

Culture in EFL classrooms

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Abstract

The idea that foreign language teaching has a cultural dimension is not new. Throughout the history of language teaching it has been possible to distinguish different links between language instruction and teaching about culture. The way how these two have been linked has depended on the general goals of foreign language education, but also on how the concept of culture has been interpreted. The main aim of the research is to get an insight into the situation of teaching cultural aspects in English language classes in Georgian Universities. In order to get a broader view, teachers' opinions of various aspects of teaching about culture while teaching EFL has been studied and discussed. A conclusion is made that, in order to teach about culture systematically, teachers should set clear and achievable goals. However, to be able to do so, they need both contents and methods of teaching adequate training.

Keywords: classroom, culture, language, EFL, teaching

Introduction

To make culture teaching an integral part of a language class, the teacher should set realistic and clear goals. Although all aspects are important, most scholars stress that the main goals of teaching about culture should be developing intercultural understanding and communication. To achieve this difficult goal teacher should consider an appropriate approach with suitable techniques and activities. The choice of the latter depends on several factors, such as the situation in which the language is taught, the age and the language level of learners, and teacher with his/her preparation to achieve the set goal. Teachers also need accessible and reliable sources for teaching cultural aspects. Despite the recognition of the importance of culture in the language classes, teaching about it still remains rather limited. The main reasons for that are lack of time, the issues of designing a cultural syllabus and choosing appropriate techniques, and lastly, the presentation of culture-related topics and activities in teaching materials.

The main goals for teaching culture

When the main aim of foreign language teaching is to develop students' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various situations, culture-sensitive language teaching should facilitate intercultural communication and understanding. Seeley formulates what he himself calls a super goal for the teaching of culture: "All students will develop the cultural understanding, attitudes, and performance skills needed to function appropriately within a segment of another society and to communicate with people socialized in that culture" (Seeley, 1993, p. 29).

Chastain (1998, pp.299-300) adds that, in language

classes where intercultural understanding is one of the goals, students become more aware of their own culture and more knowledgeable about the foreign culture. In such classes, students learn to recognize cultural patterns of behavior and communication and function within the parameters with those new expectations.

Seeley (1993:30) goes on with the discussion and states that large goals should be described in more details to be useful. He suggests six instructional goals, summarized as follows: the teacher should "help the students to develop interest in who in the target culture did what, where, when and why" (the first five goals) and "some sophistication in evaluating statements about the culture and finding out more about it" (the sixth goal).

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993, p. 7-8) have modified Seeley's goals of culturally-sensitive language instruction. According to them, the teaching of culture should help students

- to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors;
- to develop an understanding that social variable such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the way in which people speak and behave;
- to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture;
- to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language;
- to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence;
- to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture;
- to stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about

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the target culture, and encourage empathy towards toward its people.

Stern (1992, p. 212-215), after studying the goals set by several scholars, concludes that all goals, despite the differences in terminology, stress the cognitive aspect, that is: "knowledge about the target culture, awareness of its characteristics and differences between the target culture and the learners' own culture." A "research-minded outlook" is also important, that means, "willingness to find out, to analyze, synthesize and generalize." Lastly, learners should understand the sociocultural implications of language and language use.

In order to the above-mentioned goals culture in foreign language classes should be presented in a systematic and organized way. It should not be "incidental to the real business of language teaching" (Byram, 1989, p.3), neither could it be treated as "an interesting sidelight that is included periodically to provide a change of pace from language study". Cultural studies should have "a rightful place in foreign language teaching.

Kramersch's observation seems to summarize what Chastain and Byram have said. She states:

"Culture in language learning is an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them". (Kramersch, 1993, p.1)

Topics for Teaching Culture

The easiest way to design a cultural syllabus is to compile a list of topics that are thought to be important for or of interest to students. As there is no exhaustive list, the decision to include certain topics is always arbitrary.

