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Developing Intercultural Competence in Students - Philologists through Literature

Abstract

The focus of attention in this article is exploration of cultural messages conveyed by literary texts which are used as instruments for raising cultural awareness of students-philologists. The goal of this work is to demonstrate the actual intercultural potential of fictional discourse for understanding otherness and developing students' linguosociocultural competence. The research is based on the experience of analyzing English literary texts with English philology students but the techniques used are applicable for studying culture in any foreign language.

Keywords: *intercultural literacy, intercultural competence target culture, intercultural skills.*

Introduction

Developing intercultural literacy is one of the pressing tasks of modern ELT at any level of education. The traditional communicative method is considered to be a narrow one if it does not integrate “culture” into its curriculum. “Intercultural competence” has become one of the basic methodological terms, though we can come across different ways of interpreting it.

For J. Corbett intercultural competence (IC) is the ability to understand the language and behaviour of the target community, and explain it to members of the “home” community and vice versa [1997:28].

For C. Kramsch IC is not knowledge, but “shared rules of interpretation” that are applied judiciously to familiar and new contexts to make sense of the world [1998:27].

M. Byram [1997] has produced what is to date the most fully worked-out specification of intercultural competences, which involve five so-called savors, that is, five formulations of the kinds of skills needed to mediate between cultures. Together, these savors indicate the students' ability to reach, what Kramsch called “the third place”, that is, a vantage place from which learner can understand and mediate between the home culture and the target culture [Kramsch,1993].

The above mentioned and some other researchers redefine the aims of language education acknowledging “intercultural communicative competence” rather than “native speaker proficiency” (a nebulous and rarely attained goal) as the ultimate goal. They argue that “transactional” view of language, which considers it primarily as a means of exchanging information, is not unreasonable but a narrow one. As L. Loveday [1981:123] observes: “Now English is increasingly recognized as approaching the status of a world *lingua franca* and because of this fact there are many involved in its teaching who seek and support its de-ethnicization and de-culturalization. Whatever the outcome of this particular debate will be, L2 teaching should not blindly follow the extreme utilitarianism... and reduce communicative competence to the mere acquisition of skills”. Loveday stresses that by focusing only on the transactional level of a communicative language teaching neglects important cultural information that can help anticipate and make sense of differences in how even simple transactions operate in different cultures.

Such view of tasks of modern ELT does not mean that previous cultural topics (exploring how personal and group identities are valued and constructed) in L2 classes were not paid attention to. Good teachers have always incorporated cultural information to their communicative language teaching lessons. H.

Stern calls this kind of *ad hoc* introduction of cultural information “cultural asides” [1992:224].

But the intercultural approach differs from earlier approaches to teaching culture by moving intercultural knowledge and skills centre-stage, and making them integral part of the curriculum. According to Corbett this means adopting strategies from ethnography as well as linguistics, and defining, teaching and testing intercultural knowledge and skills as well as language skills. Thus, a language course concerned with “culture” then, broadens its scope from a focus on improving the “four skills” of reading, writing, listening and speaking, in order to help learners acquire cultural skills, such as strategies for the systematic observation of behavioral patterns. Moreover, as learners come to a deeper understanding of how the target language is used to achieve the explicit and implicit goals of the foreign language community they should be prompted to reflection on the ways in which their own language and community functions. “The intercultural learner ultimately serves as a mediator between different social groups that use different languages and language varieties” [Corbett, 2003:2].

Home-based EFL learners are restricted to a limited access to native speakers and target culture products, that is why all kinds of texts are still the main source of cultural information for them, and that is why devising

the tasks of how to analyze texts from cultural perspective is of particular importance for the teacher.

Fiction as a source of cultural information.

Fiction text is one of the best resources for training learners to be cultural observers as they contain cultural information about the characters social and geographical identities, and about their values, assumptions and attitudes. ELT, of course, exploits literature for its own ends. From the perspective of the intercultural classroom, literary texts are selected because they illustrate aspects of the target culture. A. Pulverness [1996:11] argues that text selection should focus on the kinds of cultural information literary text can dramatize:

- period culture – “the whole way of life”
- social attitudes – *le vice anglais* (i.e. the class system)
- political values – the state of the nation
- language and manners – soundbites

The vividness of literature lies in the construction of dramatic voices which, though they are fictional, nevertheless represent the people who inhabit a given culture at a particular time.

Corbett remarks that an advantage of “cultural texts” (whether literature, film or other social practice) is that they dramatize the target value system by showing its tensions and conflicts, and this fact may indeed

motivate learners who are negotiating their own tensions and conflicts as they encounter the new culture [J. Corbett, 2001:174-175].

