CONTEMPORARY LITERARY PROSE AND ITS IMPACT ON TARGET CULTURE ACQUISITION

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Abstract

Over the last decades, the Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment influenced national curricula and expectations concerning language proficiency based on real-life experience. The paper discusses the impact of reading contemporary literary prose, focusing on cultural aspects that are not likely to be found in the course book, but only in materials related to real-life situations. The study referring to the efficiency of acquiring cultural information has revealed that being naturally exposed to target culture is more attractive for ELT learners and help them develop cultural awareness significantly. The factor that seems to influence the approach of learners to cultural awareness is a context-based naturalness of presenting different aspects that are linked to real life. Being engaged in the plot, the learners can recognise specific features concerning target culture that enable them to better understand a written text and interact with the writer.

Key words: *cultural awareness, contemporary literary texts, naturalness, context, real-life experience and situations*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), published in 2001, influenced the national curricula, language syllabi, language tests and publishing textbooks across Europe. The purpose was to improve the efficiency of language learning. The CEFR presents a clear philosophy concerning outcomes and specifications, an action-oriented approach, plurilingualism and language competences. The idea behind the philosophy resulted from a multilingual and multicultural European society the members of which need to understand each other while communicating their perception of the world, ideas, values and beliefs. Therefore the CEFR also promotes language learning as discovery about other cultures (North 2014). Different countries use different ways of exposing their citizens to other languages and cultures such as watching films in the original language, supporting mobility, etc. The self-assessment grid (CEFR, 2001, p. 27) includes a descriptor concerning reading comprehension at level B2 that reads – *Can read contemporary literary prose*, alongside with the ability to read articles and reports concerning contemporary problems in which writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. Contemporary literature depicts real-life problems people face every day either as members of their communities or in person.

Introducing literature to language teaching and learning is well justified by applied linguists due to its authenticity, real-life language and real-life problems discussed in contemporary literary works. Literary texts are seen open to multiple interpretations as only rarely will two readers' understanding of or response to a given text be identical. Every writer has a variety of choices available for conveying a message (what he/she wants to say and how he/she wants to say it). According to Widdowson (1975, p. 70), the aim of literary texts is to convey "an individual awareness of reality" and therefore they are unique. They cannot be paraphrased or explained by any single interpretation. They enable readers (learners in our case) to interpret the writer's ideas on their own, and therefore they are worth introducing in language classes.

Although literary texts should be read in language classes to support interaction between a reader and a text, they also provide enough samples of everyday language use either in the language of the narrator or that of the characters, which deserve analysis. As learners of English possess conscious, systematic knowledge about the target language, they are able to analyse it, which provides them with the tools to justify their own opinions on a text. The previous projects, applied in 2014 and 2015,

provided us with a lot of material supporting the idea that literary texts are attractive for learners who enjoy being exposed to real language. In our studies, we presented what university students were able to gain from reading contemporary literary prose (Bérešová, 2014; Bérešová, 2016) concerning primarily grammatical patterns and vocabulary. Both English grammar and vocabulary were discussed from the perspective of current trends in contemporary English. In some of the mentioned studies we made a passing comment about using literary texts to develop cultural awareness. As we have mentioned before, using contemporary literary texts in English class has its potential for developing cultural awareness, either inter-cultural or cross-cultural.

2. LANGUAGE

Beyond the structural and functional views of language, language has been understood as a communicative system since the 1970s. Carey (1989) presents communication as a cultural act that is constituted by social groups including a complex performance of the individual communicating not only information but also a person as a social agent that exists in the act of communication (Liddicoat, Scarino, 2013). The rich complexities of communication require to consider language "as open, dynamic, energetic, and constantly evolving and personal" (Shohamy, 2007, p. 5). Language enables us to see and understand the world around us, and to communicate about it differently as we are social individuals having different personalities. Language might be seen as both personal and communal and its use is a process of adapting, negotiating and accommodating. People use language for expressing and interpreting meanings while establishing, maintaining either social or interpersonal relationships. To be able to use a target language for expressing and interpreting meanings, language learners should be able to engage with unplanned and unpredictable aspects of language that requires an ongoing investigation and analysis of language beyond its linguistic features. What is more, language encompasses the history of its users, therefore can be considered as a "reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which people exist and perceive their world" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 29). Gadamer (1976) develops the idea of an ongoing process in which language is seen as the universal medium that allows understanding through words, interpreted by the participants in conversation whose historical circumstances and language limit a full interpretation. The current view of language encompasses views of language as a structural system with a view of language as a communication system, integrating the relationships of language to other aspects, for example, culture.

