

## On the Relationship between Culture and ELT

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**Abstract.** In the literature, there are two widely spread and opposing views regarding the relationship between culture and English language teaching (ELT). One is that, since culture and language are inseparable, English cannot be taught without the culture (or rather, one of the cultures) in which it is embedded. The other one is that English language teaching should be carried out independently of its cultural context. It is often suggested that, instead of the context of the target culture, ELT should make use of contexts familiar to language learners. Taking this debate as a starting point, the paper reports on a survey carried out at a university college in Hungary investigating students' attitudes to the cultural content of their EFL courses. The **aims** of the survey were to find out respondents' attitudes towards the cultural elements of their EFL courses, and to define their perceived needs.

### Introduction

Many experts agree that most ELT materials, and especially those published in English speaking countries, approach the cultural content of English courses with a nation-state centred view. This means that target language-related culture-specific prescriptive norms determine the way English is taught (Modiano, 2001, Phillipson, 1992). There **problem** is that such an approach to the promotion of English is likely to weaken cultural diversity and have unfavourable effects on the learners' own culture and language.

This paper **aims** at researching arguments for and against a target culture centred approach to ELT. Throughout the paper, a focus is given to EFL teaching and learning situations.

### What is Meant by 'Culture'? A Working Definition for ELT

The term 'culture', as the Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus defines it, refers to the total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge, which constitute the shared basis of social action. This system is acquired socially and organized in our minds in culture specific ways forming a framework, which largely determines the way we perceive and define the world around us (Alptekin, 1993).

Based on Adaskou et al. (1990), it is possible to divide 'culture' into three different subcategories for the purposes of language teaching. These are the following:

- Culture in the aesthetic sense involves literature, music, films and the fine arts.
- Culture in the sociological sense refers to the way of life in the target community. This category includes the structure of different institutions from the national health system to the family, and the interpersonal relations at home, at work, and during free time activities.

- Culture in the pragmatic sense is the third category. It refers to the social skills, which make it possible for learners to communicate successfully with other members of the target language community according to setting, audience, purpose and genre.

The above categories are useful for our purposes because they incorporate topics, which are normally dealt with in general English language courses. The relative importance of such culture-related topics may of course vary according to the aims of the courses.

### Opposing Views on the Cultural Content of EFL Courses

In the literature, one can find two widely spread and opposing views regarding the relationship between culture and ELT. These are the following:

- Culture and language are inseparable, therefore, English cannot be taught without its culture (or, given the geographical position of English, cultures).
- English teaching should be carried out independently of its cultural context. Instead, contexts familiar to the students should be used.

It is important to note that both views support the inclusion of cultural elements in the English language course. The second statement, as well as the first one, assumes that language cannot be separated from the larger contexts in which it is used, and that these contexts are determined, among other variables, by the cultural background of the participants. The question, then, is not whether to include cultural elements in the teaching of English. Actually, the question is which culture or cultures should receive focus and how this should be done.

In order to be able to deal with the above statements, it is necessary to take into account relevant arguments and counter arguments.

It is considered that children acquire the formal properties of their native language (i.e. its semantic and syntactic systems) together with their cultural knowledge. The

situation is different in the case of foreign language learning in that the learners are already culturally and linguistically competent members of one community, and they aim to acquire the language code of another community (Widdowson, 1990). The assumption that children acquire their first language together with cultural background knowledge may lead to the belief that no language, be it second or foreign, can be learnt separately from the culture to which it belongs. Indeed, many native and non-native EFL teachers, and other members of the academic community, assume that it is virtually impossible to teach the target language without teaching the target culture (Byram, 1986, Jiang, 2000). Otherwise, the learners will be exposed to an empty frame of language.

Another argument for tying language and its culture together for teaching purposes relates to motivation.

Gardner and Lambert's classical study (1972) introduces the concepts of integrative and instrumental motivation and claims that students with motives to integrate in the target community can be more successful in second language learning situations. Although other studies question the application of this claim in foreign language learning situations (Dörnyei, 1994), it still remains a general assumption that successful language learner is the one who has a positive attitude towards the target culture (Svanes, 1988; Prodromou, 1992).

