

## On Some Culture-Specific Issues of TEFL in Armenia

*Shushanik Paronyan*  
*Yerevan State University*

### Abstract

The present article focuses on the cultural aspect of globalization in Armenian higher education system which has come to the fore recently within the framework of the unifying European academic field. Bearing in mind that education is part of culture, some effective ways of adapting teacher-centered educational strategy to Armenian academic network are discussed. Using the cultural dimensions model proposed by G. Hofstede, I make an assumption that certain attitudes and behaviour types characteristic of educational strategies implemented in Armenia recently should be acculturized.

**Key words:** globalization, acculturation, independent learning, the Bologna process, teaching EFL.

### Introduction

It is well known that the most recent trend in the development of human civilization is convergence, that is leveling of living standards and conditions, minimization of socio-cultural gaps among people living in different parts of our globe. Conceiving both the positive and negative effects of this important social process known as globalization, many people admit that the world is becoming narrower and narrower.

The phenomenon of culture is undoubtedly manifold and embraces different components such as language, business, politics, routines, social life, etc. (Hall 1997; Utley 2012). Being part of social life, education can be viewed as an important cultural element. Hence trying to comment on recent changes which were introduced into the Armenian higher education system, I would like to pinpoint the cultural aspect of the issue and draw your attention to the problem of acculturation of certain global European values, standards, rules and norms. Hence the aim of the article is to bring to light some difficulties, or negative side effects which have been revealed in the process of adaptation of Armenian education system to European standards, and figure out some effective ways of fitting into the framework of adopted cultural backgrounds.

### Acculturation of Teacher-Centered Educational Strategy in Armenian Academic Network

There is no doubt that despite the inevitable tendency for leveling in almost all spheres of social life, which is reportedly observed during globalization process, deep-seated cultural differences and cultural diversity present critical challenges to people all over the world. This fact often results in negative side-effects. The disastrous outcomes of globalization can be witnessed in almost all spheres of human activity. As a consequence, resistance and clashes like ethnic, religious conflicts, confrontations of languages and political systems have become common in modern society (consider the recent conflicts in the

Ukraine, Russia, Egypt, Israel, Croatia, Bosnia, Spain, Great Britain, the Baltic Republics and so on). Since the present article deals with the problems of higher education system in Armenia, I will concentrate on this particular area of acculturation.

It is well known that the Bologna process, launched in 1999, aims to create a common European Higher Education Area and, therefore, requires a series of steps in the process of education and administration tactics. Obviously, the aims of this far-reaching project are noble. As it is stated officially, the intention is to allow the diversity of national systems and universities to be maintained: "The Bologna Process does not aim to harmonize national educational systems but rather to provide tools to connect them." (The Official Bologna Process Website). Furthermore, it improves transparency between higher education systems, as well as implements tools to facilitate recognition of degrees and academic qualifications, mobility and exchanges between institutions. As members of Bologna Process, Armenian higher education system authorities (including YSU) are expected to implement certain novel principles in accordance with the European dimensions of higher education. These principles concern almost all aspects of education such as curriculum development, length of academic terms, academic hours allotted to courses, the system of grading (written and oral mid-terms, final exams), awarding academic degrees, assessment of lecturers' work by students and so on.

As we have already stated, education, and the system of higher education in particular, is part of culture. Hence, naturally, when implementing borrowed elements of scholarship, certain problems connected with acculturation arise. As a professor of English at YSU, I am well aware of certain cultural obstacles which have been encountered in this long-lasting process of adaptation. Among them I would like to highlight the problem concerning the applicability of written mid-terms to Armenian mentality, the drawbacks of grading practical foreign language mid-term written tests on a 4-score basis, misinterpretation of student-centered strategy of education, and so on. In this article I would like to center on certain issues that have to do with one of the major values in the European system of education – independent learning.

As it is, educational programs at YSU are designed according to the academic hours allotted to certain courses included in the curriculum, for example: History of English – 32 hours per term, which means 2 academic hours weekly, or Latin – 64 hours per term, which means 4 academic hours weekly, and so on. The academic timetable is usually drawn up in accordance with the hours allotted to classroom activities – lectures, practical classes, seminars. Furthermore, besides classroom activities, education plans also include a certain amount of academic hours allotted to independent learning. Thus, the education plan for 2013-14 academic year adopted for Bachelor students at the Department of Romance and Germanic languages presupposes 4160 hours in total for independent learning. For example, for English major (1 year), 224 academic hours are allotted to classroom activities (practical classes) and 196 hours to independent learning. The academic course in Cross-cultural Pragmatics is designed as follows: 32 academic hours for classroom activities (lectures) and 58 hours for independent learning. I tried to find out whether the lecturers in English include these hours in the academic syllabus or not, but as it appears, actually no lecturer knows for sure what is meant by independent learning. In fact this aspect of education plan is mostly

interpreted as academic hours designed for preparing homework by students. Meanwhile, I think many judgments about the above mentioned aspects of academic life are culture based. Therefore, in order to elucidate the problems concerning independent learning, first of all it is necessary to explore the cultural dimensions which affect education.

