

ТЕОРИЯ И МЕТОДИКА ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ

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Teaching English through an exploration of identity in its socio-political and cultural contexts

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Abstract. Developing and proceeding from ideas of cultural immersion, this article intends to analyze the contribution that the study of contemporary socio-cultural and political realia can bring our students' learning outcomes and to their academic achievements. With students gaining increasing exposure to English language sources and sites, as well as immersion in the life and culture of an English-speaking community, this article aims to explore and interrogate issues of English cultural continuity by addressing the consequences of the impact of recent socio-political events on British society such as Brexit and the COVID pandemic. A crucial consideration is how such circumstances will be factored into the English language teaching and learning process.

Keywords: identity; language; pedagogy; socio-political context; culture

Introduction

The two pressing issues that have confronted the United Kingdom in the past two-three years are Brexit and COVID-19, both of which have brought with them a whole new set of words, phrases and concepts that had not existed before, or which had been known by other terms. The political (and social) context of these developments invites a scholarly appraisal of the 'weaponization' of language, and the cultural evolution of what we call 'national identity'.

Brexit and Britishness

The use of language and the gamut of intercultural communication in a rapidly developing political environment have served as foci of scholarly interest since time immemorial. The Russian context in the post-Soviet period was aptly summarized by S.G. Ter-Minasova in the early post-Soviet period: "The fundamental task of teaching foreign languages in Russia at the present time is the teaching of language as a real and robust means of communication. New times and new conditions have demanded an immediate and drastic revision of both general methodology and specific methods and procedures for teaching foreign languages. These new conditions consist of the 'opening up' of Russia and its headlong engagement with the world

community, madcap leaps forward in politics, economics, culture and ideology, the mixing and displacement of peoples and languages, changes in relations between Russians and foreigners, and absolutely new aims and objectives in communication; all this cannot but set new challenges in the theory and practice of teaching foreign languages" [1].

Thus, the interest of scholars in the sphere of foreign language teaching has shifted from the structure of language to its functioning, which has enabled discourse analysis to assume a central position in modern linguistic science. The work of S.K. Gural' in this respect has strengthened the position of discourse analysis in the methodology of foreign language teaching [2]. Furthermore, the British theoretical linguist H.P. Grice, when analyzing the logic of conversation proposed several precepts for conducting conversations that are to be adhered to in verbal discourse (for instance, 'to speak on the topic') [3]. In order to teach students English with the accent on its practical use, it is vitally important to formulate with them an integrated picture of the relevant socio-political reality. The political and the social spheres constitute important cultural strata that require an extensive understanding for the purposes of teaching methodology.

Consequently, the socio-political realia of modern Britain, in our view, should form the basis of content-based teaching if teaching is oriented towards the practical use of language. This is defined by the need to discuss these realia in an authentic environment, in other words, with native speakers of that language, which can be modelled within the teaching methodology. The content-based teaching paradigm is proposed by the authors of this article to be one of the most important aspect of teaching methodology today [4].

In the British context of 2016–2021 linguistic change has assumed a socio-political dimension not dissimilar to the challenges facing post-Soviet Russia as highlighted above. One of the major stumbling-blocks in Brexit negotiations and policies was the Irish 'backstop', the land border between the Irish Republic, a member of the European Union, and Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom. This border was the only land border between the European Union and the United Kingdom, and thus one of the major problem areas in negotiations over trade agreements, and the movement of goods and people, between the UK and EU following the UK's exit from the European Union on 31 December 2020. The word itself is a term from American baseball, indicating the last line of defence.

