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# **Culture in the EFL classroom**

which cultures dominate the classroom?

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**Title: Culture in the EFL classroom - which cultures dominate the classroom?**

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**Abstract:** In this essay a number of English teachers at upper-secondary level in Sweden have responded to questions concerning the concept of *culture* from mainly two points of view. Firstly, this essay analyses which topics the teachers prioritise and what their attitudes are towards teaching culture within the subject of English. Secondly, the aim is also to analyse which kind of culture is taught in the classroom. The phrase "*...which kind of culture*" concerns the type of culture and where the culture stems from. *Culture* is a vague concept, therefore a specific and applicable cultural model was adopted. According to the cultural model by Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990:3-10) culture is divided into four categories: Aesthetic culture such as literature, poetry and music, sociological culture such as leisure time, history and family, semantic culture which contains certain words and expressions that are specific for the country and pragmatic culture which contains words and phrases that are necessary for everyday conversations. The results of this small study show that most teachers prioritised the communicative skills such as listening, speaking and learning vocabulary higher than culture. The general attitude towards the importance of teaching culture among the respondents was found to be "*Rather important*". As to the second question, it was found that most teachers have a sociological and pragmatic sense of teaching culture. In addition, the teachers found it important to address many English-speaking countries and therefore contradicts some of the previous research, in which it was stated that there is dominance of British and American culture in the classroom. In conclusion, teaching culture can be a great tool in order to motivate the students. Furthermore, it might also broaden their horizons in the sense that they learn the connection between the English-speaking countries.

**Keywords:** Culture pedagogy, English as a Foreign Language, syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7, target language culture

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. What is culture?

Some people claim that humans essentially have two sides, a cultural and a biological one. This is also what many claim to be the main distinction between humans and animals. Both humans and animals are biological beings, however, only humans have culture. Human culture is a very broad subject of study and includes many aspects of society. Within the field of anthropology, in 19th century Europe, culture was defined in a very broad sense as can be seen in the quote below.

Culture or civilisation, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

(Tylor, 1874: Chapter 1)

In the definition above culture is defined as human civilisation which means that besides from "art", "morals", "custom" and anything else made and acquired by man in a society, should be seen as a form of culture. Since culture is acquired by the human, the educational system has a major part in creating as well as preserving the cultural values of a society. Needless to say, human civilisation has undergone great changes since the time of Tylor. Recent discussions concerning culture evolve around how a country's culture should be defined in our increasingly global society, in which people are more mobile than ever before. Some of the most prominent aspects of culture in the globalised world are for example monoculture, where immigrants should adapt to the host country's culture or in a multicultural society, where the different national groups should be able to preserve their own culture and coexist with the natives of the country.

In Sweden most people go to school from the age of six or seven until they are eighteen or nineteen years old. During this period, among other things they are supposed to be socialised i.e. learn how to function in a multicultural society and thus be able to interact and show tolerance towards people from other cultures. Secondly, school should also prepare the students for the job-market and lifelong learning. In the syllabi (Skolverket, English 5, 6 and

7) for English at Upper-secondary level in Sweden, one can see that apart from linguistic knowledge such as reading, writing and listening, the students should be familiar with a wide variety of English-speaking cultures. The Swedish syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 are not particularly specific concerning which kind of cultural topics the teacher should address. This freedom of choice given to the teachers, enables them to implement their own ideas about culture in their teaching. However, since the syllabi are vague, it might also create problems since the concept of *English-speaking cultures* is a vast area of study.

## **1.2. Structure of the essay**

In section one, the theoretical models will be introduced. This will include a broad definition of culture and a more narrow cultural model adapted to educational research. The concept of *English-speaking cultures* will also be explained more in-depth as well as the definition of culture found in the syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 at Swedish upper-secondary level. Finally, a brief overview regarding research about culture in the foreign language classroom and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) will be made, followed by a summary of the previous research concerning culture in an educational context. In section three, the method, in this case a questionnaire will be explained and motivated. Section four consists of the results section, where the findings from the surveys will be accounted for and discussed more in-depth. Section five is the conclusion, where the results will be summarised and compared with some of the studies from the previous research section.

### 1.3. Defining *culture* as a concept in an educational context

*"Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language"*  
(Williams 1983:87)

The famous academic and novelist Raymond Williams struggled with the definition of *culture* as can be seen in quote above. Why is the concept of *culture* so hard to define? Words that can be described and defined easily are often concrete like book, bird or cup. There are also so-called abstract words which denote words you cannot physically touch like democracy, hate and culture. The abstract words are more complex than the concrete ones, as a consequence it is rather difficult to find one single suitable definition and the concept of *culture* is no exception. Culture can be defined in a broad way as in the quote below.

As to the notion of "culture" itself, it should not be too specifically defined. Culture, understood as a particular view of reality as shared by a group of people, is necessarily contingent upon political, sociological, historical, and geographical categories. Therefore, one does not have to distinguish between "small cultures" and "large cultures

(Wolf and Polzenhagen 2006:295)

As the authors describe, *culture* should not be narrowly defined but seen as a political, sociological, historical and geographical discourse shared by a group of people. This definition rules out the separation of small and large cultures. Consequently, one could talk of Spanish culture as well as Spanish-youth culture in a particular region. When comparing and analysing cultures, three common categories are considered: national cultures such as Swedish or Serbian culture, international cultures like European and South-eastern European culture. Furthermore, there is also transnational culture which for example includes youth-culture or the culture of teachers (Wolf and Polzenhagen 2006:295).

Since this study concerns culture in an educational context, a model adapted to this purpose has been used. The model below will be used as a framework throughout the essay. The concept *culture* is understood through a model constructed by Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990:3-10). This particular view on culture was chosen because a more pragmatic and unambiguous definition of culture was required. Furthermore it provides the researcher with appropriate analytical tools that could be used in theory as well as in the analysis.

Culture contains four aspects

- 1) The aesthetic sense: The media, film, music and literature
- 2) The sociological sense: this a very broad area but some important aspects are for instance, the organisation and the nature of family, work, leisure, customs and institutions
- 3) The semantic sense: In this category culture is seen as a "conceptual system" which is expressed in the language. It concerns words and expressions which have cultural and historical connotations with the country. Some examples are "stiff-upper lip"<sup>1</sup> in British English (BrE) and "yellow journalism"<sup>2</sup> in American English (AmE)
- 4) The pragmatic sense: Means the teaching of necessary speech acts such as asking for information, giving directions and how to decline an invitation properly

(Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi. 1990:3-10)

Aspect (1) contains all forms of art such as dance, painting and stand-up comedy. This category could be found in a newspaper's culture section, where journalists often critique the art form. Aspect (2) is related to sociology which is the scientific study of human society. This is the most hard-defined of the four categories since "...*human society*" contains a lot of information ranging from family structure, education and social class. In aspect (3) the description is heavily influenced by semantics, which is the study of meaning in language, i.e. what words, phrases, sentences and symbols denote (Yule 1996:114). Furthermore, it is also inspired by Keesing (1974:75-76) who viewed language as a cognitive system in which there are certain behaviours such as hand gestures, common references to historical/cultural events and shared customs. The final aspect (4), is sometimes referred to as the communicative approach which elucidates the importance of how to make oneself understood in real-life situations. Thus, the focus lies more on the actual function of the language and not on the form i.e. grammar and phonology (Yule 1996:193-194).

