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## THE RELEVANCE OF CULTURAL STUDIES IN THE TEACHING OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE TO FOREIGNERS

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### Summary

The paper seeks to highlight the relevance of cultural studies in the teaching of Russian language to foreigners especially. It looks into the concept of language and culture as part of a whole, language is an integral part of culture, and cultures are best expressed through language, either in the spoken or non-verbal form. The paper tries to situate the Russian language learner in the Russian environment through *Stranovedeniye*, a term the Russians have coined for cultural studies. The paper concludes by submitting that *stranovedeniye* should be an important aspect of Russian language teaching to foreigners, and thus should be implemented as a means of achieving Russian language competence.

**Key words:** language, Culture, Russian ,Russia *Stranovedeniye*,

### *Introduction*

Culture, although a complex term to define, remains an integral part of every human society. It has also been rightly postulated that where there is a society, there exists a culture, and where we have a culture, then, a society surely is present. Accordingly, language is an important aspect of culture, for it is through language, spoken or tacit, that culture is communicated, preserved and transmitted from generation to generation, and from one society to the other. Above all, language is the key identifying characteristic of distinct ethnic groups, it is through language that cultures, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and other human capabilities are

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reflected and communicated. In this context therefore, the troika of culture, man and language are inseparable.

While this study does not deny the fact that the multiplicity of various, but valid definitions of culture has led to hybrid terms such as culture, civilisation, culture and civilisation, and cultural studies, etc, new scholarship has advocated that there is a dire need to supplement and implement the teaching of Russian as a foreign language with cultural studies (*stranovedeniye*). The main thrust of this paper therefore, is to make a case especially for cultural studies in the curricula of foreign language teaching with special emphasis on the Russian language, after all, languages cannot be limited to particular or distinct ethnic groups, it serves as a means of communication within and outside the group and its usage thus cannot be restricted or censored.

### ***The role(s) of cultural studies (stranovedeniye) in the teaching of russian as a foreign language***

As a starting point on the relevance of cultural studies in foreign language teaching, I wish to present my personal experience as a university Russian language teacher in Nigeria to be precise. Experience and research in this viable area have shown over the years that there exist very potent indices to urgently implement Russian language teaching with Russian cultural studies, a terminology that the Russians call *stranovedeniye* which would be used freely in this article. Although we live in an interconnected world politically, economically and technologically, there still exist wide cultural lacunas across the Atlantic.

The department of Modern European Languages, University of Ibadan, as it was formerly known, was one of the first departments created in 1962. Russian language was introduced into the University curricula in 1965 with a lecturer to provide ancillary tuition for science and agricultural students, while further development of Russian language culminated in the creation of a full honours degree programme in 1979. (Department of European Studies, handbook, 2008). Having cited this brief, but succinct background information, one realises that Russian language was being taught in isolation and it was in fulfilment of the desire to expand the students' horizon of knowledge that the department changed its name to European Studies during the 1995/96

session. What's in a name? One might be forced to wonder. Names prove too important in the tales they tell. The name 'European Studies' adequately reflects the broad spectrum focus the department had adopted, that is, to encapsulate and include the history, politics, economy, ethnography, society, and most importantly the cultural development of the Russian people, it further captures in a broader sense of it, regional histories, institutions, thoughts as well as Russian relations with other European, African and countries which had hitherto, been part of the former Soviet Union.

The argument to supplement language learning with cultural studies according to Barten (1972) had been advocated by neo-philologists at their Vienna congress in 1898. Subsequently, cultural studies had metamorphosed through several name rites: *Kulturkunde*, *Volkerkunde*, *Realienkunde* and *Landerskunde*.

*Stranovedeniye* according to the Russian –English dictionary (1991) means 'regional geography; area studies. In Russian vocabulary, *Strana* means country, while *vedeniye* translates as, study; or knowledge. To this end, *Stranovedeniye* studies Russian Language from a regional, geographical and cultural point of view.

With the understanding that language and culture are part of a whole, Vereschagin and Kostomarov in Fawole (2004) assert that methodologists have distinguished five basic principles of *Linguo-Stranovedeniye* thus:

1. Language has a social nature which gives a foreigner the opportunity to become part of a new reality. The social function of language is realised in three functions (i) communicative, (ii) cumulative, (iii) directive.
2. Language learning is a process of acculturation. Through a new language, a foreigner gets acquainted with new facts of life, norms and values.
3. A learner develops a positive attitude to the people whose language he is learning.
4. Linguo-cultural material is extracted from natural forms of language and texts in contrast to what is brought from sources outside the language.
5. The aspect of Linguo-stranovedeniye realises philological means of acquiring knowledge.

From the foregoing, one can deduce that a words meaning transcends language, language is also inherited by social interaction. By learning a new language, one becomes a part of that

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culture sub-consciously. Russian words have multiple meanings and on a more specific level, this aspect of communication serves as a means of accumulating knowledge about the Russian society, region and ethnography. This is an area of *Stranovedeniye* that needs to be canonised in teaching Russian as a foreign language. *Stranovedeniye* connects the Russian Language with the characteristics of the Russian arts, norms, beliefs, authority structures and customs. It helps to decode Russian language theory into real societal life and national character which is helpful to the learners of Russian. To this end, a first hand information of Russia and Russian through *stranovedeniye* presents to the learner a clearer picture of Russian life, ways of thinking, emotions, ethnography, nationalism, and Russian heroes ancient and modern, these imperative factors emerges not from the language content but rather through environmental experience taught in *stranovedeniye* classes. An essential part of understanding a language, Russian specifically is to be able to comprehend their culture (Russian culture)

