UDK 81.115 + 81’276.11

https://doi.org/10.52058/2786-6165-2025-4(34)-962-973

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DEVELOPING STUDENTS’ NATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMPONENTS OF IDENTITY IN ENGLISH STUDIES: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

Abstract. The article runs about the approaches to forming students’ national and international components of identities during English language acquisition at the Faculty of Foreign Languages (Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University (Ukraine)) and English Language Studies, School of Humanities, Tallinn University, (Estonia)). The paper focuses on how educators incorporate cultural contexts in teaching, enhancing students' understanding of their national identity and global perspectives. The study highlights teaching methods, intercultural activities, and challenges like language proficiency differences and sensitive historical topics.

The research is grounded in the idea that English language learning today transcends linguistic competence and encompasses cultural awareness and identity formation. Drawing on recent theoretical insights from Norton, Yuan & Fang, Fielding, and others, the study investigates how English teaching practices reflect and foster national and international perspectives.

Using interviews with teaching and administrative staff, observations of classroom practices, and content analysis of English language materials, the study highlights significant differences and similarities in how Ukrainian and Estonian institutions approach cultural content. Findings show that while Estonian English education is more globally oriented and often underrepresents national identity, the Ukrainian context integrates national and local cultural and historical elements more explicitly. However, both institutions face challenges balancing global and national narratives, especially in multicultural or politically sensitive classrooms.

The article concludes by proposing certain steps to strengthen identity-building in English education. Suggestions for better integration of cultural education, such as incorporating core national texts and updating library resources, are provided to foster tolerance and intercultural communication skills.

The study emphasises that a well-rounded English language education should help students understand both their national roots and global citizenship.

Keywords: national, international, identity, English language learning, linguistic competence, educators, students, other.

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РОЗВИТОК НАЦІОНАЛЬНОГО ТА МІЖКУЛЬТУРНОГО КОМПОНЕНТІВ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ СТУДЕНТІВ ПІД ЧАС ВИВЧЕННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ: ПОРІВНЯЛЬНЕ ПРИКЛАДНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ

Анотація. У статті йдеться про підходи до формування національного та міжкультурного компонентів ідентичності здобувачів вищої освіти під час вивчення англійської мови на факультеті іноземних мов (Уманський державний педагогічний університет імені Павла Тичини (Україна)) та на англомовній програмі гуманітарного факультету Талліннського університету (Естонія). У центрі уваги дослідження – ідея, що сучасне вивчення англійської мови виходить за межі мовної компетентності, охоплюючи усвідомлення культурної компоненти та контексту, що, у свою чергу, сприяє формуванню національної глобальної ідентичності здобувача вищої освіти.

Проаналізовано, як культурний контекст вплетений у англомовну підготовку обох підрозділів та на скільки він сприяє покращенню розуміння студентами як своєї власної національної ідентичності, так і розширенню загального світобачення. Методологічною основою дослідження стали інтерв'ю з викладачами та адміністрацією підрозділів, спостереження за освітнім процесом і контент-аналіз навчальних матеріалів. Дослідження висвітлює методи навчання, міжкультурну діяльність і виклики цього процесу, а також відмінності у рівні володіння іноземною мовою студентами. Окремо приділено увагу делікатним історичним та політичним темам. У статті також наводяться пропозиції щодо фасилітації та інтеграції культурного компоненту в іншомовну освіту, зокрема, включення базових національних текстів та оновлення бібліотечних фондів задля формування толерантності та навичок міжкультурного спілкування студентів.

У результаті дослідження виявлено як спільні риси, так і відмінності у підходах до представлення культурного контексту в англомовній освіті. Зокрема, в естонському підрозділі університету домінує міжкультурний підхід з проєкцією на глобалізований світ з обмеженим залученням

національного контенту, тоді як в Україні більш активно інтегруються елементи національної культури, історії та суспільного життя в освітній процес. Разом з тим, обидві моделі стикаються з викликами у збереженні балансу між національним і глобальним підходами до формування мовних ідентичностей здобувачів вищої освіти, особливо у випадках мультикультурних або політично чутливих верств студентства.

