



CULTURE, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNITY: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the importance of teaching cultural courses in the foreign language learning environment. More precisely the analysis introduced here is drawn from my personal experience of teaching the course of Culture and Civilization of English-speaking Countries to MA students who are going to become teachers of English. No matter how common and simplistic the discussion may sound, still using data drawn from discussions, surveys and interviews with my students, I intend to point out that such courses help in reshaping and redefining students' perception and conception of culture, community and cultural communication, especially when these issues are embedded within a comparative approach that contrasts the native culture with the English-speaking cultures.*

Keywords: *culture, cultural courses, community, cross-cultural communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

Peter Medgyes (1996) emphasizes the crucial role teacher education has on training either native or non-native speakers to become English teachers. In calling for a quest of the "ideal teacher" he considers several aspects of teaching prospective English teachers mainly from his own experience and finally recognizes the need to give special priority to language training among and above other things. While this is still the case in many teacher education programmes offered in Albanian universities, I would like to focus my attention on another issue, the importance of reviewing cultural courses in teacher education programmes.

The role of culture in language teaching has been acknowledged by several authors. The nineties were a decade of revived interest in culture and the introduction of cultural elements in the foreign language teaching context (cf. Kramsch, 1993; Lange, 1998; Atkinson, 1999). Thus, increased awareness of cultural influences upon language and language instruction has reformed many foreign language teaching programmes ever since. Various cultural courses have been introduced in many programmes offered by

Departments of Foreign Languages in Albanian universities. Despite the recognized importance culture has in the education of foreign language teachers, there is still a continuous discussion as to the role it plays in the teacher education curricula. The reasons behind this stand in the simple fact that culture itself is an elusive and evolving concept, which reflects the continuous social, economic, demographic, technological and other developments taking place in our society. Therefore, while on the one hand, it is beneficial to integrate cultural courses in teacher education programmes, it is, on the other hand, necessary to continuously review these courses.

I would like to take a more expanded view of this matter by revisiting the concept of culture and other related concepts such as communication and community, an intention which I evoke in the Shakespearean question in the title of this paper - "what's in a name?". What I am concerned with is to see how students themselves view the concepts of culture, communication and community, what associations they make with them, how instruction and knowledge received in the cultural courses help in shaping their definitions, ideas and attitudes towards them

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and how they influence their education as future teachers. Today's society is in an ongoing process of change and all related concepts undergo the same process of change. Therefore, it is important that these changes are investigated and considered when introducing new academic programmes. While other factors contribute to the formation of such concepts such as socio-economic, religious, demographic and many more, I have decided not to consider these, but to focus closely on what students benefit from their teacher education programme.

I will draw on my experience of teaching the course of *Culture and Civilization of English-speaking Countries*, a course designed for students who become teachers of English¹. My intention is to look into the relation between the students' concepts of culture, community and communication and the knowledge received in this course, whether these concepts have been reshaped by it, as well as to consider any possible shifts in these concepts from their traditional definitions. The study is based on data drawn from discussions, surveys and interviews with my students. The paper discusses first the concept of culture, some perceptions and attitudes to consider with regard to English and English culture, if there is such a thing any longer, then it focuses on the study carried out with the MA students who prepare to become English teachers and analyzes their view of concepts such as culture, cross-cultural communication and community. In the end some conclusions follow as recommendations for curriculum designers.

2. WHICH CULTURE?

¹ This is a specialist Master's degree course in foreign language teaching. Our students who have a BA degree in English specialize to become teachers of English and Italian. Thus, they study two foreign languages in this programme, with English as major and Italian as minor. Among other courses they also take two courses on culture, one on the culture and civilization of English-speaking countries and another on the Italian culture. My research was limited to the first course because at the time when research was conducted they had taken only the first course.

More than twenty years from the fall of communism many things have changed in Albania but not only. A lot of concepts, things and ideas have been reconsidered and reformulated, new elements have been introduced, older ones have been removed. The exchange of cultures, the erasure of borders and boundaries has given way to a globalized world in which all cultures negotiate. The reconsideration of culture affects other aspects related with it such as cultural communication. There is so much being said about intercultural communication nowadays. The rapid advance of technology has created new spaces for communication and for reformatting our ideas about culture or community.

Given all these changes it is no surprise that those who deal with matters of education still keep the discussion on culture on. What do we really have in mind when we talk about culture? The distinctions so far made about culture have generally led to two directions: whether to consider discussing culture with capital *C* or small *c* (Adaskou and Britten, 1990; Kramsch, 1991). Often defined as high-brow culture, culture with capital *C*, embodied in the fine arts has always been present in language teaching. Apart from the representation of "the culture's greatest achievements", Lange (1998:3) believes that another reason for this "emphasis on high culture" is that it "lends greater intellectual status to the language and literature department, elevating it above the ranks of language teaching institutes." Low-brow culture instead, which "implies what members of a language community do, feel, talk, think, and dream about, within the framework of their system of values, attitudes, and mind-sets" (Medgyes, 1996: 186) is more the object of study for social sciences, but it is that which "is hard to disentangle from language" (Medgyes, 1996: 186).