What a huge task trying to list the topics for teaching culture is can be seen from the list of 62 topics compiled by Brooks (1986, p.124-128). His list includes, for example, greetings, patterns of politeness, verbal taboos, festivals, folklore, music, medicine, hobbies, learning in school, meals, sports and careers. However, he claims that such a list is in no way exhaustive and stresses that the learners' age and needs should be considered. The level of language skills is also to be taken into consideration.

Chastain (1988, p.303-304) has compiled his list using an anthropological perspective. Similarly to Brooks, he claims that students can add topics with which they want to become familiar. In his list, there are 37 topics, including family, home, money, religion, holidays, clothes, good manners and non-verbal communication. He considers the latter especially important to teach when students anticipate having direct contacts with speakers of the other culture. What he also emphasizes is that the discussion of these topics should be based on comparing similarities and differences of students' own and the target culture.

The comparative approach is also emphasized by Durant (1997, p.31). His list consists of topics such as food, customs, the legal and judicial system, holidays, housing and gardens, social attitudes and forms of political expression. He adds, though, that "there seems to be little need for any fixed list of fixed order of themes" and the choice of topics depends on students' interests and suggestions.

To make culturally sensitive language teaching an in-

tegral part of EFL, teachers should set clear and realistic goals. Although all aspects (cognitive, behavioral, and affective) are important, most scholars stress that the main goal of teaching a foreign language in a culturally sensitive way should be developing intercultural understanding and communication. To achieve the goals teachers should consider an appropriate approach as well as suitable techniques and activities for such teaching. The choice of the latter depends on several factors, such as the situation in which the language is taught, the age and the language level of learners and, lastly, the teacher and his/her preparation to teach the target language in a culturally sensitive way.

Besides the above-mentioned factors, teachers also need accessible and reliable sources. Several studies have shown that the cultural dimension in textbooks varies to a great extent. In order to evaluate their cultural context, teachers can use several checklists. However, in order to provide learners with up-to-date information, teachers should also turn to other sources.

The aim of my research is to get an insight into the situation of culturally sensitive language teaching in university English classes in Georgia. In order to get a broader view, teachers' opinions of various aspects of such teaching were studied.

Method

A questionnaire for university teachers was chosen as a source for eliciting the data. A one-to-five Likert scale was used for getting the respondents' judgments about the ways of culturally sensitive language teaching and topics of interest. Teachers were asked about the importance of teaching about culture in the process of EFL teaching. A questionnaire was composed with the help of survey software package (www.surveymonkey.com). The questionnaire was sent via e-mail to teachers of 4 universities (2 state and 2 private) in Georgia and also was distributed in person. All participants were volunteers. The survey was paper-based and responses were entered manually. A total of 50 questionnaires were completed and returned.

The questionnaire was designed with the aim of finding answer to the following questions:

1. How do teachers define culture and what importance do they attribute to the teaching of it? (Q1 &3)
2. Should we teach culture or about culture? (Q2)
3. How often are cultural issues discussed in your classes and do these issues motivate students' language learning? (Q4 &5)
4. What methods and techniques are used? (Q6)
5. What topics and information about which cultures do they consider important to teach? (Q7 & 8)
6. What teaching materials and other sources do they use and do they offer enough material for culturally-sensitive language teaching (Q9, 10 & 11)

Results

All teachers gave answers to multiple-choice questions, whereas not all teachers ranked the ways of teaching and topics. Some teachers also left unanswered some open-ended questions.

Question #1

The question about the definition of culture was placed first in the questionnaire. The respondents were given 2-3 lines to provide answers. The fact that culture is a very difficult word to define was proved by the fact that nearly one third of the teachers (32%) left the question unanswered.

In the provided definitions one part of the teachers concentrated on the people's way of life and their beliefs and perceptions, while another group claimed that culture embraces both people's way of life and their history, geography and arts. Many teachers stressed that culture is associated with one country and that it is shared by its people. On the other hand, there were no definitions that mentioned cultural diversity within one country. Some respondents made it explicit that values are determined by one's own culture. Language as a reflection of culture was also stressed in some definitions. The fact that culture is a dynamic system that develops continuously and influences people's lives was also emphasized by some teachers.

