

CRITERIA FOR EFL COURSE BOOKS' VOCABULARY SELECTION: DOES IT HAVE ANY PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES?

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RESUMEN

En este estudio preliminar, partimos de la idea casi generalmente consensuada de que el vocabulario juega un papel esencial en la adquisición, tanto de una segunda lengua como de la lengua materna, y que el grado de competencia léxica de un sujeto determina en buena medida la calidad de sus escritos. Examinamos aquí la transmisión de valores sociales a través de material educativo. Creemos que la incesante promoción del consumismo que reciben nuestros jóvenes se hace no sólo a través de corporaciones y empresas, sino a menudo a través del material educativo; todo esto puede que influya en la visión del mundo de los aprendices que después queda reflejada en su producción académica. Utilizamos aquí la producción de una muestra de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera para investigar estos aspectos. Finalmente, examinamos los libros de texto utilizados por este mismo grupo para analizar la potencial influencia sobre su producción de vocabulario. Nos centramos en el consumismo y los temas mediante los cuales éste se introduce. Al mismo tiempo comprobamos si el sexo es una variable relevante.

Palabras clave: valores, vocabulario, consumismo, tareas.

ABSTRACT

In this preliminary study, we start from the now almost general belief that vocabulary plays an essential role in second, as well as in first, language teaching/learning, and that the degree of a subject's lexical competence greatly determines the quality of his/her writing. We examine here the transmission of social values by means of school materials. We believe that the unrelenting promotion of consumerism received by our youth is done not only by enterprises

and business, but often by teaching materials; all this may influence the apprentices' view of the world which is then reflected on their performance in school tasks. We analyse here the production of a sample of secondary school EFL students to investigate these aspects. Finally, we examine the course books employed by the same sample in their classrooms to analyze the potential influence on their vocabulary production. We focus on consumerism and the topics by which it is implemented. We also try to identify some gendered patterns.

Key words: values, vocabulary, consumerism, tasks.

INTRODUCTION

The essential role of vocabulary in communication is currently an issue of general consensus. Wilkins' often-quoted dictum "While without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (1972: 111) is as valid today as it was almost four decades ago. Along the years, Wilkins' recognition of this centrality has been acknowledged by many other scholars (e.g. Meara, 1987; Nation, 1990; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997; Singleton, 1999); almost twenty years later, for instance, Michael McCarthy gave us a parallel message in a more forceful assertion:

No matter how well the student learns grammar, it is the experience of most language teachers that the single, biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. No matter how well the students learn grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way. (1990: VIII)

Equally acknowledged is the correlation between lexical competence and academic achievement; as well as the beneficial effects of vocabulary on the quality of writing (e.g. Engber, 1995; Laufer & Nation, 1995; Lee, 2003; Morris & Cobb, 2004; Read, 1998). As a consequence of this central role in communication, vocabulary selection also reflects the ethical and civic values of the mainstream citizenship of a community.

If we focus on values, we see that the pursuit of success has been promoted and rewarded in most cultures ever since history began. It can be granted that a certain degree of ambition may trigger communities and individuals to move forward in search of better life conditions: after all, mythical and historical heroes were traditionally moved by the pursuit of fame and a good name. However, in

present day society, there has been a transfer of values, and the traditional function of heroes does no longer include saving their countrymen from human foes or dragons. Today's champions are singers, actors, professional athletes, and even playboys, and their success depends on the admiration, worship, and trust of the community who, by consuming their products (be it a piece of music, a performance, or a commodity) make their enrichment and prominence possible.

