

## THE ROLE OF MEDIA OUTLETS IN CREATING A CULTURAL IMAGE

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*Abstract: The article offers an overview of topics dedicated to British culture and civilization in the view of widely present and accessed media outlets (such as BBC's History page, for example), whose aim is to reflect the United Kingdom's self created image, its culture and values. It focuses on students' needs and requirements and is meant to provide an illustrative approach to the way a country's cultural identity is promoted and perceived with the use of authentic online materials.*

*Keywords: culture and civilization, Britishness, teaching resources, history, identity*

Elements of culture and civilization have been used to facilitate language comprehension and acquisition; however the cultural and the linguistic aspects are intertwined. Language learning does imply developing an awareness of the world but cultural acquisition is also only possible through a comprehensive picture that encompasses both information and vocabulary. In intercultural competence, acquired through language learning, social identity plays an important role.

The purpose behind Culture and Civilization courses is to use texts and materials as an aid in promoting and understanding British Culture. In higher education, culture and civilization courses, also lay the ground for other subjects, because historical facts are offering social context for literature classes. But, in this context they are no longer just a frame for the text or historical background. They focus on two components, one historical and one contemporary. Focusing on the issue of British Studies from an educational perspective Brumfit (2003: 45) refers to the concept of Britishness as being highly disputed. However, the purpose of this article is not to discuss the idea of British Cultural Studies and how they have emerged.

British Culture and Civilization courses need to follow the trends of perceiving British identity; identity however is an image made up of lots of individual components constantly restructuring in a shifting global context currently also influenced by the Brexit crisis. According to Peter Childs (2001:30) Britishness has always been "a hybridised and hyphenated identity".

And it is precisely this pluralistic and diverse character that needs to be acknowledged and understood by the learner for it is easily transmitted through authentic material. In Hanif Kureishi's essay, *Bradford*, we learn that:

[...] he found three Englands. There was guide-book England, of palaces and forests; nineteenth century industrial England of factories and suburbs; and contemporary England of by-passes and suburbs. Now, half a century later, there is another England as well: the inner city (Kureishi, 2011: 42).

Period dramas and heritage movies focus on the first type. The second one nostalgically remembers the greatness of the British Empire and its role as the engine of European economy. Yousaf (2002: 28) defines the third type as the "Americanized" England, while the inner city reflects the "evanescent fads and phases of contemporary British life".

Byram (2003: 56) considers that "British cultures, or any others, can be studied by those who are native to them or by outsiders". The popularity of Kate Fox's *Watching the*

*English*, a series of rules, codes and rites, proves an interest in "pop-anthropology about English behaviour" (Fox 2014: 10) beyond the school or the university. The official handbook that is fundamental for all questions in the citizenship test, *Life in the UK: A guide for new residents* is made up of five chapters structured as follows:

- The values and principles of the UK,
- What is the UK,
- A long and illustrious history,
- A modern, thriving society,
- The UK government, the law and your role.

These aspects can be used as key points around which to organize courses.

In an article from 2005, *The Telegraph* mentioned "ten core values of the British identity"; amongst them was history (the term encompassing political culture and national achievements that should be taught to British students). O'Driscoll refers to this necessity as well, writing about the requirements for becoming a UK citizen:

Now they have to study an official book called *Life in the UK* and then pass a 'citizenship test' based on it. After that, they attend a formal ceremony at which their citizenship is conferred upon them. (Interestingly, when *Life in the UK* was first published, it emerged that most British born-and-bred people could not achieve the required 75% pass mark!) (O'Driscoll, 2013: 61).

Brumfit identifies a market for British Studies as well as an "eclectic sets of materials recommended by interested agencies", mentioning the case of the British Council. However, he reduces this type of pre-selected materials to a mere set of facts, - "an organism" -, due to the filter and the obvious educational aspect and thus warns about "an approach [that is] no more than intellectual tourism, or high-grade stereo-typing" (Brumfit, 2003: 45). Authentic materials have been used for years, as they expose students to real language in a real context. Just as artificial language is to be avoided, so is the exposure to censored materials.

