

**ACADEMIC CLASS AS A PLATFORM  
FOR RAISING LEARNERS'  
SOCIOCULTURAL MATURITY**

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The article deals with raising students' sociocultural maturity. The humanities academic classes are considered as a platform for encouraging students to develop their social and cultural skills, with particular attention given to classes where the foreign language is taught. The choice of the theme is determined by the necessity to improve the situation with the level of graduates' cultural literacy and sociocultural skills, which accounts for the relevance of the given paper whose subject matter is viewed on the background of the current crisis of culture.

Considered inseparable from society, culture as a topic has recently been developed in many directions and with enough vigour. Considerable literature on the theory of and methods for teaching foreign languages witnesses educators' interest, both empirical and theoretical, in engaging a variety of culture-related aspects in the learning process.

We assume that a foreign language course has a great potential to serve as an efficient means for strengthening the «friendship» between the curricular disciplines of natural and technical specialisms and the humanities. To this end, it is significant to review the position occupied by the humanities in the curriculum and give them a due weight in education process. So far, the curricular subjects concerned with the way people think and behave are seriously underrated. However, language and literature, history and philosophy and other humanities disciplines make up a powerful arsenal contributing to enhancing the individual's

sociocultural awareness and improving the respective skills, without which no one could be considered a civilized person and human at all.

In discussing the main points of the given article we are based on the views of two world's most original literary scholars writing today – Mikhail Epstein and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. They both argue that the humanities are bound to increase enhance their intellectual impact on society. We accept Gumbrecht's concept – the dimension of «presence», in which cultural phenomena and cultural events become tangible and have an impact on our senses and our bodies. Proposing putting the dimension of presence at the center of academic practice, we highlight the far-reaching effect of the presence of a qualified and culturally developed instructor. It is this understanding of the teacher's presence that serves as a prerequisite for encouraging appropriate sociocultural education of the motivated learners.

**Key words:** crisis of culture, humanities, platform for development, raising cultural literacy, sociocultural maturity.

**Волкова А.Г. Академічне заняття як платформа для підвищення соціокультурної зрілості студентів.** Статтю присвячено підвищенню соціально-культурної зрілості студентів вищих навчальних закладів. Заняття з гуманітарних дисциплін розглядаються в якості платформи для розвитку соціальних та культурних навичок студентів, при цьому особлива увага приділяється заняттям із вивчення іншої мови. Вибір теми визначається необхідністю поліпшити ситуацію з рівнем культурної грамотності та соціокультурних навичок випускників. Означена тема розглядається на тлі загальної кризи культури сучасного суспільства. Наводяться приклади конкретних заходів для вирішення проблеми.

**Ключові слова:** гуманітарні дисципліни, криза культури, культурний рівень, платформа для розвитку, соціокультурна зрілість.

**Волкова А.Г. Академическое занятие как платформа для повышения социокультурной зрелости студентов.** Статья посвящена повышению социально-культурной зрелости студентов высших учебных заведений. Занятия по гуманитарным дисциплинам рассматриваются в качестве платформы для развития социальных и культурных навыков студентов, при этом особое внимание уделяется занятиям по изучению иностранного языка. Выбор темы обусловлен необходимостью повышения уровня культурной грамотности и социокультурных навыков выпускников. Данная тема рассматривается на фоне общего кризиса культуры современного общества. Приводятся примеры конкретных мер для решения поставленной проблемы.

**Ключевые слова:** гуманитарные дисциплины, кризис культуры, платформа для развития, социокультурная зрелость, уровень культуры.

**The theme relevance.** The relevance of the issue under consideration is proved by the fact that the present period witnesses persistent speculation about the current crisis of culture. In this article we express our strong conviction that a foreign language class can be an appropriate platform for enhancing the learner's cultural maturity level. We believe that in a global context, language-related classes as one manifestation of the humanities, are capable of making up an invaluable asset to encourage the cultural health of the youngsters – ad hoc graduates – and society as a whole.

**The aim of the paper** is to describe the ways of raising students' sociocultural maturity through the humanities academic classes, in particular a foreign language course, which serves as a platform for encouraging students to develop their cultural literacy and communicative skills. We consider this way a feasible suggestion about how best to tackle the problem of approaching a proper level of sociocultural maturity, which plays a crucial role in providing learners' successful functioning upon graduation in both private and public spheres.