In what way may society at large, and specifically our students, be affected by these modern celebrities? youths emulate them with the idea in mind of obtaining their "glory"; but since fortune and fame are most often as tantalizing as ultimately unattainable, from these unrealistic expectations of success emerges frustration that is some times followed by health hazarding behavior and mental states such as depression, anorexia, and bulimia. These conditions are particularly acute in first world societies in which spoiled youths have low tolerance for frustration and where advertising is forever sending the message, "Succeed and you will be happy!", and success lies in reproducing all the external signs of society's winners which are offered to our adolescents under the condition of consuming the product being advertised. The fact that businesses are mainly interested in commercial benefits is nowadays to be expected, but *we educators* should not neglect any aspect of children's education.

Youths are instructed to believe that they have the right to expect, and then achieve, "success" and the luxurious and glamorous lifestyle that fame and fortune provides. For instance, a test conducted in class during this 2009-2010 school year to a group of 33 students attending the first course of English Studies shows that in answer to the question, "what is the most important thing in life?" 56 % give responses such as "wealth", "success", "being a rich footballer" and so forth.

Parents, teachers, peers, the community, and media all exert an influence on the development of a child's learning abilities. Parents seem to have the greatest influence in the earlier stages, since they represent the earliest exposure to socialization (Kaplan, 1991; Santrock, 1994). But in the preschool and kindergarten years this influence shifts increasingly to teachers and peers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, if teachers influence children's learning processes, so must the instruments they use in the process of educating; we here focus on some of these instruments and teaching materials: course books, and more specifically EFL course books.

Editors and publishers of EFL books pursue the same goals as other businessmen, and their products, which happen to be teaching materials, are designed to serve the goal of maximising profit. The astonishing fact is that education authorities do not mediate to neutralize the effect of those messages

fraught with consumerism and worship of success that students receive even from course books. We should not forget that in Primary and Secondary school, text books are a source of informative authority for young apprentices. This is particularly so when dealing with foreign language texts due to the fact that the readings and discussions are necessarily recurrent to offer students the opportunity of assimilating and incorporating the new structures and vocabulary into their output: it is a basic behaviourist notion that repeated exposure to a word will help to cement it in their memory. Apprentices are encouraged to implement the new vocabulary and, since words are best practiced in connected discourse, they are also bound to absorb the ideas this vocabulary conveys. Thus, it is reasonable to deduce that if educational materials consistently present luxurious settings, and financial success, this must have some kind of impact on the young readers and on their outlook on life.

On the basis of all the above, this preliminary study examines the EFL written production of a sample of secondary school learners, focusing on the themes and vocabulary implemented in an EFL school task, and on the course books this sample used in their classrooms.

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1. Objectives

In this study we first examine 228 EFL school compositions produced by Spanish secondary school students, with an eye to identifying all statements related to consumerism and social success; then, within these statements the specific vocabulary implemented is analysed. Simultaneously, we attempt to ascertain whether the sex variable affects their performance. Finally, we examine the course books employed by the sample in their EFL classrooms to investigate the potential influence on the students' vocabulary production. We believe that our findings can and should be applied to second language instruction procedures, and to the fundamental design of educational materials, in particular that of EFL course books. Thus, our research questions are as follows:

1. Do Spanish secondary school apprentices betray consumerism and aspirations of success when writing EFL compositions in the second year of ESO¹?
2. If they do, what specific themes and vocabulary are implemented?
3. Does these participants' production seem influenced by EFL course books?
4. Do any gendered patterns emerge?

2. INFORMANTS, INSTRUMENTS, AND PROCEDURES

The informants of this sample are 228 EFL students (104 females and 124 males) from four different middle class and low middle class co-educational schools located in Logroño, La Rioja. The test administered is a composition in the shape of a letter to an imaginary prospective host exchange family in England who is expected to be host to the student writing the letter. The task was completed in approximately 30 minutes within classroom time. The participants received the following written instructions in English, as well as the necessary oral explanations, occasionally in Spanish:

Imagine you are going to live for a month with an English family (the Edwards), in Oxford. There are four members in the family: Mr. and Mrs. Edwards, and the children Peter and Helen. Write a letter to them in English in which you should introduce yourself, and tell them about your town, your school, your hobbies, and any other thing of interest that you would like to add.

