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Short Communication

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Jane Austin's Literary Heritage: Developing University Student's Foreign Language Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The paper focuses on issues connected with developing university students' foreign language communicative competence by means of integrating Jane Austin's literary heritage into the English Language Program. It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Jane Austin's creative work, which has greatly contributed to the formation of the English classical realism. The accuracy of portrayal of the national character is of great value for international students specializing in the history and traditions of the United Kingdom. Jane Austin's novels are much admired for their humor and originality, their sudden twist in the storyline, as well as the eloquent language, which is nevertheless easy to understand for the contemporary reader. The author's novels center round such issues as: romantic relationships, family, love and marriage, pursuit of happiness and women's place in society. All these characteristics are relevant to and motivating for the young generation. Apart from this, Jane Austin reveals the complexity of her characters' feelings by means of the inner monologue—a stylistic device invented by the author herself. Moreover, Jane Austin drew society's attention to the "women's issue": women's education and social standing, which has remained a burning problem. The integration of the author's literary heritage into the English Language Program will not only motivate students to read, but solve a whole range of digital generation's issues, i. e.: surface reading, poor Critical Thinking skills, as well contribute to greater awareness of the practical value of reading in the wake of class discussions.

Keywords: *Foreign Language Communicative Competence, Jane Austin's Literary Heritage, Digital Generation, Critical Thinking Skills, Surface Reading, Inner Monologue, International Students, English Classical Realism*

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1. Introduction

This young lady has a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I have ever met with. The Big Bow-Wow strain I can do myself any now going; but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary, commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment is denied to me. *Walter Scott*

One of the major tasks, facing foreign language teachers, is to expand the lexical and grammatical context within the existing programs and work plans. The development of students' foreign language communicative competence is directly dependent on the expansion of this context. Sandra J. Savignon, a professor at the University of Illinois and Ex-president

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of the American Association of Applied Linguistics, has clearly demonstrated the relationship between the development of the main components of the Language Communicative Competence and the communicative context. She presented this relationship in the form of an “inverted pyramid” classroom model (1983), which “shows how, through practice and experience in an increasingly wide range of communication contexts and events, learners gradually expand their communicative competence, which comprises grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociocultural competence and strategic competence. Although the relative importance of the various components depends on the overall level of communicative competence, each is essential. Moreover, all components are interrelated. They cannot be developed or measured in isolation...” (Savignon, 1997).

When selecting educational materials, a foreign language teacher considers a number of factors, that will contribute to achieving a set of didactic tasks. These factors include psychological peculiarities of the students’ age group, their language level, their thinking skills, professional orientation, topics which are particularly motivating for students as well as compliance with the curriculum. Jane Austen’s creative work is a milestone in the history of the formation of the English classical realism. Her novels remain greatly popular with the readers in the XXI century. Several outstanding movie productions have gathered large audiences. The author’s complete works have been reprinted several times and Jane Austen’s Society attracts new members and admirers. The accuracy of the description of the peculiarities of the English character is of great value both for historians and academics engaged in Linguistics, Country and Culture Studies. The author’s literary heritage will, without doubt, contribute to better understanding of life priorities, traditions, and the English character at large. University students with Upper Intermediate and Advanced levels of English will enjoy the humor and the vivid depiction with which Jane Austen introduces her characters.

In her book “*Jane Austen: A Life*”, the famous British journalist and biographer Claire Tomalin writes about the extraordinary popularity of the writer both in the literary circles, and among the ordinary readers, who have made Jane Austen quite their own and consider all claims on their favorite author unacceptable. Claire Tomalin compares “*Mansfield Park*” with “*The Merchant of Venice*” to suggest that Shakespeare’s play and Austen’s novel are both so alive and flexible as works of art that they can be interpreted now one way, now another. The reader recognizes in the characters of the writer’s novels both himself, his relatives and friends, their hearts filled with love or hate, kindness or cruelty, but, often as not with a desire for happiness.

Despite the fact, that the writer created her novels three centuries ago, many of the sensitive issues covered in her novels, remain relevant today, i. e., family relationships, romantic love, as well as pursuit of happiness, love, and jealousy. Jane Austen’s heroines have very different destinies as well as ideas about happiness, they are “programmed” by the rigid conventions and traditions of their time, and, at the same time they remain so original and purposeful on the way to achieving their life goals. All the novels are extremely dynamic, full of optimism and sparkling humor. The writer’s great sense of humor was already evident in her first work “*A History of England*”, written by a very partial and ignorant historian, which was written in 1791, when Jane was 16 years old. She dedicated it to her sister Cassandra, who was her closest friend. This work is the only one which has illustrations of that time. Cassandra made the only portrait of Jane in pencil, that has survived to this day.

