

***"We Need to be able to see the World Through the Eyes of Others":  
Transforming Curricula in Teaching Foreign Languages***<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

The United States Senator of Hawaii Daniel Kahikina Akaka was so right when he stressed the necessity of being "open to the world". Addressing the National Council for Languages and International Studies, he emphasized that "we need to be able to see the world through the eyes of others if we are going to understand how to resolve the complex problems we face" (Akaka). In the age of globalization and transnational communication, higher education should be transformed in order to apply an integrative approach, especially when it comes to academic programs for teaching foreign languages. University curricula for language learning in the twenty-first century should include translingual and transcultural competence, as well as be broader and much more dynamic. The staff of the Faculty of Philology at Belgrade University have recognized this necessity and incorporated such new tendencies in the transformed program of teaching language, literature and culture within the numerous departments of this academic institution, and it is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate their success.

Keywords: higher education, foreign languages, transcultural competence, Belgrade Faculty of Philology

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## **Introduction**

At the very beginning of the twenty-first century, the necessity to intertwine learning foreign languages with learning about foreign cultures was coincidentally recognized, almost at the same time, both in Europe and America.

In 2001, the European Union Council (Council of Europe - COE) published and recommended for use the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (see: "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment" [CEFR], 2001) – that is, a guideline which includes a method for both learning and teaching any foreign language, as well as a system for the assessment of foreign language learners' achievements.

In America, it was also in 2001 that the Modern Language Association (MLA) Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching submitted its remarkable final report to the MLA Executive Council (see: Houston et al., 2001), while six years later the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (2007) reported that the MLA "supports a broad, intellectually driven approach to teaching language and culture in higher education" (p. 234), with the goal of studying how this approach can be best implemented in today's world.

These documents are extremely significant because they have paved a very wide and solid road for the subsequent changes in teaching languages and cultures hand in hand, at universities all over the world.

## **Why Culture Matters in Language Learning**

Prior to that, the role of culture in teaching foreign languages had been a controversial issue, to say the least. If culture existed at all in programs of foreign language education until the 1990s, it was viewed by both teachers and theoreticians "as a relatively invariate and static entity made up of accumulated, classifiable, observable, thus eminently teachable and learnable 'facts'." (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 2003, p. 176). In this model, the focus was on *surface level behavior*, whereas the *underlying value orientations* of the target cultural community, as well as "the interaction of language and culture in the making of meaning" (Paige et al., 2003, p. 176) were neglected.

The coupling of culture and language is additionally underlined by the very well-known fact that the role of language is complex and double, as it not only represents *a medium* for culture, but also participates largely in *creating* that culture (Paige et al., 2003, p. 176). In defining *culture learning*, Paige et al. (2003) stress that this process is aimed at "acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures," and further add that this "dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process [...] engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively" (p. 177).

Unfortunately, teaching foreign languages did not previously include teaching foreign cultures, and a good example is that of the Cornell model, in which language was taught by means of teaching linguistic forms, "as skill, not as cultural understanding"

(Kramsch 2011: 305). Both languages and cultures were separately studied as closed systems of, respectively, signs and relational structures, while neither linguists nor anthropologists paid attention to “the mutual dependency of linguistic forms and cultural worldviews” (Kramsch 2011: 305).

In such an unfavorable situation as regards teaching of cultures as an important tool in teaching foreign languages, the hypotheses and instructions contained in both CEFR guidelines and MLA reports came as an invaluable assistance to the case of the role of culture learning in early twenty-first century. For example, in view of the multilingual and multicultural context of Europe, and with a view to improving communication between EU citizens who speak different languages and come from different cultural backgrounds, the Council of Europe proposes the following premise for teaching foreign languages: “In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner’s whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture” (CEFR, 2001, p. 1).

In order to achieve this, learners of foreign languages should simultaneously study respective cultural contexts, and thus develop intercultural awareness, which is defined as “Knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community’.” (CEFR, 2001, p. 103). This intercultural know-how is further explained as a very complex and intricate whole, which comprises the following skills:

- the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
- cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures;
- the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations;
- the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships (CEFR, 2001, pp.104-105).

Similarly, the members of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (2007) accentuate that language is “an essential element of a human being's thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions; and as such it is considered to be at the core of translingual and transcultural competence” (p. 235). The inseparable bond between a language and its respective culture is additionally underlined by their conclusion that “Language is a complex multifunctional phenomenon that links an individual to other individuals, to communities, and to national cultures” (2007, p. 235). Therefore, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (2007) points out that “deep cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are equally necessary if one wishes to understand people and their communities” (p. 235), whereas the importance of learning culture is highlighted by the fact that it is inextricably linked with learning a foreign language, since “Culture is represented not only in events, texts, buildings, artworks, cuisines, and many other artifacts but also in language itself” (p. 235).

Consequently, the Committee recommends that foreign language programs and curricula at university level, which used to put focus on canonical literature, be transformed in order to include teaching cultures as well. Since studying cultures and languages is assessed as vital for the entire society in the present day, it is suggested that the two-tiered structure of teaching languages and literatures should be replaced “with a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007, p. 236).

### **Case Study: Belgrade Faculty of Philology**

That is exactly what happened at the Faculty of Philology of Belgrade University, consisting of more than thirty departments, which had earlier been devoted to teaching the respective languages and literatures. The situation in this higher education institution reflected the global viewpoint, at the core of which lay the fact that in foreign language instruction cultural study was perceived for the major part of the twentieth century “as incidental to the ‘real business’ of language teaching” (Byram, 1994, p. 126). Even when teaching about a culture did exist, it was only an implicit and integral part of teaching a foreign language. The new trends in higher education were recognized early by the staff of Belgrade Faculty of Philology, who incorporated such innovative tendencies in the transformed program of this academic institution, and implemented the reforms in line with the Bologna Process.