The corpus of compositions was written after students had attended approximately 760 hours EFL tuition, and their average age was ± 13 . Once the compositions were decoded and the precise meaning of ambiguous words decided upon, they were electronically transcribed. Then, all the examples referring to the selected topics were isolated and their characteristics, such as theme and type of vocabulary employed, were manually analyzed.

3. RESULTS

From the analysis of the corpus of compositions emerges the scenario of a group of early adolescents in whose minds, at least when writing EFL school compositions, the ideas of consumerism and social success are ever-present. Thus, we can safely declare that the answer to our first research question is affirmative, though as seen in the instructions, these topics had not been encouraged. Although the participants' consumerism is reflected in various different ways, and due to space constraints we unfortunately analyse here only a few aspects of consumerism and pursuit of success:

1. Interest in ownership, shopping, markets and buying.
2. Claiming of social status by means of their parents' professions.
3. Discussion of the beauty and size of their homes and locations.
4. Boasting about friendship and emotional relationships.

In relation to the first aspects, we identify as many as 211 participants, (92.54% of the sample) who explicitly inform of their possessions declaring all kinds of ownership; that the idea of possessing is a central issue in this corpus seems further proved by the fact that participants use the possessive adjective “my” as many as 1,966 times in this corpus, with an average occurrence of 8.60 times per participant.² A typical example is that of female 211 who, after using fourteen tokens of “my” in a composition of 156 words observes, “My favorite toy is my mobile and my computer”. Other participants introduce the idea of ownership by using the verb “have”, of which we find at least 472 tokens, and type “got” which occurs 306 times.³ There are only 17 informants who implement neither of these two verbs, but some of them express consumerism and status consciousness in different ways: such are the cases of male 123 who directly asks the host family, “Are you a rich family?” and male 125 who, in a brief composition of 68 words, asks: “I am a Ferrary car?” his intended meaning seems to be the rhetorical question, “do I have a Ferrari car?” or “Do you have a Ferrari car?”

In addition, 121 participants, 53.07% of the sample, discuss these topics further in a more comprehensive way. Shopping and markets are mentioned by 37 participants, and the recurring idea permeating the compositions is that buying is one of their favorite activities: they love to explain how they have bought or mean to buy a new commodity: female participant 70 writes: “Tomorrow I’m going shopping (this is other hobbie) I want a new skirt, a shirt many T-shirts, two trousers and a jacket.”⁴ Male informant 102 explains: “When I go whit my frinds we are going to central shops of Logroño.” Male 91 remarks: “I bought a bike yesterday afternoon the bike is very beautiful.” Importantly, apprentices associate the beauty of a city to the availability of shops: female 57 observes, “Logroño is a very beautiful city its big and it has got four commercial center.”

An interesting sign of status-claiming behaviour is their discussion of parents’ lines of work. The schools to which the participants are ascribed are located in middle class and low middle class areas of Logroño, but, unexpectedly the professions of nearly all parents mentioned are well qualified ones: all of them professionals with a couple of exceptions as can be seen in table 1. Among the 50 parents whose profession is mentioned, only one has a totally unskilled vocation. These results concur with those obtained from a sample of 130 Riojan and Basque female students when attending the 6th year of Primary Education (Ojeda, 2009). In the present sample participants again volunteer their parents’ line of work when they consider it sufficiently attractive; in addition, we are concerned here with the sex variable. Females implement two more types than males, and though both sexes produce exactly the same

number of tokens, the percentage of females who refer to their parents professions (24.03%) is higher than that of males (20.16%) due to the unequal presence of the sexes.

These findings seem to suggest either an excessive awareness of social status, or (if they are simply making use of their available vocabulary) an inadequate selection of trade and profession vocabulary in the EFL input received. Probably both for, on the one hand, according to some evolutionary psychologists such as Adler et al. (1992), teenagers, particularly females, attempt to gain peer acceptance by referring to their parents' socioeconomic status; and on the other, our review of EFL course books demonstrates that a higher proportion of liberal professions versus vocations is included.

