Integrating Citizen Education into English Language Courses for University Students

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Introduction

This paper presents an experiment carried out at the New Bulgarian University (NBU) seeking to explore whether integrating citizenship education into the teaching of English can increase the motivation of the students and improve their language proficiency. The presentation here focuses on the benefits for Citizen Education from the activities and the methodology. Firstly, the rationale for the course is outlined; secondly, the course is evaluated on the basis of the European Citizenship Education Matrix (ECEM); finally, feedback from the learners is explored.

The rationale – why citizen education?

Language teaching is always about something. Medges (1998, p.25) divides the content of language lessons into two categories: 'content carrier' - which exemplifies and stimulates active language use, as opposed to the 'content proper' – the purely linguistic issues to be taught about a foreign language. Courses in general English use as their 'content carrier' everyday and curiosity topics. Academic English with broad focus (Flowerdew and Peacock 2001, p.14) – lacking orientation to a specific subject – picks topics from various sciences. However, it is a moot point whether the content is transparent enough for the students to practice their skills on. Additionally, it is the policy of the NBU during the first two years to give the students a broad introduction into academia and the arts, rather than narrow down on a specific field. Therefore, the content-carrier for classes in Academic English needs to be non-specialised and sufficiently transparent for the students.

It is known that at high school learners develop an aversion to topics re-appearing in general English courses, as too trivial (Ministerial Action Group on Languages, quoted by Starkey 2005, p. 35) A few comments from my own practice of University lecturer illustrate this point: "I hate happiness! Ever since I started learning English we have discussed it at least twice a year", "The more we discuss my ideal house, the more I discourage I'll ever get to build it", "Please do not entertain me at English classes, I have come to learn and not to play games". Moreover, most of the popular courses have been taught to the students either at high school, or at one of

the numerous private schools – where every student in Bulgaria has taken at least one course by the time they come to University.

Furthermore, my needs analysis revealed that what students suffer most from is a culture shock from the contact with the specific institutional culture of a university, as different from the culture of the high school. Critical incidents told by students show a lack of orientation on the premises, inability to communicate with University staff, misunderstanding of the value systems at work at the NBU etc.

Therefore, an acculturation course was designed to help students adapt to the new environment by developing their intercultural competence. This is where intercultural training meets language teaching and becomes the content carrier for learning English. The foreign language, for its part, is seen as the step back from the picture of a basically native environment – a Bulgarian University – thus allowing a critical distance to better perceive the cultural practices and values.

Along with courses in ethnography and culture-specific rhetoric, the intercultural complex includes a course in the British media, expected to sharpen the cultural sensitivities of the students and their analytical skills for critical assessment of reality. In line with the educational strategies of Universities, the component needs to be 'intercultural education' rather than 'training', therefore the cognitive component has to be strengthened and the strategies have to be developed in an informed way.

A content-carrier with intercultural impact and a strong cognitive component appears to be the picture of world events as depicted by British newspapers. Getting to know the world, and thereby developing skills to understand and engage with topical issues forms part of Citizen Education. Its conceptual framework was instrumental in organizing the teaching of the language at University level with impact on the cognitive, academic and Citizen capabilities.

Language and Citizenship

The NBU has adopted the Common Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) as a guideline for language assessment. Therefore the course had to adopt its objectives in terms of the language competence. CEF proposes a broad definition of language use and learning, including general competences, communicative language competences, understanding of the specifics of the contexts of language use, as well as general cognitive capabilities. (CE 2001:9). Consequently, it is convenient to define the broad target competence as the knowledge, skills and attitudes, allowing the students to follow the news as presented by the British media.

The intercultural skills formulated in the CEF include:

- the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
- cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies to contact with those from other cultures;
- the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations;
- the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships. (CE 2001, p.104)

All of these skills feature in the course described here. The media bring into contact not only target and source cultures, but a wide range of cultures covered in the news. Cultural sensitivity is fostered by recognizing the mediating role of newspapers – they are not a mirror, but project values and agendas which need to be understood in order to get the most out of the information in the newspapers. Recognising the mediating role of newspapers is also meant to serve as a model for any mediation – informed by specific outlooks, aimed at a selected target audience, and geared to incite particular attitudes. As for stereotypes, newspapers are often agents of stereotyped presentations. However, critical reading allows stereotypes to be tackled by analysing and contextualising their use. Additionally, the situation in Bulgaria does not yet allow much international travel, so the media remain a major source of direct contact with other cultures.

