

TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH ENGLISHNESS OR ENGLISHNESS IN ENGLISH

(Published in *Journal of Linguistic Studies*, II/1, pp.23 – 30.)

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the author's experience in teaching the course in Anglophone Area Studies (AAS) as part of the Bachelor's Degree Programme in European Studies and International Economic Relations at the University of Rousse, Bulgaria. The objectives of the course, the means to achieve them, and the students' share in the subject content of the course are discussed in relation to one another. The paper focuses on the culturematic approach to teaching English.

Key Words: *Englishness; Britishness; Culture; Cultureme; Civilization; Cultural Competence; Linguistic Culturology; Area Studies.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a broadly acknowledged fact that the English language today has become the lingua franca of our modern world. We can daily witness how an ever increasing number of people in Europe and beyond are using it for many different purposes and in various spheres of life – in business and commerce, in academic and professional communication, in travel and tourism, in politics and international relations, and – recently - on the internet. Indeed its role as a major means of intercultural communication is now being taken for granted.

At the same time, EFL teachers are well aware of the fact that any **foreign language teaching**, especially in its intermediate and advanced stages, inevitably involves teaching a specific **cultural competence**. As a natural side effect of language teaching, this either just 'happens' in a fairly unintended way, or can be consciously aimed at. The forms cultural competence takes can most easily be seen in the subject content of the textbooks, especially in those authored by native speakers. They generally involve people, places, facts, situations and behaviours that are authentic or typical of the culture they portray, i.e. they - quite naturally - match the way of life shared by their authors. This cultural aspect is also visible in the denotational meanings of the words and phrases that make up the texts included in the course books, but also - although more covertly - in some specific grammatical structures, and even in the methods of teaching. We only need to recall Sapir-Worf's hypothesis of language relativity (Worf 1941) or some of the writings of any of the exponents of the contemporary school of Linguistic Culturology (Petrova 2006) to find overwhelming evidence of the enormous impact any one language has upon the way the people who speak it see and label the world and think about it. The reverse can of course also be true, – that the textbooks written by non-native speakers are at best a compromise between the author's own culture and his or her own personal representation of the foreign language culture, to the extent to which it has been acquired.

Seen from this perspective then, the issue course writers and course leaders face when they are about to design their ESL course involves the fulfilment of at least four main tasks. The first is **the choice of the specific variety of English** they will be teaching: British English, American English, Australian English, etc., **together with the culture (way of life) this variety of the English language embodies**. The second is the **level, or degree, of competence** that is intended (elementary, intermediate, advanced,

proficiency, etc.), the third may be **the choice (or the exclusion) of English for Specific Purposes** that might be needed to match the specific (academic, professional or other) demands of the learners, the fourth is the building of a conscious awareness of **the interference of the learners' own native language and culture**, together with the tools that are needed for overcoming their **interlanguage** (Ellis 1995: 710) and **interculture**.

The two-semester course in Anglophone Area Studies that is being taught to the students of the University of Rousse (Bulgaria) taking their bachelor's degree in European Studies and International Economic Relations provides some practical solutions to the tasks just outlined. In the pages below I will discuss how this is done with our Bulgarian learners of English.

2. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE ANGLOPHONE AREA STUDIES COURSE

In his Introduction to *The Way We Live Now* (1995), the English literary critic and co-founder of the school of British Cultural Studies, Richard Hoggart, outlines broadly the objectives of his book: to present his readers with an exposition of what he sees as **'Englishness'** (Hoggart 1995: xi), a term which the title of the book aptly paraphrases. The term 'Englishness', explains the author, sounds clearly more authentic than 'Britishness': 'Is it certain that there is such a thing as 'British' culture? There is an administrative and political unity which has lasted over centuries and so shares much history and responses to it. But when Eliot, Orwell and Lawrence talk about the culture of the biggest part of these islands, they say 'English' and seem to believe they are pointing to a network of attitudes which they find central to the English, not all of which they would wish to father on the Scots or Welsh or Northern Irish. I share that view.' (ibid., xii).

