

Case Study of Students' Needs and Attitudes Towards Topics Dealing with the Target Culture in the EFL Syllabi in Georgian High Schools

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Abstract

In second/foreign language teaching a very important aspect of contents of teaching is culture, the unity of language of culture. Much has already been done in this direction, but still much has not been investigated. The goal of the article is to find out whether Georgian students think that too much / insufficient teaching about English-speaking countries' culture is offered at school and what aspects of teaching about the culture students expect to get. A conclusion is made that it is necessary to pay more attention to teaching about culture in general and in particular to that of various English-speaking countries (not only the UK and US, as the traditional approach is), to develop various language activities, especially speaking ones, that will make teaching about culture interesting and engaging, and to provide a variety of culture-related topics.

Keywords: Students' Needs, Teaching about Culture, Language and Culture

Introduction

Today it is essential in education to meet our students' (customers') needs. According to Webster (2012, p. 81), "aiming to satisfy student expectations is considered a virtue of corporate pedagogy where the students, as customers, are considered to be appropriate in providing the reference point for determining 'good' teaching". The quotation deals with higher education, but high school students (via their parents) may also be viewed as our customers whose needs we have to satisfy.

In second/foreign language teaching a very important aspect of contents of teaching is culture, the unity of language of culture. If in a newspaper article people read that, say, "Tim Morris, professor of management studies at Oxford University, was part of a team that carried out a study

into the expectations of today's CEO" (Young, 22 Jan 2015), they need to know that Oxford University is one of the two most famous universities in the UK and one of the best in the world and not just a university, to realize how the opinion expressed is important. In second / foreign language teaching the necessity of teaching language in a culturally sensitive way has been widely recognized (Kramsch, 1983; 2003; Nieto, 2010; Wardhaugh, 2010).

Sociocultural and cultural information is part of the National Curriculum in Georgia (The Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, n.d.), concerning foreign language teaching, which is in full agreement with the existing research on language and culture inseparable teaching (Kramsch, 1983; 2003). Unfortunately, from the few sources on the situation

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in Georgia from this viewpoint that are available (Tvalchrelidze, 2014), it is evident that neither textbooks, nor teaching is satisfactory in this direction.

Consequently, a study of students' needs and attitudes towards topics dealing with the target culture in the EFL syllabi in Georgian high schools was undertaken.

I. Aspects of students' needs concerning the English-speaking culture

Teaching language in a culturally sensitive way is a very wide topic, this is why in this article I will try to answer only-four questions:

1) Which aspects of culture to teach while teaching English?

2) What are students' attitudes towards learning about other countries' cultures (in particular to English-speaking nations' cultures)?

3) Cultures of which English-speaking countries, students think,(if any) are insufficiently represented in textbooks?

4) Which activities, according to students' opinions, are insufficiently used to teach about cultures?

The traditional definition of culture dealt with the so-called belles-lettres or fine arts perspective. Brooks (1960) referred to the belletristic perspective of culture as student "refinement," concerning the fine arts (painting, sculpture, dance, music) and literature. This perspective, with its emphasis on "high culture" (as opposed to "popular culture"), continues to exist in college and university foreign language departments for the purposes of students' general education. According to Lange (1998) another reason for it is lending a greater intellectual status to the language and literature department.

The social sciences perspective on culture, on the other hand, defines culture as "the sum of all the learned and shared elements that characterize a societal group" (Brooks, 1960: 80). This involves a value system, behavior patterns, events and products (including the products of high culture).

Sociolinguistics includes such social factors as age, gender, educational level, ethnic group and geographical origin) in it, it also emphasizes roles in relation to each other (parent-child, teacher-student, doctor-patient, salesperson-customer, etc.), and social status (social standing, power, authority) in the sphere of culture (Spolsky, 1989; Tarone, 1988).

