

DIFFERENT CULTURES AND DIFFERENT WORLDVIEWS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to find methods for teaching a culture and civilization optional course for non-philological students. The paper focuses especially on engineering students, whom the author of the paper teaches. The problems that have been noticed in the case of Romanian university students is that they lack background knowledge of British culture (Ciornei and Tamaga 2013). Skills such as understanding how social events work and the way this could ensure success or failure of business collaborations as well as the understanding of different mentalities through knowledge of history are also explored as part of teaching this course. Different mentalities and ethical makeup make the subject of intersemiotic translations. The different makeup and cultural background of engineers could easily be explored in order to create a course adapted to their needs.

Keywords: ELT, ESP, history, motivation, intersemiotic translation.

1. Motivation

Teaching a culture and civilization optional course for engineers at the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest poses several questions, such as: In what way are these students different from philological students when it comes to learning about this topic? What aspects are of interest to them? Briefly, the question is how to arouse their interest in these topics in order to motivate them. Usually, their question is related to ways in which the courses in their curricula will be useful in their future careers. They are, perhaps more than other students, oriented towards the practical aspect, as engineering deals after all with concrete work. All the theoretical knowledge will need to be applied practically in the future. For philology students, culture and civilization courses will include, among knowledge of historical events and customs of various cultures, the study of literary works belonging to the studied cultures to exemplify the atmosphere of a certain time. The use of literary works is not usually associated with teaching engineering students, as they have chosen to focus on a scientific profile in high school and wish to continue it at university. They perceive their interests as more practical, and down-to-earth. They will most likely be interested in topics such as famous inventors, and famous discoveries throughout time, as well as in corporate cultures, as some of them may wish to work for multinational companies after graduation. Others may have the opportunity to work and

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study abroad, so they can be interested in topics such as culture shock and cultural differences in the way relationships of various kinds (work, friendship, family, etc.) work. For instance, in Japan it is an insult to offer a watch or clock as a gift. The way social events work can lead to the success or failure of a business meeting. For example, coffee invitations can last longer or shorter function of culture and a business collaborator might refuse an alcoholic drink. All this is part of a cultural background that is very much related to everyday life and very useful to students. They need to know about culture shock, and the way it can affect their professional performance. Ways to minimize it are related especially to background knowledge of the culture of the foreign language they study and of the foreign country they will wish to stay for a while or move to. Knowledge of history is not to be ignored, as we can understand how mentalities differ function of times and cultures. Ancient civilizations, such as the Romans, have a different ethical makeup from ourselves: they preferred a heroic death to a life with no achievements. The *carpe diem* lifestyle was due to the acceptance of the fact that life was ephemeral due to the constant threat of war. Ciornei and Tamaga (2013) claim that university level students in Romania lack the necessary background knowledge of British culture. A culture and civilization optional course is thus a way to help students gain this background knowledge and show them the practical aspects of culture present in their everyday life interactions. The knowledge of different ethical makeup from history can help them in comparing and understanding the way cultures can differ.

The optional course in culture and civilization refers not only to aspects of British and Anglophone cultures, but to other cultures as well, depending on the students' interests. The course book used for study and teaching is *Culture. An Awareness Raising Approach* by Professor Sorin Baciu (2011). The book offers theoretical knowledge of concepts in order to understand cultures, such as definitions of culture, civilization, society, state, nation, diaspora, corporate cultures, globalization, and culture shock. At the end of the course book there is a guide for contacts with cultures, hoping to make us aware of differences such as that of offending the Japanese if we offer them a clock or watch as a gift. To the general, basic knowledge and understanding of cultures in this textbook we could add topics related to engineering students' interests, such as history of metro stations in Bucharest, famous Romanian inventors, and so on. In fact, these topics have been discussed with the occasion of the Foreign Languages Week event organized annually by the Department of Foreign Languages and Communications at the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, in students' round tables and PowerPoint presentations sessions.