Apocalyptic imagery has been used for a projected catastrophic slump in the UK's economy following Brexit, such as 'end-times', suggesting termination but no renewal, 'disaster nationalism', signifying the apparent Devil-may-care attitude of those who voted for Brexit in the 2016 referendum, usually associated with English (NB *not* British) nationalism and its consequent disdain for foreign influences. Allied to this is the 'disaster capitalism' brand attached to several powerful business entities who would become even

richer as the country as a whole became poorer as a result of the UK's economic decline (by betting huge amounts of money on the indicators of that decline). At the height of Parliamentary squabbles over the nature of Brexit and the UK's future relationship with the EU in September–October 2019, Prime Minister Boris Johnson resorted to wartime vocabulary to designate those opposed to leaving the EU and their actions ('Remainers'): collaborators, traitors, betrayal, surrender, thus conveying to the public an 'us-and-them' mentality while also apparently stoking nationalistic outrage verging on xenophobia with the analogy of fighting the Nazi menace. The Prime Minister then attempted to 'prorogue' Parliament in order to secure the passage of his agenda without discussion or amendment in the House of Commons, a procedure for the suspension of the operation of the government usually reserved only in the approach to a General Election (this action was later ruled as 'unlawful' by the UK Supreme Court).

Until late December 2020 the prospect of a 'no-deal Brexit' was writ large, with the introduction of tariffs and duties on all exports and imports between the EU and UK, with consequent price rises and possible food shortages. Given that a trade deal was reached 'at the eleventh hour', the phrase 'cliff edge diplomacy' became commonly used in the press to define the perceived obstinacy of both sides during the negotiations. The Northern Ireland 'problem' was categorized as a 'trilemma' in that it required a resolution not by two parties ('dilemma') but three: the UK, the EU and the Irish Republic.

As Brexit has at the time of writing (January 2021) been 'done', it is unclear how the ideologically charged, and thus emotionally loaded, nomenclature will survive. Since 2016 the UK has been divided into those who favoured a 'hard Brexit', that is without any trade agreements with the EU, and a 'soft Brexit', which would have kept the UK in the EU's Single Market and Customs Union, not to mention those who campaigned for a second referendum and as of January 2021 are arguing for re-entry into the EU. Will we remember in ten years' time the 'Brexiters' and the 'Remainers', not to mention their pejorative monikers 'Bremonoaners' and 'Bremonoaniacs'?

The Pandemic's Social Dimension

The arrival of the COVID-19 virus in the UK led to a wave of government initiatives that were couched in new words and concepts. Thus, in the autumn of 2020 the following instructions were issued to every household in the UK:

- Legal duty to self-isolate comes into force today (Monday 28 September), to ensure compliance and reduce spread of COVID-19;
- Support is now available for people on low incomes who are unable to work while self-isolating through the £500 Test and Trace Support Payment;

– Fines for those breaking the rules now in place start at £1,000 and increase up to £10,000 for repeat offenders.

Those on lower incomes who cannot work from home and have lost income as a result will also be eligible for a new £500 Test and Trace Support Payment.

Local authorities will be working quickly to set up Test and Trace Support Payment schemes and we expect them to be in place by 12 October. Those who are told to self-isolate from today will receive backdated payments, if they are eligible, once the scheme is set up in their local authority.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

Anyone can catch coronavirus and anyone can spread it. We all have a crucial part to play in keeping the number of new infections down and protecting our loved ones. As cases rise it is imperative we take action, and we are introducing a legal duty to self-isolate when told to do so, with fines for breaches and a new £500 support payment for those on lower incomes who can't work from home while they are self-isolating. These simple steps can make a huge difference to reduce the spread of the virus, but we will not hesitate to put in place further measures if cases continue to rise. As the infection is now spreading rapidly again, these new measures will help ensure compliance and reduce the spread of COVID-19 [2].

A number of steps will also be taken to make sure that people are complying with the rules. These include:

– NHS 'Test and Trace' call handlers increasing contact with those self-isolating;

– using police resources to check compliance in highest incidence areas and in high-risk groups, based on local intelligence;

– investigating and prosecuting high-profile and egregious cases of non-compliance;

– acting on instances where third parties have identified others who have tested positive but are not self-isolating.

Recognising that self-isolation is one of the most powerful tools for controlling the transmission of COVID-19, this new Test and Trace Support payment of £500 will ensure that those on low incomes are able to self-isolate without worry about their finances.

Just under 4 million people who are in receipt of benefits in England will be eligible for this payment, which will be available to those who have been notified that they must self-isolate from today [5].

