

# Exploring students' reactions when working teaching materials designed on their own interests\*

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## Abstract

The current article describes the findings of a qualitative, descriptive-case study which aimed to explore the reactions of a group of students, after using didactic materials designed according to their interests. The population consisted of a group of fourteen EFL learners who started fifth level in the extension area, at Instituto Internacional de Idiomas (IIDI) of UPTC. A diagnostic survey was applied at the beginning of the process, in order to verify the issue. The study was framed under *action research principles* aiming at articulating possible solutions to some observed classroom problems related to students' attitude in front of the English learning. The instruments used to collect data were a diary, students' artifacts, and a final survey. The findings evidence that it is relevant to take students' interests into account when planning a course since they can become the motor to encourage and improve the teaching-learning process; however, this is not enough, students' commitment plays the main role.

**Key words:** Language teaching, English learning, teaching materials, and reactions.

## Explorando las reacciones de los estudiantes cuando se trabaja con materiales de enseñanza diseñados según sus intereses

### Resumen

El presente artículo describe los hallazgos de un estudio de casos, descriptivo y cualitativo el cual pretendía explorar las reacciones de un grupo de estudiantes, después de usar materiales didácticos diseñados de acuerdo a sus intereses. La población consistió en un grupo de catorce estudiantes que aprenden inglés como lengua extranjera quienes comenzaban su quinto nivel en el área de extensión, en el Instituto Internacional de Idiomas de la UPTC. Al inicio del proceso se aplicó una encuesta diagnóstica con el fin de verificar el problema. La investigación estuvo enmarcada bajo los principios de investigación-acción y el objetivo era articular posibles soluciones a algunos problemas observados en clase, relacionados con la actitud de los estudiantes frente al aprendizaje del inglés. Los instrumentos usados para recoger la información fueron el diario del profesor, los trabajos de los estudiantes y una encuesta final. Los hallazgos evidencian que es importante tener en cuenta los intereses de los estudiantes al planear un curso, puesto que estos llegan a ser el motor para motivar y mejorar el proceso de enseñanza aprendizaje. Sin embargo, esto no es suficiente, el compromiso de los estudiantes juega el papel principal.

**Palabras clave:** Enseñanza del idioma, aprendizaje del inglés, materiales de enseñanza y reacciones.

## **En explorant les réactions des étudiants quand on travaille des matériels d'enseignement conçus dans leurs propres intérêts**

### **Résumé**

Cet article décrit les découvertes d'une étude de cas, descriptif et qualitative lequel voulait explorer les réactions d'un groupe d'étudiants, après l'utilisation de matériels didactiques dessinés tenant compte leurs intérêts. La population était un groupe de 14 étudiants qui apprennent l'anglais comme langue étrangère et qui commençaient leur niveau cinq dans le cours d'extension à l'Institut International de Langues de l'UPTC. Au debut du processus, on a appliqué une enquête pour faire un diagnostic afin de vérifier le problème. La recherche a été encadrée sous les principes de recherche-action et l'objectif était d'articuler les solutions possibles à quelques problèmes observés en cours, reliés à l'attitude des étudiants en face de l'apprentissage de l'anglais. Les instruments utilisés pour recueillir l'information ont été le journal du professeur, les travaux des étudiants et une enquête finale. Les découvertes mettent en évidence qu'il est important de prendre en compte les intérêts des étudiants au moment de planifier un cours puisqu'eux-mêmes sont le moteur pour motiver et améliorer le processus d'enseignement et apprentissage. Cependant, ça ne suffit pas, l'engagement des étudiants joue le rôle principal.

**Mots clés:** Enseignement de la langue, apprentissage de l'anglais, matériels d'enseignement, réactions.

## **Explorando as reações dos estudantes ao trabalharem materiais de ensino desenhados de acordo a seus próprios interesses**

### **Resumo**

O presente artigo descreve as conclusões de um estudo de casos, descritivo e qualitativo o qual pretendeu explorar as reações de um grupo de estudantes, depois de usar materiais didáticos desenhados de acordo a seus interesses. A população consistiu em um grupo de catorze estudantes que aprendiam inglês como língua estrangeira os quais começavam seu quinto nível na área de extensão, no Instituto Internacional de Idiomas da UPTC. No início do processo se aplicou um questionário diagnóstico com o fim de verificar o problema. A pesquisa esteve enquadrada sob os princípios de pesquisa-ação e o objetivo foi o de articular possíveis soluções a alguns problemas observados em aula, relacionados com a atitude dos estudantes frente à aprendizagem do inglês. Os instrumentos usados para recolher a informação foram o diário do professor, os trabalhos dos estudantes e um questionário final. Os achados evidenciam que é importante ter em conta os interesses dos estudantes ao planejar um curso, já que estes chegam a ser o motor para motivar e melhorar o processo de ensino aprendizagem. Porém, isto não é suficiente, o compromisso dos estudantes joga o papel principal.

