

TEACHING CULTURAL STUDIES OF ENGLISH SPEAKING COUNTRIES IN SCHOOLS IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: The article deals with the problem of teaching cultural studies of English speaking countries in schools in Slovakia. The author first explains what cultural studies are and what countries are regarded as English speaking and then she discusses what cultural awareness is. She also gives a short review of English textbooks and other material used in Slovak schools. Teachers often hesitate whether or not to include cultural studies of English speaking countries into their lessons and the author encourages them to do so. At the end of the article, a possible way of including cultural studies into English language teaching is presented.

Key words: English speaking countries, cultural studies, cultural awareness, English textbooks, lesson plan.

Introduction

Our world has become much smaller in recent years. More and more people travel abroad not only as tourists but also in search of work or study. Teaching and learning foreign languages thus has become even more important than ever before and, as it is generally known, English is the most widespread language on earth and is second only to Mandarine Chinese in the number of people who speak it.

“English is the most widely used ‘lingua franca’ in the world. When Europeans meet Japanese, when Indians meet Nigerians, when Brazilians meet Malaysians, they are likely to discuss their business in English. Inside great countries like India there are many different languages. The most common Indian language is Hindi, but the large population of Tamils in southern India find it easier to learn English than Hindi. So Indians from the north usually speak English when they meet Tamils.” (Musman, 1993: V)

1 What are cultural studies and cultural awareness?

Nevertheless, learning to speak English, or another foreign language, is not enough. If people want to travel, work or study in another country, they have to be aware of some facts connected with a certain country and its culture. And that is why cultural studies of English speaking countries should have a certain place in EFL teaching. But what does it mean “cultural studies”? Cultural studies is an ‘umbrella’ term under which we can include everything that is connected with the language, way of life, system of government, geography, holidays, customs, simply with everything that can make us acquainted with this country. Another question is – what are English speaking countries? Many people, including English teachers, think that all countries, where English is used as an official language are English speaking, which is not really true. English speaking countries are those in which the majority of the population use English as their mother tongue – concretely both the countries in the British Isles (the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland), the U.S.A., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. All the other countries which are members of the British Commonwealth of Nations (there are more than 50 of them nowadays) use English as a second official language but they are not regarded as English speaking. This of course does not mean that teachers cannot mention them in some respect in their English language teaching.

We all know very well that a foreign language could be best learnt when staying abroad in a country where the certain language is spoken as a mother tongue by the majority of the population. But it is not always possible. Learning the culture of a country whose language a pupil or a student studies is very

important and it could be helpful if he or she decided to visit a certain country to study the language or even just to do some sightseeing. It could help in such a way that he or she would be aware of certain customs, ways of acting and behaving or at least to have some knowledge of the country just to make a good impression when meeting inhabitants of that country. Not least, culture affects the language learning as well.

It is not possible to teach every part of cultural studies of every English speaking country at once or even in one year. But it is possible to choose some parts of cultural studies of English speaking countries and teach them in English lessons. If these parts are well prepared, they can be used to achieve two aims at the same time: 1/ teach pupils (students) parts of cultural studies of English speaking countries, 2/ teach pupils (students) parts of the English language (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, phrases, etc).

However, the material for teaching cultural studies should be well planned and selected because "...the material presented to an intensive English class at a college or university in the United States will differ greatly from that presented to a class of elementary school children in Greece, or to a class of engineering students in Algeria studying English for the purpose of reading American textbooks." (Valdes, 1995: ix-x)

Yet, many English teachers still hesitate whether it is really important to teach British, American or other English speaking countries studies, whether this can really help pupils or students understand the language better. Alan C. McLean gives one of the possible reasons why to teach cultural studies – to develop cultural awareness in students.

"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 to have them examine their own." (McLean in: Perspectives, 1993/94: 23)

Barry Tomalin, a famous expert on teaching cultural studies, further develops the idea on cultural awareness and underlines what cultural awareness we want to create in our students. He basically speaks of developing three main points. They are awareness and tolerance of other people's culture, greater awareness of the student's own culture, and the student's own ability to explain his or her own cultural viewpoint (Tomalin, In: Perspectives, 1995: 5).

One has to be aware of a culture, country, behaviour and way of life of a country whose language he or she studies so British, American or English speaking countries should be taught in English lessons. A student of English should be aware of British or American culture and way of life in English speaking countries. Being aware of the cultural differences would be of great help when one is staying in an English speaking country.

