

## CULTURE INTEGRATION INTO ELT: ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS AND THEIR TEACHING PRACTICES<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In today's world, English has become the global language that helps different cultures communicate each other. As a consequence of this globalization, culture has become an inseparable aspect of English language teaching (ELT). In line with this paradigm shift, many studies have investigated the role and importance of culture in ELT context. One of the most explored topics is language instructors' perceptions of culture integration into ELT classes. However, few studies question whether their perceptions accord with the actual practices in classrooms. In this regard, the present study attempts to explore what English language instructors' perceptions of culture and culture teaching in language classes are, and whether they are able to reflect these perceptions in their actual teaching practices. The study also attempts to show the possible factors that may impede the instructors' applications of culture teaching. The participants were 10 English language instructors at a Turkish state university. Data were gathered via 10 classroom observations and two semi structured interviews carried out before and after the observations. Content analysis was conducted for analysing and interpreting the qualitative data. The findings revealed that the instructors considered culture integration significant in ELT classrooms. However, during their practice they mostly employed very short discussions that compare local and target culture. Besides, their practices were limited to the course book they use as they are obliged to implement a pre-planned syllabus. This study has significant implications for curriculum designers, material developers, language instructors, and language learners.

**Keywords:** *English language teaching, globalization, cultures, perception, teaching practice.*

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## **1. Introduction**

“Yesterday I was clever I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise I am changing myself.”

— Rumi

Culture has been one of the most important and broadest topics investigated by different research fields for several decades. Scholars from various disciplines have provided different definitions to explain the concept. However, Spencer-Oatey (2012) states that it is a challenging task since how it is defined can change according to different disciplines. On the effort to define culture, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (as cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012), presented a list involving 164 different definitions. For instance, Hofstede (1994) defines culture as ‘...the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.’ (p. 5) According to Matsumoto (1996) culture is ‘... the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.’ (p. 16). Spence-Oatey (2000) explains culture as “... a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions, and basic assumptions and values that is shared by a group of people, and that influences each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people's behaviour.” (p. 4). In most of these definitions, some common characteristics of culture leap out. According to Danesi and Perron, (1999) these common characteristics are that it has been“(1) ... a way of life based on some system of shared meanings; and (2) passed on from generation to generation through this very system” (p. 22).

In the field of English language teaching (ELT), culture has also gained an important place for the last few decades. Initially, behind this interest lied a vital question: Should culture be taught in language classes? In this regard, the notion of culture teaching emerged especially with the concept of communicative language teaching. In this view, culture integrated into ELT classes is the culture of English-speaking countries, namely target culture (Clandfield, 2008). Kachru (1985) defines these countries as inner-circle countries such as the UK, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. However, this perspective of communicative language teaching has been criticised for not reflecting the “complexity of the modern global and multilingual world” (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 279). For instance, Alptekin (2002) criticized the traditional perspective of communicative competence in terms of its “strict adherence” to native speaker norms resulting in emphasizing merely the target culture (p. 63). According to Alptekin (2002), such an emphasis would not help learners use English effectively in cross cultural environments. Such criticism has led to the emergence of the notion of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and the concept has gained great significance in ELT context. Meyer (1991) identifies intercultural competence as “the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures” (p. 137). Byram (1997) defines ICC as “...to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language...” (p. 71). Although the definitions have been provided in order to conceptualize the term and the concept has quickly become popular, it could not fully embrace the non-natives and the encounters between them since it has not considered that the language spoken throughout a communication may be foreign to both speakers (Abad, 2013). As a consequence of this incomplete perception, it could not fully grasp today's multicultural

state. Therefore, Meyer (1991), one of the several scholars engaged in studying cultural competence, has categorized it into three groups in terms of intercultural performance. The first category is monocultural category that refers to the learners who reach cultural understand through their own native culture. The second category is intercultural category which represents the learners who can distinguish between foreign culture and native culture. The final category is transcultural category where the learners can completely understand values and perceptions of different cultures, and “resolve cultural problems” so that they can “stand above” their native culture and other foreign cultures (Meyer, 1991, p. 142-143). As can be understood from these three perceptions, what really fits in today’s globalized world is the transcultural category as it is not bidirectional, but multidirectional.

