

Teaching Hungarian culture to American students. A successful cooperation between the University of Wisconsin and the University of Szeged

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In this presentation I intend to introduce the successful cooperation between the University of Wisconsin (Stevens Point) and the Hungarian and Central European International Study Center at the University of Szeged. Planning and managing a program for American students requires a series of methodological decisions and an ongoing process of modifying course content and teaching style according to the needs of the students. These points will be discussed in short in the following sections.

The beginning

For years the undergraduate (BA or BSc) students from the University of Wisconsin arrived to Hungary only for a week as part of their European Entry Tour prior to their semester in Poland. Due to the success of the Hungarian study tours and lectures, our department was asked to set up a semester long program. It has been more than ten years since the first group of students arrived from Stevens Point. According to the American colleagues and the students, the Hungarian program is still graded as exotic and interesting, as a result of the needs analysis and the good cooperation with the International Office. The feedbacks on our program is positive and attracts students every year.

Our aims

The Szeged program has twofold aims: one is to offer students an insight into the various assets of Hungarian culture; the second is to develop students' intercultural sensitivity. The latter one has prime importance in our program, since many of the overseas students experience culture shock (Ward et al. 2001) after two or three months. To prevent or ease the shock each student is assigned to a Hungarian language partner (a Hungarian Studies student) who assists him or her throughout the semester. This has mutual benefits for both parties, i.e. the overseas students can ask for help almost any time, the Hungarian students will also learn a lot about another culture and about handling and teaching foreigners. Thus, the intercultural sensitization of the foreign students is developed in and out of the classroom and by the end of the semester it is often visible in the changes of the students' attitudes and behavior. From a broader perspective, it serves as a tool of cultural diplomacy.

As one of our former students wrote in his testimony after returning home: "*There is one difference in myself that I noticed before anyone else. I'm better at talking with people. I've learned how to read body language. If I can get the gist of what a Hungarian is telling me based on his motions and tone of voice, understanding English-speakers is a cakewalk. Living in a foreign country is a challenge which, once accomplished, will give you the confidence to easily overcome whatever life hits you with next.*"

Methodological considerations

In order to accomplish the abovementioned aims, a series of methodological decisions had to be made. First, it was important to invite qualified lecturers who gained experience with teaching foreign students previously and were flexible enough to adapt to various learning styles. Second, besides the traditional thematic culture courses such as Hungarian history, folklore and music, visual arts, Hungarian films, each semester a special course (*Hungary at large* or *Culture method*) is offered to cover a plethora of topics discussing "culture with small c" (Seely, 1994). The course material and the presentation topics are tailored according to the needs and the interests (usually the major) of the students which can range from botany to political science. At this point the course is becoming rather challenging for the instructor who is required to quit his or her traditional course design practice and discover new fields. It is not only the selection of the topics but also the way of presentation and the assignments that call for flexibility. For overseas students we offer project work, teacher- and peer support, extra-curricular activities often with the help of their Hungarian language partners. In these special classes we foster students to explore the cultural difference on their own without explicitly telling them in advance what to look for.

Finally, the most important goal is to maintain the motivation and the positive attitudes, i.e. enthusiasm towards the Hungarian culture throughout the semester.

Methodological difficulties

For every international program cultural differences can cause difficulties for teachers. In our program the most challenging part was to adjust the level of the courses to students' varied background knowledge. Also, in the case of overview-type of thematic courses that discussed an aspect of the Hungarian culture in chronological order we realized that due to the lack of knowledge of Hungarian and (European) history most of the overseas students struggled with the amount of information. As an alternative, analyzing a few pieces of art in depth or spending several classes on reading extracts from only a few novels gave them opportunity to grasp the cultural connotations and raise relevant questions. Again, proper selection is a key factor here that should be governed by the balance between exotic Hungarian and general European cultural patterns (Szőnyi, 2012).

As for classroom management, having only American students in the class, has several advantages compared to the multicultural classroom. In our program contrastive analysis in language instruction and in culture courses are used but in different ways. While observing cultural issues comparisons often generate heated discussions which activate and elicit students' background knowledge.

Summary

The key aspects of the success of our program might be attributed to the wide variety of courses and the flexibility of the instruction, i.e. tailoring the course content according to students' needs. The program is basically culture oriented, there is also an emphasis on integrating culture in language teaching (Árvay, 2013). Finally, keeping good contact with the International Program leaders who come for an inspection trip is every two-three years is a must.

References

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