**Palavras chave:** Ensino do idioma, aprendizagem do inglês, materiais de ensino e reações.

## Introduction

Nowadays, the most common concern among language teachers has to do with the lack of interest and commitment of some students toward the English learning as a foreign language. Maybe, these students are not aware enough about the relevance of English as the universal language or the impact this language can have in their personal and professional development. Actually, the behavior and attitude of some students at Instituto Internacional de Idiomas at Uptc (Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia) in Tunja, is not very different from this general view.

Unfortunately, during last years it has been observed through the teaching practice that a significant number of English learners in both areas, undergraduate and extension, show very little responsibility along the development of the different levels of English offered by the Institute. Of course, it cannot be denied that there are also many brilliant students who take advantage of the courses at maximum and with a big or sometimes a small effort, achieve to improve their English level and foster their communicative competence in a significant way; consequently, these students accomplish outstanding results at the end of the learning process.

However, other times it is a kind of frustrating for English teachers in this setting, when an important number of students quit the courses and show wrong attitudes during the learning process. For instance, some of them evidence little interest in learning this foreign language. Many times, they do not take the materials required to class, forget the assignments at home, and do not make any effort to prepare the oral and written reports with quality. Besides, they usually have a long list of excuses and sometimes they seem not to enjoy the activities prepared for them.

Additionally, as these students do not either take part in the classroom interaction, their exposition to the language is minimal. Unfortunately, these students often miss classes too or when attending, their behavior, interest, and commitment are not the best; it seemed like they lack self-motivation, and in language learning the desire to learn is key. Thus, they do not show enthusiasm but a sort of resistance. What is worse, they never do homework assignments or study for tests. As a result of this bunch of issues, most of them fail the subject since they are not able to accomplish the learning goals for obvious reasons, they have learned nothing.

Furthermore, it is also possible that language teaching is being focused on institutional syllabus pursuing very general learning objectives, and these objectives are usually based on international language standards, following national policies. In the same

way, the didactic materials implemented in language classrooms are focused basically on the use of text-books (or course-books) which are designed taking into account general achievements and *not* the particular needs and interests of a local target population of learners.

Thus, after a lot of reflection trying to find out what is going on behind this big concern and also being aware of the multiple reasons that might lead learners to this worrying attitude, this research aimed at finding out how these facts could be changed, how Uptc students could become better encouraged in order to switch those mentioned negative issues, and how language teachers can help them succeed in their English learning process. In summary, it was thought that it would be good to investigate how Uptc teachers could engage students more *effectively* and how we-language teachers could accomplish more meaningful learning outcomes in all language students at this university. The research question this study wanted to answer was the following: What can be evidenced after implementing teaching materials designed according to the students' interests, in a group of EFL learners belonging to the extension area at Instituto Internacional de Idiomas of Uptc, in Tunja?. The related questions were three: What are the most common students' interests when learning English as a foreign language?, To what extent the English learning outcomes can be modified through the use of didactic materials based on students' interests?, Why should teachers encourage the English learning process by means of the use of teaching materials based on students' interests?

The general objective of this study was to find out what reactions can emerge after the implementation of didactic materials designed and based on the students' interests in a group of EFL learners who study in the extension area, at Instituto Internacional de Idiomas at UPTC. The specific ones were to know what are the most common students' interests when learning English as a foreign language; to find out to what extent the English learning outcomes can be modified with the use of didactic materials based on students' interests; and to encourage the English learning process by means of the use of teaching materials based on students' interest.

Among the materials and activities which were planned and designed based on the participants' requests elicited through an initial diagnostic survey, they are, in order of importance: chats with native speakers, games and dynamics, songs, reading comprehension exercises, movies, listening exercises, and technical vocabulary. This is why two chats with native speakers were organized (with one American and another British teachers who used to work at the Institute, in order for the students to notice the different accents); several games and dynamics for almost each class were carried out; five listening workshops with different English songs were developed; a workshop with the movie "August

Rush, the triumph of a dream” was projected; some texts for complementary reading were worked; additionally, the students designed flash cards to learn vocabulary and verbs, and manufactured creative portfolios in order to keep all their artifacts made inside and outside the classroom.

To conclude, the introduction, the objectives, the methodology, the findings of the study, and the conclusions, are all contained in the current article.

## **1. Methodology**

The procedures to gather information was direct classroom observation and the instruments used were the teacher's diary, the students' artifacts, and a final survey or group administered questionnaire at the end of the process, in order to complement the data and corroborate what it had been observed in classroom interaction.

By means of these research instruments, it was expected that the collected data could provide the required information to be able to answer the research question of this case study. These instruments were chosen since all of them seemed to be the most appropriate tools to gather the information to successfully develop the research.

### **1.1 Teacher's diary**

Regarding the teacher's diary, the teacher-researcher observed her own classes and students. Then, as soon as the class ended, all the events happened during the development of the class were written in her diary, as well as the materials used for each session. Besides, it was described all students' reactions, their attitudes, and behaviors observed during and after the implementation of the teaching materials designed according to their own interests. The diary was written in English and it became a useful instrument for teaching reflection.