It can be concluded that the teachers who answered the question mostly defined culture by listing its various elements. A few holistic definitions were also provided, where the relations between various aspects of culture were indicated.

Question #2

1. Culture
2. About culture?

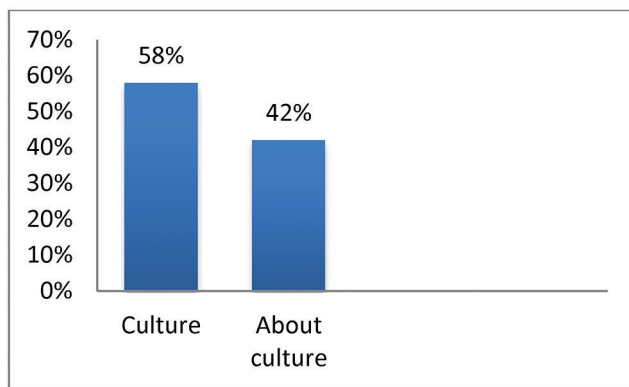


Figure 1. Teachers' opinions about teaching culture or about culture

More than half the teachers (58%) considered important to teach culture, while 42% considered teaching about culture. Despite the fact that in literature we frequently encounter with the phrase "teaching culture", it is not wise to teach culture without a person's will. It is against any legislation, against human rights. Teachers should teach about culture of the target language.

Question #3

Do you think it is important to integrate the teaching cultural issues into foreign language classes?

1. Yes, important
2. Yes, very important
3. Not important
4. It should be taught as a separate course

The results were as follows: 56% of the respondents

considered important to integrate the teaching cultural issues in EFL classes, while 32% considered it as very important. For 2% of the teachers it is unimportant and 10% considered that it should be taught as a separate course. In fact, having separate culture-like courses in an EFL program is quite a good idea, parallel to teaching the practical language courses in a culturally-sensitive way.

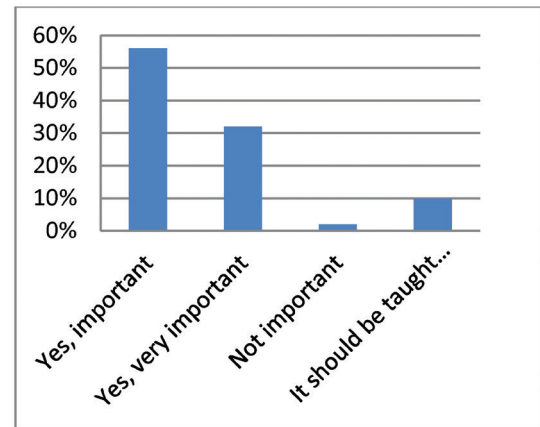


Figure 2. Teachers' opinions about the importance of culture

Question #4

If the answer is yes, how often do you discuss culture-related topics in your English classes?

1. Often
2. Sometimes
3. Rarely
4. Never

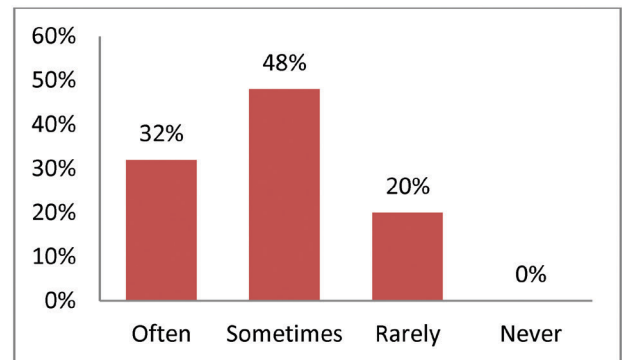


Figure 3. Teachers responses to the frequency of discussion of culture-related topics in EFL classes

The results were as follows: The majority of teachers, 48%, stated that they 'sometimes' included cultural issues in their lessons, 32% of the respondents claimed that they 'often' discussed culture-related topics, while 20% discussed it 'rarely'. There were no negative responses. We see that the situation could be better.

Question #5

Which of the following do you consider the most useful in culturally sensitive language teaching? Rate from 1 to 5 for each selection. 1- least useful, 5 – the most useful. Please tick the appropriate boxes.

