

USING INNOVATIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS IN TEACHING EUROPEAN STUDIES IN GEORGIA

Abstract

European Studies have been taught in the Georgian universities across the country for almost two decades. As a result, there is a vast range of pedagogical practice in this area. Nevertheless, teaching European Studies has never been an easy exercise due to teacher-oriented, rather than student-oriented teaching. This was further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic when a face-to-face component of teaching was reduced to no or very limited forms of direct communication.

More and more faculties in Georgia realize in a slow and painstaking manner that course activities in European Studies should be held by a mixture of teaching and learning methods designed for the groups with various backgrounds, using the opportunities offered by modern technologies. Indeed, despite existing challenges in teaching European Studies, interactive and innovative ways of learning, including by incorporating technology and game-based learning platforms and applications such as Kahoot and Quizlet, allow a more balanced approach, facilitate an interesting and engaging learning experience, develop necessary skills, and ensure the achievement of the course and program goals.

This paper looks at these innovative teaching and learning methods and tools that, although widely used in European and U.S. respectable universities, only now start to emerge in Georgia's high education institutions. In particular, it looks at the author's experiences in teaching European Studies in Georgia, and offers relevant recommendations.

Keywords: Innovative teaching methods, teaching European Studies, Georgia

Introduction

European Studies have been taught in the Georgian universities across the country for almost two decades.

Initially brought into curricula of Tbilisi State University by western-educated wonks of European Studies back in early 2000s when the EU has still been far from hearts and minds of many Georgians, EU-related subjects (such as EU governance, history, law, policies, theories) are now an integral part of every faculty of law, international relations, political sciences, social sciences, humanities, and economics of universities from Telavi to Batumi, from Tbilisi to Zugdidi, from Akhaltsikhe to Kutaisi. European Studies are taught to students but also to pupils of various age as part of awareness raising campaigns, UNICEF projects, short modules and crash courses of universities, schools, the Erasmus Plus Jean Monnet Activities or civil society organizations. As a result, there is a vast range of pedagogical practice in this area.

Nevertheless, teaching European Studies has never been an easy exercise due to teacher-oriented, rather than student-oriented teaching. It has recently further been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic when a face-to-face component of teaching was reduced to no or very limited forms of direct communication. It made the student engagement a mere formality while the richness and benefits of teaching process as well as emotional exchange related to face-to-face teaching are lost to black screens of computers during online sessions.

This paper looks at these innovative teaching and learning methods and tools both in academic literature as well as in practice, its advantages and disadvantages, and related challenges. It also suggest several recommendations for improving the class dynamics of teaching European Studies.

¹ Associate Professor at European University, Invited Professor at the TSU Institute for European Studies, E-mail: levanmakhashvili@gmail.com

Literature Review

Before I move to teaching European Studies in Georgia, it is necessary to clarify several terms and concepts.

European Studies is considered as the „analysis of national and transnational changes on the European continent, with an emphasis on the European integration and European construction as a central theme“ (Buda, 2019, p. 1). For Maastricht University’s bachelor programme, European Studies is all about “insights and methods from history, political science, international relations, law, economics, philosophy, and sociology” of Europe and European integration (Maastricht University, 2022).

By teaching I mean its three dimensions (based on Shennan, 1986): first, „the knowledge that students must have“; second, „the skills they need to assume“; and third, „the attitudes and values that must be transmitted by the studies about Europe“ (Buda, 2019, p. 3). It echoes all three goals of the European Studies programme at the Institute of European Studies of Tbilisi State University, together with the fourth goal – to facilitate public awareness on the EU, support establishment of European values in Georgia and promote European Studies in Georgia and the wider region).

In particular, as Maastricht University puts it in its European Studies programme description, it “trains you to become a critical thinker who can understand, analyse and explain complex current problems at the European level from various disciplinary perspectives” (Maastricht University, 2022). In the same spirit, the master’s programme of the Institute for European Studies of Tbilisi State University aims “to provide students with in-depth interdisciplinary knowledge of EU issues (law, politics, economy, history and culture), incorporating also Eastern European issues (present and expected links with EU)” (Institute for European Studies, 2022).