Female 167 writes: "My father is Zidane is the football player of the Real Madrid. And my mother is Elsa Pataki is the model." Indeed this informant fantasizes about her social status, for we have the certainty that neither the famous footballer Zidane, nor the well-known actress Elsa Pataki are her parents.

Female 239 observes: "My father is in my school, he is a teacher. My mother works in a school too, but she is in the secretary." This informant does not know how to explain that her mother is a clerk, and she uses what she believes to be the English translation for "Secretaría", the Spanish term for school office, where her mother probably works.

Male 218 writes: "My mother is María and my father Peter. -she is teacher and he is functionary." Again this informant knows how to express his mother's job; but for his father's he uses a poor translation of "funcionario" the Spanish generic term for civil servant, with all probability either because he does not know the term, or because he does not consider his father's job important enough.

Table 1. Parents' professions

TYPES	TOKENS	FEMALE OUTPUT	MALE OUTPUT
teacher	18	9	9
doctor	8	4	4
architect	5	1	4
lawyer	3	2	1
footballer	2	1	1
astronaut	1		1
Banker	1	1	
Bank director	1		1
cleaner	1		1
dentist	1		1
engineer	1	1	
mechanic	1	1	
model	1	1	
nurse	1	1	
paediatrician	1	1	
civil servant	2	1	1
secretary	1	1	
technician	1		1
TOTAL	50	25	25

Fewer participants are interested in discussing their own future careers, but when they do, they choose either high status professions or exciting and glamorous ones. Occasionally, we stumble upon declarations such as the following: female 50 confesses, "I want ser actress or TV present, or journalist or police woman."; male 137 observes, "I'm going to be a famous actor, and I will live in "Las Vegas"; male 268 writes, "I want to be an aernautic engeener"; and male 227 maintains, "I will be pilot of the plane." When interest is high enough they manage to use various strategies to express their dreams: for instance, female 159 is so eager to write about her dreams that she makes use of her native language, "I in the future liking.. was diseñadora de ropa." (I would like to be a fashion designer in the future). In contrast, when the profession/studies of other members of the family seem attractive, they are mentioned as well: male 165 observes, "two of my cousins are engineers"; and female 142 writes, "My brother is studing electronic ingenery".

Grounds for bragging are found to be also the qualities and size of their living space. Female participant 75 asks the recipients of the letter: "Your house is big or small? Have you got a swimming pool at home?" this query reveals a broad concern of the sample. The type "house" is implemented 141 times; and type "room" 31 times. Participants boast about the size and beauty of their houses and bedrooms, and in some cases they either distort the facts or boldly lie about it. Male 271 declares, "I live in a castle in Barcelona". Since the participant attends school in Logroño, the fact that the castle is in Barcelona increases implausibility and disbelief. Informants seem to believe that certain locations add glamour, so male 29 observes: "I have a house in Paris and a plane." Male 163 explicitly fantasises, "I live in Lotus Land, in the Play Boy mansion"; and male 34 states, "I have house in the Texas. I have two cars." The value placed on size is indisputable: when they don't consider their houses big enough to boast about they may sound apologetic: this is the case of male 165 who explains, "My flat is medium, it has got four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen and a living room. But my house in my village is bigger than my flat in Logroño because it has got four flats and a garage only for me and my family". Also apologetic about size sounds female 168 who observes, "My house isn't very big, but is great". Female 178 voices in a nutshell most participants' desires when she writes: "If I was rich I would buy a big house with swimming pool and big garden".

