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To cite this article: Maria V Arkhipova *et al* 2020 *J. Phys.: Conf. Ser.* **1691** 012173

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Teaching EFL through culture and technologies

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Abstract. The article refers to the experience of introducing the Country Studies Course into University Baccalaureate curriculum for students majoring in studying English as a foreign language in Minin Nizhny Novgorod State Pedagogical University, Russia. The purpose of the present research is to describe the program of the academic discipline, its objectives, content modules and teaching methods. The course, viewed as a contribution to University curriculum development, proves its effectiveness, helping students understand the countries, people and traditional values, get rid of existing prejudices, and it can be one of the ways contributing to mutual understanding, tolerance, appreciation of history, and culture. Information and communications technology is used as an effective teaching tool, meeting the needs of the modern generation of students. The study is a source of guidance and practical advice for novice and experienced teachers as well as administration seeking to compare existing programs with the aim to introduce the best practice into University education.

1. Introduction

The term culture is described by scientists in a variety of definitions and explanations: as a form rule of social systems, memory and control device of society [1], an ongoing argument about rightness of choice [2], the development of all aspects of human life that are not biologically determined and a whole way of life and the beliefs, values and attitudes associated with it [3], a theory about the world and the people, the ways distributing goods among them [4]. Culture being inseparable from languages, language proficiency may fail in a natural environment if the cultural awareness is minimal or non-existent [5,6]. Awareness of a foreign language culture is a significant component of learning and teaching. It is a necessity for teachers to include cultural components in EFL teaching [4].

The reforms of education systems, taking place in Russia, set a new priority in establishing partnership agreement with higher education institutes around the world. Therefore, the English language is included into a wide range of academic programs. Higher institutions seek to offer new academic programs for both Bachelor's and Master's Degrees students with the subjects taught in the English language.



2. Materials and method

The purpose of the present research is to describe the experience of introducing the Country Studies Course into University curriculum of Baccalaureate students learning EFL as their major in Pedagogical University. The article is focused on providing the example of the discipline curriculum, aimed at a Bachelor in Teacher Education, which can serve as a source of guidance and practical advice for EFL University teachers.

The research was conducted on the basis of Minin Nizhny Novgorod State Pedagogical University, Russia, with the Country Studies Course included into the University curriculum of third and fourth year students of the Bachelor Programmes.

3. Results

The new course introduced into University curriculum is “Country Studies. The UK and the USA. The Countries and People”. It is aimed at the third and fourth year students of Bachelor’s Degree with the major of the English language, future teachers of English at secondary schools. The program of the academic discipline is developed in accordance with the University educational and professional training program 050100.62 «*Pedagogical Education. The teacher of English*», Bachelor’s Degree. The training is organized with the purpose to develop planning and organizing skills, empathy, communication and social skills.

This course, being for the Intermediate/Upper-Intermediate level, offers students another chance to acquire a more sophisticated cultural grounding in English. Academic research reveals that a good deal of “common wisdom” about language learning is inaccurate. Students admit that coming abroad and even knowing English at Upper-Intermediate level they tend to feel helpless if they do not know culture, the way of everyday life [7]. It is especially vital for Bachelors in Teacher Education as they are being prepared to teach English, to introduce a new culture, way of life of other nations to the younger generation.

The course is grounded on the idea that language and culture are basically interdependent processes and places this interdependence at the centre of the learning process. The main objective of the course is to encourage self-knowledge and self-awareness in developing cultural sensitivity. The course, designed to foster skills, knowledge, attitudes applicable across a wide range of linguistic disciplines, helps compare existing knowledge, draw connections between two cultures.

The object of academic discipline is historical, cultural, social, economic features of the UK and the USA. The objectives of the academic course are the following:

- to explore language through culture and culture through language;
- to develop a growing understanding of values and interdependence of language and culture;
- to help in comparing existing knowledge, drawing connections between target culture and home culture;
- to develop the capability to reflect critically on differences between cultures and traditions;
- to become aware of the existing stereotypes, consider linguistic and cultural similarities and differences;
- to develop willingness to interact with people from diverse cultures, show tolerance, take responsibility for contributing to mutual understanding, peaceful dialogue and successful communication.

A multi-disciplinary approach aims to integrate general EFL course with the study of geography, history, culture, literature of the studied countries.

The program of the course includes the following content modules:

1. GEOGRAPHY

- Geographical outline
- Natural wonders
- The symbols and distinguishing features
- The mysteries, unique places

2. HISTORY

- Main periods in the history
- Main events in the history
- Basic documents

3. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES

- Ethnic/Geographical Identity
- Stereotypes and changes
- Describing people: Personality and character traits
- Humor

4. THE ECONOMY AND EVERYDAY LIFE

- Housing
- Holidays and special occasions
- Festivals
- Sports and competition

5. THE ARTS

- The arts in society
- Theatre and cinema
- Music
- Literature
- The fine arts

6. GOVERNMENT, POLITICAL LIFE

- The civil service
- Central and local government
- Government services
- The party system/Elections

Teaching methods include:

- working with texts for reading and listening;
- absorbing information through observing, reading and listening;
- stimulation of speaking by creative tasks and questions, serving as the impetus for class discussion;
- presentations and reports of self-research;
- individual and group projects;
- critical analysis of the information;
- project-based learning, engaging students into the learning process and stimulating creativity;
- implementation of problem-solving strategies.

The course includes a large online block based on Moodle platform. The introduction of modern information technologies in the educational process is currently taking an increasing place. Their use in the educational space is a powerful motivating resource. Motivation, which occupies a leading place in the structure of personality, is one of the main concepts that is used to explain the driving forces of behavior and activity. The content of the motivational system as a whole determines the content of activities characteristic of a person. The motivational system determines both the activity being carried out and the prospects for its further development [8].

The discipline course is structured in such a way that after lectures, seminars, and tutorials students are to refer to the Moodle course, do tests, check if they remember everything, supported by the links to the necessary information. The objectives on the Moodle course:

- developing and improving effective reading and writing skills;
- developing learners' autonomy and independence;
- boosting communication skills.

The Moodle course implies the gradual development of acquired skills during traditional classes, including teacher-student interaction through forums, chat, surveys. Each section includes authentic materials, media resources, links to encyclopedias, maps, movies, blogs and video lessons of native speakers, which helps to activate interest in the subject and increase cognitive motivation of language learning.

The ICT are an effective means of organizing the educational process, motivating students to active participation. Information and communication technologies meet the needs of the modern generation of students, and combined effectively with traditional classes improve language skills. Teaching EFL in the combination of online and offline classes presents positive benefits and proves beneficial learning results, making the learning process more engaging and interactive.

4. Conclusion

The course “Country Studies. The UK and the USA. The Countries and People” proves to be effective; it helps students develop language proficiency through absorbing, analyzing and evaluating rich data. The course is based on the use of authentic material, including printed, audio, video materials, also such teaching methods as role-plays, workshops, dialogues and debates, presentations and projects. This course is of demand for the Bachelor’s Degree programs for future teachers of the English language. The combination of learning the language and culture is significant for future teachers as it helps students broaden their mind, be aware of existing stereotypes and prejudices, understand the country, people and traditional values, develop communicative skills, and feel free to speak out. The course, included into University curriculum as a separate discipline, teaches students the historical and cultural heritage of the countries, with the emphasis paid on time and facts, philosophy and values, making it possible to study the wholeness of American and English culture and get rid of existing prejudices.

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