Teaching European Studies has never been an easy exercise due to teacher-oriented, rather than student-oriented teaching. The teacher-oriented teaching is a Soviet legacy that still has solid grounds in Georgia. In this model, the teacher stands in the centre of an education process and his/her conveyed knowledge is factual or declarative. The process is implemented based on a scenario strictly planned by the teacher, and the interest, capability, free thinking and cooperative attitude of and with a pupil is ignored. The learning process is a monotonous and tiresome routine and does not serve the development of a pupil’s interest. To the contrary, the student-oriented teaching places a student in the centre of the education process – learning process centres in, on and with students. A student leads the lesson himself/herself in the conditions of teacher’s facilitation and mutual cooperation while taking his/her cognitive capabilities and individual interests into consideration. The education activity in such circumstances is a permanent approximation towards the student’s life experience, whereas the obtained knowledge is functional and dynamic. In parallel to permanent mutual cooperation between a teacher and a class, a student presents a problem and freely expresses his/her opinion, which is shared by a teacher and peers. The knowledge is not conveyed automatically but rather the student arrives at the new knowledge by step-by-step and systematic discoveries. Hi/she thinks creatively and critically, and his/her interests are taking into consideration as much as possible in the process (Makhashvili *et al.*, 2021, p. 26; Norton *et al.*, 2005; Neumann, 2013). The transition from the traditional role of a teacher as a knowledge provider to a facilitator of the learning process (Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999) has accelerated since the 2004 with the inclusion of Georgia in the Bologna Process.

Selecting relevant pedagogical approaches is important because as Maurer & Lightfoot (2013) highlight, the questions of „how students learn and how we teach“ matter. Proper teaching methods often determine the level of students’ engagement in learning, and the intended learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2007) as well as „ensure that students have both knowledge and transferable real-world skills“ (Timus, 2014), which in turn, further facilitates employability of the students on an increasingly competitive labor market. This is especially true about deep learning process – making students to develop practical connections with the knowledge acquired rather than simply (re)producing materials is a daunting and challenging task.

Hanna and Silver (2000) study active teaching and find out that innovative, student-oriented methods like simulations, learning games, team work, project or work-based learning, expert sessions, field-work (e.g. excursions), internship/student’s volunteering, and peer-tutoring facilitate students’ active involvement in the process. Similar conclusions are made by other researchers exploring student-oriented pedagogical approaches in European Studies in the EU member states (Baroncelli, Fonti & Stevancevic, 2014; Fonti & Stevancevic, 2014).

Timus, Cebotari & Hosein (2016) argue that practical application of student-oriented approaches in teaching

European Studies varies and depends on several factors. First, higher academic position of a teacher gives him/her „more time and ‘safer’ opportunity... to engage in experimenting with innovative teaching methods“ (p. 656). Indeed, new academic staff often prefer to go ‘classic’ or ‘safe’ in hope of avoiding mistakes and not risking his/her academic career. As a result, the researchers assume that having professional stability, greater access to university’s financial resources and wider network of contacts, senior professors are more likely to use innovative teaching methods. Second, class size matters. Active teaching requires high-level student engagement and practice. Suitable learning environment can more easily be created with smaller number of students rather than by working with large groups. Thus, they believe the smaller the size of the class, the higher the use of innovative teaching methods. And finally, Timus, Cebotari & Hosein (2016) find that teachers employ „on average three or more innovative teaching methods in programs pertaining to European Studies“ (p. 663). This is normal as you can increase your coverage of engagement of more students and more often by using several innovative teaching methods.

Using innovative teaching and learning methods has its disadvantages too. It can be time consuming as teachers themselves often need to learn how to use the methods. It is also problematic to apply the methods in large groups (as it is usually the case in many Georgia’s higher educational institutions). In addition, using innovative teaching methods needs suitable environment and culture in universities – academic and administrative staff must be trained to properly communicate, manage expectations and relations with students. Moreover, relevant culture and profound changes are needed in order to streamline educational system so that innovative teaching methods are not unfamiliar or surprise for pupils once they become students. This is a very long and often politically-laden process with unclear results in the end. However, it is worth doing as it ensures deeper learning and provides more opportunities for achieving intended learning outcomes.

