

THE IMAGE OF ‘THE OTHER’ REFLECTED IN ACADEMIC LITERATURE TEACHING MATERIALS

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Abstract: *As Romania belongs to the Balkan area, academic studies concerned with particular aspects related to this geographical space constitute a part of the curriculum of the Philology Department within the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti. The paper focuses on the teaching materials used in this field of study, trying to offer an insight into the manner in which the image of ‘the other’ is presented in them. We consider that our pilot research may foster a positive attitude towards relationships among peoples in today’s society.*

Key-words: *literature, positive attitude, Balkan area, students’ opinions.*

Introduction

The present study aims to identify the extent to which Philology literature courses and other teaching materials in the field reflect the relations of the Romanian people with other neighbouring countries, particularly the way in which they contribute to the development of positive attitudes and beliefs such as tolerance, collaboration and mutual respect. These are indispensable values that each university should take into consideration and develop by means of their academic programmes if they want to be part of the present multicultural society, a world of multiple interconnections.

Main hypothesis

In order to accomplish our aim we had in view the following hypothesis: if approached in an academic environment, Balkan studies can configure a specific identity of a group of nations characterized by ‘soul uniqueness’ (Rădulescu-Motru, 2001, p.13) which, however, participate in developing a broader European context. To check the validity of such a hypothesis, we formulated several research questions:

RQ1. What are the main subjects in the field of literature that deal with the image of ‘the other’ within the context of Balkan studies?

RQ2. What do the students know about the image of ‘the other’ as reflected in their learning materials?

RQ3. How do the studies in the field within our university contribute to the development of students’ awareness as Balkan citizens?

Participants and research instrument

The participants in the study were 40 Philology students enrolled in the undergraduate and postgraduate studies within Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti.

The used research method was a pilot questionnaire containing 10 items, both open and closed, meant to discover students’ perception of the manner in which

courses and the teaching materials express the image of ‘the other’ and succeed in cultivating their interest in other cultures.

Data analysis

The collected data on the way in which the image of ‘the other’ is reflected in the literature teaching materials that our students study during courses and seminars indicate that a high range of subjects cover this topic. Accordingly, 41.00% of the respondents show that they learn about it during Romanian literature courses as, historically speaking, Romanian writers have been linked with the geographical and cultural Balkan space, rendering it in their work throughout the centuries. It is also relevant that not only literary subjects such as Comparative Literature and Romanian Literature in Exile cover the field, but also other courses, be them compulsory (Intercultural Communication) or optional (Strategies for Cultural Communication, European Identity and Mentalities).

Q 1. What subjects in your academic programme include the image of ‘the other’ and the relations of the Romanians with other neighbouring countries?	
A) The History of Romanian Literature	41.00%
B) Comparative Literature	19.00%
C) Literature of the Romanian exile in Europe	13.00 %
D) Intercultural communication	12.00 %
E) Other, please mention	10.00%

In regard to the following question, it should be noted that more than half of the surveyed learners (56.00%) reveal that the most frequently studied cultural background is Greece, which can be explained by the fact that they have the opportunity to investigate it more closely in a large array of subjects focusing on the ancient cultural period (The Greek Antiquity, Greek Philosophy, Political Thinking and Democracy, and Aesthetics). Referring to the 22.00 % of students who mention the impact of the Turkish environment on the Romanian culture, we may state that this is due to the political and social relationships between the two nations during history. It is significant that 19.00 % of the respondents mentioned The Republic of Moldova and Russia as subjects of interest, the former being connected with the historical destiny of our countries, and the latter being part of the comparative studies based on the great Russian writers (Alexander Pushkin, Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov). The very low percentage of students mentioning Bulgarian and Serbian environments (3.00%) reveal that courses pay almost no attention to the cultural exchanges among these nations.

Q 2. What are the cultural environments and nations mentioned in the materials you have studied:	
A) Greek	56.00 %

B) Turkish	22.00 %
C) Bulgarian	2.00 %
D) Serbian	1.00 %
E) Other, please mention	19.00 %

As shown by the respondents' answers to Q3, we can assert that they are familiar with the fundamental concepts provided by these subjects, on the one hand being aware of the meaning of the concepts of 'identity' and 'nationality' (52.00 %) and, on the other hand of a nation's belonging to a greater geographical and historical space, namely the Balkan or the European one (48.00 %).

Q 3. Which of the following concepts have you come across more often during these studies?	
A) literary balcanism	14.00 %
B) Balkan mentality	22.00 %
C) Europeanization	12.00 %
D) identity	28.00 %
E) ethno-cultural patterns	24.00 %

Another positive aspect of our analysis is that a high percentage of our students are motivated to deepen their knowledge on this subject matter, finding it useful and interesting (55.00 %). As to the students who had a neutral attitude (33.00 %) or are dissatisfied with the studies (9.00 %), this can be justified according to the reasons they mentioned: too much reading involved, overloaded timetable, lack of diversity of the materials, more enthusiasm about the Western studies and, most of all, their courses do not include present aspects related to the intercultural exchanges among the neighbouring nations etc.

