

Title of example of practice: Living culture and literature

Author

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Institution and initiating department/faculty

(i.e. where example of practice takes/took place):

Tartu University, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics

Departments/faculties in which initiative implemented/to be implemented:

Department of Estonian as a Foreign Language

Abstract

(QA question: What are/were you trying to do?)

The 2 courses which I am going to describe are both attempts to teach a foreign language (in our case - Estonian) in out-of-classroom surroundings. They are examples of interactive learning. The aim was to bring some elements of culture (folklore) and literature (drama) into language learning process in order to inspire students in their studies. A possibility was given to study and use Estonian in a real language environment. As we know, outside-classroom-education is based on the learners creativity and enquiry, it works through personal experience and activity and this is how it can give very good results. One of the goals of the teachers was to move the focus from the teacher as an expert to more students based activities. This was the same idea which Maria Holmgren Troy from sub group 4 has also mentioned in her case study "Developing a course on English-language societies and cultures at a Swedish university".

The courses are:

- 1) Estonian Traditional Culture on Field (BA level, 3 ECTS), supervisor Madis Arukask
- 2) Learning Language Through Theatre (a facultative course for both university levels, BA and MA, 3 ECTS), supervisor Sirje Ramm

Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative

(QA questions: Why are/were you trying to do it? / What are/were the aims and objectives?)

The teachers` aim was to make the learning process more interactive to get better results. Both courses are/were meant for the non-Estonian learners, it means mainly for local Russians but also for exchange students from all over the Europe and occasionally even from countries further away. It is important to underline that the students are all future linguists, so their language knowledge is already on a relatively high level.

The main aim was to improve the quality of language learning. In addition to that, the courses had also more specific goals:

1) Estonian Traditional Culture on Field

- To introduce the students with the main field work methods and to practice them.
- The students are learning how to literate the verbally collected data.
- To introduce the students to systematize folkloristic genres.
- After the work on the field a student has knowledge about the local culture and its characteristic representations typical for some part of Estonia.

2) Learning Language Through Theatre

- To develop communicative competence.
- To develop the oral language skills of the students, to broaden their vocabulary.
- To improve the pronunciation in the target language.
- To teach the literature of the target language. Students obtain the ability to read a specified fiction text – drama, comprehension of this type of texts will be deepened.
- The final goal is to stage the play, the other objectives are realized through the ultimate goal.

Rather than acting as “director”, the instructor (supervisor) is transformed into a guide who outlines the steps, keeps track of time and provides feedback. The success of the “project” is in the hands of students.

Description of activity or initiative

(QA question: How is/was the activity/initiative implemented?)

1) Estonian Traditional Culture on Field

This course is a good example to view how learning a foreign language is integrated into studying oral culture and folk poetry. The course is meant for the non-Estonian learners, practical collecting of folklore is carried out during one week in summer. After getting instructions students are in pairs moving around in the rural areas of Estonia and interviewing local people there. The questions are about traditional culture/folklore and local mode of living now and in the past. During the practise the students are also living on the same location which means completely different situation for them as majority of our students come from towns not from the countryside.

2) Learning Language Through Theatre

Literary texts constitute valuable authentic material as it exposes the learner to different registers, types of language use. At the University of Tartu this course has been carried out in four years (2002, 2003, 2005, 2006), every year a different spectacle was staged. In 2006 it was a dramatization based on Estonian children poetry. The other three have been comedies of Estonian classical literature. Language learning has always been the priority of the course, not creating an excellent production which is the main goal at a theatre. For the teacher of the course it has been important to consider the needs of the learners, that is why comedy is the genre used – learning through fun is more effective than dull swotting. Positive emotions are part of this course.

As linguistics is speciality of our students, it has given the teacher the possibility to choose so called more demanding plays but of course a piece of drama is selected founded on the language level of the group of students.

Evaluative comments

(QA questions: What are/were the outcomes? What is/was the impact? Is/was the activity/initiative successful? How do you know whether or not it works/worked?)

1) Estonian Traditional Culture on Field

What are/were the outcomes?

In a very natural surroundings the following skills have been developed and improved:

- the Estonian language skills
- communication skill
- new communicative abilities are obtained
- new practical and theoretical knowledge is obtained

Is/was the activity successful? How do you know whether or not it works/worked?

In our opinion the activity was successful. To examine the quality of the practise, students are/were asked to keep diaries. On the basis of their notes it is possible to follow how the former attitude of mind and stereotypes are changing. Every student has also to write his/her report. From their diaries and report it is possible to evaluate if their language skills have improved or not. In many cases these documents show the enlargement of the vocabulary of the students during the course.

2) Learning Language Through Theatre

To examine the quality of the course the rehearsals of the plays were videotaped as well as the first performance. (Two plays gained so much popularity that they were performed three times). Now it is possible to view the tapes in order to decide what was good and what can be done better.

Every year also a questionnaire with open answers was filled by students. In addition to the aims concerning the language issues, the students also pointed out some non-linguistic outcomes. Many of them mentioned that they noticed the rise of their self-confidence and that they benefited from communicating with people of different nationalities during the course (it was interesting and improved their Estonian language). It was also mentioned that during the course they got the opportunity to speak a lot, more than in the whole semester.

The teachers of others subjects have noticed that after drama course students started to use different sayings and phrases from these plays which means that they have really "obtained" something. The students themselves have admitted the same in their questionnaires.

Advice to others

Before going on field with your students they should be very well prepared. They have to be aware of the cultural differences between different nationalities and take into account that religious background can be dissimilar. Also the methods of gathering the information must be very clear to them in order to pick up the most suitable considering the concrete circumstances. A training how to communicate successfully would be very useful as well.

The drama course. It is important to choose the right play in which the students are really interested, which can inspire them and is not above their language level. Sirje Rammo told that in her mind comedy is the best genre but of course it depends on the concrete teacher and concrete group of students. One of the drawbacks in the use of literary texts such as drama is that many of them contain language forms that learners of a language find difficult to understand. This could be overcome by simplifying them, which may lead to criticism that the texts became pale imitations of the original writing. So, a drama text can not be simplified too much, a happy medium has to be found.

Drama games, role-plays, individual and group improvisation can all be used to support the staging

process. A good idea is to carry out a pre-reading/listening stage before the actual creating of the performance. The disadvantage of the last two suggestions is that both of them are quite time-consuming. Now it depends how many time you actually have for this course.

Reflection/any other comments

QA question: Is/was that the best way to do it? Why/why not? What improvements or adjustments are needed?

- 1) Estonian Traditional Culture on Field. It is a good way to do it. In future it is planned to use a standardized questionnaire at the end of the practise to get better overview of what has been achieved and what can be done better.
- 2) Learning Language Through Theatre. To carry out a course like this you need a group of students who are willing to do this and at the same time are above average creative.

For both courses a well designed preparation phase would be very useful and it is important to make these preparations together with students.

Further details

e.g. web links; relevant references/publications; alternative contact names