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THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ISSUES AT FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEPARTMENTS: A SERIES OF SMALL SERENDIPITIES¹

Abstract: *This paper argues that it is high time for the ongoing public debate of whether Western Balkans' foreign language departments should be transformed or not to be steered in a different direction – that on focusing on how to use the positive experiences of current teaching practices in order to improve existing foreign language teaching processes. To illustrate, this paper provides examples of restructured teaching approach practices, which are followed at the English Department of the University of Banja Luka's Faculty of Philology.*

Key words: *foreign language didactics, raising awareness, learner-centred instruction.*

Introduction

Being a teacher of a foreign language, especially of English, involves choosing on a daily basis between the positive outcomes of the recent globalisation process and the ever-growing need for introducing specifically targeted aims for individual learners. Therefore, the role of a teacher working with non-native speakers within the tertiary sector of education is under constant scrutiny of the native-speaker teaching community. The need for the actual transfer of positive teaching results at home departments sometimes can be understood too literally. The good tradition of existence of parallel modern languages versus linguistic departments has resulted in foreign language teachers who present excellent role models for teaching practices, but cannot respond to the problems faced by both students and teaching staff in relation to teaching at a tertiary level.

Modern languages, linguistics, literature – one or three departments?

The unnecessary and unnatural exclusion of the teaching of cultural issues from linguistic and literary courses was viewed by many as out of date, but rarely challenged publicly. The insistence on teaching 'purely' grammatical problems within linguistic courses, especially at the university level, seems inappropriate, if not utterly futile. Language cannot be taught without all the cultural nuances, which are exhibited in every sentence spoken and uttered. Therefore, this paper focuses on proving that in foreign language didactics the issues of language, literature and culture are so finely and inextricably interwoven that it is time to stop separating them and to embrace this 'old' synergy with a proactive attitude and with new enthusiasm. The days of labelling things as linguistic, literary or cultural are long gone. The full merger of this tripartite division in foreign language classes means providing students with opportunities to get involved in real-life situations of language use, thus enhancing the acquisition process in general.

In trying to cast some light on problems addressed on a daily basis, let us first discuss the underlying basis of foreign language programmes in general. When talking about teaching and learning of languages, Halliday (1987) proposes that if language learning is to be discussed at all, one

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has to bear in mind its three-part structure: learning language, learning through language and learning about language. A quick glance at some of the foreign language programmes in the Western Balkans shows that usually some additional focus is given only to one of these issues. In some unofficial small talk, I have heard proposals which left me flabbergasted: our students have poor language skills, let us do something about it – let us rid ourselves of all the literature classes whatsoever and increase the number of language classes. It hurt even more to hear this because the persons involved had actually been fellow-linguists. The plain fact that through literature classes our students acquire not only the target-language culture, but also linguistic structures has somehow escaped the ever-so-scrutinous mind of the proposal maker. Slobin (1992: 6) emphasises the fact ‘[...] that language acquisition ALWAYS takes place in cultural and interpersonal contexts.’

Still, one must take into consideration the argument that is always presented in such cases: linguistics is separated from modern languages in most of the Western universities. Moreover, there is a more than plausible chance that if you enter, for example, English departments in the UK and the USA, you will actually study literature. Of course, there is nothing controversial in using such an approach in countries where English is spoken as the first language. The positive history of foreign language teaching, at least in the area where I live, presents a basis that should not be changed just because someone thinks it necessary. Changes are definitely needed; and they are welcome too. However, the question one has to ask oneself is this: Must changes be radical? My answer: Hopefully, not. One can change things by introducing radical measures, but there is no need to do so here. All experiences so far have shown that the concept of putting together linguistics, the literature and culture of the target language into something that is called the foreign language curriculum, works perfectly. There is no need to change the ingredients; some adjustment in the measurement of specifics, i.e. course elements, would do the trick, bearing in mind that such adjustments must always be made in accor-

dance with students’ needs and the needs of the market these students are going to work in.

What about culture?!

Contemporary didactic and methodological researchers and authors take it for granted that culture must be taught in foreign language classes. One can find some extreme examples, like Damen, who claims that culture is ‘the fifth dimension’ of language teaching, in addition to the other four language skills. (Hall and Hewings 2001: 186) Even though he uses the term dimension, he still treats culture as a skill. One cannot but wonder about the amount of importance cultural issues will be dealt with if addressed in such a way. The main concern, which immediately arises from such an approach, is the attitude towards culture as an additional material, a secondary aid in the process of language teaching and learning, not as a means of widening the overall knowledge. Another problem is, of course, the choice between a culture and cultures, which inevitably every course developer has to face.

Other authors embark on a further voyage of setting goals and aims when involvement of culture in classes is concerned, again treating it as a means or an apparatus used for enabling language acquisition.

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993: 7) set a list of goals that the teaching of culture should follow:

- help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally conditioned behaviours,
- 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,
- help students to become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture,
- help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language,

- help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalisations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence,
- help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organise information about the target culture,
- stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and encourage empathy towards its people.

