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TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST IN THE EFL CLASSROOM – A PHOTO PROJECT ON JEWISH LIFE AND CULTURE PRIOR TO WWII

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Teaching about the Holocaust is a cross-curricular subject matter and should not be taught exclusively in history classes. Nowadays there are many exemplary lesson plans and activities developed by educators that are broadly applicable and practical, providing a rich learning experience to a diverse range of students. This fact makes it easier for all educators to cover this topic in their lessons. The Pre-World War II European Jewish life photo project is such an example. With minor alterations to meet the needs of English teachers and their students in Croatia, it is an engaging project that addresses what life was like for Jews before the Nazi persecution. Students relate their own lives to those of the Jews and examine the normalcy of Jewish culture, while at the same time showing that individual people are behind the statistics.

Keywords: Holocaust, Jewish life and culture, cross-curricular approach, photo project, writing assignment

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Teaching about the Holocaust in the Republic of Croatia

Teaching about the Holocaust was thought of as a difficult and complicated topic to deal with. Many teachers hesitated to teach about the Holocaust for several reasons: they felt they were not competent enough and readymade materials did not exist. Furthermore, they feared inappropriate questions or attitudes from their students. Teacher training seminars, lectures and workshops were few, if any.

In 2003, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports decided to participate in commemorating the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau – 27 January – was designated as the annual day of commemoration by the UN General Assembly. Every member state of the UN should honor the victims of the Holocaust and develop educational programs to provide remembrance activities. According to Miletić (2012:2), this was a turning point in teaching about the Holocaust in Croatia. The Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Education and Teacher Training Agency and other educational institutions became competent authorities on developing materials for teaching about the Holocaust. Guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust and other materials were translated or developed for teachers to use, teacher training seminars are organized annually and scholarships are awarded by foreign partners, such as Yad Vashem in Jerusalem or the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC.

Finally, a cross-curricular approach in teaching about the Holocaust was introduced, which meant that the Holocaust can and should be taught in other subjects, not only in history.

1.2. Cross-curricular approach on teaching about the Holocaust

The Holocaust is a mandatory topic in History classes, a state standard in the eighth grade primary school. According to the Guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust

(<http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/guideline>), students in grade six and above are able to understand the complexities of this topic and empathize with individual eyewitness accounts. Elementary school can be an ideal location to begin discussion of the value of diversity and the danger of bias and prejudice. A good knowledge of

historical facts is the key to understanding the Holocaust and the context it occurred in. On the other hand, understanding the Holocaust in its entirety goes beyond understanding historical data and phenomena, such as a series of political or military events. This topic raises questions of moral dilemmas, fairness, justice, individual identity, conformity and many others. Therefore, the cross-curricular approach to teaching about the Holocaust facilitates students' understanding of its complexity and provides answers to various ethical, moral, theological or social issues. Discussing this subject matter in other subjects – such as religion, Croatian, foreign languages, sociology, ethics, psychology and philosophy – means adding expertise from various areas and approaching the Holocaust from more than one perspective (Miletić, 2012:4).

The National Curriculum Framework for Pre-School Education and General Compulsory and Secondary Education (NCF) (2010:23) developed by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia, describes interdisciplinary themes which all educators are obliged to implement. Among them is Civil Education, which should teach students how to “develop awareness of the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of the individual, and of the importance of equality in society, observance of the law, tolerance towards other nations/cultures/religions, and acceptance of different opinions; be trained to think critically about social phenomena” (NCF, 2010:27). Therefore, teachers of English should also address this topic in their classrooms.

1.3. Holocaust as topic in an English classroom

Even though some English teachers may have not received official training in teaching about the Holocaust and may not feel ready or competent enough to tackle this complex subject matter, it should become a part of their lessons. A well-formed rationale and structured lesson plan will help address any questions or concerns English teachers may have. They will develop confidence to teach, as well as develop a keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter.

Exemplary lessons developed by educators are available on the Internet. In 2004, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum presented five lessons that conform to Museum's guidelines for teaching

about the Holocaust. They were chosen as exemplary models for their historical accuracy, building understanding, engagement of students, and demand for critical thinking by students. Finally, they were selected because of their applicability and practicality for most classrooms.

Most of these and other similar lesson plans available to English teachers nowadays can be adapted and used in classrooms. Students will develop critical thinking and “become aware of the need for tolerance and empathy towards persons from other cultures, and recognize the existence of stereotypes and prejudices as well as the need to eliminate them” (NCF, 2010:63). These lessons will engage the intellectual curiosity of the student, while at the same time develop all four language skills and expand vocabulary.