Looking at the question from another point of view, publishing language course books focusing on the target culture is cost-effective because such a decision makes it possible for learners from different societies to make use of the same materials. Also, for native speaker textbook writers it may be hard to develop materials focusing on cultures other than their own.

However, there seem to be some problems with treating English and its culture as inseparable. Firstly, the use of target culture elements in the process of ELT encourages a view, which equates English with the ways it is used by native speakers. Such a view leads to the assumption that native speakers are not only representatives but also the only owners of the language (Alptekin, 1993:140). In my view, this approach strongly relates to the idea of a national language being a requirement for a national state, a powerful idea in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also, the model of dividing English speakers into three groups (first language, second language and foreign language speakers) stems from this approach. It must be seen, however, that this model, although a very useful starting point, will not be the most helpful one for describing the use of English worldwide in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is because English as the second language and foreign language speakers outnumber the first language users, and it is logical to assume that the global future of English will be determined by second and foreign language speakers (Graddol, 1997).

Secondly, English already represents many cultures. First language speakers live, mostly, in countries in which the dominant culture is centred on English. As an example, this is the case in Great Britain, the USA, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. But the fact that the first language of most people in these countries is English

does not mean that there are no cultural differences between them. Then, which culture should be tied to the English language teaching? In a second language learning situation it may seem reasonable to focus on the culture of the target community in the given country. But what should we do in a foreign language learning situation? Should we focus on all cultures? That might be impossible. Should we focus on a few or one of them? But how should we choose? Instead of trying to answer the above questions, perhaps it is more useful to accept that 'English [as indeed any other language] can be used by anyone as a means to express any cultural heritage and any value system (Smith, 1987:3). It follows from this argument that the teaching of English does not need to focus exclusively on the target culture or cultures.

Thirdly, there are indications that some ELT course books focusing on the target culture have an alienating effect on students who do not want to be culturally assimilated and, as a consequence, give up learning the language (Gray, 2000). On the other hand, it is not uncommon for many students to become alienated from their own social and cultural settings as they become adjusted to the value system of the Anglo-American world. Many educators in Asian and African countries have expressed their concern for the status of their native culture and language in relation to the cultural content of ELT materials developed for global use (ibid.).

These problems with the cultural influence of English on other societies have led to the suggestion that an ideologically, politically and culturally neutral form of English should be promoted in ELT. It is argued that English, as an international language utilised for communication purposes would make it possible for non-native speakers to retain their own cultural characteristics as much as possible (Jenkins, 2000). Another suggestion is that, instead of focusing entirely on the culture of the target language, it is more beneficial to take a cross-cultural approach to EFL teaching. According to Prodromou (1992), for example, the development of students' cross-cultural awareness is of vital importance because in this way they will become more sensitive to the world's many cultural systems and will care more about the world they live in.

### A Survey

In the second part of this paper, the author reports on the survey, which was designed to put to the test the two assumptions on the relationship between culture and ELT. More precisely, the purpose of the survey was to investigate what students, the participants of the language learning process in an EFL learning situation, think about the cultural content of their language courses and what cultural content they feel they need, if any at all.

Accordingly, the following research questions were asked:

What is the attitude of students towards the status of English?

What is the attitude of students towards the cultural elements of EFL courses?

What cultural content is needed as perceived by students?

## Research Design

The survey was carried out with the help of a questionnaire, which was divided into three sections (see Appendix). The first section asked about personal information and students' EFL learning background. The second section contained 12 statements to be evaluated by respondents and focused on students' purposes for learning English. This was done in order to find out whether students viewed English for their own purposes as a *lingua franca* or as a first language model used by native speakers. Of the 12 statements, numbers 2, 3, 6, 8, and 10 suggested that it is useful to learn English because it is a powerful tool of international communication. The other six statements (1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11) had an integrative orientation indicating that acquiring first language models of English is important. The third section investigated students' attitudes towards the cultural elements of their EFL courses and their perceived needs. 12 possible cultural elements belonging to the three subcategories of 'culture' as determined in the beginning of this paper: the aesthetic sense: 8, 9, 10; the sociological sense: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; the pragmatic sense: 1, were listed. One statement referred to subject specific topics (11), and one to students' personal lives and interests (12). Also, there was an opportunity for the students to add their own preferences. The statements were designed so that they formed three groups. One referred to target-language specific cultural element, the second one - to cross-cultural elements, and the third one related to course components that focused on students' own life, culture and field of study.

