

The Importance of Raising Teacher Awareness of Culture-sensitive English Language Teaching

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Abstract

It is straightforward that English language teachers in the 21st century face the daunting task educating students from diverse ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious background. It has become pivotal for teachers to raise their own cultural understanding first to be successful educators. This study demonstrates to what extent English language teachers in Georgia value and practice culture-sensitive English language teaching and learning. The study concluded that at first teachers have to grasp the inseparability of language and culture to achieve students' success in gaining communicative competence in English language. Based on the results of the study, English language teachers, in order to raise their cultural awareness are recommended: to participate in periodic in-service trainings, workshops and regional or national conferences that focus on target and international culture; to receive in-service professional training through participation in professional associations such as English Teachers' Association of Georgia (ETAG), Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Foreign Language Teachers Association; the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIERAR); to subscribe to the journals and other publications of these professional associations.

Keywords: Culture, culture-sensitive, communicative competence, language, teacher awareness

Introduction

It is known that teaching English as a second/foreign language acquired a great importance after the Second World War. English started to be considered as the language of international communication and there was a demand for studying English by students, immigrants, refugees, and tradesmen. The search for the new methodology brought Communicative Language Teaching as a new orientation, which emphasized the use of authentic material and which introduced the culture-specific phenomenon embedded in the language.

A Substantial number of investigations of the connections between language and culture were carried out in the 1960s and 1970s and significant works were produced. Hymes (1967, 1972) first introduced the concept of 'communicative competence' that has thereafter had a great deal of impact on second language research and teaching methodologies. He identified that communicative competence incorporates both 'speaking' and behavioral competence and 'interpretation' of speech and behaviors according to the standards of the speech populace (Hymes, 1972, p.53 and 64 respectively). This was the commencement of consideration of speech acts and rules of speaking in comparison of languages and analysis of the sorts of communicative in

terference which may occur as people learn second/foreign languages. Communicative competence is now widely recognized as an important goal of language teaching. As language learning is the integral part of 'culture learning' and vice versa, teachers hold theories of 'culture' learning too. It is crucial to maintain the link between language learning theories and culture learning theories.

What is successful language learning? It is the synergy of linguistic and cultural proficiency. These discussions illustrate the pivotal role of teacher and student variables in the process of teaching and learning languages and cultures. Teachers should possess a deeper understanding what teaching a target language means and realize that it is also teaching about its culture. Learning a language simultaneously makes students acquire different ways of living and discovering how differently people think in different cultures. Teachers should know that they are primary sources for learning about the target culture. Teaching and learning about culture has been a matter of continuous consideration for language educators.

The National Curriculum for Georgia (2009-2010, 2011-2016) presents the following list as prioritized objectives for

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teaching foreign languages: to communicate successfully with the people from foreign language speaking cultures; to have positive attitudes towards cultural diversity; to understand different cultural texts and contexts; to be ready for collaboration with people from different cultural identity. The topics at different study levels of the English language are: English traditions and customs, education, youth, the European Union, geographical and historic dimensions of the target culture, historical personalities, facts about relationships between Georgia and English speaking countries.

Teachers' awareness and knowledge of aspects of culture-sensitive language teaching will benefit their students to communicate in the target language and smoothly overcome negative cross-cultural experiences. It must be noted, that wherever in this article the term 'culture-sensitive' language teaching is used it does not involve English language teachers teaching culture to students, as they are not culture teachers, but it entails teaching about culture and cultural peculiarities of behavior in connection with language teaching.

Study of attitudes and instructional practices of English language teachers in Georgia

The presented research reveals to what extent English language teachers in Georgia value and practice culture-sensitive English language teaching and learning. A survey was given to 4 university (Tbilisi International Black Sea University, Tbilisi Iliia State University, Kutaisi Akaki Tsereteli State University and Telavi Iakob Gogebashvili State University) ELT teachers, who were selected voluntarily and at random. The inseparability of language and culture teaching is especially visible while teaching the language at a high level, this is why university lecturers teaching English were selected for the research.

As I believe that most importantly language teachers have to raise their own awareness as cultural beings and acquire a deep insight into the inseparability of language and culture to reach the main goal of English language teaching, the acquisition of communicative competence.

Results

Question 1: Please rank the importance of the following goals of English language teaching (from the most important - 1, to the least important-5).

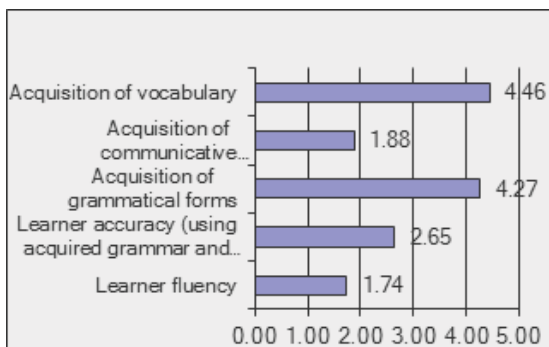


Figure 1. Main goal of English language teaching

Learner fluency was ranked as the most important goal of English language teaching, which is followed by acquisition of communicative competence. As for learner accuracy and acquisition of grammatical forms, they occupied the third and the fourth place respectively. However, the acquisition of vocabulary was ranked as the least important objective of all. Of course, all the above-mentioned goals are important for language teaching, but communicative competence as discussed above should have been named as the most widely acknowledged goal for language teaching as it involves both linguistic and cultural competence.

