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Závěrečná práce

The choice of suitable thematic
areas for teaching English at
grammar schools according to the
preferences of the students
themselves

Výběr vhodných tematických
okruhů pro výuku angličtiny na
gymnáziu dle preferencí
samotných studentů

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Podpis:

Anotace

Závěrečná práce se zabývá výběrem vhodných tematických okruhů pro výuku angličtiny na gymnáziu dle preferencí samotných studentů. Pro výzkum jsou použity dotazníky ze tří českobudějovických gymnázií studentů 2. a 3. ročníků. Teoretická část je věnována výběru vhodných témat pro konverzaci v angličtině dle Rámcového vzdělávacího programu pro gymnázia a Společného evropského referenčního rámce pro jazyky. V praktické části jsou vyhodnoceny dotazníky. V závěru jsou porovnány skutečné potřeby a zájmy studentů s Rámcovým vzdělávacím programem pro gymnázia a Společným evropským referenčním rámcem pro jazyky.

Abstract

The final paper deals with the choice of suitable thematic areas for teaching English at the grammar school according to the preferences of the students themselves. For the research, questionnaires are used from 2nd and 3rd year students of three grammar schools in České Budějovice. The theoretical part is devoted to the choice of suitable topics for conversation in English according to the Framework Education Programme for Secondary General Education (Grammar Schools) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. In the practical part, the questionnaires are evaluated. In the conclusion, the actual needs and interests of students are compared with the Framework Education Programme for Secondary General Education and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

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Used abbreviations:

FEP SGE = Framework Education Programme for Secondary General Education (Grammar Schools)

CEFR = Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

1 Introduction

Every English teacher, either at elementary or secondary school, is faced with choosing the right topics for conversation for his or her learners. Perhaps it is even more challenging for demanding students at grammar schools to meet their needs and at the same time to fill them with some new knowledge.

There are curriculum documents – Framework Education Programme for General Secondary Education (for Grammar Schools) and Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – that regulate and propose different thematic areas and in a certain way also limit teachers by the choice. They are the basis for creating School Education Programme of each grammar school that the school and the teacher must follow.

Each teacher also knows that if you take advantages and motivate your students, they will achieve better results and their output will be at a higher level. We can do this if the teacher knows his or her learners and their interests and can achieve their common goals. So, what about the students themselves? What topics do they prefer in English lessons?

The aim of this work is to find out through questionnaires what level of interest grammar school students have in different conversational topics in English. Then the results are compared with the thematic areas recommended in those curriculum documents and are compromised with each other to make a final decision for curriculum. And after this all “you CAN have your cake and eat it” (see – Czech proverb: the wolf shall eat, and the goat shall remain whole).

2 Theoretical part

2.1 Contemporary situation in education

The first foreign language is compulsory from the 3rd class of elementary school in the Czech Republic. English is recommended and so it is also taught in most schools. At secondary schools, it goes to a deepening of communication skills acquired at elementary school. It builds on the level of language and communication skills corresponding to CEFR level A2 and aims to achieve level B2 according to the Education Framework Programme for Grammar Schools. Nowadays, emphasis is placed on raising the level of communication in English so that students can talk about common themes. Just choosing these conversation themes stays crucial for language teaching and learning.

The number of topics for conversation is infinite. They should correspond to the age, interests and needs of grammar school students and to the Framework Education Programme for Grammar Schools and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Moreover, every grammar school has the right to enrich its own School Education Programme according to its educational intentions and options. Then every English teacher creates his or her own curriculum for specific language group which is based on School Education Programme of the concrete grammar school. They will of course make their decision based on the assessment of learner communicative needs and motivations.