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<sup>1</sup> "Stiff upper-lip" comes from the idiom "To keep a stiff-upper lip" which means roughly to show no emotions or fear in front of a great challenge. The expression itself was an ideal for the students in the public school system during the Victorian era.

<sup>2</sup> "Yellow journalism" is a kind of journalism that focuses on scandals and celebrities to sell as many copies as possible. A synonym is "the tabloid press."

## 1.4. English: A lingua franca

A lingua franca, which is also known as a bridge language is used to facilitate communication between two speakers who do not share a mother tongue. The term lingua franca comes from a mixed language (mainly Italian) which was used in the renaissance era around the east Mediterranean. This particular language was used for commercial and diplomatic reasons between mainly Turks, Italians, Arabs and Spaniards. There are many other more recent examples of lingua franca for instance Serbo-Croatian which is spoken in the former countries of Yugoslavia, such as Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Montenegro. However, the great difference between Serbo-Croatian and English is that the former is used as a lingua franca in one particular region i.e. The Balkans whereas English is used in many more countries situated in different continents. Another example is "Russenorsk" which constituted a linguistic bridge for Russian and Norwegian traders and fishermen in the northern part of Norway from the late 18th century up until the Russian revolution in 1917 when all trade stopped and as a consequence "Russenorsk" became extinct (Jahr 1996:107-109).

As Schneider (2011:56) states it is always problematic to estimate the number of speakers of a language. However, in order to illustrate the fact that English is a lingua franca, an estimation is relevant. In our society an estimation is that there are roughly 350-380 million native speakers of English. The number of "Competent second-language users" could be around 600 million speakers, thus exceeding the number of speakers with over 200 million speakers (Schneider 2012:56-57). Naturally, there are many more learners of English worldwide. According to Schneider (2012:56) there might be around 500 million to 1500 million "Global learners" of English. These numbers, especially the last ones should be used with precaution since they are hard to prove scientifically. In this essay, they are merely used to illustrate that English is a language with a large amount of speakers.

Why has English grown to become a lingua franca? There are mainly two reasons for this. Firstly, the dominance of The British Empire during the 18th and 19th centuries and its colonisation of many countries in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Secondly, the political, cultural and scientific influence the US has had in recent times (Svartvik 2000:12) . Apart from the reasons stated by Svartvik, modern technology such as the Internet and cellphones has increased global communication. In our society, people can communicate with each other via social media such as Twitter, Facebook and games like World of Warcraft which did not



exist ten years ago. It is not surprising that English is the most widely used language on the Internet and this fact makes English easier to access for everyone with an Internet connection.

According to Svartvik (2000:4-10) the position of English in the world can be described using three concentric circles. The inner circle represents the countries where English is a native tongue, for example the USA, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Anglophone Canada and Ireland. The outer circle contains the countries where English is important for historical reasons and where it is seen as an official language, in this category many of the ex-colonies of the British Empire can be found, for instance India, Malaysia, South Africa and Pakistan. In The expanding circle the countries where English is a foreign or lingua franca language are found. Countries that belong here are for instance, Germany, China and Japan. According to Sharifan (2009:2-3) the Englishes of the three concentric circles can be summed up with one term, namely World English. The term itself is thus not a particular accent or dialect of English, instead World English encompasses all the varieties of English, from British English to Hinglish and Englog.

According to Modiano (Sharifan 2009: 59 - 61) the so-called "native speakerism" i.e. the fact that the learner is focused on learning a standard of English, mainly British English or General American is still prevalent in the European school systems due to the hegemony of Great Britain and the USA. However, he states that teachers and other people involved in language planning in schools are becoming more aware of the fact that English needs to be seen as a global lingua franca that has many standards. Furthermore, he compares this divide in the community with the notions of prescriptivism (that there is one correct standard with regard to the language) and descriptivism (how the language is actually used by the speakers). The prescriptive method would endorse for example the RP accent as being the only correct way to pronounce English and the descriptivists would counter-attack by saying that a Hinglish accent is not less correct than RP (Sharifan 2009: 59 - 61).

## 1.5. Definition of culture in the syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7

The quote below comes from the syllabus for English as it was about 40 years ago which was valid until the launch of a new syllabus in 1994 (Lpo94).

For Swedish schools the normative pronunciation is "Received Pronunciation (RP)". Other refined British pronunciation, which the student might have acquired, is however fully acceptable. A survey is to be given about the characteristics of "General American", its pronunciation and intonation. However, the student should not be acquiring an American accent. (My translation)

(Lgy 70 1970:274)

In this quote it is made apparent that British pronunciation was favoured instead of other variations of English such as General American or Australian English. However, after some vast educational reforms made in 1994 when the new syllabi for the schools were launched, the view on the English language changed substantially. The educational reforms consisted in teaching English as an intercultural language and thus not favouring either RP or GA (Sharifan 2009:66-67). As will be demonstrated in the next section, the current syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 do not favour a certain accent or a particular target culture such as American or British culture.

The syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 follow the same basic structure: the core content of the courses contains four categories, namely: Content of communication, Reception, Production and Interaction. Thus, this structure has been inspired by a popular theory that a foreign language must be learned using the four skills of language learning which are, listening, reading, writing and speaking. In the first English course (English 5) it is stated the students should be familiar with "*Literature and other fiction*", "*Living conditions, attitudes, values and traditions as well as social, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. The spread of English and its position in the world*". Furthermore the student should also be able to "*Develop strategies for contributing to and actively participating in discussions related to societal and working life*".

In the syllabi for English 6 and 7 the cultural content is similar with some minor differences for example that "*older literature and poetry*" should be addressed as well as "*ethical and existential issues... in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used*". In these extracts from the syllabi, it is evident as stated before that they do not give any

preference to a certain target-culture, instead the culture should originate from "...parts of the world where English is used" which could be seen as variants of English from all three concentric circles, the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle. Furthermore, it also says in the syllabi that the students should be familiar with "*The spread of English and its position in the world*". An interpretation of previous quote could be that the teacher should address questions such as why English has become a lingua franca from a historical perspective and where English is spoken in the world.

In Table 1 the model by Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990:3-10) has been applied to the syllabi in order to find some examples of culture according to the four aspects of culture.

