

Using Brexit-Related Contents to Reinforce Gabonese Learners' English Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Teaching and learning a foreign language require the use of adapted materials. Thus, teachers have the huge responsibility to investigate, find and put tools at learners' disposal for the optimal development of their linguistic competences. Resting on both qualitative and quantitative approaches, this article aims at showing to what extent Brexit-Related Contents can serve as authentic materials to reinforce English language acquisition in an EFL context.

Keywords: Brexit-Related Contents, EFL, Gabonese Learners, Language Acquisition

Introduction

Teaching and learning English in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context requires a judicious choice of didactic materials by the teacher. She/he has the professional duty of selecting motivating, captivating and informative instruments that can enable learners' optimal acquisition of the language. Among them we have cartoons, audiotapes, songs, audiovisual aids..., and above all, contents in relation with British civilization. The latter are mostly favoured because of their authenticity, actuality, and capacity to effectively expose pupils to the foreign language, reducing the overbearing influence of the official language and local dialects.

One of the first teaching goals of English acquisition should be creating an environment where natives' politics, economy, history, health, religion, lifestyle, education, etc., are assimilated. On this ground, we highly recommend Brexit (Britain's exit of the European Union) fact as a new source to fetch didactic contents and teach English in Gabonese High Schools. In electing it as a focus, we intend to arouse our pupils' curiosity on what happens abroad and sharpen their knowledge of international news. Gravely, learning English without getting interested in what occurs in the native country is a big mistake. That is certainly why Gabonese learners have difficulties in developing their reading, listening, speaking and writing skills.

The research question of this paper can be formulated as follows: how can Brexit-Related Contents reinforce Gabonese learners' English language acquisition? Two hypotheses can help answer this question: Brexit Contents can reinforce Gabonese learners' English Language Acquisition through topical issues covering matters such as politics, economy, health...; and through engaging activities that will favour a natural immersion of the English language.

Some research works have been conducted as regards the integration of British civilization or culture in language teaching. In *Authentic Materials and Cultural Content in EFL Classrooms*, Ferit K. (2004) states the crucial importance of using cultural contents in EFL classrooms. He strongly believes that authentic materials are pivotal for a better learning or teaching. Sultan Türkan & Servet Çelik, S (2007) joins his view in his seminal work *Integrating Culture into EFL Texts and Classrooms: Suggested Lesson Plan*. The author suggests the promotion of intercultural competence at each phase of the English learning experience, maintaining that EFL teachers should help students personalize a particular content by making them realize the differences between their own culture and the target culture. Equally meaningful is Francis Mfoumou Mba's (2016) Master's thesis entitled *Using Texts on British Civilization to Motivate Gabonese E.F.L Students: case of Premiere*. The researcher indicates how useful texts on British civilization can be to motivate Gabonese E.F.L students at high school. Last but not the least, in *British Cultural Aspects as a Didactic Tool to Reinforce Pupils' Comprehension of Texts*, Roméo Obiang Sima

(2020) sustains that only the cultural facet of British civilization should be considered for learners' effective understanding of texts. He thus proposes festivals, museums, cinema, holidays, people, lifestyle, novels, etc., as the remedies to comprehension difficulties of texts at learners.

Three insightful observations can be made from the previous publications: the researchers champion British Civilization as an authentic material for cultural immersion, motivation boosting, and text comprehension. Such a perspective is reductionist. Thanks to British Civilization aspects, one can also explore historical, cultural, economical, political aspects. On the linguistic level, language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) and English functional features (vocabulary, grammar, comprehension...) can be enhanced thanks to British Civilization. Seen from this perspective, the present study aims to offer British topical contents for a substantial acquisition of the English language. Such an endeavour forcibly gives way to a variety of practical activities to be implemented (debates, group or pair works, etc.) in the classroom. The content-based approach fits better to this demonstration purpose as it is an approach in which "[language] teaching is organized around the content or the information that the students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus (Richards & Rodger, 2001, p. 204). Interestingly, the learner learns and develops his/her aptitudes through the thematic content.

