LITERARY TEXTS AS A SOURCE OF CULTURAL AWARENESS AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract
The paper explores research based on the contrastive analysis of two different sources of authentic materials related to cultural aspects and language acquisition: one from fiction and one from non-fiction sources. The hypothesis - based on the assumption that a literary text is more appealing and motivating for learners (an experimental group) than non-fictional authentic materials (a control group), and therefore learners' cultural awareness and language acquisition will be more significant than those of the control group learners - is discussed in the paper. Literary materials as effective teaching materials for providing cultural and linguistic input will be analyzed and compared with authentic non-fiction materials. Practical recommendations for language teachers will be provided in the conclusion.

Key words: *cultural awareness, authenticity, communicative competence, action research*

1. INTRODUCTION

As the goal of language teaching has changed into the concept of actual language use, the need for authenticity has become an inseparable part of the current approach to English language teaching (ELT), along with the needs to communicate, to set up long-term goals and to focus on student-centeredness (Tomlinson 2011). The term authenticity seems to cover language in authentic use and/or features of authentic input. Some methodologists consider all the materials written in a target language authentic, as it was written authentically, however, much course book language is produced for instructional purposes, pedagogically modified to encourage learners to use the language and feel self-confident with their comprehension of it. For this paper purposes, authentic materials are seen as materials that provide exposure to real language and authentic cultural information. Thornbury sees the notion of authenticity as "originally introduced to distinguish between artificially simplified texts and unmodified real texts" (Thornbury 2006, p. 21). Other applied linguistics have concluded that authentic materials are those materials which were written for native speakers and which might help not only to improve a target language but to develop cultural awareness – sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behavior on language use and communication (Tomalin, B.& Stempleski, S. 2008). In this perspective cultural awareness covers target language life and institutions, beliefs, and values, as well as everyday attitudes and feelings conveyed not only by language.

Since the English Major bachelor-degree program at the Department of English Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education, Trnava University, comprises British and American studies, the course emphasizing the 'big C' elements – history, geography, institutions, literature and way of life (achievement culture), the master-degree program has been broadened to include culturally-influenced beliefs and perceptions of target language communities in two courses – Intercultural communication and British and American cultural studies. The courses focus on attitudes, beliefs and values expressed both through language and cultural behavior. Theoretical concepts are verified through practical samples and students are expected to become aware of similarities and differences between home culture and target culture, avoid stereotyping, to refine generalizations, to organize information about

target culture, to be tolerant to otherness, and to understand native speakers attitudes to life, social conventions and everyday living.

Linguists (Kramsch 1991; Buttjes & Byram 1991) claim that language and culture are inseparable. Foreign language learners become learners of target culture. Byram points out that communicative competence involves "appropriate language use, which in part at least, is culturally specific" (Byram 1991, p.61). Hymes (1996) states that culture and language can draw on and change one another. These concepts influence the English Major programs in the Department of English Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education, Trnava University, and students are trained that language is a living thing, which reflects the changes in community in which it is used. On the contrary, language enables one to discover values, beliefs and attitudes, social conventions, ritual behavior, and interpersonal relations between members of a target community.

Synthesizing various approaches to authentic materials, authenticity is related to the concept that language data are unaltered and are produced by and for native speakers of a common language. They can be written or spoken and are produced originally for nonteaching purposes with the goal to convey a real message using authentic language and reflecting real-world language use. Authentic materials might be any articles published in target language newspapers, journals, magazines, non-fiction books, fiction books, or electronically displayed on the Internet.

Literary texts are a powerful motivator, as they touch on themes to which learners can bring a personal response from their own experience (Duff & Maley 1992). What is more, they meet the criteria of authenticity, interactiveness and are very useful for both language learning and cultural awareness. Communicative language teaching (CLT) supports the approach to literature based on allowing learners to put themselves imaginatively into the target situation. Learners can benefit from reading literature as they can improve their vocabulary and grammatical structures being exposed to real language, and therefore the selection of suitable works of literature requires increased vigilance. Extensive reading increases a learner's receptive vocabulary, provides rich context in which individual lexical and syntactical items are made more memorable (Collie & Slater 2011). All the items are contextualized and the richness of language is recognized in a natural way. Reading current literature is one way of deepening understanding of life in a target community. A reader can discover various aspects of social life as literary heroes depicted in current literature come from different social backgrounds and allow readers to discover their thoughts, feelings and "how they behave behind closed doors" (Collie & Slater 2011, p. 4).

