

An Analysis of BUP Students' Preferences on Topics of Current Events

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The reader will find the results of a survey carried out with 166 BUP and Cou students of English as a foreign language. This survey was set up in order to find their preferences for topics related to personal and social issues. The results show common preferences on topics, such as: “the destruction of the environment”, “drugs”, “racism” and, “AIDS.” The results also show clear differences on topic preferences according to the sex variable.

1. Introduction

The approaches of learning and teaching foreign languages in secondary stages, advocated in the Spanish *Diseño Curricular Base* (1989), stress the importance of creating meaningful contexts for authentic communication in the classroom, as well as the need of familiarizing the student with the knowledge and usage of communicative language functions.

From this standpoint, the learning of a foreign language is considered, rather than just the master of grammatical rules or isolated words of a language, as the development of the learner's communicative competence, which implies the knowledge of when, where and with whom to use the sentences and vocabulary. (Mumby 1978, Johnson 1982).

In line with this communicative approach, Halliday's (1978) functional theory of language outlines seven different functions of language: instrumental, personal, regulatory, interactional, imaginative, representational, and heuristic. Among these functions, it is the heuristic one which is most closely linked to the aim of our study. Because of this, we will now explain it briefly. This function is used to acquire knowledge and to learn about the socio-cultural environment. In foreign language learning, heuristic learning is a wide concept that may range from identifying and describing objects and places to analyzing the problems of our modern society.

Up to this moment, the heuristic function has not really been encouraged, neither in methods nor in practical teaching. To enable the learner to develop

this function, teachers usually fall back on the themes put forward by the textbook they may be using in the course. Very often, it is found that the thematic contents covered by many textbooks do not go further than asking the student to describe people, objects or places, or demanding the student to answer some questions from a reading text which may be related to some real issue. The kind of topics as the activities presented by many textbooks are not usually motivating enough to help feelings or ideas to develop; they do not foster personal growth because they neither stand for the students' true concerns nor their experiences of real life.

The reasons of this drawback are manifold. On the one hand, textbooks are based on methods and approaches stemming from different theoretical sources. Many of them, do not hold a functional division of language, but a structural one. On the other hand, most textbooks used in the Spanish secondary school are produced by British publishers, who have designed them with learners having in mind learners of different backgrounds and nationalities. They do not purposely focus on the Spanish Secondary learner.

2. Objectives

This study was planned to achieve several objectives. In the first place, to find out what the personal or social issues are that our sample of Secondary pupils studying English are more concerned about. Secondly, to check whether there are differences in their preferences according to sex. Our third aim was to prepare materials and activities in tune with the students' preferences for these topics without neglecting language development of grammar, vocabulary and functions. Finally, it was our objective to collect and organize data which would allow us to check, through a subsequent survey, whether there is agreement or disagreement between the student's concerns regarding personal and social matters, and the topics found in most of the textbooks currently used in our secondary schools.

In this article, we present and discuss the results of the first stage of our research. Part of this information was displayed, during a talk given at the 1994 APAC Convention, at which, we also offered some examples of how we might work with these topics in the English class.

3. Rationale

It is our opinion that a thorough knowledge of the student's concerns for these matters can provide many benefits. On the one hand, it will enable the teacher to understand the student's needs better. We cannot forget that one of the most important changes in the methodology of EFLT has been the shift of focus from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach (Numan 1988). The student is increasingly being considered as the key factor in the process of teaching. According to the *Diseño Curricular Base*, this assumption implies, in the first place, that a teacher must begin by analyzing the learner and his learning factors, and, among which there are his own interests, and only when this analysis has been carried out, is it advisable to go further and discuss what to teach and what methodology to use.

On the other hand, an awareness of the students' topics preferences gives the teacher the opportunity to search for the most suitable teaching materials, and design activities which may be more in line with their real interests (Brindley 1989, McDonough & Shaw 1993). In turn, this information might be used as the basis for course design, which, no doubt, is an interesting aspect, since nowadays the "Proyecto Curricular del Centro" allows teachers to make up their own programmes in accordance with the particular context in which they are teaching. Moreover, bearing in mind the fact that English is a compulsory subject within the Spanish Education System, and that, except for a few cases, the student will not encounter situations to speak English in a natural setting, it seems quite reasonable to use English, among other things, as an instrument to discuss the students' personal concerns and interests.