With regard to ingraining specific learning issues – much needed to avoid the problem of trivial topics – Byram's (1997) concept of critical cultural awareness (CCA) was evoked in designing the course. CCA presents an ability to engage with social reality, as its French title suggests - *savoir s'engager*. The competence is based on cognitive, evaluative and action-oriented criteria. Byram's definition is: 'the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, particular perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries'. Such an objective is clearly defined and lends itself to transparent evaluation, at the same time suggesting a methodology for developing the skill.

The students in the Media course described here were asked to evaluate the media representation of events on the basis of the specific profiles of the respective newspapers, to compare how a left-leaning broadsheet presents an event, as different from a right-wing tabloid; to discern anti-power-block attitudes and populism; to relate the editorial policy to the prospective profile of its readership, to react to

topics such as violence and crime etc. The criteria, of course, evolve from media research (Bell, 1991)

Risager (2005) prefers to think of critical cultural awareness as a result, rather than a part of intercultural competence. With a view of teacher training, she writes: 'the development of intercultural competence ought to lead to a critical cultural awareness and a political awareness of oneself as a citizen. I would add that it ought to lead to a political awareness of oneself as a citizen of the world. This is because I feel that language teachers, by virtue of their experiences with various languages and various language areas have special opportunities to contribute to developing the global vision and involvement of their students/participants.'

It looks as if Risager is suggesting that having developed Intercultural competence (not known how), one will automatically become a citizen of the world. My course, however, approaches the issue from the reverse angle – engaging with the political agenda of the day is a guided process, the learning *per se*, through which students improve their language and intercultural competence. From the cognitive point of view, active citizenship presents a broader and more challenging subject matter than language learning, its agendas are more practical and pragmatic than these of language improvement. The skills and attitudes for active citizenship are much easier to define and teach than the fuzzier domain of intercultural communication. Moreover, expecting citizen skills and attitudes to develop of their own accord, without setting an example at least for the young people, is risky or even ill-advised.

By the time students come to the University, they are expected to have acquired knowledge of topics such as food, transport, mealtimes, customs and celebrations etc. Knowledge about the social and political organization of society, about the institutions of democracy would be a level above the day-to-day concerns and require more critical thinking and better analytical skills. Besides, they are an area where high school, at least theoretically, is expected to have developed elementary knowledge with a view of the home culture. The course in media was expected to bring a comparative focus with a range of new cultures.

It was also important that the delivery mode reflected the principles of intercultural and political education. To that purpose, most of the activities were designed as group activities, special tasks involved collective fora for discussing issues and arriving at collective decisions. Time was allotted for every student to voice their opinion on the issues.

So a synopsis of the course objectives is: it adopts a broad understanding of language competence, combining knowledge about society, communication and language, language and intercultural skills, as well as engrained know-how about sustainable learning. The scope of knowledge from previous language learning experiences is 'promoted' to the domain of societal organization, the role of media and other democratic institutions, topical political events and their coverage. The target skills are of analytical nature – to discern bias while deriving information from a document – as well as practical skills such as negotiating a common view, working collectively, sharing with a wider student community.

Description of the course

The course was run three times – as a summer course in 2005, as a regular course in the 2006 spring semester at the NBU and as an in-service training for Officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sofia. In each case it was advertised as an experimental language course for learners with some knowledge of English. It so happened that mostly people with high language competence (B2 and above) volunteered for the course. Nevertheless, they all confessed that they had difficulties with the genre.

The lessons firstly introduce a methodology of analyzing media texts, then time is given to the learners to apply it on their own on news items, using the web pages of British newspapers. Each session exploits the news on the specific day, so the topics follow the agenda of the events in society. The analytical models include activities familiar from media studies, as well as my own creations:

- 'unpacking' headlines – making simple sentences with all the words in the headline;
- matching the abstracts (the first sentence summarizing the article) to the respective headline;
- arranging the stories in order of significance – which story is likely to be under the masthead and which ones would follow;
- comparing the coverage of the same event in different newspapers;
- analysing the illustrations to the respective stories;
- creating a digest of the press etc.