Cultural dimensions are principles which are used for discerning cultural traits of social groups and classifying cultures according to certain features. Having analysed the most widely known systems of dimensionalization of cultures (Hall 1997; Hofstede 1991, Lewis 2006), I came to the conclusion that the cultural dimensions model proposed by G. Hofstede can best be applicable to academic network.

As a component of culture, education system can be associated with family system, specifically, with its authority structure and structure of social relationships. Therefore, among the cultural dimensions mentioned by G. Hofstede (Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism vs. collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Long Term vs. Short Term Orientation), the one of Power Distance plays an essential role in the process of teaching/learning. In order to confirm my opinion, let me define briefly what characteristic features this cultural dimension area involves. Power distance has been defined by G. Hofstede as the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality, but defined from below, not from above. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. G. Hofstede mentions that all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others (Hofstede 2001; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). Research on power distance index scores comes to prove that these scores are higher for East European, Latin, Asian, African countries and lower for Germanic and English-speaking Western countries (Samovar et al. 2012). The following cultural traits may be helpful to describe some of the differences that exist between Small vs. Large Power distance countries:

In Small Power Distance societies use of power should be legitimate and is subject to criteria of good and evil, while in Large Power Distance societies power is a basic fact of society antedating good or evil: its legitimacy is irrelevant; in Small Power Distance societies parents treat children as equals, while in Large Power Distance societies parents teach children obedience; in Small Power Distance societies hierarchy means inequality of roles, established for convenience, while in Large Power Distance societies hierarchy means existential inequality; in Small Power Distance societies older people are neither respected nor feared, while in Large Power Distance societies they are; in Small Power Distance societies subordinates expect to be consulted, while in Large Power Distance societies they expect to be told what to do; in Small Power Distance societies corruption is rare, scandals end political careers, while in Large Power Distance societies corruption is frequent, scandals are covered up; in Small Power Distance societies education is student-centered, while in Large Power Distance societies education is teacher-centered, etc. (Samovar et al. 2012:24).

It should be stated that research on Power Distance index scores in Armenia has not been carried out so far, but judging by our own observations on the above mentioned variables, we can assume that Armenia can be considered as a society characterized by a high rate of Large Power Distance. Needless to say, traditionally, our education system has been teacher-

centered. Hence, naturally, teachers (or lecturers) have always been endowed by certain authority over students, students are used to be guided unquestionably by teachers. Hence the image of a teacher as a bearer of knowledge and wisdom, a preacher of light, a model for imitation is quite common in Armenia. Since teachers are usually older than students, they are respected by students. Furthermore, Armenian students, who are usually younger than their teachers, are taught to show respect to hierarchy of age and social role. Specifically, they are advised against applying certain interpersonal strategies which are considered to be improper from the point of view of Power Distance. For example, Armenian students, unlike their peers in student-centered modes of education (the US educational institutions, for example), should avoid using improper honorifics and address forms (addressing one's teacher by his/her first name instead of surname), inappropriate forms of pronouns (Armenian *you* singular instead of the polite plural *you*) and colloquial language forms. Breaking these rules of existential inequality in the process of communication is considered to be a grave social gaffe in Armenian society. In other words, we have to admit that there is a certain amount of social distance between teacher and student, which is a matter of cultural values, beliefs, traditions implemented in the society. As a matter of fact, the images of the greatly respected and celebrated Armenian teacher, Mesrop Mashtots, the creator of the Armenian alphabet in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, and his bright and diligent pupil Yeghishe can be seen as a model for the established cultural background of teacher-pupil relationship: a teacher should be a model of worship and imitation. To tell the truth, the ideas of worship and imitation have become outdated in academic context at present, but respect – showing consideration, appreciation to the reputable source of knowledge, is traditionally observed. With this in mind, it is natural to expect that certain attitudes and behaviour types characteristic of Small Power Distance strategies are bound to fail in Armenian academic context.

Two problems are worth mentioning with this respect. Firstly, the implementation of student-centered education in Armenia should be done with great care, since it may be treated as a face-threatening act which diminishes the social role of the teacher/lecturer and puts his/her reputation at risk. Hence if the students have to decide what and how they should be taught, or who should teach them, all this should be done mindfully and with forethought. If students have to assess and grade their lecturers' work, the questionnaire should be worked out thoroughly to reveal objective data.