"What the sojourner or student must accomplish is a knowledge of the culture – to understand behaviour, not necessarily to become part of it: 'Adjusting' a person to a culture has connotations of cultural chauvinism, implying that the newcomer should abandon the culture of origin in favour of embracing the values and customs of the host society. On the other hand, learning a second culture has no ethnocentric overtones. There are many examples in life when it becomes necessary to learn a practice even if one does not approve of it, and then abandon the custom when circumstances have changed. Americans will find that they have to stand much closer to an Arab during interactions in the Middle East than they would with fellow-Americans at home. Japanese must learn to have more eye-contact with westerners during conversation than is customary in their own culture. Australians in Great Britain of necessity have to learn to drink warm beer, a habit they discard as soon as they depart. An English gentleman in Japan will learn to push and shove his way onto the Tokyo subway, but resume his normal queuing practice after returning home. The possession of a particular skill by itself carries no value judgement – the act attracts notice only when the appropriate skill is not available, or the skill is used in inappropriate circumstances." (Valdes, 1995: x)

There are many other examples of cultural differences between various nations in all spheres of life, starting with everyday life and finishing with, for example, doing business.

2 Teaching cultural studies of English speaking countries in schools in Slovakia

It is very important for foreign language teachers to have enough information about the countries whose language they teach. Today there are quite a lot of books and publications, dealing with cultural studies of Britain or the U.S.A., but not so many about the other English speaking countries. To gain some information the Internet can also be used. But it is generally known that the hardest work is left upon the teachers who have to select and prepare material for their teaching if they really want to cover various countries and various topics as the textbooks used in our schools, whether primary or secondary, usually do not offer enough.

Concerning the textbooks used in Slovakia the situation is much better now than it was a couple of years ago, although there are still some problems. There is a great variety of coursebooks imported into our country from Great Britain or the U.S.A. and used in elementary or secondary schools. These books are very good because they really show the way of life in these countries and there are also many pictures included to help pupils or students to visualize it. It is a great advantage to use these books to teach the language, but there are also some disadvantages when teaching cultural studies. These books of course do not cover the culture and life of the target country, the country where they are used and thus it is again upon the teacher to compare whatever part of the culture of an English speaking country being taught to the culture of Slovakia. Moreover, if they are published in Cambridge, Oxford, London or anywhere else in Britain, they only contain British studies. These books are full of nice pictures, interesting articles, but only from British life. On the other hand, if the textbook is printed in Washington, New York or anywhere in the U.S.A., it contains only American studies.

It is evident that teachers of EFL cannot know everything and have to study, prepare and design their lessons on teaching cultural studies of English speaking countries. But they have to be aware also of changes in cultures, in societies, ways of living. It is significant that the way of life changes very fast in most countries of the world. E.g. the way of life in America today is totally different from the way of life ten or fifteen years ago.

McLean gives a piece of advice on teaching British studies which could be applicable to teaching any other country's cultural studies as well: "I'd say to course designers: avoid stereotypes and strive to present reality; choose topics that are of concern to the British today and examine the issues that inform them; and get students to relate what they learn about British life and culture to their own culture." (McLean in Perspectives, 1993/94 : 24)

As it has already been mentioned, teaching cultural studies of English speaking countries is not and cannot be the same in elementary schools and secondary schools.

Based on diploma theses and research of many students of mine and also on my personal discussions with teachers of various schools of both types I think it can be concluded that teaching cultural studies of English speaking countries in elementary schools in Slovakia is very limited. Elementary school teachers do not teach them very much or very often. Although they teach some basic facts about London or the U.S.A., mainly when they are included in the textbooks they use, they usually do not mention other English speaking countries.

The teachers are as if afraid that teaching cultural studies of English speaking countries cannot be of a great use to elementary school pupils mainly at the first grade. They think they might not understand it nor even learn anything from it. Moreover, elementary schools do not have much material for teaching cultural studies. They have some audio tapes, usually the ones that supplement the coursebook used, and maybe some pictures; some of them also may have a couple of video tapes, but they usually do not have anything to help them teach cultural studies of English speaking countries. Thus again, the most difficult and time consuming work is put on teachers if they are so enthusiastic that they are willing to prepare something on their own. Elementary school pupils are very playful and I myself have had a very nice experience teaching them. A few years ago I worked as an English summer course lecturer and one of my groups were children aged from 8 to 10 years. Once I used a very short story titled *Going to Timbuktu*, and working on it, we learned a few adjectives, verbs, names of animals living in Africa, we mimed the action, drank coca-cola, ate bananas, danced, and so on. The children liked it

very much and although the lesson was a bit noisy it was worth it in the end. (I described the whole procedure and the story in one of my previous articles in the magazine Teach for Slovak English teachers.)

