



***Original Contribution***

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## CULTURAL STUDIES IN THE FRAMEWORK OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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### ABSTRACT

Cultural studies are indispensable in foreign language teaching. Since English has become the most widely spoken international language, the notion of understanding one's culture along with its language is a prerequisite for establishing successful interpersonal contacts, business, diplomatic, social and cultural relations. Very often, however, the significance of raising students' cultural awareness has been underestimated for the sake of achieving pure linguistic competence, grammatical correctness and mastering of vocabulary. The English language teacher is confronted with the difficult task of establishing Cultural Studies in the curriculum of English language teaching not as an extendable fifth element but as an integral and necessary component in foreign language acquisition. Dealing with uncertainties of content, methods of representation and appropriate selection of the material the teacher embraces the challenging objective of introducing students to diverse aspects of both the foreign culture and that of their own society in the hope of broadening their comprehensive knowledge and preparing them for a world of change, tolerance and pluralism.

**Key words:** Cultural awareness, English language, content, methods and approaches, selection

### INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial when people from different tribes and communities were involved in commerce, the establishment of social and cultural contacts or in warfare, human beings needed a medium to successfully communicate among one another. Unlike other animals, we are the only biological species capable of producing speech; in other words - of making meaningful, coherent utterances through which we can share our ideas and experiences with others. And what is more, "only humans have the biological capacity for language, which allows them to communicate cultural ideas and symbolic meanings" (1). Hence, language is first and foremost a mediator that enables people of a particular language group to understand one another. It is at the same time central to the culture of that community since it is through language that most of the culture is learned, expressed and handed down from generation to generation. An infant learning his or her mother tongue is simultaneously being exposed to and

subconsciously learning about the cultural reality of his or her social environment. In addition, drawing upon our experience as language users and being aware of some existing individual differences due to one's social and cultural background, we cannot underestimate the close interrelatedness between language and culture (2).

The objective of this article is to show that the main principle of binding culture to language and vice versa and viewing the two as an inseparable and interdependent entity is and must be one of the basic concepts in foreign language teaching. Over the years there has existed a widespread conviction that since we are all humans "we can easily understand each other, provided we share the same code; all we have to do is learn that code and use it accurately and appropriately." (3) The ensuing paper sets its task to prove that this "code" that we have to "decipher" in order to be able to communicate in the foreign language is mostly culture-specific and therefore requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural awareness.

With today's world-wide technological advance, economic and political development, the impending changes of globalization and EU integration, we are facing a world where English has become an international language,

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a fact which has led to the expansion of English language teaching and learning in many countries, including our own. At the same time, close international contacts have shown that very often, when communicating in English, interlocutors are in real danger of falling into the trap of miscommunication and misinterpretation because, despite their language fluency, foreign language speakers seldom have the appropriate cultural knowledge to understand "the other". In the English classroom, students receive some information about the foreign people and cultures but such information is usually fragmented, insufficient, stereotyped and in the case with some course books - subjectively selected and out-of-date. And whereas, on the one hand, students learn little about the foreign culture because Cultural Studies is still not a priority when teaching general English. On the other hand, teachers, in spite of their creativity and enthusiasm, are confronted with the lack of appropriate methodology, very few training courses and seminars in cultural studies. And, finally, if they still have the will and stamina to teach and discuss culture with their students - there comes the difficult question of the selection of the material, of how and what culture to teach.

### PROBLEMS AND METHODS

Cultural Studies as part of the curriculum of foreign language teaching has comparatively recently received its proper and deserved academic attention. A few decades ago when language studies were experiencing the impact of the Grammar Translation Method, the acquisition of a foreign language was perceived as a mere mastering of grammatical rules and a set of structures which were believed to be the necessary equipment for any learner undertaking the task of achieving language proficiency. Soon enough this notion of teaching and learning a foreign language, which was not much different from teaching and learning a dead language, such as Latin or ancient Greek, gave way to other, more efficient methods where the focus was more on the learner, seen as an active participant, a collaborator, an inventor indulged in a journey of "self-discovery".