The Home Secretary Priti Patel added: "These new measures are about saving lives. Everyone must take personal responsibility and self-isolate if they test positive or if told to do so by NHS Test and Trace. For those who fail to do so, the police will enforce the law. These new fines are a clear sign that we will not allow those who break the rules to reverse the hard-won progress made by the law-abiding majority" [6].

Local Government Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said: “Councils across the country are working at pace to set up new self-isolation support payment schemes and ensure people in their communities have the information and advice they need to stay safe and reduce the spread of the virus. Since the start of the pandemic councils have played a crucial role in supporting businesses and their communities, and I want to thank them for their hard work as they roll out this new support for those who need to self-isolate. Fines will also be introduced from today for those breaching self-isolation rules, starting at £1,000, in line with the existing penalty for breaking quarantine after international travel. This could increase to up to £10,000 for repeat offences and the most serious breaches, including for those preventing others from self-isolating. Employers who force or allow staff to come to work when they should be self-isolating will also be liable for fines of up to £10,000, sending a clear message that this will not be tolerated.

If someone is instructed to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace, because they have had close contact with someone outside their household who has tested positive, they are legally required to self-isolate for the period notified by NHS Test and Trace. Both household and non-household contacts must self-isolate for the full period, regardless of whether they have symptoms and, if they develop symptoms and take a test, regardless of whether any test taken gives a negative result.

Individuals will receive this payment on top of any Statutory Sick Pay or benefits they receive. Currently individuals in employment who are self-isolating and cannot work from home are entitled to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) if they earn more than £120 a week from a single employer. Depending on their circumstances, they might also be able to claim Universal Credit and/or new style Employment and Support Allowance.

The criteria for self-isolation payment is:

- to have been instructed to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace, either because they’ve tested positive or are the close contact of a positive case;
- are employed or self-employed;
- are unable to work from home and will lose income as a result;
- are currently receiving Universal Credit, Working Tax Credit, income-based Employment and Support Allowance, income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit and/or Pension Credit.

Councils will also have discretion to make payments to those who don’t receive the qualifying benefits, but are on a low income and could suffer financial hardship as a result of not being able to work.

As per the current guidance, the legal obligation to self-isolate will afford specific exemptions including for those who need to escape from illness or harm during their isolation, and those that require care” [7].

With regard to the ‘Test and Trace’ programme, many millions of public funds were invested in a system whereby an app would be developed

to ‘trace’ those in recent contact with a person who had been ‘tested’ positive for coronavirus, to force them into self-isolation and thereby halt the spread of the disease. The programme has generally been accepted as a total failure, given the rising (as of January 2021) infection rates and death toll.

The Pandemic’s Cultural Dimension

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it to the UK not only untold suffering and grief (as of January 2021 more than 100,000 deaths), but also a whole raft of restrictive measures, legally enforceable, as outlined above but also see below, and a new phraseology designed to make these measures more palatable to the public following the apparent failure of similar measures to halt the spread of the pandemic in the spring and summer of 2020. The ‘new normal’ is now a stock phrase in the British media.

In the Spring of 2020, when the pandemic was not immediately perceived by Boris Johnson and his government as a potential national disaster, the official albeit short-lived, policy was to ignore it and continue normal life in the hope (rather than expectation) that ‘herd immunity’ would protect the vast majority of the population. The thinking was that some people would die but the vast majority of those who became infected with the virus would recover and thereafter be immune to further infection. No numbers were put on the number of projected deaths, and the idea of ‘herd immunity’ was rejected when the number or actual death in the summer of 2020 started to rise into the tens of thousands.

Thus, as of 4 January 2021 Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the third national ‘lockdown’ in 10 months, the word ‘lockdown’ normally reserved for a prison procedure whereby certain wings are closed and inmates confined to their cells for a specific reason and period of time. In the autumn of 2020 UK citizens were encouraged to develop their own ‘bio-secure bubble’ of relatives and friends with negative COVID test results with whom they can socialize, as a two-week ‘circuit breaker’ in September 2020 intended to halt the spread of the virus was rejected.