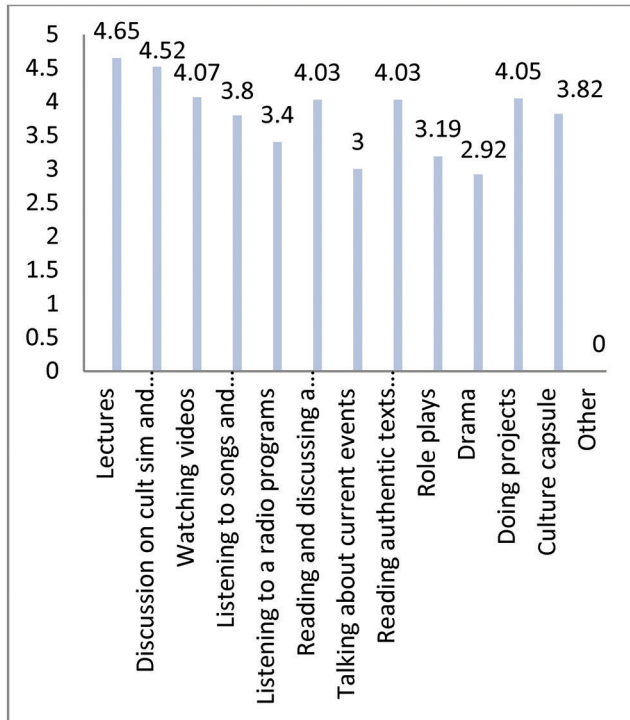


Figure 4. Teachers' responses to the ways of teaching culture

The teachers considered lectures as the most important way of teaching about culture, giving 4.65, on a five-point scale, a little bit less, 4.52, was given to the discussion of cultural similarities and differences. Such a high score reveals that the teachers understand the importance of the comparative approach. Watching videos was also rated highly – 4.07, followed shortly by doing projects (4.05). Reading and discussing newspaper articles and reading authentic texts (short stories, poems) were rated equally by teachers, giving 4.03. Teachers were also asked to rate a technique that has been specially developed for the teaching about culture – the 'culture capsule'. It was considered a useful technique with the average score 3.82. Listening to songs and discussing lyrics were rated higher (3.8) than listening to radio programs (3.4). Role plays were rated 3.19. The least effective for teachers was considered drama (2.92) and a little bit more effective - talking about current events (3).

Although some space was left for the teachers to add some other ways of teaching about culture, there were no suggestions.

Question #6

What aspects of culture would you consider the most important to teach about? Rate from 1 to 5 for each selection. 1- least useful, 5 – the most useful. Please tick the appropriate boxes.

Teachers were also asked to indicate the most important topics to teach. A list of sixteen topics was provided for assessment. The teachers rated 'patterns of politeness' the highest – 4.68. 'The rules of behavior' was also considered very important to teach, with the average score of 4.25. This reveals that most of the teachers understand that, besides presenting background information about the culture, the development of students' intercultural communicative skills is equally important. 'Customs and festivals' as well as 'na-

tional symbols and stereotypes' were also scored highly – 4.62 and 4.35 accordingly. From the topics connected to everyday life, 'education and schools' was scored the highest – 4.23, while 'family life' was scored – 4, a bit lower – 3.8 was given to 'food' and the lowest – 3.5 was given to 'youth life'. Other topics were rated up to 4. The highest was 'literature and art' – 3.8, 'history' – 3.7, 'music' – 3.62, 'geography' – 3.5. It might be considered slightly surprising, as topics such as 'history', 'literature', 'geography', 'art and music' are considered to get most attention in EFL classes.

