CY-ICER 2012

Teaching heterogeneous students in Israel

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Abstract

I have been teaching in the University of Haifa for almost twenty years. The courses range from Slavic Folklore and various topics in Russian Literature to the Comparative Epic Poetry and Modern Folklore. The classes are heterogeneous not only in ethnic/religious composition but also from linguistic point of view. For almost half of the students as well as for me, Hebrew, which is the language of instruction, is not a native language. The material taught represents unfamiliar cultures. The explanations given confront different cultural expectations. This paper will concentrate on the strategies implied in my pedagogical work.

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Keywords: Minority students, teaching humanities, Israel

1. Introduction: the meanings of heterogeneity

The word "heterogeneous" applied to the pedagogical process can be used in two main meanings. The first meaning refers only to the combination of successful and unsuccessful students within one class room and the pedagogical strategies which are implied in order to reach all of them (Millrood 2002). The second meaning addresses gender, ethnical, religious and linguistic diversity in the class-room, which requires culturally responsive teaching (Geneva 2002). In fact, sometimes only one of these complexities is experienced by the teacher/lecturer. Thus, for example, those, who study in the programs for gifted students with high scores in psychometric tests, are culturally diverse, but relatively homogeneous in their results. On the other hand, students in some religious schools may be culturally homogeneous, but diverse in their success. Yet, in many cases the classes are heterogeneous in both meanings of the word.

This is the case with all my classes in the University of Haifa were I have been teaching since 1992. My students are Jews (secular, traditional and religious, some of them with right-wing while others with left-wing political views, veteran Israelis and fresh immigrants), Arabs (Christian and Muslims), Druze, and Bedouins etc. All the groups are represented by both urban dwellers and villagers. The situation is further complicated by four additional factors. First, I am myself an immigrant, who came to Israel in 1991. And although teaching in Hebrew, I belong to

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the linguistic and cultural minority of the Russian speakers in Israel (Fialkova, Yelenevskaya 2007). Second, the subjects, which I teach are culturally sensitive, and yet far both from students' schools' curricula and their everyday practices (cf. Quenoy 2011). Third, they can choose my courses after having studied some other related courses or as the beginners. Thus, for example, the course on the Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) can be taken by the students, who have already studied something in the field of Russian literature, e.g. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) and/or Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) or Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). Still for others it may be their first contact with the Russian literature. The same is true for my courses and seminars in Folklore. And last but not the least. There are no textbooks in Hebrew and the majority of the research bibliography which the students are supposed to read is in English, although the level of their language proficiency varies greatly.

2. Strategies and teaching tools

Having taught for almost twenty years at the University of Haifa, I address this conference not as a specialist in pedagogical theory, but rather as a person who have to deal with the heterogeneity practically. Although each course has its specifics, there are several general strategies which I imply. At the time of my first meeting with each group, I find out the composition of the class, trying to identify those who will help me during the lessons. The students, who have some preliminary knowledge in the field, become my "assistants", because otherwise they will be bored. And giving some basic introduction, I rely on their help. An important further step is the permission to read the required bibliography in any language, which they find appropriate. Of course, the implementation of this strategy greatly depends on translations available. Thus for example, although I teach only those primary sources, which are translated into Hebrew, yet Russian-speakers may read Bulgakov's novels in the original, English speakers may do it in English, while Arab speakers can read at least some of them in Arabic. The same is true for the course "Heroic poetry as a genre of folklore", as "Iliad", "Song of the Cid" and "Shah Nameh" etc. can be found in a variety of languages (some eposes are studied in full, while others only in abridged form). In relatively rare cases research sources can be also found in translations to different languages. If not, they should be read in English. I am fully aware that such language permissiveness has its shortages. It's much easier for the lecturer when all the students work with the same text and don't depend on different translations. Yet, it's much better when the students fully understand the translation to their native language then when they struggle with the foreign text (cf. Abu-Rabia 1998, Spolsky, Shohami 1999). More than that, our discussions help them to understand that any translation is a kind of interpretation, which turn shortage into advantage. Importantly, my language liberal policy has nothing to do with low requirements.

2.1 The use of illustrative material

Another general principle is the wide use of illustrative material. While at the beginning of my teaching career in Israel I used to come to the class with a piles of heavy books, in recent years the University has supplied us with the Highlearn program, which allows the lecturers to include not only research papers, but also pictures, fragments from films on YouTube etc. The students can access these materials any time from any computer via Internet. And I am able to track their use of the system, to send them messages. Thus for, example, for the course on "Heroic poetry as a genre of folklore" the Highlearn program contained illustrative materials including short films or excerpt from them for all the eposes studied. The students, who have never previously heard about Kyrgyzstan, could enjoy the film about Kyrzyz epos "Manas" with the manaschi (folk singers) of various ages, performing the fragments of this magnificent epos: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMDklwoLf34 . For the course about the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin the Highlearn contained not only the pictures of his family members, including his black great grandfather, and of houses and apartments where Pushkin used to live, but also fragments of plays, operas, ballets and cartoons based on his writings. If we encounter some disagreements concerning various professional issues, I can give the students convincing references through the same program.

2.1.1 Culturally sensitive framing of the courses

These general principles are supplemented by particular methods of culturally sensitive teaching, which are dependent on the course in question. They may contain the formulation of the course's title and/or the material studied. Had I chosen the title of one of my seminars as "Folklore and Aliya", it would have referred only to the narratives of the Jews who repatriated to Israel from the Diaspora. And in this case my entire non-Jewish students would be alienated. Yet, I gave the course broader title: "Folklore and Immigration", which made the narratives of those Arabs and Druze, who immigrated to Israel from various Arab countries also accountable.

Taking into account that the texts studied in the course on "Heroic Poetry as a Genre of Folklore" deal with wars and conflicts, I decided to include eposes from different cultures, with different religious background. Conflicts of Christian and Muslims in the "Song of the Cid", in the "Song of Roland" and in Serbian songs of younaks are balanced by the conflicts between Islam and Zoroastrianism in "Shah Nameh" and between Islam and Buddhism in "Manas". Each epos has its heroes and enemies. And they can exchange places in different cultures.

The same principle is implemented in my seminar "The Image of the *Other* in Folklore", which directly refers to the stereotypes. I pay special attention not to alienate any group of the students by referring to the texts about it as a sole example of stereotyping. On the contrary, subjects and objects interchange, showing the relativity of any stereotypes including color and odor symbolism, dirtiness and cleanness, nobility and villainy. In all my courses the students can acquire bonuses for the participation in discussions. They are added to the results of the exams thus encouraging those who strive for success.

Acknowledgements

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