Recent developments and changes especially in technology, especially easier transportation beyond borders and the invention of the Internet, increased immigration and international trade have brought people from different regional, cultural, ethnical and religious backgrounds together. More importantly, these encounters, as we know of statistically today, do not necessarily occur between natives (people who use English as their mother tongue) and non-natives (people who use English as a second or foreign language). On the contrary, encounters between non-natives are much more frequent. Abad (2013) states that 329 million people speak English as their mother tongue, 430 million people speak English as a second language and 750 million people have learnt English as a foreign language with different levels of proficiency. In this context, English has gained an international significance and thus become the international language which bridges different cultures and enables them to communicate regardless of mother tongue differences especially between non-natives. Hence, in such a fused environment, it is noteworthy to query whether focusing on merely the target culture addresses the need of English language learners to function competently in such cross cultural environments. Today, most scholars have agreed that gaining specific foreign language skills is not alone adequate for successful communication in such a multicultural global world (Jacob, Juan-Garau, & Prieto-Arranz, 2013). People also need to display “global cultural skills” which can be defined as being “aware of other world views, knowledge of how other languages work and how people from diverse cultural backgrounds may use language according to their specific cultural upbringings” (Jacob, Juan-Garau, & Prieto-Arranz, 2013, p. 291). As a result of this shift in perception, the concept of transcultural communicative competence (TCC) has recently started to be used frequently in the field. In TCC the concept of cultural sensitivity is one of the core principal distinguishing intercultural speakers from transcultural speakers. Thompson (2011) states the distinction between intercultural communication and transcultural communication in terms of “movement” and “flow” (p. 207). According to Thompson (2011), transcultural communication is a “multidirectional movement, flow and mixing” while intercultural communication emphasizes “bi-directionality, stasis and separation” (p. 207).

With TCC, other new concepts have also taken attention: transcultural awareness and transcultural identity. Neulip and McCrosky (1997) explains transcultural awareness as the “awareness developed through exposure to beliefs, values and norms of other cultures and the ability to communicate competently and in a sensitive manner with people from other “cultural, ethnic, religious or regional backgrounds”(p. 390). As Abad (2013) states it is an essential competence in today’s multicultural environment as individual’s behaviours have impact on communicative contexts. Abad (2013) also highlights the importance of gaining a world-identity, also referred as transcultural identity, described as “a cultural identity which is not exclusively constrained by nationality”, and it is the outcome of “transcultural formation” (p. 64). One can only achieve transcultural identity

by breaking stereotypical ideas, prejudices and revising one's world view (Abad, 2013). Thus, another vital question inevitably arises: Which culture should be taught in ELT classes? This question has contributed to the debates on which culture to integrate into ELT classes in order to create transcultural awareness and transcultural identity in a globalized context. In this regard, re-evaluating the existing models in English language teaching (ELT) field and developing these models in accordance with the changing demand of today's world have become vitally significant as ELT profession cannot be dissociated from the realities of the world where the notion of global education has incrementally been expressed (Tomalin, 2008).