While reading this passage, one is inclined to immediately accept the legitimacy of the view it expounds, especially as it comes from an 'insider', and from such a well-known literary figure at that.

However there are other, different views, which, conversely, defend the legitimacy of the terms **'British'** or **'Britishness'**. In his study *The British Isles: a History of Four Nations* (a 1995 reprint of a book that came out in 1989), at about the same time as *The Way We Live Now*, the historian Hugh Kearney writes in an equally convincing way that the British Isles are host to a bundle of nations each with its own distinctive culture, in much the same way as the peoples inhabiting the Iberian peninsula, or the ones living along the value of the River Danube; that the British Isles have been an arena where several Germanic and several Celtic cultures competed with each other to form the 'Britannic melting pot', and that speaking of a mainstream English culture and several other, 'peripheral' cultures is clearly going against the grain (Kearney 1995: 4-6; 286). John Oakland's book *British Civilization: An Introduction* (Oakland 1995) similarly seems to convey how widely accepted the concept of Britishness was in the early 1990s.

As can be seen from these examples, both of the terms have their more or less distinct denotations, which have for fairly long secured their positions in scholarly writing. Their specific connotations, some of which may be politically loaded, probably arise from the ways they are interpreted and understood and from the attitudes they try to convey to readers of various backgrounds. Once these attitudes are revealed, articulated and explained, some degree of clarity can be achieved.

When designing the Anglophone Area Studies course some fifteen years ago, the original idea that was to materialize itself in it was from the very beginning precisely this - to achieve this much desired clarity, or in other words, to **help learners get a clear, objective, balanced and realistic idea of Englishness and how it relates to Britishness by presenting the many aspects of these two phenomena and by doing this in a structured and coherent way**. Following this main objective, the subject content of this course was organized in a way that was expected to give learners the entire 'map' of Englishness and its distribution through time and space. **Englishness is also viewed as a set of specific culturemes** – verbalized entities with axiological (positive or negative)

characteristics, such as 'nobility', 'home', 'privacy', 'countryside', 'loyalty' – on the positive side, and 'bad manners', 'laziness', 'familiarity', or 'being common' – on the negative side. These cultureemes are explained in relation to the contexts in which they occur, throughout two consecutive semesters (thirty weeks in all.)

Still another equally important objective of the course is to give learners the opportunity to actively use their own English, and what is most important - in precisely the cultural context where the language originated and where it is being used. While doing this, along with the acquisition of a more systematic knowledge of the culture they study, the students practice their communicative skills and significantly enlarge their vocabulary along specific thematic lines.

One more objective of this course is to lay the foundations of the skills in scholarly writing in English. For this, I must thank the wonderful people who organized my teaching contract at the North Georgia College and State University (U.S.A.) in 2000 – 2001. My experience in an authentic environment provided me with the invaluable opportunity to teach English Composition to native and international speakers of English and to use the university's rich library resources on academic writing and rhetoric. This - hopefully - had some positive impact on my teaching from which, I believe, my students also benefited.

2. THE SUBJECT CONTENT

In the Anglophone Area Studies Course, an attempt is made for all the major areas of knowledge of **the English culture as a specific set of values and way of life** to be introduced and discussed. The **topics** broadly include the relation between language and culture according to the contemporary scholarly field of Linguistic Culturology, the English language and how it came to be what it is today, its major varieties and the kind of culture(s) it stores, embodies and transmits across generations, the people who speak it today as a first, official, or foreign language both in the English-speaking countries and in other places on the globe, England and the British Isles as the cradle of Englishness and Britishness, the geography of the British Isles, Britain's ancient, medieval and modern history, its folklore, customs and traditions, its present-day institutions - government and law, social structure, education, religion, literature, science, art, the media, and the role of Britain in world politics, economy and culture today.

This rather daunting range of topics was determined by the perceived needs of the learners to acquire a general, but fairly well defined idea of the kind of people the English are, of what is meant by 'Britain' and 'British', of the kind of natural environment in which the English culture and the British civilization have emerged and evolved, their development from the beginnings until today, and the stereotypical, quintessential English and British person seen through the eyes of himself and the others.