Secondly, it is absolutely necessary that Armenian teachers (I mean both school teachers and university professors or lecturers) should boost independent learning by encouraging their students to learn with minimal control on part of the teacher. Hence, independent learning should become part of our educational system. In teacher-centered educational strategy established in Armenia, students are expected to be guided, controlled by teachers, and education is a one-way process where assignments are given and checked by the lecturer in class. The assignments given as a kind of individual, noncompulsory work, tasks allotted to students out of course syllabus, are often neglected by them – why should I do it if it is not going to be graded or checked? Hence, education is basically confined to classroom activities: giving assignments – checking homework, nothing more. Implementation of this kind of strategy means that many essential educational tools like motivation and personal development, are overlooked. As for EFL courses, lecturers in English may feel hindered by the

lack of academic hours designed in the educational program, which is, by the way, characteristic of the Bologna system of education where students' independent work outside classroom is encouraged, and in-class teaching hours are minimized. Therefore, English language teachers should find ways of boosting the students' desire to learn more and motivate them to gain knowledge without anybody's control and support. This kind of individual work should include various types of oral and written assignments such as reading fiction, newspapers, watching videos and films, recording one's speech, writing summaries, commenting on certain situations, etc. Independent learning can best be promoted by implementing new styles and means of teaching and learning via new information and communication technologies. The significance of virtual learning environments – software systems designed to facilitate management by teachers of educational courses for their students and to promote e-learning process via online courses has been highlighted recently (Dontcheva-Navratilova 2008). Therefore the use of online courses and sites such as MOOC, The Voice of America, Memrise, Duolingo, Project Gutenberg, Lextutor, Voxopope and so on, is highly recommended. It is important to find ways of motivating students to gain knowledge, master their English, skipping the process of checking and grading. Each student should feel the benefits and advantages of this kind of learning and be prepared to work out an individual plan of learning which corresponds with his/her individual needs, aspirations and aims.

I would like to discuss one more question in this respect which concerns the role of the lecturer. I do believe that the successful implementation of elements of independent learning in Armenia depends to a great extent on the lecturers themselves. There is no doubt that many lecturers are used to the system of face-to-face classroom activities and wrongly assume that the teaching/learning is conducted only in the classroom. Hence in order to become an established habit, part of learning process, independent learning techniques and strategies should be taught both at school and at university levels of education. This means that teachers and lecturers should be mindful about this aspect of education and make it part of in-class cultural program.

### Conclusion

Education is part of culture and certain global European values, standards, rules and norms need to be acculturized in Armenian academic framework. Therefore some effective ways of fitting into the framework of adopted cultural backgrounds should be found in order to boost the process of learning. One of these ways is implementing elements of independent learning, the latter being an actual aspect of learning English as a foreign language.

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### Անգլերենի՝ որպես օտար լեզվի ուսուցման մշակութային խնդիրների շուրջ

Հողվածում արծարծվում են անգլերենի՝ որպես օտար լեզվի, ուսուցմանն առնչվող մի շարք խնդիրներ, որոնք մշակութային հենք ունեն: Քննարկվում են Հայաստանի Հանրապետության բուհերում, մասնավորապես՝ ԵՊՀ-ում, Բոլոնյան կրթական համակարգի ներդրման հետ կապված որոշ դժվարություններ: Հեղինակի համոզմամբ կրթական համակարգը ազգային մշակութային հենք ունի և, ըստ այդմ, Հայաստանի բուհերում Բոլոնյան կրթական համակարգի որոշ տարրեր անհրաժեշտ է ադապտացնել՝ հայ ուսանողների և դասախոսների մտածողությանը համապատասխան: Հեղինակն անդրադառնում է ինքնուրույն ուսուցման հարցին, որը ուսանողակենտրոն ուսուցման հիմնաքարերից մեկն է Բոլոնյան համակարգում: Նշվում է, որ ինքնուրույն ուսուցումը, որը ենթադրում է համակարգչային տեխնոլոգիաների կիրառում, օտար լեզու սովորելու ժամանակակից առաջավոր ձևերից մեկն է:

### О некоторых культурно-обусловленных вопросах преподавания английского языка как иностранного в Армении

В статье обсуждаются проблемы, связанные с преподаванием английского языка как иностранного, которые обусловлены изменениями учебного процесса. Обсуждаются некоторые трудности, связанные с внедрением Болонской системы образования в вузы Армении и, в частности, ЕГУ. Автор убежден в том, что система образования имеет культурную основу и Болонская система должна быть адаптирована в Армянских вузах согласно менталитету армянских студентов и преподавателей. Автор затрагивает вопрос самостоятельной учебы, которая является одним из приоритетов Болонского процесса. Отмечается, что самостоятельная учеба, которая предполагает использование современных компьютерных технологий, является одним из современных методов изучения иностранных языков.