Although there seems to be a tension between these two ways of seeing and defining culture, which Lange (1998: 3) deems to define as "emotional", still there are other issues which interfere with the teaching of English. In the context when English, a

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language spoken by people all over the world, native and non-native, is being more and more discussed in terms of a *lingua franca* rather than in terms of a foreign language, its cultural claims grow controversial as well. At a time when we speak of Englishes rather English, “the traditional link between English as a foreign language and British (or American) culture in the sense of national culture has also changed” (Nizgorodcew, 2011: 10). All of these seem to have contributed to “render[ing] the English language itself culture-free” (Medgyes, 1999: 187).

Given the situation, when dissociating the English language from the target culture is proposed (cf. Nizgorodcew, 2011: 10) and the European Commission is encouraging the learning of two second/foreign languages² instead of one (Nizgorodcew, 2011: 11), the question of which culture to teach becomes even more complex. Considering also that our students are very much education-dependent for the formation of most of their ideas, the question deserves great attention. But how do students themselves feel about it? Which culture do they prefer to be taught?

3. THE STUDY

To answer most of the questions that came up I decided to conduct a research. Although I could sense some ideas students had about these concepts during my class discussions, from the assignments they had to do, or the opinions received from spontaneous interviews with them, I decided to look into the matter further by conducting a survey. I believed that in such a way, with me not interfering and their identity kept safe, they would feel free to express their thoughts as they wished. I prepared four questionnaires: the first contained seventeen items (twelve short-answer questions and five multiple-choice questions), which asked general questions about students' perceptions of culture; the second contained thirteen items (four short-

answer questions, nine multiple-choice questions), which required information about the course of *Culture and Civilization of English-speaking Countries* students have taken in the teacher education curriculum; the third contained nine items (two Lickert-scale questions and seven multiple-choice questions) about cross-cultural communication³ and the last contained eight items (four short-answer questions, four multiple-choice questions) about how students define and feel about community. My population of interest was as I suggested previously students of English taking the specialist Master's degree in foreign language teaching. My sample consisted of 28 students out of 50 students who are actually studying in this programme.

In order not to influence their opinions about the course of *Culture and Civilization of English-speaking Countries*, I decided to ask them to complete the first questionnaire first, which asked general questions about culture. Another reason for doing this was that I wanted to see how their ideas about culture had changed after having taken this course. I should emphasize here that the topics discussed during this course covered various aspects of the English-speaking world, included both perspectives of culture, also discussed the issue of Englishes, the place of the United Kingdom within the European Union, Britain's colonial past as well as the present relations between Britain and its former colonies, or Britain and America. What is more, the discussions were often embedded within a comparative perspective with the native culture, that is, aspects such as education, art, music, cinema, or lifestyle were often contrasted. While teaching the course, I felt some hesitation on the part of the students to discuss a lot of things, which I presumed stemmed mainly from lack of knowledge. Therefore, I decided to give them a lot of assignments and to keep them active as much as I could.

² This recommendation has been considered in the preparation of our teacher education curriculum. Our students major in English and minor in Italian.

³ All the questionnaires except for questionnaire three were prepared by me. Questionnaire three was adopted from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/17900388/Questionnaire>.

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4. CULTURE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU?

But what view of culture do these students have now? Has it somehow developed after having taken this course? I must admit that two things impressed me after having conducted the survey. First, the students' view of culture is still traditional, in the sense that they view culture as the highest form of expression of a country's traditions and values, as "the best that has been thought and said in the world" to put it in Mathew Arnold's words ([1869]1971:6). As such culture in their view is culture with a big *c* and is identified with art, literature and music.

Second, their view of culture is strongly influenced by their education. It is no surprise that these students associate culture with language and identify a strong relation between the two. The first question I asked in the questionnaire was: "Which of the following counts as culture?" and offered them the following options: Literature, Music, Art, Cinema, Food, Fashion, Language, Community and Other (for any other activity which for them counted as culture). To my surprise language rated first, with art and literature following. I asked them other questions about certain cultural activities such as 'Reading books, magazines etc; Watching films; Listening to music; Shopping; Going to the cinema; Writing poems, making music; Cooking; Going out for a coffee; Signing in your facebook account; Learning a foreign language' and asked them to indicate in a grading scale (1-5) which one(s) they liked most doing and which one(s) they found most useful doing. 'Reading books, magazines' and 'Learning a foreign language' rated first in both cases.

