

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE CULTURAL COMPONENT

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Abstract

The paper I would like to present is based on my 7-year teaching experience as a lecturer at the Center for Foreign Language Teacher Training and European Education of the University of Warsaw and my 5-year experience as the Centre's director.

I work at the University College of English Language Teacher Education (a part of the Center) where I teach American literature and culture. Teaching these subjects (which are foreign and at the same time familiar to my Polish students through their immersion in popular culture which is highly grounded in American culture and reality) I have been basing on what Patrick Moran calls "four knowings:" knowing about, knowing why, knowing how, and knowing oneself. Thus, not only am I required to present my students with information on a particular cultural aspect they are learning about, but I also strive at grounding and comparing the knowledge I am passing onto my students with their experiences of their vernacular culture and language. This, in turn, as I see it, helps them not only learn the relevant and required information and facilitate the language learning process but also have the knowledge stored in their long term memory. It may seem a natural way of teaching content and language, however, from my perspective, teacher trainers and language instructors often forget or disregard this valuable aspect of knowing oneself.

As far as my experience as the director of the Center is concerned, I would like to acquaint the participants with the new teaching program we have implemented in our institution. The Center is the only public university unit running a program in which students learn to teach two subjects: either two foreign languages (English, French or German) or a foreign language and civic education. Not only does this meet the demands of the education market in Poland but also makes our students successful competitors in terms of employment.

I think that sharing the above mentioned experiences might be a valuable contribution to the conference.

Essay: "As many languages you know, as many times you are a human being."¹ Starting from this premise the European Union encourages its member states to make learning and teaching foreign languages one of the priorities in their educational policies. Poland has internalized this idea to a high degree and made learning English in primary schools and gradually introducing a second foreign language learning cornerstones in school curricula. Children in Poland start their obligatory English language education at the age of six or seven, depending on the choice of their parents when to start school. After 2014, the mandatory age will uniformly be 6. Pre-school foreign language

¹ Omniglot: The Online Encyclopedia of Writing Systems and Languages, download 25.05.2013
<<http://www.omniglot.com/language/proverbs/language.htm>>.

education is popular but financed by the parents and completely voluntary. According to findings provided by the Early Language Learning in Europe research project, foreign language teaching in Poland tends to be standardized and correspond to descriptors and standards set in Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The standardization allows one to state that primary school pupils in Poland upon reaching the age of 10 years attain the A1 level of language competency, similarly to their peers in England, Spain or Hungary.² This, in turn, exerts the necessity of educating highly qualified teachers.³ Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present the program of training foreign language teachers implemented and carried out in the Center for Foreign Language Teacher Training and European Education of the University of Warsaw. Special focus will be given to utilizing a cultural component in English language teaching.

1. THE CENTER AND ITS PROGRAM

The Center, which encompasses three university colleges: University College of English Language Teacher Education, University College of French Language Teacher Education, and University College of German Language Teacher Education, was formed in 1998, in order to meet the demands of a rapidly growing need for foreign language teachers in Polish schools. Five years later, in 2003, to broaden the scope of Center's graduates' qualifications and to make them competitive not only on the Polish but also European education market, added to the program was a vital module consisting of lectures on the European Union, its member states' systems of education, educational policies, and the position of a foreign language teacher within the context of diverse European countries. In its current shape, the curriculum in the Center is balanced and divided between academic/philological and practical subjects, since a well-rounded teacher of foreign languages is required to have competences in both fields.

The Center carries out first cycle studies in the field of foreign language teaching in two subjects. The program was developed in 2012 and is unique on the Polish scale. Its first subjects are English language teaching, French language teaching, and German language teaching, whereas its second subject is teaching one of the already mentioned foreign languages or teaching history and civic education. When admitted, our students present at least the A2 level of French and German on first-language basis, while B1 in the case of English. As for the second language, admission level is A1 and A2, respectively. Throughout the course, our students are offered ca. 600 hours of practical English as first subject, and 750 of German or French in that capacity. At the same time, they receive ca. 600 hours of practical French or German as second language, while ca. 500 hours of practical English on second-language basis. Upon graduation, Centre's students possess a C1 level of both first and second languages. The graduates are certified to teach in first and second educational stages, which in

² Cf. Janet Enever, ed., *ELLIE: Early Language Learning in Europe* (The UK: The British Council, 2011) 31, 34.