In the pre-communicative approach to English language teaching (ELT), influenced by Chomsky's *Theory of Syntax*, language was viewed as a self-contained, idealized system that could be mastered in a culture-free, context-free manner. Such an attitude to language emphasized structural clarity, rather than ambiguity and disregarded cultural

peculiarities as being unimportant and confusing for acquiring the "standard" English. This standard language, apart from its fixed rules, also required correct pronunciation, a coded system of sounds, considered to be the norm and known as RP (received pronunciation) for which native speakers of English (from the middle-class area of London) were believed to be an exemplary ideal.

With the advance of the Communicative Language Teaching, language was no longer seen as being separate from culture. The native-speaker ideal was still considered a key factor for language fluency but it was deeply context-bound and represented an innovative approach, which tried to reunify language and culture. It is an undeniable fact, however, that in today's world many English language teachers are not native speakers of the language and most of them have never lived within the foreign culture and correspondingly lack the first-hand cultural experience to share with their students. Does this make them unsuitable for their role as teachers of language and culture? The answer is "no".

Nowadays, in the post-modern society where people embrace the notion of multiculturalism, it is obvious that English as an international means of communication and a language spoken by millions of people as either their first or second language is itself a reflection of different world cultures. Each culture with its own linguistic differences projects its impact on the language. Therefore, it will be unwise to try and search for one standard and uniform cultural use to which all existing and potential users of the language can conform. English (as well as any other language) is not a static homogeneous entity. It is rather a rapidly changing, multifarious phenomenon, a global, neutral language that mirrors both multi-national diversity and local varieties of culture. In this respect, a good English language teacher is one who understands that teaching cultural differences is the only appropriate way for providing information, knowledge and skills for effective communication in an intercultural environment. The interrelatedness of language and culture, along with cultural awareness is the tool that will enable strangers to communicate across linguistic and cultural barriers and open their minds to new opportunities and ideas.

Unfortunately, sometimes even when the notion of introducing Cultural Studies in the framework of ELT is well accepted, there

are still other problems, either with the curriculum itself or the methodology and materials selected.

The pedagogical dilemma which accompanies the teaching of language and culture as Claire Kramsch points out in *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (4) is that "culture is often seen as mere information conveyed by language; not as a feature of language itself", as something separate from language and an objective in itself. Many guidelines for teachers emphasize the importance of cultural awareness and recommend teaching the four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) "plus culture". Culture, however cannot and must not be considered an "expendable fifth skill". Only when "we recognize that language use is indissociable from the creation and transmission of culture" (3) and unravel the dichotomy between language and culture, can we try to reassess the role of cultural studies in ELT.

Another misconception and a certain difficulty arise from the fact that English language teachers are normally philologists with university education and training in literature and literary criticism but not enough cultural knowledge of the countries where English is spoken as a native language. In Bulgarian universities, for example, students in English philology learn about British and American societies and cultures, literature and criticism but have no lectures about other English-speaking countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand and the subcultures and ethnic cultures within the mainstream English or American societies remain usually on the periphery of selective courses. Thus, with little cultural experience and lack of self-confidence, the would-be teacher finds himself/herself unprepared for educating his/her students towards cultural competence. Without appropriate training in cultural studies the Bulgarian teacher has to tackle the subject alone. He/she has to find and carefully select cultural materials and eventually to arrange and present them in a way comprehensible to his/her students. Another challenge is the course book. Fortunately, there have been a number of English language course books published in recent years which present the students with an insight, though fragmented and often unstructured, of the variety of English cultures, social customs and traditions, modes of behaviour, accents and dialects from different parts of the world. All in all, the teacher rarely has the chance to decide on a course book suitable for the classroom and