Perceptions of culture have been investigated among different groups. Some studies have been conducted with EFL learners (Devrim & Bayyurt, 2010; Lai, 2013). These studies have revealed that EFL would like to see aspects of not only target culture but also local and world cultures in classes and materials. Some other studies conducted with teachers and academicians have revealed that teachers and university professors are aware of the importance of teaching and integrating culture in foreign language classes and they are willing to engage in culture teaching (Atay et al., 2009; Hun, 2009; Gönen & Sağlam, 2012; Barzegar & Afghari, 2015; Monfared, Mozaheb & Shaitabar, 2016; Yılmaz & Özkan 2015; Yılmaz, 2016). However, a gap between the perceptions and actual classroom practices has also been discovered (Atay et al., 2009; Hun, 2009; Gönen & Sağlam, 2012; Osman, 2015; Zare, Nemati & Jafarian, 2015). Different studies have investigated the reasons behind this gap. These reason can be listed as 1) the curricular considerations and limitations, (Gönen & Sağlam, 2012; Osman, 2015) 2) highly examination-based environment and academic qualifications and experience of teachers in the classroom (Barzegar & Afghari, 2015), and 3) ELT materials especially the ones published in the USA or UK, which generally promote the cultures associated with English-speaking countries and have a tendency to neglect third world cultures, lacking in glocal aspect of English and in blending of cultures (Wandel, 2003; Monfared, Mozaheb & Shaitabar, 2016). In addition to these findings, some research also found out that teacher's filters and their culture concept are important factors in culture teaching. For example, when a teacher views culture as daily life, his/her culture teaching in the classroom may depend on some cultural anecdotes based on personal experiences (Ryan, 1994). As Byram and Risager (1999) states when a teacher focuses on national culture, he/she may limit culture teaching only with the aspects in the course books and may not feel the urge to move beyond the course books. According to Zare, Nemati and Jafarian (2015), another factor that affects culture teaching in classrooms is the preferred teaching approach. For example some teachers may utilize a linguistic-oriented approach and some teachers may not consider cultural knowledge necessary.

This descriptive study, taking the concept "transcultural awareness" into consideration, aims to explore instructors' perception of culture integration into ELT classes and whether their practices are in line with their ideas. The significance of this study lies within the transcultural perception it holds because especially in the national scope few studies explored culture, culture teaching and university instructors' perceptions of it from the transcultural perspective. Three research questions guided the study:

1. What are the English language instructors' perceptions of culture integration into ELT?
2. Are English language instructors' actual teaching practices in line with their elicited perceptions?
3. What factors, if any, may prevent English language instructors' practices from being in line with their perceptions?

## 2. Methodology

### Participants

The participants in this study (n=10; one male and nine females; age range: 25-43) were all English language instructors working full-time in Academy of Foreign languages in a state university. They were all teaching to preparatory students and following a pre-planned syllabus based on a course book by a well-known British Publisher. The course book includes listening, reading, speaking, writing skills and grammar topics. All the participants were teaching in preparatory classes between 20-24 hours in a week. Educational background of the participants varied regarding their BA degrees. Four of the participants graduated from linguistics department, one instructor graduated from literature, four instructors graduated from ELT and one graduated from translation department of different universities. As for the graduate degrees, three of the participants had already an MA degree, two of them were still doing MA studies, and one was doing Ph.D. studies during the present study.

### Data collection tools and procedure

As for the data collection tools, semi-structured interviews and classroom observation checklist were used (see App. A & App. B). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a one-to-one fashion before and after the classroom observations. Pre-interviews lasted about 100 minutes in total; 8 to 10 minutes per participant, and the post interviews lasted about 50 minutes in total; 4 to 5 minutes per participant. They were audio recorded in order to gain better insights of participants' comments and enhance validity. Also, the recorded interviews were listened twice in order to make sure that no points were missed. The classroom observation checklist was used during the observation of 10 classes. Each observation lasted 80 minutes which was a block scheduling.

## 3. Findings

Content analysis of the transcribed data revealed five categories and related themes for each. One of the interview questions posed to the instructors was *What do you think culture is? and How do you define culture?* This question revealed the first category, namely *definition of culture*. As presented in Table 1, the descriptive analysis showed that the instructors defined culture as *life styles* (f=40%), *norms* (F=30%), *material and sentimental values* (f=20%), and *communication* (f=10%).

**Table 1. Definition of culture and related themes**

Category 1	Themes	f	%
Definition of culture	1. Communication	1	10
	2. Life styles	4	40
	3. Material and sentimental values	2	20
	4. Norms	3	30

Below are presented the participants' verbatim statements highlighting the themes related to Category 1:

**7:** "I think culture is what enables communication most between societies. Both between the same and different societies."

**5:** "Culture is a broad concept. It includes lots of things. It includes life styles in a country, even in different regions of that country."

**4:** "Culture is all the material and sentimental values of a nation...life styles and the emotions that give national unification."