Apart from an extended stay in a target country, another indirect route to deepen understanding of target culture is reading non-fiction literature. This involves newspapers, journals, magazines, articles printed or displayed electronically. As successful learning is based on the ability to integrate new information with one's existing knowledge, either general or cultural or subject-specific, reading non-fiction literature in a target language positively influences the development of students' language skills as well. In choosing suitable non-fiction material, the key point is to plan in advance, to be systematic, as it is an on-going process.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As far as our research is concerned, the idea was to familiarize students with the fact that extensive reading provides a rich linguistic environment and develops cultural awareness. Extensive exposure to linguistically and culturally comprehensible written texts can enhance the process of language acquisition. Both authentic fiction and non-fiction materials enable the student to be exposed to real

language and target culture. As both sources are used in the above mentioned courses, a research question about which of these sources is more motivating and challenging for English Major students emerged and we started search for the solution.

2.1 The research hypothesis, research questions and methods

Formulating a research assumption was influenced by a modification of Seelye's framework for facilitating the development of cross-cultural communication skills (Tomalin & Stempleski 2008) focused primarily on the development of understanding culturally-conditioned behaviors, of locating and organizing information about the target culture and the increase of students´ awareness of the cultural connotation of words and phrases in the target language. The hypothesis predicts that a literary text is more appealing and motivating for learners than non-fiction authentic materials and therefore literary-text readers' cultural awareness and language acquisition will be more significant than those of the non-fiction readers. The research questions referred to language acquisition and cultural awareness, which were measured by two measurement techniques: three tasks and a questionnaire. The tasks were as follows:

Task 1: Describe what a law study in the U.S.A looks like. Your need to present 5 issues, supported by exact evidence from the texts.

Task 2: Describe the dress code in American universities. You need to present 5 issues, supported by exact evidence from the texts.

Task 3: Select 10 items related to grammar and vocabulary you have learned from the texts for real-life purposes. Give examples from the texts.

Initially, the goal was to distribute fiction texts in the experimental group and non-fiction ones in the control group, to let students read the texts at home emphasizing the focus on language and cultural aspects. However, later, it was changed into an activity done in class during a regular lesson, as the goal was to measure immediate impact on the students' language acquisition and cultural awareness.

2.2 Research samples

The research sample consisted of students of the bachelor-degree program in the summer semester in their first year of study. The background of these students was the same – the school-leaving examination in English and two semesters of the English Major program. Before the experiment, these freshmen had experienced linguistic disciplines (Introduction to Linguistics, Phonetics and Phonology), Introduction to Literature, and practical lesson of English aimed at integrated communicative language skills and enhancing grammar and vocabulary at CEFR C1 level). They had attended the course called Introduction to British and American civilization studies, focusing on history, geography, institutions and everyday life from a clearly identified curriculum of topics to be covered.

As the culturally-influenced behaviors should arise out of the language material being studied or read, the best selection seemed to be using authentic materials from the reasons mentioned in the introduction section. The assumption related to the impact of fiction and non-fiction sources on language acquisition and cultural awareness resulted in the decision that the total number of students (88) was divided into two groups: an experimental one (44 students) and a control one (44 students) in alphabetical order. The experimental group (A-K) consisted of 36 females and 8 males while in the control group (K-Z) the number of females was 35 and the number of males increased in one more (9).

The experimental group of students was obliged to read Chapter 2 from The Pelican Brief by John Grisham and the control group was provided authentic materials taken from the Internet (available at www.internationalstudent.com, blog.talkingphilosophy.com) related to all three issues mentioned

in the tasks. The length, the level of proficiency, the language difficulty was the same. All the texts were written in American English as the conditions needed to be the same. In both groups the students were working with the texts on their own, provided by dictionaries and grammar reference books, although they were familiarized with guessing meaning from context. They had to answer the questions as thoroughly as they could and all their answers were analyzed and assessed. Then they were given the questionnaire referring to cultural awareness (closed-item questions) and the whole process was concluded by discussing which texts were more appealing and motivating and which ones they considered more suitable for acquire new language and become aware of culture typical for American universities. The reactions of students were monitored, measured and analyzed. What is more, the questionnaire related to cultural awareness was analyzed as well and the data were synthesized for both groups separately.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that students were exposed to such an activity for the first time in their language learning experience they tried hard as they knew it was a clearly stated research study. Most of them could recognize that their poorer language limited their comprehension but the majority focused on the items they had to work on and completed the tasks successfully.

Their answers were different as the groups were provided different materials. Testing was based on right/wrong assessment and if the answer was supported by enough evidence from the read materials the students' answers were considered right. Assessing items 1 and 2, the learners were given 5 points per statements and 5 points per evidence. The total score was 40 points.