У завершенні статті автор пропонує низку практичних кроків для посилення формування ідентичності у процесі навчання англійської мови: включення національних текстів, оновлення бібліотечних ресурсів, розвиток міжкультурного діалогу та формування толерантних і відкритих до іншого особистостей. Підкреслюється важливість розвитку як національної свідомості, так і глобального мислення у сучасного студента.

Ключові слова: національний, міжкультурний, ідентичність, навчання англійської мови, лінгвістична компетенція, освітяни, здобувачі вищої освіти, інший.

Problem statement. Contemporary English learning is not reduced to acquiring linguistic competences; it is oriented on fostering students' broader socio-cultural awareness. Understanding how students develop their identities, understand their national heritage and perceive global cultural influences has become essential in modern foreign language learning. This "social turn" in second language acquisition brought into focus the concept of identity in all its relationships between the language learner and the social world [6; 7].

Analysis of recent research and publications. In another paper, Bonny Norton highlights the importance of identity in language learning, criticising previous research that neglected the concept of identity. She notes that more interdisciplinary studies should be carried out on the complexity of language learning in diverse social contexts [8].

Yuan, Y., & Fang, L. support the above-mentioned ideas, suggesting practical strategies to facilitate self-identification, appreciation and exploration of students' own culture while learning English. The authors also highlight the importance of balancing global English skills and national cultural values [9].

The Serbian researchers and practitioners focused on how national identity is represented in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks. They analyse the ways in which these textbooks incorporate elements of national identity and the potential impact this has on students' perceptions of their own and other cultures. Thus, the students could perceive their national identity from a foreign context, which can sometimes be challenging for them. The authors recommend including national components in English learning materials to boast national and intercultural tolerance and understanding [2].

Other researchers regard how foreign language learning influences the formation of students' identities, noting that the teacher's instructions play a crucial role in this process. Although this studying trip can be full of challenges, it is absolutely worth taking it to encourage students to understand their cultural heritage via language connections better [5]. Han, Y. explores the influence of multicultural context on students [4].

Fielding, R. highlights the dynamic relationship between multilingualism, identity, and interculturality within educational settings. The paper examines how multilingual individuals navigate their cultural and linguistic identities in schools and universities and how educators can foster intercultural understanding through inclusive pedagogical practices. Fielding emphasises the need for educational frameworks that support multilingual learners and facilitate positive identity development through language education [3].

That is why the issue of how English studies are designed to include national and intercultural components is a topical, sensitive, and sometimes triggering issue for the educational system, especially in post-Soviet countries like Ukraine and Estonia.

In this paper, we understand the cultural, societal, and political markers of the student's identity as the national component of the English learning process. Meanwhile, the international component includes the markers peculiar to other cultures and identities, including the ones of English-speaking countries.[7] **The objective** of this paper is to explore the scope and essence of these contexts interwoven into English studies at the Faculty of Foreign Languages ((FFL), Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, Ukraine) and English Language Studies ((ELS), School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Estonia). The research focuses on how educators' understanding of national (Estonian or Ukrainian) and global cultural contexts are revealed in the English language learning process. The paper also presents the degree to which the students are prepared to engage with diverse cultural perspectives and experiences, gain skills for effective communication across cultures, and appreciate the role of language in shaping their national and global parts of identity.

Presentation of the main material.

The research methods are observation of the learning process and interviews with the FFL and ELS teaching and administrative staff and content analysis of the interviews. For this reason, we conducted a series of interviews with the teachers of English and English-related courses as well administrative staff (10 representatives from Tallinn University (ELS) and Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University (FFL), respectively.

[7] National component of identity is considered as "our" while "other" refers to the foreign one.

The participants of the interviews were not informed in advance about the topic of the discussion. It should be mentioned that it was pretty surprising for the Estonian teaching staff but quite natural for the Ukrainian colleagues. The very first reaction to the topic of the local national component being included in the English studies of the Estonians was that it was not included in the English-related subjects. However, some extra questions helped to reveal that this component is still present in teaching English in various forms.