What follows is an evaluation of the contributions to global citizenship education of the course. As a benchmark, I employ the Citizen education matrix (T-Kit for European Citizenship: 64-65).

Evaluation

The course materials are the news of the day as reported by the British media. Therefore this fulfils the criterion for *knowledge of current affairs*. Additionally, the news items often acquaint with *specific features of the life in EU countries and the world.* The learning potential includes concepts such as *backbenchers, NHS, OAP,* collocations and specific jargon, such as *rule out*, *account for, in the shadow of, to be charged with, in a bid to secure approval, root out*, *draw to close* etc. An interesting observation from the course is that jargon connected with civil society, such as: *whistleblower*, *watchdog*, *grass root*, etc does not have direct equivalent in Bulgarian. The absence is indicative that in Bulgaria such practices are unknown, therefore no referring terms have been coined yet. The introduction of the terms in English through language classes may be considered a step towards adopting the social practices in our conceptual framework and in life.

What has been more interesting, was the potential for *comparison with home issues.* Generally, similarities evoked surprise while differences appeared the rule at the beginning. This was considered a sign that attitudes of isolation and rejection of common ground prevailed. Towards the end of the course, however, things gradually slipped into expectation of similarity rather than difference. Students were initially surprised to read that pensioners in the UK also have the problem of low pensions, like those in Bulgaria. Later on, when trying to guess the meaning of the word 'hike', they concluded: "the prices of gas are going up in Bulgaria, the same must be the situation in England, so 'hike' would mean 'increase'." It is early days to believe that integrative attitudes are settling in, although such discussions might be a step in this direction.

Comparisons of social practices were most welcome: abortion pills – unavailable in Bulgaria, the pairing system in Parliamentary votes, the protocol for receiving presents by civil servants etc. Learning about such practices was perceived as a useful extension of life experience but more significantly – they added to the evaluative mechanisms of events in reality. For instance, the Bulgarian press is full of articles criticizing the local MPs for their constant absences from Parliament sessions. A review of the pairing system in English Parliament in connection with an article incited discussion informed by knowledge and a true comparative criterion.

A comparison between the diplomats and the students reveals that different topics were of interest for each group. While the diplomats spent hours discussing the difference between 'bail' and 'parole', the students passed on the matter as a mere oddity; conversely, the students spent a long time on A-levels, Bach and other degrees, while the Foreign Officers were uninterested.

The type of *knowledge about the target culture* brought with media texts is even more valuable because it comes along with the public attitudes to certain behaviours: "So the British are outraged that the demoted minister plays croquet in a governmental estate!" (a reaction to 'Backbenchers in open revolt over Prescott' in the Times of 29.05. 2006),"What is wrong with political parties treated as charities?"(reaction to 'Labour wants political parties treated as charities, complete with tax relief' Independent 25.05.2006) etc. I encouraged discussion and comparison, trying to maintain explicit criteria to prevent stereotyping.

The course emphasized the *anti-violence attitudes* of the students. The following slides come from a student presentation showing how the news items were ranked in significance by the newspaper. Those written in capitals are choices of the newspaper which coincide with the students' choices:

Plate 1. Students' ranking of the news in The Daily Mail on 26.07.2005

As can be seen, students agree that preventing violence should be a priority, as well as preserving nature. This has been a stable tendency for the two student groups. The diplomats, for their part, always gave precedence to political issues. An interesting subject for a detailed study would be to elicit whether students go for green and anti-violence topics as a rejection of party-political issues, or for some ethical reasons.

I found the news-ranking activities particularly stimulating for the expression of personal opinion. By the third run of the ranking activities - the news in a newspaper in jumbled order to be arranged in order of significance - students realized that no matter how strictly they try to adhere to Galung and Ruge's criteria

(1965) and to the paper profiles, they never achieved the arrangement of the actual paper. So it was a challenge to put forward a personal arrangement reflecting the students' own views, rather than trying to achieve the original. Even students reluctant to engage with political issues were prolific in these activities.

