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Perceptions and Misperceptions of Canadian Realia among Slovak Students of English

Perceptions et perceptions erronées de realia canadien chez les étudiants slovaques d'anglais

Stanislav Kováč

Abstract

This article explores Slovak university students' perceptions of Canada. The study, involving 108 future teachers of English, analyses responses gathered over two academic years through a questionnaire. Findings reveal moderate knowledge of Canada's geography, challenges in political and economic understanding, and idealized views. The study also emphasizes the importance of cultural studies in foreign language education, providing valuable insights for the development of Canadian Studies in Slovakia.

Keywords: culture, cultural studies, Canadian Studies, foreign language education

Resumé

Cet article explore les perceptions des étudiants universitaires slovaques au Canada. L'étude, impliquant 108 futurs enseignants d'anglais, analyse les réponses recueillies pendant deux années académiques à travers un questionnaire. Les résultats révèlent une connaissance moyenne de la géographie du Canada, des difficultés dans la compréhension politique et économique, ainsi que des visions idéalisées. L'étude souligne l'importance des études culturelles dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères, fournissant des perspectives pour le développement des études canadiennes en Slovaquie.

Mots-clés : culture, études culturelles, études canadiennes, éducation en langue étrangère



In 2018, an article in the *Central European Journal of Canadian Studies* (vol. 12/13) titled “Perceptions and Misperceptions of Canada among Non-Canadian Students” revealed astonishing results. Diana Yankova and Andrei Andreev, the authors, presented findings indicating that Bulgarian students (along with a few international students studying in Bulgaria) possess minimal knowledge about Canada. Their perceptions of Canada heavily rely on stereotypes propagated by the media.

Their article inspired the idea to conduct similar research with Slovak students enrolled in Teacher Education programmes (future English teachers). The adjusted questionnaire aims to explore the knowledge, attitudes, and interests of these students regarding Canada and its people. The research seeks to enhance the syllabus of cultural studies courses and contribute valuable data for educators in similar courses and other researchers.

However, before a describing the procedure and the results of the study, the article offers a brief section about teaching cultural studies in the Slovak context, as it provides important context for the study and for interpreting its results.

Cultural studies in the Slovak context

In former Czechoslovakia during the pre-internet era (i.e., prior to the 1990s), *realia* (a term describing area/country studies) at faculties of arts were usually a part of history courses of the target country (primarily Great Britain and the USA). These courses presented what was believed to be the “high culture” of the target country, an assumption based on the fact that the study of culture was initially part of the study of literature (Badinská 2011, Kačmárová 2012). Globalisation and the Internet era that started in the 1990s caused many academic courses to face new challenges. These challenges combined changes in the scope of the courses with a change in teaching methods.

As Javorčíková and Zelenková state, “many opinion-shapers tried to redefine the post-2000 nature of cultural studies – they generally agreed on the instrumental and interpretative nature of the corpus of information and skills presented in cultural studies” (2019, 19). The authors mention elsewhere that “studying cultural studies in the era of migration, Americanization and, above all, globalisation requires mastering many more skills and competencies than were sufficient prior to the 1990s, a pre-turbulent era in many of the Eastern-Bloc countries in Europe” (2020, 4–5).

As a result, the courses began incorporating the culture of the countries corresponding to the language being studied. They adopted a comprehensive approach that not only includes the culture specific to those countries but also addresses broader global cultural concepts or important cultural objectives. However, there are many ob-



stacles Slovak teachers of English (or any other foreign language taught in Slovakia) need to overcome. The two biggest ones are:

1. In Slovakia, no framework sets cultural studies methodical and curricular requirements. Javorčíková and Zelenková (2020, 36–37) note that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) lacks explicit guidance on teaching intercultural competence, leaving many teachers unsure of the means and methods to develop it, as well as which cultural aspects to prioritize, often leading to a lack of cultural orientation awareness.
2. No framework suggests which literature is suitable either – that is why instructors often use high-quality foreign language literature. This literature, however, often does not correspond in structure and format to higher education textbooks that are suitable for the Slovak higher education context. Therefore, there are many domestic publications created by long-term instructors who know the domestic cultural environment and students' initial language and cultural skills.