**3:** “To put in the simplest way...the way we greet, the way we speak to the elderly or the young...”

**10:** “I think culture is what we call life styles of different societies.”

Another question asked to the instructors was *do you think culture teaching is important in ELT classes?* This question revealed the second category which was *role and importance of culture in ELT classes*. As shown in Table 2, the majority of the instructors approved the importance of culture teaching in ELT classes. The reasons they stated were that culture teaching *enhances language learning* (f=30%), *increases motivation* (F=20%), prepares students for real life situations (f=20%), and changes students’ point of view (f=20%). However, one of the instructors stated that culture teaching was *not important* in ELT classes (f= 10%).

**Table 2. Importance of culture in ELT classes and related themes**

<b>Category 2</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
Importance of culture in ELT classes	1. Increases motivation	2	20
	2. Prepares Ss for real life situations	2	20
	3. Enhances language learning	3	30
	4. Changes Ss’ point of view	2	20
	5. Not important	1	10

Below are given the instructors’ verbatim statements highlighting the themes related to Category 2:

**3:** “We send some of our students abroad. I think it is important for them to know certain basic habits at first.”

**1:** “It is important to understand and learn the language...to comprehend the language better.”

**7:** “Yes, I think it is important because it changes the students’ point of view. If they know different cultures or if they have any idea, as it is not possible to know completely, but even if they have any idea it changes their point of view.”

**10:** “I think it is very important. I think it has a positive effect in increasing motivation because when students witness the examples from different cultures, this may arouse curiosity”

Below is the verbatim taken from the interview of the instructor who stated that culture was not important in ELT classes.

**2:** “I believe there are more preferential aspects in language teaching, for example, proficiency in skills. If they have a good proficiency, they can survive in a different culture because I always think that when a foreigner comes to our country and does not behave accordingly we do not judge him/ her. I believe this same thing is valid when we go abroad.”

During the interviews instructors were asked the question *which culture do you think should be integrated into ELT classes?* This question revealed the third category, which *culture to teach in ELT classes*. Table 3 presents this category and related themes. As can

be seen, the majority of the instructors (f=70%) stated that *target culture*, esp. British, was to be taught, because English language was the language they were teaching. In addition, some instructors found it utopian to integrate *world cultures*. However, some of the instructors (f=30%) world cultures should be integrated into ELT classes.

**Table 3. Different cultures in ELT context and related themes**

Category 3	Themes	f	%
Different cultures in ELT context	1. Target culture	7	70
	2. World cultures	3	30

Below is given the instructors' verbatim statements emphasizing the themes related to Category 3:

**10:** "I prefer world cultures...I see that our books are dense with English culture ... I observe that it doesn't include world cultures adequately. Mainly it deals with target culture...I believe the examples of world cultures are inadequate."

**1:** "As we are teaching English, I think it should be target culture."

**4:** "The culture of the language he/she is learning should be integrated."

**7:** "I think world cultures. Although we are imposed the cultures of English speaking countries, I think it is beautiful to learn even the tiniest thing about Africa. So I prefer world cultures, to change the students' point of view...Turkish culture can also be reflected in course books...Not only Turkish culture. I can learn English culture and Canada and I can learn Italian culture or French culture. I can learn all through English language. I prefer that."

**6:** "Now, in the literature it is world cultures. But the course books we use mainly focus on target culture especially British. The previous course book we used was almost completely target culture-focused. This one contains some elements from world cultures but it is still very few."

**2:** "It is utopian to integrate world cultures. Some aspects of target culture, British culture I mean, is enough. And we have that in our course books."

The question *How do you think culture should be taught in ELT classes?* was also asked to the instructors. Hence, the fourth category which was related to *teaching practices involving cultural elements* was revealed. As can be seen in Table 4, the instructors stated two types of learning: *task-based learning* (f=60%) and *blended learning* (f=40%).

**Table 4. Teaching practices and related themes**

Category 4	Themes	f	%
Teaching practices	1. Task based learning	6	60
	2. Blended learning	4	40

Following verbatim statements of the instructors' highlight the themes related to Category 4:

**10:** "As we are in the technology era, I could benefit ... from videos or CDs. Short films also tell a lot; French, Italian, Indian. It can arouse students' attention via technology...I can give them the opportunity to compare and discuss what they watched with their own culture and other world cultures...I can use pre, while, after watching sessions."