The position just mentioned does not imply neglecting the practice of grammar or vocabulary; on the contrary, it means the integration of different language aspects with a single purpose: to help the student to use the foreign language for looking at issues in which he has a real interest.

The inclusion of themes chosen by the students themselves encourages responsibility and motivation towards the foreign language; furthermore, the student uses English to read, talk, listen to, or write about a theme which interests him, at the same time, that it is linked to real life (Moskowitz 1978, Rivers 1981).

The methodology to deal with these current topics offers the teacher a lot of possible alternatives, which may range from classroom exercises, to home reading for example. Above all, the knowledge of the students' topic preferences favours project work, as this activity is essentially topic based, and is developed by means of related tasks in which the student expresses his opinions, feelings or attitudes (Nunan 1991, Long & Crookes 1992, Bruton 1993).

The development of the student's topics preferences in the classroom is also related to different communicative methods; especially it is strongly connected to "Community Language Learning"(Curran 1976), as in this method, learners say things which they want to talk about in their native language. Nevertheless, as we have stated above, the purpose of our study has not been to prove any premise from any method, but to draw attention to the necessity of incorporating "the student's real concerns" into the topics of the English classroom, as well as to the need to help the student to increase his ability to analyze society. At the same time, we provide him with related activities of grammar and vocabulary so as to promote progress in the learning of the language.

4. Method

4.1 *Subjects*

A total of 166 EFL students, 103 male and 63 female, studying English at the secondary school "San Miguel de Aralar" in Pamplona participated in this study. Subjects fell into four groups: BUP1, BUP 2, BUP3, and COU. Their ages ranged from 14 to 20.

4.2 *Materials and procedures*

At the beginning of the school year (1993-94) the students were given a questionnaire containing 54 topic- words standing for current affairs of our world, as well as personal problems, related to teen-agers. From this questionnaire they had to choose and arrange in order of importance, according to the ordinal scale provided, (1-10) the ten topic words which identified their ten most important concerns either on personal matters or social issues. Within the list of topics a section with numbered answers was included. (See Appendix 1). In order to avoid problems in the target language with low-proficiency

learners, which might have altered the results, both, the questionnaire form and the necessary instructions were given in Spanish.

The questionnaire for this study was drawn from an analysis of the main news items spread in Spanish newspapers over one month. We took a pretest questionnaire to 34 students studying English at "I.B. Principe de Viana" in Pamplona. After analyzing their answers, some topics were added and minor changes introduced. The revised list with 54 items was administered to the sample of 166 students at "San Miguel de Aralar" private secondary school the week following the Christmas holidays.

A wide choice of options was used to prevent any predetermination of the results, as a consequence of using a questionnaire with settled topics for gathering the information.

After collecting the data, these were processed by means of the computer package programme DBASE III PLUS, which allowed us to store, sort and relate data easily.

4.3 Operational Definitions

Three types of scores have been used in this study:

a) *Cases*: which stand for the total number of students who included each of the 54 options within the most chosen topics.

b) *Points*: which refer to the value given by the student to each option. Different scores were given depending on the ranking of the students' individual choices. We allotted a scoring of ten points to the option placed first by each student; nine points to the option placed second; eight points to the option in the third position, and so forth, in decreasing order, up to the tenth position which was given one point.

c) *Percentage figures*: the proportion of students who placed a particular topic among the ten most frequently listed.

5. Results

The list of the ten most frequent topics displayed in Table 2 shows that our sample of BUP and COU students are more concerned about social matters than about personal problems. "The destruction of the environment," "AIDS" or "drugs" rank highly, while personal matters such as, the student's own future are placed far down in the list.