Table 1: Cultural topics from the syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 at upper-secondary level in Sweden adapted to the model by Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990:3-10).

| <b>Aesthetic</b>             | <b>Sociological</b>                       | <b>Semantic</b>                             | <b>Pragmatic</b>  |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| literature and other fiction | living conditions                         | the relationship between language and power | communication strategies in real life situations                              |
| older literature and poetry  | attitudes                                 |   | the use of words and phrases that clarify causal connections and time aspects |
| cinema                       | values                                    |   | oral and written production   |
| history of literature        | traditions                                |   |   |
| drama                        | social, political and cultural conditions |   |   |

Aesthetic culture is an essential part in the syllabi and it is clearly stated that students should be familiar with different kinds of aesthetic expressions such as cinema, drama and literature. However, the concept of literature is more multifaceted than for instance cinema, in the sense that students are required to be familiar with "older" literature as well as the history of literature.

Sociological culture, is a category which covers a wide array of cultural topics in the syllabi such as traditions which could include how and why Christmas or any other festivity is celebrated. In this category, "*social, political and cultural conditions*" are also included which covers three broad areas of contemporary society. Semantic culture is perhaps the smallest category in the syllabi. However, it appears in the syllabi at least one time, where it is stated

that the student should be familiar with *"the relationship between language and power"*. This statement could be interpreted in many ways by the teacher, it could for instance be the case that the teacher could analyse political speeches and their references to social and historical events. As a consequence, the student would acquire semantic cultural knowledge through the use of words and expressions.

The syllabi are permeated by the notion that language is learned from real-life situations. This is illustrated in the general purposes of English, where it is stated that *"The students should be given an opportunity to use the language in functional and meaningful contexts and develop versatile abilities to communicate"* (My translation)

In the quote above the forms of language such as grammar, syntax and phonology are not mentioned. Instead a pragmatic and communicative approach is used, where the student should develop versatile communicative strategies which should be used in relevant and meaningful contexts.

## **1.6. Aim and scope**

This essay addresses two main questions: How is culture prioritised as a subject within English, in comparison with more linguistic topics such as reading, writing and speaking. Furthermore, the aim is also to grasp teachers' general attitudes towards teaching culture within the subject of English. The second question is which kind of culture that is taught in the classrooms? In order to answer the second questions, the cultural type needs to be established and which country/countries the culture(s) stem(s) from.

As this is a small case study, consisting of two upper-secondary schools, one cannot generalise to a national level. However, hopefully it will give the reader some insight into teachers' attitudes towards culture and the kind of culture that is taught in the classrooms.

In addition, this essay might reveal cultural values found in the syllabi.

## **2. Previous research of culture in the foreign language classroom**

### **2.1. Culture pedagogy**

For a long time Culture pedagogy has been a neglected subject of study in the academic world. However, in recent times culture in foreign language (FL) teaching and in particular English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching has attracted the attention of the academic world (Byram and Feng 2004:149). One of the reasons for this development is that the world has changed rapidly over the last 40 years. Our cultures are more intertwined than ever before and thus less isolated on account of the popularity of the Internet and travelling.

A foreign language teacher is most likely to be seen as a sort of representative for the culture he/she is teaching whether they are a native of that country or not. According to Keesing (1974:75-76) who interprets culture from a behavioural perspective, culture is seen as cognitive systems containing particular behaviours such as celebrations, traditions, ideas and gestures. Needless to say, there are differences in these cultures or cognitive systems. An example of this could be the use of gestures when communicating. In Northern European countries, there is little use of hand gestures when communicating whereas Southern Europeans such as Spaniards and Italians are known for "speaking with their hands". In addition, when students learn a foreign language, they must familiarise themselves with the cognitive system in order to fully grasp the language. The role of the teacher in this process is to function as a bridge from the native culture to the foreign culture.

### **2.2. How do teachers define *culture*?**

In Gagnestam (2003:116) which includes an interview study with students aspiring to become upper-secondary English teachers in Sweden, it was discovered that the teacher-students' definition of culture could be divided into four categories (see Table 2. below).

Table 2. Descriptive categories - what is culture? Number of interviews. N= 20

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Descriptive categories              |    |
| Aesthetic culture                   | 1  |
| Ways of life                        | 11 |
| Ways of thinking                    | 3  |
| Something that permeates everything | 5  |

(Gagnestam, 2003:116, My translation)

Even though the study is relatively small one can see parallels with the model of Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990:3-10). The category with the least amount of respondents with only one respondent of twenty was aesthetic culture which Gagnestam describes as various art forms such as literature, cinema and poetry.

The largest category by far in the study with more than 50 % of the respondents adhering to the category "*Ways of life*" can be seen as a combination of sociological and pragmatic culture. Gagnestam's category is described as containing: traditions, customs, working life, living conditions, climate and food. All of these subjects are categorised as *sociological* culture, in addition, her category is also described as containing social interactions between humans and different ways of communicating which belong to pragmatic culture. "*Ways of thinking*" also belongs to the minor categories in the study, accumulating in total three respondents out of twenty. Gagnestam describes it as for instance understanding the religion of the target country if it differs from the student's religious beliefs. Furthermore, it also includes the way in which the culture itself affects the language and general discussions about the connection between language and culture. This category could be seen as semantic culture, in which language is seen as a conceptual system where culture affects the language in many ways such as words, expressions and syntactic structures.

The second largest category "*Something that permeates everything*" means that culture is in fact the society we live in and that it consequently cannot be sorted into a certain category.

In short, according to Gagnestam (2003:116) most of the teacher-trainees have a sociological and pragmatic view on culture and 25 % of the interviewees claim that culture cannot be sorted into one category.

In another similar but slightly larger interview study with English teachers in Turkey 79.2 % of the teachers adhered to the category sociological culture. However, the author stressed that the teachers were initially reluctant to identify culture into one single category (Önalán 2005:225- 226).

### 2.3. Target countries in English as a foreign language

In a research project by Gagnestam (2005:59) entitled "*Language Teachers' Identity and the Process of European Integration*" a study was completed concerning the view on culture of English and Danish language teachers. In the analysis of the interviews and the questionnaires, the conclusion was drawn that about half of the Danish language teachers associated the concept of culture with "*...one country or its inhabitants or one society, i.e. a nationally orientated definition*"

The explanation for this *national* view on culture among the Danish foreign language teachers could, according to the researcher, be the strong tradition among foreign language teachers that the concept *culture* implies a single nation (Gagnestam 2005:59-60).

A relevant question that follows this result is which target cultures are taught in the EFL classroom. A common standpoint and which is also exposed to criticism is that EFL-teaching has a UK-US centric viewpoint. This fact is criticised since EFL-teaching should address many more of the countries where English is an official language (Sharifan 2009: 59 - 61).