Our study revolves around four sections. The first lists some relevant matters to teach in classroom. The second presents the sources to fetch Brexit-related contents. The third proposes some engaging activities to be implemented in the classroom as regards Brexit-related contents. The last unveils the analysis of results.

Main Brexit Matters to Teach in Gabonese Classroom

This section is dedicated to Brexit issues to explore in the classroom. To be more specific, the section aims to identify some Brexit domains whose contents can help reinforce students' English learning. These are: politics, economy, health, and education...

Political Matters as a Pertinent Brexit Topic

Politics can be a first Brexit matter to consider in Gabonese schools. A scrutiny can be made on the different positions of the existing parties in the UK (mainly the Conservative and the Labor parties) during Brexit negotiations and ratification. Derek. E Mix (2020) confirms:

Brexit was originally scheduled to occur on March 29, 2019, but the UK Parliament was unable to agree on a way forward due to divisions over what type of Brexit the UK should pursue and challenges related to the future of the border between Northern Ireland (part of the UK) and the Republic of Ireland (an EU member state). In early 2019, Parliament repeatedly rejected the withdrawal agreement negotiated between then-Prime Minister Theresa May's government and the EU, while also indicating opposition to a no-deal scenario, in which the UK would exit the EU without a negotiated withdrawal agreement. (p.1)

Here, it is evident that Brexit was/is a divisive issue. From the 2016 referendum, stating Britons' desire to leave the European Union by 51.9% (17,410,742 against 16,141,241 voters), the British Parliament had a fundamental role to play in terms of voting the conditions of departure. The teacher of English, for sure, will exploit that political aspect in evoking MPs' conflicting positions on the subject, former Prime Minister Theresa May's failure to conduct the exit process from 13 July 2016, her ensuing resignation on 24 July 2019, the dangers of a no deal, Boris Johnson-led Conservative Party's decisive victory (365 out of 650 seats) following the 12 December 2019 general election...

On the international stage, some issues deserve pedagogical scrutiny. Indeed, the UK's privileged/historic relationship with the United States, despite tensions over Northern Ireland border, the Afghan evacuation deadline, and the now resolved corona virus ban imposed by the US to vaccinated British people (Pippa Crerar, *The Mirror*, 2021), or her rivalry with France, where France's Minister of Foreign Affairs recently

accused Boris Johnson of “*permanent opportunism*” (Harry Cole, *The Sun*, 2021) amid the Australian-UK-US (AUKUS) Pact, can constitute substantial and resourceful topics to teach to Gabonese learners.

The UK’s strategy to seek new partners around the world-free of EU’s overbearing restrictions-is equally worth reflection. For instance, thanks to an effective and intensive cooperation between the UK and Gabon (primarily on the environment issue), the central African country has, through its President Ali Bongo Ondimba, stated the country’s intention to join the Commonwealth of Nations. On 11 May 2021, he happily informed: “*I had a warm and rich conversation with honorable Patricia Scotland, Commonwealth Secretary General, on Gabon’s possible integration into the Commonwealth. This will be a historical milestone for Gabon! The mutual goal could become a reality during the next Commonwealth Summit in Kigali*” (Twitter). Here, it is crystal clear that UK’s membership in EU used to undermine the Commonwealth’s capacity to attract new partners to cooperate with. Thanks to Brexit, the Commonwealth is regaining visibility. A Gabonese teacher of English will necessarily be perspicacious if he/she exploited that civilization aspect in showing how much salutary Brexit has been in opening up opportunities to Gabon.

