

A Reflection on the Class Teaching Sequence with Particular Reference to History Classes in Spain

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Abstract: This contribution reflects empirical data arising from a study based on the testimony of 1523 students referring to the time when they studied history in secondary school. It forms part of an on-going inter-disciplinary research project. By means of open activities, information was compiled on the History classes received by students studying Bachillerato (two-year pre-university course) in Spanish secondary schools. The data, therefore, reflect students' views of the subject and the way in which it was imparted. The article will analyse the sequence of actions followed by teachers in the classroom (initial phase, development or application phase, and final phase). For each stage we shall analyse the information received and study the aspects into which the teacher, seemed to put most effort. The results show that the most frequently used teaching model in the classroom was the traditional rote learning approach, with little student participation.

Introduction

The present article forms part of the project “The teaching and learning of History at *Bachillerato* level in the Autonomous Community of Murcia: students' views”, financed by the Seneca Foundation (Murcia, Spain). The study analyses the testimony of 1,523 students, who provided 42,000 descriptive items on the characteristics of their history classes. All the students had studied the second year of the two-year, pre-university *Bachillerato* course, were followed during the 10 years that the study covers (1993-2003).

Situated between the end of compulsory secondary education in Spain and access to university, for which it is basically a preparation course, the *Bachillerato* lasts two years, after which students take a University Access Test, commonly known as *Selectividad*, whose final mark decides which university course students can follow.

We focus here on the teaching of history at *Bachillerato*. In the words of Downey and Levstik (1991) research into history teaching is poor and uneven:

Much of the professional literature about history teaching consists of either descriptions of exemplary practices, usually reports from the teachers who developed the approach or the method or untried prescriptions for effective teaching. Claims for the exemplary nature of the methods being

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recommended are seldom supported by evidence of what or how much student learning took place (p. 400).

Wilson (2001) observed growing interest in such research and centred his emerging research on three questions: the traditional history teaching, the research and the good teaching. Among portraits of traditional history teaching different studies reflects a great diversity of methods but “little intellectual engagement, a dominance of teachers and textbooks, and minimal problem solving or critical thinking” (p. 530). In Wilson (2001), Downey & Levstik observe that

We know quite a bit about traditional history teaching: the heavy reliance on textbooks; a dominance of teacher lecture and recitation; and the weekly quizzes and individual assignments that are interrupted sporadically with a film. (p. 529)

One of the key points in the present day debate on history teaching is precisely this dichotomy between the traditional way of teaching the subject, basically founded on teacher explanation, and classes in which some sort of student participation is encouraged (Wilson, 2001). Onosko (1989, 1990) and Newmann (1990a, 1990b) observed and questioned teachers and students and found that participative teaching led to a more meaningful learning than the strictly explicative approach. According to these authors, successful teachers included fewer topics in their classes, what they taught was coherent and structured, while any proposed problems and tasks were stimulating and matched the abilities of each group. These teachers depended on discussion as much as their authority and were more likely to encourage rigorous thinking by sharing their reasoning and listening with their students. In contrast, less successful teachers gave their lessons as lectures, made greater use of text books and attributed less importance to group discussions.

The study presented here is our contribution to the field of history teaching and is intended to give students' views on what teachers do in the classroom. It is intended to help teachers with their teaching and in the planning and execution of their lessons.

Conceptual Framework.

A fundamental concept in the planning and analysis of teaching is the sequence in which a given content is offered. All teaching-learning situations should form part of a sequence and each situation should be part of a sequence that is not simply random (Perrenoud, 2004).

Giné, Parcerisa, Llana, París and Quinquer (2003) mentioned that looking at the educational process from a sequential point of view will facilitate holistic analysis, permit the individual components of the educational act to be viewed as part of the whole and reveal how these components are related and how they influence each other; this, they argued, could make the complexity of the teaching-learning process more easily understood and consequently provide a more solid foundation on which to base teaching decisions. In agreement with these authors, we understand the teaching sequence as a process composed of a series of actions, tasks and activities developed in a sequential manner, whose final aim is to help learning. In this process, we identify three phases: the design or planning phase, the interaction phase between teacher and student, and a final phase of revision and evaluation.

In the present article we attempt to understand and analyse the phase in which teachers and students interact in the history class and during which students' knowledge will evolve (Quinquer, 2004a). For the social sciences, this author defends a teaching

method based on cooperation, interaction and participation, and claims that even traditional expository methods can be improved if students are encouraged to take part by means of suitable teaching strategies (Quinquer, 2004a).