As stated before, there are many voices in the academic world that are critical towards the US-UK centric viewpoint of EFL-teaching. According to Nault (2008:315-316) the UK-US centric viewpoint of EFL teaching is problematic since it ignores other countries where English is an official language. Furthermore, English culture is not bound to one single nation like Norway or Italy as was discussed in the section on English as a lingua franca. As mentioned previously since the educational reform in 1994 the syllabi have adopted a multicultural approach to the English language and consequently do not favour any particular English-speaking country. However, it is important to say that the syllabi do not always correspond to what is actually taught in the classrooms. In a German study made at *Gesamtschule*<sup>3</sup> and *Gymnasium*<sup>4</sup> the teachers at *Gymnasium* reject the idea that English should be taught as a lingua franca. Instead, they stated that they preferred teaching British or

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<sup>3</sup> Equivalent of "Yrkesprogram" in the Swedish educational system

<sup>4</sup> Equivalent of "Högskoleförberedande program" the Swedish educational system

American culture. The teachers working at *Gymnasium* thought that teaching English as a lingua franca was "cultureless", "neutral", "empty" and "abstract" (Byram and Grundy 2003:64). In contrast to the German study, Crystal explains his view on the future of teaching English as follows.

...teachers need to prepare their students for a world of staggering linguistic diversity. Somehow, they need to expose them to as many varieties of English as possible, especially those which they are most likely to encounter in their own locale and above all teachers need to develop a truly flexible attitude towards principles of usage.

(Crystal 1999: 17)

"...for a world of staggering linguistic diversity" implies that teachers should view English as a lingua franca and raise awareness of the great number of Englishes. However, Crystal does not mean that all the Englishes in the inner, outer and expanding circles should be taught. Instead he proposes that the teacher should focus on "...those (the languages) which they are most likely to encounter in their own locale". This means that the students should learn the variety of English they are most likely to use. In the last sentence he makes it clear that teachers must be tolerant towards variation in the use of the English language.

#### **2.4. Do the teachers consider culture to be an important topic?**

According to Byram and Risager (1999:Chapter 4) foreign language teachers in their study considered it to be a part of their professional responsibility to teach cultural topics. However, they found that culture was not prioritised in the teaching as much as the actual teaching of the language. The reason for this was that many of the teachers did not feel supported to teach culture by the school-system, since it was hard to prove measurable results and the teachers felt there was a general lack of time. In a Spanish study, where they interviewed EFL secondary-school teachers, it was shown that over 90 % of the respondents devoted 20 % of their time to teaching cultural topics and 80 % to actual language teaching, like grammar, oral exercises and reading. The reason as to why such a result could be established does not however mean that the teachers considered teaching culture as unimportant. On the contrary, roughly 75% answered that they would want to teach more culture if it was not for the lack of time (Castro et al. 2004: 91 - 104). This tendency can also be seen in Gagnestam's study



where most teachers rate teaching culture as both important and necessary (Gagnestam, 2005:155)

## **2.5. Which topics are commonly addressed in the EFL classroom?**

In Gagnestam's study, teacher trainees were interviewed in order to find out which topics they perceived were being taught at upper-secondary school. Gagnestam's conclusion was that two topics were recurrent in the interviews, namely grammar and reading in the textbooks.

Furthermore, many of the students also mentioned learning vocabulary as especially frequent. Other topics that were mentioned but less frequent were: learning facts, literature, preparation for national exams and some realia (Gagnestam 2003:188). In the same study, a questionnaire

was carried out with the purpose of finding out more about culture in the EFL classroom. In this section, upper secondary EFL teachers answered which cultural topics they had taught during the previous year. 90% of the teachers stated that they had dealt with "Everyday life, ways of life", 71% aesthetic culture and 69 % Realia. As a consequence, the conclusion drawn from this study is that upper-secondary EFL teachers mainly teach sociological and aesthetic culture. The results from the Turkish study come to a similar but more detailed conclusion.

This study established that 75% of the EFL teachers mainly treated what the author calls "*safe topics*" such as traditions, folklore, daily routine and tourist attractions which all belong to the same category, namely sociological culture. In addition, another common cultural topic was to compare Turkish customs with the British and American ones (Önalın 2005:225-226).

## **2.6. Summary of previous research**

In short, two studies show that teachers are not inclined to giving only one definition of culture. However, the dominant view on culture of the teachers in the two studies seems to be of a sociological kind. It was also discovered that there still is a US-UK centric viewpoint in the teaching of English culture. In a German study, some of the teachers preferred to teach a certain country's culture instead of viewing English as a lingua franca. The German teachers' view contrasts to what Crystal considers to be important when teaching English. Furthermore, he states that the English teacher must take into account as many variations of English as possible, in order for the students to familiarise themselves with the real world linguistic situation. In the studies that were analysed, culture was seen as an important component of language teaching. However, the teachers in a Spanish study said that there was too little time

to teach culture therefore linguistic content such as grammar and phonology were seen as more important. Common topics in the EFL classroom belong to the same group, namely sociological culture for instance ways of life, tradition and customs. Other common activities were "Reading in a textbook", "Grammar" and "Learning vocabulary".

### **3. Method and Material**

#### **3.1. Research design**

In order to answer the question posed in the case study, initially a mixed-model study containing both a questionnaire and interviews were considered. However, this kind of study was later seen as too time consuming and was therefore discarded early in the process. This study could be described as a case-study of English teachers working in two larger upper-secondary state schools in the Gothenburg area. Since the aim of the essay was to gather data about the opinions of the EFL teachers and explore their ideas in a wider sense, a questionnaire was favoured in the place of individual interviews.

The questionnaire was inspired by Gagnestam (2003:279-286) and the cultural model by Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990:3-10). The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section explained briefly the purpose of the questionnaire, it was then followed by a factual survey including questions such as "gender", "age", "number of years working as an EFL teacher" and other relevant background questions. The third section consisted of questions concerning their own opinions of culture and which kind of culture they feel is the most important one. The aim of this study was not to explain why the teachers favour a certain culture. The questionnaire is supplied in Appendix 1.

#### **3.2. Participants**

In order to participate in the study two criteria had to be fulfilled, firstly they had to work in one of the two schools and secondly they needed to be working as English-teachers. In total 17 English teachers completed the questionnaire. The distribution of female and male teachers, was 59 % female and 41 % male. This result is not surprising since nationally there are more female teachers than male at upper-secondary level. Of the 17 teachers, 15 teachers (88%) answered that they taught another subject besides English. This is not surprising either, since at University in Sweden almost all teachers are required to take two subjects. The

teaching combinations were diverse within the humanities, social sciences and sports. No combination with mathematics, natural science or technology was found. The most common combination was English and Swedish with 7 out of 15 teachers (50 %) belonging to this category. Furthermore, many of the teachers (88%) had another language in their combination. 4 out of 15 teachers (25%) had 2 to 3 subjects in their combination including English. As a consequence, most teachers, 11 out of 15 (75%) had two subjects including English in their combination.

