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WHY IS IT DIFFICULT TO TEACH AND UNDERSTAND MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE?

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at stating some general and special problems encountered by Russian university teachers and students of modern English literature. General problems include reading crisis, lack of time, motivation and background knowledge, while special difficulties consist in misunderstanding language and cultural situation peculiarities described in modern English fiction. It is argued in the paper that the majority of the revealed problems are conditioned by cultural barriers, different mentality, value systems and stereotypes. The hypothesis has been proved that integral discourse approach to literature teaching and learning in general and modern English literature in particular is considered to be the most productive way in acquiring language and cultural professional competence. Teaching modern English literature course alongside with teaching and analyzing language and cultural peculiarities of English speaking countries, using available for students and teachers commentaries to the modern English novels, writing detailed commentaries to the books recommended for reading and discussing are understood by the author as effective means to minimize misunderstanding of authentic literary discourse. Examples from the novels *Nice Work* by David Lodge and *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith are given to implement the integral discourse approach for understanding English literary discourse through understanding peculiarities of national and cultural identity of the characters.

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Keywords: English literature, language and cultural situation, cultural barriers, misunderstanding, stereotypes.



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1. Introduction

The paper is an attempt at summing up some of the major problems encountered by many Russian EFL university students and teachers while reading and discussing books by modern English writers. Chelyabinsk State University has been an active participant in the project Oxford-Russia for teachers of English from Russian universities. The project concentrates on teaching modern English literature, free ordering and shipping of the necessary amount of copies of 24 modern novels to participating universities, writing commentaries with annotations with students after the novels discussions, correcting students' essays on the novels they are reading, taking part in the annual September international seminar "Contemporary English Literature in Russian Universities" in Perm State University organized by professors Karen Hewitt, an Oxford university scholar "who bridges English and Russian cultures" (Sidorova, 2017, p. 927) and Boris Mikhailovich Proskurnin, the dean of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures faculty of Perm State University, in extremely popular May seminars for English teachers from Russia in Oxford, meeting British writers and editors and many other teachers and students involving activities. There is a tough competition among Chelyabinsk teachers to be chosen as the seminar participants and use its results in class discourse teaching.

The project is a great success among about 100 Russian universities because it helps overcome cultural difficulties and misunderstanding in literature teaching and learning. One of the benefits of the project is a free access to the books by modern British writers available for groups of linguistics and foreign philology students. One more benefit of the project is the possibility of writing commentaries with students on the novels that will be summed up and published in order to clarify ambiguous parts of the books. There is an annual journal Footpath published in Perm State University with the mixed British-Russian editorial board in which teachers and even students can share their opinions on the books.

2. Problem Statement

Foreign literature studies at universities have attracted attention of many Russian and foreign researchers. Bloemert, Paran, Jansen, and van de Grift (2017) view students' perspective on the benefits of EFL literature education, Calafato and Paran study how age factor influences attitudes of EFL teachers towards literature in language education (Calafato & Paran, 2019). Duncan and Paran (2017) prove the effectiveness of literature on acquisition of language skills and intercultural understanding in the high school context. Ibragimova, Kadyrova, and Kharitonov (2017) show that using fiction develops intercultural competence in teaching foreign languages. Işıkli and Tarakçıoğlu (2017) investigate problems of English literature teaching to EFL high school students in Turkey.

The importance of literary texts in teaching students whose majors are not foreign languages and literature are analyzed by Belkina and Stetsenko (2015), while Vasilenko and Sidorenko (2016) discuss the usage of fiction texts in teaching English to students of linguistics. Methodological ways of generating interest for reading are discussed by Belkova and Chubak (2016). The conference was held in Ekaterinburg (Zarubezhnaya literatura..., 2010) to discuss innovations, methodology, problems of teaching and learning on studying foreign literature at a higher educational institution. We agree with Calafato (2018) that "in Russia literature has a storied history of use, although relatively few empirical

studies exist on contemporary teacher practices and how these have evolved in the post-Soviet era" (p. 91).

However, there are still numerous problems in teaching and understanding English literature to be analyzed and discussed.

The hypothesis of the paper is that an integral analysis of authentic literary texts can help students overcome cultural difficulties and minimize misunderstanding caused by the difference in cultures, mentality and in value systems.

3. Research Questions

General and special problems of teaching and learning modern English literature at Russian universities should be stated in order to find out the most productive way in acquiring language and cultural professional competence.

Integral approach to modern English literature studies is supposed to be useful to minimize cultural barriers. This approach presupposes parallel teaching of the intercultural communication and English literature courses for students whose major is foreign literature.

4. Purpose of the Study

The paper is aimed at stating some general and special problems encountered by Russian university teachers and students of modern English literature. To minimize difficulties in teaching and understanding modern English literature for foreign philology university students the advantage of the integral discourse approach to literature teaching and learning in general and modern English literature in particular are viewed.