**Analysis of the recent researches.** Culture is of primary concern for those involved in the process of education. We consider the concept of culture to be inseparable from the notion of society. Among various aspects characterizing culture, we emphasize those relevant to the subject in question and look at culture as a central anthropological concept encompassing the range of phenomena transmitted via social learning, the latter including the academic surrounding. Of special importance for discussing the given theme is the domain of culture represented by society's values, norms, and modes of behaviour.

Let's look at the humanities as the sphere of our particular interest with concentration on language learning and teaching in order to take a brief look at the way culture-related questions are involved. Some educators propose to incorporate a special culture class in the curriculum as an inseparable component of language learning and teaching. This initiative has a lot to offer regarding the development of communicative competence at language teaching departments, especially in case of training prospective teachers of foreign languages [1; 7]. In the sphere of language teaching and learning the concept of culture is often defined pragmatically as culture associated with a particular language which is being learnt [2; 4; 8]. Lexical dominance is noticeable in researches on the way lexical

items reflect culture, in particular how culture is encoded in the everyday conceptual metaphors taken for granted by speakers [6]. Conferences on education are held with relative frequency, with undivided attention being paid to very diverse aspects of a complex and multifaceted phenomenon of culture. One example of such events was a conference Context and Culture in Language Teaching and Learning organized at the University of Durham in June 2001 [1].

Modern researchers are concerned about the correlation between cultural values and traditions reflected in language. They recognize the tight relationship between language, culture and the way people think. Liz Reisberg, an independent consultant in higher education with a large international experience, points out that studying another language is proven to increase the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication, above all in developing a deeper understanding of culture, rather than only in knowing vocabulary [9].

**Presenting the main material.** In the article we express our strong conviction that the humanities in general and an academic discipline related to teaching another language in particular can serve as a platform for raising learners' sociocultural maturity. By the latter we mean the level of a person's social and cultural development that allows him or her to function well as a representative of a particular community.

The point of departure for our discussion is based on the ideas of Mikhail Epstein and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who are among the world's most original literary scholars writing today.

Mikhail N. Epstein, a literary theorist and critical thinker, Professor of Durham University, is the author of a seminal work *The Transformative Humanities: A Manifesto*. The book's main thesis, as we understand it, is that the humanities have lost their rightful and natural leading position in educational curriculum and among academic disciplines as a whole. M. Epstein accounts for the current crisis in the humanities by their «intellectual autism», characterized by impaired social interaction and calls for a reexamination of the far-reaching question of how the humanities can affect the areas of their study [3]. It is of vital importance that the intellectual and institutional balance between the sciences and the humanities should be restored. The genuine aim of humanities is self-transformation of the human species as spiritual beings through the force of their self-awareness and self-exploration. We are strongly convinced

that the humanities should not only to survive, but what is more they are bound to enhance their intellectual impact on society. Therefore they need to be adequately recognized in contemporary universities. An important consequence of this might be establishing programs in creative thinking and other generic skills. In his *Manifesto*, M. Epstein ingeniously emphasizes that our world is in a state of continuous movement and change. He writes about a tiny word that dominated the humanities in the late twentieth century. This is «post-», a word with a specific power. The magic of the prefix consists in relegating the term with this time element to the past. Living in a new epoch whose features must now be more positively defined through «proto-» rather than «post-», we are witnessing a major shift in cultural attitudes: from retrospectivism to prospectivism [3: 24].

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, a professor of literature at Stanford University, is our another authority whose ideas build up a strong foundation for the given discussion. In his reputed work *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* Gumbrecht introduces a new concept – the dimension of «presence». This is a concept whereby cultural phenomena and cultural events become tangible and have an impact on our senses and bodies. In the frameworks of the author's philosophy through this concept we approach the opposition «presence culture» versus «meaning culture». This thesis reveals that, via their exclusive dedication to interpretation, i.e. to the reconstruction of meaning, the humanities have become incapable of addressing a dimension of presence in all cultural phenomena that is as important as the dimension of meaning [5]. As a source for an exemplary instance of presence, it is aesthetic experience that plays a significant role. It manifests a specifically high level in the functioning of some of our «general cognitive, emotional and perhaps even physical faculties» [5: 98]. Gumbrecht writes about «the state of being lost in focused intensity» aimed at preventing us from «completely losing a feeling or a remembrance of the physical dimension in our lives». In other words this «focused intensity» remind us of our being «part of the world of things.» Summing up, Gumbrecht links this to a state of extreme serenity, of «being in sync with the world» [5: 104–105]. With his book *Production of Presence*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht puts the dimension of presence at the center of academic practice in the arts and humanities.

