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Regional Approach in the Content of English Language Instruction at the University Level: A Case of Kazakhstan

Gulzhakhan Tazhitova^{1a}, Dina Kurmanayeva^{2a}, Jannat Sagimbayeva^{3a}, Gulden Tussupova^{4a}, Natalya Ustelimova^{5a}

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates the results of the study on the use of region-based materials in EFL classes at university. The empirical research methods made it possible to reveal teachers' attitudes towards the use of region-based materials. The data were collected from 21 participants through an interview that showed teachers' positive attitudes to region-based materials integration. Based on the results obtained during the study, implications were provided for teachers to improve the EFL teaching process at universities. The practical significance of the study is determined by the fact that the realization of a regional approach in different countries of the world and in Kazakhstan was studied. English teachers' attitudes towards the use of region-based materials in classes were revealed and the difficulties in the use of those materials were indicated.

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¹ Professor, Email: gul-tazhitova@ust-hk.com.cn (Corresponding Author)
Tel: +7-7172-709500

² Professor, Email: kurmanayeva9@nuos.pro

³ Associate Professor, Email: jannat.sagimbayeva@nuos.pro

⁴ Associate Professor, Email: g.tussupova@uohk.com.cn

⁵ Associate Professor, Email: nustelimova@tanu.pro

^a L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Republic of Kazakhstan

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the significance of regional knowledge in the process of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching is discussed among scholars and instructors in the sphere of English teaching more often. Understanding regional knowledge is extremely important for the process of personal development and broadening the students' horizons (Aksentyeva, 2015; Sapetra, 2020). Regional knowledge provides students with the world of native and foreign language culture and history. This approach develops students' thinking by means of the foreign language. It helps to maintain interest in the study of the history, life, and traditions of the people inhabiting the region (Ghadiri et al., 2015; Mighani & Moghadam, 2019).

The topic of region or region-based knowledge is one of the current issues in Kazakhstan education nowadays as well. Regional knowledge is an important point that develops young people in a spiritual and cultural way. It opens the way to join the ranks of competitive developed countries in the global world. Since becoming a sovereign state, all the measures taken in the field of science and culture in Kazakhstan contribute to raising the level of education of young people on the basis of universal and individual national values. Therefore, in the context of democratization and humanization of public life, the training of spiritually, competitively, and professionally competent professionals who define the national identity has become a topical issue.

Kazakhstan is a country located in the center of the Eurasian continent. It has been a place of former nomads and eternal wanderers, reborn into a modern powerful state, with a stable developing economy and a confident view of the future, but at the same time preserving the charm of antiquity and originality. The issues of preserving the national identity of the Kazakh people have been discussed among scholars and society as a whole for all these years. Well-known customs, centuries-old traditions, oral musical and poetic creativity, language and other components, and a stable layer of the spirit of the nation were, are, and should be the basis of the spiritual culture.

The purpose of this article is to study English teachers' attitudes towards incorporating

regional materials into their teaching at the university level and give recommendations to improve the teaching process. If a student is aware of traditions, customs, rituals, history, and mode of life, it is easier for him or her to present his/her native country to foreigners. This study explores two research questions: What are English teachers' attitudes towards incorporating regional materials into their teaching at the university level? What recommendations can be suggested on the result of the research?

2. Theoretical Framework

The culture of a country plays an important role in promoting the national idea, which unites citizens of the country. The national idea, in turn, shapes national identity in the age of globalization and this question is highly relevant. Preservation of the cultural heritage of the nation and its identity, which are the factors that differentiate this country from others, helps to preserve the cultural, spiritual, and material wealth of the people of the country. Thus, the culture and image of the country have become effective tools of foreign policy, as well as in the struggle for national ideas of the country. In order to preserve a cultural code, identity of culture, and traditions the country has issued several programs. The state program "Towards the future: spiritual revival" considers the formation of one whole nation in the context of the modernization of public consciousness, associated with the preservation of the cultural code, the identity of culture, and customs (Course towards the future..., 2017).

The term 'region' means an area, district, space, part of the country; a country without boundaries in the Oxford Dictionary (Oxford Lexico, 2020). 'Region' is used in different spheres: economy, social sciences, geography, history, cultural studies, and education. From an economic point of view, the 'region' is a combination of different production systems with joint firms and combined with management structures. It is an economic region with a common history, a certain level of culture (Dobrinin, 1977). In the field of sociology, the concept of 'region' is considered as a form of the regional organization of the social structure of society, social connections, and relations, social institutions, and processes.

