

# Teaching American little-c culture to prospective teachers of English

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The development of cross-cultural competence, as an integral part of communicative competence, is one of the main objectives of teacher training. The competence in question should be consistently developed at each level of the system of the prospective EFL teacher training. This paper will discuss some of the ways it is formed, in particular through the incorporation of the 'little-c' culture into the curriculum of Faculties of Education.

It has become traditional within the frame of the communicative approach to speak about communicative competence in terms of constituting competencies or sub-competencies. Communicative competence, as summarized by van Ek, should include linguistic, socio-linguistic, discourse, strategic, socio-cultural and social competence (van Ek 1986). The socio-cultural approach (Saphonova 1996:62) to foreign language teaching oriented at a tight interrelation between the language and culture and their integration in the process of learning a foreign language, made it possible to single out another constituent of communicative competence, i.e. cross-cultural competence. The latter, unlike communicative competence, which is inherent in native speakers, is a characteristic feature of the foreign language learner, who as a mediator between the target language culture and his native culture should be able to maintain cross-cultural communication, preserving his own cultural identity (Elizarova 2001:193).

Fully accepting the idea that each of the communicative competence constituents has a significant contribution to the process of language learning, we would like to focus on the cross-cultural competence as an integral part of the EFL teacher training process. The focus in this particular writing will be restricted to the target culture of the US community, as we believe there still exists a certain bias to teaching British studies in the teacher training programs at Russian universities. The competence in question could be formed on different levels of the teaching process and should be regarded as a necessary and inseparable component in the system of training prospective teachers of English.

Students who major in English should possess a certain amount of knowledge as well as skills related to the culture of the target language community.

What is understood by the notion 'culture?' Though there have been serious attempts to regard culture from a multi-perspective angle, (see for example the monograph *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, by A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn), many teachers of English as a foreign language have been and still are slow to regard culture as a broadly defined concept. As Seelye wrote,

for much of the profession culture has been defined almost exclusively in terms of the fine arts, geography, and history. This narrow definition of culture, unfortunately, does

not fully prepare a student to understand the wide range of behavior exhibited by our species. (Seelye 1993: 15-16)

Due to the works of Nelson Brooks, who was very persuasive and influential in causing EFL teachers to recognize that the study of culture goes beyond artistic expression and should be concentrated on the personal side of culture – ‘the distinctive life-way of a people’ (Brooks) there are now two widely accepted types of culture learning. The first type one that is deservedly referred to in current literature as ‘high-brow’ culture with a capital ‘C’ and includes the study of literature, art, history, music, etc. The other type emphasizes informal and often hidden patterns of human interactions and viewpoints and which is referred to as little/small-c culture (Alatis, Straehle, Gallenberger, Ronkin 1996:148). Nowadays, well-trained teachers of EFL believe that little-c culture can be introduced to students at all levels of language learning.

If we take a closer look at the curriculum of the English departments at Russian Universities and at the Curriculum of the English Department at the University of Ústí nad Labem, where I am currently teaching, we see that among the theoretical subjects, traditionally regarded as related to culture, and that have been incorporated into the curriculum for many years, are *American History*, *American Literature*, and the recently introduced *American Realia*. Ideally these subjects have to be taught on a solid interdisciplinary basis with meticulous consideration of the American historical background.

Using the dichotomy of the culture mentioned above, it is possible to state that the first two subjects and partially the last one mentioned are aimed at equipping the students with a profound knowledge in the field of the big/capital-C culture. This leaves behind their frames the development of the skills related to the patterns of living, everyday behavior, which are associated with small/little-c culture of the target language community. Thus, the accepted pattern of teaching theoretical culture-related courses to prospective teachers of English is aimed at the formation of their socio-cultural and cross-cultural competencies from such disciplinary perspectives as literature, history, political science, art, etc.

Generally, the departments that train prospective teachers of English as a foreign language, are aimed at producing well rounded specialists and they tend to cope with the task rather well. Not only can our students communicate in English, but they are also well read in British and American literature and can also, for example, explain the historical premises for the Civil War in the US and how it changed the nation. Our students may be aware of the social problems facing American society, as well as being informed about the latest political issues in that country.

I myself as a student was brought up with a greater emphasis being placed on the so called big-C culture and thus felt more helpless in situations related to everyday cultural problems. As a result, it was no wonder I had a funny and (at that moment) embarrassing experience that I am about to share with you.

I can still easily recall the day when I first arrived in the US several years ago. I was to stay at the University of North Dakota for the academic year as a Fulbright Scholar for the academic year. By that time, I had a degree in teaching EFL and 15 years of experience in teaching English to students of different levels and programs. On the very first day of my arrival, I needed to buy some groceries so I headed for the nearest supermarket. It reminded me of the one which was close to my home in St. Petersburg, with the only difference being in that the American supermarket was much bigger and the variety of products was larger. I took a cart at the entrance, strolled along the aisles, put everything I needed into it and being pleased with myself, I headed for the cashier.