2.1. Language and Culture

The term culture has been defined in many ways and these definitions include notions such as *thinking, feeling* and *reacting*, determined by participles like *acquired* and *transmitted* by symbols, *complemented* by expressions, e.g. the *distinctive achievements of human groups*, *embodiments in artefacts*. From our perspective, we prefer the definition focusing on the concepts such as **traditional** (historically derived and selected) **ideas and their attached values** (Kluckhohn, 1951) or "transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic/meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behaviour and the artefacts produced through behaviour" (Kroeber and Parsons, 1958, p. 583). To make these definitions shorter and more content-based, Hofstede (2001) treats culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (p. 9) or "the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influence a human group's response to its environment" (p. 10). The culture patterns of different countries consist of the value systems shared by major groups in the population, factors that affect the physical and social environment and societal norms reflected in structures (institutions) and ways of functioning.

In the 1980s, the concept of culture focused on the ways of speaking, organizing texts, etc., which can be characterised as a culture of societal norms. From the culture as symbolic systems, culture has been understood as a system of shared meanings which are communicated and interpreted. The concept of cultural competence comprises understanding and interpreting target language and society meaningfully. According to Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), cultures are dynamic and emergent, created

through the ways in which individuals use language. Their concept of cultures as practices concerns knowing how to select and deploy practices that will enable participants in a culture to achieve goals in a particular context and evaluating the likely consequences of the selected practises.

2.2. Culture in language learning

Cultural learning used to be treated and is treated in some local contexts as learning about the history, geography and institutions of country of the target language. This approach presents a limited use for language learning and real communication in language as those concrete facts are taught for factual information rather than for communicative purposes. However, teaching culture comprises culturally-conditioned behaviour of target language speakers, social variables, conventional behaviour in common situations, cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language, generalisation about the target culture, development of skills to locate and organise information about the target culture, stimulating intellectual curiosity and encouraging empathy towards target culture people (Tomalin and Stempleski, 2008).

Alongside with accepting that there is no one right way to do things and that life is not black and white, intercultural competence enables learners to be able to value their own culture and other cultures and to find their own way of being involved in intercultural interaction, using language to explore culture. In language classes, language is privileged to become the entry point to cultures as language functions interdependently from the context in which it is used. Language is affected by the context in which it is used, and is shaped by speakers or writers in a particular interaction, at a particular time, and in a particular setting. Language learning enables learners to view the world more colourfully, holistically and empathically.

The interrelationships between language and culture in communication can be seen at different levels. The concept of culture might be broadened to the speakers of a particular language community in which the valued artefacts are produced, for example, English culture might include artefacts from the United Kingdom, the USA, Canada, Australia and/or South Africa, while the concept of culture as a national culture might be matched with the territory where culture is found, e.g. American culture. What is more, it can be reduced to a label derived from political geography. All these issues will be analysed in the following lines.

3. CULTURAL ASPECTS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY PROSE

In this chapter we will not deal with approaching literature as the teaching of literature, but contemporary literature will be used as a way into understanding cultural practices. Literature is one of the authentic resources for intercultural learning. Nevertheless, its study should be beyond literary criticism. Before discussing the analysis of a literary text, it is necessary to define contemporary literary prose. Since the goal of reading a book is not its artistic value, any literary prose published either as a single book or a short story in the 21st century might be used for the planned analysis. Other criteria incorporated into the judgement framework might include contemporary language, a story setting, bestseller ranking or the international reputation of the writer, etc. The final selection of one of John Grisham's books resulted from a very good experience gained while analysing the language of the narrator and that of characters used in his book *The Pelican Brief* (2009). The decision for his book *Gray Mountain* (2015) was a logical consequence of several criteria that included some of the previously mentioned aspects, including the setting in which the plot of the book was placed – Appalachia (a cultural region in the Eastern United States that stretches from the Southern Tier of New York to northern Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia). Alongside with English and American culture, local culture seemed to be a challenge for learners.