For the purpose of this work, the class sequence is broken down into three stages (initial phase, development or application phase, and final phase), which constitute our reference categories and what we call the teaching sequence. These categories, in turn, are sub-categorised in an attempt to obtain more detailed information from the students' point of view, which will serve to describe and analyse how class activity is organised.

The *initial phase* lays the foundations for learning, so that sufficient time has to be dedicated to it and it has to be considered important: it is a necessary pre-condition for learning to take place. The first step is to present the main points of what is to be taught, the subject, and the objectives, at the same time awakening interest, curiosity and positive expectations. Students must understand and assume the objectives; in this sense, many studies have revealed that students learn best what they think the teacher wants them to learn (Quinquer, 2003). Secondly an initial evaluation of previous ideas and knowledge is indispensable. The teacher must gather information on the students, analyse it, take the corresponding decisions as regards planning, while students must be aware of what they know and any difficulties they might have.

The *development phase*: from a constructivist point of view and for meaningful learning to take place, students should take part in activities whereby their previous ideas are restructured, and which makes them question their own ideas on the subject or some aspect of it, in order to produce conceptual changes. This is the phase when any new content is introduced.

The *final phase* is also indispensable. If this step is not correct the process remains open, unfinished (Parcerisa, 2004). The activities must encourage students to classify, synthesize, structuralise and be aware of what they have learnt, and to have learnt in such a way that their knowledge can be evaluated. Indeed, the key elements here are evaluation and synthesis (Parcerisa, 2004; Quinquer, 2004b).

In the context of Spain, Giné et al. (2003), Parcerisa (2004) and Quinquer (2003; 2004a, 2004b), consider and explain the teaching sequence by focusing mainly on the types of evaluation that take place in each of the stages and which help consolidate learning and increase student success. In each of the stages certain actions, closely related with how the teacher understands his/her class and with classroom life as represented by the class-teacher interaction, facilitate or improve student learning. This is where our interest lies - in the teaching sequence both for the research presented here and for the on-going project as a whole. We attempt to look at teachers' teaching sequence and to "map" what really happens in the classroom, not simply look at what the student learns. We think that an important facet in this field, and one which is not always attended to, is continuing teacher development and training, which may help resolve day to day uncertainties in the teaching process and help maintain professional motivation at the same time.

In agreement with Soteris (2003), programming by following the teaching sequence reveals the importance of foresight and planning, evaluation and self-evaluation, revision and synthesis (p. 23). This will provide us with an argument to explain why we have chosen the term teaching sequence in our study.

Methodology

To obtain the information, we depended on students' own accounts and the

stimulation of their memory. The open question asked each participant was ‘*what were your history classes like?*’ We analysed different activities around this topics with students, answers in written form. We emphasised the points their were interested in.. This method is based on the qualitative method of life histories (Beraux, 2005) with new elements required for the investigation in hand.

The sample uses information collected from people who had been students in secondary schools of the province of Murcia during the years 1993-2003. The literature points to different research models and techniques that can be used as aides-memories (Delgado & Gutiérrez, 1994; Salkind, 2007). Simple narration has served in an educational context to understand the teaching process mainly as understood by the teacher (Bolivar & Domingo, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1998).

In our case, the data comes from the narrative of an experience that has remained in the minds of the students. This memory is long term, declarative, episodic and autobiographical. There was no limit set and the participants were free to relate what was significant for them about their history classes during the last year of secondary school (see Neisser & Fivush, 1994). The enormous quantity of data amassed meant great effort was needed to categorise the content and meaning. The present article concerns the “Structure of classroom activity”, whereby we analyse the ways in which lessons are begun, developed and finished. Of the 1523 narratives contained in the database, 99% dealt with the teaching-learning sequence, a high percentage which reveals the impact that the teaching-learning process had.

Descriptive Analysis and Interpretation of Results: Class Sequence

We analyse the students’ accounts of the model followed by the teacher with reference to the three phases identified: initial phase, development phase and final phase.

1. Analysis of the category defined as “Initial phase”

As can be seen (Table 1), nine subcategories arise, which will help us interpret the students’ views.

	Number of descriptions ²	Number of cases ³
1. Entrance in class	1496	1087
2. Social behaviour	584	516
3. Controls at the beginning of class	1028	776
4. Preparation of media	79	70
5. Actions indicating the beginning of the class	421	356
6. Begins the classes dictating	108	96
7. Begins the classes by relating it with previous classes	621	523
8. Begins the classes by correcting work	52	46
9. The presentation or beginning of a new topic	410	359
Initial phase. TOTAL	4799	3829

Table 1: Sub-categories of “initial phase” category.