### **3.3. Apparatus**

Besides being inspired by the questionnaire by Gagnestam (2003:279-286) and the cultural model by Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990: 3 - 10) an electronic survey program called Analyzer was used to create the questionnaire and send it to the participants through an open link via the Internet. All the graphs and tables were created in a computer program entitled Numbers and were then used in the essay.

### **3.4. Procedure**

Before being distributed to the teachers, the questionnaire was sent to a colleague who provided important feedback from a teacher's perspective. The final questionnaire was sent to 26 teachers in two schools. 17 teachers completed the questionnaire which gave a respondent rate of 65 %. The rationale behind the high respondent rate could be attributed to the fact that one of the schools was visited and the questionnaire was explained when talking with the teachers. In addition, a reminder was sent out ten days after the distribution of the questionnaire.

The data were downloaded from the Analyzer program and were then moved to Numbers, where all the necessary calculations were made. For the tables, the median rank was calculated and for Graph 1 the three most important activities were measured. For Graph 2 the subjects from Table 6 were inserted into the cultural categories provided by Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990: 3 - 10). Graph 3 illustrates the teachers' perception of the most important cultures.

As a final remark, measures have been taken in this essay in order to make anonymous the identity of the two schools and of the respondents. Furthermore, since the questionnaire

was posted on-line through a link, all the respondents were anonymous and were given a number from 1 - 17 when the data were processed (McQueen and Knussen 2002: 220).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. How is culture prioritised?

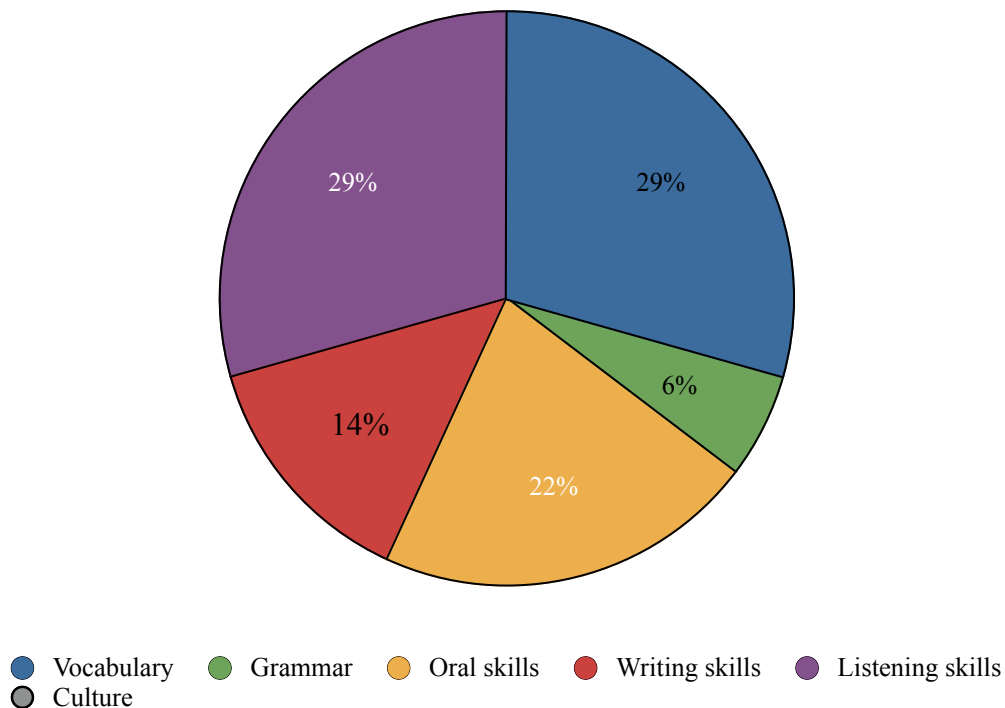
To reiterate the aim of this case study, two main questions are addressed: how culture is prioritised within the subject of English and which kind of culture is taught in the classroom at upper-secondary-level.

In the questionnaire the teachers were asked to rank from a scale of 1 - 6, the most important activities in the classroom. In Table 3, the median rank of all the six activities is shown. The most important activities were: Listening skills, Vocabulary and Oral skills.

Table 3: Rank of the activities done in class

| Activity         | Rank |
|------------------|------|
| Listening skills | 1    |
| Vocabulary       | 2    |
| Oral skills      | 3    |
| Writing skills   | 4    |
| Grammar          | 5    |
| Culture          | 6    |

Listening skills is one of the four skills of language learning and means that you learn how to decode the message of the person with whom you are speaking. Learning vocabulary is an essential part of language learning and involves learning foreign words from different contexts. Oral skills means that you learn how to produce phrases so you can communicate with another person. The other activities are: Writing skills, Grammar and Culture. With the activity writing, it is intended that the student learn syntax, how to adapt written language to the situation etc. Grammar is the study of the different forms of the language, it is theory that can be applied and used in the four skills of language learning.



Graph 1: Which activities are considered to be important in the classroom

In Graph 1, the distribution of the three most important topics considered by the teachers is shown.

The two largest categories with 29 % of the teachers were Listening skills and Vocabulary followed by Oral skills (22%). Grammar was not considered important since it only got 6 %. The final category Culture was surprisingly not chosen by any teacher and it came last in ranking in Table 3. The results from Table 3 and Graph 1 are interesting since they illustrate which activities the teachers prioritise.

In the Swedish syllabi the communicative approach is mentioned several times and it means that the aim of the study of a foreign language should be more orientated towards a pragmatic use of language in real situations and it should not focus on the theoretical skills of the language called grammar. The results from this study clearly show that the teachers have a preference towards activities such as learning vocabulary, listening and speaking more than grammar. This result could partly be explained from the general trend in language learning

which emphasises the communicative approach and not a focus on the theory of language, namely grammar.

Culture as stated before is substantially behind the more linguistic activities, given that it was ranked last in Table 3. In the Spanish study (Castro et al. 2004: 91 - 104), the teachers thought that culture was important, however they stated that it could not be prioritised since there was a lack of time and as a consequence the linguistic skills such as reading, writing and speaking had to be prioritised.

Most of the teachers taught another subject in addition to English. The most common combination was to teach another language. The second largest group of the respondents were the social-science and history teachers. A comparison between these two groups was made in order to see how important teaching culture was for them. In Table 4 where the comparison between the two groups of teachers was made, no substantial difference could be found between them. However, most of the teachers in both groups, 75 % of the language teachers and 50 % of the English, social science and history teachers stated culture to be "*rather important*". Furthermore in Table 4 one teacher was excluded since his/hers combination was Sports/English and was consequently not a part of the two main groups of teachers. Hence the total number of teachers is 16 in Table 4 and 17 teachers in the remaining tables and graphs.