2. PRE-WORLD WAR II EUROPEAN JEWISH LIFE PHOTO PROJECT

The Pre-World War II European Jewish life photo project was created and developed by Aimee Young (2004:8), who has been teaching sophomore English in Loudonville High School in Loudonville. Her project was accepted as an exemplary model by the Arthur and Rochelle Belfer Exemplary Lessons Initiative. This program seeks outstanding examples of classroom lessons in which “teachers address the issue of teaching the Holocaust for understanding and transformation” (Ibid, 2004:8).

The object of Young’s project is “to engage students in understanding both the individuality of Jewish lives affected by or lost in the Holocaust and the cumulative effects of the Holocaust on their communities” (2004:7). One of the methodological considerations for teaching about the Holocaust is to translate statistics into people. It is important to show that individual people are behind the statistics. According to Miletic (2012:5), not enough attention is paid to teaching Jewish life and culture prior to World War II. It may prove difficult for students to understand the overwhelming effects of the Holocaust if they are not aware of the lives forever lost. Understanding the Holocaust means realizing how and why Europe changed after destroying six million lives. Moreover, teaching about long Jewish history and their rich cultural heritage may help us avoid portraying Jews as dehumanized victims and degraded objects of the Nazi regime. Teachers should emphasize that within the

larger historical narrative exists a diversity of personal experience. Young (2004:7) developed this project so that it addresses the individual lives behind the statistics of the Holocaust and to deal with “misconceptions that students may have that the Jews were not people like themselves, but somehow different”.

2.1. Resources and materials used

The Pre-World War II European Jewish life photo project can easily be modified to suit the needs of Croatian teachers and the national curriculum. It is applicable to grades seven and eight primary school, but could be further developed and used with older students in high school.

Depending on the amount of homework teachers decide to assign, the time required varies from three to five lessons. Project assignment sheets that give students instructions for each step should be photocopied and handed out to students. There are also several handouts that should be distributed to each student. Computers with internet access should be available for students to use during the project. If an IT classroom is not available at school, the photo collection search can be assigned for homework.

The original lesson plan can be found at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website (<http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/prodev/beli/2003/lesson.php?content=youth>).

2.2. Project overview

2.1.1. Pre-World War II European Jewish life

Since the focus of this project is to engage students in understanding the normalcy of Jewish life prior to their life under German rule, ghettoization and the “Final Solution”, it is important that students gain some insight in the fundamentals of Judaism: religious, cultural and communal background of the affected communities and individuals. This goal can be achieved in several ways.

Teachers may ask their local Jewish community to prepare a lecture or workshop for their students. If there is a survivor within a community, they can talk to students and discuss life prior to Nazi occupation. It is critical that students do this project before looking at life under German

occupation and persecution – they must understand what it is that will be lost.

To achieve this goal, teachers have to work on developing students' critical thinking skills. Stereotyping is a natural and common process in cultures around the world. They involve generalizations about the "typical" characteristics of all the members of the group. Stereotypes may lead to prejudice, which in turn can result in discrimination. Stereotypes may be successfully reduced by motivating students to think critically. Critical thinking means identifying how our culture and upbringing affect our beliefs. When looking for evidence, our beliefs can be refuted, which should result in the change of position. A KWL table facilitates this activity².

It is typically divided into three columns, labeled K(now), W(ant) and L(earned). The first column 'K' is for what the students already know about the topic. This is a good strategy to activate prior knowledge. The next column, 'W', is for students to list what they would like to learn about the topic. These two steps are completed before any activity or work takes place, in this case a lecture or a workshop on Jewish life prior to Nazi occupation. The final column, 'L', is for what the students learned.

When the students have finished with the table, it can be analyzed. Students can go back to the table, specifically the 'K' column, and discuss whether their knowledge was a fact or an opinion. It is of utmost importance to distinguish between these two categories, since facts can be proven true or false through evidence, whereas opinions cannot be proven right or wrong, as they are one's personal belief or feeling.

If there are not any local Jewish communities available, English teachers who do not feel competent enough to prepare a lecture or a workshop on Jewish life may ask teachers of Religion or History to do this instead of them. Since teaching about the Holocaust is an interdisciplinary theme, the National Curriculum Framework allows schools and teachers to freely elaborate on proposed interdisciplinary themes and "devise ways to implement them. The efficient development of interdisciplinary abilities among students is greater when, in addition

² Marinko Uremović delivered a workshop called *Teaching Culture – Teaching Critical Thinking* at Osijek Branch meeting of the Croatian Association of Teachers of English on 17 November 2012. He discussed various activities to facilitate teaching critical thinking. A KWL table was one of the activities mentioned.

to being incorporated into individual subjects, they are fostered through common projects or modules" (NCF, 2010:23).