² Descriptions made by students. Apply this to the other tables

³ Students who mentioned this category.

The first of these is “entrance in class”, which is mentioned in most accounts (71.4%). This is to be expected because of the narrative nature of the replies and the teacher’s entrance forms a natural starting point.

Most accounts than continue with the behaviour of the teachers as they made themselves ready to give the class. “The teacher sat down” is the most widely used phrase, although in this act may be included matters such as placing things on the table or hanging up clothes.

Punctuality was among the most widely mentioned attributes, whether favourably (most cases) or not. In this sense, teachers’ behaviour may be taken as a mark of their professional responsibility, determined by their own values or sense of work ethic, although fulfilment of this obligation may also reflect adaptation to the school environment, including the presence of school managers who control such matters. Punctuality reflect the sense of responsibility and professional pride of the persons involved.

The second sub-category is “social behaviour”. The way in which the teacher greets the class is considered important by students, as accredited by 477 mentions of this aspect. These range from a laconic greeting to other forms of expression that point to a desire for a first verbal exchange, such as a friendly comment or apologies for being late. In 83.4% of cases in which this aspect is mentioned, the teacher’s tone was adjudged as courteous or friendly. It is the teacher who is responsible for establishing this first verbal contact.

Elbaz (1983) considers that the teacher’s way of greeting the class reveals his/her practical knowledge of the class, showing the pleasure felt at seeing the students or the tension or state of anxiety concerning potential problems. The teacher’s first remarks made to the students will have a personal component, reflecting his/her style as a person, and a social component that will depend on the type of relationship he wishes to establish with the class as a whole.

Our results show that most students welcomed this initial stage, appreciating any sign of goodwill and looking positively on an initial strategy that started the class in a relaxed manner. In contrast, although such complaints were fewer, any act that smacked of confrontation or indifference towards the class was negatively evaluated, such acts including the absence of any greeting or ironic comments on the teacher’s part.

“Controls at the beginning of class” was the third sub-category. Many students (50.9%) mention the controls related with the order necessary to begin and the recording of attendance and punctuality. The act of calling for silence and order is the most frequent, while an alternative is to gesture and wait for silence. Both forms are mentioned equally by students, the non-verbal way being mentioned slightly more times. Calling the attendance register is mentioned by 30% of student replies.

The controls at the beginning of a class, which act as a strategy to impose order, attract attention and to record attendance and punctuality, depend on the personal characteristics of the teacher and their experience. According to Crocker (1986), these actions constitute part of the functional paradigm of teachers. Proof that this model is understood by the class is that some students end by adapting to the same, exhibiting behaviour that responds to the expectations of the teaching staff, such as keeping quiet.

The recording of attendance, on the other hand, has little effect on class performance, although it may have an influence at an individual level. It is also one of the most mentioned factors by students and which they see as a measure of teacher responsibility and professionalism.

“Preparation of media” and “actions indicating the beginning of the class” are the next two categories, which are closely related. More than a quarter of student

commentaries mention some actions whereby the teacher prepares the material to be used. Most mention organising the material to be used in class on the teacher's desk. This is a type of ritual which permits the teacher to make a or last minute decision regarding the focus of the forthcoming class and how it will be presented.

In 18.9% of cases students mention that the material used at the beginning was the assigned textbook. A similar percentage (16.2%) mention the use of materials other than the textbook to start the class, such as the teacher's own notes, photocopies, study plan and flow charts, or using the blackboard. Sometimes teachers will not start by preparing their own material, but will ask the students to open their textbooks where they finished the previous class, to take out their notes or exercise books to begin writing, or to do some other task such as a an exercise or comment on a text or revise the previous lesson.

The difference between the types of material used by the teacher to start the class, according to Elbaz (1983), points to a decision regarding the theoretical orientation that will influence how the class will evolve. The textbook represents a package of knowledge to which the teacher has not contributed, in this sence we think that the use of the textbook suggests a "transmission" type of teaching, which will reduce the possibility of meaningful learning taking place. For us, the preparation and organisation of the teacher's work material influence the meaningfulness of student learning, while the use of materials other than the textbook favours the construction of knowledge.