There is a number of published works on the use of literature in intercultural language education at different levels (e.g. Anashkina, 2012; Burwitz-Melzer, 2001; Byram & Fleming, 1998; Kramsch, 1993; MacDonald, 2000). For instance, Eva Burwitz-Melzer describes a sequence of four English lessons with 14/15-year-old pupils of a German comprehensive school and shows how a literary work (a short story) can be used to develop an understanding of otherness.

M. MacDonald and his colleagues from the University of Sterling adopted a four-phase learning cycle which gives a model for using a literary text of some length to explore culture in an ELT setting and monitor the effect of the exploration. The first phase was devoted to pre-reading activities designed to activate relevant schemata by relating the theme and subject matter of the story to the students' own experience and/or knowledge of similar stories. The second phase consisted of students filling in a worksheet of questions checking on the “basic facts” of the story – point of view, character, setting, time, place, and so on. The third phase in the cycle involved small-group discussion of key-issues in the story – plot climaxes, themes and style. Finally, the students returned to a discussion which related the themes of the story to prob-

lematical issues in British culture – for example, class conflict, racial, ethnic or sectarian tensions, colonization, or general alienation.

Both Burwitz-Melzer and MacDonald use almost the same methodological techniques to achieve their goals and student feedback mentioned in both publications suggests that the learners felt that the goals were being achieved.

However, another variant of employing this approach in an ELT setting is possible. Instructor, instead of using complete short stories and novels, may choose a number of short extracts from novels and stories representative of only one particular cultural aspect, say, social attitudes (Pulverness' "le vice anglais") in England for a more detailed analysis and interpretation.

Cultural Analysis Techniques. Preparatory stage.

At the beginning of the course the instructor explains the role of the cultural analysis of a literary text, dwells on the forms of representation and possible functions of sociocultural information in fictional discourse, illustrating his/her point by the analysis of a few passages from English literature. An important thing to stress is that forms of identity in a literary text can be expressed either explicitly or implicitly. Passage 1 from Molly Keane's novel "Good Behaviour" representing the epoch of Edward VII (the end of the

19th - the beginning of the 20th centuries) is a good example of the first type.

In those days one did not quite admit the possibility of cowardice even in young children. The tough were the ones who mattered; their courage was fitting and creditable. A cowardly child was a hidden sore, and a child driven to admit hatred of his pony was something of a leper in our society.

In this text author describes directly a system of moral values of the privileged classes in the period described. Passage 2 from H.H. Munro's short story "When William Came" is illustrative of both explicit and implicit forms of class identity representation:

There are things that a plain esquire may leave undone without causing scandalized remark, but a fiercer light beats on a baron. Trigger pulling is one of the obligations. Up to the present Pitherby has never hit a partridge in anger, but this year he has commissioned me to rent him a deer forest. Some pedigree Herefords for his "home farm" was another commission, and a dozen and a half swans for a swannery.

This extract represents ironically the relationship between the upper and the middle class of English society, the clash of different systems of bringing up, different norms and rules of behaviour. Obviously, the change of the social status involves the change of the whole way of life. The character of the story follows readily all obligations imposed on

him by owning the title of a baron. The reader cannot understand the depth of author's irony unless he possesses a certain kind of social-historical knowledge as well as philological knowledge, in particular, the ability to appreciate connotative meanings of words and word combinations or techniques of creating irony.

Involving learners in the process of identifying and interpreting cultural information.

Each passage chosen by teacher for analysis in the classroom is intended to add some new colour to the cultural feature discussed. For example, passage 3 from H.H. Munro's short story 'Reginald on Worries' is one more example of the relationship between the upper and the middle class in the first half of the 20th century but it also gives the idea of how the representatives of the middle class could raise their social status.

Of course I'm a believer in Nature-study, as I said to Lady Beauwhistle, if you want a lesson in elaborate artificiality, just watch the studied unconcern of a Persian cat entering a crowded salon, and then go and practice it for a fortnight. The Beauwhistles weren't born in the Purple, you know, but they're getting there on the installment system – so much down, and the rest if you feel like it. They have kind hearts, and they never forget birthdays. I forget what he was, something in the City, where

the patriotism comes from: and she – oh well, her frocks are built in Paris, but she wears them with a strong English accent. So public-spirited of her. I think she must have been very strictly brought up, she's so desperately anxious to do the wrong thing correctly.