‘Paper or plastic?’ the cashier asked me. The question baffled me. What did she mean? The cashier saw the puzzled look written on my face and repeated her question, only this time louder and a bit slower. ‘Paper or plastic?’ Still not having the slightest idea of what I had to say in return, I could only stare at her in utter confusion. Fortunately, I noticed the 18-year-old boy who was standing on the other end of the counter. He was impatiently carrying two BAGS, a paper one AND a plastic one.

The cashier had asked me a simple question that she automatically repeated hundreds times a day. In response to her question, the customer only had to say what kind of bag she/he preferred to have the groceries put by the bag boy.

Why did this question, tremendously simple in the structure and vocabulary, baffle me? Taken for granted by any American, this elliptical sentence presented me with my first ‘cultural puzzle’ that I had to decode. In Russia as well as in the Czech Republic, the majority of supermarkets do not provide their customers the services of shop clerks and the customer has to pack his/her own purchases. Therefore, the culture with a little-c, which is related to the everyday patterns of life and informal pattern of human interaction was vividly manifested in this situation.

So, coming back to some concrete ways of developing cross-cultural competence of prospective teachers of English, I would like to define from my own perspective the two main directions.

One possible way is to consistently and regularly incorporate a variety of **communicative tasks** that deal with everyday life in the US (as well as the material for reading and writing) into the syllabi of the subjects that traditionally are related to major subjects in the English Departments. Among these subjects are classes in Conversation, Phonetics, Home Reading, English Grammar, etc.

The other very effective way of developing cross-cultural competence of prospective teachers of English is **to pre-teach** courses in American History and American Literature. This can be accomplished by having a course on cross-cultural training which would serve as an introductory basis for such courses.

To bridge the gap that still exists between teaching the two types of culture, I have introduced an elective course into the curriculum that deals with the differences in the US and Czech cultural patterns. The course is meant for students who are majoring in English and is regarded as an introductory one for a compulsory course in American Studies. The objectives of the course are manifold. Among them, it is possible to enumerate the following as the main ones:

1. On the basis of the cultural differences to build up students' awareness of their native culture.
2. To develop students' understanding of cultural differences and similarities, that exist between the two cultures.
3. To instill the idea of the importance of cross-cultural knowledge for successful language learning and teaching.

The implementation of the objectives in the future may contribute to smoothening the ‘culture shock’ or ‘culture fatigue’ (Seelye 1993:60) that an individual experiences while having daily interaction with people from another culture. The knowledge and skills related to the little-c culture, instilled and developed in an individual, will help to minimize and turn the ‘culture shock’ or ‘culture fatigue’ into a state that, from my point of view, can be called *cultural discomfort*, which eventually would be less traumatic and painful for a person.

The composition of the course in question presupposes not to merely provide the students with the information on the topics related to culture, but it also lays great emphasis on the development of the students' speech skills and on their practical application in the situations of cross-cultural differences. That is why I could define the by-objectives of the course as:

1. To enhance students' speech skills in a variety of topics related to American life;
2. To teach students to behave adequately in many 'practical situations' while in America.

I always start the course by sharing with my students the 'paper or plastic situation,' which I call my 'classical experience' in American culture. Among the students who sign up for the course there are always a few who have experienced their own 'paper or plastic situations' and they seem willing to share them with the group, especially after my confession that I also encountered cultural puzzles while staying in the USA. Below are topics that we suggest be included in the course in question:

- I. Introductory Lesson: Definitions of Culture; Are we different or are we the same? The importance of cross-cultural awareness for language learning.
- II. Ethnic Diversity: Melting Pot, Mosaic, Salad Bowl or Tapestry? Ethnic Minorities in the USA.
- III. Some Dominant American Attitudes: Challenging Authority; Controlling Nature; Equality and Independence, etc.
- IV. Cultural Patterns of Perception and Thinking: The American Model of Perception and Thinking; Differences in Style of Thinking.
- V. Verbal Communication: Conversational Involvement; Directness and Indirectness; Conversation Styles.
- VI. Students' Life: Educational Values; Cooperative Student Relationships vs. Competitive Student Relationships; Academic Cheating; the Teacher – Student Relationship.
- VII. Family Values: Types of Families; Child Raising; Sharing Household Tasks; Balancing Career and Family Life.
- VIII. Work Values: Looking for a Job; Hiring and Firing; Employer-Employee Relationship; Workaholics; Sexual Harassment.
- IX. Manners and Courtesies in Social Life: Parties, Invitations, Clothes; Dinner at Home; Buffet Meals; Bringing Gifts; Thank You Letters.
- X. Relationships: Mobility and Friendship; Dating;
- XI. Nonverbal Communication Patterns: Gestures and Body Positioning; Facial Expressiveness; Conversational Distance, etc.
- XII. Food and Food Customs: Shopping in America.
- XIII. Tips on Practical Adjustment: Opening a Bank Account; Telephone; Renting a Car, Travel Agencies, etc.

The content of the course can be realized through different teaching techniques, such as mini-lectures, classroom discussions, role-plays, simulations, culture assimilators, group presentations, etc. Each of these techniques deserves careful consideration which cannot be done within the framework of this particular article.

In conclusion, I would like to mention that irrespective of the content of the course on cross-cultural training, as well as the activities aimed at the achievement of the course objectives, one invariable component should permeate such a course, and that is the teacher's and trainees' respect for the target culture.

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