The sequencing of the thematic content is organized in a way to show as clearly as possible how certain events can become the cause for others. A phrase students would often hear in relation to this aspect of the process of **cultural continuity** is that 'nothing ever happens overnight'. On other occasions, students are often reminded that the wide range of thematic fields covered inevitably means that at this early, introductory stage they can't be discussed in depth, that there is much more to explore and that they are now 'merely scratching on the surface of things', but also that this consciously intended encyclopedic approach will allow them to follow more easily the process of growth as such. Learners are encouraged to pay attention to the key role of impetus, to the significance of the 'critical mass' factor, to the crucial importance of public opinion in the destiny of innovations, and to the great value of individual talent and personal drive coupled up with the receptivity and support on the part of society at large. Examples may vary from the tracing of the long history of the parliamentary form of government to the development of the social security system (the Welfare State) to the history of the abolition of slavery to the scientific method and its outcome, the Industrial Revolution.

What must be stressed in relation to the character and range of topics involved is that they are meant to give as complete representation as possible of the natural

environment of the English language. Many English words, especially political or administrative terms like 'county', 'Poll tax', 'circuit judges', 'common law', 'high church', 'establishment' or 'first-past-the-post system' do not have equivalents in Bulgarian. In order to explain such words, the lecturer has to outline the whole system of which they form a part, or in other words, a whole segment of the English culture. Thus, while going deeper into the context of the English language, the learners become more and more aware of the specifics of the English way of life and how it came to be what it is today, but also of the great cultural divide between Britain and Bulgaria. This in turn helps them not only to dispel some myths they may have had previously concerning the English and British way of life, but to also to start inquiring more deeply into their own, deeply ingrained Bulgarian culture traits.

The basic argument of **Linguistic Culturology**, a modern branch of Linguistics that can be traced back to Wilhelm von Humboldt, later to continue with the 20th century American anthropologists and recently to establish itself as a legitimate scholarly field with a well developed methodology in the works of the contemporary Russian linguists of the schools of Axiological Linguistics and Linguistic Conceptology is that human beings not only view the world in highly specific ways determined by their specific languages, but also that they have no choice in that; that they can only see and think about the world through the 'glasses' of their own language and culture. In other words, any given language, through its sounds, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phraseology, paremiology, precedent names, precedent texts, folklore, and literature stores and transmits the entirety of its people's specific culture, their whole worldview and way of life. **In order to understand this culture then, one needs to study the language from a cultural perspective. Our experience has shown that one of the most efficient ways to achieve this is through teaching Anglophone Area Studies, as in it the material is arranged and discussed in relation to the set of culturemes that make up the complex notions of Englishness and Britishness.**

4. THE ACADEMIC WRITING COMPONENT

The Academic Writing Component of the Anglophone Area Studies Course aims to develop the learners' skills in scholarly writing. I have found that the most difficult part has been to teach our students the difference between writing their own paper and copying from a source without acknowledging its author. This might be due to their native culture in which the ideas of individual responsibility and authorship and are not yet fully developed. Some of the students (or sometimes their parents or other 'patrons' or 'sponsors') are sincerely surprised and even shocked at finding out how a neatly printed and richly illustrated paper does not earn any points at all only because it is not authored by the student whose name is printed at the top. For some of them, the idea that cheating is bad is difficult to grasp, probably because the practice of cheating is so common. Such students seem to believe that because cheating is such a widely-practised strategy, it ought to be tolerated. One is tempted to admit that the positive cultureme 'honesty' does not rank very high in present-day Bulgarian culture (although according to our research (Petrova 2006) the Bulgarian proverbs prove exactly the opposite!)

But there is also the honest and hard-working student who prefers to follow instructions closely and composes his or her own paper himself. He or she soon realizes – much to his surprise - that honest work is this time rewarded. Perhaps for the first time in his life, this humble student finds himself to be in a winning position. On seeing this new turn of events, some of the cheating students decide to 'move with the times' and write their next paper themselves. The academic writing process thus turns into a hands-on social experiment that proves that most of our young people can very easily become receptive to ideas of justice and personal responsibility, provided there exists a functioning system of rewarding the good students and not rewarding the lazy ones.