often has to put up with what is available now or has been approved by the authorities. In both cases there are disadvantages for many of the older textbooks abound in stereotypes and clichés about the foreign people and inevitably create a false, simplified and sometimes prejudiced image of foreign cultures. Paradoxical as it may sound, the truth is that some fifteen years ago the basic course books for the preparatory class of the English language schools were entirely modelled on socialist ideology and contained texts probably written in Bulgarian and then translated into English about the "advantages" of communism, whereas the original English passages did nothing more but introduce the pupils to elaborate vocabulary items and convince the Bulgarian reader that the average Englishman had a rather strange sense of humour. Over the past years there has been a considerable improvement in the selection and variety of materials designed for teaching general English. However, despite these positive aspects and supplementary materials now available to teachers, we are still confronted with a lot of stereotypes inherent in textbooks. In New Headway Intermediate (4), for example (a course book still widely used by many Bulgarian teachers of English), in one of the presumably culture-oriented activities, learners are expected to complete a chart with a number of adjectives describing one's character and match these adjectives with six different nationalities. Pupils rely on their knowledge and pre-existing cultural stereotypes and a general feedback at the end of the activity reveals, not surprisingly at all, how very few differences there are between individually completed charts. Are we supposed then to readily accept and believe in stereotypes that have been formed in our society about other cultures and take them so easily for granted? The answer to this question is not an easy one. Stereotypes about one's own culture and stereotypes about other cultures have their roots in the established cultural knowledge of a particular community and society. This knowledge reflects social and historical experience and has accumulated in the course of many years. There is nothing illogical in culturally-based stereotypes of foreign people. The problem is not within the stereotypes themselves but rather lies within the attitude towards such stereotypes. Their predominantly negative overtones cannot be expected to simply disappear as a consequence of exposing students to more attractive images of the foreign cultures. The role of a good course book and an experienced

language teacher is to make an attempt to open students' minds to other more tolerant views of "others", to unsettle their static universe, to provoke them, to make them question what has been perceived as undisputable facts because "it is evident that the success of their relationships and communication with others will depend in part on those stereotypes." (5) Our feelings, attitudes, experiences and whole perceptive modes of interpretation are influenced and formed by the culture in which each of us lives. Therefore, the knowledge of one's culture, which is self-knowledge along with the recognition of cultural differences and of "how we usually respond to those differences" is essentially important to "make us aware of hidden stereotypes which are barriers to tolerance, understanding and good communication". (6) Such barriers, which are due to lack of cultural awareness can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication in international English. In the English-speaking world today speakers differ from each other not only with their individual voices and accents. They also have different cultural background, which predetermines their knowledge of the world. The difficulty when using English as a social practice arises from the fact that speakers do not always share the same knowledge, which sometimes hinders the discourse and the right interpretation of the message. Cultural competence is the key to effective communication and could be achieved provided we realize the importance of cultural studies as an integral part of any foreign language teaching programme. Teaching culture is essential for "structuring our knowledge of the world and in particular of other cultures." (5) because learning about cultural diversity prepares students for better and more effective communication when they are involved in intercultural situations.

Considering the arguments above, we logically arrive at the point where it becomes necessary to outline the main educational *objectives* in support of cultural studies within the framework of foreign language teaching. Apart from the conviction that language learning broadens the mind, opening new unlimited horizons to the learner, there are a number of other, not less important purposes for teaching language and culture, which deserve systematic attention.

1) Teaching a foreign language and culture exposes students to a completely new system of expression and interpretation and introduces them to the culture or cultures of the countries where the

language is spoken as a mother tongue

- 2) It offers insights into the life, thought, behaviour and civilization of other people and encourages a positive, tolerant attitude towards other cultures.
- 3) Cultural studies should start with developing an understanding of one's own culture.
- 4) By being aware of one's own culture and by recognizing differences between this culture and that of other communities or countries where the target language is spoken, students learn to understand and appreciate cultural differences.
- 5) Raising cultural awareness and tolerance by means of cultural studies involves students in an enlightening process of discovering and understanding points of view different from their own. Thus, they are able to move from a state of "egocentricity" to "reciprocity" (5).

The hazards of incorporating cultural studies for most Bulgarian teachers of English, and probably for many other native and non-native teachers throughout the world, are that being aware of the necessity and the objectives for cultural studies does not solve the problem. Even when we feel convinced and willing to increase students' cultural awareness and provoke their curiosity towards the target culture, we, as teachers, still have to face a number of important and not-so-easy-to-answer questions.

One such outstanding question derives from the problem of *what culture to teach*.