3.1. Cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language

The English-speaking world is of a diverse character/nature as is English spoken as a first language in many countries. However, from the historical perspective, the dominant culture was Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition. Any language reflects both past traditions and the living culture. Analysing the American text, we could recognize shifts in meanings of the words. While the expression *goon* means a stupid or silly person and is considered informal and old-fashioned in British English, in informal American English it means a criminal who is paid to frighten or injure people (OALD, 2005, p. 670). In the analysed text, both meanings were used. The following sample depicts the situation where the FBI agents raided the office and Anette who was in charge of Donovan Gray's law offices tried to protect the premises: *"…And you, sir, are not entitled to see any of it. If you try to touch any of it, I'll resist with all the physical might I can muster. Arrest me if you will, but I promise you the first thing in the morning I'll file a federal lawsuit with your name, Mr. Frohmeyer, and the names of the rest of you goons, front and center, as defendants"* (Grisham, 2015, p. 419). The second sample concerns the situation in which Samantha was sure that Donovan's brother Jeff was chased by hired gunmen to kill him: *Under the circumstances, she was reasonably sure it was the sound of a man getting hit by gunfire, not that she had any experience with such situations. As the seconds passed she became convinced it was Jeff who'd been hit. Ambushed by the backup thugs, or goons, or whatever* (Grisham, 2015, p. 446). The expression *thug* means a violent person, especially a criminal (OALD, 2005, p. 1602), therefore we can predict the meaning in which the expression *goon* is used. Other samples include the expressions *gal* that is considered old-fashioned, informal, especially NAmE (OALD, 2005, p. 636) was found several times in the language of the local people – *Hump said, "Let's go gals. I'll walk you back to the office"* (Grisham, 2015, p. 106), or *hillbilly* that means in NAmE, disapproving, a person who lives in the mountain and is thought to be stupid by people who live in the towns: *"Look, Samantha, I'm a son of the coal country, a hillbilly and a proud one, and I could tell you stories for hours about the bloody history of Big Coal"* (Grisham, 2015, p. 57).

Another category of words depicts American lifestyle. One of them was the expression *convenience store* that is related to a store that sells food, newspapers, etc. and often stays open 24 hours a day (OALD, 2005, p. 335) – *Their mother was at work at a convenience store* (Grisham, 2015, p. 120). The words describing typical way of living in an American society enable readers to imagine what the life is like:

- meals and drinks: *At one end of a cluttered table were two plastic carryout containers and two bottles of water. Lunch is served.* (Grisham, 2015, p. 119), "*I'm offering lunch, a working lunch in my office. Chicken salad sandwich?"* (Grisham, 2015, p. 114), *"I think you should make some coffee, decaf if you have it, and open the damned door"* (Grisham, 2015, p. 390)
- buildings and offices: *Through the thin wall she heard Annette discussing a case with Mattie* (Grisham, 2015, p. 115), "*They stuffed us rookies into what they called 'quads', these cramped little work places where you could reach over and touch your colleagues, if you need to"* (Grisham, 2015, p. 114)
- economic conditions of some families in the country*: A massive boulder, the size of a small car, had crashed through* a *mobile home, shearing it in half and causing serious damage* (Grisham, 2015, p. 120)
- parts of the USA: *Appalachia* and *West Virginia* (Grisham, 2015, p. 123).

The mentioned expressions through which it is easy to recognise some typical features of American society are words that are culturally induced and they are related to typical culture of a target community. Some of them are becoming multicultural due to globalisation.

3.2. Cultural values

While in Anglo-American culture people use conversational routines such as *How are you?, How are you doing? Nice to see you again, Lovely day, isn't it?*, expecting positive answers, East European cultures do not understand this concept of expressing good feelings when one doesn't feel anything good. This situation is depicted on page 24 when Samantha meets her dad after being sacked from her job: *"How are you doing" he asked sincerely, a hand on her knee as if she'd fallen down the steps. "I'm okay," Samantha said and immediately felt her throat tighten* (Grisham, 2015, p. 24).

Informality is another issue, which is recognisable in Anglo-American culture. When people meet for the first time, they introduced using their full names, but immediately start using their first names to express familiarity, friendliness, and equality (Wierzbicka, 2003). This aspect occurs several times in the book, for example, when Samantha met her new colleagues and was addressed by her future boss in the following way – *"I take it you're Samantha," she said, walking toward her* (Grisham, 2015, p. 60). The communication continued in two-page span as follows: *"Pardon me for saying so, Ms. Wyatt, but–". "It's Mattie"* (Grisham, 2015, p. 62). This way of communication is based on the idea of inviting people to treat a speaker as if they know him/her very well and there is no need to show overt respect toward him/her. In Slavonic languages, people call each other Ms or Mr working together for many years, mostly when they are not at the same position in their working setting. What is more, titles of respect are used widely. At universities, students address their pedagogues by using the titles of their academic ranks. The norms of each society have to be well understood and carefully defined.