**3:** "I would use reading texts...I would prefer it to be communicative... I would use discussions a lot ...The students can be given responsibilities...they can search the topic."

The analysis of the observation checklist revealed that none of the instructors were able to implement any culture teaching in their actual practices though they stated the importance of culture integration. They mostly asked a few questions about the topic related to target culture (transportation, food, films...etc.) and also asked about the differences between target and local culture. They utilized this question-answer sessions mostly as a warm-up before or as a close-up after a skill section in the course book. They were not able to implement any blended or task based learning for culture teaching in actual practice. As a result of this, the final interview question was posed to the instructors "What factors do you think prevent the instructors from integrating culture teaching into their classes?" Hence, the fifth category, *obstacles in dealing with culture*, was revealed with four related themes. As can be seen in Table 5, 60% of the instructors stated the obligatory pre-planned syllabus and time constraint. 20% stated that students mostly had an indifferent attitude towards different cultures. Two other impeding factors the instructors emphasized were course book content (f=10%) and highly exam-based assessment system (f=10%).

**Table 5. Obstacles in dealing with culture and related themes**

<b>Category 5</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
Obstacles in dealing with culture	1. Obligatory pre-planned syllabus and time constraint	6	60
	2. Course book content	1	10
	3. Highly exam-based assessment system	1	10
	4. Ss' indifferent attitude towards different cultures	2	20

**Discussion**

This study revealed that the majority of the instructors were aware of the importance of teaching and integrating culture in ELT classes, which supported the previous findings (Hun, 2009; Gönen & Sağlam, 2012; Barzegar & Afghari, 2015; Yılmaz & Özkan 2015; Monfared, Mozaheb & Shaitabar, 2016; Yilmaz, 2016). However, it was observed that the instructors' in-class practices were not in line with their perceptions of the significance of culture teaching. They did not implement culture teaching whether blended or task based. This finding clearly indicated the gap between the perceptions and actual classroom practices, which had also been revealed in previous research (Osman, 2015; Zare, Nemati & Jafarian, 2015). As for the reasons behind this gap, three impeding factors stated by the instructors were obligatory pre-planned syllabus and time constraint, course book content, and highly exam-based assessment system. These findings were also consistent with the studies conducted by Mendéz Garcia (as cited in Abad, 2013), Wandel (2003), Gönen and Sağlam (2012), Osman, (2015), Barzegar and Afghari (2015), Monfared, Mozaheb and Shaitabar (2016). In addition to these factors, students' indifferent attitude towards different cultures was also stated by the instructors as another impeding element. This perception of the instructors' may be related to the students' overall attitude or motivation towards learning English, rather than its being related to specifically culture teaching.

Another significant finding of the study was about instructors' perception of which culture to integrate into ELT classes. The majority stated that the culture to be taught should be the target culture, which was mainly the British culture. The reasons behind



this tendency towards target culture were the language being taught and the instructors' idea of impossibility to integrate world cultures into ELT curriculum or course books. This finding clearly shows the importance of regular in-service trainings for instructors because the perceptions in ELT field have been dramatically changing for the last few decades. Giving in-service trainings may help them keep up with the latest developments in the field. In the case of culture teaching, if the instructors had an in-service training, they could be aware that constant emphasize of target culture cannot promote transcultural awareness because students are not exposed to beliefs, values and norms of other cultures and as a result of this they cannot develop the ability to communicate competently and in a sensitive manner with people from other "cultural, ethnic, religious or regional backgrounds" (Neulip & McCrosky, 1997, p. 390). Consequently, this study has shown that there is a great need for re-evaluation and remodelling of current ELT models in practice in preparatory schools, for re-evaluation of ELT course books for the integration of world cultures into the content, and for the acknowledgement of the importance of in-service trainings for instructors because if educators want to make a difference and serve for a greater good, they have to start it from themselves and when the educators change, then the world changes.

