

TACKLING AREA STUDIES FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE (AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TOWARDS LANGUAGE AREA STUDIES)

PhDr. TATIANA HRIVÍKOVÁ, PhD.¹

Summary: The aim of the paper is to present an alternative approach towards language area studies. Initially, it deals with the development of courses related with language area studies as they have been changing in form and content. Each kind of course is discussed from the perspective of their merits and drawbacks. The paper also presents an alternative approach to area studies course structure, suggesting a new three levelled model with horizontal as well as vertical ties among individual components. The proposed model would be the outcome of a two-year project in which teachers of various languages would participate if accepted by the Ministry of education's project agency.

Key words: area studies, course structure, model, cultural substrata, lived culture

Összefoglalás: A tanulmány célja a nyelvterületi tanulmányok alternatív megközelítésének bemutatása. Elsősorban, a területi tanulmányokkal foglalkozó kurzusok formai és tartalmi fejlődésének elemzése, valamint az egyes kurzusok előnyeinek és hátrányainak értékelése a fő cél. A tanulmány egy alternatív megközelítést terjeszt elő a nyelvterületi tanulmányokkal foglalkozó kurzusok szerkesztéséhez egy háromszintű modell javaslatával, amelynek az egyes részletei horizontális, valamint vertikális irányban vannak összefüggésben. A javasolt modell egy kétéves projekt kimenetelét képezi, amelyben különböző nyelveket tanító oktatók vesznek részt az Oktatásügyi Minisztérium projektügynökségének támogatásával.

Kulcsszavak: nyelvterületi tanulmányok, kurzus struktúrája, modell, kultúra táptalaja, élő kultúra

¹ Head of Department of Intercultural Communication, Faculty of Applied Languages, University of Economics in Bratislava, tatiana.hrivikova@euba.sk

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to present a new, alternative approach towards language area studies as an important part of foreign languages education. It proposes a three level model which enables to combine information from the language areas with study of the specific culture from both perspectives of institutions and everyday life of people. Based on the suggested model, the student can be presented with a complex but comprehensible view of the said language area.

The existing approaches

Area studies have been around for quite a long time, though, initially, in a relatively simplified form. They were regularly incorporated into various language courses as topics of interest mostly with the aim to facilitate ‘conversation’ and expand vocabulary. Topics like famous sights, historical places, cities and holidays offered opportunities to practice the studied language and demonstrate one’s language competence. But unfortunately, such implementation gave the students only a couple of facts without any context.

The next stage of development brought the acceptance of the idea that a living language cannot be separated from the people and countries where it is used as the dominant means of communication, because the language is closely connected to the society of its native speakers, its way of life and institutions. So specific courses have been developed which deal with various aspects of a particular society. Area studies are an integral part of mostly philology oriented study programs but they occur in the curricula of other study programs as well e.g. diplomacy, media or journalism. The current concept of those courses appears to be just a positivist, juxtaposed set of particular items (geography, history etc.) missing inner ties both horizontally (among particular components) and vertically (streaming into a higher-tier system). To present an example of such a course we list the fundamental topics of a course on British, and American Studies taught at the Faculty of International Relations, University of Economics in Bratislava (Bocková & Hrivíková, 2008):

- Geography
- History
- Political system
- Legal system
- Social security system
- Education
- Minorities & Human rights
- Economic system
- Culture
- Media

The topics follow a typical pattern of a traditional area studies course with a number of important aspects of life discussed separately in the form of either lecture or seminar. The individual topics are analyzed and used as building cubes to create a comprehensible picture of a particular society. The course offers facts again but in a more structured form than the previous stage, and moreover it gives the students an insight into the society. They learn to understand how the society functions in various areas but they are hardly shown how those building cubes are interconnected.

As an improvement and a further step ahead, a comparative and contrasting approach has been applied through the incorporation of Slovak studies as well where they can learn a lot about their own country as well. The idea behind has been that, while communicating in foreign languages, the students would probably need to talk about their own country rather than others, they can also gain a lot from recycling knowledge collected about their own country throughout their previous education, and by the same token they can learn a great deal from comparing different systems, and start to consider the reasons why the variety occurs in the first place; what has made the people in the studied countries choose a particular political system or how they substantiate their policies of social welfare or education. So it adds an improved level of understanding to the facts but still quite haphazard and incidental, missing to produce a systemized view.

The project

To avoid the shortcomings of the previous approaches and to fill the gaps in a concise and structured image, a group of teachers involved in teaching various language area studies have decided to propose an alternative approach towards the subject. The aim of the project proposed for the next two years is to prepare a theoretical model of a new study concept for the subject of Language Area Studies. As mentioned previously, the existing handbooks and the method of interpretation of the discipline are characterized by juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements (geography, history, political system etc.) which negates the idea of their correlation, mutual conditioning and it fails to join the parts into a coherent representation of the particular cultural system. We believe that culture should not be just one of the listed topics; it should be the climax of the course.

The new model carries the ambition to put the scattered elements of area studies into mutual correlation, map out both their horizontal links and their vertical manifestations streaming them into a higher total – a cultural system. Another important contribution of such a model would be its universal applicability for various language areas in the teaching process as well as in creating textbooks and other supportive didactic materials.