Based on these definitions, the national / school curricula of English (or other foreign languages) usually define corresponding components, including culture with a capital and small letter (i.e., high and everyday culture, such as literary works and life styles of particular people, correspondingly). As this article deals with the Georgian case, it is necessary

to present the Georgian national curriculum in English (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, n.d.), which involves:

- Traditions and lifestyles of English-speaking countries
- Education in English-speaking countries
- Young people's life (free time, entertainment, recreation, participation in social life, relationships, interests, mass-media) in English-speaking countries
- European Union
- Geography of English-speaking countries
- Political systems and administrative organization of English-speaking countries
- Capitals of English-speaking countries, their history and sights
- Famous people (scientists, politicians, sportsmen)
- History of English-speaking countries (epochs, people)
- Art of English-speaking countries (artists)
- Literature of English-speaking countries (trends, fragments of works)
- Regions of English-speaking countries
- Relationships between English-speaking countries and Georgia

Though this list (and analogous lists in other countries / schools) is relevant enough to scientific definitions of culture and socio-culture, students may have their own view on the necessity of such detailed study of culture or, vice versa, may want a more detailed list of issues. There are not very many studies concerning students' needs related to the cultural aspect of language learning, however, some of them confirm that there may be conflicts between what is suggested and what students perceive as the 'right' way of learning (Hu, 2002). This stimulated me to study the attitude towards the socio-culture component of the Georgian National Curriculum in English.

Cultures of the UK and US are normally abundantly presented in English textbooks, however, other English-speaking countries are less presented, more than that, many students have no idea about Commonwealth. This is why to find out where our schools stand was one of the goals of this article.

To teach about cultures various reading and reading-based speaking activities are mainly used at school. However, there are few (if any) listening and especially writing activities offered in textbooks for the purpose. Turkan and Celik (2007), for instance, view activities for reading and discussion involving the target culture and its comparison to native culture. Hughes (1986) provided some techniques / activities for teaching cultural awareness: comparison, cul-

ture assimilators, culture capsule, drama, audiomotor unit or Total Physical Response, newspapers, projected media and the culture island. It is easy to see that the majority of them is reading-based. Neff and Rucynski (2013) view role play, poster presentation and intercultural interview-discussion activities to integrate language and culture teaching. These are also speaking and reading activities. However, I expect that to teach about such a rich and delicate thing as culture requires involvement of all communicative skills.

II. Method

A questionnaire was designed and piloted with a group of 20 students at one of Tbilisi schools to see whether statements are clear and that they really cover the research questions mentioned above. After the piloting some questions were dropped, others added and still others reformulated.

The questions included the four aspects of the research: aspects of culture to be taught, attitudes towards cultural component of texts / topics under study, representation of various English-speaking countries and communicative activity types (listening, reading, reading and writing). Totally there were 25 statements (plus 2 questions about student's age and residence). Not all items were positive by their contents – not to stimulate the respondents to “help” the researcher get the desirable results. Correspondingly, for positive by contents statements (e.g., Learning about the cultures of English-speaking countries motivates me to study English) mean results equal to or higher than 4 was viewed as a good result and for negative by contents statements (e.g., I think that learning about cultures is boring) mean results equal or lower than 2 was viewed as a good result.

High school students were asked to assess the items in a Likert scale format: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 – more or less disagree, 3 – neither agree, not disagree, 4 – more or less agree and 5 – strongly disagree. The questionnaire was translated into Georgian, to be sure that school children understand it well. I decided to view the mean results for the questions as supportive the idea between 3.1 and 5, as rejecting the idea between 1 and 1.9, and as neutral (no certain opinion) between 2.0 and 3.0.

Questionnaire was put on the Facebook. I asked teachers to ask their students to fill it in. Both teachers and students were involved in the research on a volunteer basis. Unfortunately, I could not use www.surveymonkey or some similar software, due to the application of the Georgian language. This, of course, limited the number of students I could reach – only via teachers who are my Facebook friends or friends' friends. I waited for results for more than a month, then summed them up in table 1. Means and standard deviations were calculated with SPSS 16.0 program. 252 students aged 15-18 from totally 5 schools: in Tbilisi (a public and two private ones), Kutaisi (a private school), and Telavi (a public school) participated in the research. I hope that the results can be viewed as representative, as schools in the capital (Tbilisi) and regions, as well as private and public schools were involved, and the number of the respondents was high enough. Of course, variations are possible, but,

based on experience, I can say that the obtained picture is quite realistic.