The questionnaire was completed by 50 undergraduate students of EFL at Kodolányi János University College in Hungary. The language of instruction in the institution is Hungarian but the students are required to learn two foreign languages and pass two intermediate level State Language Examinations by the end of their studies. To help achieve this students receive 600 hours of language

instruction during the four years of their studies. Language is taught at four levels in the institution: beginner, elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate. An effort was made to have students at each level to be included in the survey.

The questionnaire was administered to the students with the help of their EFL teachers. The purposes of the questionnaire were explained and participation was voluntary. The students completed the questionnaire at the beginning of their language classes.

The data analysis did not aim at carrying out in-depth statistical evaluation of data. Rather, it was regarded important to investigate the general tendencies in students' attitudes regarding the cultural content of EFL instruction. For this purpose, Microsoft Excel 97 was used.

## Results

### *Background information on students*

Altogether 50 students answered the questions. Respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24. Most of them had already studied English before university; only 7 of them indicated that they started their English studies at Kodolányi. The total duration of English studies varied between 1 and 11 years. Of the respondents, 12 students were beginners, 9 students were at an elementary level, 15 students learned English in pre-intermediate, and 14 in intermediate groups. For the purposes of data analysis, beginners and elementary students were treated as one group (21 students altogether), and pre-intermediate and intermediate learners as the other group (29 students altogether).

### *Attitudes to the status of English*

Section Two of the questionnaire aimed at answering our first research question (What is the attitude of students towards the status of English?). The results of this section are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Students' attitudes to the status of English in percentage

EFL (integrative), %	Total	Beg	Int	EIL (international), %	Total	Beg	Int
1 Near native proficiency	56	48	62	2 Successful communication	88	95	83
4 British English variant	68	86	55	3 Successful language exam	92	90	93
5 American English variant	46	48	45	6 Not speaking like natives	40	48	34
7 Prestige	30	33	28	8 A means to succeed around the world	100	100	100
9 Living in the UK or the USA	10	5	14	10 Finding a good job	94	95	93
11 Accepted by natives	24	14	31	12 International progress of profession	80	76	83
Altogether	39	39	39	Altogether	82	84	81

(*Beg=beginner and elementary, Int=pre-intermediate and intermediate*).

The overall results indicate that the recognized usefulness of English for international and instrumental purposes plays a significant role in students' reasons for learning the language. All in all, 82% of the responses given to the statements in the international category point towards this direction. Every respondent (100%) agrees that English is a very powerful tool for success worldwide. This clearly indicates that students are aware of the effects of globalisation from the point of view of language use. They can see clearly that at present English is the *lingua franca* of our planet. Most students (94%) also appear to

understand that speaking English is almost compulsory when seeking a good job after graduation. Taking a successful language exam is the third in the rank order. 92% of the students indicated that this is one of their aims for learning English. It is important to note here that 4 students disagree with this statement. At the same time, all of them indicate the desire to achieve native-like proficiency. It is likely, that for these students passing a language exam is only a means to an end rather than an aim in itself. The majority of students (88%) state that they learn English partly because they need it to communicate

successfully in many contexts. Although it is the fifth in the rank order, still four fifths of the students (80%) express their need for English in order to follow the international development of their profession. This result indicates that, on the one hand students are interested in such developments and, on the other hand, they are aware that international progress in many fields of study is documented mainly in English. Fewer than half of the respondents agree that it is not important to speak like the British/Americans. In fact, 44% of the respondents disagree with the statement and 16% are unsure.

As a comparison, 39% of the responses in the integrative category suggest that students regard native-like use of English as the aim worth pursuing. A considerably lower number of responses fall into this category compared to the number of overall responses in the other one. In rank order, speaking British English receive higher number of votes (68%). This may be due to the fact that in Hungary, as well as in other European countries, EFL teaching has been carried out according to British norms. Also, there is a widespread view in the country that British English is the 'real', 'the most pure', 'the original' version of the language. 20 percent of the students do not want to acquire British English, and 12 percent are unsure of what to answer. American English comes third in the rank order (46%). This is probably, at least partly, due to the popularity of British English. Also, it may be due to the effects of the growing US cultural influence. Although American music and films are very popular in Hungary, there is a widely spread view in the country that they destroy Hungarian culture. There were 9 students (18%) who feel they want to speak both versions. It is interesting to note that only two respondents (4%) indicate they do not wish to acquire neither British nor American English. (N.B. It may be that they have another first language version of English in mind. However, to find this out is beyond the reach of this survey.)

