

Khatuna Kharkheli is an English language teacher in the Faculty of Education, Exact, and Natural Sciences at Gori State Teaching University (GSTU) in Gori. With her passion for developing innovative and creative lessons and with her commitment to professional development, Ms. Kharkheli works to inspire her students to achieve success both in and out of the classroom. “If students do not have motivation, then they will not learn,” she said.



Khatuna Kharkheli in the English library at Gori State Teaching University

To increase students' motivation, Ms. Kharkheli begins lessons with a warm-up activity—such as showing images or making predictions—as a way to capture students' interest in the day's topic. And when teaching a new group of students, Ms. Kharkheli surveys them to learn their interests and hobbies. She uses that information to design lessons that integrate the learning objectives with topics she knows her students are already interested in. For example, one semester she discovered that most students in her class liked the movie *Sweet November*. She designed a lesson that involved watching the movie trailer and discussing the plot and characters. The lesson ended with a discussion of the question, "If you were the director of this movie, would you change the movie's ending? If yes, how would you change it?" Students took turns sharing their answers and hearing the creative ideas of their classmates. By using this movie instead of solely relying on the textbook, Ms. Kharkheli helped students develop their listening and speaking skills

while giving them the opportunity to express their own thoughts in a way that was interesting and engaging.

She also provides her students with opportunities to use English outside the classroom. In 2015, for example, she organized an English/Georgian poetry event. Several native English speakers were invited to join her students at the local American Spaces. Her students practiced English and learned about American culture, while the invited guests were introduced to Georgian poetry and learned about Georgian culture. Each of her students recited one poem by Georgian poet Galaktion Tabidze in Georgian and one poem by Maya Angelou in English. A discussion followed. Students translated the themes of the Georgian poems into English and discussed the English poems. At the end of the event, the attendees sang an English song together, then engaged in informal conversation while enjoying Georgian treats.



Ms. Kharkheli and her students work together to create a colorful poster to review and practice phrasal verbs.

More recently, to improve her students' speaking and presentation skills, Ms. Kharkheli took them on a field trip to Mtskheta, a former capital of Georgia and the center of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Before the trip, students prepared short English language presentations about Mtskheta's churches and historical sites. During the trip, they gave these presentations while standing in front of the very sites they were talking about.

It is no surprise that Ms. Kharkheli decided to become an English teacher. In addition to being the daughter of a language teacher (her mother is a Georgian language and literature teacher in the local public schools), she fell in love with English at a young age. "I started learning English from a private tutor when I was six years old, and I really liked English from the beginning," Ms. Kharkheli said. "I deeply admired my tutor for her clear pronunciation, her interesting teaching methods, and her knowledge and intelligence. I wanted to be like her."

When Ms. Kharkheli studied at GSTU, she majored in English Philology, then received a fifth-year master's degree in the same subject. From the time she completed her master's degree in 2006 until she began teaching at GSTU in 2014, she worked for a variety of organizations while working as a private English tutor at home.

One position Ms. Kharkheli held was Regional Coordinator for Teach and Learn with Georgia, a project of the Ministry of Education and Science that brings native English speakers into Georgian primary and secondary schools for an academic year. In this position, she delivered trainings about co-teaching to the English-speaking volunteers, local English teachers, and school administrators.

In 2014, Ms. Kharkheli landed her dream job teaching at her alma mater. "I had been dreaming about this and then found out that there were some vacancies, so I applied," she said. "I graduated from this university

and want to teach and help students as my lecturers taught and helped me." She likes teaching university students because she feels they have an "understanding of why learning languages, especially English, is important for their future lives and careers."

With a population of about 55,000, Gori is the largest city and regional capital of the central Georgian region of Shida Kartli. GSTU is the largest university in this region. Many GSTU students are from Gori and nearby villages, though some students come from other regions of Georgia. The university consists of six buildings, four of which are nestled together in the center of town. The English Philology Department is headquartered in Building 2, which also boasts a large English language library.