2.2 Framework Education Programme for Secondary General Education (Grammar Schools)

Framework Education Programme for Secondary General Education (Grammar Schools) itself contains six thematic areas for conversation in English.

public area – public institutions, public announcements, authorities, official letters, main political parties and bodies, public meetings, public services, passports, authorisation, performances, competitions

work area – state administration, companies, industry, agriculture, less common professions, instruments and equipment, events at work, employment contracts, business letters, advertising materials, manuals, job description, occupational safety

educational area – elementary, secondary and tertiary education in the Czech Republic and countries of the foreign language studied, scientific societies and clubs, professional institutions, vocations and degrees from educational institutions, student gatherings, classroom equipment, work in the classroom, debates and discussions, annotations, summaries

personal area – home when abroad, lie of the land, social relationships, close family or friends, colleagues, artistic subjects, household utensils, sports and recreational equipment, health, accidents, lifestyle, non-traditional holidays, non-traditional hobbies, recipes, novels, magazines

personality area – identity, methods of self-perception, philosophy of life

social area – nature, environment, ecology, global problems, science and technology, progress¹

Then there are certain requirements for receptive, productive and interactive language skills and their types. The curriculum includes also all the four sub-skills (orthography, grammar, phonetics and lexicology). Finally, the framework mentions “the facts of English-speaking countries” that are considered as important thematic areas for conversation. Students should be able to speak about politics, economy, society, culture, science, technology, literature, sport, art, traditions, education, family, and media and compare the Czech Republic with English-speaking countries. The last requires a degree of knowledge which puts these themes in the front positions in the intercultural communication.

¹ Framework Education Programme for General Secondary Education (Grammar Schools), p. 18

REALIA OF THE COUNTRIES OF THE LANGUAGE STUDIED

- *political and economic position in the world*
- *brief characteristics of the economy, society and culture*
- *relations with the Czech Republic*
- *literature, important works and authors*
- *science, technology, sport, art, significant personalities, works, achievements*
- *life and traditions, family, education, national pastimes and specialties*
- *language peculiarities and differences*
- *media and their impact on individuals and society*
- *current affairs and events of greater significance*
- *authentic materials – press, radio, film* ²

The Framework Education Programme for Grammar Schools offers a free choice of themes. However, it is also necessary to take account of the choice of topics in relation to key competencies. The aim becomes a meaningful conversation full of suggestions and questions.

2.3 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages distinguishes various topics for conversation which are classified in many ways. One possible classification may be in themes and sub-themes.

1. personal identification 2. house and home, environment 3. daily life 4. free time, entertainment 5. travel 6. relations with other people 7. health and body care 8. education 9. shopping 10. food and drink 11. services 12. places 13. language 14. weather

In each of these thematic areas, subcategories are established. For example, area 4, 'free time and entertainment', is subcategorised in the following way: 4.1 leisure 4.2 hobbies and interests 4.3 radio and TV

² FEP SGE, p. 18-19

4.4 cinema, theatre, concert, etc. 4.5 exhibitions, museums, etc. 4.6 intellectual and artistic pursuits 4.7 sports 4.8 press³

For each sub-theme, "specific terms" are also distinguished.

For instance, under 4.7. 'sports', Threshold Level 1990 specifies: 1. locations: field, ground, stadium 2. institutions and organisations: sport, team, club 3. persons: player 4. objects: cards, ball 5. events: race, game 6. actions: to watch, to play (+name of sport), to race, to win, to lose, to draw⁴

The CEF describes the term "themes" as "topics which are the subjects of discourse, conversation, reflection or composition, as the focus of attention in particular communicative acts".⁵

The teacher will consider and state which themes, sub-themes and specific notions (relating to locations, institutions, persons, objects, events and operations) the learner will need in order to deal with each of them.

3 Practical part

3.1 The aim of this work

Teachers can decide which topics would be suitable for their students. Sometimes they can let their students decide or make the choice along with them. This is also related to the fact that the teacher becomes a partner for advanced students. However, themes should reflect students' interests and needs. Finding favourite themes for conversation in English of the students of grammar schools in České Budějovice and comparing them with the ones recommended in the Framework Education Programme for Secondary General Education (Grammar Schools), the Common European

³ Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, p. 52

⁴ CEFR, p. 52

⁵ CEFR. p. 51-52

Framework of Reference for Languages, and possibly also with the School Education Programme of the grammar school is the main aim of this work.