The traditional peculiarity similar for both institutions is the use of comparisons with the mother tongue while teaching grammar structures, typology, history of the English language, phonetics and vocabulary items (words, expressions, proverbs, and idioms), which may seem similar or different (e.g. *Silence is gold, Speaking is silver*). Such an approach helps trace similarities and differences between the mother tongue and English. It also enables the realisation of the peculiarities of national mentality and the English-speaking countries, as well as revealing stereotypes, etc. That is the reason why translation into and from the mother tongue is a frequent teaching technique in Estonia. At the same time, Ukrainian colleagues prefer eliciting some cultural issues (paraphrasing and explanations of some specific cultural terms in English).

It should also be considered that students who start education at ELS have a C1 level of English, while it varies from B1 to B2 at FFL. And that is the principle difference in the approach to studies. While ELS provide integrated classes of English with no English Practice as a separate course, FFL has the latter. That is why ESL focuses more on serious matters of theoretical character while mastering English proficiency (e.g. theoretical grammar topics, advanced writing and reading issues and strategies, etc.). At the same time, the inclusion of English Practice classes in the curriculum at FFL in Uman enables vivid cross-cultural, -societal and -political comparisons in the classroom while discussing any topic, starting with *"Daily routines and rituals"* and finishing with *"Law enforcement"*. That is a strong platform for understanding both students' own identity and national background and the one whose language they are trying to learn, plus the international perspective of the issues discussed crowns it all. The English Practice classes encourage the students to provide comparisons and prepare projects on fundamental national and international peculiarities. The range of topics varies depending on the unit topics, for instance, *"Hospitality in Ukraine and the UK/USA/Canada"* and *"What is it like to be President of Ukraine / the USA?"*. Those who fled the war in Ukraine prepare such round tables as *"Living in Ukraine versus living in the USA/Italy/The Check Republic and others"*, etc.).

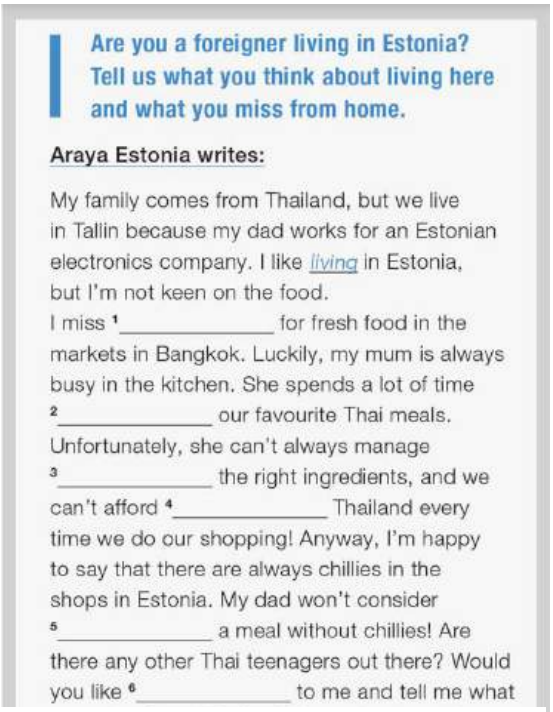
The overview of the available manuals and books for reading at FFL and ELS shows scarce references to Ukrainian or Estonian cultures. Brainstorming

helped to identify a range of books by English authors, which are sometimes used in English classes in Estonia. They reflect some unsystematic aspects of the Estonian culture, national identity, and the style of living, namely:

Alix Wright (2013) The Swan Book (featuring the Baltic countries, namely Estonia);

Peterson & Fagersten (2023) English in the Nordic countries. Connections, tensions and everyday realities (provides a historical overview of the subject, synthesises the latest research, illustrates the roles of English with original case studies from diverse communities and everyday settings, and offers transnational insights critically and in conversation with the situation in other Nordic states);

Focus 2 pre-intermediate (provides a text on some peculiarities of Estonian cuisine seen by a foreign student).



Are you a foreigner living in Estonia? Tell us what you think about living here and what you miss from home.

