be aimed at one goal – “to enrich students’ experience and to make them aware that although some culture elements are being globalized, there is still diversity among cultures” which students should learn to treat with understanding and respect (Tavares, Cavalcanti 1966: 18,19) .

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion I would like to underline the need to include cultural studies, not excluding the Slovak cultural studies, into English or another foreign language teaching in our schools, at least secondary schools. Our country is still trying to find its place within the European Union. This has resulted in intensive use of English as the main means of communication for our people within Europe. The new possibilities for studying, working and international co-operation offer an interesting challenge for Slovaks to enrich other nations and show them their own qualities. Besides basic reasons for their communication such as everyday information, business, profession and so on, during unofficial meetings earlier or later a partner’s country and its history and culture will always become the theme of their conversation. Therefore, there is no doubt we need to teach the learners of foreign languages in our country such skills and knowledge.

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