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**A LOOK AT STUDENTS' CONCEPT  
OF LANGUAGE LEARNING<sup>1</sup>**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Teaching a foreign language involves knowledge of three basic areas: language, a methodology to teach it and the student we teach to. The language is the part that deservedly receives the lion's share in any foreign language education program. At the undergraduate level we can estimate that more than 70% of the EFL curriculum is devoted to language learning activities. The rest is devoted to methodology, where the student may get more or less attention, mainly in the educational psychology and practice teaching practice teaching components of the program.

There is a strong belief in the history of language teaching that the student is getting more and more attention for every new methodology that is proposed. Earlier things such as individualized instruction and even language aptitude tests were once regarded as ways of centering on the student. More recently, the techniques used in foreign language acquisition studies, the assumptions behind the needs analysis movement and the procedures used in many humanistic approaches, including Lozanov's Suggestopedia and Curran's Community Language Learning, suggest a student-centered pedagogy. The latest ideas behind schema theory, with an emphasis on prior knowledge, and sensitization, which is a way of making the learner aware of the task he is faced with (RILEY, 1985), are the ones that get closer to the issue we are addressing in this paper.

The problem, in my view, is that when we talk about student-centered activities we start from our point of view. We have a

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concept of language and language learning and our task in student-centered activities is to manipulate things so that the student is led into adopting our point of view. The assumption is that the students' concepts of language and learning are naive and should be replaced by our sophisticated ideas.

A more serious problem is that our concepts of language and language learning have always been proven to be wrong. What we have held as true in the past, and have often imposed upon the students, has generated such strong opposition that it was totally discarded later. We move, or have been moving, from thesis to antithesis without ever being able to reach a synthesis. The frustration bred by any methodology is always so strong that we move to the other extreme, again breeding more frustration. Between being wrong and being naive, we have decided, in a way, to be wrong, sometimes moving very far from where the student is.

Up to now, to my knowledge, no study has ever tried to describe what concepts students have of language and language learning before they start studying English as a foreign language. This study is then a first attempt in this area, and the results should be regarded as tentative.

In terms of students' concepts of English as a foreign language, this paper addresses four basic questions: first, what concepts the students have of the language they are going to study (the language variable); second, what concepts they have of a person who speaks the language (the speaker variable); third, what knowledge they have of what is involved in learning a foreign language (the strategy variable); and finally, what knowledge they have of the possible advantages of knowing a foreign language (the purpose variable).

## METHODOLOGY

The experiment involved a group of 33 fifth grade students in a public school in Greater Porto Alegre, Brazil. The students came from a lower middle-class neighborhood and had never studied any foreign language.

The data were collected in a two-hour session with the students. The session started with a free writing activity in which the students were asked to write as many words as came to their minds after a prompt word was pronounced. The words were 'Xuxa' (a popular Brazilian star in children's shows) and 'football'. The students had five minutes for each word. The activity was presented as a contest and the ones who

wrote more words received a small prize (a bar of chocolate).

In the second moment, the students were instructed to write ten words that came to their minds when each of the following prompts were given: 'Portuguese', 'Star Wars' and 'English'. This time no time limit was set.

The assumption behind this activity was that the words written by the students after they heard the word 'English' should reflect their concepts of the language or lack of them. This assumption may be valid or not. The experiment, however, has a built-in validity measure to test this assumption, which is the additional use of concepts and experiences that are very familiar to the students such as the name of a popular television star and the word 'football'. To the extent that there is a match between these familiar concepts and the words the students produce from them, the technique may be validated. Considering, as regards the television star, that the most frequent word provided by the students was beautiful and that this word does in fact describe the actress in question, we can conclude that what the students wrote in the experiments is probably related to concepts they may have about the key word.

In the last part of the session, instead of words, the students were asked to complete a story. They received four sheets of paper, one at a time. At the top of each page there was a lead, which was read to them aloud. The first lead presented the setting, a typical school, and the characters, Maria and Bill. Maria was Brazilian and Bill American; he had just arrived from the United States and was unable to say one word in Portuguese.

The subjects were then instructed to start the story by describing Bill, what he looked like, outside and inside, mainly what ideas he had in his mind. The concern here was with the speaker variable and the purpose was to make the students define, in their own words, what stereotypes they had, if any, of a typical American young man.