In our article we concentrate on «sociocultural maturity» as a key term which represents the level of learners' education – knowledge, skills,

and development. Using the allusion to M. Epstein, we declare that the more a person matures, the less malleable he or she becomes [3: 94]. Being not easily influenced, the person is capable of behaving in a sensible way. A fully grown and developed young person is strong enough to resist whatever pernicious influence, to understand intricate meanings, to read between the lines, etc. In the context of the given subject, we emphasize a person's cultural development, when s/he is becoming full of culturally enriching experiences. We put special emphasis on sociocultural maturity, i.e. the state of being related to society and culture, and refer to this parameter as an ultimate characteristic of the personality's development. It is a socioculturally matured person who is able to resist what is bad but may be shared by the majority. As M. Epstein put it, «The fact that all people are in solidarity about something does not automatically make their opinion true» [3: 182].

One can see the difference between the 21-st century classroom needs and those of the 20-th century. In this century classroom, teachers act as facilitators of student learning. A person with calling of a teacher has the power to build up a student's self-esteem. Given classroom atmosphere is a comfort zone for those who are present there, the classroom becomes a platform for successful learning and developing skills, which might need at present and in future. The best kind of class activities is intrinsically motivated, where students want to learn because it is interesting, purposeful and personally relevant, not because it is assessed. Socioculturally mature learners look into perspective, which makes them eager to master the needed knowledge and skills to be applied in personal and public spheres. The physical presence of a qualified and culturally developed instructor serves as a prerequisite for encouraging appropriate sociocultural education of the motivated learners. Such potent encounters of instructors and learners, accompanied by direct sincere and emotional communication, are expected to facilitate learners' development. We highlight the far-reaching effect of the instructor's presence, which might be confirmed through the words reportedly said by St. Augustine: «I learned most, not from those who taught me but from those who talked with me».

We base our view on the assumption that by and large, a foreign language course as a learning discipline serves as a practical branch of the humanities which might be referred to as the extension of a socially and culturally developed personality and as the prerequisite for becoming

human in a deep meaning of this word. It has been widely recognized that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways.

Now we offer here some practical advice based on the experience of work with international students. No civilized person can deny the importance to be knowledgeable of other societies and cultures. During the course of language teaching, we give priority to increasing the international learners' awareness of the existing differences between their own and the host cultures. As a starting point, it is worth discussing the meaning of the word «culture». Here are some questions and tasks which might be given to students: As a brainstorming activity learners are asked to complete the sentence «Culture is ...» or take a minute to write down their own definition of culture or say what kinds of things generally come to their mind when they think about «culture». The students might be asked to discuss in pairs or groups what each of them would include in their definition of culture. More complicated question may be whether it is possible for people to understand a language fully without knowing the culture. We may offer students a brief story about some type of cultural miscommunication. Students may be divided in groups and have the handouts with the task to discuss the incident trying to understand why the miscommunication took place and how it could have been prevented. Besides, students may be directed to describe an incident in which an international visitor is faced with a dilemma, problem, or situation that has a cultural basis. As a variant, multiple choice explanations might be suggested for this or that problem being discussed. We may ask students to comment on something new or interesting related to a host culture that they have recently learned, which might be followed by common discussion.

Thus, during the language course we attempt to provide students not only with linguistic competence, but try to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with their own distinctive values and behaviours. We consider it our duty to help learners see that such interaction is an enriching experience

**Conclusion.** Education takes on added importance nowadays, at a time of uncertainty and crisis of culture. The right approach to the humanities gives them new credibility. It is of the utmost importance that

we should be in harmony with ourselves and the outside world, both our students and we teachers being part of the environment.

**Direction of further research.** We have an intention to concentrate on further discussing how to successfully develop our learners' transferable skills, which are indispensable for a student to become a graduate worthy of a job in a highly competitive market. Besides, we strongly believe that the mastering of generic skills is to enrich the person's life.

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