Question 2: Please write your idea what successful English language learning means.

The teachers' ideas to this open-ended question are widely varied. Out of 82 teachers only 19.51% think that successful English language learning means all (speaking, writing, reading, listening) skills competence plus behavioral competence of the people from target culture. This makes me think once again that English language teachers in Georgia have to undertake the view of inseparability of language and culture. Below are some of the responses to the above question given by the teachers.

1. To put the theory into practice and make your language competence applicable in communication.
2. Native-like competency in English.
3. Ability to communicate successfully.
4. Acquisition of language and culture.

Question 3: Do you think that non-verbal communication should be included into formal curriculum?

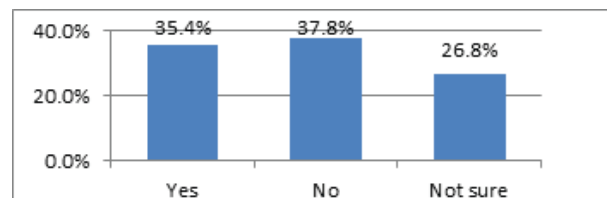


Figure 2. Non-verbal communication-the content for formal curriculum

The response to the question whether non-verbal communication should be included in the formal curriculum or not is distributed almost evenly between Yes and No, 35.4% of subjects thinking that it should be included and 37.8% answering that it should not be included. However, 26.8% were not sure about the issue. In the interaction with the members of different cultural groups the lexical and cultural aspects equally contribute to making the ground for understanding. Cultural aspects include many dimensions of non-verbal communication.

Question 4: How important is culture-sensitive English language teaching?

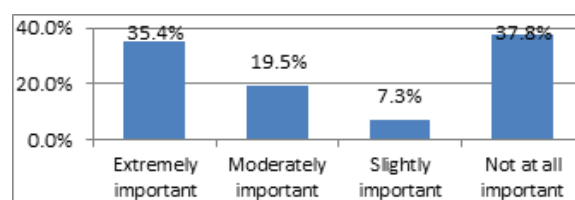


Figure 3. The importance of cultural teaching

The majority of responses (37.8%) were allocated to the response that culture-sensitive teaching is not at all important while teaching English language, which means they are either not informed about the role of culture in language teaching or simply have a wrong opinion. The number of teachers who answered 'extremely important' is only 2.4% less. It is notable that if we join all positive answers (Slightly important 7.3%, Moderately important 19.5% and Extremely important 35.4%) together than more than half (62.2%) of the respondents replied that culture teaching is generally important while teaching English language. Anyway, much work has to be carried out in order to change teachers' viewpoints and to help them change their teaching practices.

Question 5: Do you think that future English language teachers should have courses in anthropology?

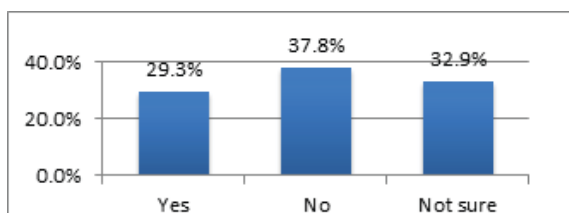


Figure 4. Anthropology as a compulsory discipline for future teachers

You can see that 32.9% of teachers do not have a clear idea whether anthropology is an important discipline for future language teachers. The majority of subjects 37.8% responded that future English teachers should not have courses in anthropology. A substantial amount (32.9%), however, is devoted to the category of teachers who think that this discipline is important for teachers. Anthropology studies the relationship between language and culture, it is part of culture pedagogy. An anthropology course, that is ethnographic in character, focuses on a specific culture using the theories of cultural anthropology and it is not at all important, which culture the course focuses on, much of the value for teachers is to utilize the application of anthropological theory. In order to deal competently with the 21st century classroom diversity, cultural anthropology is a useful and important discipline for language teachers.

Question 6: Have you tried in practice culture-sensitive English language teaching?

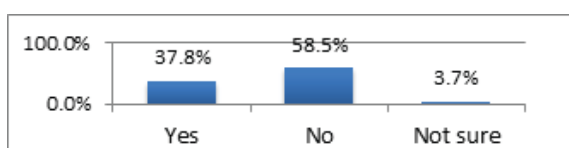


Figure 5. Teachers' instructional practices

The graph shows that more than half of respondents (58.5%) have never tried culture-sensitive English language teaching, which of course, is problematic. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of the subjects (37.8%) responded positively to this question. Only 3.7% were not sure if what they did was cultural orientation in language teaching.

Question 7: Please describe the techniques you have used for culture-sensitive English language teaching.

