

PERCEPTION OF THE IES “EL TABLERO” (CÓRDOBA) STUDENTS ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING OF GEOGRAPHY

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The essential purpose of this article is to analyze the attitude and perception that the students of the IES El Tablero de Córdoba show about the teaching of Geography in the different levels in which it is taught, both in Secondary (1st, 2nd and 3rd of ESO) and in Baccalaureate (Geography of Spain in 2nd year of Baccalaureate). To do this, and in order to promote further comparisons, we used a questionnaire that was used to know the opinion of the same students about the History.

As a basis to support this article, we have made a brief survey by some scientific references that have dealt with this same object. The first idea that we have deduced is that there are very few works that are directed in this same direction. Most of the practical research examined is oriented in some following lines:

1. Geographical knowledge level tests (what do you know about the Geography of ...?.. Locate a map, ...).
2. Studies on the learning difficulties of Geography.
3. Justifications from the teachers about the need to teach Geography.
4. Methodologies of teaching and learning of Geography.
5. Previous ideas of the students on specific aspects of geographic content.

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6. Studies on the environment of the student body (with or without participation of the students in the design of the activity)

Some authors like Professor X.M. Souto González (1998, pp. 60-66) noted the lack of studies on the perception that students have about Geography as a subject of study. In most of the works he examined in this regard, the students showed a clear descriptive conception of the subject (mainly related to geographical accidents), with some confusion with what was treated by History and, in general, a little significant learning. This led him to conclude, among other ideas, that there was a low level of knowledge of this subject. However, Souto argued that the negative perception of Geography was not a matter of level, nor of late incorporation of geographical knowledge, but that it was because “students despise or forget what they believe is not meaningful for their learning” (Souto González, 1998, p 62). He concluded that it was possible to change the feeling of apathy and rejection towards the study of Geography and, for that, he bet, in the first place, for more school-time dedicated to Geography and, secondly, to improve the initial teacher training in content as in methodology. The aim was to formulate a motivating proposal, based on the study of social and environmental problems and on active methodologies so that students consider the study of a subject such as Geography to be profitable. And these were conclusions and analyses that were made in 1998. Twenty years later is still talking about this issue recurrently, and as far as we are concerned, we fully agree both in the analysis and in the conclusions, which comes to suggest us the idea that we have made little progress in the attitude of students towards our discipline. Indeed, and although we have been able to verify the opinions of various authors on the positive aspects that Geography can contribute to the integral formation of middle school students, we continue to see a certain rejection towards our subject. This statement is the main conclusion we have reached after applying the questionnaire to the students of this centre in the city of Córdoba (Spain). This center (IES El Tablero) receives students from the North and Northwest of Córdoba. It is a socially and economically heterogeneous student body, mostly of middle and lower middle class. Families are very involved in the formative process of their sons and daughters.

The questionnaire that has served as the basis for this study was applied to the students of 1st and 2nd year of ESO / who share school-time with History) and those of 3rd (only Geography is taught) as well as those of 2nd year of Baccalaureate (Geography of Spain). In this case, we would like to highlight its excessive extension and complexity, which makes it unattractive to students, as evidenced by the fact that, in recent years, the number of students studying Geography of the 2nd Baccalaureate of Humanities and

Social Sciences in our centre has decreased considerably. In total, the questionnaire has been completed by a total of 247 students.

The survey was structured in three sections:

1. Study habits.
2. Study Techniques in Geography.
3. Attitude towards Geography.

The first section will help us to know how our students study independently of the subject in question. Due to its generic nature, we have not considered it in this article due to space issues.