Again, the emphasis is on raising awareness on the fact that certain features actually exist in the foreign language. The introduction of raising awareness or consciousness raising may bring some positive effects, but it is just the tip of the iceberg when thinking about attacking the essence of the problem. Still, the key phrase here is still raising awareness, which is learner centred, but time consuming. To be honest, I am aware of the fact that foreign language teaching mainly focuses on future teachers in primary and secondary schools. Academia is left to its own devices, or, at least, to the learning environment called English for Specific Purposes, which is vast in its variety of types and approaches towards the problem of attacking language teaching topics that it evidently cannot address at all - most of the problems related especially to English departments.

Methodological literature is so closely focused on prescribing and describing the entire foreign language teaching process that it somehow misses a valid point: a different methodology ought to be developed for students at English departments in countries where English is not their native language. Communicative language learning argues that culture and language are not separate. Kramsh (1993: 1) claims that culture 'is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them'. Again, it seems completely useless to prescribe a self-evident need. The mere transference of experiences from Western universities is not possible, because stu-

dents in Western Balkans countries are not obliged to spend at least a year in the country whose language they have been studying as their major, thus having a personal experience in the target culture. Most of the students must be taught cultural nuances because they do not have opportunities to experience them personally. As long as the present state of the studies stays as it has been up to now, it will be necessary to provide some kind of input into culturally-charged issues and the target-language culture itself.

The same can be applied to literature, when considering it a part of the triad. Collie and Slater (1987: 3) emphasise the importance of the presence of literary items within language classes and claim "literature offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is 'important' in the sense that it says something about fundamental human issues and which is enduring rather than ephemeral". Still, one has the feeling that everything keeps on turning around language. Literature is used simply as yet another provider of data, which is to be used for purely linguistic purposes. Moreover, the insistence that literature should be used as a body or a corpus for presenting or working on linguistic issues somehow calls back the old grammar-translation method from the past. Can literature be used in some other way? Is there really a need to assign role(s) to aspects so particular that it is sometimes almost impossible to determine where one stops and the other starts? I wholeheartedly believe that the answer should be a simple NO.

The implementation of the ideas discussed in practice

The practical side of this paper is dedicated to presenting a small contribution in proving the point that it is useless to envisage separation of these three (or four) disciplines into different studies, at least for the time being.

At the Department of English at the University of Banja Luka, a lot of attention is paid from the very beginning of the learning process to providing not only a learning-rich but also a learning-differentiated environment. The problems freshmen usually stumble on in their first

year, apart from the fact that all classes are held in English, is the variety of similar topics dealt with in different courses. It is difficult for them to grasp such an approach to teaching practices, the origin probably lying in the fact that very little attention is paid on teaching pupils and students how to connect things from different realms of the learning process. The reforms in the primary and secondary education levels result in students who expect to be told everything, who expect to be asked only what they have been told and taught, and whose expectations mainly consist of jotting down the numbers of pages (hopefully not more than thirty) for the colloquia. Even though all of the subjects in the curriculum at the English Department are carefully planned to follow one another in a sequence that will enable students to connect previously acquired knowledge, such practices sometimes must be induced. Let me give some examples.

Courses, such as *Introduction to Anglo-American Studies* and *Mediaeval English Literature* are designed to cover some of the similar cultural topics, namely English history. So, when talking about issues in Anglo-Saxon Britain, it is always a thrill to show students the slide illustrating one of the great kings of the time, Penda the Pagan. By pure luck, it is always this slide we discuss the most, because they relate the name of the king with the surname of a professor they appreciate enormously. This relation to a person they are acquainted with helps immensely with future work. Many a times have I found myself in a position that after the class about Anglo-Saxon history, students finally get involved in the course. I have been teaching this course for seven years now, so, for the last three years, it has usually been here that the class stops dealing with the Anglo-Saxon prescribed course topics and evolves into a discussion about the need for wider general education and comparison to circumstances in our country at the time, be it sociological, political, cultural or historical in general. The prompt for elicitation usually proves itself in such an excellent way, that, if I ask students to prepare some facts about Penda the Merciless for the following class as their homework, it usually proves to be one of the rare tasks that are actually

done. Unless, of course, I promise to give negative points for not bringing the homework, but that is a whole other point which is not to be discussed here. The usual icebreaker works the other way round as well. Being constantly asked whether they heard about certain events or topics on literary classes, students realise that they have to study more at home, that it will not suffice just to be present in classes. The joy and pride every teacher feels when students answer that they, at least, heard about an issue or even discuss it, is immense. As aforementioned, due to sheer luck, the department I work in has a teacher who shares his surname with a historical character. Even if that were not the case, it is always possible to find some correlation with the perceived general knowledge of students.

Here is another example.