Brexit economic Issues to Improve Learners’ English Language Acquisition

The UK’s economy (world’s fifth) may serve as an appropriate basis for pedagogical purposes in Gabon. The consequences on the UK’s economy for instance, are obvious topics to be examined. Mix (2016) pessimistically conjectures:

Many economists have expressed concerns that Brexit would cause an economic shock that could leave the UK facing weaker economic growth, higher inflation, job losses, and depreciation of the pound, with potentially significant negative consequences for the U.S. and global economies. Advocates of Brexit have maintained that such economic fears are greatly exaggerated. Meanwhile, observers have noted growing unease among some of the many multinational corporations that have chosen the UK as their EU headquarters, who now face a period of uncertainty about UK’s trade and economic arrangements and the corresponding legal and regulatory frameworks”(p. 2)

On a less pessimistic note, however, Gemma Tetlow and Alex Stojanovic (2018, p. 29) imagine a brighter trade future for the UK with the advent of Brexit. They sustain: “*...depending on the precise details of the Brexit deal signed with the EU, the UK may be able to negotiate its own FTAs in future*”. This assertion is profound in that it subsumes the UK’s fervent desire for freedom when it notified its departure to the EU. With Brexit, the UK has a certain amount of latitude to negotiate and conclude its own trade agreement with both EU and non-EU countries. Mix (2021) confirms: “*On January 1, 2021, the entire UK, including Northern Ireland, left the EU customs union and now conducts its own national trade policy*” (p. 2). Therefore, in learning English through such informative contents, pupils will be familiar with terms such as trade, growth, job, inflation, (un)employment, currency, etc., which will consolidate both their comprehension of the topic and their acquisition of economic and commercial vocabulary. More importantly, a contextualization effort can be envisioned by the teacher in drawing parallels with Gabon’s economic situation (sectors, imports, exports, economic sustainability, GNP, GDP...).

Health as a Relevant Brexit Issue

Overlooking the health issue related to Brexit as an apparent angle to collect didactic material for our Gabonese learners will be seen as huge mistake. As a former EU member, the UK had for long had one of the best and the most securing health system in the world. Despite that distinction, the UK’s National Health Service (NHS) has been facing many challenges. The Corona virus outbreak has been an additional complication to deal with for the British Health system. Coincidentally, the pandemic was reported nearly at the same time as Brexit ratification. Tamara Hervey et. al (2021) anxiously report the sea massing challenges when they hold:

"The NHS has been under pressure to reform since its inception. Pressure comes from an aging population; changing disease patterns; new technologies; changing patient expectations (increased desire for choice and decreasing trust in professional advice) and a desire for cost containment. In 2021, there are immediate pressures from Covid-19, and a longer term need to improve health security. All these challenges are exacerbated by the UK's changing relationship with the EU." (p. 28).

Ostensibly, the EU-UK relationship is changing, mostly in the worst. With that dissension, the UK's shortages in medicine supply will undoubtedly increase, as EU sometimes envisages export bans against the UK, which was recently the case concerning the AstraZeneca vaccine. Failing to fulfill an EU order for vaccine and having prioritized British people with the limited stock of jabs it had produced, the UK faced continental criticisms and threats of ban exports. An antagonism of that sort can be highly profitable to the teacher of English as his/her learners will be deeply involved in trying to understand the problem. Furthermore, the learning can be contextualized by discussing how the covid-19 pandemic is handled by Gabonese authorities across the country, what are the protective measures, what children think of vaccines and so forth. Confidently, this will meet pupils' interest and lead them to communicate in English.

Brexit Education Matter to Reinforce English Learning

As we are dealing with teaching and learning, The UK's education issue is unavoidable to our survey. Because of Brexit, the education sector has been highly and negatively impacted. During the time when the UK was a member of the European Union, multiple partnerships between the country and its counterparts in terms of education were noticeable. With Brexit, however, the EU-UK collaboration and exchange of the academic staff will be revisited. Simon Marginson (2021) worryingly confirms: *"The capacity of UK universities to recruit talent from Europe will be substantially reduced by their lesser role in European research funding and project leadership, and the restriction of free demographic movement"*. Unquestionably, the free movement of students and academics will be restricted on the continental level. Immigration obstacles and financial difficulties will undeniably deter EU specialists from venturing into the UK and vice versa. As a result, such downward mobility will lead to a lack of teachers (primarily in secondary schools). On the matter, the Department for Educational alarmingly worries: *"secondary schools in England will need 15,000 more teachers between 2018 and 2025 to meet a 15% rise in pupil number"* (iGShools, 2020, p. 6). That nationwide shortage will be much perceptible in Modern Foreign Language teachers. That is why Baroness Coussins, the Vice President of the Chartered Institute of Linguists, warns the House of Lords: *"Even if every single one of our students now doing Languages at University went into teaching, the shortage of MFL teachers will still not be met."* (p. 5). Domestically, a Gabonese teacher of English could take advantage of that crisis to tackle the necessity for a country to have ties with others, the importance of teachers-mainly foreign language ones-or slightly compare both the British and Gabonese educational systems (curriculum, modes of organization, examinations, higher education...).

