Nagy, Judit; Bánhegyi, Mátyás

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The Canadian North in the English Classroom

Judit Nagy[1] and Mátyás Bánhegyi[2]

[1] Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Budapest

[2] Budapest Business School University of Applied Sciences

Abstract

Focusing on the Canadian North, this study reviews some theoretical questions of teaching language and culture and explores the interrelatedness between language and culture. Apart from dealing with the topic of teaching culture from a theoretical perspective, the paper also discusses certain theoretical considerations concerning teaching about distant cultures as exemplified by the Canadian North. In addition, the essay addresses practical issues about teaching this topic at secondary and BA levels and provides a step-by-step methodological description and an illustration of the preparation of topic-related teaching materials.

Keywords:

teaching culture, distant cultures, Canadian North, language teaching, teaching material development

Résumé

Cet article se concentre sur l'enseignement du Grand Nord canadien. Il examine quelques questions théoriques de l'enseignement de la langue et de la culture. Il explore également l'interdépendance entre la langue et la culture. Le document aborde également certaines considérations théoriques concernant l'enseignement sur les cultures lointaines comme en témoigne le Grand Nord canadien. En outre, l'essai porte sur des questions pratiques sur l'enseignement de ce sujet au niveau secondaire et fournit une description méthodologique étape par étape et une illustration de la préparation de matériel pédagogique liés au sujet.

Mots-clés :

l'enseignement de la culture, des cultures lointaines, le Grand Nord canadien, l'enseignement de l'anglais, la préparation de matériel pédagogique

Introduction

The great majority of people who start learning English want to learn the language primarily so that they can easily communicate in global contexts. In fact, culture is only of secondary importance for them as cultural knowledge about the English speaking countries may not be seen as an essential asset to be able to communicate effectively. Considering the bulk of learners, this instrumental approach to language learning (i.e. language is only a means of communication) is unlikely to change and for this reason, sneaking culture into the curriculum, always pairing up learning about culture with some new linguistic input, may be a solution to combat students' understandable negligence of culture and cultural information.

Approaching from a theoretical perspective, this study reveals the interrelatedness between language and culture, and considers the consequences of this relationship on language teaching. Next, some theoretical considerations concerning teaching about distant cultures are introduced. This is followed by a review of potential Canadian North-related raw materials for the English classroom. Ultimately, the paper provides a step-by-step methodological description of the preparation of teaching materials connected to the Canadian North, which will be in turn illustrated with the example of the Kuupak house.

Language and culture

This section discusses the relationship between English as a foreign language and culture by exploring diverse views about this interconnection in the literature. As a starting point, it must be noted that English as a foreign language is used extensively in international contexts, where the language exists in a cultural vacuum, i.e. no culture is attached to this international version of English. Bearing in mind such contexts of language use, some researchers including Jenkins (2000, 2002, 2005) and Seidlhofer (2001), argue that no culture can and should be attached to this international variety of English and thus no cultural information as such should be taught. However, the strong motivational power and the mutually reinforcing nature of learning the language and learning about culture should not be neglected and should therefore be utilised as a driving force impacting students. This is claimed by Wardhaugh (2010), who points out that the relationship between culture and language might be a motivational force for learners.

In fact, pairing up language education with learning about culture has been emphasised by many acknowledged researchers. Seelye's (1984) theory on the development of cross-cultural communication skills maintains that behaviours are culturally

conditioned and that students can be made to realise this through learning languages. Similarly, Byram and Morgan (1994) as well as Hinkel (2000) claim that language education is inevitably culture-based in its approach, i.e. language instruction cannot effectively take place without teaching about culture. This is also supported by Ardila-Rey (2008), who draws attention to the close relationship between language and culture in general. Risager (2007) also underscores that English is closely connected to English-speaking cultures unless English is used as a lingua franca without a definite cultural element. Kramsch (1991) goes even further and maintains that 'culture and language are inseparable and constitute one single universe' and this way suggests that it is not possible to teach language without inevitably teaching culture.

