

Canadian Studies as a Part of “Realia” Courses of English-Speaking Countries

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Abstract. Mária Badinská is a professor at Matej Bel University, Faculty of Political Sciences and International Affairs where she teaches at the Department of International Communication and Foreign Languages. This article deals with the state of Canadian Studies in Slovakia before and after 1989. The author also discusses the future of Canadian Studies and their contribution to mastering a foreign language in the “new” globalized world.

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Introduction

Teaching language inherently implies teaching culture as well. Competent users of a foreign language do not only function *linguagewise* but, more importantly, can cross cultures on a *culturewise level* (Zelenka, 31; Zelenková, 2008). By what means, however, culture should be taught – that is a question that has been attracting scholars for decades. In this article I would like to explore the state of Canadian studies in Slovakia and to analyse it in the context of its past, present and future.

Prior to 1989, Canadian studies in Slovakia (formerly Czechoslovakia), similarly to many present-day post-communist countries, were at university level practically non-existent. English was not a priority language (Russian took the place of *lingua franca* in pro-communist Eastern Europe) and studying English was limited to few institutions (mostly universities) and few study programmes. Teaching methods that were perpetuated in the period did not stimulate the active use of the language; instead the Grammar-Translation method dominated, and other methods mostly trained receptive skills. Cultural studies of English-speaking countries were almost an oxymoron, as it was not in accordance with the official state ideology to perpetuate any positive view of culture or life in Western-bloc capitalist countries. Their culture was often presented through ideology-loaded, distorted views. For example, the course book of *English for High Schools 3* (published in 1989, prior to the Velvet Revolution) introduces New York as a large city where “...there are gangs of people who won’t hesitate to rob and beat pedestrians” (Benešová, 118). As a reading exercise, the same course book includes an article about V. I. Lenin’s Stays in London. One may rightly doubt the objective value of such information as well as their representation of the English-speaking world. Interestingly, perhaps as a counter-balance to facts about America, this course book offers two chapters related to Canada (*Talking about Canada* and *More facts about Canada*), mostly with geography-oriented content.

At universities, cultural studies were usually integrated into courses of history. Humanities and foreign-language curricula periodically covered British and American studies; however, cultural studies of Canada and other English-speaking countries (such as Australia, for example) were completely neglected.

Since 1989, the situation in teaching Canadian studies in Slovakia has gradually improved. The reasons are multiple, generally including subjective, financial and objective-political ones. Among the subjective reasons for improvement of the position of and access to Canadian studies we might include personal involvement of Canadian lecturers – native speakers teaching English in Slovakia who pushed Canadian studies forward and developed courses with Canada-based content at various levels of schools in Slovakia. Financial circumstances often affect the scope and content of courses; since 1989, however, there has been better access to Canadian literature and grants for Canada-related research available to students and scholars (many initiated by CEACS association). The political reasons relate to improved relationships between Canada and Slovakia (especially during the Visa-free period since 2003) which also gives students more opportunities to travel and get acquainted with Canada.

At present, the very first encounters of Slovak students with Canadian culture (apart from regular geography lessons) occur as early as in primary schools. Canada-related topics are included

in some primary-school English course books. These topics are mostly related to the landscape and geography; they present big cities (e.g. Vancouver, Toronto) and theme parks, a topic that is of interest to young learners. However, when presenting English-speaking countries, the Canadian element is often underrepresented or completely missing, as the predominant focus is on British and American cultural studies, i.e. *realia*. Let us take the most commonly used English course book in Slovakia, *Project Plus* (oriented at young intermediate learners at primary schools; note: Slovak schools exclusively use textbooks published in the UK), as a case study. As for American *realia*, students (thorough two or more single-paragraph articles) encounter topics such as the American education system (Hutchins, 62), a detailed comparison of the American and British governments (Hutchins, 82), as well as American wrestling, pop music and forest fires. English/British cultural studies is represented by topics such as the history of the English language (Hutchins, 22), Charles Dickens' simplified version of *A Christmas Carol* and the fictitious story *The Man Who Sold Big Ben* (Hutchins, 72). Students even encounter Australian culture through the article *Jungle Runaways* (Hutchinson, 48). However, any representation of Canadian culture (history, landscape, literature, sports or arts) is completely missing. One of the few course books that attempt to present the culture of English-speaking countries more equally, also including Canada-related content, is *Opportunities - Intermediate*.