Araya Estonia writes:

My family comes from Thailand, but we live in Tallin because my dad works for an Estonian electronics company. I like *living* in Estonia, but I'm not keen on the food.
I miss [1]_____ for fresh food in the markets in Bangkok. Luckily, my mum is always busy in the kitchen. She spends a lot of time [2]_____ our favourite Thai meals. Unfortunately, she can't always manage [3]_____ the right ingredients, and we can't afford [4]_____ Thailand every time we do our shopping! Anyway, I'm happy to say that there are always chillies in the shops in Estonia. My dad won't consider [5]_____ a meal without chillies! Are there any other Thai teenagers out there? Would you like [6]_____ to me and tell me what

Visual 1. Text about some aspects of living in Estonia (Focus 2, 2nd edition, Workbook)

The analysis of the ESL library and methodological resources shows that manuals by English publishers do not specifically focus on some targeted national customers. This means that there are practically no tasks or activities specially tailored to reveal the national or cultural peculiarities of the countries or nationalities that bought these manuals to learn English. The interviewees could only recollect the old edition of *Upstream B1*, which contained a text and a few exercises on the topic *"What Estonians do on a Midsummer day?"* Besides,

some fragments and pieces of information about the country can be found on BBC News for educational purposes. At the same time, quite predictably, the library's materials are rich in manuals and books for reading, featuring cultural peculiarities of the foreign countries in which the language is studied.

At the same time, in Uman, there were found no manuals or books on Ukraine for reading by English-speaking authors, its mentality or culture, which would be included as a part of the curriculum. Still, some references to cultural peculiarities of the Ukrainian culture were found in the coursebooks by Ukrainian authors. For example, the course "Creative and Academic Writing" compares the

Ukrainian, British and American approaches to writing and arranging ideas into paragraphs, textual blocks or texts.

Moreover, such courses as “Country Study of the English-speaking Countries” and a range of manuals developed by the university instructors help form intercultural competence, which includes empathy, cultural awareness, and adaptability, which are key for working in diverse international environments.

At the ELS, from the intercultural perspective, English and international holidays are sometimes compared to Estonian ones, such as Christmas dishes in Estonia and English-speaking countries. However, such parallels are not a general practice in English classes. Students also get the task of preparing presentations about regional festivals. Such activities broaden students’ horizons. To illustrate this, the educators provided an example of the May 1 celebrations. Estonian students fully considered it a Soviet holiday, and only in the English class did they learn about its origin and international significance.

The issue of cultural references should be paid special attention to regarding multicultural classes at Tallinn, which have students of different backgrounds in the English classroom. In the latter's case, the students join courses from around the world, some of whom are Russian-speaking students. That is the reason why a so-called “Students’ Union” was once organised to facilitate quick adaptation and extra-curricular activities for students of different cultural backgrounds. This means that the ELS does not organise its own events. Instead, they fully rely on the variety of ideas and initiatives of the Union when it comes to the celebration of national, English or international holidays.

In contrast, the English class at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Uman is mainly Ukrainian with some inclusions of Jewish, Polish, Bulgarian, Russian, and Moldovan peculiarities of the students’ identities due to the fact that Ukrainian identity is shaped by many other national and ethnic groups blending together. Although there are Chinese students and previously there were some students from other oriental countries, they studied in special classes being put together with Ukrainian students only for lectures. Still, the Faculty has an extremely pro-active student’s body – The Students’ Council and the vice-dean for extracurricular activities who organise and facilitate various national celebrations – both Ukrainian and those of the countries whose language is studied as well as international ones. On some special days, apart from extracurricular activities, English classes are partially or fully dedicated to the cultural thematic orientation of the lesson.

With the break of the war in Ukraine in 2022, FFL pays special attention to marking the significant events associated with it (e.g. *February 24*, *Liberation of Kherson*, *Debaltsevo boiler* and many others). Other tragic events, such as the *Holodomor*, *Chornobyl catastrophe*, *Babyn Yar*, are regularly commemorated.

Apart from these momentous historical events, the Faculty celebrates some principal English and International holidays like *st. Patrick's Day, Mother's Day, st. Valentine's Day, Halloween*, etc.