The state of the art is characterized by terminological inconsistency among languages (studies, civilization, culture...) and by the above mentioned positivist presentation of variety of elements of the particular culture without internal relations (Hrivíková, 2012). The consumer (student) is led to some idea about the cultural aspects of the given language area but he will never receive a comprehensive view of the whole system as the currently published source literature follows the traditional subject concept of language area studies as well. It does not show any indication of crossover of certain elements into the sphere of intercultural communication. The current presentation is rather a static set of heterogeneous facts without inner connections and dynamics. The particular elements are analyzed but not their functions within the cultural and communication systems. The outcome of that in our view outdated concept is a reduced utilization of source materials (vocabulary and facts) rather than an image of the cultural system.

We suggest a three level system which would interlink the topics both horizontally and vertically. We believe that knowledge in form of facts should create the foundation and the first level, followed by awareness and attitude on the second level and comprehension and empathy on the top.

Our new project is in its initial stage but we hope to demonstrate the validity of our argument and create a model usable for any language area studies as its reasoning has a universal hold without exceptions. It will probably require some time before we can prove the benefits of our proposal but we are confident that it will be successful both concerning results and arousing students' interest in the subject (Povchanič, 2012).

The foundation of the theoretical structure will be represented by those elements of traditional topics of area studies that belong to the cultural 'substrata' of the given language area (geography, history etc.).

The manifestations of the substrata presented vertically as components of 'lived' culture (way of life of the particular society) will create the next level. This is the level which enters into communication acts and determines them. Moreover, it has a decisive role in the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence.

Through manifestations of 'lived' culture, the new concept modelling should achieve a systematic cognition and comprehension, a discovery of a higher coherent total specific for the particular language area. That total will be defined according to existing cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Trompenaars ...).

The methods to be used in creating our model are:

- comparative and contrastive method for clarification of terminological inconsistencies of the area studies' concept area studies/culture/civilization
- functional analysis of the components of the cultural structure at various levels of the proposed system: In that way we will describe the convergence of the existing juxtaposed elements into a higher system
- synthesis of the results of analytical stage at various levels into the final system and compilation of theoretical equivalents into the final cultural system
- evaluation of components according to cultural referential dimensions: enables acquisition of their theoretical equivalents
- dissemination of the results of the research in the form of publication of the new theoretical model in a form of a monograph.

The model

The proposed model can be demonstrated in a following way, using the example of British studies:

The foundation, or first level, labelled cultural substrata will be filled by the relatively static, stable aspects such as geography and history. They both have had an immense impact on the development of a specific society, its culture and individuals. It is not only the influence of climate, surface or natural resources that count but also distances, proximity of threatening neighbours or access to sea and other natural ways of movement. United Kingdom as an island country was influenced by the relative separation from the mainland but still having intensive contacts through seafaring to various territories of northern and western Europe. All the invasions, which UK had to face throughout its history, were caused by the relative closeness to Europe, rich soil combined with mild climatic conditions and abundance of natural resources. In such sense geography and history were and still are closely interconnected, and it is important to illuminate the natural sequence of causes and consequences. The history of the country unfolded leading to the development of fundamental institutions (monarchy, parliament, law ...) which again due to the growing power of the country and its separation from mainland took their own specific forms (e.g. English common law vs. continental law) and were even exported to English and later British dependent territories due to British dominance over the seas which developed based on the sheer necessity of living on islands. The culture developed and formed under the given circumstances and as a reaction to the challenges, the society had to face throughout its history and on the locations allotted to them by a mixture of geographical conditions and power struggle of individuals and peoples.

Now approaching the second level labelled 'lived' culture, the students would be informed about the present life of the British society but not only about the institutions which give the society its structure but more of a view from the grassroots' level, i.e. how they are perceived by the population, what are the problems, disputes even scandals connected with e.g. the parliament reforms, role of the royal family, immigration or social security. All these topics must be presented in a context explaining each other and putting them into a comprehensible entity. This is an especially challenging task for a non-native teacher but we believe that it can be managed by the help of modern technology, press and a great deal of involvement. We believe that the students will be much more interested in learning about real people, their everyday problems and solutions offered by the society. In this way, they can more easily get an insight into the reasons and ways British people think and act, what they honour and respect and what their motives are. In that specific level the issue of identity will play an important role, as in UK the multicultural character of the society may present an interesting model of multilayered identities.

The third and final level of our proposed model should become the summary of all that the students acquired throughout the course, and it should round off by creating a multidimensional model of the British culture based on the chosen set of cultural dimensions comparable with their own national culture. We suggest to take into account the dimensions proposed by the studies of Geert Hofstede and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner and cultural factors of E.T. Hall.

Conclusion

To summarise our point, the presented project of an alternative approach towards language area studies strives to present the chosen societies as complex integral units with their parts interlinked by relations between cause and consequence, and to enhance the students' understanding of the society, culture and people. We can utilize the synergetic effect of contemplating the various aspects of a given culture as pieces of puzzle that fitting into their places present a more colourful and realistic picture.

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