The second section shows us how they face the study of Geography in its different levels. We have been able to verify that it does not vary, substantially, from the study of the history that we did in our first work. This indicates that, in a first approach, the way of studying our student students does not vary depending on the subject. Try to use the same techniques and methods of study. In general, a preference for the use of the textbook is observed, followed by class notes and summaries, while the Internet and the complementary readings have less use. The textbook predominates in Secondary while the notes of the teacher are used mostly in Baccalaureate. This distribution of techniques and methods of study is marked, fundamentally, by the teaching praxis of the teaching staff. Schemes, organization charts or concept maps are not used so preponderantly. These techniques are more exploited in the higher grades than in the initial ones and, although there are very significant differences between these methods, schemes are used more than conceptual maps that require more intense practice and training that, usually, is not usually taught, since, in many occasions, it is also not handled with preference among the teaching staff. A subject of great interest in us is the memorization of content, which as we have been able to verify, is the most used study technique, although it is the least significant learning can generate. We must specify, however, that this feature not only affects the subject of Geography but also History, as verified in the previous work and, we dare to say, that in most subjects. Added to this question is the fact that, in general, students affirm that they do not understand geographical concepts very well. Memory learning and lack of understanding of the fundamental concepts are two keys that can explain the lack of enthusiasm for the study of Geography by our students. The third section of the questionnaire is the most interesting insofar as it seeks to investigate the attitude of students in front of Geography as a subject. We started by asking if he liked to study Geography. 56.14% of the respondents answered “A lot” and “Enough”.

This figure is lower than that indicated in the survey on History and, moreover, it is irregularly distributed among the different educational levels: while in 1st and 2nd of ESO it is above this average, in 3º of ESO and 2º of Baccalaureate it is less than fifty percent, precisely in the courses in which Geography does not share time with History. In these data, as we will conclude, we consider it possible that personal elements influence with respect to the teaching staff who teach the subject.

Despite the weighting achieved in the previous question, when we asked the students about the relevance of Geography for their training we noticed a very positive trend, while 81.33% of the respondents answered that it was “Very necessary” and “Quite a bit”, While they deny it absolutely (item “Nothing”) only 5.81%, below the rejection shown in the previous question. This assessment is more significant among the ESO students than in the 2nd year of Baccalaureate, where only 43.75% of the students consider it relevant.

One issue that we consider essential is to discern which contents are treated by Geography according to the students. For this, several possibilities were proposed and the results have been very diverse. Predominantly the answer “Human facts that have a relation with the territory in which they occur” (35’15% of the respondents), followed by the answer “Rivers, mountains, capitals, countries, ...” (18.83%), “Economic, social, demographic aspects of a country” (13.81%), “Maps, plans and atlas” (13.39%) and “The impact of man on nature” (12.13%). This raises a double possibility: either they do not have it very clear or the answer depends on the level in which they are. Indeed, while the item “Human Facts ...” is the majority in 1st and 2nd of ESO, in 3º of ESO, the items «Rivers, montains, ...» y «Maps, plans, ... “begin to have a higher valuation. In 2nd year of Baccalaureate, it overwhelmingly surpasses that of “Rivers, montains, ...” (62.50%). We believe that there has been a slide of opinions in which human influence was interpreted as more relevant, towards a conception of Geography as a mere relation of physical or descriptive aspects. It is important to emphasize this aspect, since it occurs at educational levels where the curriculum is more diversified and where various aspects are taught on general geography in 3rd of ESO or the Geography of Spain in 2nd year of Baccalaureate.

In the same way, we have obtained very illuminating results with the question in which the influence of the teaching staff is questioned when making the subject more or less attractive, since 76.23% of the respondents (grouping the items “Much”) and “Enough”) they think it’s essential. Undoubtedly, the teacher’s mark is essential to attract students to their subject, both in Geography and in other disciplines. In this regard, we must highlight a determining aspect in our discipline, such as the scarce presence of specialists in Geography in Secondary Education. This has caused that

these contents are taught by non-specialists who, in many cases, are forced to assume it without the maximum possible enthusiasm. This fact, as we have personally verified on numerous occasions, has an impact on the students' assessment of this subject.

Regarding the opinion that students have about the number of hours dedicated to Geography, 71.72% of students consider unnecessary an increase or decrease in the number of hours (three in Secondary or four in Baccalaureate).

On the way we teach the subject, we have probed the opinion of the students about the following phrase: "In class, the teacher should explain less and the students work more in groups." 53.49% of the respondents rejected this. The results vary from totally disagreement in 1st of ESO to a more positive assessment with this affirmation in 2nd year of Baccalaureate, which indicates that, as we advance in educational levels, students opt for less directed and more autonomous learning.