The second page added that Maria decided to learn English. The subjects were then asked to write what she had to learn to be able to communicate with Bill. In the third page Maria was still trying to learn English and the subjects were asked to describe what she did when she could not understand what Bill said or what was written in a magazine. The purpose here was to assess concepts in terms of the strategy variable.

Finally, in the last page, the subjects were informed that Maria had gone through college, had a career and was now able to speak English very well. They should now describe of what use English was to Maria.

## RESULTS

The words and the stories produced by the 33 students were then analyzed in terms of word frequency and idea units. The words and ideas were counted for each of the concepts involved: language, native speaker, learning strategies and purpose.

Patterns, or some kind of regularity, were expected to emerge from the answers provided by the students. These possible patterns were sought for each of the variables.

### *Language Variable*

For this variable the subjects were asked to write ten words that came to their minds when they heard the word English. What follows is an example of the words given by one student (translated from the Portuguese):

English: language, country, England, subject, rich, powerful, accent, actors, cinema, Disneyland.

The relevant question here is which words, if any, tended to be repeated by the students. Table 1 shows the words that have been cited more than four times by the students.

TABLE 1 -Words cited five or more times by the students after hearing the word 'English'

Word	Frequency
word	23
language	13
book	12
pencil	11
pen	11
people	10
notebook	9
country	8
study	7
speak	7
England	5
subject	5
interesting	5
teacher	5

The first thing to be noticed is that students did tend to repeat some words. The second thing is that the words they cited could be grouped into different areas.

The most frequent word was 'word' itself. The word belongs to a group that we can classify as language-related words. Other frequent words in this group were "language", which was cited 13 times and 'speak', cited 5 times. There was no occurrence of 'sentence', 'text', 'paragraph' or more common terms such as 'read' and 'write'. The words 'understand', 'pronunciation' and 'accent' occurred once.

A second important group that emerged from the survey consisted of words that related to the classroom setting. In this group we have the words 'book', 'pencil', 'pen', 'notebook', 'subject', 'teacher', and 'study'.

A third group, more difficult to define, suggests concepts related to culture in very broad terms. The most frequent words in this group were 'people', 'country', and 'England'. Others, mentioned only once, were 'Parliament', 'queen', 'America', 'California', 'Disneyland', 'Statue of Liberty', 'New York' and 'baseball'.

A fourth group reflects attitudes towards English (either positive or negative). The most obvious example is the word 'interesting', a translation for 'legal', which, in Portuguese, has a very positive connotation. Some students also wrote English words, which may be interpreted as a positive sign. Other related words were 'easy', cited twice, and 'difficult', cited three times.

One area that was expected to produce words, but failed to do so significantly, was awareness of English in the community: 'movies' was mentioned twice but the words 'actor', 'actress', 'singer', and 'television' were mentioned only once. Many trade marks identified by English names were not mentioned.

### *The Native Speaker Variable*

Data for the native speaker variable were collected from the students' description of Bill. The students were encouraged to describe not only what Bill looked like, but also what ideas he had in his mind. Students had no trouble in providing a physical description of Bill, but usually avoided internal, psychological traits. The following is an example provided by one student (All examples are translated from the Portuguese and slightly edited. Names are replaced but sex is kept):

Bill was rather tall, a little dark, straight black hair and large eyes. He was thinking the following: he had left the United States for Brazil to make a living here. He wanted to work for the theater, making plays for children and adults (Doris).

In terms of physical traits, only two idea units formed a pattern. One was that Bill had brown eyes, which was repeated by nine students. The other was that Bill was short, repeated by eight students. The closest to a possible American stereotype was a description of Bill as a cowboy.

Very little was produced in terms of psychological traits. Some qualities were mentioned (shy, friendly, hard-working), but no pattern was discernible.

In terms of the positive-negative dichotomy, 12 students pictured Bill in a positive light, 3 were negative and 18 described him in neutral terms.