"Begins the classes dictating" is the sixth sub-category (6.7%). Although some students indicate that the teacher breaks the dictation up with comments, most mention that the dictation is continuous. This sub-category makes direct or indirect reference to the teacher's notes as class material. As we have said, such notes imply some sort of personal intervention on the teacher's part; notes are potentially more flexible than the textbook alone, although much depends on the use made of them. It is clear that students generally dislike this procedure, which seems to them monotonous and producing pressure as most of the time they have to copy hurriedly. In principle, it would seem unproductive to dictate something that could easily be photocopied, since the time could be used for explanation or more participative activities.

Sub-category seven is "to begin the class by relating it with previous classes". This is the third sub-category in terms of the number of mentions it gets (36.6%). However, no explicit references is made of any attempt on the teacher's part to find out what the students know about what is about to be taught.

Some commentaries mention the teacher asking where they stopped during the previous session, perhaps so that everyone concentrates on the matter in hand or to turn to the relevant page of the textbook. Another group mentions that the teacher resumes what has been previously given, orally, by drawing some sort of schema on the blackboard or asking a student directly. Another technique frequently used is to begin the class by asking questions on previous lessons, sometimes awarding marks in the process. Some students do not mention whether marks are given or not or whether questions are asked in a certain order or randomly.

The contributions to this category are relevant in the sense that they represent a link between old and new knowledge, which is supposed to facilitate meaningful learning. Of course, the simple fact of recording where the previous class left off does not in itself establish such a link from a cognitive point of view, so that we do not attribute to this group of descriptions a value other than a means of attracting students' attention or imposing the order necessary for teaching to begin. The most interesting group of contributions is that which describes how the teacher makes a résumé of the

previous class before beginning with anything new. Besides being the most numerous in this category, these descriptions give us to understand that this is normal practice in most cases.

In principle, the act of introducing this element at the beginning of the new content constitutes a decision taken from the *deep structure* of the conceptions that the teacher has of the learning process. This aspect of the practical knowledge is manifested in the *theoretical orientation* (Elbaz, 1983) that the teacher attempts to imprint on the beginning of the main body of the class. What these 269 descriptions show us is that a large number of teachers adopt this element, which we might name as cognitive *bridging* between old and as yet unlearned knowledge.

Indeed, we can mention a recapitulation element that may or may not be linked to the new content, but which is potentially suited to favouring meaningful learning and the construction of new knowledge, be it an internal reconstruction of the cognitive structure or the external reconstruction of the conceptual apparatus of the subject. This forms the eighth sub-category and may be termed “beginning the class by correcting work”, which was mentioned in 3.2% of cases. Most of these (59.6%) refer to correcting homework from the previous class and the rest (40.4%) mention other exercises whose aim is to check whether the work has been done: for example, looking at exercise books, marking down those students who do not bring the work to school, collecting exercises or commentaries.

Beginning by correcting homework is related with the revision mentioned above, although it has its own characteristics and distinct form. The exercises are activities that only partially treat the matter in hand and therefore do not have the all-embracing character of a full résumé. Neither do they necessarily have any connection with the new theme, although they will undoubtedly be used occasionally as a bridge to introduce it. Anyway, by definition, the correction of exercises has more in common with the conclusion or consolidation of ideas the teacher wishes to emphasise than an introductory character.

To begin a class regularly in this way implies a certain *theoretical* concept of learning, in which reinforcement is an important tool for consolidating basic knowledge before passing to new matters. This idea materialises in the teacher’s *practical orientation* by the application of a rule that consists of dedicating a certain amount of time to the correction of exercises, an activity that may include theoretical and practical aspects: the idea that reinforcement is an important element in acquiring knowledge and the possibility of the daily supervision of students’ work, which may arise from experience or respond to the teacher’s knowledge of the *medium* where control is seen as necessary.

The students’ adoption of the teacher’s functional paradigm will undoubtedly influence their learning. The possibility that they may be examined daily on their own theoretical or practical work (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1989) done without the direct supervision of the teacher will have a strong self-control effect on the students, in the sense that they will realise that they should study regularly.

More than a quarter of the commentaries mentioned the ninth sub-category “the presentation or beginning of a new topic”. This sub-category covers a significant dichotomy regarding the way in which new material is introduced: either the teacher begins with no preamble or does so with some type of introduction or presentation of the new content. In relation to the latter, some laconic observations do not reveal whether or not there was some type of preamble in the form of revision or brief introduction: expressions like “began to explain” or “took out some papers and began to talk”. In other words, if there was some type of introduction, it did not seem sufficiently

relevant to merit being considered as part of the beginning of the class.