### **1.2 Students' artifacts**

The students' artifacts consisted of all the students' works developed along the course. By means of the students' artifacts the results of the students' work could be evidenced and analyzed further. They showed the positive and negative aspects of the teaching materials, the advantages and disadvantages, and also the learning outcomes. This important instrument allowed the researcher to do a critical analysis about how effective the English learning process can be after using didactic materials designed and based on the students own interests and their degree of appropriateness. This instrument consisted of a portfolio that kept most of the students' works, flashcards, reflective papers, and activities developed in and outside the class and other materials designed by the students themselves, too and the different activities used for the development of the course such as listening workshops and

a questionnaire of a film. The teaching materials were requested by the students through the diagnostic survey applied at the beginning of the process.

### 1.3 Surveys

The current study made the decision to use the survey as another appropriate instrument to collect data, taking into account that a survey is a way of going from observations to theory validation. According to Burrell and Morgan (cited by Newsted *et al.*, 1998), surveys provide one way of obtaining and validating knowledge. This is why the observed responses become data on single questions to be interpreted. Even though surveys are typically used in quantitative research, they can also be helpful in qualitative research like this.

At the beginning of the study a diagnostic survey was applied in order to corroborate the research problem. Likewise, at the end of the process a final survey was applied as a complement to the other two forms of data collection.

Surveys can become interviews or questionnaires. For this study they took the form of questionnaires. There are different types of questionnaires for instance the mail survey and the group administered questionnaires among others.

The present study chose the group administered questionnaire because each participant was handed a structured questionnaire to complete it in the classroom at the end of the process. Each student completed the survey individually and provided information in order to validate what was observed during classes and through the other research instruments used. This type of questionnaire was easy to administer and it was convenient for the study because of the type of participants, a group of students and the facility of access to the setting, our classroom. This final survey or questionnaire was applied in Spanish in order for the students not to feel limited by the language barriers to express what they wanted and relevant information could be lost. The diagnostic survey was done in Spanish.

In order to validate the study and do it more reliable it was necessary to analyze carefully and fairly the collected data, asked for some required advice to some colleagues and friends; then, to incorporate their recommendations and valuable opinions to the research. Lastly, it was also needed to triangulate the data that was collected through the instruments planned to do it. Immediately then, it was proceeded with the creation of categories.

## 2. Type of study

This was a descriptive, and for this fact exploratory, qualitative case-study (individual case) concentrated on a specific situation, in a particular place, and with a specific group of people. Besides, as Seliger and Shohamy (1989) state, qualitative research aims at providing descriptions of phenomena that occur naturally without the intervention of an experiment or an artificial contrived treatment and is focused on processes, interpretations and understandings rather than outcomes. Moreover, this type of study analyzes reality based on the participants' behavior and attitudes. The approach used was action research as if follows.

According to Wallace (1998), one of the most effective ways of solving professional problems, and continuing to improve and develop as teachers is through reflection on the professional practice. This is why the *action research* approach was the main model supporting this proposal. Action research is basically the systematic collection of data on our everyday practice to analyze it, in order to come to some decisions about our future practice should be. This means that the solution to classroom problems is inside the same classroom and this is achieved through reflection as mentioned previously. In consequence, Wallace (1998) proposes that teachers should turn problems into positive experiences by turning them into a challenge rather than a threat.

Another strong reason to select this type of study is because action research is different from other more conventional and traditional types of research in the sense that this approach is focused on individual or small group professional practice (case studies) and it is not so interested in making general statements. In this particular case, this study was focused on a group of fourteen students belonging to the extension area of the Instituto Internacional de Idiomas of Uptc (Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia). One of the objectives was to facilitate reflective cycles, providing in this way a more effective method for improving professional action (Wallace, 1998).

Basically, Action Research is to identify a real classroom problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful the efforts are, and if the findings do not satisfy the researcher, it is needed to try again. Kemmis & Susman (cited by O'Brien, 1998) summarize this process as a simple model of cyclical nature. Moreover, they assert that each cycle has four steps: *plan, act, observe, and reflect*.

On the other hand, Kemmis & Susman (cited by O'Brien, 1998) hold that first a problem is identified and data is collected for a more detailed diagnosis. This is followed by a collective postulation of several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action



emerges and is implemented. Data on the results of the intervention are collected and analyzed, and the findings are interpreted in light of how successful the action has been. At this point, the problem is re-assessed and the process begins another cycle. This process continues until the problem is resolved. This was the reason why in the study a problem was identified in a teaching setting, a survey was applied in order to verify the problem. Afterwards, information was collected with the end of having sufficient information on the issue. Then, the information was carefully analyzed and an action plan was implemented. Finally, the collected information was analyzed again and transformed in material to reflection.

The research took place at the (UPTC) *Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia*, a public university in Tunja, the capital of Boyacá Department. Through its 11 faculties and programs, in daily and night shifts, this state university offers higher education to more than 27.000 students of medium and low social backgrounds. Its mission is to provide an integral, professional, and ethical education to Colombian students from all over the country, favoring all social stratus and always looking for the academic excellence. This state university gives special importance to the scientific research and the social extension to the external community, too.