Other researchers also state that it is practically impossible to separate the teaching of language from the teaching of culture, which approach is advocated by Jiang (2000) as well as Peterson and Coltrane (2003). Also connecting culture and language, Damen (2003) believes that language is both the means of communication and the mediator of cultural codes and rules, which suggests that language can also be effectively exploited for educating about culture. Eventually, focusing on the production on textbooks that include culture, Mitchell and Myles (2004: 235) put forward a similar argument when they claim that "Language and Culture are not separate but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other". This seems to suggest that this mutually reinforcing nature of language and culture should ideally be exploited for teaching purposes.

Teaching culture

This section addresses the issue of teaching culture and discusses relevant methodological considerations. As far as teaching culture is concerned, a very broad definition of culture is suggested by the authors, which resounds with Paige et al.'s (2003: 177) definition of learning about culture. They define learning about culture as "[t]he process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills and attitude required for effective communication". In the scope of this definition, with a view to including the widest possible aspects of culture in the teaching materials designed by the authors and exemplified below by the activity on the Kuupak house, we adopted Brown's (2007) approach, according to which culture is a way of life presentable to students. In this respect, any such aspect of the target culture can be presented to students that they can relate to and understand. Nevertheless, from a pedagogical perspective, this highly abstract concept of culture can only be tangibly presented to students, in our view, in a pedagogically proper way, through concrete cultural objects and examples. This approach enables students to understand the given

culture more deeply by way of dealing with easy-to-understand objects and examples first and then moving on to learn about more complex issues.

A similar gradualness is underscored by Gochenour and Janeway's (1993) model of culture learning, which suggests that students should progressively be involved in culture-related issues during the learning process. This entails moving from less complicated and less abstract aspects of culture towards more elaborate ones in a way that this information gets structured for students in a way that they potentially understand even the most difficult aspects of culture later on.

Hofstede's (2010) famous concept of 'peeling the onion of culture' likewise bears implications to the teaching of culture. Hofstede claims that there are different levels of culture that exhibit different levels of abstraction: the less abstract ones are easier to understand whereas the more abstract ones are more difficult to comprehend. From this it follows that tangible cultural products and phenomena, which Hofstede collectively calls cultural practice, should be introduced to students first. In addition, cultural discourse and cross-cultural learning should also be part of teaching culture, Berrell and Gloet (1999) claim. This means that educating about culture should focus on understanding one's own culture and the target culture, possibly by making comparisons and by carefully examining cultures in cross-cultural and multicultural perspectives exhibiting a tolerant and bias-free attitude.

Another relevant aspect to consider in connection with teaching and explaining culture is the notion Seelye's (1984) theory discusses as the culturally conditioned nature of behaviours. According to this theory, teaching about culture should extend, on the one hand, to the description, explanation and justification of the behaviours associated with the target culture and, on the other hand, to enabling learners to explore why such behaviours exist and why they are (not) accepted in the culture under scrutiny. Moreover, the same theory advocates not only trying to combat generalizations about cultures but also showing empathy and understanding towards other cultures without passing any judgement about the cultures involved.

Finally it must also be stressed that culture and the manifestation of culture are so diverse and so complex that unless a very thorough investigation into culture is performed in class, students will mostly be able to see the tip of the iceberg of a culture. This is not desired as students may draw false or incorrect conclusions about the culture(s) involved due to the superficial nature of both the presentation and the acquired knowledge. Therefore, in-depth approach is encouraged by Hall (1996), who claims that the explicit manifestations of culture only constitute purely the tip of the iceberg of a culture but these "tips" do not make visible the motives, underlying concepts and non-communicated values associated with the given culture. Therefore, it is important, as also advocated by Nieto (2002), to try to go beyond superficial topics and approaches and to extensively discuss and survey culture-related aspects and in-

formation in class and to address both visible and non-visible aspects of culture in the classroom so that learners are given the opportunity to explore the given culture(s) more extensively and in depth.

Teaching about distant cultures

Given the uniqueness of the Canadian North, the issue of teaching about distant cultures must be addressed. Teaching about the Canadian North requires a distinct methodological approach as this culture is presumably lesser known in the learners' own cultures and is probably culturally more distant than the English-speaking cultures the students have been exposed to. With reference to the practice of teaching culture in general, Holme (2003) has revealed that the great majority of teachers include culture in their teaching irrespective of what practical purpose they teach the language for. Thus it can be maintained that apparently culture is inevitably included in the curriculum.

