
CULTURAL AWARENESS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: BREXIT – SEEN FROM CLOSE AND AFAR**Rumyana Todorova**Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen – Shumen, Bulgaria r_todorova@yahoo.com

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Abstract: The paper deals with raising cultural awareness in students of English at Bulgarian universities, retraining courses and high schools through issues related to Brexit and its aftermaths based on opinions and interpretations from the media, Internet information, articles, advertisements, video clips and sketches. It summarizes students' discussions of these materials, their reflections and knowledge on the matter in question and dwells upon various issues connected with the respective topic with the help of multiple choice questions, a questionnaire and additional questions. The issues reflect not only local and regional culture but their interrelations with global culture and their impact on representatives from various national, social and personal backgrounds. It turns out that the respective matter concerns people of different age groups and social status, as well as people from a number of cultural, ethnic and minority groups from all parts of the European Union and in the world at large. The topic also appears in infomercials which are expected to present and provoke positive and pleasant associations, feelings and emotions and usually the information in them provides a solution to a problem which causes a lot of worries and concerns. Vocabulary as one of the multifaceted aspects of knowledge related to the subject of attention is also commented upon as there are some interesting finds which, if one is not familiar with, they would never be able to guess correctly. Some cultural and social factors are brought to the fore exploited through the use of language and through reality expressed in a number of ways touching upon people's feelings and emotions with their needs and demands which are more or less one and the same everywhere in the world. It is surprising but also something usually taken for granted that the most unpleasant and debatable questions are the focus of attention more often than not as they reflect people's attitudes from their own perspectives. The discussed issues provoke a lot of tension in people not only directly affected by the process of Brexit. It is true that it will have an impact on representatives living and working in the UK, i.e. on a local basis, but globally as well.

The paper deals with all those issues by applying Critical Discourse Analysis and content analysis as methods for analyzing the different types of materials. The culture-specific aspects and the linguistic manifestations should be dealt with and treated with caution as some people will most probably be quite sensitive to instances related to nationality, ethnicity and the like. As personal opinions are of importance, some of the most interesting and provocative ones are also dwelt upon.

Keywords: Brexit, culture, media, questionnaires

**КУЛТУРНО ОСЪЗНАВАНЕ В АНГЛИЙСКАТА КЛАСНА СТАЯ:
БРЕКЗИТ – ВИДЯН ОТ БЛИЗО И ДАЛЕЧ****Румяна Тодорова**

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Резюме: Статията разглежда осъзнаването на културните ценности при студенти, изучаващи английски в български университети, в курсове за преквалификация и в гимназии посредством разглеждането на въпроси, мнения и интерпретации, свързани с Брекзит и последиците от него върху материали от медиите, интернет източници, статии, реклами, видео клипове и скечове. Обобщават се дискусиите на обучаемите, техните наблюдения и знания за разглежданата тема на базата на въпроси с вариативни отговори, анкета за проучване на мнението им и допълнителни въпроси. Проблематиката е свързана не само с местните и регионални култури, но и с връзките им с глобалната култура и въздействието на всички тях върху представители от различен национален, социален и личностен произход. Оказва се, че темата засяга хора от различни възрастови групи и социален статус, както и хора от редица културни, етнически и малцинствени групи от всички части на Европейския съюз и на света като цяло. Тя се появява и в *infomercials*, които би трябвало да предизвикват положителни и приятни асоциации, чувства и емоции, и обикновено

информацията в тях представя разрешение на проблема, предизвикващ много тревоги и загриженост у хората. Речниковият запас като един от многообразните аспекти на познанието, свързано с предмета на обсъждане, също се коментира, тъй като има някои интересни находки, с които, ако човек не е предварително запознат или не са му известни, никога не би могъл да отгатне правилно. Някои културни и социални фактори са изнесени на преден план и са разгледани чрез езика и реалността, изразена по различни начини, които въздействат върху емоциите и чувствата на хора с едни и същи нужди и потребности. Учудващо е, но също така се приема за даденост, че най-неприятните и дискутирани новини винаги предизвикват най-голямо внимание, тъй като отразяват собственото мнение на хората. Обсъжданите въпроси предизвикват голямо напрежение у хора, които даже не са засегнати пряко от процесите на Брекзит. Вярно е, че те ще се отразят най-вече върху тези, които живеят и работят в Обединеното кралство, т.е. на местна основа, но също и в глобален мащаб.