Among the extension programs, the university offers through the *Instituto Internacional de Idiomas* the teaching of different foreign languages such as English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Chinese-mandarin, among others in both areas undergraduate and extension programs. The extension area is open not only to those learners from the three university branches (administrative staff, teachers and undergraduate students), but also to external public in general. It is to say, that in those extension courses all kind of students from inside or outside the university are enrolled. It is usual to find heterogeneous groups among undergraduate students, workers, professionals in all fields, school students, informal students, and people who are not studying or working, people who just want to learn a foreign language for different reasons, even children of all ages. Usually, children are not mixed with adults, but there are certain exceptional cases of very smart young students who do not want to continue working with small kids and feel demotivated. So, their parents ask the director for them to be placed with teenagers or even with adults. Actually, they succeed and feel comfortable.

Most of the time, it is easy to find willing students who really want to improve their language level. However, there are other less committed learners who although are aware of the money being invested in the courses, just quit.

The current study was developed with a group of students of this extension area as will be described as follows.

## 2.1 Participants

The population of this research was selected considering the convenience strategy stated by Cohen and Manion (1994), since the researcher works at the same place UPTC. Thus, she also has classes at the extension area, and easy access to the site.

Thus, the population was a group of 14 students, aged between 18 and 35 years old. There were eleven women and three men. They were studying English as a foreign language and belonged to the extension area as mentioned above. They were starting fifth level of English in a course that lasted 40 hours. They took 8 hours of class a week in the schedule of Saturday mornings, from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 m. Three participants were high school students, seven studied an undergraduate program, three were workers, and there was one housewife. Unfortunately, after some weeks of classes five undergraduate students quit, some of them after the others and the course finished with nine participants only: eight women and one man.

## 2.2 Findings

The instruments used to gather information were the teacher's diary, the students' artifacts, and a final survey. Thus, applying techniques from the grounded theory method (Corbin and Strauss cited by Pandit, 1996) the following categories emerged after having re-read, analyzed, compared, reflected, found communalities, and also by contrasting and triangulating the data. It is important to mention that the participants signed a consent form accepting to participate in the research and allowing using their proper names in the study and further publication.

### 2.2.1 Category No. 1: Positive students' reactions as indicators of acceptance

This first category gives response to the main research question: What can be evidenced after implementing teaching materials designed according to students' interests, in a group of EFL learners belonging to the extension area at Instituto Internacional de Idiomas of Uptc in Tunja?

After the implementation of the agreed didactic materials and subsequently to a careful analysis of the information collected, it was found that the participants reacted through different positive attitudes and feelings such as satisfaction, enthusiasm, awareness, gratitude, and identification, in front of the use of didactic material designed according to their interests. This happened, maybe, because their requests, about the materials they wanted to, had been taken into account at the moment of planning the didactic materials and the complementary activities that were going to be implemented along the course.

These reactions could be evidenced by means of the three instruments used to gather data where the participants and the teacher-researcher stated their responses regarding the different teaching materials employed.

The following literal testimonies taken from the final survey, the reflections written in the students' artifacts as well as the teacher's diary corroborate this fact. The questions were asked in Spanish in order to make the participants easier to respond openly and in this way, avoid the loss of important information. The positive reactions already stated were: satisfaction, awareness, gratitude, enthusiasm, and identification, as follows:

### **2.2.1.1 Satisfaction**

On the one hand, the responses obtained to the first question of the final survey (¿Cómo fue la experiencia? ¿Cómo se sintió usando los materiales acuerdo a sus intereses y necesidades?) evidenced satisfaction and happiness:

“Me sentí identificada”, “Fue una experiencia gratificante, pude aprender y recordar temas”, “Me sentí muy bien, aprendí nuevas cosas y capté mejor el tema”, “ Fue una buena experiencia, hubo aprendizaje interactivo, efectivo y eficiente”, “Fue una experiencia enriquecedora, material suficiente y variado, permitió profundizar; me sentí muy contento”, “Excelente material, sobre todo dialogar con los nativos”, “Me sentí muy bien, material de gran apoyo para el desarrollo de las clases”, “Buena experiencia, los materiales fueron importantes y facilitaron el aprendizaje”(Taken from the Final Survey, Nov.23rd,2013).

As can be observed, the participants felt satisfied with the teaching materials implemented along the development of the course. For instance, in the first answer, the first person felt identified since the materials used were the ones she had requested at the beginning of the course. Thus, as a constant, the participants mentioned to have felt happy with the practice and considered it as a rewarding and enriching experience.

On the second hand, the answers to the second question of the final survey (¿Se siente satisfecho con el material didáctico utilizado a lo largo del curso de inglés? ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué no? Sustente su respuesta) also evidence and corroborate that all participants did feel satisfied with the materials used along the course, because the didactic materials they had chosen at the beginning of the English course, actually had made easier their learning process; furthermore, they asserted that they had had a more direct contact with the target language; moreover, the participants felt that they had advanced and learned more, being now their turn to practice and reinforce at home. They also consider that the materials were appropriate, educative, and simplified their learning.