Being successful seems to entail for these informants wider availability of friends and sex. We find 361 tokens of type "friend", and participants systematically boast about the number and quality of their friends and acquaintances. Along the same lines emotional involvements are also described, and there are at least 52 references to emotional relationships in the corpus: and, as might have been expected, the percentage of females (21.15%) is higher than that of males (17.74%). Some informants explicitly brag about sex, although considering the amount of sexually charged information these youths receive, the number of sexually explicit statements seems low; but again, it should be taken into consideration that fear of their teachers' finding out what they had written about probably deterred participants from being too explicit. Some of those who bring up the topic go as far as employing the taboo word "fuck"; curiously, females implement it more often than males: from a total of eight tokens five of them are produced by four different females, and three by two males. The whole list of examples is quoted below:

- Female 50: "My hobbies are drinking, smoke and fuck!! All the weekend I go to my friends to San Miguel for drinking vozka with kas limon and the Saturdays go to the disco (Concept) and dance and say the ugly boys fuck you!!

- Female 74: “My hobbies are smoke, drinking and fuck” Female 77: “I like my computer and watch TV. But I also like meet friends, smoke, drink and funk.”
- Female 216: “I love fuck.”
- Male 222, “My school is a shit. Helen, when I will go to Oxford. I’m going to fuck you because I love you.... In summer I will to meet you, so a big kiss and fuck a lot.”
- Male 226: i love fuck all the night.”

It is precisely in this topic of sex where the participants display their imagination most often. Male 247 writes, with the visible desire of shocking the reader: “My father’s name is De Cepote, and my mother’s name is Dñ. Coñota, my brother’s name Pichashort. With my imaginary girlfriend. In the bathroom I am dirty, I take my dick and I play with here.”

Male 15 boasts, “My girl friend is Carmen Electra and my ex is Pamela Andersen.” When Male 263 confesses, “Soy budista y me e enamorado of britner, Spears...” We may be suspicious of his adhesion to Buddhism, but he is probably being honest when he confesses his infatuation with singer Britney Spears.

Male 263 asserts, “I married with Ana Torroja.”

Being interested in sex is a perfectly natural behaviour for teenage males as well as for females, but the commentaries are somewhat crude and out of place.

4. TEACHING MATERIALS: COURSE BOOKS

It seems sensible that educators and parents should oppose the effects of mass media tendency to trivialize, but an examination of the teaching materials such as the course books used in these apprentices’ EFL classroom shows that neither the themes nor the photographs and illustrations included attempt to counteract the pressure of media advertising.⁵ Most EFL course books endorse more than interfere with or neutralize consumerism models. We now take a cursory look at the units done by our informants previous to the administration of the test.

Book one, *Challenge*. Unit one includes games such as monopoly, and illustrations of soft drinks and sweets. Unit two deals with birthday celebrations, with the subsequent abundance of presents demanded by the topic. Unit three is entirely dedicated to social achievements, and under the title “Fashion” the success stories of Zara and Levi’s are presented spiced up with photographs of

fashion models and celebrities such as Antonio Banderas, Boris Izaguirre, Colin Farrell, and Dido among others. Unit four displays an example of man's lack of respect for animals, with illustrations of imaginary creatures for which there is no name. Unit six is exclusively dedicated to TV shows and celebrities. And unit seven deals with luxurious homes.

Book two, *English Alive*. Unit one does not present a central topic, but straightforwardly promotes clothes, mobiles, TV, and computer games. Unit two focuses on television, and discusses soap operas, reality shows, and contests. The content of unit three is anticipated by its title, "Success", and again includes success stories such as that of Zara, as well as the world of fashion with photographs of famous models and celebrities such as princess Letizia Ortiz, Ronaldo, Emma Watson, Fernando Alonso, Madonna, Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp and many more. Unit four deals with supernatural stories, and is seasoned with pictures of would-be-creepy creatures, as well as of the stately houses and castles they inhabit. Unit six deals with technology, television, mobile phones and computer games. In addition, in every other unit the picture of an attractive singer is included.⁶