Geographical knowledge seems to be a powerful and irreplaceable mechanism for organizing the humanities, and the use of a regional approach and the method of regionalization encourage the development and implementation of optimal opportunities for direct communication with local structures and the environment (Dermendzhieva & Doikov, 2017). In historical sciences, the term 'region' is used as "A path that creates positive interest in people and promotes awareness" (Hoskins, 1984, p. 81). As for the field of cultural studies, it is a special cultural form that is included in a certain 'landscape' through a single physical environment and a homogeneous economy that forms the general basis of social life and historical development (Spiridonova, 2007). All these things indicate that 'region' is a multi-user term. In education 'region' is used in two directions: 1) at the official level, at the discretion of local teachers, to include them in the educational process as blocks or elements. This can be applied to any academic discipline, expanding or reducing the number of hours spent studying it, the proportion of topics, and so on; 2) systematic inclusion of regional materials in the structure of educational programs at the content level.

English is taught as a discipline of general education for the first-year students majoring in different specialties at the university level in Kazakhstan. It is based on the program and standards of the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" (Alderson, 2002), which designates 6 levels of proficiency: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. At universities, students have B1 or B2 levels. English is taught through foreign language textbooks from famous publishing houses such as Cambridge, Edustream, Oxford University Press, Macmillan, and others. These books enable teachers to teach students by using authentic materials that equip them with knowledge of English-speaking countries as well. The educational process excludes the adapted and outdated textbooks from local publishing houses.

In connection with the above, it should be noted that in pedagogical practice, there is an approach in which a foreign language is considered mainly as a means of introducing the target language to the culture of the country. As a result, students find it difficult to convey

information about phenomena and facts related to their native regional culture or history by means of a foreign language, and, therefore, are not able to disclose and broadcast its assets and peculiarities in the process of real communication.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The interviewed teachers came from different regions of Kazakhstan and they all were teaching English as a General course to the first-year students majoring in different specialties. Their age was from 25 up to 53. Overall, 21 teachers working at universities from different regions: central Kazakhstan (Nur-Sultan, Karagandy), southern Kazakhstan (Taraz, Turkestan, and Shymkent), western Kazakhstan (Atyrau), northern Kazakhstan (Kokshetau, Pavlodar) participated in the interview. Teachers were educated in Kazakhstan and graduated from teacher training universities in various cities. Of the 21 teachers having been interviewed, 9 (43%) teachers answered the question "What pedagogical approaches do you use in your teaching?" that they are using mostly content-based, problem-based, culture-based, and competence-based teaching, 8 (38%) teachers preferred communicative approach, critical thinking, and project-based teaching, and 4 (19%) teachers said that they use research-based teaching and interactive methods such as games and quizzes.

3.2. Instruments

It is known that language and culture are connected with each other. Cultural awareness is defined as "an approach to culture that includes skills in observing and understanding difference and sameness" (Belli, 2018, p. 108) and "the suspension of judgments, i.e. not being critical of other people's apparently deviant behavior" (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004, p. 7). Incorporating regional or local materials into English teaching can be a great help in teaching English for non-native English speaker students (Mahardika, 2018). At this point, it is crucial to focus on the term 'attitude' since this research is mainly aimed at revealing students' attitudes towards the use of regional materials in classrooms. Attitude is a term that means "positive or negative feelings that students have

toward the language, the language teacher, and the study of the language” (Önalın, 2005, p. 128). The language learning process is influenced by the attitudes of students towards language learning and materials.

The inclusion of regional peculiarities and local differences in the specific region became a focus of higher education in recent years and resulted in the localization principle in the training of specialists in universities. The principle of localization was considered as an installation on the leading local direction in the education system. Under the local principle of education, it is understood the accounting principle in the pedagogical process, social and educational activities of the university local features, which adjoined professional activity (Ivanov, 1985). The regionalization of the higher education system as the main social institution designed to form a person today is aimed at covering the state policy in the field of higher education in Kazakhstan. A review of Kazakhstan literature has shown that the regional approach has been examined from different aspects. It has originated from ethnopedagogy (Kozhahmetova, 1998) some studies investigated this problem from a historical point (Kalkeyeva, 2010). A number of research papers related to the life and activities of national personalities in the field of education lived in different regions (Kalkeyeva, 2000), there are research studies dedicated to the formation and development of pedagogical science in the regions as well (Mutalieva, 2007).