Another innovation to working practice, and thus vocabulary and its attendant psychological constructs, is the ‘furlough’ scheme introduced by the UK government in March 2020 and continuously being extended. The government’s furlough guarantees most employees 80% of their salary if they are unable to work in their employment premises and must stay at home (although many self-employed workers and small businesses do not qualify).

The social impact of the virus on everyday life has been telling, with those who choose to ignore ‘social distancing’ labelled as ‘covidiot’, especially the young who are less susceptible to the virus holding ‘coveideo parties’, and those who simply want ‘covexit’, that is, to escape the lockdown and go back to the ‘old normality’. With millions of people required to work

online, the acronym ‘WFH’ (Working From Home) has become commonplace, and meetings on online platforms can easily be ‘zoombombed’ by unwelcome intruders. You can even be ‘zoomdumped’ by your partner without any actual physical eye-to-eye contact. With many international borders closed UK citizens are encouraged to enjoy a summer ‘coronacation’, a play on the ‘staycation’ promoted by various media in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum whereby summer holidays in the UK were preferred to those in other favourite EU destinations, such as Mallorca, the south of France, Italy and Greece (ie, where the sun always shines). For the more doom-laden, the ‘coronapocalypse’ was imminent. At the same time, those who refused to accept that the pandemic was real, or at least as prevalent and threatening as mainstream media and the government insisted, lampooned it as the ‘moronavirus’.

On a more positive note, the need for lockdown has encouraged more intimacy among couples forced to spend whole days, weeks and months together cheek-by-jowl, followed nine months later by ‘coronababies’. However, a downside in the enforced lockdown of personal relationships is the rise in ‘coronadivorces’. In short, all British governmental efforts to halt the progress of the virus and curtail its effects have been designated as trying to ‘flatten the curve’, a phrase derived from mathematical graph theory whereby the upward curve (here of infection rates) should be stopped and then turned downwards. As of early 2021, the curve remains defiantly upwardly mobile.

With the emergence of new COVID strains and mutations from late 2020 and into 2021, the United Kingdom introduced measures intended to halt the spread of the virus, even with the development of a vaccine to control most of the worst symptoms of the virus. With the introduction of drastic new immigration laws in February 2021, those arriving in the UK from 33 ‘red list’ countries are ‘quarantined’ subject to an airport hotel stay of 10 days (to be paid for by the traveller: not surprisingly, hotels doubled their prices overnight), with fines reaching £10,000 and a prison sentence of up to 10 years for those not forthcoming about their point of origin into the UK (a sentence unlikely to be imposed by a British court, but still a hefty deterrent).

Conclusion

It is no exaggeration to say that in 2020 the UK was fundamentally shaken by two great crises: Brexit negotiations with the EU that went to the ‘cliff edge’ of late December, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Both events have been accompanied by a corresponding vocabulary and cultural assignation whose long-term viability remains unclear. British society and the English language have been forced to reconceptualize existing paradigms, and to reimagine and reformulate linguistic and visually semiotic signifiers. Consequently, the UK’s psychological make-up in the face of these challenges has

been framed and articulated by a particular set of concepts and expectations. The task of foreign language education in the ‘new normal’ is to assimilate these shifting values and accommodate them within a new pedagogical framework for future generations of learners who wish to understand the modern socio-political and cultural realities of the post-Brexit and, one day, post-COVID. United Kingdom.

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Преподавание английского языка через изучение идентичности в ее социально-политическом и культурном контекстах

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Анализируется вклад, который может внести изучение современных социокультурных и политических реалий в обучение студентов. В связи с тем, что обучающиеся все больше знакомятся с источниками и сайтами на английском языке, а также погружаются в жизнь и культуру англоязычного сообщества, эта статья направлена на изучение вопросов преемственности английской культуры путем рассмотрения последствий воздействия недавних социально-политических событий на британское общество, таких как Брексит и пандемия Covid-19. Решающее значение имеет то, как такие обстоятельства будут учитываться в процессе преподавания и изучения английского языка.

Ключевые слова: идентичность; язык; педагогика; социально-политический контекст; культура