2.1.2. Photo collection

In class, students brainstorm a list of words they associate with "typical" or "normal" daily life. This can be done as individual or pair work. Students can compare their maps and talk about the normalcy of their everyday lives.

This activity should facilitate Assignment 1 of the project: Photo Collection. The previously brainstormed list can be used as key words for searching the collection of thousands of photos at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Web site, www.ushmm.org.

At this point, project instructions are handed out and explained. Students will now spend one or two lessons in an IT classroom using computers to research two photos of pre-World War II Jewish life in Europe. Students should pay attention to the locales of the photos and years in which they were taken. It is important to find photos taken up to 1939, thus making sure they depict "normal" or "typical" daily life. Teachers should monitor this activity and help if necessary.

Students should then copy and paste their photos onto a new word document and print it. This word document should also include the date it was taken and its locale, as well as any other relevant piece of information (the caption). Students can also email their documents to their teacher and themselves, so that they can have digital photos for their essays later on.

2.1.3. Photo analysis

After students have found the photos, they should analyze them using the worksheet provided by the teacher (Appendix 1). This can be done in class or for homework. The questions on the worksheet guide students to analyze their photographs in detail, as well as prepare them for the essay they will write in the following phase of the project. Furthermore, they help establish which vocabulary items students may need when writing a short essay.

For homework, students are to look through their own family photos and find at least one photo to bring in and share with the rest of the class. Teachers can decide whether to tell their students that they will be

looking through their own family photos at home ahead of time or not. In any case, it is always interesting to see that students do not choose the first photo they come across; they go through several pages of photos before they find the one that relates to them somehow or the one they can identify with. If a teacher decides to inform their students beforehand, it is necessary to emphasize that they do not have to find a photo for which they have an exact match at home.

The next step is an in-class discussion. Students bring their photos to class and attach them on boards. This can be done in two ways: they can either attach their own family photo to the prewar one it relates to or put their photos on one board and the Jewish life photos on the separate board. When all the photos are on boards, students will have created a large visual collection which they will now compare. Young (2004:12) suggests the following questions to guide the photo analysis and discussion:

1. What did you find out?
2. What were you surprised by?
3. What was Jewish life like before the German occupation?
4. What are the similarities and differences of life in both sets of photos?

Students should be allowed some time to look at the photos and prepare for the discussion. The focus of the discussion should be the similarities between the students' lives and those of the people pictured. They should notice the parallels between Jewish prewar life and their own life, which brings them to the final phase of the project: writing a short essay.

2.1.4. Photo Parallel – Writing Assignment

A follow-up writing assignment is the final stage of the project. The writing assignment can be done in class or for homework.

Students are given instructions for the assignment. They are to write an "organized response to the following questions concerning their photos:

1. In examining your research photos, what evidence suggest that life was "normal" or "ordinary" for the Jews prior to the German occupation?

2. What did you discover as you looked through your own family's photos in relation to those that you had researched? Which one did you choose to share? How does it relate and why?
3. What do these photos, both yours and the researched ones, tell you about Jewish life in Europe before World War II?" (Young, 2004:11)

At this stage, students should be ready to write an organized and well thought out essay, putting into words everything they have seen while researching online archives and discussing their findings in class.

Students hand in their first draft so that the teacher can proofread and comment on them. They write their second and final draft (Appendix 2).

2.2. Students' writing assignments

The Pre-World War II European Jewish life photo project and the writing assignment as the end result of the project can be done a few weeks before 27 January, International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Researched photos and students' short essays can be attached on boards for other students, parents and educators to read. Furthermore, they can be published in school newspapers as one of the activities carried out in a school to commemorate the victims of World War II and Nazi persecution.

Finally, if teachers decided to cooperate with local Jewish communities, they too can be given students' written pieces, either to publish in their newspapers or to exhibit in their communities.

3. CONCLUSION

Teaching about the Holocaust does not need to be limited to history lessons. Educators across a range of subject disciplines can and should include this subject matter in their classes, no matter how difficult or overwhelming it may seem at first. A number of resources and guidelines exist nowadays, developed by individuals and institutions with expertise in teaching about the Holocaust. They address concerns teachers may have and offer methodological advice.

The Pre-World War II Jewish life photo project is just one of the projects available to teachers. When adapted for students of English as a foreign language, they do not have any linguistic difficulties in completing the project. Furthermore, students have the opportunity to individualize this complex history, by translating statistics into people.

As they go through photo archives, they see real faces and names instead of numbers; they begin to grasp a rich cultural heritage of Jews and should finally draw a conclusion: Jews were normal people who had normal lives. Finally, they draw parallels to their own lives thus developing understanding of the importance of recognizing and appreciating differences, whether individual, cultural, religious or otherwise. They “become aware of the need for tolerance and empathy with persons from other cultures and recognize the existence of stereotypes and prejudices as well as the need to eliminate them” (NCF, 2010:59).