Namely, soon after the new Serbian Law on Higher Education was enacted, in 2005, the Faculty of Philology introduced the three-cycle system of teaching languages, literatures and cultures (abbreviated as JKK – meaning ‘*jezik, književnost, kultura*’, or in the Cyrillic alphabet ‘*језик, књижевност, култура*’ = language, literature, culture), at bachelor, master and doctorate levels. So, starting from the 2006/2007 academic year, the studying of languages and literatures has been enriched by adding respective cultural studies. For instance, in the case of the English Department at the Faculty of Philology, the curriculum had previously focused on students’ communication in English, whereas British culture was “only sporadically present in their manuals, in the form of supplementary means, a support for the study of the English language, represented by various texts about life in modern Britain, only as a basis for grammar and lexical exercises” (Djorić Francuski, 2011, p. 56). And not only were the role and importance of culture within the framework of foreign language teaching neglected and overlooked to the extent that, in most other Departments as well, teaching a language at that time did not focus on also teaching a particular culture, but this relation between language learning and culture learning turned out to be, prior to the implementation of the reformed curricula, „a huge hindrance for the introduction of cultural studies into higher education“ (Djorić Francuski, 2012, p. 10).

Although it is indisputably true that authentic literary texts are a valuable source for teaching foreign languages, and that literature thus undeniably represents an important factor in language learning, it is also true, on the other hand, that students find it extremely hard to grasp the real meaning of these texts unless they are familiar with the source cultural context. Even in regard to successful oral communication which is, and always has been, among the top priorities of foreign language learning,

background cultural knowledge plays an important role. Students will certainly be able to communicate much more effectively when their communicative competence is enriched with the knowledge about the particular culture. They will understand the collocutor and be able to reply much more successfully, since communicative competence cannot be reduced to grammatical competence only, and proficiency in a foreign language is not enough for fluent communication if it does not incorporate cultural or contextual competence. It is precisely for this reason that theoreticians dealing with relations between teaching languages and teaching cultures have concluded that cultural studies “should provide an encompassing intellectual umbrella for all the activities housed in foreign language departments” (Byrnes, 2002, p. 114).

Somewhat more specific examples of the importance of cultural knowledge for learning a foreign language are supplied by Keiko Koda (2005), who points to the phenomenon “that ways languages reflect reality vary from culture to culture; there is no exact one-to-one lexical correspondence across languages” (p. 61), and then gives the example of two Japanese words for cold – *samui* and *tsumetai*. The second example concerns “more subtle, but equally definitive word-meaning deviations,” such as the understanding of the sentence “She clutched her purse firmly” in the context of the New York subways, which are dangerous and associated with crime (p. 62). The true meaning of this sentence is obvious to the readers who are familiar with the necessary culture-specific information, but those who are not so well acquainted with background reality might not grasp the meaning entirely: for instance, Japanese students would need further explicitation because in Japan the crime rate is not so high (p. 62). The third group of examples Koda gives are the result of discrepancies between beliefs and attitudes across cultures, and these are illustrated by different emotional concepts and linguistic means in expressing emotions dependent on a particular culture (p. 62). The specific example chosen by Koda definitely proves the necessity of learning about the culture in which a language is spoken, because it shows the direct link between learning a language and its cultural context: it has been demonstrated that in the English language the predominant part of speech in describing emotions are adjectives (because in the Anglophone culture emotions are conceptualized as involuntary states), but in the Russian language verbs are prevalent (since in the Russian cultural context emotions are considered to be voluntary activities).

That is why students at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade have been encouraged to choose between many courses in Cultural Studies that have been introduced lately at all levels. Some of the courses are compulsory, like *British Studies – Introductory Course* for first-year students and *American Studies – Introductory Course* for second-year students at the English Department; while others are elective, such as the fourth-year subjects *British Cultural Studies* and *American Cultural Studies*, or *Cultural Diversity in Modern Britain* at MA level. Furthermore, all of these courses are also optional for students from other Departments, and this is another feature that so well reflects the integrative approach adopted at the Faculty of Philology. Even when they study, for example, English as the second foreign language (in which case the language classes last two years, while for the first foreign language they last four years), students can choose British culture courses, and enhance their overall cultural knowledge and cultural competences in this way. Likewise, the students of English who opt for studying Japanese as their second foreign language, can also take any of the numerous elective courses in Japanese Studies, namely: *Japanese Culture and*

*Society, Japanese Civilization, Japan and the World, Japanese Social and Cultural History, Japanese Economy and History of the Asian-Pacific Region*, some of which are mandatory for the students of Japanese as the first foreign language, while others are optional.

## Conclusion

We can conclude that the moto which so well describes the goal of our institution, the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, is that “Each knowledgeable, intellectually lively teacher we educate will affect the lives of thousands of young people and affirm the value of the subjects we teach” (Houston et al. 238).

Therefore, the reform at our Faculty of Philology has been guided by the necessity that the utmost priority for teaching foreign language students in the twenty-first century, in addition to the study of language and literature, should also be the study of history, life and culture. As we have seen previously, the syllabus at the English Department has been transformed in such a way that studying culture has been implemented in a comprehensive manner, “not only when intertwined with the teaching of English *through culture* at regular language classes, in the form of ‘background information’, but also in the curricula of independent subjects” (Djorić Francuski, 2011, p. 55).

Even though some theoreticians claim that we “can never see through another’s eyes; we must see through our own” (Robinson, 1981, p.150), our reform has been guided by the opposite opinion, cited at the very beginning of this paper, that in order to resolve contemporary global problems and educate interculturally aware graduates, we must open our curricula for foreign language studies in higher education to teaching cultures as well, and let our students "see the world through the eyes of others" (Akaka), as has been shown clearly by this paper.

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