Items	Experimental group	Control group
Item 1 (10 points)	68%	75%
Item 2 (10 points)	73%	70%
Item 3 (20 points)	88%	76%

Table 1 Scores of experimental and control group students

The control group score in the first task was better than that of the experimental group. This achievement was based on the fact that while in literature the students had to infer proper information, in a journalist style the information was clearly recognizable and the students were able to find the appropriate answer more quickly and directly. Fiction is based on reading between lines and the first task related to the way how law is studied in the U.S.A required longer reading in the experimental group as the way of studying law in the USA needed the reading of the whole chapter.

The second task was addressed better by the experimental group, who, on the contrary with the first task, were provided information directly in page 13 for professors' dress code and page 14 for students´ dress code. The control group were to read the Philosophers' Magazine Blog, an article written by Mike Labossiere (http://blog.talkingphilosophy.com). As the text was written in a philosophical way, the students had to search for information in the text. Nevertheless, the difference was not significant.

The most remarkable difference was seen while checking the answers to the third task. The experimental group discovered a lot of structures and trends typical for modern English such as shortening (ammo for ammunition, p. 16), hyphenated compounds (a law-and-order right-winger, p. 18; the liberal-chic-academic look, p. 13; those normal, red-blooded, patriotic, middle-of-the road Americans, p. 19), words in collocations (drug trafficking, p. 18; a cardinal sin, p. 18), colloquialisms

(dope pushers for drug dealers, p. 18), inversion (Had she been a first-year student, and afraid of him, he might have ripped into her and screamed a few times, p. 14), verbless sentences (Dead silence, p. 14; No volunteers, p. 15). The analysis of the questionnaire has revealed that 42 percent of the students had written down sentences like: Someone was about to be nailed (p. 15); The exam was a nightmare, but he was really a sweetheart, a soft grader, and it was a rare dumbass who flunked the course (p. 15); Only Sallinger saw it though; since everyone else was glued to their legal pads (p. 15), giving reasons that they had liked them due to the used expressions (to be nailed, a soft grader, a rare dumbass, a person glued to…). The experimental group students were attracted by John Grisham's language and could find a lot of sentences which were word-for-word translations of mother tongue sentences but they would never have been brave enough to translate them into English in such a way.

On the contrary, the language used in blogs was more informal and students registered colloquialisms such as saggy pants, do-rags, hoods, usage of abbreviations (b. s.), discourse markers (as might be imagined, after all, in fact), fillers (of course, I think), more emotive language (I personally was not bothered, I believe), idioms (to turn a blind eye – to ignore something, to pretend that a person does not see it), abbreviations (uni), etc. From the grammar and vocabulary perspective, the students of the control group liked the articles but felt a little bit disturbed, as the language was full of jumpiness from one topic to another, which did not allow them to enjoy the language.

The experimental group was working with a literary text and had to deal with metaphors and metonymy. On the other hand, the sentences smoothly flew and the students were attracted by the way how ideas might be conveyed in English. The control group students were given two texts, one written for a journal and the second one, in which the first part of the text was written for a magazine blog and the second half was composed from the comments of the readers. Discussing the organization of all the texts, the student of both groups could recognize that specific or journalistic texts are written in logical order, clearly without any metaphorical expressions. Key words enabled them to locate proper information, and they were able to provide their answers to the questions more directly and therefore did not have to spend a lot of time discovering the right answers.

As mentioned above, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire to get feedback on their cultural awareness. The questionnaire was adapted from various questionnaires which must be filled in when a person wants to be employed in a culturally-diverse community. As the students had not experienced lectures referring to pragmatics and sociolinguistics, the majority of them (65%) could not recognize the influence of culture on language acquisition. On the other hand, they expressed their tolerance for other people's culture (78%) and agreed upon the necessity to be respectful to other cultures. They were open to the ideas of breaking away from ethnocentrism. As Trnková (2011) states when people are empathetic, and able to perceive feelings, motifs and behaviors of others, the chances to reach a successful interaction increase. Some answers to the questions were contradictory, as some students preferred foreigners to behave according to the proverb *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*, and at the same time they strongly supported the last item referred to the appreciation of the diversity of ideas based on different cultures. The discussion resulted in comparing university studies in Slovakia and in the USA and students proposed some examples what Slovak professors might say in a situation described in the book. What is more, the topic related to behavior of those American students was posed; consequently, both groups started to present their opinions on probable behavior of Slovak students in that situation.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The communication approach defines a multicultural aspect as an integral part of target language education. Hymes (1974), one of the first linguists who introduced the term communicative competence, emphasizes that communicative competence comprises, apart from others, behavioral competence and behavior related to the norms of the target community. Discourse is influenced by social and linguistic norms. Speech acts act in relation to social structure, values and social-cultural order and rules of the community.