Всички тези въпроси се разглеждат като се прилага критическият дискурсен анализ и контент анализ като методи за анализиране на различните типове материали. Културно-специфичните аспекти и лингвистичните проявления трябва да се третират внимателно, тъй като някои хора са доста чувствителни към въпроси, свързани с националност, етничност и др. подобни. Тъй като личните мнения също са от значение, на някои от най-интересните и провокативните също е обърнато специално внимание.

Ключови думи: Брекзит, куртура, медии, анкети

1. INTRODUCTION

Raising cultural awareness in people in general is related not only to their having some knowledge about other cultures but about their own culture as well. It is taken for granted that if one is acquainted with other cultures and knows at least some facts about them they will also be able to realise what their culture is all about and sensitize it better, hence they will be more tolerant towards the Other, i.e. representatives from other cultural, national and ethnic groups together with their problems, worries and concerns. There are quite a lot of reasons for making people aware of what is happening around them one of them being the hot issue related to Brexit and its aftermaths.

2. PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESSFUL CHANGES AND METHODS OF STUDY.

The principles for successful changes and methods of study usually work well, if there is a variety of representatives from different groups, which gives a richer and clearer picture of the respective study. So, in this case, the target groups of the present case study are all types of students (in our case 38 in number): from secondary schools, i.e. secondary level of education (High School of Humanities in Shumen – 5 students); from tertiary schools, i.e. universities, or tertiary level of education (Shumen University – 8 English Studies students); Varna Free University (18 students as follows: 11 2nd year International Relations and Law students, 3 3rd year International Relations and Law students, 4 1st year students of Psychology); and 7 life-long learning or continuing education mature students, or the so called re-trainees.

The main focus group was the one from Shumen University. All types of cultural awareness discussions were conducted in this group and oriented to the abovementioned issues through media and Internet information (articles, advertisements, video clips, gigs and sketches) and students' reflections and knowledge about the matter in question.

They were supported by:

- questionnaire²⁷;
- multiple choice questions;
- advertisements and articles on Brexit (in an indirect way);
- additional questions related to Brexit.

The methods of analysis applied in the study are Critical Discourse Analysis and content analysis for analyzing the different types of materials. The culture-specific aspects and the linguistic manifestations were treated with caution as some people are quite sensitive to instances related to nationality, ethnicity and the like. As personal opinions are of importance, some of the most interesting and provocative ones are also dwelt upon in the paper. The methods and the principles for successful changes in students' way of thinking are demonstrative enough of the issues discussed.

3. STAGES FOR SUCCESSFUL CHANGE.

1. Sensitizing the issues related to Brexit. The reason for choosing this topic was that it reflects very sensitive issues concerning a lot of people, irrespective of their location and it crosses boundaries and influences people either

²⁷ The questionnaire and the multiple choice questions were given to all groups of students.

physically or emotionally, directly or indirectly. “Trying” it on a number of students allowed for a broader perspective on different reactions of young people but from different age groups. The reason for choosing English Studies students from Shumen University was that they have classes on British and American Studies in their curriculum and they cover as many British and American cultural issues as possible. It is true that they do it guided by a number of selected topics related to history, politics, education, sports, literature, and social life, all of these forming the broad notion of culture. In principle, according to Ellis ‘consciousness raising’ can be achieved through ‘isolating some information within a larger text by analyzing the form – meaning relationships’²⁸. In this respect, if we want to put an emphasis on any phenomenon, be it cultural and/or grammatical, we have to draw learners’ attention to it in a way we find appropriate.

As the series of activities was oriented to multitasking, one of the tasks was brainstorming related to human experience, which is more or less universal, but students had to approach the current situation with the necessary understanding and knowledge not based on assignments set preliminary and prepared in advance but on their value judgments, personal opinions and social and cultural experience.

The next step was for students to fill in a questionnaire as well as multiple choice questions.

Then they watched a 2-minute gig²⁹ presented by two Irish men (‘Foil Arms and Hog’) discussing Brexit in an interesting, lively, humorous and provocative way. It contains a lot of information that they are supposed to know from their British Studies classes but there are some intricacies which made them think about some of the questions posed. So, at this point there was a juxtaposition of something taking place at a distance but viewed by people from close (Irish sketch / gig performers) as well as from afar (Bulgarian students).