This result appears to be very important from the point of view of our research because it suggests that students view the acquisition of English as adjusting to first language norms of reference. They seem to accept that speaking English means following the models first language speakers have developed for their own communication purposes. This is despite the fact

that, all in all, international reasons for learning English are perceived as very useful.

Second in the rank order is the aim to acquire native-like proficiency in English.

More than half of the students (56%) study for this purpose. This finding relates to the above argument because it represents the belief that speaking a language well means to speak it like a first language speaker does. Given the way the statement is put (I want to speak like native speakers do), the result does not indicate that only half of the students equate speaking a language well with speaking it like a native. Rather, it indicates that somewhat more than 50% of the respondents are ambitious enough to strive for a high level proficiency. My speculation is that a statement like 'the nearer your competence in English is to native speakers' competence the better you are at English' would receive a very high percent of agreement. Another indication of the results may be that many respondents do not feel the need for native-like proficiency in order to communicate effectively, find a good job or pass an examination. Some may also regard it as an unrealistic aim.

Less than one third of the students (30%) feel that it helps them to achieve prestige to speak like the British/Americans as opposed to 54% who disagree with the statement. 24% feel that first language speakers accept them better if they speak English well. Here, a relatively high percentage of the respondents (32%) are unsure of the answer perhaps because of lack of experience. Few students (10%) think they want to live in the UK or the USA. This statement comes last in the rank order indicating that for students this is not a very attainable prospect.

#### *Attitudes to cultural content and perceived needs*

The results on students' attitudes towards the content of EFL courses and their perceived needs are summarised in Table 2. The questionnaire, besides the categories 'sufficient' and 'more needed', contains a third one, 'too much'. This does not appear in the table because there were only 4 responses in this category. Without exception, the responses are given by intermediate students to indicate that they feel their personal life and interest receive too much focus in EFL classes. The 4 responses are counted as 'sufficient' for the sake of simplicity.

**Table 2.** Students' attitudes to cultural content of EFL courses and perceived needs

	<i>Cultural content, %</i>	<b>Sufficient</b>			<b>More needed</b>		
		<i>Total</i>	<i>Beg</i>	<i>Int</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Beg</i>	<i>Int</i>
<b>Target culture contexts</b>	1 Adjusting to pragmatic norms of communication	80	71	86	20	29	14
	2 Life of British/American people	54	43	62	46	57	38
	5 Politics, economy, society in the UK/USA	20	19	20	80	81	80
	8 British/American literature, music, film, etc.	66	76	59	34	24	41
	Altogether	55	54	57	45	46	43
<b>Cross-cultural</b>	4 Comparing lives of people of different nationalities	52	38	62	48	62	38
	7 Comparing politics, economy and society in different countries	30	10	45	70	90	55
	10 Comparing literature, music, film, etc. of different nationalities	54	57	52	46	43	48
	Altogether	45	35	53	55	65	47
<b>Contexts familiar to students</b>	3 Life of Hungarian people	64	76	55	36	24	45
	6 Politics, economy, society in Hungary	28	10	41	72	90	59
	9 Hungarian literature, music, film, etc.	54	48	59	46	52	41
	11 Field of study	80	67	90	20	33	10
	12 Students' personal lives and interests	78	90	69	22	10	31
	Altogether	61	58	63	39	42	37

(*Beg*=beginner and elementary, *Int*=pre-intermediate and intermediate).

The overall results show that there is no general agreement among students either in connection with the attitudes towards course content or their perceived needs. In many cases, the percentage numbers vary between 40 and 60. A possible explanation may be that respondents have different EFL teachers and, naturally, the extent of focus given to the listed elements varies even if the same course books are used. Another possibility is that students themselves evaluate course content differently and their needs can be diverse according to aims and areas of interest. Nevertheless, a further research project could provide us with a more definite answer.