Some Activities and Procedures to Implement Brexit-Related-Contents in Class

After providing some relevant themes related to Brexit, let us propose some activities and procedures. Essentially, dialogue, debate and speech have been selected for the purpose of this work because of their engaging, interactional, and motivational characteristics. As for the sources, the teacher is highly recommended to consider newspapers (the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Independent, the Sunday Times, etc.), magazines (the New Statesman, The Week UK, BBC History Magazine, the Spectator...), news television channels (BBC World Service, Sky News, GB News, CNN...), platforms (YouTube, Dailymotion, Vimeo...). Incidentally, both teachers and learners just need to log on the internet to have them, and their contents can be exploited in various forms by the teacher (audio, videos, scripts...). That being said, let us now tackle the activities.

Dialogue

This activity highlights the divergence of opinions in the United Kingdom during the Brexit. To start with, the teacher gives a short script to all the pupils. He/She briefly explains the message carried through the text. The script contains the viewpoint of Brexiters on the one hand, and the position of Pro EU on the other. The teacher reads first. Then, he/she makes the students repeat in chorus. He/she performs the model reading, makes learners repeat for a considerable time for them to acquire pronunciation, intonation, articulation, and rhythm. The next step consists in naming the learners two by two to perform before their classmates. Standing comfortably face to face, the two learners perform the dialogue by reading from the scripts. The activity lasts ten minutes to allow maximum of students to take part in the activity. Obviously, this dialogue will not only motivate learners (even shy ones), but also develop their listening, speaking, and reading abilities. In case the activity is not achieved in the classroom, learners can prepare it in pairs for the next session.

Debate

As far as debate is concerned, it would be opportune to specify that the teacher selects a divisive topic linked to Brexit. For example, *“Are you for or against Brexit?”* He/she writes it on the board for clear visibility and adequate understanding. To ensure a good classroom management, the teacher divides the classroom into two groups (about 15 members). One group is going to defend Brexit, and the other is going to oppose it. The teacher lets each group designate a leader to coordinate the task, which lasts five minutes. Meanwhile, the teacher moves around the classroom to check whether everybody is participating. Then, as a facilitator, he/she launches the debate by giving the floor to one group. This activity favors speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills for they overlay during the performance process. The teacher should devote ten to fifteen minutes to this production phase.

Speech

In this activity, students are expected to embody some famous British people. The teacher divides the class into four groups; each group comprises seven students. Chosen by his/her classmates, one member in group A, role-plays Boris Johnson by delivering a speech in front of the “British Parliament” represented by five members of the same group, while the remaining member plays the role of the Speaker of the Parliament. Those role-playing the “British Parliament” respond to the speech through approving or disapproving noise and ask questions. Once group A has finished, group B takes over, till every group has performed.

The teacher shares the script of the speech to all the students. He/she reads it himself first. Subsequently, he/she puts the “MPs” in front of the Speaker, and “Boris Johnson” amid the room. In the meantime, everyone is listening to him. The speech should be extremely short to avoid boringness. In total, the activity takes place for ten minutes maximum. During the activity, the teacher may serve as a facilitator. If the activity is unfinished due to time management issue, the teacher is absolutely free to reserve it for the next session; for instance, before tackling another lesson.

Research Procedure and Result Analysis

Our study was conducted at Léon MBA High School, a state school located after Trois Quartiers, opposite to the Beach that bears its name_ la Plage Léon MBA, at Boulevard Bord de Mer, Libreville. It is recognized as one of the oldest and most prestigious schools in the country. It comprises two Junior High Schools respectively, C.E.S Léon MBA 1 and C.E.S Léon MBA 2. Both go from first form (6eme) to fourth form (3ème). As for Léon MBA National High School itself, it starts from the fifth form (2nd) to the Upper sixth form (Terminale).