Secondary schools have a bit more material for teaching English and also cultural studies of English speaking countries. It depends on the type of a secondary school. Most *gymnasiums (grammar schools)* have already got video tapes of London and Great Britain, supplemented with teacher's manuals and exercises and some of them also own materials and teaching aids for teaching cultural studies of other English speaking countries. In the first two forms teachers at *gymnáziums* teach some basic cultural studies, more is done in optional or 'non-compulsory' English classes. Teaching cultural studies of English speaking countries covering also Australia, New Zealand and other countries is more intensive in the third and fourth forms of *gymnázium* when a more intensive preparation for the school – leaving exams starts. Today there are also enthusiasts among teachers who prepare various projects with their students and in this way students help the teachers to also make their English lessons more attractive for their classmates.

3 Teaching Australian studies

All my diploma students dealing with teaching cultural studies in their diploma theses have also included their own lesson plans in them. We always discussed some ideas in advance and they also taught them in their teaching practice to know how and if they worked. Then they commented on their success but also possible failures. In the last part of my article I would like to shortly describe at least one possible way how to include cultural studies of English speaking countries into the EFL teaching. It was successfully taught by my diploma student Júlia Šmigová a few years ago at her teaching practice. Of course, we prepared the plan in advance. It was used at teaching pre-intermediate level students aged 13 and dealt with Australia.

When we mention Australia, people often imagine kangaroos jumping across the streets in Australian cities and villages. Australia is full of unusual animals and some of them do not live anywhere else in the world. Pupils may know some Australian animals from their biology or geography lessons but certainly not all of them. What we need is a map of Australia, a picture of the Australian flag, a couple of pictures of the most famous Australian animals, flashcards with the names of the animals, an envelope, small, blank cards (one for each pupil). The time needed is one 45-minute-long lesson. The aim of the lesson is to show Australia as an absolutely unique country concerning her animals and, of course, teach the pupils the names of these special animals.

At the beginning of the lesson the teacher asks the pupils if they know any country which has the British flag as a part of its own national flag. There are many countries like that, former British colonies, now members of the British Commonwealth of Nations, but the most famous and the biggest one is Australia. Then the teacher shows the picture of the Australian flag to the pupils and thus introduces the topic of the lesson and can also explain why so many countries, and among them Australia, have the British flag as a part of their own national flag.

Then the teacher can hang the Australian map on the wall or blackboard and the class can talk about Australia for a few minutes. The teacher can ask a few questions about it, such as whether they know who discovered Australia and when, what the indigenous people are called, etc. After this introduction the teacher asks the pupils if they know any Australian animals. They will probably know animals like kangaroos or koalas, perhaps also some others but surely they will not be able to name all of them in English. So the teacher will show them the pictures of the other animals and ask them to write the names of the animals known to them on the blackboard. If they are not able to do that, the teacher writes the unknown words on the blackboard herself or himself. There can be about 13 or 14 names of the animals on the blackboard (besides kangaroo and koala, which are most probably known to the pupils, there is also the platypus, albatross, emu, ant-eater, python, wombat, lizard, parrot, penguin, dingo, crocodile, but also pigeon, goose, sheep and rabbit which also live in Australia). Of course, the pupils are asked to copy the words they do not know into their notebooks.

Then it is important to practise a newly acquired vocabulary, which can be done in several ways. The teacher tells a name of an animal in Slovak and says a pupil's name. The pupil has to say a sentence including the English name of the animal in it. After a while, when all the animals are mentioned and the sentences are made about each animal, the pupils are divided into groups of three or four. The groups get one by one an envelope with mixed pictures of the animals and flashcards with their names in them. The group's task is to put the name of the animal together with its picture. This activity can also be done as a competition. The group that makes pairs of all the names of the animals and their pictures in the shortest time without any mistakes is the winner.

Then the pupils go back to their seats. Each pupil chooses a picture of one animal and also gets a blank card. The teacher encourages the pupils to imagine they work in a zoo and have to write a card for an Australian animal just being brought into the ZOO. Each pupil writes a couple of sentences about their animals saying what the animal is, where it lives, etc. They can finish their cards for their homework and also draw or stick a picture of the animal on them.

And what was the feedback from the pupils? They liked the lesson very much and learnt not only the names of the animals, but they were surprised that the word wombat cannot be translated into Slovak as this animal lives only in Australia, and that is why its original name is also used in other languages. They also learnt something about the former British colonies and their flags. And moreover, the lesson was different from what they had experienced before.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would again stress the necessity of including cultural studies of English speaking countries into EFL teaching at all levels. It can be done in a very simple way so teachers should not hesitate and start with this work already in elementary schools.

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