3.2 Research questions

Will all the topics proposed by the students be included in FEP SGE? Possibly also in every School Education Programme of the grammar schools? Does FEP SGE cover all the thematic units that students would like to pay attention to? What themes will be suggested by students? What are the most wishful and important themes for students themselves? Will they be united by the choice of themes for conversation? What are the students of grammar schools interested in? What are the most popular themes for English conversation? Are there any specific wishes for some themes which cannot be fulfilled at all?

3.3 Research sample

As a sample, thirty students of the second and third year of higher secondary schools from three heterogeneous groups of grammar schools in České Budějovice are asked to come up with ten favourite themes for conversation in English according to their interests or needs and their current or future use. They should be numbered depending on how important they are for them - number 1 for the most important one and number 10 for the least important one. Of thirty respondents, sixteen are males and fourteen females. They are from 17 to 18 years old.

3.4 Method used

For the survey method, the questionnaires are used. The data obtained by the questionnaire is always conditional only and always requires a very prudent interpretation to distinguish objective findings from subjective judgments. On the other hand, the undisputed

advantage of the questionnaire is that it allows relatively rapid and economic data collection from a large number of respondents.⁶

Primarily, the most favourite conversational themes are set according to their popularity. This is done by appointing student-written topics, 10 points get the most important theme and 1 point gets the least important one. Secondary, the frequency of the most favourite themes is also evaluated. Finally, the results are applied, compared and commented on.

3.5 The research itself

3.5.1 The basis for the research

There is a variety of themes. Nevertheless, there are occasionally offered topics that are very like each other, there is only a very thin line between them and their content would match (for example "communication with friends" + "communication with other people", "dating agencies" + "dating and relationships", "free time" + "free time activities", "job" + "job interview" + "looking for jobs").

In some cases, the topic is given in two or more themes (for example "family" and "family, friends"; "films", "films and songs", "films/serials", "movie/music industry (BBC)", "movies (BBC)" and "music, movies"; "free time (hobbies)", "free time" and "free time activities"; "health", "health/and food" and "health and diseases"; "politics" and "politics/international relationships"; "dating and relationships" and "relationships"; "restaurant/shopping" and "shopping"; "film and songs" and "songs"; "sport; sex" and "sex"; "sport", "sport (fidget spinners)", "sport and tradition" and "sport; sex"; "hobbies and sports"). Putting such topics together is not the case for the accuracy of this research. Above that, the occurrence of this case is only singular or rarely double, so the results are not affected in any way.

⁶ Chrástka, Miroslav: *Metody pedagogického výzkumu*. Havlíčkův Brod: Grada, 2007. p. 164

3.5.2 Themes according to popularity

The topic "travelling" got number 1 (the most important) topic and so gained 10 points seven times of thirty questionnaires as the most wanted topic. As well as by adding all the points that the theme gets from the other positions of popularity, "travelling" becomes the most important theme for conversation. In a close-second, the students would prefer to discuss the theme "food". Both these topics receive more than a third the points they could have gotten. Next highly-rated topics are "animals", "hobbies", "sport", "history". Below stands a list of other topics sorted by the number of points achieved according to their popularity by the students. The maximum number of points that each topic could get would reach 300. This would have happened if the concrete theme appeared in the first places in all distributed questionnaires.

<u>Themes</u>	<u>POINTS</u>
Travelling	109
Food	104
Animals	49
Hobbies	44
Sport	44
History	41
Family	38
Free time	34
Friends	32
Technics	31
Sightseeing	29
Shopping	28
Work	26
Weather	25
School	23
Education	21
Job	21
Relationships	19
Introducing myself	19
Hotel booking	18
Job interview	18
Finance	17
Problems of the world/global problems	17