Teaching and learning through PowerPoint presentations accompanied by oral presentations before an audience is a way of motivating students to learn about culture and civilizations. If engineering students will have a career in research or in a business corporation, they will need presentation skills, during a conference or business meeting. Effective techniques of presentations are taught to them during second year foreign languages seminars. At the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, students study foreign languages seminars once a week during their first two years. The culture and civilization optional course is taught during their first year of study, in the Romanian language.

Besides the technique of doing and holding PowerPoint presentations, what other methods can be used to teach such an optional course? The basic idea underlying this course is for it to be interactive. There should also be discussions among students themselves, as they need to exercise their arguing for a certain opinion about a topic discussed during the course of lectures. They can do this by means of presentations, as at the end of the presentation the other students can ask the presenter questions, the presenter should clarify certain aspects and/or argue for a certain position. A debate can be created in certain cases, where the topic allows for it. Students can also make suggestions for the topics the course of lecture should focus on, suggesting discussions of mysteries or ancient civilizations, for instance.

2. Teaching Techniques and Methods for Culture and Civilization Courses

The teaching techniques for such a course are different, depending on the students' age and interests. While with high school students, teaching culture and civilization can be done through drama (Nechifor 2007), as these students are willing to participate and visualize cultural aspects (due to the fact that it is said that we live in a visual age, with all the computer technology being so accessible, and since they are easily influenced by the media, through films), with university students the same course should be taught with a special focus on their interest in their future jobs and required skills. The example with presentations, for business-related purposes and for research, fits in this category.

Castillo (2006) focuses on sports when teaching culture and civilization for second language students. He believes that the methodologies focusing on history and high culture is not enough, and that the focus should be on popular culture. He believes that sports can help understand the Spanish culture, in its deeper aspects, in contradiction with the more superficial view offered by studying a country's literature, politics, geography, demography, etc. What could be added is the fact that sports can show Spanish country in a more attractive way to students who are interested in sports. By comparison, the same could be done in a course focusing on the interests of engineering students. Famous inventions, discoveries, mysteries, the evolution of technology in history could be used similarly to sports to help them go deeper in the aspects of different cultures. However, more important is the way cultures work, as well as how they are built, and reasons why civilizations disappear. This approach, suggested by Professor Baciu's coursebook, is universal, for non-philological university students. What is more, it is also of interest to philology students as well as to anyone interested in understanding the ways in which cultures are built, the way cultures turn into civilizations and the ways cultures differ and how we should approach moving to another country to work and study as well as business or personal relationships coming from other cultures.

For non-philological students, the general approach is not to focus on creating culture and civilization background as means for analyzing and understanding different literary texts, but different cultures and mentalities.

Thanasoulas (2010) sees culture and civilization as a necessary component of foreign language learning and teaching, due to the way this study enables communicative competence, cultural competence as well as empathy for different cultures. Mehdaoui (2015) also believes that courses of culture and civilization will offer students the necessary skills to observe critically different cultures and civilizations. He argues for using a thematic-based approach to teaching culture, and not a functional approach for offering chronological information for students during culture and civilization courses. His recommended approach shows that simply teaching historical events from a culture and civilization is not enough for students to build intercultural skills. They need more skills to deal with understanding and adapting to different cultures and mentalities. This is the recommended approach by Professor Baciu's course book as well, showing that it is part of recent teaching methodology trends, meaning that it offers a focus on various discussion topics and not a simple lesson of history. The focus at university level is on interpretation and discussion of various events and cultural mentalities.

The basic aspects of understanding cultures relate to differences as well as to universal aspects. Universal aspects include what makes up a culture, such as values, traditions, customs, and heroes. Differences among cultures can should be dealt with as today's world believes in values such as cultural empathy, and tolerance. The EU's slogan is "unity in diversity", meaning a good understanding and diplomatic dealing with cultural differences and values. Professor Baciu's course underlines the fact that it is not appropriate to judge whether a culture is good or bad, as this is an entirely subjective matter. Objective truth cannot be judged in such cases by individuals. Only time will tell whether a culture is still actual or not, whether its cultural products are still of use to communities.