A lot of research studies are related to the place of a regional approach in English language teaching. A regional approach in teaching English means systematic and consistent inclusion of local material in teaching English. The aim of teaching English at the present stage proclaims the development of the student who is willing and able to participate in intercultural communication, which implies the development of students' desire and ability to enter into the dialogue of cultures with other people. The need for teaching English taking into account the regional component is dictated by the fact that understanding another culture is possible only on the basis of one's own knowledge. Lack of knowledge about the culture of their region, as well as about the culture of the countries of the target language,

is a source of misunderstanding, conflicts, and crises in the process of intercultural communication. Therefore, one of the leading tasks of language education at the present stage is the formation of the socio-cultural competence of students, which implies the ability to navigate in various types of cultures, understand, compare, and be able to explain the phenomena and facts of native and foreign cultures in the process of intercultural communication.

In this research, we consider the use of regional knowledge in English language teaching at universities. An interview was used in order to collect data. The aim of the interview was to reveal English teachers' attitudes towards the use of local materials in teaching English at the university level in Kazakhstan. Teachers were selected based on three criteria: 1) having proper qualifications to teach English; 2) conducting English courses at their institutions of higher education; 3) consent to participate in the interviews.

3.3. Procedure

Teachers are working in a bachelor's program currently. The data were transcribed and coded; pseudonyms were chosen by participants. The interview consisted of 15 questions and was conducted through the Zoom platform because of the pandemic. The first five questions covered general information about the interviewed teachers, their age, educational background, teaching experience, teaching specialties, and teaching approaches they mostly pay attention to in their teaching process. The other five questions were related to their attitudes about the use of region-based materials. The rest of the questions were devoted to which region-based materials they think would be suitable for use in English classes and difficulties in incorporating those materials in classes.

4. Results

All teachers responded that they have to use the material that is offered by the department council for the question “How much influence do you have upon the choice of materials?”. However, they were able to add and enhance the syllabus materials as well. Interviewed teachers thought positively about the effectiveness of region-based materials in their

teaching process. Students get acquainted with or improve their knowledge about the values of their native place if they learn more about the history, culture, and geography of their region. Students would be able to present their homeland to foreigners if the region-based materials were of good quality and selected appropriately. Students would benefit from this as they would learn how to compare and analyze.

For the question “Are there any region-based materials in your textbooks?”, the interviewees

indicated that textbooks do not have enough region-based materials. They teach their students through foreign textbooks that are not adapted, so region-based materials should be complemented by the teacher. Some teachers said, “We wish we had a textbook that contains region-based materials and different activities, unfortunately, we do not have such materials”. The responses to the question “What kind of specific region-based materials would be beneficial for your teaching?” are given in Table 1.

Table 1

Teachers' Preference on What Region-Based Materials Should Be in the Syllabus

Alternatives	Number in teachers	Percentage (%)
Every day life	2	9.5
Historical facts	3	14.2
Culture, Arts	5	23.8
Sport	1	4.7
Historical monuments	3	14.2
Economical	2	9.5
Based on the major of students	4	19.4
Education	1	4.7
Total	21	100

When answering the question “How would integrating region-based materials contribute to students' motivation to study and provide better practice?” teachers expressed their opinions that through region-based materials students would learn more about their region's history, culture, tourism, and famous figures. Consequently, this would increase their motivation to study. Region-based materials contribute to connecting learning a foreign language with everyday life. If region-based materials contain video and audio materials and are accompanied by didactic materials, they can be really useful. This way, the students will be proud of their country and try to deliver their knowledge to foreign friends in English. Teachers have found many difficulties in integrating region-based materials into the teaching process, in particular:

- lack of appropriate materials (28.5%),
- difficulties during designing the lessons (9.5%),
- lack of activities on the region-based materials (19.4%),
- students' unwillingness to study through those materials (4.7%),
- incompliance with the syllabus topics (14.2%),

- the fact that there isn't any system and each teacher works independently (9.5%),
- the fact that regional materials need renewing (9.5%),
- lack of various topics on regions (4.7%).