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POUČAVANJE O HOLOKAUSTU U NASTAVI ENGLSKOGA JEZIKA – PROJEKT S FOTOGRAFIJAMA IZ ŽIDOVSKJE KULTURE I ŽIVOTA PRIJE DRUGOG SVJETSKOG RATA

Poučavanje o Holokaustu je kroskurikularna tema i ne bi trebala biti zastupljena isključivo na satima povijesti. Iako se učitelji i nastavnici drugih predmeta ponekad ustručavaju poučavati o Holokaustu, danas postoji mnogo gotovih nastavnih sati i aktivnosti koje su razvili stručnjaci i institucije, a koje se mogu primijeniti u nastavi. Učitelji i nastavnici engleskoga jezika imaju na raspolaganju niz oglednih sati i projekata koje mogu prilagoditi i oko njih razviti vlastite aktivnosti.

Projekt prikupljanja i analize fotografija o životu Židova u Europi prije Drugoga svjetskog rata primjer je projekta koji se može provesti na nastavi engleskoga jezika u sedmome ili osmome razredu. Učenici stječu nove spoznaje o životu, kulturi i običajima židovskih zajednica i pojedinaca prije rata, a na kraju uspoređuju svoje živote kako bi uočili sličnosti. Istovremeno se razvija svijest o pojedincima i pokazuje ljudsko lice statistike.

Ključne riječi: Holokaust, život i kutura Židova, kroskurikularni pristup, foto-projekt, pisanje sastavka

Appendix 1: Photo analysis handout³

Photo Collection

Research and print two photos that reflect Jewish life prior to the Nazi invasion of that country using the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Web site, www.ushmm.org (go to research then collections then photo archives). Search the collection of thousands of photos using key words (check the list brainstormed in class). Once you have found a photo you would like to use, right click on it, copy it, and paste it into a new Word document. Then return to the photo on the Web site, and copy and paste the date and the locale to the Word document with the photo (do not include any other information, including the caption). Print it.

Guidelines for choosing photos:

- People must be in the photo.
- The photo cannot be what is classified as a portrait.
- The photo must include the date and place that the photo was taken.

Photo Analysis

I. SUBJECT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Are there people in the photograph?

Number of people: _____ Estimated ages: _____

Number of men or boys: _____ Number of women or girls: _____

Describe clothing:

Describe facial expressions:

Describe what people are doing:

Are there objects in the photograph?

³ This handout was created by Aimee Young and adapted by the author of the article.

List the objects in the photograph:

Describe in detail the objects in the photograph:

II. SETTING OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Can you tell when or where the photograph was taken?

Estimated time of day:

Estimated time of year:

Outside or indoors:

Describe as many details as you can identify about the place where the picture was taken (example: in a yard, on a street, etc.):

Appendix 2: Student work samples



(left)

(right)

Date: 2002

Date: 1934

Locale: Osijek, Croatia

Locale: Miskolc, (Borsod), Hungary

It is not important if you are a Jew, a Christian or a German – everybody has equal rights. I compared the photo of Agnes and Zsuzsi Laszlo. They are playing outside in the snow and are making a snowman, like I did when I was younger. They had a normal, carefree childhood. I can see that they are happy, like all children should be. They did nothing to deserve persecution and death. Nobody deserves that, no matter what religion they are. I remember when I was young and how happy I was when I

was playing in the snow. And how happy I still am. It is difficult to understand I could lose all that. It was probably difficult for them to understand, because they had normal lives. And then the Holocaust happened.

We have to use our knowledge and prevent it from happening ever again. Children shouldn't die in wars. Adults and children have the right to live carefree lives, without wars and persecution.

Fran Popović, 7.b



(left)

(right)

Date: 1934 – 1936

Date: 2003

Locale: Bamberg, [Bavaria; Franconia], Germany

Locale: Osijek, Croatia

I liked the photograph with children in costumes because it reminded me of the time when I was a Pikachu in kindergarten. I remembered nice moments, how I spent time in kindergarten and played with my friends. The children from the old photograph also had a nice time with their friends and family. But they also lived through a horrible war. I feel very sad when I think about that. They lost their childhood. They lived during the Holocaust. And all they wanted was to live like all kids do – carefree, surrounded by their friends and family. I sometimes ask myself: Are we really different? Who says we are different and who gives them the right to say it? Why do we destroy children's lives, their dreams and hopes? Why do we kill other people? Just because they believe in a different God?

Nobody can decide how they come to this world: black, white, Jew or Catholic. Why should we suffer because of that? All people should work together and never let something horrible like the Holocaust happen again.

Matej Jugović, 7.b