Table 1: The ten most frequent topics

| ORDER TOPIC | CASES | PERC. | POINTS | MALE | FEMALE |
|----------------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|--------|
| 1 LA DESTRUCCION DE | | | | | |
| LA NATURALEZA | 99 | 59.28 | 596 | 62.14 | 55.56 |
| 2 LAS DROGAS ENTORNO | | | | | |
| ADOLESCENTE | 82 | 49.10 | 508 | 50.49 | 47.62 |
| 3 EL RACISMO | 79 | 47.31 | 505 | 44.66 | 52.38 |
| 4 EL SIDA | 78 | 46.71 | 541 | 44.66 | 50.79 |
| 5 LA LIBERTAD | 63 | 37.72 | 386 | 32.04 | 47.62 |
| 6 EL TERRORISMO | 57 | 34.13 | 324 | 38.83 | 26.98 |
| 7 EL DESEMPLEO | 54 | 32.34 | 294 | 37.86 | 23.81 |
| 8 EL ANTIMILITARISMO | 53 | 31.74 | 307 | 41.75 | 15.87 |
| 9 LA GUERRA | 51 | 30.54 | 271 | 33.98 | 25.40 |
| 10 LOS PROBLEMAS EN | | | | | |
| LOS ESTUDIOS | 51 | 30.54 | 271 | 25.24 | 39.68 |

The tendency outlined above is even more evident when we look at the general topic list where all the options are included. (Appendix II). “Problems with their studies”, “friendship”, “love”, “lack of friends” or “lack of communication with their parents” are found well down the list. It is even more surprising to find out that “to fail an exam” has been placed in the 37th position !

We also notice how some matters, as for instance: “to get old”, “strikes”, “dirtiness in the streets”, “marriage” or “kidnappings” do not seem to be very important for these students, since they do not rank highly.

The table illustrates interesting differences between male and female students’ preferences. Five out of the ten most frequent topics are found in both groups. This means that the female and male students in our sample share concerns

about: “the destruction of the environment”, “AIDS”, “drugs”, “racism” and “freedom”.

Nevertheless, the degree of importance attached to these issues seems to vary between boys and girls. It is plain that both groups consider “the destruction of the environment” as the most important matter, although males’s rate it higher. (62.14 % as compared with the female students’ 55.56 %).

Another difference is worth mentioning. Male students placed “drugs” in the second position while female students classified them in the fourth position. “AIDS” appears in the same position in both groups, although, again, different percentages are shown (50.79 for female students as compared with 44.6 for male students). Futhermore, these tables show that girls are more interested in “racism” than boys, since the girls place it in the second position and the boys in the fourth one.

Moreover, among the common issues whose interest is shared by both groups, there is a noticeable disparity in the degree of importance given to “freedom”; male students rank it tenth, while female rank it fifth. Nevertheless, the most outstanding feature is, that male and female students share common concern for five topics. The girls show more interest for “problems in their studies” (39.68 compared to 25.24), “sexual matters”, “the abandoning and ill-treatment of children”, or “the third world”. While boys express other issues such as “terrorism”, “unemployment”, “antimilitarism”, or, “war”.

6. Conclusion

The figures show clear common tendencies among the students’ preferences for topics, as well as some differences according to the sex factor.

In our opinion, these results may be interesting for the foreign language teacher, particularly in two ways: first, as an example of small- scale classroom research; second, as a tentative guide of the student’s preferences. In the light of these results, it seems advisable not only to include “drugs”, “the destruction of the environment”, “AIDS” and “racism” as topics in a secondary teaching programme, but also to prepare materials and activities dealing with these issues. It also seems advisable to take into account boys and girls’ differences on personal and social matters.

However, care should be taken not to extrapolate these results to the whole BUP population, without carrying out further studies to validate our findings. These future studies should include a larger sample selected at random, besides of introducing additional variables, as for instance, age, which would enable us to check whether there is any relationship between course grade and topic preferences. Only then, would educational authorities, designers of teaching materials and teachers be sure of a way to follow in order to encourage the student's motivation for the foreign language.