In general, over half of the respondents (55%) are satisfied with the amount of attention given to the target culture contexts, and somewhat more than 60% are also happy with the attention given to familiar contexts. 'Cross-cultural contexts' is the only category where over half of the responses imply that students would like to deal more with issues of this kind. Below, I will highlight results in each category where the percentage is above 60.

#### *Attitudes to content:*

As for target culture contexts, it is with the attention given to pragmatic aspects of language that students are satisfied the most (80%). Over 60% of the respondents (66%) also feel that sufficient amount of time is spent on the target culture in the aesthetic sense. No cross-cultural context receives over 60 percent from the point of view of student satisfaction. In the third category, however, three out of the five contexts are given over 60% of the votes. These are in rank order: field of study (80%), students' personal lives and interests (78%), and life of Hungarian people (64%). Students indicated in Section 2 of the questionnaire that they needed English so that they can follow the developments in their field of study, which seems to correspond strongly with the EFL teachers' aims and hence the course content.

From the point of view of language teaching, it is reassuring that there is a considerable number of cultural contexts where students feel they receive a sufficient amount of information and instruction. The question remains, however, and I will return to it in the concluding remarks, what to do with contexts where the student population is seemingly divided into two groups, with approximately half of the learners agreeing with the cultural content, and approximately half of them feeling that they would require more. Also, it is important to emphasise again that they do not want less focus on any of the contexts.

#### *Perceived needs:*

There is only one context throughout the three categories, which should be given more attention according to the students. This is the political, economic and social issues. Regardless of whether these issues relate to English speaking countries, Hungary or various countries in the world, students seem to be open to them and express a need to spend time on relevant topics in the EFL classroom. It is interesting that a feeling of lack from this point of view is more obvious in the case of beginner and

elementary students (81% relating to the target culture, and 90% relating to both cross-cultural comparisons and Hungarian culture). This may well be that such issues are not discussed during the EFL classes at all due to the low level of the students' proficiency. In the case of intermediate students, it is only the relevant issues focusing on the UK and the USA where the needs receive a rather high percentage (80%). It remains a question what focus is given to such issues at this level, if at all.

The following answers can be given to our research questions on the basis of the results:

What is the attitude of students towards the status of English? From their personal points of view, the majority of students learn English because of reasons that point towards the international functions of the language. Students are aware of the utilitarian ways English can help their career improvements and well-being in life. At the same time, students regard first language varieties of English as norms of reference and more than half of them express their wish to acquire native-like proficiency in time. It needs to be emphasized, however, that students look at English mainly as a means of international communication.

What is the attitude of students towards the cultural elements of EFL courses? On the basis of the results, it is not possible to give a definite answer to this question because students' attitudes differ considerably. Still, we can state that there are two categories of culture where students are mostly satisfied with the amount of focus these areas receive (culture in the pragmatic sense and in the aesthetic sense). An important result is that students hardly express the need to focus less on any of the cultural contexts. To summarise, it seems that most students are satisfied with a considerable amount of the cultural content of EFL instruction.

What cultural content is needed as perceived by students? Again, it is not possible to give a straightforward answer to the question for the same reasons as above. It is possible to state, however, that students seem to be more satisfied with the cultural content of their EFL courses than not. There is only one category of culture where they experience a lack (culture in the sociological sense). This lack does not relate to any specific context, the results are similar in the case of target culture, cross-cultural issues and familiar contexts as well. Furthermore, almost three fifths of the students would like more focus on cross-cultural issues. This suggests that students would need to spend more time on the comparison of different cultures.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper, the author have investigated attitudes to the cultural content of EFL courses. In the literature, different and often opposing views can be found on the relationship between culture and language teaching. The literature review in the first part of the paper raises a number of questions, and the second part aims at testing, in the form of a survey, what EFL students' attitudes are to these questions.

The results indicate that students strongly associate the learning of English with adjusting to first language norms of reference. This is not a surprising result, such a view has very deep roots in the society in Hungary, Europe and elsewhere. Although students feel that it is the native speakers who own English, they appear to be conscious about the international functions of the language. They claim that they will probably use English mainly for such purposes.