Table 4: Attitude to teaching culture: comparisons of teachers and teaching combinations.

| Attitudes to teaching culture | Language teachers | Social science and history teachers |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| very important                | 25.0 (3)          | 25.0 (1)                            |
| rather important              | 75.0 (9)          | 50.0 (2)                            |
| unimportant                   | 0.0 (0)           | 25.0 (1)                            |
| not important at all          | 0.0 (0)           | 0.0 (0)                             |
| Total                         | 100.0 (12)        | 100.0 (4)                           |

In Table 5 the connection between attitudes to teaching culture and textbook usage is shown. It was found that most teachers use the textbook less frequently than 50 % of the working time. Only 4 of 17 teachers stated that they use the textbook more than 50 % of the working time. Furthermore, no great difference in attitudes towards teaching culture between the two

groups were found. In short, the majority of the teachers regardless of how often they use the textbook consider culture to be *”rather important”*.

Table 5: Attitude to teaching culture: comparisons of teachers and textbook usage.

| Attitudes to teaching culture | Textbook usage |                |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
|                               | Less than 50 % | More than 50 % |
| very important                | 23.0 (3)       | 25.0 (1)       |
| rather important              | 69.0 (9)       | 75.0 (3)       |
| unimportant                   | 8.0 (1)        | 0.0 (0)        |
| not important at all          | 0.0 (0)        | 0.0 (0)        |
| Total                         | 100.0 (13)     | 100.0 (4)      |

#### 4.2. What kind of *culture* is taught in the classroom?

In this part of the essay the results from Graph 2 will be compared with the results from Table 6 which illustrates what kind of culture is considered to be important to teach in the actual classroom. In order to answer the questions *What kind of culture is taught in the classrooms?* The teachers were asked about their own definition of culture as well as what they considered to be the most important cultural topics to address in the classroom. The topics are ranked in Table 6 below.

Table 6 consists of two columns; on the left hand side the cultural topics are ordered in median rank based on the results of the questionnaire. The column on the right hand side show the total rank of the cultural topics. The results from Table 6 were taken from question 15 in the questionnaire and besides the alternatives listed under Topics in the table, they could also choose *”Other”* which was an open questions, where they could write another topic. In this case one teacher wrote *”News”* which is shown in Table 6.

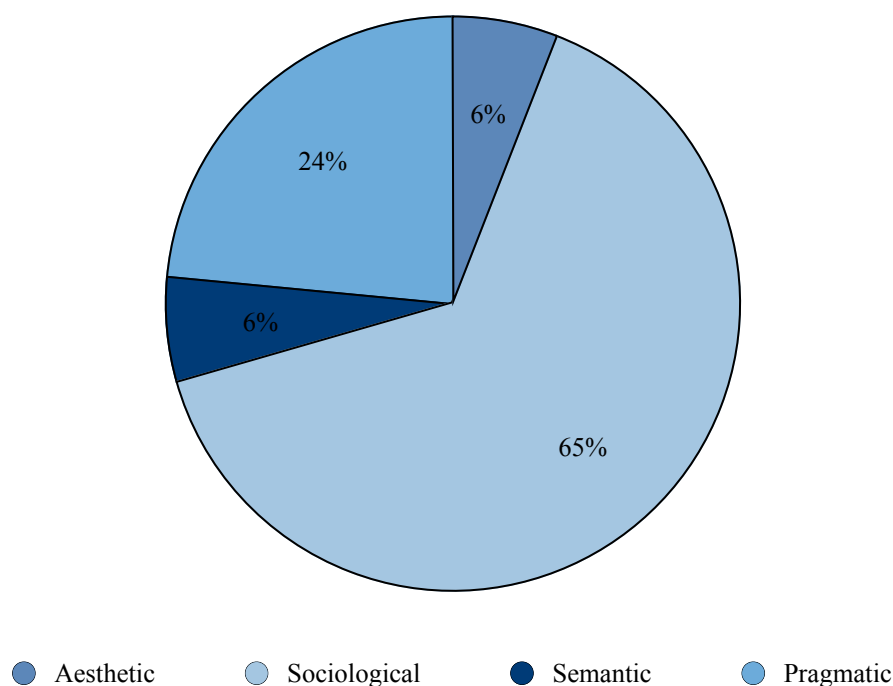
Table 6: Subjects ranked by the teachers

| Topic                         | Rank |
|-------------------------------|------|
| Customs and traditions        | 1    |
| Language in social situations | 2    |
| Literature                    | 3    |
| Institutions in society       | 4    |
| History                       | 5    |
| Words and expressions         | 6    |
| Work and leisure              | 7    |
| Tourism                       | 8    |
| Food                          | 9    |
| News                          | 10   |
| Music                         | 10   |
| Film                          | 11   |

As can be seen from Table 6 Customs and traditions, Language in social situations and Literature were the most important cultural topics according to the teachers. The topics, News and Music had the same median rank and that is the reason why they are both listed at tenth place in the table.

The cultural topics in Table 6 all belong to one of the cultural categories according to the model by Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990:3-10). To see the results in accordance with this model the above topics were sorted into the four categories in order to view the results from a different angle.





Graph 2: Which kind of culture do the teachers consider to be important in the classroom?

Graph 2 illustrates the same distribution as Table 6 using the four categories by Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990:3-10). By far the largest category with 65 % was Sociological culture which is also the broadest category. As previously stated this category includes customs, traditions, history and institutions. The dominance of this kind of culture is not surprising since it is the category which covered the most cultural topics. In addition, similar results were found both in the Turkish study (Önalán 2005:225- 226) and the study by Gagnestam (2003:116).

Interestingly enough, Pragmatic culture was also considered as important with 24 %. This category is synonymous with the topic Language in social situations which means that the student should learn certain words and phrases in order to function in social situations such as at parties or at the supermarket. This is an interesting result because it confirms the result from Graph 1 which showed that the communicative approach is a pedagogical theory which is applied in a greater extent than for instance a more theoretical approach such as grammar.