5. Research Methods

The use of authentic literary texts requires appropriate teaching techniques and methodology. This study is an integral text and cross-cultural approach to analyze students' perception of authentic literary text. Khomutova and Parulina (2016) argue that "from the integral perspective, a literary text is an integral dispersed object, a unity of four fragments: a fragment of knowledge, a fragment of national culture, a fragment of language and a fragment of social space which are verbalized in their global interrelation and interconnection" (p. 8018). The authors have applied this approach to the study of a university novel in the literature classroom with students who major in linguistics. They have successfully analyzed lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, topical and culturally conditioned stylistic exponents of characters' discourse in the course of literature studies of the university novel "The Secret History" by Donna Tartt.

Comparative language and cultural analysis has been applied to outline similarities and differences of the problems discussed in the novels and in Russian language and cultural situation in general. The target of the interview questions is to gather information about: (1) the students' response to the integral approach in literature studies; (2) the problems encountered in English literature teaching and learning.

Data collection consists in the 8 teachers' and 30 students' interviews on modern English literature teaching followed by classroom observation. Contemporary English novels are read by students in class

and as a part of extensive home reading tasks. All the interviewed teachers and students from Chelyabinsk State University agreed that integral text approach to teaching and learning was highly effective, took a lot of effort, was very time consuming but rewarding. Interviews study has simplified the process of summing up general and special problems of understanding modern English literature.

Results of the study are supposed to help understand the difficulties encountered by English teachers and students when teaching and learning English literature. In the editorial article of Footpath “On the Literary Dangers of Searching for Russians”, Karen Hewitt has justly pointed out: “I am suggesting that the best way of dealing with confusions about a different culture is to identify how to read each novel. Each reader asks himself or herself: What is the author trying to tell me? How do I know? In each case the answers will be different and will require careful reading and searching in the text, but the process of finding out is itself a guide to the attitudes of the author. It protects us from seeing everything that happens as somehow typical of “the English” or “the British”, just as finding out how to read “The Kreutzer Sonata” helps us to understand Tolstoy and distinguish his story from “typical Russian attitudes” (Hewitt, 2014, p. 9).

Integral text teaching approach avoids simplification and stereotypes in understanding language and cultural diversity, teaches creative thinking interpretation and writing. We argue that integral literary text teaching approach should be enjoyable not boring.

6. Findings

Understanding English literature problems can be divided into general, not conditioned by cultural and language differences, and special, caused by numerous national and cultural peculiarities of the foreign language and cultural space, differences in value systems and mentality.

6.1. General “Reading” Problems Encountered by Modern University Students

The first type of general problems includes crisis of reading.

It results from the growing tendency to substitute printed books by their electronic versions, audio-books or even by abridged variants of novels. The culture of thoughtful reading is swallowed up by mosaic and fragmentary scanning of the texts which leads to neglecting important details of the content, ignoring stylistic peculiarities of a concrete book. If several decades ago the majority of pupils and students used to read a lot, often with a torch at night, hiding from parents’ displeasure under the blanket, modern students, when asked how often they practice such type of reading, answer ‘never’. Doubt that my students are an exception. Young people read much less at present. For many of them reading is substituted by 24-hour on-line activity. New technologies increase access to information but decrease the stimulus for thoughtful reading. Book collecting was very popular in the Soviet Union. Home libraries, big or small, could be found in each house or apartment, waste paper was exchanged for books, shops selling books on subscription were not rare. If books surround you from birth, you can hardly refuse opening them. Regretfully, fashion comes and goes. Meetings with poets and writers attracted many people of different age groups, tickets were difficult to get. Book deficit epoch came to an end after market economy was established in Russia. Gradually books disappeared from the foreground of many

living rooms into the background of dachas (allotments in the suburbs to grow fruit and vegetables and spend free time for many Russian families).

Lack of Thoughtful Reading

Reading abridged versions of novels at school instead of thoughtful reading, simplified interpretation of literary texts based on stereotypical approach to characters and author's ideas, substitution of essay writing by tests are often practiced by school teachers of literature. Audio-books and film versions often substitute printed versions.

Lack of Time and Short Courses of Literature Studies

There are only several lessons of literature per week at school. As a result only Russian literature is taught. Foreign literature is seldom, if ever, studied at school. The exception is schools specializing in foreign languages. As a rule, school leavers know a few foreign writers, mainly representatives of the past centuries. The same is true of university programs even for students whose majors are foreign languages and literature.