As opined by Kostomarov (1990) Language- cultural studies has been an essential aspect of teaching Russian to foreigners since the 1950s , Linguo-*stranovedeniye* so defined, is an aspect of teaching Russian Language to foreigners for the sole purpose of providing a communicative orientation of carrying out general educative and humanitarian tasks, the cumulative function of language is realised in the Linguo-didactic forms and acculturation of an addressee takes place , the methodology of teaching , having a philological nature, that is, cognitive objective is achieved through the Russian language and in the process of its learning. One must also quickly add that the learning of a foreign language i.e., (Russian) leads to acculturation that is, the learner blends his original culture with the new one by contrasting them side by side. The language learner further integrates himself into the target language community thus appreciating the culture and the relevance of the language.

Cultural information is more than important to a language learner because it provides the needed cultural basis of the language being learnt, As corrected noted by Lapere(1988), this is “a means of uncovering the complex network of conscious and sub-conscious ways of being and thinking that are shared by the group”.

The role(s) of *stranovedeniye* will thematically and basically explore the historical complexities arising from the Russian empire, the relevance of the tsar and tsarinas, the intricacies of the Soviet Union and the dynamics that led to her eventual collapse, the ideology

called communism that held the Union together for 74 years and the enigma of Russia as an independent republic.

How does one claim knowledge of the Russian Language without an academic understanding of Gorbachev's *glasnost* (openness, voice out) and what it connotes? Of *perestroika* (reconstruction, rebuilding)? Of *democratisatiya* (democracy) and of other Russian words that have found a host in the English language, i.e., *troika* (threesome), *vodka* (Russian traditional spirit) *Sputnik* (space shuttle) etc.

*Pretcelle* (1983.143) in describing cultural competence in studying a language, comments that language study is “*consisting of the ability to observe with intelligence, paying attention to the right things and the skill to interpret appropriately what was observed*”. The teaching of *Stranovedeniye* with benefit of academic hindsight and inquiry ultimately exposes the Russian language student to the behavioural patterns of the Russians, their patriotism to the motherland, perception of nationalism, the geopolitical context in which they live in, the internecine wars ever erupting, underlying currents of the Russo-Georgian war, the Russo – Ukrainian face-off, Russo – Chechen conflict etc,

As a teacher of *Stranovedeniye*, I have had to depict Russian language through my personal experiences in Moscow. Although Russian grammar books present a lot of illustrations which is intended to help the learner, but a lot more is realisable by implementing *Stranovedeniye* to teach grammar. Also one must also factor in the complexities and contradictions of Russian history. The school syllabus had to be altered post-Russian Empire and post –Soviet Union to reflect the new nascent political dispensation and ideology, ‘gone are the memories of our heroes past’ Here, I argue that the main thrust of teaching *stranovedeniye* to Russian language learners is to extract the student from the theoretical atmosphere of the classroom and create a practical ambience by trying to bring Russia and the Russians to the classroom. *Stranovedeniye* as a concept should therefore encompass all characteristics of Russian area studies such as culture, economy, politics, and religion, literary and ethnographical survey. Based on this assertion, Albane (1990) considered the following major factors towards achieving success in cultural studies 1.physical appearance, 2.way of life, 3.social organisation,4 tradition,5.history,6.politics,7 landscape.

I have come to realise that much of the difficulty in understanding the Russian Language is borne out of ignorance of the Russian *stranovedeniye* as a consequence of Russia’s peculiar

location between Europe and Asia which has given rise to the term Eurasia. Russia, is located at the intersection of both Europe and Asia, and is influenced by both cultures. Surpassing these reasons, one of the clearest examples is the true translations of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian classical novels, plays, poems of literary icons, whose true meanings are lost in translations. It is only if we adopt *stranovedeniye* as a teaching method to full language competence that we can have epical descriptions of textbook illustrations, plays, poems and understand the literary writings of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Lermontov and Pushkin.

Every fair minded academic should see the need for *stranovedeniye* in the teaching of Russian language to foreigners, as Coseriu adumbrates “*it is impossible to speak in a language only by knowing its system: it is necessary to know the norms of the application of that system according to situations and contexts*”. It has been observed that quite a lot of *Russian* words have multiple meanings, Russian verbs of motion appear in more than fourteen pairs, and their application is quite contextual, the verb *idti* can mean either to go, or to come, while also the verb *yehat*, connotes movement by some means of conveyance could also mean to go or to come by some means of transportation. The verb *hodit*, movement on foot could either denote habitual action, action done frequently, or movement to, fro. These verbs of motion although complex are at the same time quite interesting to study, for a Russian language learner a good understanding of these aforementioned verbs depends on the contextual and situational meaning. The Russian Bolshoi theatre has more cultural, nostalgic and historical meanings than what a foreigner would term simply as ‘the big theatre’.

Language and *stranovedeniye* are linked together and in the words of Von Humboldt language is the very organ of a people’s being.

It is my contention that Cultural studies (*stranovedeniye*) should not only be a supplement to language teaching, but should be part and parcel of it. As a language teacher one agrees with Irele (1982) when in his inaugural lecture he asserted that we conceive our task not only to impart a foreign language to the student as a practical tool, but also to lead him out of the familiar environment towards a perception, perhaps even a full apprehension, of different modes of experience proposed by the foreign culture. The role of *stranovedeniye* in the teaching of Russian language to foreigners is thus an essential part of the whole.

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