With respect to culture, the authenticity of teaching materials poses an inevitable question. Addressing the issue of authenticity as far as cultural information is concerned (i.e., the question of what counts as authentic cultural information in which learning context), Kramsch (1998: 81) advocates that "cultural appropriateness may need to be replaced by the concept of *appropriation*, whereby learners make a foreign language and culture their own by adopting and adapting it to their own needs and interests" (emphasis in the original). This claim is even more vital if the students' own culture and the culture about which the students are studying are quite distant from each other, as it may well be the case in the majority of contexts where students learn about the Canadian North. What is important to underline here is that students must be made aware that their native culture and the culture of the Canadian North are so wide apart from each other that students' usual 'native' approach to other cultures is likely to fail in this case. Therefore, students need to start their investigation into the Canadian North by focusing on those relatively few aspects that the target culture and their native cultures have in common and it is only later, in possession of some knowledge about the Canadian North, that they can safely extend the scope of their studies and interest to aspects of this culture quite distant from their own. This approach is also encouraged by Gochenour and Janeway's (1993) above-mentioned model of culture learning, which proposes the gradual involvement of students in culture-related issues. This gradualness and the depth of insight into a given culture one can attain this way are discussed by Scanlon (1996), who distinguishes four different interactions as far as the depth of learning about culture is concerned. This framework features the following categories: learning about (1) culture as "knowing about"

(studying facts); (2) culture as "knowing how" (gaining real first-hand experience); (3) culture as "knowing why" (interpreting behaviours); and (4) culture as "knowing oneself" (reflecting on one's attitudes). These depths can be achieved if culture is taught in a gradual and detailed enough way.

The culture of the Canadian North also seems to defy our traditional notions of what culture includes in the context of teaching culture. An approach, which would otherwise be easy to adapt for teaching purposes, is offered by Robinson (1985), who establishes three elements of culture referring to products (including literature, folklore, art, music, artefacts), ideas (including beliefs, values, institutions) and behaviours (including customs, habits, dress, foods, leisure). This classical categorisation may not hold entirely appropriate or valid in the case of the Canadian North, where other elements may be more or less prominent than these three. Such elements with more (or even less) prominence may include for example certain aspects of the natural or the built environment. What becomes obvious from this is that the Canadian North exceptionally well illustrates that relativity of cultures.

Materials for the worksheets on the Canadian North

There is a wealth of web-based materials on the Canadian North. Some of these appear in the form of ready-made lesson plans, others can function as raw materials to be turned into classroom worksheets with the help of the method detailed in the section "preparation of teaching materials." The current section will make an attempt at highlighting those Canadian North-related groups of materials which can be useful for the high school English classroom. These include general information on the North, geographical, historical, social and cultural aspects, and, within culture a wide range of subjects opens up for exploration from food and housing to story telling and arts.

First, for the introduction of the topic, the Nunavut chapter of the Department of Canadian Heritage publication, *Symbols of Canada* can provide the scope of information. For students at a more advanced level of English, the 'Nunavut" or "Inuit" entries of the online *Canadian Encyclopaedia* can serve the same purpose.

As for geography, *Canadian Geographic Education* covers diverse issues such as the climatic features of Canada's North and climate change (e.g. "Canada's arctic Barometer"), physical geography (e.g.: "Arctic Archipelago – Canada's Amazing Arctic Islands"), fauna and flora ("Arctic Web Quest," "Harp Seal: Population, Migration and Distribution"), expeditions in the polar region ("and various features of social geography such as environmental problems ("Arctic Cleanup") or arctic community life ("Some Like it Cold": Canada's Northern Communities," "Living in the Canadian

North"), Some of the issues (e.g. "Arctic and Atlantic Environments: A Comparison," "Comparing My Community to a Northern Community") are discussed in a comparative manner, which also facilitates the understanding of the cultural differences arising from the geography of the regions compared.

Even though the materials presented in this section come in the form of classroom-ready worksheets, one must not forget that they have been taylor-made for Canadian school-age audiences, therefore, adjustments and supplementation concerning both language and cultural content may be necessary following the procedure outlined in the next section.