The mean results were calculated as follows:

$$(N1 \times 1 + N2 \times 2 + N3 \times 3 + N4 \times 4 + N5 \times 5) : N_{total}$$

Where N is the number of students giving the corresponding answer (N1 – “1”, N2 – “2”, etc.), while Ntotal was the total number of respondents (252). Besides mean results, I put such an important statistic measure as mode (the answer most often chosen by students), as it often better shows the trend. The number of answers for modes is marked in red color in the table 1.

III. Results analysis and discussion

First of all, it is necessary to note that the opinions on all questions were quite various. It is quite natural, as, for instance, school children, who are not very interested in humanities, of course, do not like much attention being paid to cultural issues, while those who are interested in them, are of the opposite opinion. However, certain trends can be noticed in the answers to the majority of questions.

Concerning the attitude of the respondents towards-learning about culture (items 1-6), it is rather positive:

- item 1 (both mean and mode are positive: 3.39 and “4”)
- item 4 (both mean and mode are positive: 3.89 and “5”)
- item 5 (both mean and mode are positive: 3.42 and “4”)
- item 6 (both mean and mode are positive: 3.62 and “5”)
- items 2 and 3 express a negative view on learning about culture, and the students' answers are between neutral and disagreement (2.38 and “1” and 2.02 and “1”).

Though the respondents support learning about the English-speaking countries as related to the course, they definitely do not want to concentrate only on this culture or on culture as a whole (items 7 -8). They share the ideas expressed in the items that other cultures (item 7: both mean and mode are positive: 3.39 and “5”) and other topics should also be included in the topics (item 8: both mean and mode are positive: 3.34 and 5).

However, the students do not think that they are taught enough about the cultures of English-speaking countries in general (item 9: both mean and mode are negative: 2.49 and “1”).

Items 10-13 deal with the wish of students to increase the number of activities for the development of listening-speaking-reading and writing skills on the culture-related topics. The respondents support all these ideas, especially

Table 1. Questionnaire results

number of students who chose the answer//question #	1	2	3	4	5	mean	mode(s)
1. I am interested in the cultures (history, geography, traditions and living styles, education, art and literature, politics and economy) of English-speaking countries.	12	24	54	102	60	3.69	"4"
2. I think that learning about cultures is boring.	97	56	35	34	30	2.38	"1"
3. I think that knowing one's culture it quite enough.	127	51	31	27	16	2.02	"1"
4. I believe learning about the cultures (history, geography, traditions and living styles, education, art and literature, politics and economy) of English-speaking countries helps me understand and study English.	15	17	42	85	93	3.89	"5"
5. Learning about the cultures (history, geography, traditions and living styles, education, art and literature, politics and economy) of English-speaking countries motivates me to study English.	23	45	47	78	59	3.42	"4"
6. I think I can benefit from knowledge about the cultures (history, geography, traditions and living styles, education, art and literature, politics and economy) of English-speaking countries.	25	29	49	64	85	3.62	"5"
7. I prefer getting information about various countries, not just English-speaking countries in English lessons.	46	32	32	62	80	3.39	"5"
8. I prefer getting various information (science and technologies, nature, etc.), including culture of various countries to getting information mostly about English-speaking countries' cultures at English lessons.	37	44	38	62	71	3.34	"5"

9. I think we are getting quite enough information about English-speaking countries' cultures from other courses, such as history, geography, and literature.	73	63	51	50	15	2.49	"1"
10. I would like to have more listening texts during the English lessons concerning the English-speaking culture than are available now.	34	37	47	71	63	3.37	"4"
11. I would like to have more reading texts concerning the English-speaking culture than are available now.	21	46	59	63	63	3.40	"4" and "5"
12. I would like to have more writing assignments concerning the English-speaking culture than are available now.	40	50	64	62	36	3.02	"3"
13. I would like to have more speaking activities concerning the English-speaking culture than are available now.	20	33	42	47	110	3.77	"5"
14. I believe British culture is represented sufficiently in the English textbooks.	44	66	58	60	30	2.94	"2"
15. I believe American culture is represented sufficiently in the textbooks.	47	54	64	66	21	2.84	"4"
16. I believe Canadian culture is represented sufficiently in the textbooks.	85	73	58	29	7	2.21	"1"
17. I believe Australian culture is represented sufficiently in the textbooks.	75	75	43	41	18	2.41	"1" and "2"
18. I believe other Commonwealth (India, etc.) countries' culture is represented sufficiently in the textbooks.	69	66	60	42	15	2.48	"1"
19. There are sufficient texts dealing with geography and sightseeing of English-speaking countries in the textbook.	38	68	54	73	19	2.87	"4"

