

Creativity and attitudes in English language learning

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Resumen

Ésta es una investigación exploratoria sobre las actitudes de los alumnos en el aprendizaje del idioma inglés y la creatividad de los docentes en la Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo (UAEH). Los participantes fueron estudiantes del primer y último curso de inglés, impartidos en el primer y sexto semestre, respectivamente. El propósito fue averiguar qué tendencias muestran los resultados a medida que los estudiantes avanzan en sus estudios y cómo la creatividad de los maestros influye en dichos resultados. Participaron 297 estudiantes del Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades (ICSHU). Se utilizó un cuestionario y entrevistas focales. Los resultados mostraron que las actitudes son positivas entre los estudiantes del primer curso de inglés, pero las percepciones negativas aumentan en los últimos cursos. Sobre la creatividad, se identificó, de acuerdo con las opiniones expresadas por los estudiantes, que los docentes se encuentran demasiado concentrados en cumplir con las políticas educativas, pues no desarrollan su potencial de creatividad al máximo.

Palabras clave: actitudes del alumnado, creatividad docente, lengua extranjera.

Abstract

This is an exploratory research about students' attitudes towards English language learning and teaching creativity at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo (UAEH). The participants were learners in the first and last English course, which is the sixth semester. The purpose was to find out what kind of tendencies the results exhibit as students advance in studies, and to what extent teachers' creativity might have influenced the outcome. Data was collected from 297 students currently enrolled in the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades (ICSHU), using a questionnaire and focus group interviews. Results showed that attitudes to English language learning are extremely positive among basic level students, but negative feelings increase in the last course. Regarding creativity, it was found that teachers are too enclosed by the school policies that they do not perform at their fullest potential creativity.

Keywords: learners' attitudes, teachers' creativity, foreign language.

Introduction

The educational model of the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo in its pedagogical dimension states that the command of a foreign language is considered as a substantive component in higher education (UAEH, 2015). On the other hand, the Pedagogical dimension also serves as a unifying tool of values, attitudes and creativity. In this sense, teachers need to be aware of the purposes of education in the university and the methods to achieve them.

In terms of creativity in language teaching, Richards (2013) states that creativity is linked to levels of attainment in language learners, and it helps them to cope with unpredictability. Among the abilities teachers must develop to involve creativity in their classes are problem solving, making new connections and meanings, have original thoughts, and use their imagination. Burton (cited

in Richards, 2013) adds that creativity links two elements: forming new ideas and utilizing ideas in a new way. The authors argue that creativity in education is rooted in the educational model, so those models which are still based on a traditional education reduce creativity.

Regarding the concept of attitude, this can be traced from the field of psychology, referring to those predispositions or tendencies to react favourably or unfavourably towards an object, a thing, another person or an institution, as a result of the social representation that has been constructed about that object (Moscovici, 1986). In the field of language teaching, Richards, Platt & Platt (cited in Lasagabaster, 2004) draw on the term linguistic attitudes, as those attitudes that people manifest towards the languages, which are specified in an individual behaviour, and following Moscovici's ideas, their origin must be sought in social factors (see also Janés Carulla, 2006). In the same sense, Krashen (1988) has stressed that adopting a positive attitude is important enough by itself for learning to take place because positive attitudes help to minimize the affective filter, facilitating learning as well as expanding personal growth.

The relationship between creativity and attitudes with respect to the teaching-learning process can be identified in the level of participation that learners exhibit in the classroom; when creativity is present, learners actively participate in the task because it becomes more meaningful to them, resulting in positive attitudes (Guillén & Bermejo, 2011). However, as an individual engages in the creativity act, the intensity of this engagement can vary from person to person and from situation to situation (Zampetakis, Bouranta & Moustakis, 2010).

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Methodology

This study aims to shed some light on the relationship between teachers' creativity and students' attitudes. With this purpose, the following questions were established:

- What kind of tendencies do learners' attitudes exhibit as they advance in the English courses they take at the university?
- From the learners' perspectives, what amount of creativity teachers' show in their classes?