Teaching European Studies in Georgia

More and more faculties in Georgia realize in a slow and painstaking manner that sessions in European Studies should be held by a mixture of teaching and learning methods designed for the groups with various backgrounds, using the opportunities offered by modern technologies. Indeed, despite existing challenges in teaching European Studies, interactive and innovative ways of learning, including by incorporating technology and game-based learning platforms and applications such as Kahoot and Quizlet as well as various student-oriented teaching methods like problem-based learning, allow a more balanced approach, facilitate an interesting and engaging learning experience, develop necessary skills, and ensure the achievement of the course and program goals. Although widely used in European and U.S. respectable universities, these innovative teaching and learning methods and tools only now start to emerge in Georgia’s higher education institutions.

Recommendations

I myself have been engaged in many of these activities since 2011, collecting necessary experience to share as well as to suggest relevant recommendations for improvement of teaching European Studies.

Over 10 years’ experience of teaching European Studies in various universities, age groups, class sizes, nationalities, languages, countries and regions shows that problem-based learning and blended learning (face-to-face and distance learning) together with innovative learning methods using technology offer the best results in terms of achieving intended learning goals.

In particular, having this experience as well as the academic literature in mind, I have concluded to use the following methods and approaches in a teaching process in order to achieve the best possible results in terms of intended learning outcomes:

First, all lectures are led by various technologies. Power Point Presentations are used to provide key messages on the subject together with various types of visuals, faces of personalities who played significant positive or negative role in the European integration process or currently lead EU institutions, photos, pictures, and videos. Students vary in their ability to learn via various teaching methods. Visualizations of the conveyed information provide great benefit to teaching and help students digest the cognitive knowledge.

More importantly, using game-based learning platforms significantly increase students’ participation and success rate of learning. In particular, I frequently use Kahoot and its user-generated multiple-choice quizzes

to review and check students' knowledge, increase their involvement in a teaching process and facilitate teamwork (by often breaking them up in smaller teams). It can be used both in Georgian and English languages, thus allowing me to work with all groups. It is possible to add pictures, gifs and YouTube videos to the questions. Students can also create quizzes themselves to share with their peers which is important for further developing creativity, thus, providing more educational value. Sometimes, I replace Kahoot with Quizlet that offers similar experiences for quizzes.

In essence, in order to open Kahoot, students need to log into the system (www.kahoot.it) using an auto-generated game number in their mobiles or computers, write down their nickname and click for start. Correct and faster answers are awarded by points indicated by a teacher during developing a quiz. A question is visible on a large screen with (typically) multiple answers in various colours and graphical symbols, while students need to answer by choosing the colour and symbol as soon as possible. Kahoot can be played in individual or team vs team modes. In the end the quiz game shows the winners of first three places based on their accumulated points.

Georgian universities provide Wi-Fi in their campuses. Therefore, in modern era of mobiles, Kahoot is a good tool for engaging students with their own mobiles without loosing them in surfing in internet during lectures.

Since Kahoot can be used via screen-sharing using Zoom, Google Hangout or Microsoft Teams, it has been a great help during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, Kahoot has proved its effectiveness particularly with lower age groups. My experience demonstrates that pupils absorb information better with the learning games than traditional classroom activities.

Usage of Kahoot is a time-consuming exercise for starters as its development takes time and energy. However, you can use quiz templates in other courses and years. More importantly, the research suggests that Kahoot has a profoundly positive impact on concentration, engagement, enjoyment, perceived learning, subjective motivation and effort, and classroom dynamics (Wang & Lieberoth, 2016). This ultimately helps meet intended learning outcomes and program goals.

Second, together with traditional teaching and learning methods, I often use Problem-Based Learning or its modifications during my courses. As a Maastricht University alumnus, I appreciate benefits of PBL in knowledge acquisition, enhanced group collaboration and communication – much needed real-life skills and attributes. For this reason, seminars often look like auditoriums or computer screens with smaller teams in all corners. I offer my role of facilitator, guide, supporter or monitor of the learning process.

Teaching PBL is a time consuming process, as it requires more time for preparation and more energy to work with many small groups (rather than one big group). However, it ultimately brings better results.

Third, teamwork is observed beyond PBL too. Students always work in team during my courses – be it a joint homework, joint presentations, short 15 minutes' teamwork for particular seminar task, etc. It allows students to acquire knowledge but also develop much-needed teambuilding, teamwork, communication and presentation skills.