Each degree program has its own language requirements, but all students are required to study English for at least two years. English language lecturers at GSTU typically teach between six and 16 hours of classes each week. In a recent semester, Ms. Kharkheli taught eight hours: four hours of Pre-Intermediate Practical English and four hours of Intermediate Practical English to biology, math, and education majors. Foreign-language classes at GSTU are often kept small—typically no more than 14 to 18 students—to encourage communicative language practice. Because of flexible attendance policies, daily attendance is often lower than that, with many English classes having fewer than ten students attending on any given day.

Classrooms at GSTU are simple and plain: a whiteboard or chalkboard and desks arranged in rows. Most classrooms have a wall of windows, allowing for natural light. Technology is not standard, but the university provides portable CD players for faculty to use. Ms. Kharkheli would like to see more technology made available, especially classrooms equipped with computers and projectors.



The main building of Gori State Teaching University

Still, she finds ways to make her classroom a more welcoming and comfortable space for learning. She often rearranges the desks to facilitate group work and communicative speaking activities, and she adds technology by bringing her personal laptop to class to share videos and images.

Another way Ms. Kharkheli brightens up her room is by having students make colorful posters about the language concepts they are studying. One lesson involved creating and presenting posters that explained differences between verb tenses. Now she brings these posters to each class to aid students who are visual learners. For another lesson, on wishes and conditionals, Ms. Kharkheli made a “wish tree” poster. Students combined target vocabulary about professions and travel with the target grammar points to express their

wishes, then posted them on the tree. Not only has this poster become a visual reminder of the language elements students were learning, but it also provides encouragement for students to pursue their dreams.

Ms. Kharkheli believes that the best teachers are those who are lifelong learners. “I cannot say that I already know everything about teaching,” she said. “Teaching is a continuous process. Every lesson conducted teaches you something new and shows you what to improve in future lectures.”

To continue learning and improving as a teacher, Ms. Kharkheli takes advantage of professional-development opportunities. She is an active member of the Gori chapter of the English Teachers’ Association of Georgia, which meets twice each month; at these

meetings, teachers take turns presenting on their best practices, new techniques, and useful resources. Additionally, Ms. Kharkheli participates in webinars and Coursera courses.

Ms. Kharkheli is also enrolled in a PhD program in English Language Teaching Methodology at Telavi State University. Her main research interests are related to writing methodology and writing motivation, and she is researching the potential for improving writing skills through informal and formal letter writing.

“One of the reasons I’m focusing on this topic is so that I can help my students become better writers and understand its importance,” she said. “Knowing how to write well in English is important for a student’s future life, future career, and for being integrated with society. Also, there are more foreigners here in Georgia than in the past, so all skills of English are becoming increasingly important. Through my PhD studies and research, I hope to help my students both to become better writers and to see the importance of writing in English in today’s world.”

Although at times it can be stressful to balance her roles as student and teacher, her PhD courses inspire her to continue motivating her own students to do their best and work toward achieving their goals. After earning her degree, she plans to continue teaching and conducting trainings. She doesn’t plan to stop learning, however; she looks forward to having more time to continue taking teaching methodology courses, in Georgia or possibly abroad.

For now, Ms. Kharkheli is thankful that she gets to work with professional and encouraging colleagues and administrators, and she feels that from the university rector to the dean to the department chairs, there is support for professional development and improvement. The teachers enjoy collaborating with one another, she said, adding that it is nice to work in such a supportive and positive environment.

As the role and status of English in Georgia and trends in English language teaching continue to change, Ms. Kharkheli is among the new generation of teachers leading the way.

English language teaching and learning is changing in Georgia. There is a move away from teacher-centered and textbook-centered classes and grammar-translation methods to student-centered classes where teachers use communicative methods to engage learners. In the next decade, Ms. Kharkheli expects to see an improvement of the status of English in Georgia, as well as more exchange programs that send Georgian students abroad to study.

As the role and status of English in Georgia and trends in English language teaching continue to change, Ms. Kharkheli is among the new generation of teachers leading the way. With her motivation and passion for English teaching and desire to continually learn and improve, she is sure to have a positive impact on today’s learners, and perhaps she will inspire a few to become tomorrow’s teachers.

This article was written by **Melanie Baker**, an international education and TESOL professional who served as the English Language Fellow in Gori, Georgia, during the 2015–2016 academic year.

Photos by Melanie Baker