Effective Ways of Teaching British Culture and Civilization

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Abstract

This study focuses on the ways British culture is taught at the university level in Romania. Taking into account the goals, the vastness of the subject, students' lack of background knowledge, syllabus design and teaching methods, effective methods for teaching the subject should involve approaches in teaching culture and the structure of the cultural syllabus. This research was carried out over a four year period through a questionnaire applied to third year students from the Faculty of Education Sciences. According to the results, language teaching cannot be separated from culture, and choice of methods for teaching culture depends on the teacher and on learner proficiency. A combination of effective approaches and a well-designed syllabus should give knowledge of British culture and encourage students to compare it with their own.

The first definition of culture was given by anthropologists in the 19-th century. According to the English anthropologist Taylor, (cited in Encyclopaedia Britannica) “culture is that complex whole includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. There are over 300 definitions of the word which reflect the fact that culture is very complex concept which covers all aspects of human life.

The culture which focuses on the products and contributions of a society is often referred to as Capital C culture (Chastain, 1988: 303, Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993:6), known also as formal or high (Easthope, 1997:7) culture and includes history, geography, institutions, literature, art and music as well...
as scientific, economic, sports and other achievements which are representative for a certain human community. Another approach to culture stated the fact that culture is seen as a way of life and was often referred to as culture with a small “c” (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993:6) or behaviour culture, that is behavioural patterns and life styles of everyday people which was seen to contribute to an individual’s ability to function linguistically and socially in a given context. Apart from its broadest meaning, culture can be discussed from the point of view of a particular period (Roman culture, pre-Christian culture) or of a particular society (Eastern culture, British culture, Afro-American culture) or can be divided into cultures of particular societies (street culture, hip-hop culture).

The present paper focuses on the ways The British Culture Course is taught within the foreign language curriculum at the university level in Romania. It also contain a research carried out in order to assess the effectiveness of the course and the attainment of its goals at the Faculty of Education Sciences on a sample of the third years students of the Faculty who studied British Culture and Civilization.

The role of cultural learning in the foreign language has been broadly analyzed by teachers and scholars, due to the fact that culture was considered supplementary to language and not a part of it. Since many researchers in the field support the idea that language is always culture-bound and “the language holds the culture through the denotations and connotations of its semantics “(Byram, 1989:94) it is very important to teach culture through its own language.

Studied from an outsider perspective, culture teaching should not aim at only giving factual information about the target civilization, about the foreign culture which is evident during foreign knowledge, awareness and competence in such a way that might lead to better understanding of the foreign culture, the other as well as of the learner’s own culture, the self” (Fenner, 2000:142).

Cultural knowledge is defined as the information about the other culture which gives the necessary framework for its understanding and is static, external, reduced to the information available. Cultural awareness is based on the knowledge of the target and of the native language and is defined as “sensitivity to the impact of culturally induced behaviour on language use and communication” (Tomalin, Stempleski, 1993:5). It helps the learner to compare own culture with the target culture and to reflect on his cultural identity. Also, the integration of values and meanings of the foreign culture into one’s native culture can lead to empathy, development and personal growth. Cultural knowledge is gained from the others while cultural awareness is gained from personal experience either directly or indirectly. When teaching culture, educators should focus on developing both aspects which constitute important parts of intercultural competence. Furthermore, cultural competence enhances and enriches communicative competence and it can lead to understanding and appreciating different cultures as well. Consequently, cross-cultural awareness seems a very noble goal for understanding other language and culture. “The future depends on man’s being able to transcend the limits of individual cultures. To do so, however, he must first recognize and accept the multiple hidden dimensions of unconscious culture...” (Edward T. Hall, 1976:2).

The main goal for the teaching of culture is the acquisition of “the cultural understanding, attitudes and performance skills needed to function appropriately within a segment of another society (Seelye, 1993:29). Tomalin and Stempleski have completed the seven goals of cultural instruction underlying not only the cognitive aspect but also the educational and the personal one:

1. to help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.
2. to help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.
3. to help students to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture.
4. to help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
5. to help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.
6. to help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
7. to stimulate students’ intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

The British Culture is included in the curriculum at the Foreign Languages Faculties in Romania. Mainly, the curriculum has three dimensions: to offer information about the British culture and civilization, to develop positive attitudes toward foreign language learning and especially to English language and to develop pupils’ understanding of their own culture and identity. Taking into account the specific goals, the vastness of the subject, the fact that sometimes, students enter university without having much related knowledge, difficulties of syllabus design and matters of teaching methods, effective ways of teaching the subject should consider two main aspects, namely the approaches in teaching culture and the structure of the cultural syllabus.

In the history of teaching, different approaches have been used, but in very broad terms they can be classified in two categories: those focusing on the target culture (the mono-cultural approach) and those based on the comparison between the learners’ own and the other culture (the comparative approach). While giving attention to the mono-cultural approach, the main interest should focus upon the comparative approach which encourages the learner to reflect upon his culture and the target one, namely they will not deny their own culture or evaluate the target culture but simply acquire a double perspective. Also there are a number of various approaches which focus upon various aspects of a given culture which encourage comparison between the two involved cultures.