Fourth, students read materials before they come to seminars so that they already have general cognitive knowledge about the issue. It allows a teacher to delve deeper in the analysis and encourage more in-depth student discussions.

Fifth, lectures are not lecture-led tedious monologues. Every lecture contains tens of questions on factual data but also student's opinions on various EU-related events, developments, institutions or personalities. Students react by suggesting their opinions, arguing against or for each other's comments by arguments. I stand in guidance of these discussions to ensure that they remain within the limits of the asked topic. Such approach facilitates interactive lecturing and increases students' engagement.

Sixth, students do small researches individually or in-group, and present their results before audience. This exercise promotes research and communication skills. Their peers are asked to assess the research results and presentations with proper justification. Sometimes the student is also asked to provide an assessment on his/her own performance.

Seventh, apart from classic elements of assessment tools such as multi-choice tests, I offer open questions where students need to provide their opinions or comments on certain issues rather than simply finding answers in reading materials. I find this particularly useful to assess students' performance in acquiring knowledge.

My observation also suggests that teaching European Studies by using the innovative teaching and learning methods is more feasible and has better results with graduate (MA or PhD) students and those who have already studied via innovative teaching methods. Indeed, they already have certain level of knowledge of European Studies and are adapted to active learning methods, thus a teacher can more actively apply innovative methods for further generating knowledge and skills.

Challenges

There have been several challenges related to using student-focused innovative teaching and learning methods in teaching European Studies in Georgia. Let me highlight the two most important of them here.

First, the Georgian education system has had troubles even before the pandemic in terms of fully transitioning from teacher-oriented to student-oriented system. New school-graduates have come to higher education institutions with no or little knowledge and experience of student-focused, active, innovative learning methods. It usually takes 1-2 semesters to adapt to the new methods for some, while others struggle until the end of the programme. It is therefore of utmost importance to change the entire education system rather than introducing a student-focused approach only to several courses or programmes.

Several steps have recently been made towards this direction. In particular, initiated in 2019, the so-called New School Model aims at changing certain aspects of school management as well as teaching and learning of secondary education. It “envisages strengthening of human capital, student-centred assessment methodology, cooperative culture, and team work based on a high sense of responsibility” (Makhashvili, *et al.*, 2021, p. 24). It “intends to develop a new mode of school and curriculum management which views a person/learner as the core of all educational activities. Accordingly, the reform aims at creating an educational environment, which will equip learners/students with relevant knowledge and skills necessary to overcome challenges of the 21st century and to fully realise one’s potential (Makhashvili, *et al.*, 2021, p. 24).

Spreading of the New School Model or similar methods across all schools of Georgia will over time produce school-graduates who are familiar to the student-oriented innovative teaching and learning methods and tools, and do not spend time and energy in the adaptation process in universities. In turn, it will improve the teaching and learning quality in higher educational institutions.

Second, the Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the teaching and learning process, including in the field of European Studies. This is especially true to first-year students who did not have an opportunity to feel and enjoy all the benefits of classroom activities of student-focused teaching², and instead were destined to watching cold screens of or just listening to voices of teachers from their computers or mobiles. Indeed, it was very little time to swiftly adapt to online teaching, and as my personal experience at several universities in Georgia showed, many elderly teachers refused to teach for one or two semesters until they learned how to use online teaching technology.

Conclusion

This paper does not suggest that imposing uniformity and a one-size-fits-all approach in teaching European Studies is a preferable solution. Indeed, teaching and learning approaches differ, and this richness is an integral part of the teaching European Studies. It is natural as universities, their academic environment and teaching culture, background and experiences of teachers, regions and many other factors differ.

This paper only intends to propose several methods based on the author’s extensive experience in teaching European Studies across Georgia and different contexts that have brought positive results in terms of meeting intended teaching and learning outcomes. While the best alternatives may vary from country to country and from area to area, the paper only suggests that the above-mentioned mixed methods and tools offer the best results in my experience in terms of achieving intended learning goals in teaching European Studies in Georgia.

Fine-tuning of teaching methods and or more in-depth assessment of success rates of teaching European Studies in Georgia might be a topic of further research.

² In theory this could be embraced in a distance learning as well. However, the Georgian case of the Covid-19 pandemic period demonstrates that the benefits are usually attributed to classroom activities, and distance learning rarely provides the engaging experience.

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