### *Strategy Variable*

The strategy part of the story tried to elicit suggestions about what Mary had to do to learn English. This is the part of the experiment where the students produced the largest amount of data. Example of one answer provided by a student (translated from the Portuguese):

Maria could not understand the magazines that she borrowed from Bill. Then she got a super dictionary, which had all the words but, still, she had difficulty with some words. She was not very intelligent and couldn't memorize the words in spite of all the help she got from her father. But Bill, who spoke English, had Maria repeat each word 20, 30 times. Then she started learning. (Daniel).

Table 2 lists the most frequent things which, according to the students, Maria had to do to learn English. The most cited idea unit was that Maria had to study, usually intensified by words such as 'hard', 'a lot', 'all the time'.

TABLE 2 - The most frequent idea units listed by the students in terms of learning strategies.

Strategy	Frequency
Study	19
Go to a language center	10
Use a book	8
Use a dictionary	6
Use gestures	6
Talk to friends in English	5
Get a teacher	5

### *Purpose Variable*

In the last part of the story the students were asked to describe what purpose Maria found for the English she had finally managed to learn. This is an answer provided by one student:

English will be very useful to Maria. She will be able to study in other countries, talk to Bill, travel to many places, take many courses, talk to everybody who knows English and teach English. (Claudia)

The most frequent idea unit was that Maria could be a teacher of English and it was repeated by ten students. Nine wrote that Maria could travel and six mentioned that English was useful for her college studies. Finally, three students mentioned that Maria could read in English. There was only one citation that English helped her to get a job.

## **CONCLUSION**

The first conclusion suggested by the findings is that students tend to view language as a set of words. Learning a language is learning new words, an idea that is repeated over and over by the students, including memorization of lists of words, use of dictionary or some other specific strategy:

One day Maria had a bright idea. She went to town and bought many cards. When she got home she glued the cards on the wall with the words in English and their meanings. Then she learned how to speak English. (Walter)

The students made no distinction between reading in Portuguese and reading in English. In the first place, they were not aware that in English we have sounds that are different from the sounds we have in Portuguese. In the second place, they also seemed to ignore that in English we have different sound-grapheme relationships. All the examples suggest, as the one above, that by applying the graphophonological rules of Portuguese we can read (and pronounce correctly) any word written in English. Although students tended to define knowing a language as the ability to speak the language, no one, for example, mentioned the tape recorder as an aid to learn the language. In their minds, the dictionary allows us not only to translate from one language to another, following a word-for-word method, but also allows us to speak the language, even if no phonetic transcriptions are provided. In other words, there is no concern with either phonological or syntactical aspects. Learning a language is learning words with the same sounds we have in Portuguese, read with the same graphophonological rules and occupying the same position in the sentence. English is seen as a paraphrase of Portuguese where learning the language is learning synonyms for things that are already known.

The second conclusion is that students viewed English mainly as a subject in the curriculum. English was associated with the classroom environment, eliciting words such as 'book', 'pen', 'pencil', 'notebook', 'teacher', etc. In their minds, we learn English the same way we learn other school subjects, by reading from books, writing down words and studying hard, sometimes alone. Three students, for example, wrote that Maria managed to learn English only after she had shut herself in her bedroom for many afternoons. Even in terms of purpose, the main reason cited for studying English was related to the school environment, that is, to become a teacher of English. Authentic use of English was seen as something very far from their own experience, useful only to people who had the opportunity to travel abroad.

The students seem to make a distinction between what they learn and the English that the character in the story learns. The English that they learn is for school purposes only; it will be useful to them if they later come back to school as teachers. Authentic use of English is reserved



to the character, who has a chance to use it in the foreign language context.

Maria had to learn how to speak, to dance, to tell the numbers (...). She had to know the country, the people, the government. In short, she had to learn what life was like in English. (Karen)

The paraphrase concept of English will probably change as soon as the students start studying English. From the first classes they will probably realize that the Portuguese graphophonological rules cannot be applied to English and that word order is sometimes different. The realization that in English we have sounds that are nonexistent in Portuguese may take a little longer and may be regarded as more or less important to a useful knowledge of English in a foreign language context.

The concept of English as a school subject has, in my view, more serious implications, mainly because it may remain unchanged as students go through the English syllabus at school. It may be a very important part of the teacher's job to make the students aware that English is used by many people in their community other than English teachers.

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