The academic writing component of the course is aimed to develop the first three primary skills – quoting, paraphrasing and summarizing. It is being practiced from the

very first day of the course. At the end of the course, each student has to submit a summary of an authentic article on a topic that is related to the thematic content of the course. Each semester, during the last two weeks, the students make oral presentations of their papers. They are specifically asked to start preparing well in advance for their presentations as they will be expected to speak and not to read. The choice and range of the topics is practically unlimited. Each student is encouraged to find something that is interesting and exciting to him or her. This emotional approach has very positive results as the students feel very proud when they are told they are co-authors of the Anglophone Area Studies course and that the knowledge they share with their classmates adds significantly to the subject content covered, especially to its variety.

Below will be listed some summary topics that have been selected by our students over the last five years to show how this variety is achieved:

- The Commonwealth of Nations
- London
- The English Countryside
- Stonehenge
- The Arthurian Legend
- Anglo-Saxon Kings
- King Alfred the Great
- Women and American Society
- Dublin
- The Wars of the Roses
- Elizabeth I
- Oliver Cromwell
- William Shakespeare
- English Literature in a Nutshell
- The Anglosphere
- Mary, Queen of Scots
- The English language over the Globe
- Vancouver
- Australian English
- Fish 'n Chips
- The English Pub
- The Bermuda Triangle
- Rolls Royce
- The Henley Royal Regata
- The University of Oxford
- An Overview of English Customs and Traditions
- The House of Commons
- Christopher Columbus
- The Early Middle Ages in England
- Anne Boleyn
- Queen Victoria
- Sir Winston Churchill
- The Industrial Revolution
- Britain's Achievements in Science and Technology
- The Genre of Fantasy
- A Welsh Fairy Tale

The list can certainly be continued, but the above examples are sufficient to show the almost unlimited range of topics in which the students have been taking an active interest.

It should be noted that in assessing the papers, a practice common to some English and American universities is followed, according to which together with their summaries the students are asked to also submit copies of the original texts they have summarized for the lecturer to read and compare.

As can be seen, the range of the themes covered in the course can thus become pretty challenging for both the students and their course leader. However, the students seem to find this aspect of their work particularly exciting and rewarding.

The extent to which the course is fulfilling its objectives presupposes a process of constant monitoring throughout the two semesters. At the end of the second semester the students are asked to submit their own evaluations of the course in the form of an essay. Their answers without any exception sound very enthusiastic. Many of them begin with, 'In the beginning I was not quite sure what this course would offer' and end with 'It was very interesting and exciting'. Most of the answers would contain sentences like, 'I broadened my horizons and, while doing this, tremendously improved my English'.

If I had to summarize how our students feel about this course, I will begin with the language aspect: they feel this is the best way to study the English language – in its proper context. Then comes the broadening of their intellectual horizons and their general knowledge of Britain, the English-speaking world, and the world at large. Next is the acquisition of the skills in scholarly writing, and last but not least, the adventurous aspect. The course is viewed as a rewarding adventure through time and space.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I outlined the objectives of the Anglophone Area Studies course as an introductory discipline together with the means to achieve them and argued that teaching English through Englishness or Englishness in English is 'killing two birds with one stone' as this means teaching simultaneously the set of culturemes that make up the English specific culture while doing it in its own verbal medium of communication.

Teaching English through Englishness is a lifetime job as in essence it involves both learning English and learning Englishness. I believe that any one natural language can be taught in this way.

However, there is also the second, special role of the English language today that should also be taken into account – its destiny as the language of international communication. Teaching English as a lingua franca may or may not completely overlap with teaching it as the language of the English culture. Further contrastive investigations of the two usages of English will help scholars and teachers alike find out where the line can be drawn and will open new, exciting vistas on the exploration of human communication across cultures.

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