In the same order of ideas, the teacher-researcher experienced the same reaction and corroborated the issue during the last class session, “*I feel satisfied with the students' attitude; they expressed their gratitude, respect, and their satisfaction for the work done*” (Teacher's diary, Nov.23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013).

### 2.2.1.2 Awareness

The participants were indeed conscious about the usefulness of the didactic materials and pedagogical activities developed in class which promoted the learning process. The following original quotations evidence their reflections with regard to the development of the English learning process; they were taken from the reflections written in the portfolios of students' artifacts. Some of them tried to write them in English and although there are some mistakes, I really felt satisfied because their effort: “*The experience with the British teacher was very good. It was a rewarding experience. It helped me to lose a few the fear to speak in English*” (Rita Isabel).

Another participant wrote down, “*The experience was quite enriching*”. *I think the interaction with she was new and exciting, so ...well I can understand and learn more about the English language that I didn't know, I hope that our experiences are still so interesting, motivating and educating*” (MC).

Furthermore, the oral exercise or *talks with native speakers* awoke consciousness on the participants, about the importance of commitment, discipline and personal effort, as something necessary for students to achieve proficiency during the English learning process, some of them wrote in Spanish:

“La experiencia fue fantástica, me sentí muy bien al poder hablar con un nativo...”, “pienso que hay muchas cosas que faltan aprender, hay que dedicar más tiempo al aprendizaje del idioma, sé que en escucha me va un poco mal y que debo proponerme mejorarlo. Me encantaría algún día hablar tan fluido como él...” “Qué gratificante es cuando uno va por la calle y se encuentra con un extranjero y lo que habla ya no es desconocido. Hay (Ahí) es cuando nos damos cuenta que el tiempo que hemos dedicado al aprendizaje, está brotando sus frutos y que a medida que avancemos todo va a ser mejor”(Edna Rocío Sierra). “...siento que con esfuerzo y dedicación las cosas se pueden lograr. No hay que bajar la guardia, el inglés se ha vuelto parte importante de nuestras vidas y no solo eso, me encanta aprender. Es cierto, hay que seguir aprendiendo cada día. La teacher es muy amable y esa personalidad de cierta manera, transmite confianza y hace más fácil la interacción.” (ER).

Another student stated, “*This experience was very well because we could interact with a native speaker*” (S).

Likewise, the participants recognized that in spite of the degree of difficulty an oral activity can involve, the speaking exercise with natives was good, “*It helped to improve my listening. I think that it was difficult, but it was excellent*” (S).

Another participant (WS) stated in her portfolio,

“Me parece que esta experiencia es muy importante ya que tenemos un contacto directo con personas que vienen de otros países y que nos pueden enseñar más acerca de la manera de hablarlo”. “Me pareció muy enriquecedora esta experiencia ya que la profesora que fue a realizarnos el ejercicio fue muy amable y nos enseñó mucho de lo que ella conocía, así mismo pudimos ver otro tipo de pronunciación y otras expresiones”, “creo que estos ejercicios deben realizarse más a menudo, ya que gracias a ellos nosotros, los estudiantes, podemos tener mayor contacto con un idioma extranjero...” “... pudimos conocer acerca de la cultura europea...” (WS).

On her part, JM manifested on her portfolio,

“Considero que el desarrollo de la actividad es importante dentro de mi proceso de aprendizaje pues fue una experiencia que me permitió conocer y aprender sobre la pronunciación del inglés de un modo más rítmico y sonante para nuestros oídos aprendices en formación. Este tipo de actividades están conectadas con la motivación y el aprendizaje de todo estudiante de inglés pues nos da a conocer e interactuar una manera interesante de entablar una comunicación utilizando el inglés de una manera entendible y fluida”.

O, another participant, stated on his reflection paper,

“La experiencia fue fantástica, me alegró mucho saber que comprendí la mayoría de las cosas que él decía, eso se debe en gran parte a la buena tarea de nuestra profesora P, quien con sus actividades nos ha comprometido a estudiar inglés... cabe resaltar que no noté mucha diferencia entre la pronunciación del nativo y de la profesora.” “Pienso que esta experiencia fue un estímulo para seguir adelante esforzándonos cada día más para aprender ese maravilloso idioma del inglés”

Now, in order to restate and reinforce this issue about students’ awareness, let us analyze the following responses taken from the final survey, supplied by the participants to the third question (Were the materials used helpful and effective for the English learning?):

“Enseñaron y enriquecieron el proceso”, “ayudaron a hacer la clase más dinámica”, “Se aprende didácticamente y ayudan a retener más el conocimiento”, “Permitieron conocer más acerca de la lengua con los nativos y no solo con textos y libros”, “Ayudaron a interiorizar reglas y vocabulario”, “facilitaron el aprendizaje por su dinamicidad”, “Los materiales fueron suficientemente útiles para aprender los

logros del nivel”, “Fueron apropiados y de gran ayuda”, “Porque mejoré la forma de expresarme en inglés”.

As seen, the participants expressed their personal points of view naturally, with assertiveness, sincerity, and accuracy according to the experience lived and their own way of thinking, straight out.