Book three, *Exchange*. Unit one entitled "Time out" shows adolescents shopping and surfing the Internet; significantly, a section in which children are shown to help around the house is entitled "Are you a Saint at home?" the implication is that a youth who helps around the house is a rarity; and most teenagers would loathe being called a Saint. Unit two entitled "Communicate" is packed with mobile phones and other gadgets. Unit three's title, "Prizes", anticipates the topic, and abounds in photographs of champions, winners and famous people of all types. Most importantly, some of these "winners", such as Roger Robar (who won his money by means of a lottery ticket) got their status through no merits of their own. The titles of some sections within this unit, such as "Teenagers and money" (44) are sufficiently suggestive. Unit five entitled "Into the future" deals with all kinds of mechanical gadgets; and unit six entitled "Pop" again predicts, and then fulfils, the abundance of celebrities.

Book fourth, *Making Moves*. Unit one is entirely dedicated to restaurants and bars; unit three to show business with photographs of glamorous artists; unit seven to travelling; unit eight to shopping, with photographs of famous department stores such as Selfridges and Harrods, and illustrations of clothing; and unit nine to renting and buying luxurious homes.

In short, more than half the units in these texts promote sheer consumerism. We find this problem to be in need of serious attention, to promote better and more realistic values.

CONCLUSIONS

This preliminary descriptive study provides evidence that, when writing EFL school compositions, these informants discuss consumerism extensively and are concerned with the pursuit of success. In addition, due to the size of this sample, 228 participants, we can safely extrapolate the findings to other similar contexts. The topics most often discussed are ownership, status-seeking and status-claiming, the beauty and size of their dwellings, and the quantity of friends and other relationships. After analysing the data by means of a double perspective: quantitative and qualitative, evidence is provided that females implement these topics even more frequently and more boldly than males do. Meanwhile, the analysis of the themes and vocabulary in the students' course books reveals that participants' implementation of consumerism may have been reinforced by means of patterns learned in EFL course books. However, to ascertain this connection and obtain more informed results a much comprehensive and lengthier study should be conducted: questionnaires, inferential statistics, and availability tests that have not yet been administered would help to clarify the significance of the data.

The examined books, apart from conveying the message that only successful people are worth knowing about, include far too many shallow topics: shopping, games, electronic gadgets, travels, birthday celebrations, presents and so forth. We believe that it should be the role of educators and educating material to encourage a more simple life, necessary in a world fraught with problems originated from excessive consumerism. Course books could lend a hand but, perhaps because the priority of publishing houses is to make the books attractive rather than instructive, they do not. It is to this profit objective that some sections in the books seem to serve: such is the inclusion of imaginary or legendary creatures (the manticore, the hydra, and the kraken) which may heighten the students' curiosity, but which seem to be of limited linguistic benefit.

On the whole, this study has been written in the belief that a better acquaintance with the vocabulary that L2 learners implement will provide clues about word availability and the input EFL apprentices are exposed to in the L2 classroom. Above all, it has been our goal to prepare the ground for further specific studies which may eventually investigate the possible interrelatedness between consumerism/ success seeking and the input received. Changes may need to be in effect soon to replace these current characteristics that are educating our children in a basically unethical way.

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NOTES

- 1 ESO is the acronym for Educación Secundaria Obligatoria (Mandatory Secondary Education).
- 2 We have disregarded the use of the possessive adjective "my" in sentences such as "my name is"; and we have solely registered those cases in which the subject expresses the ownership of an object such as "my bicycle is big".
- 3 We understand the terms 'type' and 'token', following Richards & Schmidt, as 'The class of linguistic units is called a type and examples or individual members of the class are called tokens' (2002:567).
- 4 The quotations are reproduced as they were written maintaining all grammatical and spelling mistakes.
- 5 The units commented upon are those exploited prior to the administration of the task.
- 6 Robbie Williams, James Blunt, Stacie Orrico, Sugababes, Emma Bunton and so on.