The comparison of the coverage of the same event by different newspapers contributed to the development of a number of skills and attitudes, proposed with the European citizenship Education Matrix. Mainly, and most significantly, it contributed to the skills for *change management* – analytical skills, critical and argumentative thinking, evaluation. For instance, comparing the coverage of Bush's slip-up at the G8 summit in the Telegraph, Guardian and Independent, the Foreign Officers initially said that 'It is basically the same thing'. When prompted to analyse the positive and negative elements in each abstract and headline, they immediately discovered that the Guardian focuses on the positive - Blair is even credited for discovering the open microphone, while the Telegraph and The Independent pile up negatives.

'Yo, Blair, how are you doing?' - overheard chat reveals the real special relationship
During a quiet moment at the G8 summit yesterday, Tony Blair and George Bush swapped candid views on the Middle East. Only after several minutes did Mr Blair realise that a microphone had been left on – ***Guardian 18.07.2006***

Slip-up reveals Bush and Blair's gossip secrets
The recording will be seized on eagerly by the leaders' critics, who have long argued that Mr Blair is over-keen to please Washington and that Mr Bush sees the world in rather simple terms. – ***Telegraph 18.07.2006***

'Yo, Blair' overheard at the G8: the truth about our special relationship
Capping a miserable G8 summit for Tony Blair, President George Bush has spurned an offer from the Prime Minister to go to the Middle East as a peacemaker, after deciding that he would rather send the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice. – ***Independent 18.07.2006***

Argumentative techniques were widely exploited while comparing coverage. The application of critical skills lead students to generalize that broadsheets tend to report facts, while the tabloids – emotions:

Emotional focus	Factual focus
Blair exclusive: I refuse to fold (Mirror 8.05.2006)	**Left's 'plot' to oust Blair** (Times 8.05.2006)
PM: I'll crush rebels (Sun8.05.2006**)**	**Labour at war over plot to oust Blair** (Telegraph8.05.2006)

While the Sun and the Mirror prefer to stir feelings in a graphic, action-like plot: crushing rebels, refusing to fold, the Telegraph and the Independent pack the headlines with facts: the left are organizing a plot, they are fighting among themselves, plans have been made to oust their leader. This is a good example how rhetoric analysis and citizen education 'feed' each other.

Analytical skills and Citizen education

The following piece of evidence reveals that students show *empathy for those suffering,* while at the same time are unfairly critical of public officials. Asked to write captions to pictures illustrating the stories about ways to finance the Palestine bypassing the Hamas (Plate 2 below), the students wrote compassionate captions for the pictures showing victims of violence and accusations towards those showing Kofi Anan, Condoleeza Rice and Margaret Becket, although the pictures give no such indications. Examples: 'all the child needs is a chair', 'people dying in the streets', 'a baby is born but will it live?' as opposed to: 'they don't care', 'another useless press conference', 'Can you expect support from them?'. Only two students identified the political figures as part of the solution. The Foreign Officers, for their part, do not show such a tendency. Respect for democratic institutions is a must for educated citizens, while my students, regrettably, appear to have little of that. It is probably the anti-power-block tendency in Media which can affect such attitudes negatively.
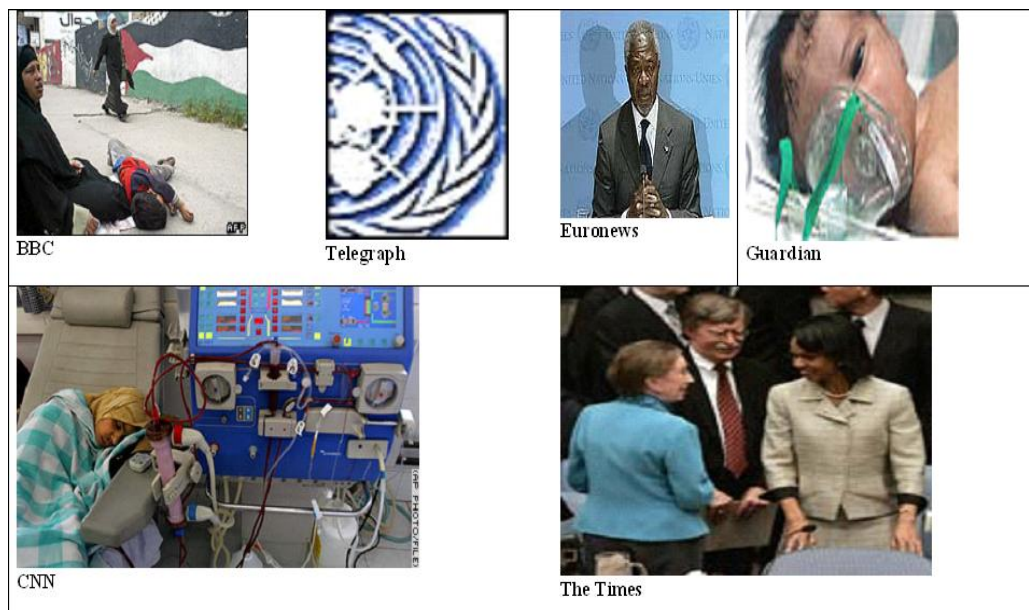