Absence of Motivation and Different Background Knowledge

Russian students enter universities soon after finishing school seldom realizing the difference between school and university education, the latter being centred on a larger time devoted not to lectures and tutorials but to constant self study including reading. The choice of future occupation is often the choice of parents not students. To survive university enrolls many students on commercial basis reducing the number of students who do not pay for their education. This group of students cannot boast excellent or good grades after finishing high school. They often lack motivation to study English that presupposes a lot of reading in the original especially in mastering humanitarian subjects. As a result university students whose major is English possess different background knowledge, different level of English and often lack motivation to study. Experience exchange with university teachers of English from Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belorussia has shown that the similar difficulties seem to be characteristic of the post-Soviet university space in these republics.

6.2. Special Problems in Understanding Language and Cultural Situation in Modern English Fiction

Special problems are conditioned by peculiarities of modern British cultural context misinterpretation which leads to text misunderstanding. Cultural barrier can be caused by the difference in social status in Russia and in Great Britain. Class division is in its initial stage in Russia, there are not many language markers attributing speakers to a certain social group. New Russian 'elite' representatives can speak like a farmer or worker. Many of them have never attended a university, are seldom well-read, cannot boast good taste but are financially stable. That is why it is not simple for Russian students of English to grasp that the novel *Nice Work* by David Lodge is 'a comedy of class and taste' a subtle analysis of which is represented in the commentaries to the novel (Hewitt, 2006, p. 6-10). Ironically depicted two main characters, Robin Penrose and Vic Wilcox, are easily recognized by the "middle-class educated" English reader "through detailed description of objects and commodities" (*ibid*, p. 7) but not by Russian students and teachers. New and expensive objects, huge houses surrounded by high fences demonstrate wealth and higher social position in Russia. Vic's large house is like that of a new Russian. It

is full of expensive but tasteless objects betraying its owner as a representative of the low middle class while for Russian students financial stability is one of the main indicators of the high social position. That is why commentaries, contextual information discussions, comparison of English and Russian social groups are of great importance.

Paying attention to details while reading and discussing English literature is a bridge to understand it. Russian students can find detailed descriptions of houses, furniture in the novel rather long and boring, but details help the readers avoid stereotypical interpretation of themes and protagonists, of perceiving the novel in black and white colours. Russian readers are used to often stereotypical portrayal of protagonists in fiction, but in modern English literature including comedies stereotypical approach to character description is not often present. Class borders are not very strictly guarded with accessibility of education and self-education. Vic in *Nice Work* is gradually getting used to reading classical literature (he'd like to keep Robin's copy of Tennyson as a souvenir). However, losing job, he is planning to 'set up on his own' producing spectrometers which implies that he will most likely remain within the same social group.

Robin has received some live experience of how non-academic people live while being Vic's shadow. Inheriting money from her uncle she does not want to give up her job as an English teacher, to change her old car. She could afford a brand-new car, "something swish and powerful. She could put Basil's nose out of joint by buying a Porshe.... A Lotus, perhaps, except that you can hardly get into them in a skirt. Then she thinks, how absurd, the Renault is perfectly adequate for my purposes, all it needs is a new battery" (Lodge, 2014, p. 377). Robin's social status will not change either. As Lodge puts it "There is a long way to go" illustrating a "very British way of handling differences of class and race" describing the university campus where a young gardener is mowing the grass while students are settling "on another patch of grass when they see that they will be in his way. The gardener is about the same age as the students, but no communication takes place between them.... Physically contiguous, they inhabit separate worlds" (*ibid*, p. 384).

Social status differences and their ironical description in the novel are not simple to understand due to many reasons, but any attempt to do it while reading and discussing modern British literature should go parallel to empathic comparison of British and Russian social life and traditions.

English humour is another difficulty in understanding modern British literature. This ironical, generous impressive debut novel is dealing with friendship, love, war, three cultures and three families *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith starts when Alfred Archibald Jones unsuccessfully tries to commit a suicide near halal butchers is very funny. During the discussion Russian students thought the introductory pages gloomy, not funny, because many of them do not know what halal means, what A41, chip shop, Lonely Street, semi-detached house and Hoover mean, why one-bedroom flat is poor as is an Cavalier Musketeer Estate, why must an army service medal and marriage license be taken as mistakes (Smith, 2017, p. 3-9). Multicultural and multilingual London is ironically and subtly represented in the novel, but many Russian students and even teachers often fail to notice the ironical descriptions of the characters and events in the novel.

Language and cultural context knowledge is of extreme importance in reading books in the original. There is still a very, very long and exciting way to go for both teachers and students.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the material has shown that the integral approach to modern English literature is effective due to several reasons:

1. It minimizes difficulties in understanding modern English literature;
2. It develops empathy, perception of the plot and themes of the authentic fiction through cultural context;
3. It leads to creative approach to language learning in general and to understand modern authentic English literature in particular.

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