One of the major topics, Jane Austen addresses in her novels, is the “women’s world”. Being a great writer, Jane Austen not only understood well the life of vicars, officer service, monetary pressure on women from society, etc., but she reflected the feelings and thoughts of her characters by means of non-direct speech. John Mullen, Professor of English at University College London and Chair of Modern English Literature named Jane Austen “the First Lady of English Literature” in his lecture “What Matters in Jane Austen?”, he made a point of the fact that “It was Jane Austen, who was the first to invent the technique of indirect speech at her desk in Hampshire” (Tat’iana Shipilova, 2011). Integrating Jane Austen’s literary heritage into the English Language Program for international students will be of great benefit for the latter. Many scientists and educators argue that the introduction of new programs and study materials contributes to the work of the brain, since “the brain craves novelty” (Biederman Irving and Vessel Edward, 2011). “Different methodologies create different types of neural networks in the brain” (Biederman Irving and Vessel Edward, 2011). The new pedagogical platform – the Mind, Brain and Education Science (MBE) considers Pedagogy is inseparable from Neuroscience, Physiology and Laboratory Research. According to one of the MBE founders, Professor of Harvard University Tracy Tokuhama-Espinoza: “MBE science improves both diagnosis and what a student needs and identification of how best to teach” (Tokuhama-Espinoza, Tracey, 2014). Thus, when new literary work is integrated into the English Language Program, several motivating factors are at work: the novelty of the study material, interest in the topics touched upon by the author and a desire to discuss/share points of views in class. “Memory and attention are vital to learning” (Tat’iana Shipilova, 2011). From personal experience (20 years of teaching English to university students) the following teaching strategies seem to be most efficient: (1) brainstorming of new words and constructions at the start of

class (stimulation of interest and attention); (2) discussion of key parts of text vital for comprehension (activation of memory and attention); and (3) discussion of topics, which have aroused students' interest (development of critical thinking and language skills).

International students show much interest in the sociocultural aspects of Britain and the peculiarities of the national character of the English. Jane Austen depicts her countrymen with the utmost precision, often with a touch of humor. To begin with, the author believes, that the trait of character Englishmen value above all is common sense. For example, Professor John Mullen drew the attention of his audience to Charlotte Lucas, the personification of female wisdom and common sense from the novel "Pride and Prejudice". "Charlotte Lucas is a favorite of all English female readers" (Tat'iana Shipilova, 2011). In support of his argument Professor Mullen quotes from the novel: "Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honorable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune... and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it. Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable, his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still, he would be her husband" (Jane, 2005). Another good example is the common sense of Mrs. Bennet ("Pride and Prejudice"). Elizabeth Bennet's mother's excessive practicality verges on tactlessness, even impudence and straightforwardness, but it pays off! Mrs. Bennet rebukes the presumptuous Mr. Darcy and manages to promote the marriage of her three daughters, acting quickly and unerringly. Relying on her common sense, she explains to her daughters' hesitant cavaliers, why they need to marry. Common sense is very characteristic of Elizabeth Bennet, the heroin of the novel "Pride and Prejudice". However, it's common sense that makes her wonder, whether her marriage to Mr. Darcy would be a happy one. Mr. Darcy is very arrogant, doesn't think about the feelings of other people and believes that his position in society allows him to behave as he pleases. Elizabeth's thoughts are akin to those of Jane Austen herself, who asked the same questions and shared her thoughts with the reader on behalf of her heroine. Such questions as; "What do I expect from my life? What would I like to achieve?" were truly groundbreaking at a time, when marriage, which provided a comfortable existence for a woman with no means, was considered great luck in itself.

Another trait of the national character, brought to the forefront is the ability to "save face", suppress violent emotions on the spur of the moment and not show feelings in public. In her novel "Sense and Sensibility" Jane Austen reveals the complexity and vulnerability of the female nature, its faith in the sincerity of feelings and the tragedy of a broken heart. Numbing the pain of a broken heart, Elinor and Marianne listen to the voice of reason and "save face" in the eyes of society. Elinor, suffering from any chance of being married to Edward Ferrars, doesn't give herself away in society and is "rewarded" by the author, when everything clicks at the right moment. Such state of affairs was in accord with society's conventions of the time; it was expected and appreciated. Marianne, on the contrary, is being laughed at, pitted, with a touch of disgust, and thoroughly criticized for wearing her heart on her sleeve. She nearly dies of a broken heart which, to some extent is regarded as "punishment" and a natural cause of events. Later, Marianne reproaches herself for her romantic impulse, she puts Willoughby out of her head and marries Colonel Brandon: "...afterwards in her more calm and sober judgment she had determined on,—she found herself, at 19, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village... Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby" (Jane Austen, 1994). Jane Austen obviously sympathizes with the true love and affection of the sisters opposing their genuine nature to Lucy Steele, a hard-boiled money-digger, who quickly switches her affection from Edward to his fortunate brother, as soon as she learns that he is going to inherit his father's money.