Plate 2. Illustration to 'Help for the Palestine' stories from different media on 10.05.2006.

An important component of Citizen Education is awareness of *representation.* Under this heading, the European Citizenship Matrix lists positive skills, such as self-organisation, lobbying, presentation skills, political and social autonomy. I found it useful to emphasize the constructed nature of representations: something is presented as good or bad in the media from a particular point and with a particular purpose. Therefore, students were encouraged to expose media practices which do not always conform to the rule of active citizenship. In an exercise, asking students to write a caption to the picture below (plate 3), the comparison with the actual caption in the Telegraph (28.07.2005) was identified as creating a dangerous stereotype that Muslims are the enemy:

Plate 3. Enemy at the door ... al-Muhajiroun propaganda

The image of Bulgaria in the British media was perceived as generally unfair on the basis of analysis of the texts. The only story about Bulgaria which made the headlines during the summer course was about a British football fan who attacked a Bulgarian barman in Varna. The specific modality in the report 'His jail, in the Black Sea resort of Varna, is overcrowded with up to 20 inmates a cell.' ('15 Years For Crime He Didn't Commit' Mirror 27.07.2005) was classified as manipulative because TV reports showed that in fact there were no other prisoners in Shield's cell.

From subtly negative references, such as

'Romania's case is separate. Hitherto rightly bracketed with Bulgaria as a laggard that failed to make the grade for the last wave of enlargement in

2004, it has moved fast since then towards key membership criteria'('Time to Pause' in Times 12.05.2006) ,

to sweeping negative statements, such as:

'On the western shore of the Black Sea there is a picturesque country of eight million souls where contract killings are common, corruption is endemic and heroin from Afghanistan moves virtually unimpeded towards lucrative markets further north.' (*ibid.*)

Such representations contribute as a negative example of the *ability to articulate one's values without causing oppression to others,* formulated in the European Citizenship Education Matrix. They certainly do not appear to reinforce feelings of empathy with a community.

Quite interestingly, **human rights** came up as a subject only once throughout the three courses. Several papers were criticizing a British court for letting free an offender who claimed that his rights had been violated by the imprisonment, but once out, he re-offended again. The students' feeling for justice would not allow them to place an offender's human rights above the security of the public. However, the populist stance of the article did not call for any serious discussion of the matter. Further to this research, it may be of interest to establish how often the media write about human rights as such and what attitudes they foster.

As for the skills in the Matrix, the course used the web-pages of British newspapers, which gave two types of information to students – where to *find information* and current language use, and how to *use technology* such as the Internet. So we can conclude that the course developed the whole gamut of the Global Citizenship Competences as defined by the CE.

The Student Voices

The outcomes of the courses were evaluated only inasmuch as the language competence was concerned because these were the institutional parameters of the experiment – to find out whether Citizenship education could make the content carrier for successful language courses. The increase of language proficiency was great – by more than 10 per cent – which leads to the conclusion that Citizenship education is an excellent content carrier for language learning. The brief analysis above also reveals how closely linked the two competences are.

The course appreciation documents reveal the students' attitudes to the subject matter.