The multiple choice questions checked their knowledge on the phenomenon called Brexit. They were the following:

- A. Brexit stands for
 - a) British exit of the EU
 - b) A blend of ‘Britain’ and ‘exit’
- B. Brexit is a result of
 - a) referendum
 - b) parliament’s decision
 - c) decision based on Grexit
- C. The referendum for Brexit was on
 - a) July 24 2016
 - b) June 23 2016
 - c) June 15 2016
 - d) August 1 2016
- D. Brexit is a
 - a) political phenomenon
 - b) cultural issue
 - c) economic invention
 - d) all of the above

Most students have provided correct answers, which speaks about their knowledge of current events not only in Bulgaria but in other countries as well, in this case the UK.

2. Broadening students’ consciousness raising. Students’ awareness of the discussed issue was definitely broadened by the following questionnaire they had to fill in in class:

1. Have you heard anything about Brexit and if yes, what? How much do you know about it?
2. Please, express your personal opinion or comment on Brexit as one of the hottest issues in Europe and the world at large.
3. What do you think of the way Brexit may influence life in general?
4. Will it have an impact on the British and if yes, in what way?
5. Will it have some influence on the Bulgarians and if yes, in what way?
6. Do you think your life will somehow be changed because of Brexit?
7. Does it have anything to do with globalization? If yes, what is the relation?

²⁸ Ellis, R. ‘Grammar teaching – Practice or Consciousness-Raising?’, Richards, J., W. A. Renandya (eds) *Methodology in Language Teaching*, pp. 167-174. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (2002). p. 168.

²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daB7np-RtOM>

These are questions which give us an idea of how young people react to the ongoing political, economic, cultural and social processes, in this case in the European Union, which will definitely have an impact not only on representatives from the United Kingdom but outside it as well.

When analyzing and elaborating on the answers given in the questionnaire, there were some standard and expected ones but there were also others which were quite surprising³⁰.

In relation to the first question about their knowledge on Brexit, some of the most interesting and unexpected ones were:

‘British people decided to leave the EU because they want to be economically independent’. (retrainee)³¹

‘UK is one of the first countries to become part of EU. They are one of the founders, without taking the advantage of the new monetary system. They are part of EU but would like to exit it because they don’t agree with the politics. To be part of EU as country you need to pay a certain fee and that’s one of the reasons they would like to exit from it.’ (retrainee)

Some students obviously watch TV news which is something not many young people do nowadays. Surprisingly enough, other students are very much into the matter and they have even heard about Article 50 related to the procedures about Brexit.

As for the second question about their personal opinion, two second year International Relations and Law students from Varna Free University have presented some very conclusive statements about the future situation of the European Union:

‘In my opinion, if England leaves the EU, this is a sign of the wakening and the breaking down of the EU’.

‘It is quite likely, even inevitable for the exit of England from the EU not to have an impact on the whole EU and all member-states’.

Another student from the same specialty has gone even further by stating that ‘Brexit is going to change the history of Europe. Brexit is a choice and if Britain wants to be out this should happen’. Still others have touched upon the issue of refugees by saying that the UK ‘wants to save its economy’; of Brexit ‘causing inflation’.

Some of the words these young people have used in expressing their opinions are quite strong as is the case with the following statements:

‘I think that Brexit is a **political, cultural and economic suicide for the UK**³², that was decided **mostly by the aging population**... and UK will toll apart out of the Brexit. FOR SURE’. (2nd y IRL/VFU)

‘...there are a lot of reasons for this result but maybe **one of them is the rise of nationalism across the world**’. (4th y English Studies, Shumen University)

‘My opinion is that every country should be independent so there is no need for an EU. Because the EU restricts the countries’ development and freedom’. (4th y English Studies, Shumen University)

Some students from the High School of Humanities in Shumen seem to be too knowledgeable about the current situation related to Brexit as one of them has expressed the following opinion:

‘England should leave the EU because the country is developed enough to need any help from the EU’.

While another one from the same school has written:

‘I think that in this way too much attention is paid to the Island in the EU’.

Yet another fellow student of theirs sounds too competent about Brexit developments:

‘Brexit will have a negative influence on British economy which as critics say is ‘bound to EU economy’. At first there will be a crisis in the UK, but then I think that the situation in the country will be normalized with the help of the capable British politicians’.