Works and/jobs	17
Accommodation	16
Diseases	16
Fun	16
Human body	16
Books	15
Films	15
Living	15
Music	15
Nature	15
Clothes	15
Home	14
Gadgets	14
Town/orientation	14
Environment	12
Music, movies	12
Games	11
Politics	11
News (world news)	11
Phone calls	11
Tourette ´s syndrome	11
Health and/ food	10
Basic survival	10
Family, friends	10
Fidget spinners	10
Formal letters, requests, legal documents	10
Health	10
Health/diseases	10
How to get a job (or study) in English speaking country	10
How to get a job in English speaking country	10
Superheroes	10
What I need	10
Communicating with people from other countries	9
Computers, mobiles and electronics	9
Determine the direction	9
Dialogue in a shop	9
Experiences and experiences of life	9
Movie/music industry (BBC)	9
Sport; sex	9
Taxi booking	9
Dating and relationships	8
Biology, animals	8
Career	8
Communication in medical facilities	8

Diseases (psoriasis)	8
Interests about a country	8
Looking for jobs	8
Newest inventions and discoveries	8
Singers	8
Transport	8
Actors	7
Booking, registration	7
Diseases, medicaments	7
Films/serials	7
Formal communication	7
Hobbies, sport	7
Movies (BBC)	7
Refugee crisis	7
Situation in Europe	7
Literature	6
Informal speaking	6
Science	6
Writing letters	6
Accent (America, Scots)	6
Apocalypse	6
Famous people	6
Films and songs	6
My country	6
Registration (paragraphs)	6
Traditions	6
Disasters	5
Arranging at the offices	5
Communication with friends	5
Education system	5
Endangered species	5
High society	5
Mysteries	5
Psoriasis	5
Small talks	5
Songs	5
Time	5
USA	5
Art	4
Balls	4
Demography	4
Doctor	4
Free time activities	4
Hotel, flight booking	4
Important phone numbers (police)	4
Communication	3

Biology	3
Body parts	3
Free time (hobbies)	3
Future job	3
History of English speaking countries	3
In the supermarket/restaurant	3
Languages	3
Restaurant/shopping	3
Sex	3
Sights	3
Culture	2
Accent differentiation USA x UK	2
Computer games	2
Dance	2
Dating agencies	2
Difference between British and American English	2
Feelings	2
Future	2
Chemistry	2
Important phone numbers in England	2
Mass communications	2
Navigation in the town/in nature	2
Communication with other people	1
In a hotel	1
Koalas	1
My future	1
OTHERS	1
Physics	1
Politics/international relationships	1
Singing	1
Sport (fidget spinners)	1
Sport and tradition	1
Traditions in England (behaviour, ...)	1
Vanda	1
What I want	1
World events	1
World 's sports	1

3.5.3 Themes according to frequency of occurrence

The second evaluation method confirmed roughly the same results. As it concerns frequency, the topic that emerged in 18 out of 30 questionnaires and 60 percent of all asked students stated it as

one of their ten favourite or important themes, is **"food"**. Second place is occupied by the topic **"travelling"** which appeared in total sixteen times in thirty questionnaires (53%). The thematic areas "food" and "travelling" came up in more than half of all grammar school students' questionnaires. The third place belongs to **"sport"** with 43% of representation by all questioned students. Almost one third of the students mentioned the topic **"history"**. Furthermore, here are many more themes such as **"animals"**, **"hobbies"** with percentage representation of 23% both. Regarding the frequency of representation of individual themes, 96 themes out of a total of 150 suggested topics are mentioned only once. They represent 32 percent of all occurrence. Below you can find a table with all the alphabetically-sorted topics and the number of occurrences in the sample of 30 questionnaires. The most frequently proposed topics are highlighted in bold.