³ According to ELLIE, foreign language education is mainly entrusted to specialist teachers, who are either qualified to teach two subjects (one of which is a foreign language) or two foreign languages specifically. Moreover, on average foreign language primary school teachers are at least on the B2 level. See: ELLIE, 26, 41.

the Polish case is from the age of 6 to 12. In order to work on the third stage, teaching students up to the age of 19, it is necessary to obtain an M.A. degree in a discipline with equivalent learning outcomes.

Since 2012, the Center has its teaching program adjusted to the demands of the National Qualifications Framework, which in turn, corresponds to the European Qualifications Framework. The program offers its students sixty five learning outcomes, 25 in knowledge, 27 in skills and 13 in social competences. The program is a mixture of general academic and practical learning outcomes, the majority of which are practical ones. As far as study areas are concerned, it ventures into the humanities and social sciences. Moreover, though the general University of Warsaw policy concerning foreign language learning requires each student to be on the B2 level in one of foreign languages learned upon completing their first cycle studies, and take a certification exam to prove it, the Center's students, due to the fact that the level they reach upon graduation is C1, and foreign language learning outcomes exhaust academic and school language learning outcomes, are not required to take the certification exam to prove their competences in any of foreign languages learned.⁴ On the one hand, this seems to be an evidence of trust that the University of Warsaw places in the Center within the domain of teaching foreign languages. On the other hand, this challenges the Center to constantly monitor and upgrade its quality of teaching.

The quality of teaching is the Center's constant concern. There are several ways of its assurance in the Center. First and foremost, practical language teaching is done by lecturers who specialize in practical aspects of given languages, English, French or German respectively. At the same time, each practical language teaching team (English, French or German) has at least one member who is a native speaker of the given language. As far as other academic subjects are concerned, the Center's policy is that they are taught by specialists in their respective study areas, either doctors or professors. Every subject is assessed by the students either on a semester basis or a yearly basis. They fill in anonymous questionnaires with questions dealing with the content of each subject, the level of teachers' knowledge, their involvement in classes, clarity of issues taught and their attitudes to students. Each questionnaire is thoroughly studied and taken into account by the Center's authorities, who, in turn, offer their feedback to respective teachers.⁵ Moreover, every year, each academic teacher is supposed to evidence their self-development as teachers and academics by filling in an evaluation form dealing with such aspects that build up academic career as the number of publications, conferences attended, or the number of completed diploma projects. In addition, at least once every two years each academic teacher's classes are observed by their peers or superiors. The abovementioned procedures

⁴ The only exception are those who take history and civic education as their second subject, not English, French or German language teaching.

⁵ According to the Center's "Policies and procedures to ensure and improve the quality of teaching at the CFFLTTEE," "Any individual who receives negative feedback from the questionnaires for two consecutive years (less than 10% percent for any of the different categories), or any individual whose relationship with students is contrary to expected standards is required to submit an explanation in writing." See: "Policies and procedures to ensure and improve the quality of teaching at the CFFLTTEE," 27.05.2013 <http://www.cknjoiee.uw.edu.pl/en/cknjoiee/quality_assurance/quality_assurance_eng>. Moreover, Negative feedback from students' questionnaires might be one of the bases of terminating a contract with an academic teacher. See: The Higher Education Act.

clearly indicate the fact that teaching quality assurance is one of most vital aspects in the Center's operations.

2. CONTENT SUBJECTS IN THE CENTER

Due to the fact that the Center's teaching program is a compound of philological and vocational subjects, the former comprise such subjects as history, culture, and literature of the target country. Since no language exists without its culture, these two aspects are inherently intertwined. According to Brown H. Douglas, "Culture is a way of life. It is a kind of context in which we live, operate, feel, think, exist and relate to others. Culture can be also defined as ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterize a particular group of people. Culture is a system of values that govern behavior. [...] A language is a part of culture, and a culture is a part of language."⁶ Following this premise one can postulate that what really facilitates the process of learning a foreign language is the exposition and immersion in its culture. Thus, cultural experience, can be generated either through direct personal encounters with native speakers of the foreign language or through diverse authentic and language materials used in the foreign language classroom.⁷ This entails four cultural knowings: knowing about, knowing how, knowing why, and knowing oneself.⁸ According to Patrick R. Moran, the first knowing concerns the process of acquiring cultural information about a given cultural aspect, phenomenon, text; the second gives us insight into cultural practices - behaviors in everyday situations, skills or actions of the target culture group. Knowing why is the domain of cultural perspectives – beliefs, values, and attitudes of the target culture group, whereas knowing oneself spurs students to form their opinions, valuations, and critical analyses of their indigenous culture.⁹ All of the knowings do not reside in the sphere of intellect solely; they exert specific practical attitudes in learners. Knowing about bases on learners' "concrete experience" of the target culture, knowing how encourages students' "reflective observation," knowing why demands learners to impose their own meanings – "abstract conceptualization," and the last knowing contributes to learners' self-awareness.¹⁰ Assigning practical labels to these for knowings, one may say that it is description, participation, interpretation, and finally response.¹¹

3. TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH THE USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

Teaching students about selected aspects of United States' history and culture is a highly complicated task since the country is an amalgam of every ethnic and cultural group in the world along with their unique cultural practices, products, and perspectives.¹² To cater to the first three knowings, the teacher not only has to be

⁶ Brown H. Douglas, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (London: Longman, 2000).

⁷ Cf. Patrick R. Moran, *Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice* (Boston: Heinle&Heinle, 2001) 8.

⁸ Moran 8.

⁹ Moran 16 -17.

¹⁰ Cf. Moran 18.

¹¹ Cf. Moran 19.

¹² These three terms are also used after Patrick Moran.

conscious of different cultural habits, traditions, perceptions, but he/she has to wisely choose and utilize learning materials. One of the best ways to expose students to real life language and situations is through the use of authentic materials, which are, in the view of M. Peacock, “materials that have been produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community.”¹³ Though they have a number of assets such as:

- Exposing students to real discourse,
- informing about what current events in the target language country and in the world,
- containing a wide variety of text types, and language styles
- encouraging further research by students themselves according regarding their points of interest¹⁴
- they may also contain some pitfalls:
- they may be too culturally biased,
- the vocabulary might not be relevant to the student's immediate needs.
- the content can become outdated easily, e.g. news.¹⁵

However, it is advisable to look for and utilize such texts when dealing with selected cultural aspects which are culturally rich and meaningful. A case in point would be Horace Miner's “Body Ritual among the Nacirema,”¹⁶ which is a sample of anthropological study of a tribe living in the US – the Nacirema (*American* read backwards). Not only does this text offer cultural description, participation and interpretation in the form of introducing the Nacirema tribe to the readers through a wide array of their elaborate social rituals and practices, but what seems most important, it does not leave the readers indifferent. What is more, once they read the essay, they are tempted to compare their own practices and rituals with those of the Nacirema. And this is where the process of self-awareness comes into sight. Though it might often be neglected or overlooked by language teachers, it plays a significant role in the process of foreign language learning: since it forces learners to refer to their own culture, it contextualizes the newly gained knowledge along with language structures and facilitates their storage in long-term memory. What is more, it offers a plane of comparison and reaching general and specific conclusions as to the operations of European and American societies. On top of all this, it poses a starting point to a discussion on each learner's unique cultural experiences. This, in turn, is a vital aspect of education of a well-rounded European teacher of foreign languages well versed in his/her own culture and with a broad outlook on the overseas countries.

To sum it all up, one needs to say that the practical mode of teaching/preparing modern European teachers of foreign languages has proved itself to be the best option, since it combines philological and practical subjects and equips its students with concrete skills and abilities. Moreover, as it was indicated above, each philological subject should be linked with references to the learners' unique cultural and social

¹³ M. Peacock, “The Effect of Authentic Materials on the Motivation of EFL Learners,” *English Language Teaching Journal* 51: 2.

¹⁴ Cf. Alejandro G. Martinez, “Authentic Materials: An Overview,” 27.05.2013 < <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/authenticmaterials.html>>.

¹⁵ Cf. Martinez.

¹⁶ See: Horace Miner, “Body Ritual among the Nacirema,” *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 503-507, 27.05.2013 < <https://www.msu.edu/~jdowell/miner.html?pagewanted=al>>.

situations. Only such a mode can guarantee a successful process of teaching and learning, also regarding teacher training.