The thematic approach focuses upon certain themes like, the art of living, rituals, beauty, religion, education, intellectuality as typical of a certain culture. Seelye (1993:133) says that culture of a community can be best taught when grouped under main themes. He also states that each culture has its own themes and no one has more than twelve.

The topic-based approach is based on more general topics which involve cultural issues. It is focused upon key elements of British life such as class, education, health, arts within a series of contexts which brings a more holistic view of the target culture.

The problem-oriented approach concentrates upon the target culture but encourages learners to do some personal research. The teacher guides students’ activity and bibliographic work in their specific area of interest avoiding as such to become lost in the vastness of cultural information.

The task-oriented approach is based on students’ own research, on common tasks to which they work in pairs or small groups. They share their research and finally they interpret the information in terms of both cultures.
The elaboration of the cultural syllabus takes into consideration the topics which are considered the most relevant for students. Although there are many common subjects to be studied, the decision to include certain topics is always arbitrary. Suggested topics include geographical and historical background, the system of government, the legal system, the British system of education, the economic conditions, the arts and especially literature, holidays, customs and traditions, behaviour and communication, family structures, living conditions. Sometimes syllabi follow larger categories as suggested by Byram and Morgan (1994:51-52): social identity and social groups, social interaction, beliefs and behaviour, socio-political institutions, socialisation, national history, national geography, national cultural heritage and stereotypes and national identity.

In the syllabus of the Faculty of Education Sciences, the English module has been designed according to the categories mentioned by Stern (1992: 219-222): places, individual persons and way of life, people and society, history, institutions and art, music, literature and other achievements. We have considered that learners should have first a sense of the physical location of the target culture and should explore the beliefs, attitudes and thoughts of everyday life. Students also need to learn about the main historical developments, historical personalities and significant issues about the past and present. Institutions include systems of government, education, economic institutions and the media. Students can always compare English institutions to their native ones and express their opinion. The category arts and other achievement included relevant aspects which form “common literacy” and which convey great cultural value. Such a category will always include Shakespeare, Dickens, Conan Doyle, Beatles or J.K.Rowling.

According to the students’ age and maturity, previous language knowledge and educational background, students’ interests, the material is carefully selected and the course is structured in two directions. With students having less language experience and a weak sense of periodicity, the course followed the suggested topics, but all of them were integrated in a chronological approach, following the main historical periods of human society: Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Middle-Age, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romanticism, Victorian era, Modernism, Post-Modernism while using a careful selection of the main cultural aspects.

Some courses were organized thematically and proved to function even better as students can focus upon their personal interests and can perceive clearly significant differences between the two cultures. Such structure included ten main themes: The Land and the People, The System of Government, The System of Law, The British Educational System, The Industrial and Economic Welfare, Religion in Britain, Attitudes, Conventions and Values, Holidays, Customs and Traditions, Arts, Life in Britain Today. Both types of courses had an introductory part which meant to familiarize students with the basic meanings of the word culture.

At the end of the term, students were given ten-items questionnaires to assess the effectiveness of their activities. The research was carried on over a period of 4 years, the samples being relatively small (between 30 and 60 students), mostly females (86%). Their responses ranked as it follows:

1. They prefer thematic (78%) to chronological courses (23%)


3. Favourite period-Victorian era, most difficult to understand Post-Modernism
4. Favourite classroom activities: research discussion, quizzes, noticing, action logs

5. They prefer getting essential information from different sources (teacher (47%), media 33%, and books 20%) and then discuss the matter into the classroom.

6. Most of them (86%) showed interest in learning about the concepts of culture, cultural competence and cultural awareness.

7. The following goals were ranked as it follows: to get and organize information about the target culture (38%), to develop better linguistic abilities (25%), social integration (20%), personal growth (11%), to create empathy (6%).

8. The role of the teacher is ranked as it follows: 1. To offer information 2. To organize information and guide students’ research 3. To teach students how to learn 4. To help students to integrate in a desired target culture 5. To help students in developing personal growth and qualities like understanding, empathy and tolerance.

9. Considering their future career and personal development, in a series of English courses within the syllabus, the importance of culture courses is ranked accordingly: 1. Language and communication courses 2. Cultural courses 3. Literature courses 4. Grammar courses

10. Main barrier factors: 1. insufficient time for such a large area of study 2. Lack of personal time 3. The lack of previous information on the subject.

As it can be observed, students have come to identify the main positive results and difficult issues of the course. Students acquired a considerable cultural and linguistic knowledge, they gained in personal growth but there are efforts to be made in the direction of empathy, integration and cooperativeness among the members of the group. Taking into account these results, the fact that language teaching cannot be separated from culture and the main goals of the cultural dimension, we can affirm that the choice of adequate ways of teaching culture depend mainly on the teacher and of the learners’ command of language. A combination of effective approaches and a well-designed syllabus should give knowledge and understanding of the British culture and encourage students to compare it with their own. Culture is a complex network and each participant has an active role in it. Consequently, culture teaching should aim to create empathy with the cultural norms of the target community and an increased awareness of one’s cultural heritage in relation to others.

References