The main way to motivate engineering students is to engage them in active participation. Besides the obvious means (oral presentations, discussions, and debates), there are also means of focusing on the

way inventions have triggered the progress of humanity. For instance, horses have had a certain role in the progress of civilizations, just as the discovery of light, the invention of writing, of paper, the creation and improvement of computers, and so on. In this way, students can feel part of the historical process of progress. They will experience history as something more than just a series and memorizing of events.

The main purpose of Professor Baciu's coursebook is to help students reflect on various aspects related to culture and civilizations, such as the role of wars throughout history. Wars are not a mere means of conquest and destruction, but also a source of progress. The two different perspectives on war differ according to the mentality of various historical periods. Nowadays we have a negative view of war, whereas in the past wars were regarded as means of progress and heroism. The typical hero we remember is Alexander the Great who, according to the ethical makeup of the times, regarded war as a means of achievement. Back then, life could end at any time, and a heroic life meant a life of accomplishment.

Creating the occasion for expressing their opinions in a logical argument is the main purpose of this course, as a skill that complements the gaining of theoretical background related to cultures and civilizations. These skills can be stimulated by teaching with technology when we prefer to take students out of the usual textbook routine. We could bring in class a documentary for students to watch and then they could express and argument their opinion on a certain issue or even create debates afterwards.

The methods need to be engaging, to include these students as part of the activity. It is a known fact in pedagogical science that boys generally need to be more active and as such the learning activities should be designed so as to sometimes make them move a bit through the classroom. With students, this could be done by making them work in groups to debate an issue, or in pairs. This means that they will need to change their partners of work to try to learn to collaborate with a variety of personalities, not just with their close friends.

As with teaching a foreign language, translations could be used with teaching culture and civilization as well, but of a different kind: intersemiotic translation. This type of translation refers to the way different signs can be translated into another system. It is used for understanding the way a novel can be adapted into a film, thus into a different medium. The same could be applied to different ways of socializing across cultures, to behavior in a business environment and to using social events to ensure business collaborations. This is a way to help students adapt their behavior to those of persons they come into contact with from different cultures. A useful activity could be done by asking students how a coffee invitation works in their own country as compared with those invitations in different countries, with respect to how long they last, for instance. In this type of activity, teaching with video could be used. Students can watch a scene with a business meeting, and afterwards the teacher can discuss and comment with the students the way the characters dress and behave, then compare this with their personal expectations influenced by their own cultural background.

Through concrete examples, students will come to visualize and understand various aspects of culture and civilization which they come across at all steps in their everyday life without even realizing it.

3. Conclusions

The best teaching methods for an optional course in culture and civilization for engineering students is, first of all, stimulating their participation and creativity. The means should be flexible, and varied, so as not to create a routine in the classroom which would make students lose their interest. For instance, only relying on the course textbook will only make them show up for the examination at the end of the course. The teacher needs to do much more than just follow the textbook material. Additional materials and activities are necessary in order to actively engage the students in interesting activities, which they will also feel that are useful for their future careers and for their own personal lives. They will have a different view on socializing events even in their own culture, as they will

become aware of the opportunities offered by business dinners, and even family events, which serve to strengthen the ties among members that are family related.

The teachers should be very much aware of the English for Specific Purposes dimension when holding lectures for this course for engineering students. The same course is held for the Translation and Interpretation section of the Department of Foreign Languages and Communication within the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest. Usually, when the same course is taught there, the textbook is usually followed in its general aspects, and topics related to engineers' interests are not added for supplementary discussions. The students in translation and interpretation are more used to working with texts, yet the visual dimension such as teaching with video, and even personal interaction through group or pair work are not excluded. Topics of interest to the students of the respective year of study, such as mysteries, can also be added with students of translation and interpretation as well. With these students, aspects related to the role of translations throughout history could be added, instead of focusing on famous inventors and technology.

The same way as teachers will always try to find common interests related to age groups to stimulate their attention (such as making references to Harry Potter to students of the respective age) will teachers of courses of culture and civilization focus on interests of students of ESP.

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