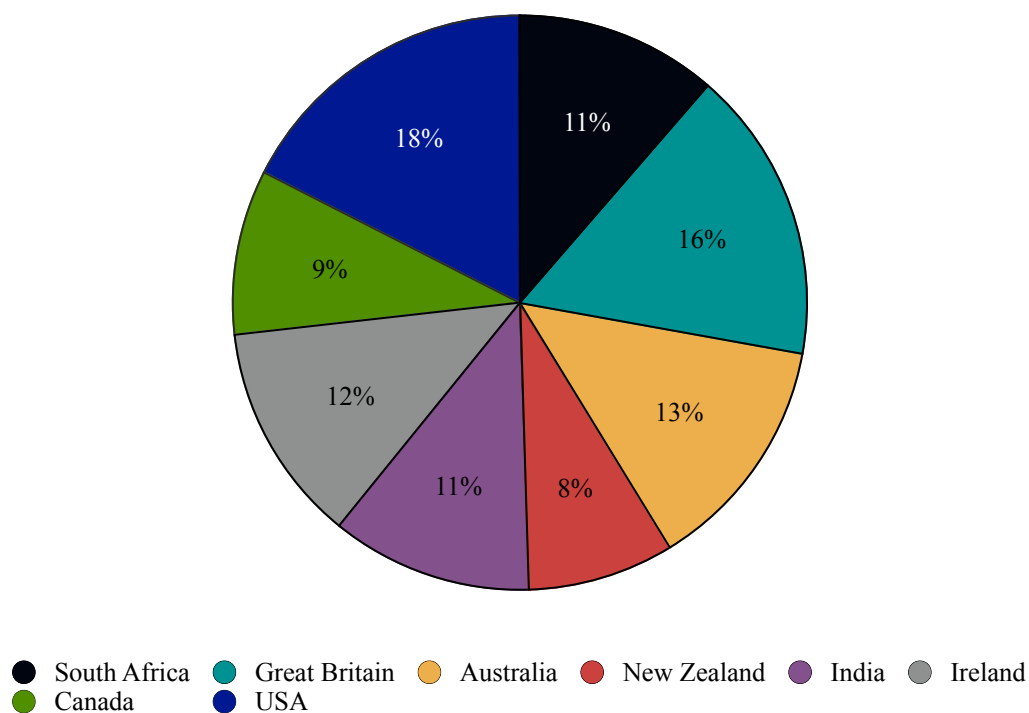
Aesthetic and Semantic culture were the two smallest categories with 6 % each. The low results of Aesthetic culture which includes cultural topics such Literature, Film and Music must be considered to be remarkable. In the syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 it is clearly stated that the students should be familiar with novels, contemporary and older poetry and literature

history. In the study by Gagnestam (2003:188) Aesthetic culture was the second largest category after Sociological culture when the teachers were asked which cultural topics they had dealt with during the previous year. Thus, this small study indicates that Literature, Film, Music and other art forms are not considered to be of a high priority according the respondents of this study. The explanation for the low results of Semantic culture could be due to the fact that it is the narrowest category with a high level of difficulty for the learner.

In conclusion, this small study indicates that the teachers rate sociological and pragmatic culture as the most important cultural categories to address in the classroom.

### 4.3. The origins of the culture

In this section the origins of the English-speaking cultures which were taught at the two schools will be discussed.



Graph 3: Which cultures are taught by the teachers?

In Graph 2 it was shown that the most important kind of culture was sociological culture, followed by pragmatic culture. Graph 3 shows the origins of the cultures that were taught by the teachers. The two most commonly taught cultures were American culture with 18 % and

British culture with 16 %. However, the distribution between the countries is fairly even. The country which was least dealt with by the teachers was New Zealand with 8 % in comparison with the USA (18%).

These results are highly interesting since they contradict the results of some studies that were brought up previously in this essay. In the German study, it was proven that the teachers at Gymnasium were generally reluctant towards the idea of teaching English as a Lingua Franca i.e. addressing the culture of many English-speaking countries. Instead, they preferred focusing on mainly British and/or American culture (Byram and Grundy 2003:64). Additionally, Nault (2008:315-316) claims that there is a dominance of British and American culture in the EFL classrooms. He found this fact to be highly problematic since it ignored the fact that English is a language that is spoken in many cultures and in many parts of the world.

The results from this small study show that there is in fact no great dominance of either British or American culture. In contrast to the German study (Byram and Grundy 2003:64), the teachers seem to treat these eight major English-speaking culture relatively evenly.

How can these results be explained? Firstly, one viable explanation could be due to the fact that the Swedish syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 have since 1994 changed their view on how English-speaking culture should be taught. Initially, in previous syllabi (Lgy 70, 1970:274), English was synonymous with mainly American and/or British culture. However, in the more recent syllabi, starting from Lpo94 English began to be seen as a Lingua Franca, containing cultures from for instance the former colonies of the British Empire such as India, Australia and New Zealand.

Secondly, the German study was carried out ten years ago and there is a possibility that the German teachers' attitudes have changed since then. It is also important to stress the fact that it goes beyond the aim of this essay to compare the German syllabi with the Swedish ones. Thus, there might be differences between these two syllabi which need further study. The results of this study reveal that the claim made by Nault (2008:315-316) is highly generic and that it did not apply the results of this study.

Finally, the teachers in this study seem to share the pedagogical idea put forward by Crystal (1999: 17) that the teachers of English have an obligation to expose the students to many varieties of English instead of only focusing on some arbitrarily chosen culture.

## 5. Conclusion

In this small-scale case study two aspects of culture have been studied in an educational context; how it was prioritised and which kind of culture was taught in the classrooms.

As shown in the previous section, culture is without a doubt seen as less important than linguistic skills such as reading, writing and listening. Even though culture is not seen as such an important topic as the communicative skills, the teachers still rate teaching culture as *"rather important"*. The teachers seem to understand that teaching culture is important, however when facing other alternatives they discard it. Concerning the second main question, it was established that there is a strong dominance of sociological and pragmatic culture when English is taught. The sociological aspect of culture is immensely broad and contains everything from customs and traditions to the country's history. This is a very important category and the students would benefit greatly from it since they acquire plenty of general knowledge regarding the country which is studied. However, surprisingly enough Aesthetic culture was not considered to be important at all. In the syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 literature is stressed as fundamental for the study of English. Literature and history of literature are great carriers of the cultural heritage. Consequently, it would be detrimental if the students should not be familiar with novels, poetry and short stories. The advantages of reading literature in the EFL classroom are many. For instance, novels and short stories are great topics of discussion, in small or larger groups. Furthermore, the students' vocabulary range will increase and as a consequence also their writing skills.

According to the Swedish syllabi, schools are supposed to convey knowledge and prepare students for either further studies or work. All schools should analyse what they are teaching and why. Before English began to be seen as a lingua franca in the Swedish syllabi, there was a strong UK-US centric viewpoint i.e. a dominance both linguistically and culturally for the United Kingdom and the United States of America. However, since the mid 1990's with the launch of Lpo94 the awareness of other English-speaking countries like India, Australia and South Africa has increased.

As shown in the previous section, the teachers did not only find it important to teach British or American culture. On the contrary, they seem to treat these eight cultures fairly evenly. Further studies could also be conducted in this area. It would be interesting to see how the cultures are taught. How are Americans and Australians depicted in contemporary Swedish education?

When speaking in general of a national culture i.e. the idea that a nation has a culture, the teacher must bear in mind not to fall into stereotypes and false assumptions concerning the country. A good solution to this problem as a teacher is travelling, working and studying in several countries where English is a mother tongue. In this way, the teacher might understand the connection between the English-speaking countries and impart his/her experiences.