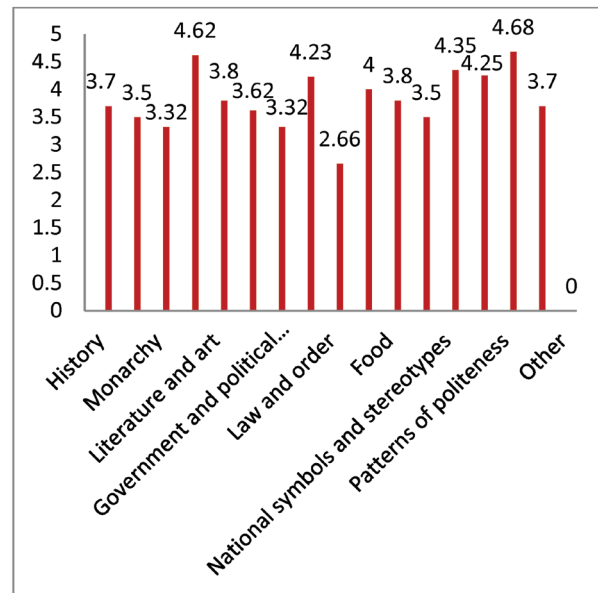


Figure 5. Teachers' scores for the topics

Low scores were given to the topics 'law and order' (2.66) and 'government and political institutions' (3.32). It is possible that teachers are not well prepared to teach these topics. As for the other topics, no additional suggestions were given by the respondents.

Question #7

When you teach the areas named in question 6, which country do you mostly focus on?

1. United Kingdom
2. Unites States
3. Australia
4. Other

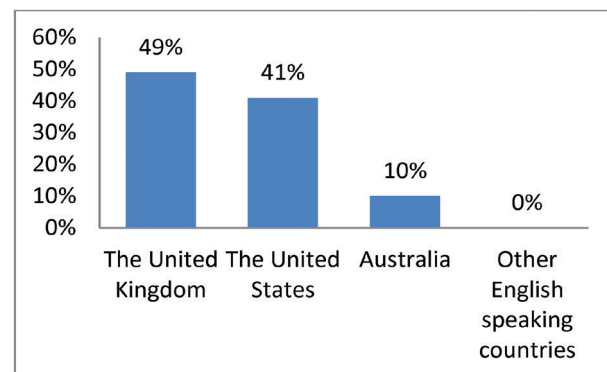


Figure 6. Teachers' responses to the countries they mostly focus on

The responses revealed that topics related to British culture were dominant – 49%. Then followed issues related to the United States – 41%, 10% of the teachers responded that topics related to Australia was important. Other cultures got no attention from the respondents. The focus on the British culture can be explained by two factors: firstly, historically British English has been taught in universities, and second, British English has been considered as superior one. However, it is desirable to pay more attention to the culture of other English-speaking countries.

Question 8

What sources do you use for teaching about culture?

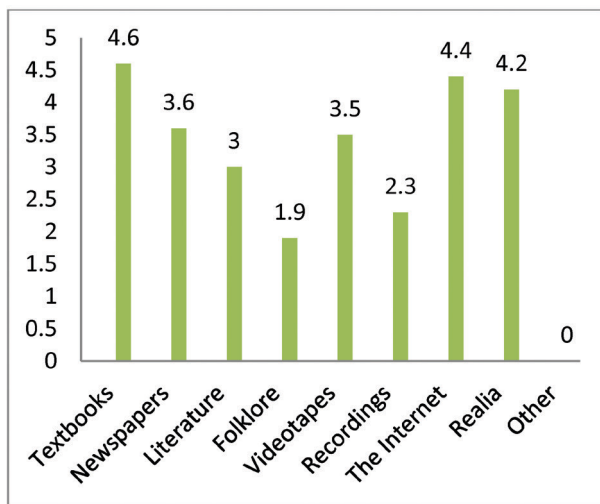


Figure 7. Teachers' opinions about different teaching materials

Although English language textbooks (4.6) are the main source for teaching cultural aspects, the teachers use various sources. After textbooks, the most frequently mentioned sources were the Internet (4.4) and realia (4.2). Newspapers (3.6) and videotapes (3.5) were given nearly the same scores, after them come audio recordings with the score 2.3. The reason for giving a lower score to them might be that audiocassettes and CDs come together with those textbooks that do not contain enough culture-related materials. Literature (fiction) usage was given 3, while folklore only 1.9. As for other sources teachers used in the classrooms, unfortunately, there were no recommendations.