4. How do you perceive such types of studies?	
A) very interesting	23.00 %
B) somewhat interesting	35.00 %
C) neutral	33.00 %
D) not very interesting	7.00 %
E) not at all interesting	2.00 %
In a few words, motivate your choice.	

The answers to Q5 somehow reiterate students' perception on the studies dedicated to the image of 'the other' as the majority of them (54.00 %) consider that their content is interesting to explore. The percentage of students exhibiting a neutral

attitude towards the topic under consideration (32.00 %) is almost similar to the one shown in the table above, probably due to the same causes already illustrated.

Q 5. How do you find the content of the courses dealing with such topics?	
A) very interesting	18.00 %
B) somewhat interesting	36.00 %
C) neutral	32.00 %
D) not very interesting	9.00 %
E) not at all interesting	5.00 %

It is remarkable that the answers to the question aiming at the the way in which other Balkan countries are reflected in their courses show that students are very content (43.00 %) and satisfied (48.00 %), whereas, in this context, the proportion of the discontent ones is not relevant (9.00 %).

Q 6. To what extent do the courses succeed in reflecting the image of 'the other' Balkan nations?	
A) to a great extent	12.00 %
B) quite satisfactorily	31.00 %
C) satisfactorily	48.00 %
D) to a low extent	7.00 %
E) not at all	2.00 %

Although students appreciate the content of the courses, the answers to Q7 point out their dissatisfaction with the teaching methods used during the classes. A possible explanation of the the respondents' unfavourable opinion (50.00%) about the instructional process lies in the fact that most teachers do not tend to employ active learning strategies, preferring traditional approaches which, in their view are monotonous and un motivating.

7. To what extent do your teachers make use of active learning strategies during the courses and seminars dealing with these topics?	
A) permanently	8.00 %
B) very often	15.00 %
C) quite often	22.00 %
D) rarely	50.00 %
E) never	5.00 %

A worth mentioning finding of our analysis is that respondents are fully aware of the usefulness of studying the image of 'the other' as it provides them with the

opportunity of developing positive values which are necessary in a multicultural society such as tolerance, mutual respect, appreciation of Balkan culture and civilization, interest in intercultural communication etc.

Q 8. What major values are cultivated by studying the image of 'the other' as part of your academic curriculum?

With regard to the respondents' personal perception of the Balkan nations they came across during their studies, most answers referred to the Greek cultural pattern and its strong influence on the Western world. As a result, they perceive the Greeks as great philosophers, founders of democracy and sciences, promoters of sporting competitions (The Olympics) etc. In reference to the Turks, the majority of the students see them in the light of the relationships between the two nations during history, especially mentioning the linguistic borrowings (for example the presence of certain words in Romanian) and cuisine similarities. At the same time, students share several stereotypes on the Balkan peoples not necessarily based on their studies, but on their personal experience. Thus, the Greeks are seen as very communicative, and direct, talkative, easy-going, great dancers, lively and enjoying life and parties. The Turks are considered good traders, hospitable people and liking to display opulence (jewellery, clothes, houses etc.). Their dances and music are also appreciated (belly-dancing and Oriental music). The clichés regarding the Bulgarians emphasise their stubbornness, nationalism and the fact that they are generally poor and, from many points of view, not different from the Romanians, while the other nations are barely characterised. For instance, the Serbians are aggressive, the Albanians are quick-tempered and the Macedonians stick to traditions. As for other nations, the respondents did not mention anything.

Q 9. What is your personal perception on different Balkan nations as a result of the courses you have studied and your personal experience?
GREEK TURKISH BULGARIAN
SERBIAN
ALBANIAN MACEDONIAN Other

Among the most relevant personalities enumerated by students in their answers are: the Greek ancient philosophers (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle), ancient theater (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes) and the modern writers Nikos Kazantzakis and Giorgos Seferis; some of the rulers of the Otoman Empire, the political figure of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and the Nobel prize writer Orhan Pamuk. Special mention should be also made about the Romanian writers who reflected the Balkan culture and civilization in their work from the very beginning of the history of the Romanian literature such as: the chroniclers, Dimitrie Cantemir, Anton Pann, Ion Heliade Rădulescu, Lucian Blaga, Ion Barbu, Mateiu Caragiale, Eugen Barbu, and

Mircea Cărtărescu. What students indicated as topics frequently presented in their courses includes fundamental concepts and aspects such as: literary balcanism, Balkan aestheticism, Balkan human typology and prototype, Balkan mentalities etc.

Q10. Mention some of the personalities or topics which, in your opinion, are the most relevant within your studies focused on the Balkan world.

It should be noted that the answers provided by the survey prove learners' solid knowledge about the major aspects of the courses and seminars they attend.