Themes	Occurrence
(alphabetically)	
Accent (America, Scots)	1
Accent differentiation USA x UK	1
Accommodation	2
Actors	1
Animals	7
Apocalypse	1
Arranging at the offices	1
Art	1
Balls	1
Basic survival	1
Biology	1
Biology, animals	1
Body parts	1
Booking, registration	1
Books	3
Career	1
Clothes	2
Communicating with people from other countries	1
Communication	2
Communication in medical facilities	1

Communication with friends	1
Communication with other people	1
Computer games	1
Computers, mobiles and electronics	1
Culture	2
Dance	1
Dating agencies	1
Dating and relationships	2
Demography	1
Determine the direction	1
Dialogue in a shop	1
Difference between British and American English	1
Disasters	2
Diseases	2
Diseases (psoriasis)	1
Diseases, medicaments	1
Doctor	1
Education	4
Education system	1
Endangered species	1
Environment	4
Experiences and experiences of life	1
Family	4
Family, friends	1
Famous people	1
Feelings	1
Fidget spinners	1
Films	3
Films and songs	1
Films/serials	1
Finance	2
Food	18
Formal communication	1
Formal letters, requests, legal documents	1
Free time (hobbies)	1
Free time	5
Free time activities	1
Friends	5
Fun	2
Future	1
Future job	1
Gadgets	2
Games	3
Health	1

Health and/ food	2
Health/diseases	1
High society	1
History	9
History of English speaking countries	1
Hobbies	7
Hobbies, sport	1
Home	3
Hotel booking	2
Hotel, flight booking	1
How to get a job (or study) in English speaking country	1
How to get a job in English speaking country	1
Human body	2
Chemistry	1
Important phone numbers (police)	1
Important phone numbers in England	1
In a hotel	1
In the supermarket/restaurant	1
Informal speaking	2
Interests about a country	1
Introducing myself	2
Job	3
Job interview	2
Koalas	1
Languages	1
Literature	3
Living	3
Looking for jobs	1
Mass communications	1
Movie/music industry (BBC)	1
Movies (BBC)	2
Music	3
Music, movies	2
My country	1
My future	1
Mysteries	1
Nature	3
Navigation in the town/in nature	1
Newest inventions and discoveries	1
News (world news)	2
OTHERS	1
Phone calls	2
Physics	1
Politics	3

Politics/international relationships	1
Problems of the world/global problems	2
Psoriasis	1
Refugee crisis	1
Registration (paragraphs)	1
Relationships	4
Restaurant/shopping	1
Science	2
Sex	1
Shopping	5
School	4
Sights	1
Sightseeing	5
Singers	1
Singing	1
Situation in Europe	1
Small talks	1
Songs	1
Sport	13
Sport (fidget spinners)	1
Sport and tradition	1
Sport; sex	1
Superheroes	1
Taxi booking	1
Technics	4
Time	1
Tourette ´s syndrome	2
Town/orientation	2
Traditions	1
Traditions in England (behaviour, ...)	1
Transport	1
Travelling	16
USA	1
Vanda	1
Weather	3
What I need	1
What I want	1
Work	5
Works and/ jobs	2
World events	1
World ´s sports	1
Writing letters	2

3.5.4 Results

Although the topic "food" appeared more times, the topic "travelling" gains more points in popularity. The popularity places the topics in that order: 3. "animals", 4. "hobbies", 5. "sport", 6. "history" unlike the occurrence (in this order: 3. "sport", 4. "history", 5. "animals", 6. "hobbies").

One student stated the theme "communicating with people from other countries" which could be added to our most favourite theme "travelling". Moreover, "traveling" as a theme that has won with "food" over the other topics can be taken very widely. All communication-centred topics connected with travelling could be assigned here (e. g. "hotel booking", "hotel, flight booking", "in a hotel", "informal speaking", "interests about a country", "navigation in the town/in nature", "sightseeing", "sights", "town/orientation"). "Food" was once mentioned together with "diseases", "hobbies" with "sport", "sport" with "tradition" and "sex", "animals" with "biology". There is also the suggested theme "endangered species" which is very close to the theme "animals". The themes are mutually blended.

3.5.5 The most popular themes in curricular documents

Some of the themes that appeared in the questionnaires did not fully correspond to the curriculum and after objective evaluation they would not even be paid attention in English lesson. These are topics: "apocalypse", "basic survival", "diseases (psoriasis)", "psoriasis", "communication with medical facilities", "experiences and experience of life", "fidget spinners", "mysteries", "Tourette's syndrome", "Vanda", "what I need", "what I want". They are too professional or meaningless for the grammar school students.