Other descriptions point more clearly to the absence of preliminary actions on the teacher's part. In this case, the type of learning expected is receptive and, given the lack of any link with previous knowledge or any introduction, not favourable to meaningful learning or the construction of knowledge in any of its forms. This approach is associated with an executive focus (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 1998), whereby the aim of the teacher is that the student receives the knowledge provided, with special emphasis on the task itself, the fulfilment of duty and the results obtained. One of the characteristics of this approach is the way in which time is managed and the use of teaching competences, regardless of the subject.

A higher percentage of contributors mention teachers introducing a new topic, although with various nuances. In the first place, a few commentaries simply mention the teacher referring to a page or chapter of the textbook which they are about to begin, and which seems closely linked to the direct explanation approach mentioned above. Then comes a group of contributions in which it is not clear to what extent these actions are related with what they are about to start: for example, explanations of what the class will be about or an introduction.

Thus, although in some cases there seemed to be a direct connection with the new content, albeit summary, most contributors indicate that there was some sort of introduction or presentation. Lastly, a group of subjects mention different techniques used by the teacher to introduce new topics, such as making a schema of what is to follow, making a student read aloud about the topic, ask questions about what the students know on the matter or encourage students to propose hypotheses on the subject being introduced.

Most agree that the way a new topic is generally introduced is by a general introduction or short summary of the new content, often with the aid of schemas. The fact that a teacher anticipates the content shows attention to the formal structure of the discipline, that is, the intent to endow the introductory material with a *logical significance* in the context of the subject, so that the new content can be related with the corresponding knowledge, and to create a cognitive structure capable of including and relating the new content – *psychological significance*.

The contributions which mention that the teacher established a link between previous classes and what is about to be taught are of great importance. Both the résumé of what has been taught previously and the general introduction of the new material can be considered as “potentiators” of meaning and new learning, which will, in the long run, depend on the learner's previous knowledge and disposition and capacity to establish a non-arbitrary and substantive relation of new ideas with this structure (Moreira, 2000).

In summary, related with the category “initial phase”, three groups of actions can be distinguished: (a) *actions related with the teacher's entrance, settling down and preparation of media* (none of which necessarily involves the students); (b) *actions related with student contact, control and organisation* (taking the register, greetings, getting started, calling for silence and order.) and (c) *the beginning of activities or development* (recall of previous content, direct start, dictation or explanation, introduction of new content, asking questions on previous classes, correcting homework and connecting with following material).

2. Analysis of the category “Development phase”

In this section we look at the contributions that describe how the new content was delivered in the class. Of the total of 1523 students, 79.6% provided 2604 descriptions in this respect. Five actions or sub-categories were identified (Table 2).

	Number of descriptions	Number of cases
1. Explanation	1486	893
2. Dictate and copy	435	346
3. Reading the content	299	259
4. Class participation	130	120
5. Debates and oral presentation	87	78
Development phase. TOTAL	2437	1696

Table 2: Sub-categories of “development phase” category⁴.

Almost 60% of teachers mostly depended on “explanation”, although we can further subcategorise this by looking at a) whether explanation was the only activity mentioned in the time available; b) whether explanation forms part of other sequences: the teacher explains something but within a wider sequence involving questions, student participation; c) whether the textbook marks the way in which things are introduced; d) the importance that the teachers gives to understanding: for example, whether or not time is set aside to make sure that any explanations given in previous classes has been understood; e) the use of any teaching media to help in the explanation; f) the quality of the explanation, based on the positive or negative reactions of the students, such as whether the explanation seemed ordered, scientific, related with other content, repetitive.

The largest percentage (37.5%) mention explanation as the only method used by the teacher, although the terms used may imply a “the teacher tried to get everyone to understand, explaining things over and over if necessary”, or be more critical “the teacher would spend almost the whole hour explaining things, without changing tone or trying to stimulate us”, “she used to spend the whole class speaking to herself”, “it became a monologue” or “that was her only resource: words”, neutral view or even approval “the teacher used to stop to explain each point” or such criticisms being more numerous than neutral comments. More than 10% mentioned that explanation was supported by the textbook, with reading and explanation alternating, and underlying the points commented on.

The students sometimes emphasised the teacher’s concern that things had been understood, referring to questions asked during or after any explanation. The blackboard was frequently used to support explanations with schemes, although an overhead transparency, maps, photocopies, and, to a much lesser extent, slides and videos were also mentioned. Regarding the *quality* of the explanations, participants mentioned the order in which things were explained, the interest shown by the teacher, examples related with the world today, the accuracy in explaining new terms, the preparative work put into preparing for examinations, and, especially, as the most common practice, the use of schemas to summarise or present the content.