On the question about Brexit having some influence on people’s life, some retrainees have come up with very knowledgeable answers as for the consequences of Brexit: ‘it influences the stability of the EU on the world market’; ‘It may lead other EU countries to the same decision and as result the whole EU could fall apart’. A fourth year English Studies student has mentioned the fact that ‘other countries may follow Britain’s example which would result in a general doubt in the EU and its purpose’, which has its reasons in a way. Yet another one from the same group has provided a very witty and more or less correct answer: ‘Brexit won’t influence life in general. After all the sun shines for all and everything on Earth’.

An opposite line of thought is stated by another English Studies student:

³⁰ Only some of the most interesting and challenging answers will be presented in the paper.

³¹ The answers are presented without the mistakes some students have made. Some of the answers were in Bulgarian and for the present study they were translated into English by the author.

³² Emphases in bold throughout the paper – author’s

‘Well. Britain will suffer a great blow to its economy. The value of the pound will go down and their trading valuables with other nations will be hindered for a period of time’.

So, from what has been mentioned so far it seems that the answers they give are quite reasonable and logical at that.

3. Emphasizing awareness of Brexit impact on the British and the Bulgarians. Students have expressed their concern about different people’s ability to travel ‘freely’ to the UK as well as about the fact that a lot of people working in the UK ‘will lose their jobs because foreign companies will close their offices in GB’ (3rd y International Relations and Law student). A high school student emphasized the fact that it is all about money and the British have it so it does not matter that much for them. Another high school student has presented a very interesting answer which means that they are not that apolitical as we are somehow prone to think about young people of that age:

‘The British won’t be affected strongly. Increase of prices of goods and services is expected but it won’t have that much of a bad influence on the British though they reacted strongly to the decrease of the size of Tobleron. Another issue for the British is the increasing social tension shown in the exceptionally close values during the referendum’.

As for Bulgarians, they have stated that ‘they will need a visa which is expensive and the process of getting a visa requires a lot of effort’. There is an interesting ‘invention’ by a fourth year English Studies student:

‘Most probably it will influence a country and its people, and it is possible that Bulgaria may decide to ‘**Bulgarexit**’.

For a high school student ‘If a Bulgarian living on the island has no British citizenship, he/she will suffer great consequences from this: they won’t get hired, won’t have the right to get social benefits and if a more severe policy is introduced they won’t have the right to stay in the country’.

4. Emphasizing personal opinions on the effect from Brexit. The personal opinions about the effect Brexit might have on them as representatives of one of the member states of the European Union include statements about their lives in the future as is the following one by a retrainee:

‘I’m sure in one way or another it will change our lives because the shared values that form the Union will be lost and all efforts made to make Europe a better place might be in vain’.

English Studies students also mentioned the fact that some of their families might be affected by this process:

‘My parents are emigrants in the UK and if Brexit “chase away” the emigrants, they will lose their jobs’.

‘If I live in the UK I may want friends and relatives to visit me’.

As is obvious, students also touched upon another hot issue, namely that of migration and the situation of people affected by this tendency and phenomenon.

Other issues that were discussed were connected with visa problems and social insurance. As regards the question of British people voting to stay in the EU some of the answers were that the UK people want freedom. The reactions of younger and older generation people in the UK were also mentioned, namely that younger people voted for remaining in the EU, while older people – for leaving it. A student went to extremes by saying that elderly people (i.e. people over 60) should not be allowed to vote as the future belongs to young people.

5. Emphasizing knowledge on the interrelation between the local and the global. On the one hand, a retrainee has stated that as we ‘live in a global world... one part of the world could have consequences for other countries’ which is a good reason for worries and concerns. On the other hand, another retrainee has expressed an opinion that ‘globalization is in the past nowadays’, which shows an opposite tendency towards the regional and the local, thus preserving moral and ethical values within a country and a community to the greatest extent. Some second year International Relations and Law students have mentioned the fact that Brexit is ‘a result of the huge migration wave across Europe, mostly in the UK and Germany’, and that ‘Now it’s time for deglobalization. That’s history!’ Other students of English Studies think that ‘Brexit is a rejection of globalization, some kind of a protest against the economic model’ and that ‘the global economic model that the EU imposes is not working’. According to some students ‘globalization is a negative phenomenon’. What is more, ‘the EU imposes a global economic model’.