### **Conclusion**

This study, focusing on the concept of *transcultural awareness*, was conducted to find out the perceptions of culture held by 10 English language instructors working full-time in a Turkish state university. In addition, it also investigated whether their perceptions were in line with their actual practices. The findings have revealed that the instructors, except one, consider culture and culture teaching in ELT classes important. However, they do not implement any culture teaching in their actual practices. The reasons of this perception-practice gap are a pre-planned and obligatory syllabus and time constraint, exam-based assessment system, the content of the course book they use and indifferent attitude of students towards different cultures. Another finding of the study is the tendency majority of the instructors have towards teaching target culture, namely British, by justifying it with two reasons a) English is the language they teach and 2) integrating a blending of cultures is utopian.

The findings of the study shows that the current English language teaching tendencies and perceptions in preparatory classes in a state university do not help fostering the development of transcultural awareness or cultural sensitivity towards other cultures. This shows the importance of in-service trainings the institutions should provide for their instructors. In addition, the study also highlights the fact that even at university level teaching approaches and methods are still in the traditional sense and are not in line with the latest developments. Hence, re-evaluation and re-modelling of the overall language teaching system is a great necessity as it does not meet the needs of students living in a globalized world. Lastly, the materials utilized in classes do not reflect a blending of world cultures, which is vital for developing transcultural awareness in students' perceptions. This clearly displays the inadequacy of the published materials especially the course books used in ELT classes regarding the needs of language learners of today's world. Therefore, publishers also need to re-evaluate their materials in order to keep up with the latest perceptions, developments and approaches in teaching and learning English.

Along with the aforementioned contributions, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the findings cannot be generalized as the number of participants was limited to 10

instructors, so the findings can only be valid for this group of participants. Secondly, the data collection tools might have been diversified for a triangulation.

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### **Appendix A**

*The Pre-Interview questions:*

- What is culture? How do you define it?
- Do you think culture teaching in English language classes is important? If so why
- Which culture do you think should be integrated into English language classes, culture of English-speaking countries, local culture, world cultures or all? Why? What do you think is Global culture?
- Have you ever heard of the terms “transcultural awareness” or “transcultural identity”? Can you try to define them?
- In today’s globalized world, we are in the era in which many different cultures are communicating with each other. Do you think our classes are successful in culture teaching? Do you think the classes we give are successful in promoting transcultural identity?
- How do you think culture should be taught? Can you explain it? Can you be specific about the approaches, methods and techniques you would use?

*The Post-Interview Question:*

- Which factors prevent you from integrating culture in the way you approve? Can you explain why?

### **Appendix B**

Observation Checklist

#### **Observation Area/Domain and Criteria**

- A      *Skills*  
Which skill is being taught?  
Listening \_\_\_\_ Reading \_\_\_\_ Writing \_\_\_\_ Speaking \_\_\_\_
- B      *Teacher*  
1      Which culture does the teacher address to in classroom?  
Local \_\_\_\_ Target \_\_\_\_ Blending of world cultures \_\_\_\_  
2      Which approach does the teacher use?  
Mono-cultural approach \_\_\_\_ Intercultural approach \_\_\_\_ Transcultural app.

C. *Cultural Topics*

1. food /clothing/drinks...etc \_\_\_
2. traditions /customs\_\_\_
3. daily lives \_\_\_
4. Literature \_\_\_
5. Places \_\_\_
6. History\_\_\_
7. important figures (politicians, writers..etc)\_\_\_
8. other \_\_\_\_\_

*D. Techniques: What techniques are used in the classroom?*

1. Providing cultural information
2. Cultural problem solving
3. Behavioral and affective aspects (for example drama and mini-drama)
4. Cognitive approaches (for example student research, discussion)
5. The role of literature and humanities (for example, literary reading and watching films);
6. Real-life exposure to the World cultures (for example, visits to the class by other foreign speakers, pen-pals)
7. Other : \_\_\_\_\_

*E. Materials :Which materials are used?*

1. course books \_\_\_
2. television programs\_\_\_
3. films / short films\_\_\_
4. interviews\_\_\_
5. music\_\_\_
6. history\_\_\_
7. Literature \_\_\_
8. adverts, photos, pictures ...etc (materials from real life) \_\_\_\_\_
9. the Internet\_\_\_
10. other: \_\_\_\_\_