### **2.2.1.3 Gratitude**

Through the collected information, it was also found a generalized attitude of gratitude was always manifested towards the teacher-researcher, not only in oral, but also in a written way, as can be evidenced in the following testimonies elicited from the students' artifacts, “*I am grateful with teacher P for these classes because are very important to learn the English*” (RI). “*También me gusta mucho ir a clase contigo profe porque hablas excelente y nos educas nuestro oído...*”, “*Gracias a ti y a la profe M por tener tanta paciencia para enseñarnos de la mejor forma*” (EIP).

The participants also displayed other natural emotions,

“The truth, I felt nervous, I could not speak” (RI). Besides, some of them recognized and valued the teacher's pedagogy and interest in her students' process: “I want to thank my teacher because she cares about our learning and performs activities like these”. “Thank you teacher for caring about our leaning” (PNO). “Fue muy Buena la conversación, me ayudó a quitarme ese miedo para interactuar con personas que hablan inglés perfecto” (EIP). “Gracias a la teacher P por estas actividades, sin duda alguna, ella sabe lo que nos conviene y nos sirve para seguir avanzando” (ER).

Moreover, to corroborate this fact, in the teacher's diary the researcher wrote down, “*Today, two students brought candies to the teacher and said to her some words of appreciation for her work. She thanked them and shared the candies with all the class*”. So, this simple but meaningful detail shows how the participants showed gratitude for the teacher's job.

### **2.2.1.4 Enthusiasm**

Some students felt very motivated to speak and practice conversations although they did not know how to speak very well in English, they are still in the fifth of sixteenth levels. Furthermore, in spite they felt nervous to interact with native speakers, some of them spoke a lot and understood many things said by the talkers and ignoring their mistakes, they wanted to continue speaking:

“When arrived to the classroom I feel a little nervous because I'm not spoken very

well but understanding everything he would say”. “I liked to speak with him, I would like to talk more with him to practice my conversation...” (E1’s portfolio).

Here we clearly notice that this student’s interest is linked to her speaking skill. She wanted to speak more to be able to practice and better her fluency and thus, to improve her listening skill, too.

#### **2.2.1.5 Identification: Love, respect and value for her own culture and country**

It was also found that one female student went a little further of her reflection, since the oral experience with the two native speakers awoke her identity with her own culture, recognizing her value, “*It was a different experience and very important for my life because I understood that my country and my culture are good. Here we, “the women” have liberty and can said and give our opinions. I love my country and I don’t change for anywhere*” (S’ portfolio).

#### **2.2.2 Category No. 2: Students’ language interests match students’ language needs**

This category answers the first related question: What are the most common students’ interests when learning English as a foreign language? After the study was carried out, it was also found that the students’ interests are linked to their particular and personal language needs or skills they want to foster. This is the reason why it can be stated that students’ interest are directly related to their needs in the English learning as well as to their likes, learning styles and preferences. The participants were given the opportunity to choose and write down the materials and activities they considered the most appropriate and useful in the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language. Consequently, they mentioned the learning materials and activities they were interested in. These choices let see the areas and language skills the participants needed and wanted to reinforce and use in order to overcome their weaknesses and difficulties in the English language learning. These choices were in order of importance: Didactic games to reinforce their grammar; English songs in order to improve their listening skill, which is the ability requiring more time and effort; conversations with native speakers, to be able to foster their oral production and their communicative competence; extra-listening exercises and movies to better and foster their ear and their speaking; pronunciation exercises, to improve and refine their pronunciation; readings on topics of their preference to improve their reading comprehension skill; and finally, technical vocabulary and expressions in order to enlarge their vocabulary, since many students understand the grammatical topics, but they lack vocabulary to be able to communicate. The last one was laboratories to practice and reinforce all the language skills and use technology.

Thus, in this study the participants were aware of their English language weaknesses and their necessity to improve them as can be evidenced in the following testimonies taken from students' artifacts, *"I feel that I need more practice for speaking and listening"* (Rita Isabel). *"... sé que en escucha me va un poco mal y que debo proponerme mejorarlo"* (ER).

These were the reasons why they asked for activities related to speaking and listening to fulfill or supply their needs. Through the students' artifacts the students also let know their interests, *"one of my dreams is to speak English"*, *"I commit to practice more the listening, the writing, the reading to achieve to speak English"* (RI's portfolio). *"In my English learning is very important to understand the different accents that English has"* (PNO's portfolio).

### 2.2.2.1 Extrinsic and intrinsic interests

It was also found that some participants' interests are extrinsic others' intrinsic. In the same vein and according to the answers stated in the diagnostic survey, the participants also manifested the reasons why they were interested in learning English. For instance, three of the participants wanted to prepare to be able to take a sufficiency test, as a requirement in order to graduate themselves from an undergraduate program in other university. These students were moved for an extrinsic or external motivation.