Many interviewed teachers thought positively about the use of region-based materials and considered them necessary for their English teaching. They frequently incorporated them in their classes. They thought that region-based materials increase students' motivation to learn the foreign language and their comprehension of regional studies becomes more obvious. Some interviewees believed that through region-based materials they create better conditions for language learning since, in connection with globalization, it is crucial. However, some teachers didn't find regional materials useful for language learning. They preferred the use of target language materials to local region-based ones as they thought that students are more interested in them. This may be due to the lack of materials related to regions and if they are available, they are boring, inauthentic, and translated by local people in a weak language. Moreover, teachers tended to opt for the existed learning textbooks more, hence they are adapted for classes and they do

not need much preparation. These materials meet the requirements of modern education and they reflect the realities of the country of the studied language. They correspond to the demands of both didactic and methodological points of teaching EFL. They compile with requirements of pedagogic process in different ways:

1. They meet program requirements, patterns of mastering knowledge, management of the process of teaching, and the interaction of all components of the complex;
2. They are purposeful:
 - goal orientation,
 - selection of threshold levels of language proficiency,
 - integrity of textbook elements;
3. They are student-oriented (taking into account individual and age characteristics, relying on the intellectual capabilities and level of training of students, creating optimal conditions for independent work, and creating a variety of work methods and types of educational activities.

Contrary to the advantages of textbook materials, research findings showed that there are teachers who were ready to change textbook materials or to use region-based materials in their teaching. These teachers believed that region-based materials in teaching EFL should be in the first place as students learn about target regional material during the learning process. Some interviewees think that they would use those materials if their qualities were the same in the textbooks of foreign publishing houses. Others held an opinion that region-based materials need renewing and creating effective activities. In other words, most teachers thought that they would use region-based materials more frequently if they were systematized, adapted, and organized appropriately for classes.

With regard to topics on region-based materials that should be included in the syllabus, teachers' opinions differed a lot. Teachers thought that cultural, historical, educational, artistic, everyday life, sports, and economic materials could serve as region-based materials. Some teachers claimed that students were not interested in materials taken from encyclopedias on topics "My university", "Nur-Sultan is a capital of our country", "My country", and others (Shaukenova, 2017). In

our view, materials from existed books and up-to-date journals on regions will be beneficial for language learning if they are systematized, adapted, and transformed into the learning process.

Additionally, teachers shared their opinions regarding the shortcomings of region-based materials use in EFL classes. A significant finding of our research was that although teachers showed the benefits of region-based materials in English classes, they also listed most of the weakest points such as the lack of time and conditions during classes, the unwillingness of students to study through local content, the quality of materials, the absence of a learning complex, online materials, the variety of topics on regions, the proportion of local and target regional materials, and others. Thus, this research study shares similar findings with studies done by Kazakh researchers as their studies are devoted to the use of the regional approach in the teaching process for different disciplines (Ermekbayeva, 2018; Kurmanayeva, 2020). Their research studies consider the incorporation of region-based materials into the content of the teaching process.

5. Discussion

In foreign literature, scholars consider the regional approach as a local approach in the teaching process, which is beneficial in learning of different disciplines such as geography, economy, history, and others (Goksu & Somen, 2019; Ivanenko 2016; Preston, 2015). However, some scholars consider the regional approach as cultural studies (Luibanchovsky, 2018; Spiridonova, 2007). In Russia, the topic of regional studies has been studied in many aspects as well. For example, a national regional component in general humanitarian education design of regional component in the content of education (Strelova, 2002), a regional component in primary teaching (Bolotova, 2007), an integrative approach in Geography teaching (Markova, 2005), and regional studies in humanities in higher technical school (Zakirova, 1998).

There were some connections between our research topic and place-based education, which is widespread in the USA education system, as both of them are focused on including locality in the teaching process.

Place-based education (PBE) is one of the most effective approaches to promoting recognition in students of the interconnectedness of themselves, their environment, and the topics they learn in class (Theobald, 1997). As an interdisciplinary and experiential learning pedagogical approach, PBE is effective in enhancing student engagement in learning (McInerney et al., 2011). Regional issues are one of the top priorities in the educational process in Australia. Integrating the history and culture of indigenous people into Australian education gives opportunities to emphasize the importance of indigenous people's values. According to Crerar and Mullins (2019), introducing the history and culture of the local population is a priority in the curriculum; it helps students learn the historical and cultural features and values of their homeland.