The following presentation (plate 4) was made by the students in the 1st summer course to show their appreciation of the course:
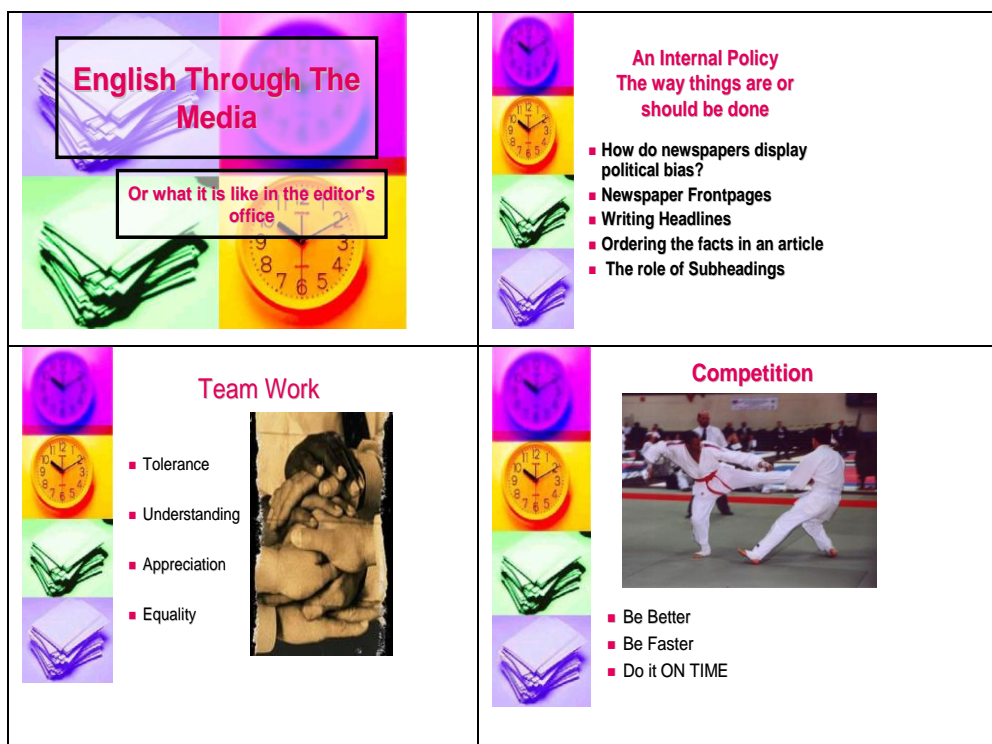

Plate 4. Students' Appreciation of the course in Media

A critical analysis of this presentation reveals the following points: The images of paper and clocks in the first slide suggest working against the time. The students did complain that they needed more time – but one of the messages of working with media is precisely this: time flies! The students seem to have gathered this message, as slide four suggests. The gloss of the title of the course – *what is it like in the editor's office* - suggests that the students found the course practically oriented. The grading of the skills in the second slide shows an exclusive orientation to the critical ones – the cline starts from the skill requiring the greatest amount of critical analysis and ends with the least problematic. Obviously several target skills are missing but the fact that these have been the salient ones reflects the orientations of the students, possibly confirming the need for more challenging tasks in the classroom. The third slide enumerates all the affective components, proposed by the CE for global education, presumably developed as a result of the course. Teamwork features as a major source of learning, even when it leads to competition, as

illustrated in the 4th slide. Generally, the students reacted very positively to the methodology of collaboration.

In terms of the cognitive components of citizenship, this presentation reveals that the students have learned:

- how the media work;
- to cope with representations;
- to deal with conflicts (among the group) in non-violent ways;
- about social roles, to understand different needs;
- a passionate and determined attitude to tasks (the course, in this case)