Methodology

For our investigation purpose, the questionnaire was preferred to the interview or the observation. Here, a quantitative approach was adopted to enable the collection of statistical and empirical data. The survey targeted chiefly two categories of participants. First were teachers of English from Léon MBA High School. Their choice was justified by the fact that they are practitioners, meaning that they are acquainted with the realities on the ground. Thus, they seem a reliable indicator to our research fulfillment. Resultantly, out of the sixteen (16) permanent teachers of English appointed in the school, eight (8) could fill their questionnaires on the spot. The others (8) filled theirs on other occasions.

Here 4 (science-oriented) students from Léon MBA High School constituted our second targeted population. Their choice was made because of their insatiable sense of curiosity about the English language. As far as the physiognomy of that level is concerned, let us note that the classroom was composed of forty (40) students who were clarified some questions.

Analysis of Teachers' Questionnaire

The results of teachers' questionnaire can be analyzed as follows:

Question 1: *How long have you been teaching the English language?* This question was designed to know teachers' professional experience in English teaching. The results show that 12.5% (2) of teachers had between 1 and 5 years of work experience, 12.5% (2) of teachers had between 5 and 10 years, and 12.5% (2) between 15 and 20 years. 62.5% (10) of teachers we interrogated had between 10- and 15-years' experience. It was the highest number of all. Thus, these figures emphatically demonstrate that most of our participants did have a deep and undeniable work experience.

Question 2: *What activities do you mostly practice in class?* This question was relevant because we wanted to know the kinds of activities used by teachers in class. 100% (16) of teachers said that they used interactive activities such as dialogue, debate and song, and role-play; to avoid their learners' fatigue or lack of motivation. We totally endorse this position as in a foreign language context; teachers must make their classrooms vivid.

Question 3: *What topics do you use to teach English?* Out of 100% of teachers interrogated, 68.75% (11) confessed that they used common issues (such as teenage pregnancies, drug, alcohol, poverty, forced marriages, pollution, technology...) to teach English, while only 31.25% (5) mentioned topical issues. The aim of this question was to check whether topical issues were sufficiently used at high school as a didactic input to teach English. Though relatively adopted, one can notice that topical matters occupy an honorable percentage in terms of use.

Question 4: *Are the topics oriented to domestic or foreign matters?* This was another question submitted to teachers. It aimed at knowing how often teachers have recourse to overseas matters. It appeared that 62.5% (10) of the teachers we encountered dealt with overseas topical issues; whereas 37.5% (6) oriented their topics towards Gabon. Overwhelmingly, despite the contextualization efforts, teachers of English have grasped the urgent need to tackle overseas topics.

Question 5: *Which countries do you often target?* The intention here was to verify the countries from which teachers selected their topics for English teaching. 31.25% (5) mentioned the United Kingdom; 50% (8) designated the United States, while 12.5% (2) indicated South Africa and Nigeria. Obviously, being Superpowers, both the United States and the United Kingdom demonstrate their hegemony. By extension, we are tempted to note that Gabonese teachers of English are mainly influenced by two tendencies of English language speaking: American and British English.

Question 6: *Have you ever evoked a civilization aspect during your lessons?* Unsurprisingly, 100% (16) of the teachers had already evoked a civilization aspect during a lesson. This reveals that the teaching of

English through civilization aspects is enormously spread at high school. This also reinforces the paramount prominence of Brexit related contents as a basis in English teaching.

Question 7: *How learners find it?* We wanted to know how much British civilization aspects were appreciated by learners. The record is adamant that 87.5% (14) of teachers said their pupils found the lesson interesting, while only 12.5% (2) of the teachers said that their students considered the topic as confusing. Amazingly, no teacher said there was a factor of boringness during the lesson. These outcomes show that students feel at ease with the teaching of some civilization aspects.