A review of world literature made it possible to find out that Indonesian researchers have considered regional issues as incorporating local materials into teaching. For example, Manurung (2009) explored the importance of local materials used in classes. Hadi et al. (2019) researched assessing the inclusion of local materials in vocational curricula in Indonesia and Sapoetra (2020) analyzed the local content of school textbooks. Manurung (2009) stated that,

Local values, local culture, and nationally related matters and culture can be integrated into the English teaching materials as it is suggested by the application of the school-based curriculum. The integration of local content into the teaching materials enables students to cope with their difficulty to tell or express their local and national values in English. (p. 23)

This idea was supported by Kaltsum and others that local content serves as a means for developing regional culture and it is one of the most beneficial approaches in teaching English. Systematized and carefully chosen materials will improve learning practices and contribute to positive results (Kaltsum & Susiati, 2019).

Eldin (2015) considered the cultural side of regional materials and noted that thanks to outstanding features, culture plays a crucial role in language learning. One perceives that culture and language are tools that can realize the

principle of communicative direction. It is a valuable aspect of language learning and it leads to understanding and advancement. Qu (2010) offered to teach culture by means of different tools such as dialogues, mini-dramas, role-playing, dances, songs, pictures, films, and bulletin boards and highlighted their significance in language learning. Almujaivel (2018) suggested that the improvement of students' knowledge of local cultures makes them more competent in the language and in communicating via English with foreigners. Karaagac and Razi (2016) studied integrating culture in English classes and characterized an intercultural person as someone who understands cultural diversities and connections. He or she is able to negotiate between two or more cultures, beliefs, values, and behaviors.

A review of related literature shows that many researchers considered the use of regional or local materials in English textbooks. Mahardika (2018) highlights that teaching materials are decisive in the learning process and these materials should include students' culture and background, as language and culture are connected with each other. Han and Bae (2005) agree with Wijaya's idea and believes that,

Learners have a chance to talk to foreigners, the materials containing the content of source culture would be a good resource for a conversation. For example, if we see textbooks as merely a vehicle for the transmission of foreign culture, this may provide a ready source of comprehensible input, but it is likely to do so at the cost of opportunities for meaningful output. Learners need to be taught how to express their own cultural values in English, otherwise, the language learning process will become a purely passive experience, hence the rationale for teaching the source culture. (p. 51)

Gunantar (2017) analyzed English textbooks from a cultural point. The researcher claims that textbooks include various cultural content; whether it contains cultural sources or target culture. The target culture refers to the culture of the studied language. There are many scholars who tackle target culture inclusion more than incorporating source culture into the language learning process. For example, Onalan (2005) aimed to investigate teachers'

attitudes regarding the place of target cultural information in English language teaching, as well as their related practices and applications in EFL classrooms. His research revealed that teachers do not aim at any change in the students' behavior in respect to the target language culture, but they intend to increase the learners' awareness of other cultures and people for intellectual development. At this point, it is important to the preparation of different methods as well (Kalkeyeva, 2000; Kalkeyeva et al., 2020). We can conclude that incorporating regional materials related to culture into language teaching, regardless of target or source, aims at developing students' communication skills and understanding values.

This study revealed teachers' positive attitudes towards the use of region-based materials. The regional approach contributes to positive motivation and conscious mastery of a foreign language as a means of communication. In our case, the integration of regional studies in teaching a foreign language will serve both as a means of improving the educational level and for improving the knowledge of a foreign language. Such positive motivation served as a contribution to improving the teaching of English through integrating a regional approach for the personal development of students. The research has revealed the obstacles that teachers encounter when they use or would like to incorporate region-based materials as well. The solution of the revealed problems can improve the benefits of region-based materials for students, fill educational materials with regional information focused on preserving the national and cultural uniqueness of the region, expand the knowledge of students about their native land, increase the motivation for learning English, and equip students with strong knowledge of the regional and professional character.

The results obtained from the study allow us to make recommendations on the use of region-based materials in the educational process of higher educational institutions:

1. Systematization and adaptation of region-based materials to the educational process of EFL teaching process;
2. Development of educational programs and integrated courses that include regional materials in EFL teaching;

3. In order to implement the regional approach, it is necessary to create favorable conditions for self-improvement of the teacher and student, to give freedom to the topic and problem of the lesson, and to ensure that this direction is constant;

4. Understanding the regional pedestal as a process that not only reflects the peculiarities of people's lives in a particular territory but also has its own logic and patterns.

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