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APPENDIX I: Cuestionario

**TEMAS SOCIALES Y PERSONALES EN EL ENTORNO
ADOLESCENTE**

CURSO

GRUPO

EDAD

SEXO

* A partir de esta lista desordenada que se te entrega, elige y clasifica del uno al diez las cuestiones que más te preocupan o que te parecen mas importantes.

La libertad, la soledad, el sida, la delincuencia juvenil, la muerte, la violencia en la sociedad, el no tener amigos, la carencia de dinero, la incomunicación con mis padres, la incomunicación con mis profesores, la incomunicación con mis amigos, la eutanasia, el tercer mundo, los gitanos, las cuestiones sexuales, la ausencia de lugares adecuados para los jóvenes, el divorcio de mis padres, la amistad, las drogas en mi entorno, las huelgas, la contaminación, el amor, los problemas en los estudios, el envejecimiento, el racismo, la existencia de Dios, el futuro de la humanidad, el desempleo, el aburrimiento, la destrucción de la naturaleza, el terrorismo, la crueldad con los animales, la suciedad en las calles, el suspender un examen, problemas físicos como engordar o adelgazar, encontrar novia o novio, el matrimonio, el aborto, la guerra, la falta de información sexual, la pobreza en el mundo, el maltrato y abandono de los niños, los secuestros, los anticonceptivos, las enfermedades, la muerte de mis seres queridos, mi futuro personal, las violaciones, la política, los inmigrantes, la liberación de la mujer, el antimilitarismo, la homosexualidad, los accidentes de tráfico.

| | |
|---|----|
| 1 | 6 |
| 2 | 7 |
| 3 | 8 |
| 4 | 9 |
| 5 | 10 |

APPENDIX II:

Topics ranked according to the importance given by the students.

| ORDER | TOPIC | CASES | PERC. | POINTS | MALE | FEMALE |
|-------|------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|--------|
| 1 | LA DESTRUC NATURALEZA | 99 | 59.28 | 596 | 62.14 | 55.56 |
| 2 | LAS DROGAS | 82 | 49.10 | 508 | 50.49 | 47.62 |
| 3 | EL RACISMO | 79 | 47.31 | 505 | 44.66 | 52.38 |
| 4 | EL SIDA | 78 | 46.71 | 541 | 44.66 | 50.79 |
| 5 | LA LIBERTAD | 63 | 37.72 | 386 | 32.04 | 47.62 |
| 6 | EL TERRORISMO | 57 | 34.13 | 324 | 38.83 | 26.98 |
| 7 | EL DESEMPLEO | 54 | 32.34 | 294 | 37.86 | 23.81 |
| 8 | EL ANTIMILITARISMO | 53 | 31.74 | 307 | 41.75 | 15.87 |
| 9 | LA GUERRA | 51 | 30.54 | 271 | 33.98 | 25.40 |
| 10 | PROBLEMAS EN LOS ESTUDIOS | 51 | 30.54 | 271 | 25.24 | 39.68 |
| 11 | EL TERCER MUNDO | 50 | 29.94 | 291 | 30.10 | 30.16 |
| 12 | MI FUTURO PERSONAL | 49 | 29.34 | 287 | 35.92 | 19.05 |
| 13 | EL FUTURO DE LA HUMANIDAD | 48 | 28.74 | 280 | 25.24 | 34.92 |
| 14 | LAS CUESTIONES SEXUALES | 48 | 28.74 | 254 | 27.18 | 31.75 |
| 15 | LA CONTAMINACION | 46 | 27.54 | 265 | 31.07 | 22.22 |
| 16 | LA AMISTAD | 42 | 25.15 | 234 | 24.27 | 26.98 |
| 17 | LA DELINCUENCIA JUVENIL | 42 | 25.15 | 228 | 27.18 | 22.22 |
| 18 | MALT.Y ABANDONO NIÑOS | 42 | 25.15 | 207 | 20.39 | 33.33 |
| 19 | LA VIOLENCIA SOCIEDAD | 40 | 23.95 | 239 | 22.33 | 26.98 |
| 20 | CRUELDAD CON LOS ANIMALES | 37 | 22.16 | 210 | 21.36 | 23.81 |
| 21 | EL AMOR | 35 | 20.96 | 169 | 20.39 | 22.22 |
| 22 | AUSENCIA LUGARES JOVENES | 32 | 19.16 | 104 | 20.39 | 17.46 |
| 23 | INCOMUNICACION PADRES | 31 | 18.56 | 204 | 14.56 | 25.40 |
| 24 | LA EXISTENCIA DE DIOS | 29 | 17.37 | 136 | 20.39 | 12.70 |
| 25 | LA POBREZA EN EL MUNDO | 25 | 14.97 | 158 | 13.59 | 17.46 |
| 26 | ENCONTRAR NOVIO/A | 24 | 14.37 | 119 | 17.48 | 9.52 |
| 27 | EL NO TENER AMIGOS | 22 | 13.17 | 141 | 8.74 | 20.63 |