3.3. Cultural traditions

Each country is characteristic by traditions that can be followed by most inhabitants, although some may be more typical for only a certain part of the country. Reading the book, it is recognisable that Samantha as a girl with her life spent in Washington, D. C. and New York is not aware of the traditions concerning rural funerals in West Virginia, and therefore a local citizen (Mattie) tried to explain why she predicts a full house reasoning as follows: *(1) funerals are important religious services, as the living say good-bye to the departed, who by then are already in heaven reaping rewards; (2) there is an old and unshakable tradition that proper and well-raised people pay their respects to the family; (3) country folks are usually bored and looking for something to do; (4) everyone wants a crowd at his or her funeral, so you'd better play the game while you can; (5) there is always plenty of food* (Grisham, 2015, p. 437). The customs referring to funerals are depicted vividly: *In keeping with tradition, the family remained in their chairs next to the grave as everyone proceeded by for a comforting word or two. The line wrapped around the burial tent and moved slowly* (Grisham, 2015, p. 439).

Literary texts provide information which non-speakers cannot get without being in a country. Being exposed to a text, they encounter something new that needs some search to get a proper idea what kind of message the expression bears. For example, the sentence *Supper was a "Baptist Potluck," as Mattie called it, in the fellowship hall. Long tables were covered with casseroles and desserts, and the crowd seemed to grow even bigger as two buffet lines started* (p. 440). The description of such a supper matches other descriptions of a true Southern-style Baptist church potlucks – a lot of food, every dish created with great care and thought, food truly made with love (Five tips for hosting a church potluck supper Southern Baptist style, 2012).

3.4. Culture of society

Every society has its typical features that might be classified according to different frameworks. Anglo-American societies are considered polite as the expressions such as *please, thank you* and *sorry* are used quite often, more often than in Slavic cultures. Despite the fact that please in British culture is used twice as frequently than in American culture (Biber et al., 1999), the book supported our assumption concerning our culture. For example, on pages 3-6 we could find *sorry* five times, e. g. *Sorry, guys. I'm really sorry* (Grisham, 2015, p. 3), alongside with *please – Please stop saying that,*

Samantha said (Grisham, 2015, p. 5), *I'm afraid – It was, yes. Very small, I'm afraid* (Grisham, 2016, p. 6) and *thanks* – "*No, thanks, Samantha said, and she managed to do so politely"* (Grisham, 2016, p. 6). In Anglo-American culture, these politeness markers are considered socially positive and are part of conventions. All the mentioned expressions were translated into Slovak but using different ways as, for example, *sorry* has at least four equivalents in the language. On the other hand, in real communication concerning dismissing a group of people, Slovak people would not behave so officially, conventionally and politely. They would have expressed their emotions more openly which might be considered impolite in the eyes and ears of the beholders of other cultures. On the other hand, it is important to acquire politeness routines of social interaction in the countries whose language we learn.

4. CONCLUSION

Learners of target languages are to understand that users of languages exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviours that are based on conventions and routines influenced by historical development as well as modern society changes. Learners are expected to organise information about the target culture, and reading contemporary literary prose proves that analysing the text, intellectual curiosity about the target culture will be stimulated and learners will be able to develop the ability to internalise cultural differences sensitively.

Interpreting and relating information needs experience and skills development in the areas of observation and discovery. Reading contemporary literary prose can help diminish a lack of opportunities to experience target culture directly in the country whose language a learner learns. Learners should become capable to understand diverse ways of knowing, being and doing, and the complex interaction between individuals and groups, focusing on how individuals negotiate their multiple identities in the context of different communities. All cultural values should be treated as open to debate, and subject to critical examination and negotiation.

Despite other cultural forms of expression, like film or music, literary texts are open to multiple interpretations, can motivate learners to search for more information (as we did while dealing with the

expression *Baptist potluck*) and encourage learners to use their own experience as their understanding is prone to interpretation. The meaning is bound in cultural context and language teaching should perceive teaching culture as its integral component since language and culture have an inextricable and

interdependent relationship.

Culturally-connotated expressions help us distinguish which English-speaking country we use the expressions from, for example British English expressions such as *rucksack* and *lorry* were used in the novel as *backpack* and *truck – They lifted the small cooler and backpacks from the truck and carried them to the cabin, fifty yards away* (Grisham, 2015, p. 407) or British English *garage flat* was used in American English as *garage apartment* as a place where Samantha was living – *After a warm dinner with Annette and kids, Samantha retired to her garage apartment, where the small furnace labored to break the chill* (Grisham, 2015, p. 389).

When learning a language, we get a new world view, reflecting the target language culture, which helps us acquire new values and develop cultural awareness and understanding of the existence of a new cultural frame of reference. Despite the fact that we mentioned some typical features of American society, their culture is associated with English and we wanted to emphasize the role culture plays in communication.

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