When the aim is to introduce students to different aspects of the English-speaking world, the basic idea will be to focus their attention on some general notions about nationalities where English is the official native language in countries like Great Britain, the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Teaching about English cultures, however, and particularly about national cultures is a dubious matter and could turn into a disaster unless one considers the danger of falling into hidden stereotypes. A "culture" is not a stable monolithic entity. There are some cultures, which are more widespread and influential than others and form the mainstream culture of a particular country. This mainstream or dominant culture exhibits some commonly shared *dominant cultural patterns*, which should be the focal point of any cultural study. At the same time "it is important to remember that even within a *homogeneous* society, the dominant cultural pattern does not necessarily apply to everyone living in that society" (7) and that we should

not underestimate the importance of other cultures, and we should "not mean to emphasize only one target culture" (1). In other words, an introductory course in British cultural studies should begin with historical, geographic, social and linguistic aspects of England and proceed with exploring cultural differences and characteristic features of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Furthermore, there is the multicultural diversity of the British Isles in terms of existing ethnic communities and other social groups, each with their specific cultures. Speakers of English might differ in dialect, accent and register according to their regional belonging, education, family background, etc. On the other hand issues of gender, social class and ethnicity are also at stake predetermining the speaker's socio-cultural and socio-linguistic identity. These notions should be considered an integral part in a curriculum in cultural studies and applied to the teaching and learning of culture. A course in American cultural studies, for example, is bound to emphasize both distinctive differences and commonly shared similarities between the dominant Anglo-American culture and that of Native Americans, Black Americans and Asian Americans on the one hand, and between the target culture (American) and the native culture (Bulgarian), on the other. In a period of cultural continuity and accelerating cultural change, it is only by "negotiating the distances" between these cultures that we can come to terms with and "cast light upon our own (culture)" (8).

Cultural tolerance and understanding can be achieved provided that we comprehend the importance of the question *how to teach culture*.

First of all, integrating cultural studies in the curriculum presupposes an interdisciplinary approach and a gathering together of materials from different branches of the humanities - history, anthropology, political science, socio-linguistics, and literature. Only by means of stepping over disciplinary boundaries, of strengthening the ties between various fields of research, of extending our knowledge can we possibly hope to get to terms with the complex and unique phenomenon of culture. Nowadays many scholars realize that "the presumption that there exists a core area of research in every discipline is put into question and the identification and overlapping has become more important than the rigorous pursuit of disciplined research" (9).

At the same time any attempt to

identify existing multicultural similarities and differences requires an adequate method of study.

Traditionally the teaching of culture has been limited to exposing students to a body of information about the target culture; and during the 1960s and 1970s due to the impact of structuralism there was a search for finding a common ground and transforming cultural barriers into cultural bridges. (3) This search for commonly shared universal features between Culture 1 and Culture 2 was predetermined by the idea that building a cognitive bridge, mostly on the basis of recognizable stereotypes would enable the learners to study the target culture in a more relaxed, less threatening and easily accessible way. Soon enough it became evident that bridging the gap and reconciling cultural clichés would result in nothing but cultural incompetence. The very notion of teaching about the mainstream culture as representative of the monolithic, identifiable nation state was put into question during the post-structuralist era of the 1980s and 1990s and the belief in finding universal cultural patterns was proven to fall short of expectations. The temptation to view culture only in terms of national characteristics disregarding other culturally important aspects such as gender, age, ethnic origin, regional background and social class is a deceptive and one-directional conviction. And since national traits represent only one aspect of the complexity of culture it will be unwise to try and identify salient universal features in a comparativist approach to cultural studies. Rather what we should try to teach and "what we should seek in cross-cultural education", as Claire Kramsch indicates, "are less bridges than a deeper understanding of the boundaries" because this is the only way we can "talk *about* and try to *understand* the differences" (3) and because "understanding a new culture is essentially a matter of negotiating the distances between this culture and our own" (1).

Culture should be taught as difference based on the concept of applying the method of comparison and contrast and advocating the principle of inter-culturality. It means that learners need to have access not only to the dominant (national) culture but also to other cultures existing within the mainstream culture and in the process of interpreting cultural differences to come to a better understanding of their own native culture. In addition, it is essentially important to understand that differences should not be viewed only in terms of binary opposition but

considered and studied in particular contexts and within the frame of lesson-planned tasks.

