POTENTIAL OF ESP CLASSES FOR PROMOTING LEARNERS' CULTURAL LITERACY

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This paper focuses on the potential of ESP classes for promoting students' cultural literacy determined by current societal needs. Sharing the ideas of E. D. Hirsch, we claim that general literacy is impossible without cultural literacy, i.e. common background knowledge which enables one to communicate adequately within the frameworks of the shared culture. Thus, we understand the notion of "being culturally literate" as realizing the underlying concepts within a particular culture and consider the term "culturally literate" as an inseparable property of an educated person.

We teachers have always been confronting incidents demonstrating more or less cultural ignorance of our students. So we should look at our subject as a means to the end – to help our students to improve their level of cultural literacy. Unfortunately, in this country ESP teachers tend to be discouraged by a strong pressure of restrictions on classroom time, which is presupposed by the curriculum. Hence, under the circumstances we cannot but be flexible and extremely selective about which teaching material and methods of instruction to use in class. Our experience in dealing with ESP students proves a universally shared assumption that involvement of one thing in academic work varies with circumstances. Imagine that we agree on arranging and using fixed lists of shared core knowledge items to improve cultural literacy. On the one hand, this idea might seem convincing, while on the other, – it may not work, for student audiences might vary greatly. Anyway, whatever the academic surrounding, the lists of common knowledge items should include thoroughly elaborated materials for the learners to deal with (in terms of reading, watching, listening to, discussing, making presentations, etc). What matters here is teachers' responsibility to encourage students' engagement in analytical activities on a regular basis. Referring to the idea of the "three Rs" applied as the foundations of an education program within schools, we extend it to the idea of promoting cultural literacy aimed at ESP students. To some extent, it is possible to draw a parallel between these two if we theorize about an averaged set of facts or names as manifestations of a core knowledge. But unlike the straightforward orientation towards basic skills, cultural literacy can hardly be treated as a certain framework mechanically restricted to knowledge of a totality of particular things. Rather, a culturally literate person should be able to insert their particular knowledge into proper contexts, find out allusions, identify metaphoric meanings, enjoy stylistic variations of whatever is being considered. To this end, much is required on the sides of both teachers and learners.

We the teachers are obliged to guide our learners in recommending this or that thing for the self-development activities. We know about the tendency of our students to ignore the required self-study activity, though it is an officially appointed part of students' work beyond in-class one. Moreover, this work is to be carried out on a regular basis! This is to a great extent a teacher's responsibility for this aspect of students' work not to be ignored. In ESP course we are supposed to deal with reading English materials. So, as we see it, teachers are responsible for a good choice of relevant reading materials. It is generally accepted that good literature broadens our view on the world. What is more, it encourages the individual to stand the temptations of the modern world. Cultural literacy develops capacity and courage to take right decisions at right time. It teaches people try to have control over their lives' situations, rather than depend on opinions of others in making decisions. These skills are of essential relevance these days, when diverse multimedia technologies are skyrocketing. The new generation is dependent on the mass media telling the audience what to do, think, believe, buy. Critical view on the current environment created by mass media can help one recognize deception, when young people are made to accept unquestionably the reality, being persuaded that entertainment is value-free. A terrible thing happens when young people cannot see the things as they are, but look at them through the prism of false opinions. To survive in this commercialized world, the youth must be capable of evaluating the inputs, making distinctions between facts and fiction. According Aldous Huxley, facts do not cease to exist, because they are ignored. We cannot but accept the assumption that nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity. Our

brains are turned off and we become unable to think or function on our own, unless we stop being exposed to too much information attacking from everywhere around us. Without developed cultural literacy skills which go hand to hand with critical thinking it is so easy for modern young people to become stupid, with their intelligence and mental capacity being actually hindered. The population may start doing or saying something bad or wrong, without even realizing that it is not good or not true at all. As Alvin Toffler, a renowned futurist, puts it, "The illiterate of twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn."

We see it reasonable to draw a conclusion by referring to a high responsibility of educational institutions. It is these establishments whose duty consists among others in promoting cultural literacy for students to be lifelong learners, which is likely to serve as a strong prerequisite for a person to survive as a citizen of a modern civilization.

BUILDING STUDENTS' CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH INTERACTIVE WEB TECHNOLOGIES

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With increased contacts between representatives of different cultures, peoples' mobility, globalization processes the issue of building cross-cultural competence becomes one of the important components of a university curriculum. Cross-cultural competence means that students understand the underlying values of their own culture, are aware of the differences between cultures, are able to overcome stereotypes about a different culture, and manage to choose various strategies of behavior in different communicative situations.

Cross-cultural competence is directly linked to learning a foreign language. Any language is determined by its culture and develops under its influence. When students learn a second or a foreign language it's logical to assume that they acquire the culture of those languages and how it correlates with their own culture.

Since English has become the language of communication in politics, business, and education students should be taught how to use the means of the language to their advantage. One of these advantages is that English as the language of the internet becomes a "lingua franca" which unites users from all over the globe. So, English becomes a medium to bridge cultural differences. Students use this medium when they interact and collaborate with each other in a virtual community.

Unlike websites that limit people to passive viewing of content, interactive websites allow users not only to read/watch/listen to shared material but also to comment on it, create accounts or profiles on the sites, which increases multicultural participation. Such interactive web technologies as wiki, blogs, google docs, video-conferencing provide a common virtual meeting ground for culturally diverse groups that are engaged in interaction.

All these interactive technologies have educational potential and can be implemented into teaching and learning process with the purpose of developing cross-cultural competence. Thus, blogs can be used as a platform for reflecting on culturally significant topics (lifestyle, traditions, celebrations, eating habits etc) among diverse student groups. Students might be offered to comment on their peers' posts and "keep up conversation" by asking thought-provoking questions, analyzing controversial points and drawing from them. Wiki might be used as a space for adding presentations with the results of culture related projects. Google documents allow students from different cultural backgrounds to engage in collaborative writing aimed at discussing and analyzing cultural assumption to produce positive change in social and political intercultural relations.

While mentioned technologies are of asynchronous nature, video-conferencing facilitates collaborative projects, develops sensitivity to intercultural contexts, has a positive impact on students' attitudes and behaviours.

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