Nowadays, when considering the role of culture in foreign language education, the emphasis is placed on *essential aspect*. This term refers to fundamental elements or characteristics that are integral to understanding a particular culture or cultural phenomenon and can vary widely depending on the context of study. This approach is based on the idea that culture cannot be omitted in foreign language education, as it often leads to communication errors even when the speaker is proficient in the linguistic aspect (see for example Magalová, Hriňák and Pokrivčáková). The essential aspect is influenced by opportunities for travel and unlimited access to information. The CEFR specifies intercultural competence as one of the communicative competencies and this is one of the reasons why it is crucial to incorporate new approaches to cultural studies. The process of selecting and creating study materials for these courses needs to be re-evaluated, especially the materials for students of teaching programmes due to the previously mentioned reasons.

Unfortunately, the situation for in-service teacher teaching at primary and secondary schools in Slovakia is not good either. Ritlyová (2009) stated that “most textbooks used in Slovakia do not include any information about [target] country as there is no national textbook of English available yet” (this statement is still valid in January 2024).

Considering the fact the students of teaching study programmes will be obliged to teach about Canadian culture as well in their teaching practice (various documents, such as the CEFR and the Slovak National Curriculum, outline and detail this particular aspect), it is clear that future teachers need to be prepared for this task during their university studies.



Slovak students come across Canadian culture during their primary school studies for the first time. Some information about Canada can be found in textbooks for primary school students (however, it is necessary to add that the cultural aspect of a textbook tends to age quickly due to rapid societal changes, globalization, technological advancements, the need for cultural sensitivity, and evolving perspectives on diversity and inclusivity). This information presents general information about Canada: about the country, its geography, its big cities, and other topics interesting for students. The situation regarding secondary education is similar.

As far as the higher education context is concerned, the instructors usually provide materials for their students. There are textbooks suitable for teaching Canadian studies in the Slovak context; for example, Světlá Brendlová's *Reálie anglicky mluvících zemí* [Realia of English-speaking countries] (2006) and newer publications like *Voices from Beyond: A Modern Coursebook of Cultural Studies for Philologists* by Javorčíková and Zelenková (2020) or *Pathways to Classics: Developing Literacy Skills in the Mother Tongue and Foreign Languages via Famous English, American and Canadian Literary Works* by Javorčíková, Šipošová and Kováč (2020).

Owing to the absence of a national textbook, university instructors are required to develop their own teaching materials. As previously mentioned, they face uncertainties regarding the content and structure of these materials. To address this issue, this study was initiated as a foundational step for subsequent studies. The aim is to gain insights into the needs of students and, ultimately, contribute to the creation of an improved textbook tailored to the requirements of future English teachers in Slovakia. The methodology of this study is explained in the following section.

Methodology

The questionnaire, based on “Perceptions and Misperceptions of Canada among Non-Canadian Students” (Yankova and Andreev 2018), served as the data collection tool for exploring university students' perceptions of Canada. Prior to the research, the instrument underwent testing with twelve students to ensure its suitability for the Slovak target group. Slightly modified for Slovak students, the questionnaire was administered to participants from the Teacher Education programme at Comenius University Bratislava, who were instructed to respond honestly based on their knowledge and feelings.



Analysis of the questionnaire

Firstly, it was essential to gather personal details from respondents, including age, degree programme, study combination, and background. Four crucial questions focused on respondents' backgrounds, exploring both their experiences and knowledge related to Canada. Notably, students not of Slovak origin, particularly those of Ukrainian, Czech, and Russian origin, were deemed unsuitable for the study. Erasmus students' questionnaires were excluded, and the degree programme was restricted to those enrolled in Teacher Education. The last two questions investigated whether respondents had taken a course in Canadian Studies and their experiences with Canada, potentially influencing perspectives and contributing to study outcomes.

Secondly, respondents answered 20 questions about Canada, adapted from Yankova and Andreev's article. These questions, employing various formats (open-ended, multiple-choice, Likert scale), assessed knowledge and perceptions of Canada. The first set focused on basic geographical knowledge, including borders, the capital city, cities, and population. The second set explored political aspects like the country's founding, government type, head, official languages, currency, and earliest settlers. The third set delved into social aspects, covering famous Canadians, social policy, crime level, predominant religion, and shared history, specifically Slovak immigration to Canada.

The subsequent set of questions (three questions, including one with a 5-point Likert scale) gauged respondents' knowledge about Canadian realia. The fourth set examined attitudes toward Canada and its people. The final set (two open-ended questions) explored sources of information about Canada (which might influence respondents' answers) and the type of information about Canada and its culture they desired.

Research unit

The research unit consisted of 108 respondents whose answers were collected during two consecutive academic years – 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. During the academic year 2019/2020, data was collected from 67 respondents through the distribution of paper questionnaires. In the academic year 2020/2021, an additional 41 questionnaires were collected (distributed via Microsoft Forms because of the pandemic situation). The research unit was deliberately chosen to focus solely on undergraduates enrolled in the Teacher Education program at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava.