In contrast, other participants see the English learning as something complementary and important in their role as competent professionals. Others consider English as a necessary aspect in their personal and professional growth; while some others learn it, because they just want to improve their speaking and listening skills. This shows an internal or intrinsic motivation, English is important in their lives. Hence, they wanted to improve their proficiency in this foreign language and looked at it as something useful, necessary and complementary in their personal and professional development. They were aware that English is an important tool to succeed in this globalized world.

### 2.2.3 Category No. 3: Teaching materials as main evidence influencing learning outcomes

Category number three answers the second related question: To what extent the English learning outcomes can be modified through the use of didactic materials based on students' interests? During the analysis of the collected data it could be established that didactic materials implemented in this study influenced learning outcomes positively, but teachers have to be careful sin this influence could also be negative. The following testimonies taken from the last survey applied to the population of the research during the last class session reinforce this finding:



Question No. 4: ¿Considera que estos materiales tienen algo que ver con los resultados obtenidos en el curso? Explique por qué, por favor. Notice that all participants responded positively to this question; the following were their answers:

“Los materiales usados sí tienen que ver con los resultados obtenidos, pues ayudaron al desarrollo de los ejercicios”. “El curso es más comprensible pues son apoyo para las actividades desarrolladas”. “Por la manera paciente y didáctica es más fácil aprender cualquier tema”. “El tema está mejor detallado. Son fuente de aprendizaje”. “Fortalecen el aprendizaje. Las dinámicas y concursos motivan a mejorar, para ganar”. “El aprendizaje depende del tipo de actividades que se desarrollan, pues el estudiante se esfuerza más por tener mayor contacto con los temas y otros aspectos”. “Cuando los materiales se usan como debe ser ayudan a que la nota en los parciales sea mejor”. “Los ejercicios propuestos en los libros ayudan a mecanizar y a afianzar la información y temas que se estén trabajando”. “Los materiales fueron interesantes y ayudaron mucho”.

The above testimonies evidence that the didactic materials implemented in language classrooms can indeed influence the final results of a course and the participants are aware of this fact. Here it is important to state that all the students approved the course. The lowest grade was 3.6 (from 1 to 5).

Additionally, the responses to the next question, taken from the final survey, also corroborate the influence: ¿Qué tan diferente fue el proceso de enseñanza del curso anterior con la experiencia vivida en éste?

“Ésta fue más interesante, divertida y enriquecedora”. “Mejóro la dinámica por las películas y karaokes”. “Clases más amenas, por hacer cosas diferentes”. “hubo mucho más contacto con la lengua, con la cultura y con los diferentes acentos”. “Fue más dinámica, entretenida, emocionante y enriquecedora. “Mejóro la pedagogía de la docente”. “El nivel anterior fue muy teórico, poco speaking y el speaking es lo que más motiva a seguir aprendiendo”. “Proceso más significativo por la cantidad de recursos que se usaban para reforzar el aprendizaje, más práctico, más real al poder hablar con hablantes nativos”. “Mejóro gramática, speaking y comunicación en los diferentes temas. Fue más divertido”.

All the participants' responses agree that the experience was better and encouraged them to continue learning. This is why all language teachers should innovate and improve the materials planned to use during the development of an English course. Not only these ones encourage learning and stimulate learners, but also they can improve or not the learning outcomes. In the above testimonies the influence of didactic materials with the final learning outcomes is very evident; learners enjoy more classes and better their language skills, and consequently their grades, too.

#### **2.2.4 Category No. 4: Teaching materials as effective vehicles to promote classroom interaction and encourage the English learning process**

This category responds to the third related research question: Why should teachers encourage the English learning process by means of the use of teaching materials based on students' interests?

Throughout the testimonies stated in the previous category (No. 3) as well as the entries done in the teachers' diary, it was evidenced that the materials and activities asked by the participants and implemented during the study, increased considerably the participants' interests in the learning process. Undoubtedly, their participation in the classroom interaction improved and the participants became more active and dynamic, too. The participants showed more interest in the development of the class, as can be evidenced in the following apart of the teacher's diary:

"They are eager to learn and improve their English level. They are very active and take part in class more than their partners do", "she also participated a lot. I felt so happy for her, she's very motivated to continue improving her level, it seems" (class number 2). "All of them passed in front the class and dramatized a verb. Although some of the students were a little shy, they all enjoyed the exercise and laughed a lot, they were very keen on the activity" (class number 4). "My students have shown satisfaction and acceptance of the teaching materials used so far during the development of classes. It seems to be they have liked them because those were the ones they asked for in the diagnostic survey". (Class number 6). "Today a dynamic was developed in class and the students liked it and enjoyed it a lot. This helped them distress, rest and re-start the class with a better attitude" (Class number 6).

Consequently, it was corroborated that materials designed taking into account the students' interest fostered their motivation and improved classroom interaction.

"O, WS and ER were the students who participated the most; in fourth and fifth place are EI and PNO" (Teacher's diary, 05-10-2013 Class No 5).

"The participants sang and showed very encouraged; it can be evidenced that they love English songs, this is why they asked for them in the diagnostic survey. During the development of the course more songs will be sung by the students even Christmas carols, since they like them as well" (class number 5). "To finish the class, a video with Adele's biography was seen by the students and a song of hers was worked through a listening workshop. They liked it a lot and sang with emotion. A

photocopy with Adele's biography was supplied to the students in order for them to read and develop a reading exercise." (Class number 6).