The students were also interviewed about their appreciation of the course. The closed questionnaire was administered by a different teacher than the one responsible for the course and the results were announced before the language tests were marked. To the statement: I appreciated the course because I found this component useful/useless etc., the students ranked the usefulness of the course components as shown in the graph below (Plate 5):
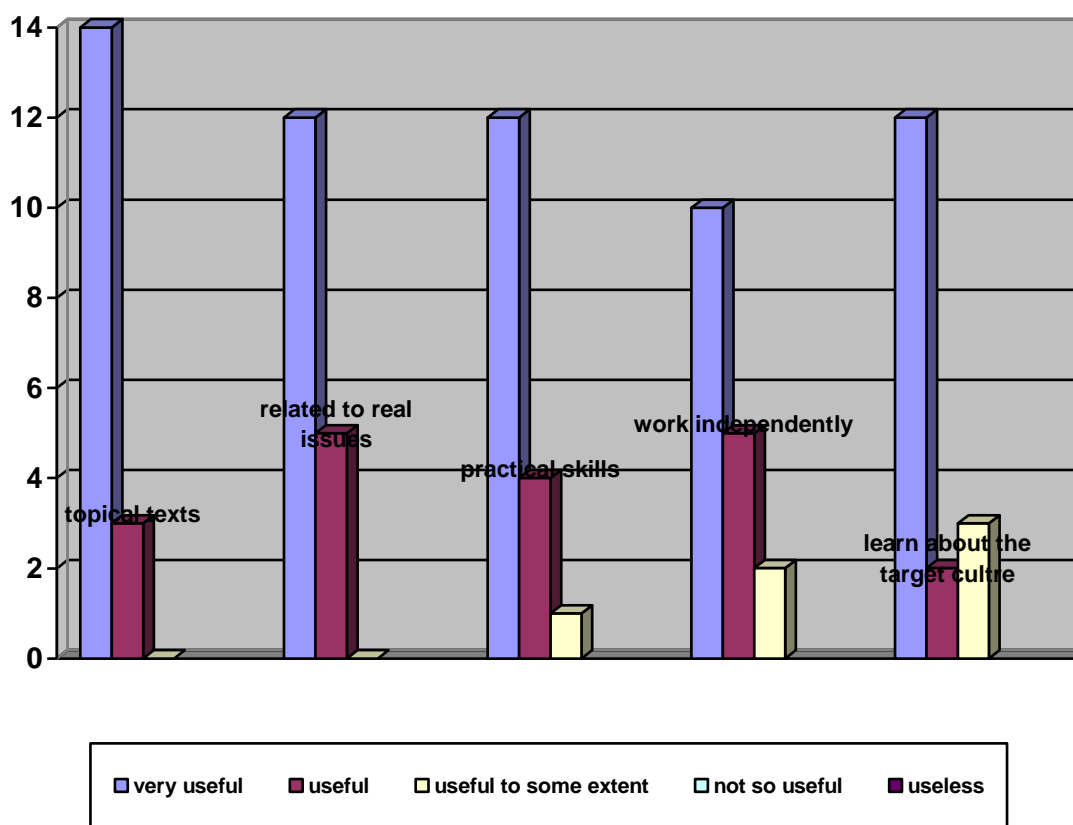
Plate 5. Post course Questionnaire.

Most students found all the components of the course useful. The negative denominators are never used. The greatest merit of the course, however, was the use of modern, topical texts, as the absolute number of respondents choosing this component was the greatest and the opinions that it has been less useful are fewest. Almost equally satisfied were the students because the materials were related to real life and because they learned about the target culture. Culture learning, for its part, appears to split opinions – relatively more students opted for the denominator 'useful to some extent'. A volunteered explanation was a comparison to the course in Cultural Studies where the range of topics was greater and more varied. It may be tentatively suggested that learning about culture would set off different aspects of Citizen Education, than language learning.

The evidence of satisfaction is corroborated by the attendance. 41% attended all the classes, 47% missed one or two classes. Given that attendance is not obligatory at the NBU, and many students prefer to follow the lectures from the electronic platforms of the university, this is no mean achievement.

Conclusions

It would seem as if learning English through the medium of the British media motivated the students, helped improve their language skills and made a step towards developing citizenship skills by:

- keeping students informed about current events
- developing critical thinking skills
- providing information about the target society, including information about attitudes to certain phenomena
- developing their understanding of civil society and its institutions
- instilling attitudes of tolerance to otherness.

This is done using collaborative learning, active involvement and mutual respect. More options need to be explored in terms of employing Citizen Education concepts, such as Human Rights, Forms of Citizen participation in society, comparing the content of terms associated with active citizenships in different languages etc.

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