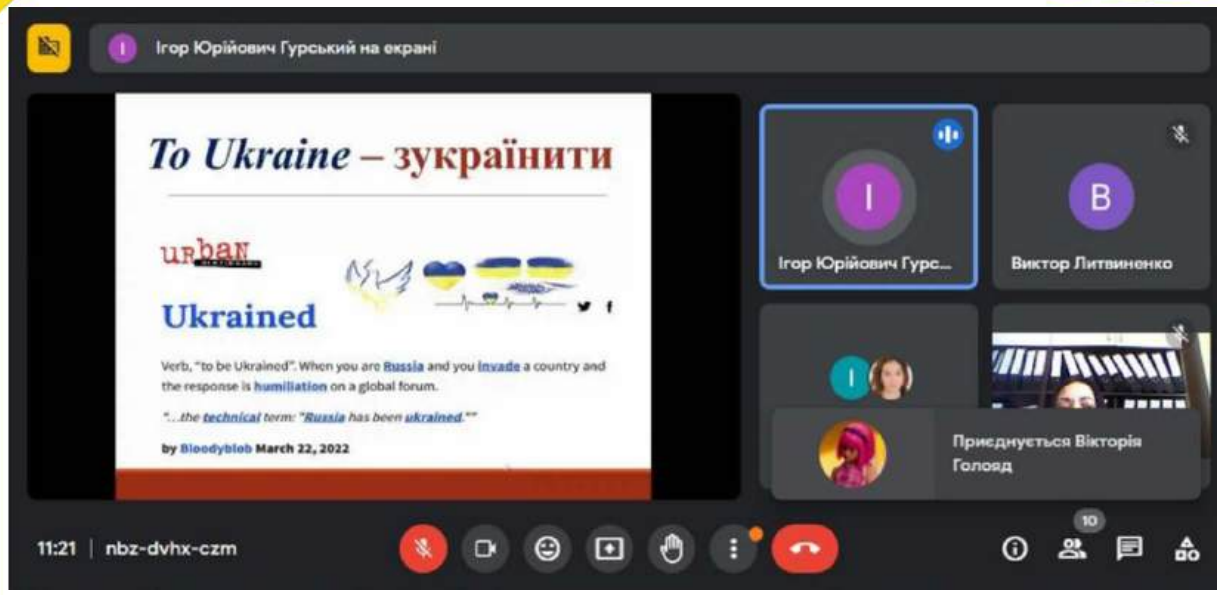


Visual 2. Students of FFL making Christmas Wreaths in December, 2024.

Such an approach to shaping national identity in English studies brings more focus on Ukrainian culture and societal events from the Ukrainian perspective and the international one. It helps students understand Ukraine's local cultural and societal dynamics. That includes exploring the national language, history, literature, and historical events that have dramatically influenced the country's past, present and future. Such focus also enables the students to realise how these factors shape the communicative practices of Ukrainians with the outside world.

A remarkable feature of the ELS is the broad maintenance of relations and socialisation with local communities through TV shows or radio broadcasts dedicated to novelties in the spheres of people's social interaction or intercultural communication. Such activities attract the attention of the locals and initiate discussions on topical issues. Media platforms are considered to be the best tools to spread and disseminate the research results. Still, such a practice is not developed at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Uman, Ukraine. However, some shorts about the events at the Faculty are regularly broadcast on social media. This is done for advertising rather than transferring progressive ideas to the local community.

In this regard, teachers in Uman focus on how national identity is presented in media. During the English classes, they explore with their students how Ukrainian national identity is portrayed and communicated through various media, including television, print, and social media in English. Such an activity and project work became especially topical with the break of the war in Ukraine.



Visual 3. A class featuring new cultural and social realia during the Russian-Ukrainian war (FFL)

Another strong aspect of building trust, mutual respect and understanding in the local community in Uman is regular participation in the vivid multinational life of the town. Faculty representatives, professors, and students actively participate in international events, meetings, and celebrations of the Jewish community and the society of sister towns, as well as at the town hall level.