“The chat with the first native people captured all students’ attention and interest”. “The students were very interested in what he told. They wanted to continue asking questions to him, but he said that he had to go, they clapped to him and Adrian went away”. “O, ER and EI were very happy because they had understood almost everything to the native speaker and because they had been able to ask him more than five questions which was the goal. In fact, EI asked more than eleven times, O over nine times, ER 8 times, AN seven, and J 5”. (Taken from Teacher’s Diary, Class number 7).

“It seems to be that the students liked the phonetic exercise because they had fun, they laughed, repeated, asked and took notes. I reinforced the video making them to repeat other similar sounds and they followed the exercise with a lot of enthusiasm. They also enjoyed the Christmas carol” (Taken from Teacher’s Diary, Class number 7).

## Conclusions

The experience in this exploratory qualitative case-study was quite enriching for professional reflection. The following are the conclusions drawn from this particular study.

Firstly, it can be concluded that it is really important to take into account students’ interest when teaching a foreign language. Several researchers (e.g. Dudley-Evans & St John 1998, Fiorito 2005, Hutchinson & Waters 1987, and Krashen 1981) among others hold that English learning can become an *easier and faster* process if it is based on students’ needs and interests. So, the teaching materials must be designed according to these requirements.

Didactic materials are very important tools to succeed in languages teaching and learning, since these encourage students’ involvement, stimulate classroom interaction, promote team work, support and make learning easier; furthermore, students’ needs and interests should be always taken into account by language teachers when planning any foreign language course; however, this is not enough; in fact through this case study, it could be evidenced that students’ attitude is the most important issue while teaching and learning. Students’ attitude plays the most important role in the learning process. Consequently, even though teachers innovate and invest precious time, effort, even money making captivating materials, appealing to students and furthermore, they take into account students’ needs, interests, likes and preferences this does not work if students do not assume the appropriate attitude like going to class, having constancy, giving their best effort, taking the guidebooks to class, getting really involved in the process, or having the necessary commitment. If so, the learning outcomes will never be the expected ones as should be. Therefore, in language learning students’ attitude is vital, their interest, compromise, their good will and responsibility to be able to achieve good results. Commitment is the core, it is essential and

it has become the central requirement in order to succeed as well as learners' autonomy, desire and good will. Fortunately, in this case study nine from fourteen students (65%) remained and finished the course. Some of them did better than the others, not only on account of a positive materials influence and their learning styles, but also because of their own commitment and individual talents or skills, but mainly because they assumed the necessary and responsible attitude to succeed in their goal to learn English and improve their communicative competence.

Another important conclusion has to do with the ideal and expected students' motivation; this should be the intrinsic one, students should be always self-motivated. By means of this study it could be corroborated that participants with intrinsic motivation remained and finished the learning process successfully while the five participants who manifested to have external reasons to learn English, quit the course after some class sessions and did not end the process. It is obvious that they were not actually committed with the goals of the course. Really they did not want to learn English, they did not have a real motor moving them forward; they just had to fulfill external demands in their study settings, because when there is a will, there is a way and they did not have enough will. It is evident that for these five students English was not really an important tool, just an external requirement.

It can also be concluded that free participation during classroom interaction evidence language proficiency and result in better learning outcomes. After having had the final outcomes of the course, it could be evidenced that the classroom participation and the interest that students showed in the development of the class can become signs of improvement in their learning process, since through their questions and constant participation they can increase their understanding of a topic. Thus, the more students participate in the classroom interaction the more they learn. For instance, O was one of the students who participated actively in most of the classes, he took part voluntarily in almost all discussions, he was always asking questions and trying to answer what the teacher asked, he was always clarifying doubts and even making mistakes as well as WS while the other partners keep silent. At the end of the course, these two students were the ones who achieved the best grades in their English learning process 4.8 and 4.5 respectively. Furthermore, their frequent participation encouraged other participants as ER and EI, who obtained 4.4 as final grade of their learning process.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that text-books are the main source of input in English classes. Surprisingly, and in spite of students are aware of the importance of the implementation of complementary materials different from the text books and also in spite of their initial complain about teachers never take into account students' interests, it was

evidenced through the three instruments their like for them and agreement in their use. The participants manifested they did enjoy the activities proposed in both books the student's and the workbook and do not ignore their importance. Through their answers, they let see their feelings in favor the use of guide-books in the English teaching and learning process, of course, with the support of complementary teaching materials and additional didactic activities.

Finally, by means of this article, it is expected to generate a professional reflection on language teachers regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of the teaching materials implemented in EFL classrooms, in order to accomplish more meaningful learning outcomes. In addition, teachers are expected to give more relevance not only to the approach they decide to use, but also to always focus teaching on their students' needs and interests. Likewise, it is hoped to accomplish a more effective students' engagement in the process to stimulate a change on students' wrong attitudes by increasing their awareness and encouraging their sincere commitment.

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