A quarter of students mention the second of our sub-categories “dictate and copy”. While in our study dictate refers to the teacher’s action in the classroom (“dictate” or “dictate and explain”), the term copy does not imply whether or not the

⁴ See comments on table 1

teacher tells the student to copy. Approximately half reply in the third person, as if it were a normal practice of the teacher, and the other half in the first person – copying what the teacher dictates and explains, with a greater or lesser degree of accuracy. Various shades of meaning can be gathered from the information given. Most refer to dictation in pejorative terms when it was considered the normal way of introducing something new, making comments such as “he spent the hour dictating”, “she dictated notes for a whole class” or, even more critically, “the teacher only dictated because he didn’t know how to explain the subject”. Other observations point to dictation alternating with explanation: from “the teacher hardly moved away from her notes” to, in clear reference to the alternating pattern of developing the subject, “the teacher dictated and explained” or “he dictated the most important things”. The term copy also appears in cases which refer to copying things off the blackboard, which, in most cases, was to give more information on a matter or to summarise it.

The activity “reading the content”, the third sub-category, is mentioned by 17% of students. This may refer to a) the teacher simply reading something or clarifying what the students have to do; b) the students reading with or without a clear indication as to what or how, simply that they read; c) the students reading something, with a clear time set before they are asked to explain what they have read.

The interviewees described how the most common teaching method involved reading the text book or notes interspersed, sometimes, by clarification of what had been read either by the teacher or a student. In most cases this way of proceeding is described in pejorative terms with expressions such as: “the teacher opened the book and read”, “the teacher read from the textbook and told us what to underline” or “her classes were simply reading the book”. In more than half of cases it was the students who took it in turns to read aloud, although occasionally reading was mentioned as a support of what had been explained. Sometimes, students read quietly and underlined the most important points, while the teacher did something else.

Only 8% of the 1523 students taking part mentioned our fourth category of “class participation”. Such participation was usually instigated by the teacher in the form of soliciting answers to questions, sometimes to initiate dialogue and sometimes to maintain attention. Some contributions mention the teacher’s attempts to make the class more participative and to encourage students to take part in how the class developed and to comment on their companions contributions.

Lastly, the fifth category “debates and oral presentation” was mentioned by 5% of contributors, underlining the scant participation of students in the history lesson. Half of those mentioning this category mention occasional debates when the teacher thought it fit and when the topic was thought suitable. On occasions, the starting point for a debate was an explanation made by a student or group of students on a given topic such as the European Union, or the biography of a historically important figure.

3. Analysis of the category defined as “final phase”

The results for this category can be seen in Table 3. First, when the class finished in the act of “explaining things”, we attempt to see whether a) the act of explaining is a general reference, indicating that there was no purposeful action to terminate the class, that is, no such phase existed; b) the content that the teacher intended to cover coincided with the length of the class; c) the “bell” marked the end of the class, cutting short the activity; d) the conclusion of the development phase took into consideration a series of social norms, rounding off, saying goodbye. Whether or not the

students showed interest in the following class is also evaluated in this phase.

	Number of descriptions	Number of cases
1. Explanation	384	338
2. Finding out what we had learnt or leaving a moment for questions	74	70
3. Resume and going over past or future topics	108	101
4. Reminding students of the need to study	58	58
5. Correcting activities	33	30
6. Setting homework	137	131
7. Call the register or ask about students' learning and absence	52	50
8. Teachers' farewells and formalities.	309	242
Final phase. TOTAL	1155	1020

Table 3: Sub-categories of “final phase” category⁵.

The mention that the teacher was “explaining things” at the end of the class includes reference to the rhythm with which the class was given and when the teacher finished his explanation. Most mention that the teacher used up as much time as possible and that sometimes they went over the allotted time. Expressions like “the teacher went on with his explanations up to the last moment”, or “she went on and on explaining things” showed how the teacher wanted to get the most out of the time. Other contributions mention the final rhythm of the class: “she began to explain more quickly” shows how the teacher was trying to fit in what had been planned for the session. Sometimes the general tone is reflected: “he finished in the same way as he started”. Half mention that things the lesson came to a sudden end when the bell rang, the teacher finishing where they found themselves at the time, or giving a rapid summary, or even on occasion continuing past the official time. Lastly, 37.8% of the contributions mention how the teacher took leave of the class, ranging from a neutral tone an attempt at humour: “that’s it for today”, “let’s see if you’re a bit quieter next time”, “boys and girls, everything I said was a lie”.