In the Framework Education Programme for Grammar Schools in the personal area of thematic areas, although there is not the theme "food", there can be seen similarity in the topics of "recipes" or

"lifestyle" or "health". As concerns the topic "travelling" in FEP GSE, we can find some similar themes in three out of six thematic areas – public area: passports, personal area: home when abroad, there can be also found the theme "non-traditional holidays", social area – global problems. This topic can also be conceived as in the FEP SGE mentioned "realia of the countries of the language studied" whose subtopics would be crucial by travelling into English-speaking countries.

The students suggested theme "animals" can be conceived within the theme: nature – social area, the theme "hobbies" – non-traditional hobbies – personal area and the theme "sport" reflects itself in the personal area – sports and recreational equipment, health and lifestyle, and can be also related to the realia of English-speaking countries.

For the theme "history" – there is no adequate link to this topic in the thematic areas in FEP SGE. It can be discussed in the history of English-speaking countries ("realia – society, culture").

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages includes these topics (travel; food and drink) in examples for communication themes. The themes "animals", "history", "sport" and "hobbies" can be conceived within the thematic areas "free time, entertainment; health and body care; house and home, environment" as is the case in FEP SGE. CEFR also brings in "sub themes" and "specific terms" for individual themes which does not specifically mention except one thematic area (listed and quoted above).

In the School Education Programme of one of the grammar schools there is neither the topic "food" nor any other related topics e. g. in the restaurant, shopping, recipes. However, it can be again included in different thematic areas, the same case with "animals". "Sport" can be discussed along with "hobbies". Although "history" is

not listed in FEP SGE, the grammar school includes it in its themes as "information about history".

4 Conclusion

The aim of the work was fulfilled. In the sample of thirty questionnaires from three grammar schools in České Budějovice, students presented one hundred fifty different themes. This was the crucial and the most interesting part of this work. The questionnaires were evaluated in two ways, followed by the determination of the most popular and most frequently encountered topics in the questionnaires. Each of two most frequent ones "travelling" and "food" were mentioned by more than a half of the questioned students, so the students gave the impression of unity. The work shows two tables in which individual topics by students and their current popularity can be read. I believe that it can inspire English teachers at grammar schools to think about their own curriculum in case they want to consider learners' opinions.

Of course, not all the learner-suggested themes were included in Framework Education Programme for Secondary General Education (Grammar Schools) or even in Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. However, the most represented and most popular topics were taken into account in these documents or could be discussed as subtopics within certain thematic areas. Ninety-six out of one hundred fifty themes that students have proposed have only been mentioned by one person. A handful of them were totally unrealistic for grammar school education. Other topics are mixed up, and in each second topic you can find something of the first one and vice versa which will let you have a hand in choice.

If a teacher really wants to maintain a balance between prescriptive curricular documents and the interest of their students, it

is possible to follow the prescribed FEP and CEF and attract their learners at the same time. Both of the listed documents have a wide range of conversational areas and it is always imperative to meet your learners' interests and needs.

5 Resources

Chrátka, Miroslav: Metody pedagogického výzkumu. Havlíčkův Brod: Grada, 2007.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – Learning, Teaching, Assessment –

- https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

Framework Education Programme for General Secondary Education (Grammar Schools) - www.nuv.cz/file/161_1_1/

6 Appendix

- the questionnaire used:

Dotazník – oblíbená komunikační témata v AJ

Napište prosím 10 témat, která jsou pro Vás důležitá, nebo myslíte, že by pro Vás byla důležitá z hlediska zájmů a potřeb, současného nebo budoucího využití v komunikaci v angličtině. Poté je očísľujte od 1 do 10 podle Vašeho zájmu a důležitosti (1 = nejdůležitější, 10 = nejméně důležité).

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Gymnázium:

Třída:

Pohlaví:

Věk: