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The necessity of cultural knowledge during the foreign language studies

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the significance and introduction of cultural studies in the curricula for foreign language studies. Although the main focus in the paper is pointed to English as the most dominant language in the world today, the paper is primarily intended and refers to all the languages. Section two consists of the aspects and reasons for the necessity of introducing the cultural studies in the foreign language curricula. Section three is written upon the research results made in the public and private schools for foreign languages. Here the good cultural knowledge is presented as an easier, better and more interesting way in acquiring a foreign language. Section three also consists of some aspects of cultural shock and the possibilities for its avoidance. Section four gives conclusion and recommendation.

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1. Introduction

The practice has shown that the cadres, who come out of the departments for languages, are not completely professional, as they have a good command on the foreign language but cannot use it in practice. What happens, in fact, is that all the future language teachers are faced with an enormous problem of how to teach the foreign language to their students, without knowing to explain why it is so. Or even worse, they cannot use it appropriately in various social or political contexts and enjoy the benefits.

This paper particularly refers to those groups of intellectuals, who are devoted to their study, yet for either financial or personal reasons they are not able to visit the country whose language is the primary aim of their studies. Facing the reality outside of the classroom is what makes them inappropriate for the job they do and puts on a negative influence.

Therefore, in this paper we would like to emphasize the importance of introducing the cultural studies in the foreign language curricula. Although the main focus in the paper is pointed to English as the most dominant language in the world today, the paper is primarily intended and refers to all the languages. Section two consists of the aspects and reasons for the necessity of introducing the cultural studies in the foreign language curricula. Section three is written upon the research results made in the public and private schools for foreign languages. Here the good cultural

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knowledge is presented as an easier, better and more interesting way in acquiring a foreign language. Section three also consists of some aspects of cultural shock and the possibilities for its avoidance. Section four gives conclusion and recommendation.

2. Importance of cultural studies in the foreign language curricula

In this section of the paper, we try to explain the necessity of a profound cultural knowledge, mostly at the departments for foreign language studies. In fact, the foreign language itself, stands for a another culture. In that context, we will start with some general aspects of the cultural studies that need to be seriously considered when making curricula.

Cultural studies aims to examine its subject matter in terms of cultural practices, they are committed to an ethical evaluation of the modern society and their objective is to understand the culture in all its complex forms. Cultural identity is represented through beliefs, languages, practices and ways of knowing. Cultures are valued when there is explicit appreciation of these characteristics, and within the curriculum this requires that a range of cultures are acknowledged and given status. Cultural groups are distinguished by social characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, race, religion, economic status or age. Valuing them means legitimating these cultures for all students, through the inclusion, recognition and transmission of cultural knowledge. Therefore, cultural studies must develop forms of critical knowledge as well as a critique of knowledge itself. The field of cultural studies has gained both importance and visibility as universities are facing new pressures and scholars are facing the complexities of a changing world. No single model has emerged as the dominant organization of cultural studies as either a research or pedagogical practice. Its goal is to encourage interdisciplinary research and education in cultural studies and to help produce a viable and flexible model for cultural studies and its role in the contemporary university by working closely with other departments and interdisciplinary programs. Cultural studies can be broadly defined by a number of commitments. First, they are interdisciplinary because in part they operate at the intersection of culture with other forms of social and material practices. They are both theoretical and contextual and their main concern is not to use theory as a resource to better understand and change the specific historical contexts, but the object of study is the relations between specific cultural practices or discourses, everyday life and structures of power, and their practice is self-reflective.

The classroom is still traditionally perceived as a place where information is transmitted to students. However, if we grant students an active role in the process of cultural formation, they can become agents in the production of social practices. So, movies, soap operas and popular novels can be completely added in the curricula. Yet, in order to describe a culture, one should accumulate knowledge about it. Such an aim leaves the impression on students that a culture has a permanent character and that specific structures can be described in an essentialist manner. These procedures are especially pernicious in those disciplines associated with the humanities since they suggest that the culture has already been formed rather than that it is in the process of transformation. Therefore, the study of culture is the accumulation of knowledge about it.

Has it now become clear of why are the cultural studies so important for the departments of foreign languages? There are many alienated, privatized and uncultured experts who are knowledgeable only within very narrowly defined areas. This technical intelligentsia, rather than intellectuals in the traditional sense of thinkers concerned with the totality is growing by leaps and bounds to run the increasingly complex bureaucratic and industrial apparatus. Thus, there is a need for cultural studies to engage critically the social and political issues, and to promote an understanding of both the enabling and constraining dimensions of culture.

3. Benefits of the cultural knowledge

In this section we will refer to the benefits of the cultural knowledge and the advantages that one may face during the professional career. Having a good educationally based cultural knowledge, reflects on one's individuality and professionalism. More efficiency is gained when it is combined with the appropriate cultural experience. Talking about Republic of Macedonia and an English speaking country (whether USA, Canada, England or Australia), there are many differences, and many questions start with the interrogative "why". In order to be able to give an answer to those questions, one should be well acquainted with the past and present cultural situation in that country, but also with its future aspires. History helps understanding things better. Yet, the two semesters civilization studies are not enough for the task to be accomplished. Even the classes in modern language that include more conversation and

tip-tops are not sufficient. There is a real need of classes where the culture of the people whose language is the principal subject will be learned and discussed through history, literature and authentic materials.

A very important aspect that needs to be considered is the cultural shock. In fact, many students are ambitious enough and they apply for various scholarship programs and are willing to spend part of their studies abroad. The cultural shock may have a dramatically negative influence on them, and even it can affect their studies. We all know that all the people in the world are different, yet we are never sufficiently prepared to face that differentiality. Then comes the moment when we need to experience the cultural shock, and neglect the studies but prioritize the learning and experience of other culture. Cultural shock itself may have a strong negative influence and may cause negative consequences on one's view and expectations of the other culture. And it won't come to that point if there is a good, practical cultural knowledge included during the studies themselves. In fact, cultural studies not only serve the foreign language teachers, but they are a benefit for all the professionals whose main job activities are inevitably linked with the use of a foreign language. As an example, aside from the teachers, we will mention in this context all the employees in the institutional departments for cooperation and export-import trade services. Their working assignments are harder in weight because of the fact that they need to learn more for the cultural background of their potential working partner before their initial meeting and communication. Successfully accomplished assignments can only be achieved through good knowledge and appropriate communication flow, and then the cultural shock will be avoided.

Our research was conducted in two public primary schools and in one private school for foreign languages. At the primary schools the main target were pupils at the age of ten (or pupils at the fourth grade). At the private school, the main target was teenagers as well as adults learning the foreign language for specific purposes. The research included English as a foreign language. The main conclusion is that both, at the primary and at the private school, the learners showed much greater interest in the culture of the English and American, rather than the various aspects of grammar of the language. Through the cultural behavior they learned the right pronunciation (depending if they wanted to sound more like English or more like American). The questions addresses to the various aspects of culture differed from one target group to another. The children at the primary school were more curious to learn about everything (mostly about the festivals and holidays). The teenagers were more directed to the social life of the foreign culture, being driven from the soap operas they watched on TV and the popular music they listened. The adults obviously knew many cultural aspects, yet their interest was directed to the economic life and professional life of the people whose language they learnt.

4. Conclusion

In recent times, cultural studies have gained more on weight and their importance was widely recognized. Many centers and institutions for cultural studies were opened or re-opened. Yet, the cultural studies are still not totally included in the teaching curricula. All the above written aspects of the necessity of cultural studies should be a frame and an urge for a serious consideration of their inclusion in the foreign language curricula.

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