Natural Resources Canada also has a page on the North, the information content of which can be turned into Canadian geography-related materials for the English classroom. It includes many features of physical geography such as sea ice freeze-up and break-up, sea ice conditions, protected areas and maps of various Canadian Northern locations.

What regards history and the Canadian Arctic, one topic which is compatible with secondary English school curricula, is likely to engage students' attention and suitable to the level of their knowledge of English is the topic of expeditions. The "Lesson Plans" page of Canadian Geographic Education covers the Franklin expedition, of which numerous other resources are available, as well. Similarly, the "Publication Catalogue" of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada has a poster of the Canadian Arctic expedition of 1913-18 which can serve as excellent raw material in this topic as well as explorer's diaries such as Conor Mihell's "Diary of a Northern Explorer."

The project entitled "Canada's First Peoples" run by Joan and John Goldi and supported by Canadian Heritage has an informative and well-illustrated chapter on the people of the Arctic, the Inuit, one subchapter of which focuses on family, social structure and leadership. Another linguistically student-friendly source with focus on Inuit society is "Through Mala's Eyes – Life in an Inuit Community" published by Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada in 2003. The thirteen personalized units of the 90-page publication offer an insight into various aspects of quotidian Inuit reality: where Mala lives, his family, what he knows about the past of his people, local history, different Arctic nations, climate and its effect on the people of the Arctic, travelling, wildlife, homes, hunting and camping.

In addition, one can find sources which focus on one particular aspect of Inuit culture. Food, for example forms the subject of Canadian Geographic Education's "The Northern Food Guide" or Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada's "Far North Food: From Char to Processed Snacks." In both cases, supplying pictorial illustrations can be helpful just as it can generate exciting further activities. As for housing, Nick Walker's "The Kuupak House" can provide practical starting points for its interesting but not overly difficult vocabulary. The building of igloos is such a widely covered subject that

activities here can aim at identifying the building parts and process without much further guidance.

Further aspects of Inuit culture for exploration may include sports (e.g. "Arctic Winter Games" in the publication catalogue of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada) and art-related topics for which the "Discover Inuit Art" information page published by the same government department proves to be a useful starting point with names of artists and reference to further web-pages. *A Cultural Reader on Aboriginal Perspectives in Canada* covers Inuit art in general, artist Jesse Ooonark and has a separate chapter devoted to Inuit stone carvings inviting students to do further Internet research on the subject. Mary Wallace's *The Inukshuk Book* exemplifies well the popularity of inukshuk as a cultural symbol of the Canadian North. This publication has information on the various inukshuk meanings through which readers can learn about Inuit lifestyles, as well.

Oral tradition, tales, myths and beliefs cover another important and curriculum-relevant cultural aspect of the Canadian North. As for oral tradition and stories, the volume *Northern Voices: Inuit Writings in English* offers a rich collection of narratives, from which the teacher can select the ones that match the theme and the curricular aims of the given class. Lydia Dabcovich's *The Polar Bear Son – An Inuit Tale* or Michel Bania's *Kumak's Fish* present a personalized version of northern lifestyles, the latter comes with a reader's guide with additional information and questions. The website "Listening to Our Past" has recordings of Nunavut elders telling stories of hunting, travelling, survival and dreams. These recordings can make exciting listening materials when their classroom application is thoroughly prepared.

What regards myth and legend, a very simple introduction can be found in the "Inuit Mythical Figures" chapter of Bánhegyi et al.'s *A Cultural Reader on Aboriginal Perspectives in Canada*. For students with more advanced English, the "Inuit Myth and Legend" entry of the on-line Canadian Encyclopaedia can be a useful point of orientation for students with more advanced English.

Finally, a few other pages on the North which may be of interest to the secondary English classroom. First, *Canadian Geographic* publishes a one-page polar blog in every issue, which features themes such as climate change, fauna, flora, and life in the arctic. The October 2015 issue of the same magazine presented a 50-question quiz on the Arctic in its "The Ultimate Canadian Geography Quiz" series, which can be used as raw material both for further research on Arctic-related issues (geography, people, history, wildlife, ice, water, earch, weather climate, place names, parks and reserves) or for customized quizzes on the Arctic.

Community web-pages for Inuit cultural groups and organizations as well as educational resource pages such as the "Inuit Cultural Online Resource" can also make useful raw materials for the secondary English classroom on Arctic Canada. Most of the

sources mentioned in this section have a social media segment, too, which is equally worth exploring.