The aim of acquiring cultural competence could be truly realized when the classroom activities designed by the teacher emphasize on developing and integrating skills. For example, a variety of exercises in listening comprehension can introduce learners to the differences in accent and pronunciation (e.g. between British and American English), the style and register of the speakers and their vocabulary usage according to social, ethnic and regional background. Students can be encouraged to take part in speaking activities such as pair-work tasks, role-plays and discussions on cultural topics and further involved in completing individual written assignments, group projects or even their own research on cultural aspects that have drawn their attention. Reading passages and extracts from literary works by contemporary English-speaking authors, newspaper and magazine articles along with watching films, documentaries and TV programmes will provide the learners with limitless opportunities for encounters with the foreign culture. Authentic materials used in the language classroom are probably the best way for incorporating a reliable and natural source of information since they have not been specifically designed to suit a pedagogic purpose. Although such authentic materials give a first-hand, more objective and direct insight into the foreign language thought and ways of perception, they might be nonetheless difficult to apply and even incomprehensible for the learners if not carefully chosen in accordance with students' level of language fluency and cultural awareness.

Considering the above, we must not forget the significance of another aspect of cultural studies - *the selection and minimum content of the material*.

Byram outlines several areas of study determining the selection and structured content of cultural learning. These areas focus on historical, geographical, socio-political and social aspects of the life of the people in the target country. Motivating his proposals, Byram explains that since "learners are outsiders to a group" they "need the knowledge and behaviour which will allow them to interact successfully with insiders" and that "their existing perceptions and their own culture are part of the content." (5) Each of the areas of study can be further compared and contrasted with the learners' own view of their national culture raising their awareness

of both the target and the native culture.

The suggested topics below do not claim to be unique or extensive but pretend to have effectively summarized the main properties included in the term "culture". The organization and presentation of cultural aspects follows a random order and intends no emphasis or underestimation of any particular item on the list.

*National history and geography:* historical periods and events significant for the construction of the nation and its identity; national boundaries and geographical places

*Socio-political institutions:* state institutions, which characterize the state and its citizens and other government and non-government organizations representative of sub-national groups.

*Cultural heritage:* customs, traditions and cultural artefacts from past and present characteristic of the national (mainstream) culture and others exemplifying the variety of sub-cultures.

*Social interaction, belief and behaviour:* interaction at different levels of familiarity; religious beliefs and patterns of every-day life.

*Language variations:* accents, dialects, pronunciation, and differences in vocabulary usage.

*National identity and stereotypes:* symbols of national identity; existing stereotypes, their origin and meaning.

*Social and ethnic identity:* multicultural aspects of the national society; groups characterized by social class, ethnic minority groups.

The specific classroom realization of the above areas of study will depend to a great extent on the language level of the students as well as on the particular society and culture they are learning about. Lower-level students of English might find it extremely difficult and feel frustrated if the selected course material is not relevant to their knowledge of English. For upper-intermediate and advanced learners, on the other hand, drilling and investigating deeper into cultural artefacts, extending their knowledge of the foreign country and simultaneously of their own society can turn into an interesting, challenging and self-rewarding task.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, teaching and learning language and culture is and must be viewed as a wholesome, interrelated process which will enable learners to understand not only other people's language and culture but will

eventually lead to a better perception of their own multicultural, multi-ethnic society. Cultural studies in the English language classroom, especially when there are students members of a minority, can help overcome the initial distancing between learners. In a group of people where there are speakers of different mother tongues (Bulgarian, Romani and Turkish languages, for example) the process of learning about and focusing on the multicultural dimension of the foreign society can create an attitude of tolerance, an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual understanding and finally a sense of security. In this respect, culture should be considered not a support to language teaching but an equally important part of the curriculum, placed on equal footing with foreign language acquisition. By means of comparison and contrast between cultures and emphasizing the diversity among cultures students learn to understand and respect the difference, they extend their knowledge and open their eyes to the world in which they are about to realize their full potential.

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