6. Emphasizing some linguistic considerations related to Brexit. Another way of raising students’ cultural awareness and consciousness towards the issues of the day was by discussing some words and phrases connected with Brexit. One of the reasons for this was that ‘language creates a mediational layer that can select and renegotiate aspects of the immediate content as well as define a completely different context, thus enriching reality and cognition’³³. English Studies students were shown some articles from *French Property News Magazine* from March 31, 2017. The question posed to them was what **buzz / catch** words, related directly or indirectly to the issues about

³³ Fusaroli, R. ‘The Social Horizon of Embodied Language and Material Symbols’, *Versus*, pp. 95-120, (2011). pp. 108-9.

Brexit they have noticed in those texts. The words characterizing the attitude of the British, mostly elderly people, towards the phenomenon called Brexit and used in the infomercials as well were *uncertainty*, *tension*, *concern* and *confusion*. It seems that Brexit is stirring confusion and tension in EU politics, economy, cultural and social life in a number of countries, which will most probably cause a lot of changes on all levels. As a result of this, some people living in the UK have started to look for other places to go and work mostly abroad. In this respect, estate agencies in the UK bet on the *uncertainties* and started promoting properties in France, on the one hand. On the other hand, advertising agents used the word *Brexit* in a text, in which it appears together with a personal opinion expressed, thus making the information sound even more convincing: ‘Worth the wait. I started to plan my Brexit 40 years ago’ (FPN)³⁴. It may seem confusing because of the mentioned period, process and event. What students can actually do is associate the information with something similar they already know or think they do. Thus, their past or present experiences can be activated due to emotions either presented or provoked in the text. The reason for this triggering of emotions and experiences is very well stated by McLuhan back in 1964 ‘Everybody experiences far more than he understands. Yet, it is experience, rather than understanding, that influences behavior, especially in collective matters of media and technology, where the individual is almost inevitably unaware of their effect on him’³⁵. Unfortunately, students (as any of us) do not have this experience. So, they can only make predictions and presuppositions of what can be expected. Students were asked to make predictions about the information the text contained. And they did which is a step forward to their willingness to speak in English and express their personal opinions thus raising their consciousness and cultural awareness.

Apart from the words used to describe the way elderly and young people from the UK felt, students were asked to think about the two words used during the referendum for the vote. The correct answer is: REMAIN and LEAVE but nobody mentioned these words. The oppositions they stated were: ‘yes’ – ‘no’, ‘accept – reject’, and ‘stay – exit’. None of the respondents used the words ‘withdrawal’ or ‘departure’. This discussion provoked another one connected with the type of visa that is issued to people (not only to Bulgarians) wanting to stay in the UK, i.e. live and work there: the type of visa is ‘leave to remain’. They turned out to lack this knowledge and none of them was aware of it but in this way they would not only learn about it but hopefully it will stick into their minds as it is related to other similar concepts.

There are a lot more questions to ask but they will be left unanswered at least for the time being. Some of them are:

What will the future relationship between the UK and EU countries be?

What is in the cards for higher education and research?

How can British and EU universities continue to work together?

What are the facts, and what is speculation?

There was an EUA webinar on June 7, 2017 on Brexit about the future of universities. The announcement was that ‘The webinar will present the views from London and Brussels how the situation is today and what we can and cannot know about the future, and there will be opportunity to ask questions about the past, present and future of the UK and the rest of Europe.’ (www.eua.be)

The list can be prolonged and will be endless with very few questions answered, tentatively at that.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS.

The findings proved that cultural awareness in students can be raised with the help of topics which can provoke their curiosity and interest and make them ‘investigate’ the respective issue with pleasure. This way they can learn more not only about the topic in question but about concepts they are familiar with but are not aware of their exact usages as they have not experienced similar situations. What matters is that they need emotional stimulation which can be achieved by means of the exceptional way of presenting information. Text producers are well aware of the fact that (shared) knowledge is power especially with the help of intricately interwoven cultural factors. On the whole, students expressed their personal opinions on the discussed issues in English thus enriching their vocabulary. All this leads to raising their cultural awareness about other cultures, this leading to consciousness raising about their own culture and them in particular. Moreover, cultural awareness and consciousness raising is rooted not only in learners’ upbringing but in their interest in what is happening in the world at large. Besides, personal stories and past experiences also help raising cultural and consciousness awareness. Finally, as regards Brexit, time will only show what will happen in the near future.

³⁴ The quotation appears on the front cover of the magazine.

³⁵ McLuhan, M. *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill, (1964).

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