Websites containing EFL teaching materials, such as *esolcourses*, (aside from grammar, vocabulary or songs), have a subsection dedicated to life in the UK. The National Archives (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>) specifically mention a subsection for Education and host interactive, individual or group tasks accompanying each original and unique document.

Judging by its title, James O'Driscoll's *Britain for Learners of English* clearly addresses foreign students. Differences and most importantly attitudes towards multiculturalism and the difficulties encountered in the attempt to define the term "British" are somewhat highlighted, however there still remains the problem of topicality and relevance. Even though it focuses on content, its purpose being to facilitate information rather than vocabulary items, the material - as a book- reveals its limits.

Contrary to these, media outlets have the advantage of novelty and newsworthiness. Newspapers and their web-pages serve as rich authentic materials. To a certain extent though, this might require some in-depth research. If specific teaching materials may lack authenticity being chosen and "purified" in advance, newspapers might act as influencers, favoring one side over another<sup>1</sup>. Pertaining to this, the *Oxford Royale Academic* published an article that categorizes British newspapers; *Black and White and Read All Over: A Guide to British Newspapers* starts with *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* and ends with *The Express* or *The Mirror*, the list covering broadsheets and tabloids alike, pointing out the papers' political leanings and endorsements of certain parties. As the authors highlight themselves, it is of utmost importance to acknowledge these aspects when researching facts about Britain: "If

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<sup>1</sup> Berardo (2006: 65) also mentions the threats of being too culturally biased as a disadvantage of authentic materials.

you're trying to understand Britain, understanding the newspapers published and read here can be vital", "Britain's newspapers continue to provide a remarkable insight into the way the country thinks, and seem likely to continue to do so" <https://www.oxford-royale.co.uk/articles/a-guide-to-british-newspapers.html>.

And this brings us back to Culture and Civilization courses; the criteria to keep in mind when choosing authentic materials must cover the purpose, the presentation and the suitability of the content, that is, its relevance for students (see Berardo 2006: 63).

The BBC's British History archive page is chronologically organized from "Norman Britain" to "The making of Modern Britain", featuring articles and book excerpts by historians and university professors, thus making them reliable sources. Also there are different viewpoints on the same topic. The articles follow a pattern, are well organized, as opposed to loose newspaper or magazine articles that require a lot of research. However, this organized aspect definitely includes them in the educational resources category.

The main BBC History webpage dedicates most of its latest editorials to Britain as it depicts:

- *Surviving Aberfan* (documentary and survivor stories commemorating the 1966 mining disaster)
- *Why should I care about 1066* (a legacy of the brutal conquest)
- *How did Shakespeare shape our sense of history* - The chapter focuses on history plays, England's identity crisis, their message reflecting contemporary geopolitical conflicts, and draws parallels to 20th and 21st century British fiction and movie heroes such as James Bond.
- *Queen Victoria. The woman who redefined Britain's monarchy* - The editorial contains journal entries and newspaper accounts of marriage, monarchy, empire and redefines Victoria as a brand, this present day term from marketing and advertising drawing a bridge over time.
- *The Great Fire of London* (a new vision)
- *How has underwear shaped women's lives* (from Elizabeth I's underwear over Victorian era corsets to early 20th century girdles, leading to links about British women in WWI and WWII)
- *How do you find hidden stories from Britain's black history* - This chapter offers inspirational stories and approaches racial origins looking beyond slavery.

The editorials create a link with the past, preserving and without a doubt promoting Britain's greatness, often offering a fresh perspective on things, without falling into clichés. Students are given the opportunity to critically observe political, economic and cultural aspects.

Raising cultural awareness, looking beyond stereotypes, understanding the cultural diversity of modern societies by perceiving shifting boundaries and comprehending concepts such as migration and immigration, without neglecting neither the aspect of heritage nor that of popular culture through media and entertainment should be objectives of Culture and Civilization courses. Thus, authentic materials from media outlets, which are first and foremost diverse in nature, prove to be of utmost importance, as they are easily accessible, updated and up-to-date.

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