The sampling unit in this study comprised respondents with specific characteristics: an average age of 22 years, all of Slovak or Hungarian origin but residing and studying in Slovakia since childhood, exclusively undergraduate students enrolled in the



Teacher Education programme at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University Bratislava. None of them had prior exposure to a Canadian Studies course. While many lacked direct personal experience with Canadian life and culture, seven respondents had visited Canada. Furthermore, a substantial number were familiar with individuals who currently lived or had lived in Canada, granting them insights into certain aspects of Canadian life.

Summary of the findings

As mentioned at the beginning of the process, the research was guided by defined aims, shaping the modifications made to the questionnaire. The questionnaire effectively facilitated the achievement of all these aims. In the following discussion, the questions from the questionnaire are analysed based on the areas outlined in the section “Analysis of the questionnaire.”

Canada’s geography

The section that tested respondents’ general knowledge about Canada found out their knowledge was moderate. 100% knew where Canada was situated. However, the rest of the questions caused issues to them: only 77% of the respondents could name the only neighbouring country of Canada; surprisingly, only 76% were able to name the capital of Canada; as many as 17% were unable to name a Canadian city other than the capital city. Unpredictably, as many as 27% of the respondents were able to state the number of Canadian inhabitants within a 1-million radius from the official figure (it is conceivable that they searched for the correct answer online while using the electronic form of the questionnaire).

Examining the incorrect responses provided valuable insights. Some students encountered difficulties with the concept of borders, considering countries separated by seas or oceans as neighbouring countries to Canada. Despite this misconception, Canada is known for bordering only one country, a fact correctly identified by 77% of the respondents. However, 12% did not answer the question, leaving uncertainty about whether they were unsure of the correct answer or simply skipped the question.

The question about the Canadian capital city proved challenging, with 14% providing no answer. Respondents incorrectly identified cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, Quebec, and Montreal as the capital.

Regarding other Canadian cities, respondents mentioned Toronto (69 occurrences), Vancouver (43 occurrences), Montreal (41 occurrences), Quebec (27 occurrences),



and lesser-known towns influenced by personal experience. In total, 63% of the respondents successfully identified three Canadian cities, excluding the capital.

Canada's politics and economics

Similarly, this section was challenging for the respondents: only 44% of them correctly labelled the correct year when Canada was founded; 65% knew that Canada was a constitutional monarchy; 11% thought that the country's head is a president (no name was provided), while 18% identified the prime minister as the head (encouragingly, most respondents correctly listed Justin Trudeau as the current Canadian Prime Minister). Almost a quarter of the respondents (24%) did not answer the question about Canada's official languages; only 53% of them could answer the question about Canada's currency correctly.

Canada's social life

Respondents demonstrated a vague knowledge of Canadian social policy, crime levels, and predominant religions, offering general and often non-specific responses. For Canadian social policy, 47% provided no response, emphasizing a need for more comprehensive coverage in Canadian Studies courses. Views on Canada's benefits and opportunities were positive but lacked depth. Similar gaps were observed in understanding the reasons for Slovak immigration to Canada (discussed below).

In examining crime levels, 47% chose not to respond, with 53% describing it as "low". Despite some correct answers, a significant 47% did not provide a response, suggesting limited understanding. Predominant religions in Canada were better understood, with 81% associating the majority with Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism. The survey identified notable awareness of religious diversity – the respondents were aware of the variety of religions in Canada, and many of them compared the situation with other countries like the USA and Slovakia.

Identifying renowned Canadians was more successful, with 90% of the respondents providing at least one name, showcasing young people's interest in popular culture. Justin Bieber was the most frequently mentioned, followed by Jim Carrey and Celine Dion. This aspect revealed the dynamic nature of preferences over time and reflected respondents' engagement with diverse influencers and YouTubers.



Slovak immigration to Canada

This question examined whether respondents knew why Slovak people had immigrated to Canada. Slovak Canadianist Javorčíková (2010) recognizes five waves of Slovak immigration to Canada:

1. The first Slovak emigration to Canada starting at the end of the 19th century
2. Pre-WWII immigration
3. Post-WWII immigration and immigration after 1948
4. Immigration after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968
5. Immigration and intellectual circulation after the Velvet Revolution of 1989

In their answers, the respondents were able to identify many reasons that motivated Slovak people to immigrate to Canada, although no one mentioned these waves directly. Respondents usually stated vague and general reasons, mostly connected to the present day (higher salary, better job opportunities, different educational system, etc.).