Obviously, the cornucopia of materials does not allow for an all-inclusive review of materials on the Canadian North for the secondary English classroom within the scope of the present article, thus the choice of the authors will remain arbitrary, no mater how many titles are added. However, it can be stated that the above collection of sources will make useful raw materials for any teacher intent on introducing the Canadian North in their secondary English classroom.

Preparation of teaching materials

The process of preparing teaching materials in connection with teaching about cultures is a complicated one and it entails several steps. Supposing that the topic of the teaching materials has been selected, as a first step of the process of teaching material preparation, various subtopics within the above-mentioned broad topic are selected as potential themes of interest for the activities. This practically means narrowing down the topic and finding some angle(s) to approach it from.

As a next step, the curriculum of English as a foreign language is reviewed with respect to the country where the teaching materials will be used. This step is important because teachers are not ready or willing to include (and as a rule will not include) any material in their lessons that falls outside the scope of prescribed materials and topics. On the basis of this review, a second scanning of the subtopics is performed and a final selection is made with a view to meeting curricular expectations: topics not included in the given curriculum are discarded and topics included in the curriculum are retained and are occasionally expanded. As a third step, the subtopics thus selected are further narrowed down and are focalised to suit students' interest. In practice, this entails choosing certain aspects or perspectives students are likely to find thought-provoking and intriguing.

For the preparation true-to-life materials, reliable sources containing authentic texts are selected. As to such sources, government-operated web pages, on-line encyclopaedias and archives (e.g. *The Canadian Encyclopaedia, The History of Canada Online, the Canadian National Library Archives, CBC Archives*), national and provincial public institutions' (e.g. National Film Board), universities' and museums' websites and on-line publications offer an almost unexplorable wealth of raw materials to be used for teaching purposes. As teachers themselves are likely to lack sufficient background knowledge on the cultural issues to be introduced with the help of these teaching materials, the above sources have the additional benefit of providing educators with some necessary background information they can use for preparation.

The next step in the production of the worksheets is to adapt the materials to students' level of English, cultural background and interest. In this stage the authentic materials are reviewed and edited linguistically, culturally and presentation-wise. This primarily means simplifying the language but retaining both key vocabulary elements and cultural information as well as finding a suitable way of presenting the materials to the audiences concerned. The following step is to find linkages between the new cultural information presented in the teaching materials and students' cultural backgrounds by exposing cultural similarities and differences. These connections are included and focalised in the teaching materials and as a rule they refer students to their previous cultural knowledge so that they can understand new cultural information more in depth. All this is planned in a way that less complex issues are addressed first, which are followed by the discussion of more complex ones. This approach also serves the purpose of students' gradual involvement in the target culture.

Next, with a view to repetition and recycling, teaching materials by the authors are designed to occasionally revisit and revise formerly taught contents by offering students practice opportunities in the framework of diverse activities. In the case of each activity, special care is taken to offer model texts for students to rely on: this linguistic model serves as a starting point for students in their communication. Generally, worksheets start with controlled or guided practice activities and move towards free practice activities. Thereby tasks provide ample opportunities for students to freely use topic-related language in context. In order to aid students' personalization of the activities in terms of content and language and to encourage learners to solve tasks at their own levels of cultural and language knowledge, open-ended activities are included in each worksheet, which allow students to customize the linguistic output to their own level of proficiency.

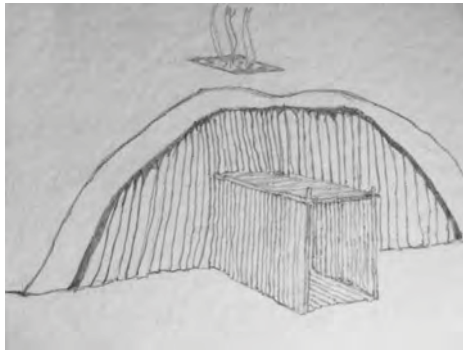
Demonstration: The Kuupak House

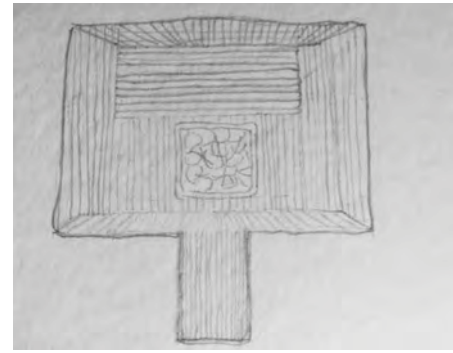
In the last secion of the article, the above principles used for the preparation of teaching materials will be demonstrated on an activity featuring the Kuupak house. The unit, in which the activity was used, covers housing in the North (Figure 1).