In the passage the reader faces with one of the ways of getting up the social ladder in England. An aristocrat Reginald comments ironically on the origin and behaviours of the Beauwhistles who, having got the access to high society, are eager to be on par with its members but fail to do so.

The procedure of classroom activities can be as follows:

First, the instructor can make a small introduction about the epoch described and the author of the story.

Then, on teacher's suggestion, each learner is to write out the elements (words, word combinations), which relate the characters of the story to a particular social class. The students are expected to identify such phrases as "to be born into the Purple", "on the installment system", "elaborate artificiality", "studied unconcern", "to do the wrong thing correctly".

After that the students can discuss their choices in small groups or pairs before they exchange their decisions by the whole group.

The teacher's main task at this stage is to follow proper "contextualization" of the chosen elements, that is, taking into consideration

the author's/narrator's and characters' points of view. The author presents an ironic opposition of two social groups, the middle and the upper class. The Beauwhistles do their best to follow the etiquette of the upper class, the conventions which they cannot violate, whereas the aristocrats themselves very often openly disregard them being sure that whatever they do will be correct.

In order to deepen students understanding of class conflict in English culture the teacher can quote social observations of F.M.L.Thompson of the English landed society in the 19th century: *“The strength and virtue oh the conventions which governed behaviour were that they permitted great diversity and colourful eccentricity, and very rarely produced that hypocrisy of more outward conformism or that brand of well-bred inhibition which have sometimes been attributed to the English upper classes. The starchy idolization of etiquette belongs to the aspirants, the new genteel somewhat uncertain of their position...”*

In the context of this quotation Reginald's characteristics of Lady Beauwhistle based on the oxymoronic word combination “she is so desperately anxious to do the wrong thing correctly” becomes clear. The attitude of two social groups to etiquette and conventions appears to be a strong marker of social identity.

The teacher's next step may be providing learners with the text thematically similar to

the first one for their home analysis and interpretation. Here is a sample (passage 4) from another Munro's short story “When William Came”:

No one could justly say that the Shalems were either oppressively vulgar or insufferably bumptious; probably the chief reason for their lack of popularity was their intense and obvious desire to be popular. They kept open house in such an insistent open manner that they created a social draught. The people who accepted their invitations for the second or third time were not the sort of people whose names gave importance to a dinner party or a house gathering. Failure, in a thinly-disguised form, attended the assiduous efforts of the Shalems to play a leading role in the world that they had climbed into”.

The text can be supplied with questions and assignments that would focus learners' attention on the cultural aspect of the text:

1. The position of what social group does the narrator represent?
2. What features of the middle class is the object of narrator's irony?
3. What words and word combinations testify to the ironical attitude of narrator to the couple of Shalems?
4. Comment on the implied meaning of such phrases as “intense and obvious desire”, “in such an insistent open manner”, “the assiduous effort”.

5. What is the stylistic connotation of the phrase “the world that they had climbed into”?
6. How does the metaphor “social draught” characterize the sort of people who attended the Shalems' dinner parties?
7. What does this passage have in common with the previous one from the point of view of the relationship between the representatives of the upper and middle class?
8. On the basis of the two previous extracts make some conclusion concerning class identities in England in the period described.

The teacher can further offer students the texts with a more specific task, for example, to identify markers 1) of living conditions, 2)of behavioural models, 3) of speech etiquette, 4) of ethical and aesthetic values characteristic of different social groups in the period described. In this way the teacher trains the students' separate “saviers” in Byram's terminology (Byram, 1997, 2008): *savoir comprendre* (skill of interpreting / relating), *savoir apprendre* (skill of discovery / interaction) and *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness).

Another task for learners can be formulated as follows: Choose the passage for analysis out of the offered list of novels and short stories. Identify as many markers of sociocul-

tural identity in it as you can. Think of the possible interpretation of the chosen facts.

Exploration of cultural messages conveyed by literary texts can be the subject of students' graduation researches in which they can apply their knowledge and skills acquired in the course of cultural studies.

Conclusion

There is now a long tradition of using literature in L2 communicative classroom. Among other written materials used for teaching intercultural competence fiction texts take not the last place as cultural patterns including norms and conventions of a society, its symbols and stereotypes, its organization of experience are acquired, to a great extent, through texts of particular culture. Being able to extract and interpret cultural information in a literary work equips the learner both with knowledge about the mentality of native speakers and cultural norms governing the target community. Systematic concentration of attention on cultural aspects of a literary text will help learners to acquire the valuable skills of observation, interpretation and mediation that contribute to intercultural competence.

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