

# RELATING TO STUDENTS

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## WHAT DOES RELATING TO STUDENTS MEAN?

Every teacher who has taught before would support the following proposition: motivated students learn better. In order to motivate students, it is necessary for teachers to have an understanding of their pupils' background. Several strands of research demonstrate that developing a personal interest in pupils is not only effective for encouraging participation and engagement, but necessary for success in learning, as there is a strong link between emotion and cognition, according to some researchers (Zull, 2002). That means if strong and positive emotions which are engendered by care, motivation and interest are not present, real learning seldom occurs. Accordingly, negative emotions, such as fear and shame, can obstruct the learning process. Classic research in communication studies also highlights the positive benefits of supportive environments (that is, those characterized by description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality) versus defensive environments (that is, those focused on evaluation, control, strategy, neutrality, superiority, certainty) (Gibb, 1961). Interestingly, undergraduate students repeatedly mention one-to-one interactions with instructors in supervised projects and closer interactions with other students and instructors in small classes as important factors for their learning. Developing personal interest in pupils is the first step towards demonstrating that a community exists within the classroom (Palmer, 1998; Tompkins, 1996).

In our project a variety of strategies were used to convey to the pupils that their instructors take a personal interest in them and their learning. For detailed information on these strategies see the appendix.

The following part will take a closer look at the effectiveness of these strategies in the context of how they helped pupils to relate to the topic.

## STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF RELATING THE TOPIC TO THE PUPILS

Most of the student teachers claimed that ‘relating the topic to pupils’ helped them to better achieve other aims of the lessons especially describing similarities and differences and critical thinking. Therefore, they applied some activities *at the beginning* to reach this (immediate) aim. Almost all of them suggested that these activities functioned as a motivating and engaging tool which contributed positively to the classroom atmosphere. As a result, according to the questionnaire, many student teachers not only tried to relate to the pupils, but also related to the topic simultaneously with activities aiming at ‘relating to pupils’.

Therefore, these activities were summarised in two categories: Firstly, relating the topic to pupils, and secondly relating to the topic (see table 1). However, a few of them were only plain question-answer exchanges instead of a specific approach. These questions were about the pupils’ concerns, aims and experiences which they have had so far. Two pairs also asked for guesses about the foreign student teachers’ family relations.

Strategies used	Relating to pupils	Relating to topic
Chessboard	Helping pupils to formulate ideas	—————
Snowball	—————	Introducing the topic
Brainstorming	Helping to discover pupils’ attitudes	Helping to discover pupils’ background knowledge
Picture frame		
What would happen if		
Intelligent guess work		
The time machine		

Table 1: Strategies used to relate to pupils and topics

As mentioned above, most of the pupils were already prepared for the lesson thanks to the activities carried out to cover the aim of relating to pupils.

It should be noted that two student teachers, covering the value of love and respect, explained that the topic itself was already related to pupils' daily life. Therefore, they did not need to use any further activities apart from introducing the topic. Moreover, surprisingly, one couple claimed that their main strategy '*what would happen if ...*', functioned to relate the topic to pupils.

## CONCEPTIONS OF THE PUPILS

To start with, it may be necessary to explain what we mean by *conceptions*. The Oxford University Dictionary defines conception as '*the way in which something is perceived or regarded*'. In the light of this definition, conception will be referred to as an abstract idea consisting of concepts throughout the paper.

In our interviews, we asked the student teachers if they had any expectations in advance to find specific conceptions, to which the answers were rather diverse. As mentioned above, one couple used the *snowball strategy* only to introduce the topic since they were not sure about what to expect at all.

To understand what kind of conceptions the pupils worked with, graph 1 should be analysed. However, it should be noticed that the categories were summarised and therefore do not include all of the conceptions mentioned. The following sub-categories could be found:

### A) Modernisation:

- » *Modernisation*
- » *Individualisation*
- » *Globalisation*

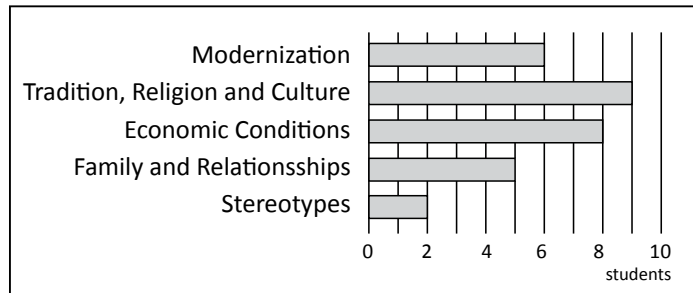
### B) Tradition, Religion and Culture:

- » *Tradition*
- » *Religion*
- » *Culture and cultural differences*
- » *History*

### C) Economic Conditions:

- » *Money*
- » *Career*
- » *Education*

It should be noted that modernisation does not necessarily mean globalisation and individualisation even though one could consider them to be related. Both terms may also support other categories. Moreover, it is very crucial to add that the pupils may have uttered these conceptions without being aware of the exact meaning since some students could not explain what they meant when they were asked for further explanation or clarification. It was assumedly because of their lack of proficiency in English. Therefore, these conceptions may be taken into consideration in terms of their associations instead of their literal meanings.