While students associate English with its first language speakers, they do not feel that a language course should focus entirely on target culture-related contexts. The EFL teachers are probably of similar opinion because EFL courses focus, to some extent, on cross-cultural contexts and on other areas that are familiar to the students, including the culture of Hungary. However, there seems to be some disagreement between students and their teachers as to how much focus should be given to different contexts. One possible reason for this may be that there is a mismatch between teachers' aims and students' perceived needs. Some discussions between the two parties could probably help to bridge this apparent gap.

The literature expresses a concern about the alienating effects of target culture-centred ELT. Some fear that it alienates learners either from the target language or from their own language and culture. Students do not seem to be aware of these concerns, they are happy to deal with issues relating to both the target and their native culture as well as to cross-cultural issues. What happens outside the classroom, however, is an entirely different issue, and there are many sources of cultural influence, which are beyond the reach of the language instruction.

The description of English as an international language for pedagogical purposes does not exist to date. This is despite excellent attempts to develop taxonomy of EIL (see Jenkins, 2000). When EIL course books are available they will surely be used in many ELT contexts. What exists at present is a growing awareness that it is necessary for ELT to give attention to cross-cultural issues. It is the general aim of education to foster learners' personal and

intellectual growth and to improve the quality of student experience. It is a task of ELT to pursue this aim by drawing students' attention to cultural diversity thus enhancing tolerance, understanding and cooperation between people with different cultural backgrounds. This awareness is present, to a varying extent, in academia as well as among the participants of the teaching and learning process.

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## Kultūros ir anglų kalbos mokymo ryšys

Santrauka

Literatūroje pateikiamos dvi plačiai paplitusios skirtingos nuomonės apie kultūros ir anglų kalbos mokymo (AKM) santykį. Vieni teigia, kad kultūra ir kalba yra neatskiriamos, todėl anglų kalbos negalima mokyti atskirai nuo kultūros (ar vienos iš kultūrų, kurioje ta kalba kalbama). Kiti mano, kad mokant anglų kalbos, nereikia atsižvelgti į jos kultūrinį kontekstą. Dažnai siūloma vietoj konkrečios kultūros konteksto, mokant anglų kalbos, naudotis besimokantiejiems pažįstamais kultūriniais kontekstais. Turint galvoje nuomonių priešybę, straipsnyje pateikiamos studentų nuomonės nustatytos specialiu tyrimu, universiteto koledže Vengrijoje. Tyrimo tikslas - išsiaiškinti respondentų nuomonę apie kultūros elementų reikalingumą mokantis anglų kalbos.

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## APPENDIXES

### Questionnaire

#### Section 1: Personal Information

1. How old are you?
2. Did you study English before starting your studies at the College?
3. How long have you been learning English up to now?
4. What is the level of the English course you attend?
5. Section 2: Attitudes to English

*Which statements do you agree with? Please put a tick (✓).*

- 1 I want to speak English like native speakers do.
- 2 I want to speak English well enough to communicate effectively.
- 3 I want to speak English well enough to pass the language exam.
- 4 I want to speak the British version of English.
- 5 I want to speak the American version of English.
- 6 I do not want to speak the British or the American version.

Agree	Disagree	I don't know

*It is important for me to learn English because*

- 7 It creates prestige if I speak like the British or the Americans.
- 8 I can succeed with it everywhere around the world.
- 9 I would like to live in Britain/the USA.
- 10 It helps me to find a good job.
- 11 Native speakers accept me better if I speak their language.
- 12 I can follow the international development of my profession.


#### Section 3: Attitudes to course content and perceived needs

*Compared to your needs, what focus do the following areas receive during your English lessons? Please put a tick (✓).*

- 1 Knowing how to behave in different situations (e.g. norms of politeness, rules of writing a letter, etc.)
- 2 Life of British/American people
- 3 Life of Hungarian people
- 4 Comparing life of people in different countries
- 5 Politics, economy and society in the UK/USA
- 6 Politics, economy, and society in Hungary
- 7 Political, economic and social comparisons of different countries
- 8 British/American literature, music, films, etc.
- 9 Hungarian literature, music, films, etc.
- 10 Comparing literature, music, films in different countries
- 11 Topics related to my field of study
- 12 My life, family, friends and interests

Too much	Sufficient	Need more