20. There are sufficient texts dealing with history of English-speaking countries in the English textbooks.	40	58	45	76	33	3.02	“4”
21. There are sufficient texts dealing with traditions, holidays and living styles of English-speaking countries in the textbook.	31	76	57	55	33	2.93	“2”
22. There are sufficient texts dealing with education in English-speaking countries in the English textbooks.	46	49	32	90	45	3.27	“4”
23. There are sufficient texts dealing with famous people, art and literature of English-speaking countries in the English textbooks.	60	55	31	70	36	2.87	“4”
24. There are sufficient texts dealing with political system and economic development English-speaking countries in the English textbooks.	53	68	76	41	14	2.58	“3”
25. There is information about relationships between English-speaking countries and Georgia in the English textbooks.	109	58	32	32	21	2.20	“1”

concerning the speaking activities (both mean and mode are positive: 3.77. and “5”).

Concerning various English-speaking countries, (items 14-18), students mostly disagree that British, Canadian, Australian and other Commonwealth countries are sufficiently represented in the textbooks:

- UK (item 14: the mean is neutral - 2.94, but the mode-negative “2”)
- Canadian (item 16: the mean is neutral - 2.21, but the mode- negative “1”)
- Australian (item 17: the mean is neutral - 2.41, but the modes- negative “1” and “2”)
- Other Commonwealth (item 18: the mean is neutral - 2.48, but the mode- negative “1”)

As for the USA, the respondents’ curiosity more satisfied, however, the results are contradictory:

- USA (item 15: the mean is neutral - 2.84, but the mode-

positive “4”, which means that many students think they are taught enough)

Concerning the types of cultural information about the English-speaking countries the respondents would like to see in the textbooks (items 19-24), they have a more or less positive attitude to all sub-topics, and the rating is as follows (from most to least):

- Education (item 22; both mean and mode are positive: 3.27 and “4”)
- History (item 20; both mean and mode are positive: 3.02 and “4”)
- Geography and sightseeing / Famous people, art and literature(item 19; mean is neutral, and mode is positive: 2.87 and “4”)
- Traditions, holidays and living styles (item 20; mean is positive, but mode is negative: 2.93 and “2”)
- Political system and economic development (item 20; both mean and mode are neutral: 2.58 and “3”)

And last, but, definitely, not the least: information about relationships between English-speaking countries and Georgia (item 25). The respondents either neutrally (mean: 2.2) or negatively (mode: "1") assess textbooks from this viewpoint, which is not good, as, knowing about these relations is a good motive for learning English.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

While writing the conclusions, I, contrary to the discussion section, rather looked at negative assessments. Thus:

- Items 1-6: Respondents' attitude towards learning about culture is positive enough (or at least neutral): only 25% (64 students) thought it is boring (item 2) and 17% (43 students) believe that knowing only one's culture is enough

- Items 7-8: Ratio of topics should be proportionately distributed among: English-speaking (78 people = 31% prefer to pay attention to other topics) and other countries' culture (81 people = 32%) and other topics (81 people = 32%)

- Items 9, 14-18: Students believe that the cultures of the English-speaking countries (136 students = 55%) (except, more or less, of the USA: 101 student, or 40% who think they have enough tasks and materials) is underrepresented in textbooks.

- Items 10-13: students are very enthusiastic about increasing culture-related speaking (67 students or 27% do not want it), reading (67 students or 27% do not want it), and listening (only 71 student or 28% do not want it) activities, but less enthusiastic about writing ones (90 students or 36%).

- The only culture-related topic which did not cause much enthusiasm, is political system and economic development (122 students or 45%): at this age generally students are more interested in other issues (Dostie-Goulet, 2009). No information on Georgian teenagers' interests is, unfortunately, available, but our experience of working with them supports this idea.

Based on literature analysis and this survey, I would recommend English textbook writers and teachers:

- Pay more attention to teaching about culture in general and in particular to that of various English-speaking countries

- Do it, while developing various language activities, especially speaking ones.

- Provide a variety of culture-related topics.

And, of course, further research with larger population involvement would be useful.

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