A mixed methodological approach was adopted using quantitative and qualitative techniques. Two instruments were used, a 10 items questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale that went from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The statements explored the aspects of attitudes (e.g. "I enjoy practicing English in classes"), level of satisfaction (e.g. "I feel satisfied with my performance in the English course"), and teachers' creativity (e.g. "My English teacher makes interesting and amusing classes"). The focus group interviews were carried out with volunteer participants: 15 from first semester and 15 from sixth semester, aimed at allowing students to express their feelings, expectations, and experiences about their English classes (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989). The participants on the quantitative part of the study were 297 students (ranging in age from 17 to 25) enrolled in the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades (ICSHU): 152 students belong to the first semester and 145 to the last one. The results are shown in the following tables:

Table 1. Students' attitudes towards the English language

| | Percentage 1 st semester | Percentage 6 th semester |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Strongly disagree | 6.2% | 2.2% |
| Disagree | 9.6% | 11.9% |
| Undecided | 30.4% | 36.2% |
| Agree | 30.3% | 39.9% |
| Strongly agree | 23.5% | 9.8% |
| Total | 100% | 100% |

Students from the first English course display positive attitudes above-chance, with a 53.8% (agree 30.3% and strongly agree 23.5%), while in the last English course students show percentages slightly below chance 49.7% (agree 39.9% and strongly agree 9.8%). It is worth noticing that both groups (first and last course students) show a significant percentage in the undecided responses (30.4% and 36.2%, respectively), that deserves particular attention to work on improving their attitudes.

Table 2. Students' level of satisfaction with their English classes

| | Percentage 1 st semester | Percentage 6 th semester |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Strongly disagree | 3.3% | 21.8% |
| Disagree | 7.1% | 12.8% |
| Undecided | 22.3% | 29.5% |
| Agree | 40.2% | 20.4% |
| Strongly agree | 27.1% | 15.5% |
| Total | 100% | 100% |

Students' responses about how satisfied they feel with their English classes show that first course students are more satisfied, with 67.3% (40.2% agree and 27.1% strongly agree), than their peers from the last course, showing a 35.9% (20.4% agree and 15.5% strongly agree). Despite the differences in satisfaction between students from first and last English courses, positive answers (agree and strongly agree dimensions) obtained the highest percentage in both groups.

Table 3. Students' opinions about the amount of creativity teachers demonstrate in their classes

| | Percentage 1 st semester | Percentage 6 th semester |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Strongly disagree | 10.8% | 12.2% |
| Disagree | 15.3% | 18.4% |
| Undecided | 30.1% | 29.6% |
| Agree | 30.3% | 30.0% |
| Strongly agree | 13.5% | 9.8% |
| Total | 100% | 100% |

Students perceive teachers' creativity in terms of the activities, dynamics, engaging tasks and the use of technology that they use in class, including their capability to build rapport. Results showed that teachers in the first course, 43.8% (30.3% agree and 13.5% strongly agree) tend to include more teaching resources that are attractive to their students, in contrast to students in the last course that displayed only 39.8%, with a distribution of 30.0% agree and 9.8% strongly agree.

« Teachers need to reimagine the role of education and move away from traditional educational paradigm. They seem to be caught up in school regulations that hampers their freedom of creativity. »

The analysis of qualitative data reveal that students' main arguments refer to the same long-standing problems related to syntax learning. It seems that the teaching methodology and educational resources that are available to students are not helping them in doing better on these aspects. As a result, students do not perceive a real improvement in their command of the language. The most significant arguments are the following:

P1: "I am tired of learning the same grammatical structure over and over again".

P5: "Teachers always use the same methodology and activities in class". "Some teachers are motivators, and take their time to help us, some others don't".

P8: "I like teachers who are rebellious, who use their imagination and are not tied to administrative rules".

P13: "I have been to the Centro de Autoaprendizaje de Idiomas several times and I have done the same activities again and again because there are not many options, that should be changed".

P15: "I like to practice English in class but I find the course book too boring".

(P= Participant)



Conclusions

The most interesting data found in this study were that students like the English language, are willing to learn it, and like the culture and the people. They favour learning English because it is a very useful tool in our present society as well as on their professional lives. There is a significant difference between students' level of satisfaction in the first and final course. The former got the highest percentage but the latter's percentage decreased drastically while their attitudes showed the highest positive results on both groups of participants.

The findings also demonstrated that teachers' creativity had more impact on students in the initial courses, but it is less successful with last course students. According to students' perspectives, this situation may show that undergraduate students are not treated in the same way throughout the six courses of English they take at the university. Teachers need to reimagine the role of education and move away from traditional educational paradigm. They seem to be caught up in school regulations that hampers their freedom of creativity. Similarly, English teachers should pay attention to students' perspectives and attitudes, as well as consider them in the design and implementation of the language lesson planning.

Even though the results of the study provided sufficient answers to the research questions addressed, future research is recommended to contribute in enhancing a comprehensive picture of the present situation so that the English teaching community could better address English learning and teaching at the university level for the benefit of all learners.

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