Secondary schools also mostly recognize English and American studies. However, Canada-related topics have been gradually emerging as a part of the study of English-speaking countries. For example, the higher level of the Slovak school-leaving exam – *maturita B2* – now recognizes Australians and Canadians as representatives of the cultures of the English-speaking countries. In the course book *Novámaturita z angličtiny* (2008), one of the topics is “English speaking countries”, discussing popular beliefs and stereotypes not only related to the British and the Americans but also to the Australians and Canadians (Bathgate, 248). The Canadians are presented as having many attributes, among which we select the following hints: -[They] suffer from an intense identity crisis; -[They] still don't know who they are [...]; -[They] don't like being confused with the Americans; -[They are] very polite; -[They have] clean, ultramodern cities, a liberal attitude, an educated populace [...] (Bathgate, 248). Students are then welcomed to debate these stereotypes and compare them with the attributes of the other English-speaking nations, which not only improves their linguistic skills but also stimulates their critical thinking and cultural awareness of a larger variety of English-speaking countries.

At Slovak universities, Canadian studies are gradually attracting greater and greater attention. In Bratislava (at Comenius' University), there is a Department of Canadian Studies (first established in 1991 and re-established in 1998), which offers a variety of Canada-related university courses, spanning from general courses (such as Introduction to Canadian Literature, Modern Canadian Novel and Modern Canadian Drama) to special courses related to African-Canadian literature and Canadian legends and myths. In BanskáBystrica, the course Canadian Studies was established in 2003. Canadian studies and literature are also taught at other regional universities in Slovakia: Ružomberok and Trnava. However, many university courses are interdisciplinary or comparative and thus contain Canada-related topics.

The future of Canadian studies in Slovakia is a complex and global issue; it requires a close look at the social justification of such courses and a (re)consideration of their objectives and goals. Thus let us start with the question: why should Canadian studies be included in curricula at Slovak schools and universities (especially those teaching languages)? The answer is, again, multiple: First, there are many historical reasons to include Canada in the study of English-speaking countries. Some of the reasons include:

There has been extensive immigration of Slovaks to Canada. Slovak Canadianist Javorčíková in her study *Slovakia and Canada: Bridging Two Nations* recognizes four waves of Slovak immigration to Canada: (1) The first Slovak emigration to Canada starting at the end of the 19th century; (2) Pre-WWII immigration; (3) Post-WWII immigration and immigration after 1948; (4) Immigration after the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and (5) Immigration and intellectual circulation after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 (Javorčíková, 327). As an inevitable result of such extensive immigration of Slovaks to Canada, there are many personal ties between the two countries and thus, Slovak history cannot omit the history of immigration. Renowned expert in cultural studies Marc Chenetier also recognizes this standpoint in his study “*New*” *American Studies: Exceptionalism redux?* (2008), where he underestimates the role of

traditional texts, *master narratives*, and their role in teaching cultural studies and wars against “the sloganization of cultural heritage” (Chenetier, 1-3). He advocates the internationalization of cultural studies and their contextualization within the students’ “mother culture”. That is, Slovak students should be provided with the cultural studies of English-speaking countries within the context of their mother country, and topics that resonate(d) in Slovakia in the past and present, such as, for example, the topic of Slovak immigration to Canada.

Another argument for integrating Canada-related content into cultural studies is the shared cultural present of both Slovakia and Canada. Many artists, sportsmen and writers have been and still are active in Canada. Literature written by Slovaks in Canada (both in English and Slovak), however, is only known to a relatively limited readership in their mother country. Otrisalová notes that several writers, for example Jaroslava Blažková, the author of *Nylon Moon* (1961) and *Lamb and Princes* (1964), have been “erased from the history of Slovak literature” (Otrisalová, 339) and very few of them have recovered their former fame after 1989. Other similar immigrant authors include famous essayist and musician Peter Breiner, literary scholar Peter Petro, Ilja Čičvák, Brigita Hamvašová and several others.

Canadian studies would also improve the linguistic competences of students, teachers and translators. Many Canadian institutions (such as the legal or school system) have merged both American and British models, borrowing their fundamentals and concepts. The Canadian system of government, for example, features both a House of Commons (of British origin) and a Senate (of US origin). Thus an awareness of Canadian systems and institutions would increase the language and cultural competence of translators and interpreters as well as of day-to-day users of language.

The last but equally important argument is practical: Both Canada and Slovakia face similar problems, for example problems with various minorities, bilingualism, and problematical national identity. Understanding how these current issues are dealt with and viewed in Canada would certainly improve their recognition in Slovakia.

Conclusion

As the historical, social and practical reasons that we have discussed in this study demonstrate, Canadian studies should become an integral part of cultural studies of English-speaking countries, which, historically, presents only or mainly English and American content. Especially in Slovakia, there are many historical and political reasons, such as Slovak immigration to Canada, that connect the two countries and provide common ground for teaching and researching in the field. Finally, teaching about a wider scope of English-speaking countries would result in a more global view of the world culture.

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