In second place respondents mention the class finishing with “finding out what we had learnt or leaving a moment for questions”, showing that a time had been left for such an activity, although not necessarily specifying whether anyone did ask; answers to direct questions would sometimes be awarded a mark and sometimes not. Some contributions in this sub-category (6.4%) mention that a time was set aside for this purpose. Of all the contributions that mention this matter, 70% confirm that the teacher purposely left time for questions and clarifications concerning the class. The others say that the teachers simply asked a few students at random in an attempt to see whether they understood the class.

The third sub-category is “going over past or mentioning future topics”. “Going over past topics” includes all the contributions, either on the teacher’s part or on the part of the students, that try to synthesise what has been done, while “mentioning future topics” refers to the teacher making students aware of what they will be doing in the next class, indicating the text they will be using and which the students should read. References do not abound in this sub-category either (9.3% of contributions), but those that do mention it make it clear that the teacher left time purposely to go over the main points; however, it is the teacher who is normally the protagonist, although occasionally the teacher asks a student to sum up or links the content with some sort of exercise to go

⁵ See comments on table 1

more deeply into the most important aspects. Sometimes the history teachers briefly described what they were going to do the next time.

The fourth sub-category - that the teacher finished the class “reminding students of the need to study” - differentiates between the teacher underlining the importance of studying and the mention of what needed to be studied. We also look at whether the students were advised to study because the teacher was going to test them the next day and whether or not this was really the case. Similarly, the students might decide to study if they think these may be a surprise test.

Few people mention this sub-category, but those that do say that this was normal behaviour on the teacher’s part: 65.5% associate being told to study and being reminded of the need to study the content of the lesson at home with the usual way of finishing the class. Although going over the content usually took place in the last few minutes, in most cases it was a simple reminder that individual study was necessary, including sometimes a recommendation of what they might read, the advice not to leave work until the last minute or mentioning the university entrance examination as a reason. More than a third of the recommendations (34.4%) mention that the teacher would ask them questions the next day, ask for some work or a summary or threaten a surprise test.

The fifth sub-category in this section is “correcting activities”: this considers whether the teacher finishes by correcting what the students have done in class, evaluating and giving marks to any answers or correcting exercises. This is only mentioned by 2.9% of participants, which means that although such activities may be frequent they are not left to the end of the class. Frequently, it just means that the teacher checks that the work set the previous day has been done or that the students have taken notes correctly.

The sixth sub-category is “setting homework”. There are two possibilities here: (a) the teacher may finish the class by telling students what activity they must do or what exercise from the textbook they must complete, perhaps related with what has just been the subject of the class or related with what they are going to do next class or (b) the teacher finishes by recommending texts from books, or articles, newspapers, maps, etc. In this way, setting homework seems to come under the heading of end-of-class activity. More than 16% of the contributions mention this as a typical ending to classes, most referring to exercise, activities or commentaries (usually a commentary on a text, deemed suitable practice for the university entrance examination), but also recommendations on what students should read on the subject treated or to be treated next time to familiarise them with the new material. Sometimes, such activities begin in class to be finished at home. On other occasions the class finishes with “call the register or ask about students’ learning and absence”. This reflects the teacher’s conscientiousness to formally ascertain who is there and who is not, the degree of concern if someone is not there and a possible warning intended for absentees. However, only 50 students mention this as an end-of-class activity.

Lastly, when we mention “teachers’ farewells and formalities”, we refer to various actions of the teacher at the end of the class: a) whether he/she remains in the classroom helping students with any questions about the class, in general or individually; b) whether the teacher picks up his/her things quickly or not, shows a desire to finish and why, whether anything is said by way of a farewell. c) whether the teacher goes before time, delays the end of the class, keeping students waiting.

In this sub-category, we listed examples that have got nothing to do with the class content or setting work for the class as a whole. Some mention that the teacher would wait behind at the end of class to clarify doubts or answer questions personally or simply to chat with some students. Most mention that the teacher usually picked up

his/her things and left, although many mention what the teacher said in the form of goodbye, the remarks made to some students, finishing on time or not, and even how the teacher left. Some students remark that the teacher would leave without saying anything.

In relation to the attitude of the teacher when leaving the class, most mention this in favourable terms, while some mention the “favourites” that the teacher would pay more attention to. Our participants positively evaluated any teacher leaving in a good mood or joking on the way out. Some mention that the teacher would allow them to relax and talk for a while at the end of class, chatting as he made his way out.