Graph 1: Conceptions mentioned by pupils

Further conceptions which were mentioned were feminism, travelling/holidays, tolerance and respect as a critical value, open-mindedness, peace, love, unity, human rights, equality and success. They are not included in the table since most of them were uttered only once.

Moreover, some pupils used some clear-cut stereotypical ideas especially in terms of modernisation and individualisation.

## PUPILS' PERSPECTIVE

Regarding the issue of *relating to pupils*, we mostly looked at the issue from the student teachers' perspective so far. Their expectations, their opinions about the efficiency of strategies, the overall effectiveness, and the appropriateness of strategies have been covered. However, it is necessary to take the pupils' evaluations into consideration as well in order to get a better understanding (bigger picture). To do so, at the end of each lesson, the student teachers collected data regarding the pupils' ideas about how the lesson went. Having considered the ideas, we tried to come up with an analysis. It made it possible to compare the student teachers' perceptions of their efficiency in relating the topic to pupils with how the pupils have seen it.

Except for two groups who could not finish the main activity in time due to management problems and on-going lively discussions, all of the student teachers collected some data to work with. They used two methods basically:

1. *They asked three or four questions at the end of the lesson and wanted the pupils to give answers to those questions.*
2. *They used a 'smiley' line. To do that, two smileys were drawn on the board: one with a happy face for the pupils who liked the lesson and one with an unhappy face for the ones who did not like the lesson/activity.*

According to the student teachers, it was easy and simple to apply the second method. On the other hand, the first written evaluation enabled student teachers to get more specific material to work on for future benefits. Furthermore, it helped to encourage pupils who might feel uneasy about making an evaluation in front of the class. Some pupils formulated very useful ideas at the end. Almost all groups had their lessons in a row. Therefore, they did not have time to revise their lesson plans and apply any ideas springing from the feedback accordingly.

The answers given to the question 'What did you learn?' were conclusive because they gave us some ideas about the *relevancy of the topic*. The following response taken from Christian Strehmel's and Adem Dal's class can be seen as an example:

*'This activity taught me (that) every country has a different idea about relationships. We have learnt a lot about the role of relationships in our lives, and we saw that the understanding of having a boyfriend or girlfriend changes in every country. I have learnt that relationships have connections with education, traditions and culture. And for some countries relationships are not very important.'*

Obviously, they found the topic 'long-term relationships' in terms of happiness very important in their lives. However, the pupils did not like to state their opinions about some sensitive topics such as tolerance towards others or discrimination.

## EXPECTATIONS OF THE PUPILS

The pupils stated that they had an idea of what would be included in the lesson after the presentation of the project. They were not used to such a lesson in their school life. Therefore, it aroused their interest at the very beginning. It was obvious that some of them did not know what to expect specifically. They did not have much experience of using such teaching methods. That may be the reason why they said they really liked the lesson and they wanted to learn more about the project. It shows that pupils can benefit more and build on their knowledge if the lesson plans are applied systematically.

## PUPILS' EVALUATION OF THE STRATEGIES

In order to revise the lesson plan the student teachers asked questions about the strategies used. Approximately half of the pupils mentioned the name of the strategy directly or the fun they had with the strategy. For example, Ece and Daniela used the strategy press conference in their lesson and it seemingly helped them to maintain the attention of the students to a great extent. Some pupils were even happier with the strategy than with the topic itself. They said that they enjoyed discussing a different topic with friends in such an environment. Secondly, they tend to prefer strategies that include visual elements. Starting the lesson with a related photograph or a short video might trigger their attention to the topic. For example the student teachers in Koc High School used a very simply picture to make pupils consider what it means to be a member of a group or not (see figure 1). This fact leads to the following: Regarding *relating to pupils*, teachers should not only take pupils' interests and background into consideration in order to make them familiar with the topic and relate it to their life itself, but they should also think about how to appeal to their learning preferences. It may be of secondary importance, but it seems to advance more participation and prolongs motivation.



Figure 1: Picture used by student teachers to evoke pupils curiosity

## PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

The pupils found the topics very relevant, but they complained about the lack of background information. Interestingly, older pupils questioned the data and wanted the survey to be applied to a larger population. Younger pupils had more problems with visual presentations and wanted the pictures to be clearer or bigger. They also mentioned that they had to speak in Turkish sometimes because their proficiency level in English was not high enough.

## CONCLUSION / SUMMARY

Summarising everything that has been said so far about relating to pupils, one can conclude that during this project the strategies helped a lot to relate the topics to the pupils. Issues such as family and religion are already very relevant topics in the pupils' social surroundings and therefore they like to talk about them. Interestingly, many of the expected conceptions were recognized by the student teachers while teaching. However, even in an open-minded world one will always have stereotypes that are part of many conceptions. That does not have to be a bad thing as long as we are aware of them and learn to deal with them. To achieve that goal this project is a good start to teach pupils more tolerance towards otherness.