When studying about Norman Britain, quite a lot of attention was focused on explaining the social and cultural contexts of the time, so when students start learning about the literature of the period, they should at least have some picture in their heads about the life at the time. As an illustration for this point, I will present one of the practices used in the classroom. The students are shown two illustrations, which present a folk calendar used at the time (*Occupation of Men 1260*), where we have illustrations of what is done at certain periods of the calendar year. As far as customs are concerned, for example, the student's general conclusion is that there have been few changes in customs, if we neglect the obvious change in clothing fashion. The relation to our everyday life is something that can always be used as a starting point for either written or spoken tasks. The two calendar pictures for example, reminded some of the students of the customs from their own surroundings, some remembered a chant from their primary school, some discussed changes in today's diet, etc. Such an approach to the topic of life in Norman Britain must introduce the question of the language spoken at the time, so a class predominately aimed at historical issues usually becomes a source for elicitation of general knowledge about life in the Middle Ages in general.

The amount of prompts 'borrowed' from literary classes is even bigger. Letters written by Mary, Queen of Scots or Elizabeth I, used as cues in discussing the position of women in Elizabethan England, can be used as illustrations for comparison with previous historical periods. The line of the position of women is drawn starting from Boudicca, through various roles that medieval women took part in, such as Chaucer's wife of Bath, to Eleanor of Aquitaine. After more than half a decade of teaching this course, it still amazes me that students wholeheartedly embrace the concepts, which otherwise they consider rather boring or useless, if just tiny pinches of trivia or historical data are served as side dishes. The means are there, at the reach of our hands. We just have to stretch them enough. And we have to leave our minds open to new suggestions, listening and looking out for particular students' needs.

The most positive outcome of such an approach is evident. The merger of approaches through teaching of the same issues through different concepts enables students to have a deeper insight into the issues discussed and finally to start to approach the different topics interdisciplinarily. There are many discussions made today on the necessity for an overall approach towards what is known as practical outcomes of the teaching practices in the tertiary level of teaching. There is a need felt for those discussions to become practices.

Concluding remarks

The topic chosen did emerge as a kind of serendipity. The more vivacious and ear catching the title, the more people would be interested in what one wanted to tell them. And the role of this paper is to point out the need for doing something immediately as well as for implementing it practically.

Taylor (Jourdan and Tuite 2006: 17) emphasises the role of knowledge in a human life:

'Knowledge consists in having the representation actually square with the reality. This we can only hope to achieve if we put together our ideas according to a responsible procedure. Our beliefs about things are con-

structed, they result from a synthesis. The issue is whether the construction will be reliable and responsible or indulgent, slapdash, and delusory.

Language plays an important role in this construction. Words are given meaning by being attached to the things represented via the 'ideas' which represent them. The introduction of words greatly facilitates the combination of ideas into a responsible picture.

Therefore, the title and discussion of this article do not present new ideas, but emphasise and prove that all culture, literature and language are inextricably interwoven. The learner-centred instruction does not only mean centering the instruction towards the present needs of learners, but also enabling them with tools for autonomous learning and for the acquisition of presented structures. Without placing all the ingredients necessary into a melting pot called 'the foreign language learning process', the theoretical framework will be stripped to its bare skin and remain just that - the theoretical framework.

Too much effort and strength is being used in trying to justify whether each of the disciplines should deal with certain aspects within themselves as parts of their own major domains of practice or just parts of an interdisciplinary research. Sometimes it seems as if we forgot the main aim we have all been aiming at – a successful and satisfied language learner, be it a student or a future language teacher. The time has come for every participant of the teaching process to take the responsibility for his/her role in something that we call the training of a future language teacher. If teachers at the tertiary level, by providing role models of their own, provide a mould or, at least, a frame for the future enhancement of personal improvements of individuals they educate, then, with almost utter certainty, we can say that there is a brighter teaching profession future at the reach of our hands. We must leave aside the urge for precedence and focus more on paving the joint path towards a teacher who not only possesses high personal and educational skills but who is also able to transfer them to students.

Times of the incessant debates whether foreign language departments should be transformed according to new concepts are over. Transformation is an ongoing process and it is happening as we speak. No one is trying to stop it or prevent it. Being proactive just means giving as much as one can to the final product – language teachers able to answer all the uncertainties and challenges that the twenty-first century educational systems are putting in front of them. Academic institutions can be neither considered nor treated as the places where all problems can be readily solved, but the teachers working at them can serve as guiding points for implementation of all good practices from the past and for the introduction of new currents of the present.

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KULTUROLOŠKA I ISTORIJSKA PITANJA NA ODSJECIMA STRANIH JEZIKA: NIZ SITNIH SLUČAJNOSTI

Rezime

Rad naglašava potrebu da se javna rasprava o tome da li studijski programi stranih jezika i književnosti na području Zapadnog Balkana treba da se transformišu ili ne usmjere u drugom pravcu – ka usredsređivanju na iskorišćavanje pozitivnih savremenih pedagoških iskustava radi unapređenja postojećeg procesa nastave stranih jezika. U radu se, kao ilustracija, daju primjeri preoblikovanog pristupa nastavi koji se primjenjuje na Studijskom programu engleskog jezika i književnosti na Filološkom fakultetu Univerziteta u Banjoj Luci.

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