Discussions and Conclusions

By analyzing the results of our pilot study, we noticed two contradictory features of the phenomenon under discussion. Firstly, it is worth mentioning that the philological curriculum includes subjects designed to offer learners an insight into the concept of 'the otherness' seen in its dual nature, as a relationship between 'myself' and 'the other' (Clément et al., 2000, p. 74), that is the dichotomy of similarity and difference in point of national and cultural identity as opposed to the neighbour's specific characteristics. However, we observed that these subjects can be divided into two categories insisting on different fields of research, on the one hand on Balkan literary studies, which are predominant, and, on the other hand on culture and civilization studies, which are optional. This is due to the fact that the first group of subjects is taught at an undergraduate level, which aims at developing a broader cultural horizon of the students, while the second one is studied by postgraduate students who attend more specialized courses enlarging upon the concept of 'interunderstanding', which means a rational agreement among the participants in the communicational situation (Habermas, 1987, p.91).

At the same time, it is remarkable that students show great interest in such types of studies, a fact proved by the high percentages of their favourable responses. Moreover, their motivation is reflected by very good knowledge of the field, being familiar with the most important elements that are part of Balkan studies. In acquiring such good knowledge, students benefit not only from complex lectures delivered by their teachers, but also from a wide range of published courses and books in the field of Balkan studies written by the our academic staff ("Literatura Română Medievală și Modernă. Ultimele decenii ale secolului al XIX-lea"/ 'Medieval and Modern Romanian Literature. The last decades of the 19th century', "Literatura română de lângă granite"/ 'Romanian Literature in the Neighbouring Area' - Mihaela Cojocaru, The theory of communication – Gabriela Vasilescu, Irina Dumitrescu) and other well-known Romanian balcanologists ("Balcanologie" / 'Balcanology', "Balcanismul literar românesc" / 'Romanian Literary Balcanism' - Mircea Muhtu, "Balcanii și balcanismul" / 'The Balkans and Balcanism' – Maria Todorova etc).

It is important to mention that both lectures and written courses or materials that students get into contact with during their studies on the Balkan phenomenon reflect the image of 'the other', meaning the neighbouring nations, under the form of a

historical Balcanism that consists in the particular study of a set of borrowings and various influences at different levels such as customs, linguistic terms, political, social and commercial relations, and most of all, literature, whose major development depended on this historical and geographical area. Moreover, Romanian literature and several related fields managed to configure a so-called Balkan mentality pattern and a certain kind of aestheticism characterized as ‘a *forma mentis*, recognizable in the social dynamics as well as in the one of the aesthetic values’ (Muhtu, 1999, p.17).

Secondly, in spite of the positive aspects that we highlighted, there are certain drawbacks in the process of teaching Balkan studies in our university. One of them regards the fact that teaching materials only privilege the historical cultural and literary components of the Balkan programme of study, ignoring the contemporary image of Romania’s neighbouring nations (with some exceptions the topic being somewhat studied during the postgraduate subject on Intercultural Communication).

The data we collected even indicate a certain hierarchy of the investigated phenomenon. Thus, Greek culture and civilization occupies the highest position of the hierarchy as teachers mostly insist on presenting it as a basis for the development of Western thinking, literature and art, which explains their concern with the classical period of the Greek culture. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions. For instance, learners may also study 20th century Greek literature within the comparative literature programme. The following cultural background that is familiar to our students refers to Turkey and Russia, the latter one, although not part of the Balkan space proper, is perceived as a neighbouring country, too (actually, the former Soviet republic, Ukraine). As we mentioned above, the second position in this hierarchy can be explained by the historical interconnections between Romania and Turkey/Russia, leaving durable traces in Romanian literature, culture and civilization. As to other Balkan nations, they do not represent a point of interest of the specialists in our university and, consequently, there are very few published materials on the mutual relations between Romania and Bulgaria/Albania/Serbia/Macedonia etc. Within such a context we can understand why when asked about their perception of the contemporary image of our neighbours, the students only based their answers on the personal experience and not on a theoretical academic study.

A second drawback regards the teaching methods themselves, in their responses students emphasizing their discontent with the old-fashioned approach during classes. In other words, they would like to benefit from more diversified and updated teaching materials, based on an interdisciplinary approach, which make use of active learning strategies that can transform the student into a direct participant in the teaching and learning process. Elaborating this position, Jeremy Harmer (2007, p. 396) argues that ‘learner training, in other words, is a first step on the road to self-directed learning. Together with activities where students are encouraged, or even (sometimes forced), to take responsibility for what they are doing, learner training gives those who are prepared to take it the possibility of real autonomy.’ It is a fact that our students prefer discussing contemporary issues that reflect the present realities in an interactive environment, instead of insisting on the study of already known topics.

In conclusion, the results revealed students’ interesting opinions and useful suggestions that could lay the basis of a more complete analysis of the phenomenon

investigated in the near future. Our findings show that there is a satisfactory trend dealing with the image of ‘the other’ in the Balkan area, image understood as a passage from ‘a society to a group self-consciousness’ (Wunenburger, 2005, p.37), but the teaching staff should develop and intensify their concerns with regard to the diversification of the pedagogical techniques and teaching materials which should include more topics dealing with present intercultural aspects. In spite of these deficiencies, there is substantial evidence to support the idea that students’ awareness about their belonging to a specific historical and geographical area which is integrated in a larger European context is quite obvious, showing beliefs in high values like tolerance, respect and the joy of being similar, although we are different.

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