Question #9

In your opinion, do the textbooks you use offer enough material for teaching culture-related issues?

1. Yes, quite a lot
2. Enough
3. To some extent
4. No

The results were as follows: more than a half of the respondents, 54%, were satisfied to some extent with the textbooks they used, while more than a quarter, 24%, considered that the textbooks they used offered enough material for discussing culture-related issues. 13% thought that their textbooks provided quite a lot material, but 9% responded that the textbooks did not offer any useful material from cultural aspect.

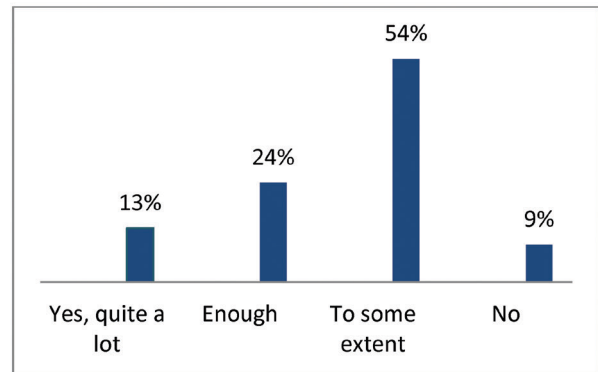


Figure 8. Teachers' opinions about textbooks

Question #10

Name the main textbooks you are currently using for teaching English.

Fifteen textbooks were named by the respondents. The results were as follows: the most frequently named textbooks were *Upstream* (12 teachers) and *Q:Skills for Success* (2&3) (10 teachers). Then comes *Market Leader* (6 teachers), *New English File* (4 teachers), *Total English* (3 teachers), *What a World*, *Master class* and *Outcome* (2 teachers each), *Discovering Fiction*, *Opportunities*, *Academic Connections*, *FC Gold*, *Famous American Stories* and *A World of Fiction* (1 teacher each).

Conclusions

Teaching of a foreign language (English) in a culturally sensitive way should be an integral part of English Language teaching in the ideal classroom. However, as culture has been defined in many different ways, it has led to different views to what is culturally-sensitive language teaching. Together with the growth of social sciences, culture started to be defined as the whole way of life. The anthropological definition has become also dominant in EFL teaching.

Today, there exists a widespread consensus among scholars that language and culture should be integrated in the language classroom. Language is seen as part of culture and culture as part of language, that is why they cannot be separated and should be taught together (Brown, 2000, p. 177).

In order to teach about culture systematically, teachers should set clear and achievable goals. The main aim of integrated linguo-cultural teaching is to develop students' intercultural understanding and help them to communicate intercultural. For the latter, learners need cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and a set of skills, which constitute the learners' intercultural competence.

Despite the recognition of the importance of integrating culture in language teaching, it has still remained limited. Lack of time, the issues of designing a cultural syllabus and choosing appropriate techniques, the presentation of topics and activities in teaching materials are the main reasons.

The easiest way of designing a culturally sensitive language syllabus is to use a list of topics (suggested, for example, by the national curriculum). After having determined the course content, teachers should decide on appropriate methodology. It should foster both students' cultural knowledge and awareness. The choice of a suitable technique

and activity also depends on what the aim of teaching about culture is.

As the culturally-sensitive language teaching mostly takes place in the classroom, teachers need textbooks with organized and systematic approach of teaching about culture. In order to find out to what extent culture-related material is present in textbooks and how it is organized, teachers can use several checklists. As no single textbook can provide information on all the aspects of culture, teachers should turn to other sources. The material is diverse, ranging from the Internet, newspapers, films, literature, radio and television programmes to realia.

To improve the situation of culturally sensitive language teaching more attention should be paid to language teacher training. Teacher education programmes at universities should include the methodology of teaching about culture in the curricula. Teachers, on the other hand, need ongoing in-service training, as culture is developing. More comprehensive and in-depth language teacher education would be one way to get nearer to the ideal where culture forms an integral part of language classes.

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