Again, it can be said that respondents' answers were very vague and general. However, as their answers are fascinating and provide another space for researching them, it can be stated that the respondents have at least a general idea of what motivated Slovak people to immigrate to Canada.

Exploring interest in studying Canada's life and culture and unveiling preferred aspects

The questionnaire provided feedback to respondents about their knowledge about Canada. Many of them stated that they were not satisfied with their knowledge about Canada – another positive outcome of the project is that the students themselves see that their knowledge about Canada is insufficient and thus are willing to learn more.

This question delved into what students would like to know about Canada, aiding in the precise development of syllabi. The most common response, provided by 23 respondents, focused on gaining insights into various aspects of Canadian life, including experiencing day-to-day realities, understanding Canadian identity, exploring how Canadians perceive their nation, and examining societal issues and how individuals manage them. Other areas of interest included living costs, the average salary for teachers, and Canadians' notable politeness.

The second most common response, cited by 11 respondents, focused on Canadian nature and national parks. Additionally, nine respondents expressed curiosity about



Canadian traditions and culture, while seven respondents simply desired information on “anything/everything.”

Seven respondents expressed interest in practical information about tourism and sightseeing, emphasizing a preference for engaging and applicable insights. Another seven respondents indicated a desire to delve into Canadian history.

Notably, the questionnaire provided valuable feedback, revealing that many respondents were dissatisfied with their current knowledge about Canada. Some self-reflective responses highlighted the need for a basic introduction to Canada, and a sense of embarrassment for not knowing more about the country.

Attitudes of future Slovak teachers of English towards Canada and its people

What is also positive is that Slovak students of English have favourable attitudes towards Canada and its people. Six percent of respondents have already visited the country, and 46% stated they would like to visit for various reasons, including nature, the country and its people, culture, and more.

The primary motivation for the majority of respondents to visit Canada is its nature and national parks, with as many as 40% expressing this as their main reason. Another 28% were motivated by the country itself, driven by curiosity and a desire to verify the accuracy of the descriptions they had heard. Specific places mentioned included Toronto (mentioned twice), Vancouver (mentioned twice, once labelled as a “wonderful city”), Montreal, Niagara Falls, Alberta (“to experience the nature”), and two fans of L. M. Montgomery expressing a wish to “go to Prince Edward Island and Avonlea” to “see places similar to those in the book and TV series.”

Next question aimed to assess the respondents’ perceptions of Canada as a country. They were presented with eleven adjectives (tolerant, democratic, immigrant, imperialistic, social, socialist, politically unstable, totalitarian, world power, peace-loving, police state), and instructed to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale how well they believed each adjective described Canada. According to the respondents, Canada is perceived as a peace-loving, democratic and tolerant place that is not seen as imperialistic, totalitarian, or politically unstable. Additionally, it is considered worth visiting.

In this question, the objective was to investigate the immediate associations that arise in respondents’ minds when the term “Canada” is considered. The question received responses from a total of 103 participants (95%), with the most frequent associations encompassing the flag/maple leaf (often referenced together), Canadian nature, maple syrup, Canadian weather, and people.



Primary sources of knowledge about Canada among Slovaks

As it turned out, mass media and the Internet were labelled as the most frequent source of information, occurring 59 times. Examples included films (such as *Room* from 2015), TV shows (*How I Met Your Mother* occurred five times, along with *Anne with an E*, *Murdoch Mysteries*, *Schitt's Creek*, and *South Park*), sports programmes, and music (with mentions of Justin Bieber and Drake). Other reasons mentioned were shared experience of respondents' friends and family, respondents' stay in Canada, books, and ice hockey/NHL.

In addition, there was an interest in exploring whether respondents' answers were influenced by media-presented stereotypes. However, investigating this aspect requires adopting a different approach, as the current research design may not fully capture the nuanced impact of media influence on respondents' perceptions. It is not possible to make that claim definitively, although 59 respondents (55%) mentioned that their answers were (at least partially) based on the media and the Internet.