Conclusions

The present article analyses the testimony of 1,523 students, who provided 42,000 descriptive items on the characteristics of their history classes. All the students had studied the second year of the two-year, pre-university *Bachillerato* course in Murcia (Spain). The information collected during this study provides us with an insight into the opinion that students and ex-students have on the way in which their history teachers performed their teaching duties. It is clear that the teaching followed the traditional methodology concentrating on rote learning with very little or no student participation. As Merchán (2005) says, (at least), it’s cheap.

Most students consider history teachers as transmitters of information. The transmission of such information by dictation, explanation, the reading of texts or notes points to a particular approach to teaching whereby the teacher is considered by Fenstermacher and Soltis (1998) as the *executive*. This kind of teacher is concerned with performance (examinations), using time to the full and covering the syllabus. This conclusion, which we reach from the data provided, obeys an internal decision-making process on the part of the teacher, the exact process of which we cannot know for certain, although we can conjecture about intervening factors.

From a constructivist point of view, the decisions taken by the teacher in class reflect intervention strategies that, as far as is possible, guarantee his/her control of the situation and the effectiveness of their teaching. These strategies arise from *personal constructs* which are produced by experience. In this sense, the implicit knowledge that teachers acquire concerning the particularities and dynamic of each class may lead to “defensive” teaching strategies being adopted if the class is likely to be difficult to control (McNeil, 1986, Wilson, 2001). The almost exclusive dependence on explanation, dictation and reading seems to correspond to what McNeil (1986) termed *fragmentation*, which consists of treating topics as fragments or pieces of unconnected information, and permits the teacher to get through the work rapidly without having to elaborate on any possible connections. However, besides being “defensive”, this strategy may also reflect the need for students to sit the university entrance examination (*selectividad*), the Sword of Damocles that threatens teachers and students alike and which obliges the former to cover the whole syllabus in a short period of time. Our study looks at what happens in the classroom and cannot, therefore, measure exactly how these factors influence individual teachers, nor the extent to which they may combine with the idea that teachers have of the teaching-learning process, which may have much to do with the classes they received as students and pre-service teachers.

According to students, when direct explanation is not used, the alternative is reading the text book or copying notes. The main teaching resource used to explain, after the textbook, is the blackboard, with a small percentage of teachers writing

schemas on the blackboard to help in the explanations being given. Audiovisual and computer-based aids shine in their absence; even maps are hardly used.

Copying notes is a way of control. Dictating notes and the absence of group work in the history class is explained, according to our replies, by the need to maintain discipline. Keeping order and ensuring correct student behaviour takes up part of the teaching time (Bernstein, 2000; Merchán, 2002). Order comes before teaching.

Of note is the absence of conditions that favour the construction of significant knowledge in students' minds and any such construction will depend on the learning skills of the individual. However, there are some exceptions and it is interesting to see how debates and the students' oral presentation are mentioned occasionally. From a learning point of view, such elements are essential for the "located" or "dialectical" construction of knowledge. Communication between class members produces a type of social knowledge, whereby individual and group argumentation is essential for the collaborative construction of knowledge and values. Few contributions, too, mention any interest of teachers in student participation, although the active construction of knowledge, at group and individual level, is actively fostered in a participative situation.

There is a difference between our study and others carried out into history teaching during the last ten years (for example, Wilson, 2001), which mostly look into what makes for good history teaching, taking as reference subjects considered "good" teachers. However, we wished to reflect history teaching as it is, at least in the Autonomous Community of Murcia (Spain), as seen through the eyes of the ex-students themselves. If we take the above "good teaching studies" as reference, it can be seen that very few teachers in our Community are anywhere near the profile offered as *excellent*. This *excellent teacher* profile includes as the principal characteristics: the incorporation of stimulating questions, the need to argue in favour of a point of view, the confrontation of ideas and, most of all, the greater participation of students in class.

The methods and strategies used by the history teachers in our context are primarily expository, formal "lectures" being accompanied by dictation, reading the textbook, blackboard outlines and student questions. These are appropriate methods for transferring passive knowledge, covering the syllabus and maintaining order.

The ideal teaching sequence from a constructivist point of view and for fomenting significant learning would involve the student in the reconstruction of previous ideas and in the questioning of his/her own ideas to produce conceptual change. Our results show that this is far from being the case in our region. Neither do teachers vary their teaching approach or focus. History teaching is firmly set in the traditional rote teaching mould: *repetitio est magistra studiorum*. However, in the contributions of more recent students, it is possible to glimpse a tendency towards the introduction of a more student-centred approach which will, it is hoped, lead to more significant learning. There is still a long way to go before this can be considered the norm.

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