The author often makes fun of such features of the English as hypochondria and obsession about one's health. Mrs. Bennet would quickly fall ill, stay in her room for days, and complain of feeling unwell, but, as soon as the problem was resolved, she would feel much better, as when Mr. Darcy arranged her daughter's wedding and immediately starts discussing the best shops for the wedding outfit with her sister. Claire Tomalin draws a parallel with Jane's mother, who often lay in bed, complaining of new horrifying symptoms, that didn't always coincide with the doctor's diagnoses. Just as her precious Elizabeth Bennet, the author certainly detests such feature of character.

Jane Austen argues that snobbery and groveling before titled and wealthy relatives are characteristic of the English. In her book "Jane Austen and Regency Bath" Maggie Lane writes: "She (Jane Austen) detests the snobbery that makes her father and sister Elizabeth fawn after some empty-headed but titled relations yet be contemptuous about her wish to see her old school friend who has fallen on hard times" (Ritchhart et al., 2011). Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst in "Pride and Prejudice" admire everything the wealthy Mr. Darcy says or does but look down on the local congregation. Miss Bingley expresses her contempt by saying to Mr. Darcy: "You are considering how insupportable it would be to pass many evenings in this manner—in such society; and indeed I am quite of your opinion. I was never more annoyed!... the nothingness and yet the self-importance of all these people!" (Jane, 2005).

The author depicts her characters with a great sense of humor, especially the more negative ones, which makes her novels both insightful and very enjoyable to read. M. Edgeworth, Sheridan and Coleridge, Tennyson, Thackeray, Gorge Eliot, Trollope, and Henry James admired the extraordinary realism and complexity of Jane Austen's characters. M. Edgeworth argued that her novels were like life itself. In her book "Jane Austen: A Life" Claire Tomalin writes: "Jane Austen's novels do not ramble. In the novels, only Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Sir Walter Elliot take much notice of ancestry and pride themselves on it, and neither is an advertisement for the preoccupation ... [although] Family history and connections ... were seen as important" (Tomalin, 2012). Jane Austen doesn't "invent" anything about the English character, she writes about the life and people she knew well about their problems and aspirations, traditional viewpoints, and importance of family ties. The author makes a point of a rather skeptical attitude of the British towards everything "foreign, not British". The writer flatly rejected all attempts to introduce her to Madame de Staël, who argued that Austen's novels were "vulgaire" "and yawns... at ... this collection of middle-aged Hampshire neighbors who had known one another now for over twenty years..." (Tomalin, 2012). Critics of Madame de Staël believe, that her perception of Jane Austen's creative work may be explained by her poor command of the English language. "Her sharpness and refusal to suffer fools makes you fearful of intruding, misinterpreting, crassly misreading the evidence. Then there are the difficulties that arise from being one of the few great writers who is popular outside academe as well as in. On the other side of the academic fence, many readers feel strongly that she is their personal property, not to be tampered with or subjected to questions and theories" (Tomalin, 2012).

Jane Austen's literary heritage has been included into study programs of schools, colleges, and universities in the UK. It is of particular interest to foreign students due to many aspects that may be very motivating for the young generation. Firstly, Jane Austen's novels deal with a lot of issues that are still very relevant for students: family relations, romantic love, duty to ones nearest and dearest, importance of common sense and practicality, women's issues, ethics and moral. Jane Austen herself was forced to write under a male pseudonym for most part of her life, and was financially dependent on her father and brothers, having rejected a marriage of convenience. Secondly, the language of the author isn't outdated and complex to comprehend; it is characterized by sparkling humor, wit, and wisdom, which makes it most enjoyable. Moreover, all the novels may be perceived as "life lessons" for students who will find answers to their real-life issues. Such educational strategies, as discussion and a problem-based approach to learning appear to be effective during English Literature Classes. They develop students' speaking skills as well as their Critical Thinking Skills. Integrating Jane Austen's works into the English Literature Program will also foster students' comprehension of the practical significance of reading. McMillan and Penguin Publishing Houses have adapted the author's novels for foreign students with different language levels retaining the dynamic development of events.

2. Conclusion

It should be noted that the new digital generations are used to getting information via the internet and various applications on their mobile devices any time any place, not only in class. That is why the author of this paper is currently working on Creating meaning tasks in Google Forms, which will integrate images, videos and study tasks related to the outstanding literary heritage of the English writers and poets. "Thus, we teachers need to foster better habits of mind that result in "visible thinking", or observable evidence of deeper, more connected reasoning" (Ritchhart *et al.*, 2011).

"The main goal of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives" (Hutchins, 2011).

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