The short description provided by *Canadian Geographic* makes a suitable raw material for an activity for Northern housing both grammar and vocabulary-wise, and it is narrow enough to be covered in a single activity. As for curricular concerns, housing is on the list of the national curricula in Central-, and Eastern Europe and so are verb forms, on which the gap-fill part of the activity is focusing.

Task Seven: Kuupak House

The pictures show an Inuvialuit driftwood house. Read the statements below the pictures and fill in the sentences with the suitable form of the verbs in bold listed below the text.





The house _____ (1) south. It was _____ (2) into a steep slope on the shore. It was a winter residence but it was _____ (3) in summer before the top ground layer _____ (4).

Sod chunks were _____ (5) over the first driftwood layer. Then more driftwood _____ (6) for stability, and finally, the structure was _____ (7) with snow.

The house could _____ (8) 15 to 30 people. One family _____ (9) at the back of the building, and two families at the side. Inside, the house _____ (10) log walls and roofs. In the middle, there _____ (11) a large hearth, and smoke _____ (12) from a square opening in the flat roof. People _____ (13) the house through a five-meter tunnel which _____ (14) to a wind-breaking porch made from snow-blocks.

be / build / cover / dig / escape / enter / face / freeze / follow / have / hold / live / open / put

Figure 1. Activity featuring the Kuupak house

Student interest is ensured by the unusual context of the topic (i.e. housing in the North) which captures young people's imagination as practice proves. The authenticity and reliability of the source is supported by the fact that the article was taken from a well-known and recognized Canadian magazine, *Canadian Geographic*, the educational pages of which also provide extra background information for the teacher wishing to introduce the topic in the English classroom.

Some alterations in the original material are needed language-wise, however, to adapt the material to students' level of English (i.e. simplification of difficult general vocabulary and grammatical structures). Also, the background information provided by Canadian Geographic Education will fill in the gaps in teachers' and students' knowledge of northern housing to be fully able to enjoy the activity. The integrated manner of presentation of the featured topic and grammar is realized through the revisiting of the grammar 'verb forms' and the revision and extension of students' housing-related vocabulary.

Conclusions

The study presented an overview of the theoretical questions of teaching language and culture and discussed the interrelatedness of language and culture. It has been concluded that language and culture are inseparable and that the teaching of these two should ideally go hand in hand. Then the paper addressed the topic of teaching culture from the perspective of the theory of culture teaching and found that gradualness will lead to in-depth understanding about the culture concerned. This was followed by introducing some theoretical considerations concerning teaching about distant cultures and it was established that traditional notions of culture do not necessarily help in understanding such distant cultures as that of the Canadian North and that understanding the Canadian North requires careful methodological planning and a lot of student effort. Then numerous sources concerning teaching about the Canadian North in the English classroom were described and some application-related insights were provided. Finally, a step-by-step methodological description of the preparation of teaching materials was presented along with the concrete example of the activity on the Kuupak house. In addition to reviewing the theoretical considerations involved, this paper presented a description and a detailed guide concerning teaching material preparation, which may serve as a model for educators who wish to produce their own materials on the Canadian North for the secondary English classroom.

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JUDIT NAGY is a full time Associate Professor at the English Linguistics Department of Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Budapest, Hungary. She teaches courses in Canadian Studies, language practice and applied linguistics.

MÁTYÁS BÁNHEGYI is a full time Senior Lecturer at the Department of the Language of Finance and Accountancy of Budapest Business School University of Applied Sciences. He currently offers language practice and ESP classes, and has an extensive employment history of teaching methodology and translation studies. The two authors have been lecturing in BA and MA programs (including teacher training) for 18 years.