One of the aspects that are changing the way of teaching the classes, whatever the subject in question, is the introduction of new technologies (computers, mobile phones, tablets). It is, therefore, that we have established an issue in the questionnaire to find out the attitude of students against the use of ICT in our subject. The result is that 73.26% of the respondents (grouping the items "Always" and "Often") judge the use of ICTs very positively, an opinion corroborated in other research on this topic (Seva et al., 2017). This response is the majority in ESO levels, while in 2nd year of Baccalaureate this assessment is not so clear. We do not find a clear basis for this result except, perhaps, the predominant theoretical nature of the subject that prepares for the PEBAU that makes the use of ICTs less interesting.

We have been accrediting so far that students usually opt for the modification of traditional educational roles, but we also verify that this statement can be disrupted when it is up to the student to take the initiative and responsibility for autonomous learning. Thus, we have introduced a question about the inclusion of supplementary content to the topics covered in class through the use of the internet, encyclopedias, etc. A 69.30% of the respondents (grouping the items "Sometimes" and "Never") shows a negative to this possibility, rejection that is increasing with the successive levels until reaching the maximum in Baccalaureate. This same preference we appreciate in the general section of study habits, and in the questionnaire on History. The factors that condition this trend can be multiple, and we have already pointed several in these pages, but we could insist on the existence of deficiencies on the part of the students in the basic research procedures, greater difficulties in analysing, understanding, relating and synthesizing, hence that we believe that students, in general, feel more comfortable in the merely memorial task, the traditional one,

in which they have been trained in most of their academic life and, therefore, less favourable to changes in their way of coping the study of these (and other) subjects. Again, the influence of teachers in changing this tonic is essential.

In the same way, we have proposed what topics they would like to discuss in the Geography class, among some pre-established ones. Thus, the vast majority of respondents thought it was convenient to carry out a greater number of educational outings (58.65%), compared to the introduction of topics related to immediate reality (24.05%), the preparation of works of field (10.55%) or the location of geographical accidents in atlas (6.75%).

Finally, we wanted to know if the students talk about geographical issues with their classmates outside the classroom. In a generic way, we can confirm a negative answer, since 68.31% of the students (grouping the items "Sometimes" and "Never") do not do it habitually. This figure is lower in Baccalaureate. It is not interesting for them.

To conclude this work, we want to indicate that, according to the data extracted from the two questionnaires analysed, History and Geography are perceived by the students in a very similar way. We have shown that traditional attitudes are still maintained both in the teaching and learning of Social Sciences, with a clear predominance of the figure of the teacher. As the student matures, different habits and attitudes are acquired, more open to the individual and autonomous management of learning, but very limited by the educational context itself. As for Geography, specifically, there is no great appreciation for its study; it is still considered a subject that is not very useful for practical purposes, but important for the training of students, that is, one more subject, whose real influence will depend on the teaching staff and their ability to motivate the students. We believe that we must improve the teaching process of this subject and for this it is necessary an adequate initial and permanent training of the teaching staff who teach it, know the subject but also be able to transmit emotions since, as the neuroscientists affirm, only learn what excites and geography has the ability to excite and motivate students. It is in the teacher's hands to transmit those emotions.

Undoubtedly, the teaching of Social Sciences and, particularly, Geography should proceed to an update not only of content (García Pérez, 2017) but of methodologies to bring it closer to a versatile student body that, at this moment, does not feel special predilection for this matter. Likewise, we believe it is necessary to promote autonomy and creativity among students and use new technologies to support the change efforts we have to face.

We want to emphasize that knowing the opinion of our students is an exercise that we must value essential for the improvement of our teaching practice and not just as a mere procedure.

Finally, we would like to add that we are facing a very interesting challenge, a long way to go that we must start as soon as possible if we want Geography to occupy a prominent place among the various materials that make up the official curriculum. Your contributions to the development of key competences make it necessary and convenient.