Question 8: *Have you ever taught English through Brexit?* To this question, 18.75% (3) of teachers answered in the positive and 81.25% (13) replied in the negative. The above result reinforces the importance for teachers to introduce Brexit in their teaching. Since it is a current issue inextricably linked to the English language, teachers should inform their pupils on what is going on. Through the variety of topics it covers, teachers will acquire matter to reinforce their learners' language skills.

Question 9: *What do you think about using Brexit-Related Contents as a helpful teaching tool for students' English language acquisition? Justify.* The last question addressed to teachers was aiming at having their view on Brexit. Teachers 75% (12) recognized that Brexit-Related Contents are opportune as the Brexit stands as an unprecedented issue that is reshaping the world. 25% (4), however, sustained that they were at ease with African Anglophone matters because of the similarities between African English-speaking countries and Gabon.

Analysis of Pupils' Questionnaire

The pupils' questionnaire was elaborated in the following manner:

Question 1: *How long have you been learning English?* The objective of this inquiry was to have Pupils' English learning duration. The figures present a diversity of results. 5% (2) of the students said that they had been learning English for three (3) years; 15% (6) of them asserted that they had been learning English four (4) years. These data can be explained by the massive lack of teachers in the discipline across the country. Conversely, 80% (32) had been learning it for six (6) years.

Question 2: *What is your level in English?* The students were expected to tell objectively their level in English. They were given three proposals such as beginner, intermediate, and advanced. The first observation on the figures above is that none of the pupil has an advanced level in English. Yet, the results of question 1 revealed that 80% of the students had been learning English for six (6) years. 45% (18) of the sample of the interrogated pupils argued to have a beginner level in English. One should not underestimate this rate for it represents nearly half of the total sample of the study. Such a situation can be justified by an insufficient sensitization of learners, especially science-oriented ones on the importance of English in their studies. Encouragingly, 55% (22) of the students claimed that they had an intermediate level in English. Obviously, it is encouraging but not comforting.

Question 3: *Are you interested in topical issues? Justify.* Students were expected to tell objectively if they were interested in topical issues. The results revealed 40% (16) of the sample argued to be interested in topical issues because it widens their general culture, while 60% (24) of them said "no", because they found them time consuming. This comes to confirm our suspicion on many Gabonese students' lack of solid knowledge concerning international topical issue. Techniques must be found to motivate our learners to know what happens abroad given that we are living in a globalization dynamic.

Question 4: *What matter (s) evoked by the teacher are you mostly interested in?* That question aimed at knowing the domain preferred by the students. In this respect, 17.5% (7) of them preferred "politics", 22.5% (9) liked "economy", while 60% (24) opted for "health". It is not surprising since the survey took place in a science-oriented classroom. This choice just reveals their personal interest. The teacher should

seize his/her learners' centres of interest as a breach to convey the English Language. Yet, the economic and political areas should not be put aside.

Question 5: *Have you ever heard of Brexit? If so, what is your knowledge on it?* This was helpful to assess the learners' level of information on the Brexit. Satisfactorily, almost 80% (32) had already heard about it and referred to it as the UK's departure from EU. However, they did not know much on the reasons for the UK's departure from the EU.

Question 6: *Learning English using Brexit-Related Contents would be: a) Interesting, b) Boring? Justify your answer.* That question was highly crucial. 30% (12) of the pupils surveyed said "no", while a larger number of 70% (28) said "yes". Even though some of the students are still reluctant to the idea of discovering more about British civilization and more specifically Brexit, 70% of them are willing to. It is a resounding score.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, British-Related Contents undeniably stand as a reliable and valuable source to not only expand Gabonese learners' knowledge of the rocky relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, but also enhance pupils' language skills. As Brexit covers a wide range of areas (politics, economy, health, education...), teachers will be completely overwhelmed with precious educational resources to teach to their learners. Statistically, the results were adamant that both teachers (75%) and learners (70%) welcomed the introduction of Brexit-Related-Contents in their teaching and learning processes. Interactive activities such as dialogue, debate, speech, etc., were complementary ingredients for the success of the implementation goal.

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BIO-NOTE



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