Besides, both institutions provide courses in English to other faculties, such as history and philosophy. Thus, in English classes, the learners develop specific presentations on the history of Estonia or Ukraine. Some topics may seem especially provocative for Russian and Estonian cohorts of students in Tallinn. The instructors observe specific emotional reactions and sensitive comments provided in the students' feedback. For instance, discussions about the Soviet times are sometimes vulnerable for Estonian students, provoking some psychological defensive mechanisms (mentions of *Snegurochka, Ded Moroz, Red Star*, etc.), while the mentions of the European Vector of Estonian politics are quite triggering for the Russian students. That is the reason why English instructors try to avoid discussions about extremely sensitive topics for Russian students in case such representatives are in the auditorium. Some political or historical topics can provoke some special reactions from the students (e.g. *why May 9 is no longer a Victory Day but a Day of Europe, "grey passport" to Russians in Estonia*, etc.). Thus, a large percentage of Russian-speaking nationals influences the interaction in the international English classroom of the Tallinn University. These students are usually of Russian descent.

The Head of Juri Lotman Semiotic Repository at Tallinn University, Merit Maran, explains the above-given situation with the following historical

circumstances, which predetermined such an influence of Russian-speaking identities on education in Estonia and the interaction of different national identities. So, nationalism is regarded from the perspective of a "black and white" past where there was much pain associated with the Russian occupation of Estonia. This painful memory work was extremely active after the fall of the USSR in the 1990s and 2000s. That is the reason why children of the 1990s are considered as those with so-called "black and white" identities, meaning "Russian" is bad while "Estonian" is good. Still, there have been some attempts to include pro-Russian narratives in Estonian politics and education.

Another problem, which nowadays results in low involvement of Estonia-related materials in English studies, was once predetermined by the fact that shaping Estonian identity after the independence was proclaimed was done mainly by enforcing speaking the Estonian language but not communicating and including culture a lot. The manuals gradually became in the Estonian language but with little cultural context. Still, the situation has been constantly improving. Even the Tallinn school for Ukrainian children of war refugees offers a wide range of activities, resources, and events that can help the schoolchildren understand Estonian identity and quickly integrate into society. Although the situation has improved, the English classroom is still poor in Estonian cultural components.

In 2023, another step forward to accentuate Estonian identity was made. A new law was passed to close all Russian schools, and all Russian-speaking teachers must be certified to the appropriate level of the Estonian language if they are willing to continue working at schools. Such a decision can reduce the number of teaching staff and worsen the complicated situation as the schools lack teachers. Some interviewees claimed that the war in Ukraine provoked such a situation. Thus, the Estonian government decided not to tolerate the influence of pro-Russian groups on society's social and educational development. Eventually, Estonian-oriented views and politics can sometimes turn into a more conservative approach to protect the country's national identity and independence.

Finally, the interviewees were asked the question, *"How can we develop the national and international components of a student's identity in the English classroom more effectively?"* The answers can be organised into the following steps to reach the objective of a self-aware cultural identity of a student tolerant to other nationals and successful in intercultural communication:

I. Introducing core texts about the Estonian and Ukrainian cultures in English classroom (these can be national fairy tales, classical works by famous writers, publicistic narratives, and ethnographic discoveries, etc.);

II. Allocating money to renew the libraries' resources to include modern works on national and international cultural components of learning English by the other nationals;

III. Providing more general reading, video and listening about national and international peculiarities of Ukraine or Estonia along with English-speaking countries and other global contexts in the English language;

IV. Giving more cross-cultural analysis for a deeper understanding of your own identity and the national peculiarities of others;

V. Forming open-minded identities (those who know and understand their national identity well and are open to other cultures and national identities);

VI. Tolerance for people of other cultures.

Conclusions. Both institutions focus on English language proficiency and shaping students' identities differently. They employ specific tools to build local and national cultural understanding. It means strengthening students' command of English and promoting an awareness of the national context in which they live, or English is used, particularly concerning Ukraine's and Estonia's multilingual and multicultural societies. The students at both institutions are open to cultural diversity and communication. They learn how language and communication practices differ across cultures, helping them understand how to navigate communication in international settings. This involves studying verbal and non-verbal communication nuances and cultural assumptions and values.

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