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The Educational Potential of Texts of Culture in Teaching English to Senior Secondary School Students



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Introduction

Teachers of English make continuous efforts to ensure that their learners successfully develop their foreign language skills. A multitude of interesting and creative activities have been designed to provide sufficiently meaningful input and yet it has been noticed that students who have acquired the ability to use the foreign language communicatively, have not undergone the expected cognitive development during the language learning process. This observation is surprising when we consider the educational potential that foreign language education seems to carry to stimulate not only learners' linguistic but also their intellectual and emotional growth.

One of the reasons for this state of affairs can be attributed to the poor quality of texts included in some English coursebooks used at school, which directly and negatively affects learners' intellectual capacity, as observed by numerous English language educators. This problem appears to be particularly visible at the senior secondary school level. At this level, learners are expected to expand their intellectual horizons also during their foreign language classes. This, however, can only happen provided students receive sufficiently challenging input. It is assumed in this work that valuable films, literature and songs and other texts of culture might effectively enrich the content of the English language course and enhance learners' overall development.

It must also be remembered that students at senior secondary schools frequently face the necessity of taking the final examination, which implies the need to learn with a specific goal in mind. This might hamper the English teacher's attempts to expose his/her learners to culture texts which go beyond the format of the examination. It is evident then that supplementing a traditional English language course at senior secondary schools with good-quality culture texts requires a solution which aims at reconciling both utilitarian and non-utilitarian approaches to teaching and learning English. The practical aspect involves teaching English for communication and preparing students for the Matura examination, while the non-utilitarian aspect refers to focusing on the potential of texts of culture for general education. Allowing for the combination of these two seemingly irreconcilable goals is worth pursuing.

The primary objective of the present work is to provide answers to some of the following important questions:

- What is the quality of contemporary ELT coursebooks texts?

- Do texts of culture, such as films, songs and literature, provide intellectually challenging input?
- What text selection criteria should be considered?
- How can teachers incorporate culture texts into an English language course at school so as to help learners develop linguistically, cognitively and emotionally?
- Can using texts of culture at English lessons contribute to the student's improved performance at the school leaving examination in English?

The present author holds the intuitive belief that the systematic implementation of texts of culture at English lessons will have a beneficial effect on students' personal growth in linguistic, cognitive, affective and emotional domains. Furthermore, it is expected that teachers of English can make creative use of the present author's proposal to build links between externally imposed curriculum objectives, the school leaving examination requirements and their own course planning.

The present work comprises six chapters. Chapter One, entitled "Selected problems in English language teaching at senior secondary schools", contains an overview of problems present in senior secondary schools as well as their reasons, symptoms of occurrence and consequences. The discussed issues refer to Matura (school leaving) examination-oriented teaching, the poor quality of text content in contemporary English language coursebooks, teachers' inability to exploit the potential of interesting texts, and finally, the impact of trivial coursebook input on students' output at English lessons.

In Chapter Two, the educational potential of English language lessons is explored. Different researchers' and educators' views are presented on linguistic and educational goals that can be achieved in the process of teaching and learning English. Furthermore, selected elements of the content of an English language course are examined as significant factors affecting students' linguistic, cognitive and emotional development. The issue of educating through content is addressed as well as some considerations on values and valuable content. The last part of the chapter presents an idea of using educational texts as a remedy to the poverty of content in English language teaching. The characteristic features of these texts and their impact on the student's personal development are discussed. The last section concerns the issue of multimodality with reference to educational texts.

Chapter Three – "The importance of texts of culture as classroom resources" – presents a typology of texts of culture and a review of publications on texts of culture in English language teaching, concentrating on the use of literature, films

and music etc. Different theoretical and empirical arguments in favour of the employment of texts of culture at English lessons are examined.

The main concern of Chapter Four, entitled “The selection of texts of culture for English lessons”, is the set of criteria of choosing texts of culture for English lessons. Among the investigated issues are the following: learner factors, text factors, school curriculum-related factors and technical and legal factors. In addition, anticipated organizational problems of using texts of culture at schools are commented upon. The chapter ends with a sample rationale for a text of culture used as classroom material.

In Chapter Five – “The English teacher’s competences and roles [...]” – the reader will find a thorough discussion of a variety of desirable English teacher’s personality traits, competences and a range of roles performed at school with a special focus on the implementation of culture texts. Wenzel’s (2001) model of the foreign language teacher’s general education constitutes the basis for the considerations and out of a number of roles, the role of the English teacher as the educator is highlighted.

Chapter Six contains some remarks on merging texts of culture into the school programme of English language teaching. It discusses the place of texts of culture in national curriculum frameworks, taking as an example the Polish new Curriculum Framework, and analyzes the Matura examination topic areas. The present author’s proposal for the integration of texts of culture into the English language curriculum is put forward in this chapter as well. Furthermore, some ideas connected with the application of films, songs and literature are examined with reference to the results of the author’s own research, conducted at several Polish senior secondary schools in 2012.

The present author cherishes the hope that her work will contribute to the current methodological discussion concerning the place of texts of culture in English language teaching.