Comparison with the original study

The results of the study could be seen as a disappointment. However, after reading the study mentioned above by Yankova and Andreev, one could expect similar results. In the Conclusion to their article, they stated:

The majority of participants in the case study, regardless of their nationality, demonstrated very little factual knowledge about Canada. Their answers to the questions in the first part of the survey indicated that they knew next to nothing about its history and geography... In addition, they appeared to be highly confused or seriously mistaken about the political setup of Canada, eventually opting to consider it a presidential republic despite the fact that nearly half of the informants were majoring in Political Science. Finally, when faced with the task of naming famous Canadians, be it historical or contemporary figures, they could come up with only a few names from films and pop music only. (187)

As was stated in "Summary of the findings" above, Slovak respondents did not perform better. History, geography, and the political setup of Canada posed challenges for Slovak respondents as well. The only area where they scored better was in naming famous Canadians, with as many as 97 respondents (90%) providing at least one correct answer.

The summary of findings also indicated that the respondents' opinions about Canada, the Canadians, and their culture were very idealistic. Once again, in this area, Slo-



vak students were no better than their Bulgarian counterparts. According to Yankova and Andreev

the prevailing perception of Canada, based mostly on personal accounts of relatives or acquaintances living there, or on impressions gathered from movies or TV series, proved to be that it is a wealthy country with a high standard of living, a low crime rate, and a warm and welcoming attitude to immigrants. With very few exceptions, informants painted a postcard-perfect picture of Canadian nature and weather conditions, as well, envisaging spectacular mountain views and cosy white Christmases. (187)

This statement could also sum up the results of this project. Thus, it can be concluded that Slovak students scored similarly to the Bulgarian ones. According to the respondents of the Slovak study, Canada represents an interesting topic, yet it lacks the appeal to prompt independent exploration of its details. Yankova and Andreev think the poor results were caused because “the country does not play a particularly prominent part in international media coverage, whether in the political, sports or entertainment feature” (188). It is not possible to definitively affirm or refute their claim, but this falls outside the scope of the study’s objectives.

Recommendations for teaching practice

To enhance the effectiveness of Canadian Studies, several key recommendations for teaching practice have emerged from the research findings. Firstly, there is a need to strengthen students’ understanding of Canadian geography. This can be achieved through the incorporation of interactive activities and discussions centered around maps to solidify their knowledge. Additionally, emphasis should be placed on political and economic education, with instructors providing comprehensive lessons on Canadian history, politics, and economics to address identified knowledge gaps.

Exploring social and cultural realities of Canada is crucial, and instructors are encouraged to design lessons that delve deeper into topics such as social policies, crime levels, and predominant religions. Fostering critical thinking and research skills will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of these aspects. Addressing stereotypes and misconceptions related to Canada is another essential recommendation. Classroom discussions should challenge common stereotypes and promote an awareness of diverse perspectives to counteract misunderstandings.

Integrating practical and applicable information into the curriculum is the key to engaging students. Lessons should include insights into living costs, average salaries, and tourism information, connecting theoretical knowledge to real-life experiences.



Engaging with Canadian culture should be a priority, encouraging an appreciation for traditions and history through interactive activities that go beyond surface-level exploration.

Encouraging self-reflection among students is crucial, creating an open environment where they feel comfortable expressing uncertainties and actively seeking additional information. Diversifying information sources is also emphasized, with instructors encouraging Slovak university students to explore a variety of sources they have access to, such as academic journals available through university libraries, scholarly articles provided by online databases, books from university collections, and government publications accessible through institutional resources. Additionally, students may find documentaries, literature, and personal narratives or memoirs in university libraries or through online platforms.

Examining attitudes and perceptions towards Canada is recommended through discussions and activities that foster cultural understanding. Instructors should tailor lessons based on students' interests and actively work to dispel existing misconceptions. Finally, the importance of continuing research and investigation is highlighted. Ongoing studies should delve deeper into specific areas, such as reasons for immigration and perceptions of social policies, while staying attuned to students' evolving interests and adjusting teaching strategies accordingly. These recommendations collectively aim to create a more comprehensive, engaging, and informed Canadian Studies curriculum.

Conclusions

This article has explored key questions presented in its introduction, specifically addressing what and how to teach within the scope of Canadian Studies in Slovakia. While the research project provides valuable insights and potential directions for the field, it does not purport to conclusively answer all questions. Instead, it serves as a foundational source of inspiration rather than a prescriptive methodological guide. The findings underscore the imperative for further research and exploration in the realm of Canadian studies within the Slovak context. The article highlights existing knowledge gaps among both instructors and students, emphasizing the need for enhanced preparation aligned with the CEFR and National Curriculum expectations. Despite revealing areas for improvement, the research project also illuminates students' genuine interest in the topic and their eagerness to delve deeper into the subject matter. As an article, this work paves the way for future research endeavours to fill existing gaps and contribute to the ongoing development of Canadian Studies in Slovakia.



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