Their knowledge of culture and their cultural preferences seem to be dictated not only by linguistic competence but also by geographical affinities. Thus, to questions such as 'What other culture do you admire most? Why?' or 'Which of the following ancient civilizations and cultures do you like most?' they would rank first English culture and then Italian culture, and Roman civilization as the

ancient civilization they like most. I tend to believe that their choices are dictated by their language choice in the case of English and Italian and geographical closeness in the case of Italian and Roman. Some of the reasons they provided for their choices do confirm my belief. They find, for instance, English culture widespread, famous, attractive and rich and many more.

Students recognized the need to learn more about their own culture. While most answered 'yes' to the question 'Do you think you know much about your own culture?', others suggested that they know enough, but there is still more to learn. Very few students responded 'no' to this question.

Students also displayed great tolerance and positive reception to other cultures as well as curiosity and desire to learn about them. In most cases they answered 'yes' questions such as 'Do you ever read about other cultures in books, magazines, on the Internet or other sources? Why, why not?', 'Would you like to live in another country? Why, why not?', 'Would you ever consider marrying or dating someone from another culture?'.

The second questionnaire asked students questions about the course itself. The questions aimed at understanding how much the course had aided in shaping their idea of culture and how useful they found it for their future career. Although students recognized the role the course had had on their knowledge of English and in their preparation as foreign language teachers, there is still more to be done in this respect. For instance, to the question 'Do you think it has contributed to your understanding of concepts like cultural awareness, cultural communication, culture encounters, community and other culture-related concepts?' eleven students responded 'to some extent'.

5. CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The third questionnaire contained questions which concerned students' perception of cross-cultural communication. They aimed at understanding how students

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cope in a cross-cultural environment and more particularly in a communicative situation. Some questions focused on misunderstanding, especially on finding out whether these, when taken place, happened for language-bound or culture-bound reasons. In most students' view misunderstanding was verbal, and they definitely appreciated culture and cultural knowledge for a better cross-cultural communication. Most of them displayed awareness of the fact that language and culture are the most important tools for proper understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds.

6. COMMUNITY: WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

The students seemed more at a loss about the concept of community. When asked to define community most would hesitate and not answer the question at all and those who did answer it would relate the concept of community to language affinity, cultural similarities and environment. On the whole, their view of community would be rather broad. Although the advance of technology, the Internet, the globalization of the world have affected this concept by defining it in all possible ways, our students' view still remains rather traditional. Despite the fact that some questions provoked them to elaborate the concept of community by relating it more to the social and technological changes, these did not interfere with their view. Although in most cases they recognized that this concept is relative, still their definition of community was limited to cultural belonging on the whole and their own community is limited to their friends, school friends or very close friends.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I tried to argue how concepts like culture, communication and community, as socially projected concepts and bound to change and evolve in this constantly shifting and moving society, need to be continuously revised. Given the importance they have on the education of the young, in our case of prospective English teachers, the question of

continuously (re)defining these concepts is important.

The problem then lies in how coherent the curricula offered in our departments are with the newly spawned definitions. Although cultural courses are introduced everywhere in our curricula, still the question remains as to how relevant is the content of these courses with the contemporary formulations and alterations of these concepts.

To understand this, a survey was conducted in order to find out how students who receive cultural instruction feel about culture-related issues. What resulted from the data analysis was a traditional view of culture, in most cases unaffected by the rapid advances of technology, discussions about the status of the English language or multiculturalism. Although it is true that a lot of factors contribute to one's understanding of culture, such as socio-economic, ethnic, geographical, religious and so on, it is above all worth considering the type of instruction received in cultural courses.

The results obtained here suggested that students' understanding and attitude towards these issues are largely education-related. Despite my attempts to offer them a comprehensive view of the English-speaking world in the course of *Culture and Civilization of English-speaking Countries* by touching upon present-day arguments and by embedding them in a comparative perspective with the native culture, there is still more to be done in this direction.

Students' association of their views with what they have learned at school suggests that it is our task to consider all these issues when designing new curricula. One course is not enough to satisfy students' worldview. What is more, we should find ways to develop these courses in a more renovated format that would contribute to a greater understanding of culture for a greater number of students. Although students take courses like *American Culture* or *British Culture* in the BA degree programmes, still these are courses which emphasize the traditional division of the English language and culture into British and American and do not contribute much to their understanding of

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the status of English as a *lingua franca*. Courses on intercultural communication should also be included. It is our task as educators to discuss these things, possibly undertake some action research to introduce the right missing ingredients into the content. After all, "what's in a name?", - that which you put into it.

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