| | | | | | | |
|----|---------------------------|----|-------|-----|-------|-------|
| 28 | LOS ANTICONCEPTIVOS | 22 | 13.17 | 117 | 13.59 | 12.70 |
| 29 | FALTA DE INFORM SEXUAL | 22 | 13.17 | 111 | 13.59 | 12.70 |
| 30 | LAS VIOLACIONES | 22 | 13.17 | 118 | 8.74 | 20.63 |
| 31 | LA LIBERACION DE LA MUJER | 21 | 12.57 | 100 | 7.77 | 20.63 |
| 32 | LA MUERTE | 20 | 11.98 | 103 | 11.65 | 12.70 |
| 33 | ACCIDENTES DE TRAFICO | 20 | 11.98 | 78 | 13.59 | 9.52 |
| 34 | EL SUSPENDER UN EXAMEN | 19 | 11.38 | 80 | 13.59 | 7.94 |
| 35 | LA SOLEDAD | 18 | 10.78 | 94 | 5.83 | 19.05 |
| 36 | LA EUTANASIA | 18 | 10.78 | 87 | 13.59 | 6.35 |
| 37 | LA POLITICA | 18 | 10.78 | 83 | 12.62 | 7.94 |
| 38 | LA MUERTE SERES QUERIDOS | 15 | 8.98 | 94 | 8.74 | 9.52 |
| 39 | EL ABORTO | 14 | 8.38 | 58 | 6.80 | 11.11 |
| 40 | PROBLEMAS FISICOS | 13 | 7.78 | 42 | 3.88 | 14.29 |
| 41 | LA HOMOSEXUALIDAD | 13 | 7.78 | 35 | 5.83 | 11.11 |
| 42 | LA CARENCIA DE DINERO | 10 | 5.99 | 38 | 9.71 | 0.00 |
| 43 | EL ABURRIMIENTO | 10 | 5.99 | 37 | 7.77 | 3.17 |
| 44 | LOS INMIGRANTES | 9 | 5.39 | 29 | 5.83 | 4.76 |
| 45 | LAS ENFERMEDADES | 9 | 5.39 | 49 | 2.91 | 9.52 |
| 46 | EL DIVORCIO DE MIS PADRES | 9 | 5.39 | 37 | 4.85 | 6.35 |
| 47 | INCOMUNICA CON PROFESORES | 8 | 4.79 | 30 | 4.85 | 4.76 |
| 48 | INCOMUNICA CON MIS AMIGOS | 7 | 4.19 | 0 | 3.88 | 4.76 |
| 49 | LOS GITANOS | 6 | 3.59 | 28 | 5.83 | 0.00 |
| 50 | LAS HUELGAS | 5 | 2.99 | 27 | 4.85 | 0.00 |
| 51 | EL ENVEJECIMIENTO | 5 | 2.99 | 24 | 3.88 | 1.59 |
| 52 | LA SUCIEDAD EN LAS CALLES | 4 | 2.40 | 16 | 1.94 | 3.17 |
| 53 | LOS SECUESTROS | 4 | 2.40 | 7 | 2.91 | 1.59 |
| 54 | EL MATRIMONIO | 3 | 1.80 | 15 | 1.94 | 1.59 |