Applied linguists and language teachers are aware of the fact that it is not possible to learn a language without including cultural aspect of the target community. Breaking cultural norms within their appropriateness and naturalness during interaction between a native speaker and a non-native speaker leads to sociopragmatic failure, the interruption of communication and non-native's stereotyping. The term culture might be seen from various perspectives, such as social norms, beliefs, value systems, which influence all the aspects of using a target language, learning it and teaching it. The principles of intercultural language education are firmly embedded, and as most European educational systems incorporated the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) into their national educational documents, they identified with the CEFR ideas related to a central objective of language learning - “to promote the favourable development of the learners whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture” (CEFR 2001, p. 1).

Authentic materials are a remarkable source of exposure to target culture and each form has its advantages and disadvantages. There is no contradiction that authentic materials are very useful in language teaching and learning, but many practitioners discuss the disadvantages related to the level of language proficiency and/or the way in which the activities are presented. From the pedagogical perspective, it is necessary to emphasize the key role of the teacher in the use of authentic materials, saying that it is the teacher, who can make any authentic-text-based lesson or seminar a fruitful language learning experience. Its potential for language and culture learning is considerable.

The goal of this research was to compare literary texts impact and non-fiction texts impact on language acquisition and cultural awareness. It has been found out that literary texts were slightly more challenging as students were to discover proper information, on the other hand, it led to attentive, but motivating reading. The most significant impact emerged one month after the experiment, when 12 students admitted that they had bought the book and read it. They were satisfied how much information related to cultural aspects they had been able to discover. Ten of them decided to enrich their vocabulary recording new words in a special exercise book. Seven students claimed that while reading the book they started to understand how grammar worked and helped convey meaning. On the contrary, other, more specific, texts provided necessary information clearly and directly. The students were able to find information quite quickly focusing on key words. They did not read the whole texts as they could not see a reason to do so. In addition, they did not care about developing their grammar and vocabulary so much because the key words directed them to their answers directly and the aim was not to elicit specific samples of language or use of a specific linguistic use. The primary focus was on meaning and achieving a communicative outcome. Comparing the scores, a slight difference between the achieved scores enables us to claim that any texts with cultural information are proper and, apart from building cultural awareness, they help enhance target language.

The revival of teaching literature emerged with communicative language teaching. Lágerová (2000) points at the fact that including literature into language teaching was related to the concept that language acquisition is not complete without experience (although mediated) from target language

traditions. Our brief research into eligibility of using literary texts has proved that language learners benefit from including reading fiction into teaching as they are exposed to real language, to real words appropriate for context purposes and can experience how grammar helps convey a message. What is more, learners can become aware of target culture in a natural way, not focusing on differences between their original culture and a target one but accepting the fact that other people can see the world through different eyes and this otherness enriches one´s life. As Trnková (2008) claims cognitive and affective aspects of intellect form a complex relationship, therefore teaching culture should be based on both knowledge and development of positive attitudes.

Despite the awkward results of Slovak students in reading literacy in PISA measurements, the experiment has revealed that most language students love literary texts as they carry cultural connotations and students want to become familiar with patterns of social interaction in the country which uses the target language. These patterns are portrayed in contextualized situations and discovery of the codes or assumptions which shape such interaction are challenging for students. Literary texts, which speak to the heart as much as to the mind, can make close contact with the student's own life.

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Appendix A

This questionnaire is to help you understand how you are likely to respond to people with cultural orientations that differ from your own. Read the questions carefully and answer the questions as objective as possible.

No	Question	Disagree ----- Neutral ----- Agree Strongly Strongly
1	Cultural unawareness does not influence language competence.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
2	There is usually more than one right way to do something.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
3	I avoid imposing values of my culture that may conflict with values of other cultures.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
4	If foreigners want to come to live in my country they should first learn the language and accept our values.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
5	The key to getting along in any culture is to just be yourself-authentic and honest.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
6	Good communication skills are universal, they are independent of culture.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
7	Sometimes it's confusing, knowing that values are different in various cultures and wanting to be respectful, but still wanting to maintain my own core values.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
8	I greet people from my culture and people from other cultures somewhat differently to account for cultural differences in the way respect is communicated.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
9	Everywhere is home, if you know enough about how things work there.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
10	I appreciate the diversity of ideas that dealing with different cultures can provide.	● ● ● ● ● ● ●

(Adapted from www.cultural.georgetown.edu)