Further studies as to why teachers focus on the communicative skills more than culture should be done. Furthermore, it could also be interesting to see how the teachers implement culture during the lesson time. This kind of study would require much more time since it would include fieldwork with classroom observations.

Probably the greatest challenge for teachers today is to ignite the will for learning in the students. Teaching culture is a great tool for inspiration and that is why it is of such importance to develop culture within the subject of English. The fact that Aesthetic culture was seen as unimportant is alarming since in my opinion literature, film and music are important pedagogical resources that should be prioritised in language learning.

Another tough challenge the teachers encounter every day, is which culture(s) should be dealt with. The answer to this often lies within the teachers themselves since they might pick the culture they are most familiar with. However, in my opinion I find it particularly important to explain why English has become such a widespread language. In this manner, the students will not only familiarise themselves with the great number of variations in English but also the connections between the English-speaking countries through colonial history.

As stated previously, the older syllabi which were launched before Lpo 94 focused mainly on the UK and the USA. The new multicultural syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 which were recently launched together with many other reforms bring many new challenges to the teacher. Since the English teacher in Sweden needs to consider more English-speaking cultures than before, it is essential that he/she avoids superficiality and teaches culture in an integrative way instead of addressing each country's culture separately.

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## 7. Appendix

### Enkät: Engelskspråkig kultur

Denna enkät kommer att användas i min C-uppsats vid Göteborgs universitet. Jag är lärarstudent och jag uppskattar djupt att du tar dig tid att fylla i enkäten och därmed bidra till min C-uppsats. Syftet är att undersöka hur du som gymnasielärare undervisar engelska  
I den första delen får du besvara en mängd faktafrågor följt av din syn på engelskspråkig kultur. I den andra delen kommer det att ställas frågor om hur du undervisar engelska.

Tack så mycket för att du tar dig tid för att delta i denna undersökning.

#### 1. Kön

- Man
- Kvinna

#### 2. Ålder

- 21 - 30
- 31 - 40
- 41 - 50
- 51 - 60
- 60 -

#### 3. På vilken skola undervisar du?

- Alströmergymnasiet
- Lerums gymnasium

#### 4. Antal år du arbetat som lärare i engelska:

-----

**5. Vilka av alternativen passar bäst in på din definition av kultur?**

Var god välj de 5 alternativ som du anser definierar kultur. Det första alternativet dvs. Nr. 1 är det alternativ som är mest relevant och nr. 2 är det som är näst relevant osv.

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| Mat  | _____ |
| Sedvänjor och traditioner te.x. Hur man firar jul.   | _____ |
| Jobb och fritid  | _____ |
| Samhälleliga institutioner   | _____ |
| Språkliga färdigheter i sociala situationer te.x. Att kunna tacka nej till en Inbjudan på ett korrekt sätt   | _____ |
| Litteratur   | _____ |
| Att känna till ord och uttryck som är särskilda för landet te.x. "Stiff-upper lip" eller "yellow journalism" | _____ |
| Musik  | _____ |
| Landets historia   | _____ |
| Film   | _____ |
| Turism   | _____ |
| Annat  | _____ |

**6. I vilket land lärde du dig engelska?**

- I Sverige
- Utomlands
- Både i Sverige och utomlands

**7. Om du lärde dig engelska utomlands, vilket land/vilka länder vistades du i?**

- Sydafrika
- Storbritannien (England, Skottland och Wales)
- Australien



- Nya Zeeland
- Indien
- Irland
- Canada
- USA

Annat:

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**8. Anser du dig tala med en särskild accent (te.x. Brittisk eller Amerikansk accent) när du undervisar engelska? och i så fall vilken?**

- Nej

Ja (var god specificera vilken accent i textrutan)

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-----  
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**9. Undervisar du i några andra ämnen än Engelska? Om så är fallet var god och fyll i ämnet/ämnena i textrutan.**

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## Kultur

I denna del kommer du att besvara frågor som handlar om hur du undervisar engelska att göra. Kom ihåg att det inte finns några "korrekta" eller "felaktiga" svar utan uttryck vad du tycker om den specifika frågan.

**10. Vilka av de följande aktiviteterna anser du vara viktigast när du undervisar engelska. Var god och rangordna samtliga alternativ, där 1 motsvarar det viktigaste alternativet och 6 motsvarar det av minst vikt**

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| Utöka ordförrådet                             | _____ |
| Grammatik                                     | _____ |
| Prata engelska i klassrummet                  | _____ |
| Lära sig att skriva engelska                  | _____ |
| Lära sig att förstå engelska i talad form     | _____ |
| Lära sig om engelsk-språkiga länders kulturer | _____ |

**11. Hur viktigt är det för dig att undervisa om kultur under engelsklektionerna?**

- Inte viktigt alls
- Inte viktigt
- Ganska viktigt
- Mycket viktigt

**12. Hur ofta använder du läroboken när du undervisar engelska?**

- Mindre än 50 % av undervisningstiden

Mer än 50 % av undervisningstiden, i så fall var god specificera vilken lärobok du använder i textrutan

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### 13. Från vilka länder eller vilket land kommer kulturen/kulturerna du undervisar om?

- Sydafrika
- Storbritannien (England, Skottland och Wales)
- Australien
- Nya Zeeland
- Indien
- Irland
- Canada
- USA

### 14. Anser du dig ha nog med tid att undervisa kulturella ämnen i klassrummet?

- Ja
- Nej, jag skulle vilja ha mer tid avsatt för att undervisa kulturella ämnen
- Nej, och jag önskar inte ha mer tid avsatt för att undervisa kulturella ämnen

### 15. Vilka ämnen inom kultur undervisar du vanligen om?

Var god välj ut 5 alternativ från listan som du tycker är viktigast i din undervisning. Det alternativet du väljer som nr. 1 är det viktigaste och nr. 2 är det näst viktigaste osv.

- Musik \_\_\_\_\_
- Språkliga färdigheter i sociala situationer te.x.  
Att kunna tacka nej till en inbjudan på ett  
korrekt sätt \_\_\_\_\_
- Sedvänjor och traditioner te.x. Hur man firar  
jul \_\_\_\_\_
- Jobb och fritid \_\_\_\_\_
- Litteratur \_\_\_\_\_
- Turism \_\_\_\_\_

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| Samhälleliga institutioner   | _____ |
| Att känna till ord och uttryck som är särskilda för landet te.x. "Stiff-upper lip" eller "yellow journalism" | _____ |
| Film   | _____ |
| Mat  | _____ |
| Landets historia   | _____ |
| Annat  | _____ |

**16. Om du rangordnade alternativet "annat" på plats 1, 2 eller 3 i föregående fråga, var god och specificera vilket ämne inom kultur du menade i textfältet.**

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**Thank you!**

Jag uppskattar djupt ditt deltagande i min undersökning.

Thank you!