Out of 31 respondents (37.8%) who answered that they have used culture-sensitive English language teaching, 15 respondents described the techniques used during the classes. They stated that they had used films, slides, videos, discussions, activities, reading texts focused on cultural issues, and comparison between students' cultures and the target culture. Below you will see some notes made by teachers:

1. *I create activities. Show the difference between cultures.*

2. *I used questioning and method of comparison, which kept students' motivation and interest very high. For reading activities-texts about different customs increased interaction, as students were making some comparisons with their own culture.*

3. *Photos, slides, videos.*

4. *Generally discussing texts with culture orientation.*

Question 8: How did you and your students find culture-sensitive English language teaching and learning process? Write about your experiences.

As we have seen in Figure 5 above, 31 teachers (37.8%) responded that they have tried to use culture-sensitive English language teaching. Out of them 17 teachers shared their experience with us. It is notable that all 17 teachers wrote how motivating, engaging, involving, enjoyable, and interesting these classes were and how proud and motivated the students felt. However, two of the respondents answered that the preparation process for teachers takes time, but the effect is worth this. Below are some comments written by the teachers:

1. *Students extremely enjoyed, were motivated, happy, and involved.*

2. *It is a hard work for a teacher, but the lesson is enjoyable.*

3. *Preparation is quite time-consuming, but the effect is huge.*

4. *Students were proud, while talking about culture.*

5. *Students enjoyed to find similarities, engaged in discussions and debates.*

Question 9: Have you tested the attainment of cultural goals for students?

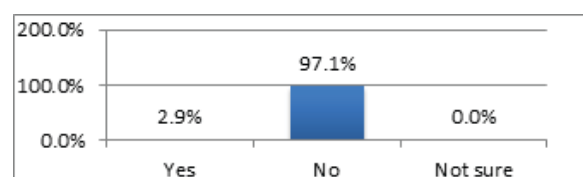


Figure 6. The issue of testing accomplishment of cultural goals

When asked, if they have tested, whether students were successful or not in achieving cultural goals, only one teacher had a positive answer (2.9%). Unfortunately, almost all (97.1%) of the teachers, who have tried culture-sensitive English language teaching, responded that they have not

tested the students' achievement of goals. This means that the teachers care for the students' achievement of the linguistic goals while cultural goals are inferior for them, as the only way for the teachers to check the student success is through testing.

Question 10: Please share with us your reasons for not having practiced culture-oriented English language teaching.

This question was asked to the 58.54% of teachers who responded to the question number 6 negatively; stating that they have never tried culture-sensitive English language teaching in practice. Out of 48 teachers 26 shared their ideas with us. Their views are very interesting. Many of them commented that course books are their guides and they follow the topics and activities in course books. Several report that it needs time and preparation and this is extra work for teachers. Some of them say that they have never thought about it. Below are several notable answers:

1. *It is not the goal for my course.*
2. *No syllabus requirements.*
3. *These extra activities need extra time.*
4. *I have never thought about it.*
5. *It should be a separate course, I think.*
6. *There is not much focus on it in textbooks.*

Conclusion

1. This study showed that culture-sensitive English language teaching in Georgia has not yet been embedded in teachers' everyday instructional practices. Due to many different reasons, teachers avoid teaching English in a culture-sensitive way. In this study learner fluency was ranked by the teachers as the most important goal for teaching the English language and not acquisition of communicative competence (including knowledge of cultural issues). This may mean that English teachers in Georgia need to make it clear that language and culture of the people who speak this language is a unity and the communicative competence which is the widely recognized goal of English language teaching means both fluent communication using this language and correct interpretation of behavior of people speaking this language.

2. It is significant that all those teachers (17 teachers who practiced culture-sensitive English language teaching out of the total number of respondents – 31 - wrote comments. They shared with us their pleasant experience and answered that they have seen how motivating and helpful for students such focus is. It is important to popularize these teachers' opinions. It is also notable that more than half (62.2%) of the respondents think that culture-sensitive language teaching is important, which may lead to putting more effort into practicing it in everyday instructional practices and will be inspiring for colleagues.

3. As for the reasons for not practicing culture-sensitive English language teaching, it is apparent that many teachers have not thought about it. So, if the culture awareness and understanding of its importance while teaching language is kept at a high level for teachers, they will find time and en-

ergy in their excessively busy schedules to practice culture-oriented language teaching. Contemporary curricula of English philology and English language teaching should involve a course on language and culture interrelations. Also in the syllabus of methods of language teaching ways how to link language teaching with dealing with cultural issues should be included. Teachers of older generations should be retrained to be aware of the importance of culture-sensitive language teaching, as well as to be able to use adequate materials, activities and teaching methods, to put this teaching into life.

4. One more important issue, that the study revealed, is the non-existence of testing system to check the language students' attainment of cultural goals. This issue is resolvable only if teachers set cultural goals together with linguistic ones before starting teaching English language. When cultural goals are part of formal curriculum, then teachers will try to check the outcomes.

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