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The Phenomenon of Consumption and Integration of Consumption as a Subject Matter into English Language Classes

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Keywords:

Consumption,
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ABSTRACT

In content and language integrated English language teaching, raising learners' awareness of sociological and environmental issues is significant since such pedagogical actions provide learners with meaningful and purposeful content and cause them to both critically reflect on and communicate about their lives and actions and produce individual and/or collective outputs. Consumption is one of those issues learners should be exposed to as it assumes multivariate meanings in today's world which exceed mere satisfaction of needs and make us feel responsible for our actions. This article analyzes the phenomenon of consumption with regard to i) signs and symbols, ii) desires, iii) sense of self, and iv) the environment, and presents suggestions to integrate this multifarious notion into English language teaching. It is recommended that in English language classes, learners be made aware of the signs and symbols intertwined with the marketing of goods and services. It is also suggested that psychological and ecological impacts of excessive consumption be critically questioned and discussed in English language lessons.

Tüketim Olgusu ve Tüketimin bir Konu Olarak İngilizce Dili Sınıflarına Dahil Edilmesi

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Tüketim,
İngilizce dil öğretimi,
İçerik ve dilin entegre
edildiği öğrenim,
Eleştirel düşünme,
Proje tabanlı öğrenme,
İngilizce dil
öğretiminde ekolojik
öğretim ve öğrenim

ÖZ

İçerik ve dilin entegre edildiği İngilizce dili öğretiminde öğrencilerin sosyolojik ve çevresel konularda farkındalığının yükseltilmesi önem arz etmektedir zira bu türden pedagojik eylemler öğrencilere anlamlı ve amaçlı içerikler sunmakta ve onların hayatları ve eylemleri hakkında eleştirel düşüncelerini, iletişim kurmalarını ve bireysel ve/veya kolektif ürünler üretmelerini sağlamaktadır. Tüketim de öğrencilerin tabi olması gereken konulardan biridir çünkü tüketim günümüz dünyasında salt gereksinim giderilmesini aşan çoklu anlamlar üstlenmektedir ve bizi eylemlerimizle ilgili olarak sorumlu hissettirmektedir. Bu makale tüketim olgusunu i) işaretler ve semboller, ii) arzular, iii) benlik duygusu, iv) çevre açılarından analiz etmekte ve bu çok boyutlu kavramın İngilizce dil öğretimine entegre edilmesi ile ilgili tavsiyeler ortaya koymaktadır. Makalede İngilizce dil sınıflarında öğrencilerin mal ve hizmet pazarlamasıyla iç içe geçmiş işaret ve sembollerle ilgili farkındalığının artırılması önerilmiştir. Ayrıca aşırı tüketimin psikolojik ve ekolojik etkilerinin İngilizce derslerinde eleştirel biçimde sorgulanması ve tartışılması da tavsiye edilmiştir.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumption can mainly be defined as the process of selecting, purchasing, and using goods and services. This human-governed process is typical of all societies and all periods in history. When the theoretical aspect of consumption is taken into consideration, it is a fundamental concept in terms of economy. Economics is the study of how society decides what, how and for whom to produce. It is mainly determined by the operation of markets, which involves the households' decisions about the consumption of goods and services, firms' decisions about what and how to produce, and workers' decisions about how much and for whom to work (Polanyi, Thomasberger & Cangiani, 2018). Consumption which is in the core of economy involves not only producers but also consumers as key-players (Sharpe, 1995). Also, since all resources, both the human and the physical capital, are owned by individuals, people have a dual role as the producer and the consumer within the framework of economy. Thus, consumption -the final use of goods and services- is either a major determinant or the end purpose of all economic activities (Pepermans, 1984).

To understand what makes the consumer one of the chief role-players in economy, we can take a look at the demand aspect of the demand-supply mechanism, the mechanism between the quantity of goods and services buyers wish to purchase and sellers wish to sell at a conceivable price (Rowley, 1997). The demand, which incurs the relation between the price and the quantity, is affected by three factors, which are the prices of related goods and services, the incomes of the consumers, and consumer tastes or preferences (Begg, 1991). When income rises, the demand for most goods/services increases. Thus, in any economy governed by free choice, the totality of the personal consumption expenditures in any year is determined primarily by the amount of disposable income that people receive in that year. As for consumer's tastes and preferences, they also affect the level of demand and they are mainly shaped by customs and social attitudes. For example, globalisation has increased the demand for internet services and all kinds of digital devices.

Consumption can also be defined as one of the core values of capitalism. This is because if the products cannot be sold in return for money, there will be no profits, and after the capital, the subject-matter, is invested in industry, there must be a return on the investment and this can only be derived from the sales of goods and services (Jahan & Mahmud, 2022). Thus, consumption is the principal stepping-stone for generating profits within a capitalist context. The unavoidable rise of capitalism throughout the world during the last half of the twentieth century has paved the way for mass consumption as the consumption of goods and services has become available for more and more groups in western societies, in Japan, and in the Eastern Block. Moreover, the changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during the late 1980s formed a new point of view by which capitalism became legitimate in the eyes of people formerly living in communist societies (Bocock, 1993). Throughout time, globalization and capitalism have more and more emphasized the market and the economic interests over people's well-being and this has been continuously supported by the media perpetually transmitting messages encouraging a consumerist way of life (Martín-Sánchez, Casares-Ávila, & Cáceres-Muñoz, 2021). Now we are all surrounded with impacts that are likely to make us consume in great amounts and amid all these variables, consumption may assume multifaceted meanings. In the following sections consumption will be analyzed with respect to i) signs and symbols, ii) desires, iii) sense of self, and iv) the environment, which will be followed by suggestions to include this notion into English language learning and teaching.

Consumption in the Realm of Signs

Consumption is a symbolic action. As stated by Prónay and Hetesi (2016), consumption exceeds the function of problem solving with significant meanings attached to products and brands and these meanings act as symbols in the cultural ecosystem. According to Baudrillard (1997), in the consumption process, what is consumed is signs rather than material goods. Thus, consumption

becomes a play by which symbols are created and manipulated and this is a world of hyperreality. Baudrillard (1997) claims that in the earlier stages of capitalism, the items to be purchased had a use-value, i.e., the items were interpreted by means of their accurate connections with the functions they had such as eating, drinking, cleaning etc. But later, there appears to be a disconnection between the items purchased by consumers and their real meanings. The items to be purchased are sold by being encoded with imaginary signs which cannot be directly associated with their real function, which is meeting the consumer's needs. This forms a hyperreality, a realm of signs unrelated to the consumer's needs. The items may satisfy a need but this has become accidental. In the world of hyperreality, the sign is autonomous and the products are sold as symbols. Through advertisements, goods and services are marketed in such a way that referred meanings overextend their semantic and functional scope and direct the consumer's attention to an artificial world in which, by the power of images, false-consciousness is sustained (Kleine, Kleine & Kernan, 1993).

According to Belk (1988), the possessions central to self may be visualized in concentric layers around the core self, and will differ across individuals and cultures that create shared symbolic meanings for different goods. From a semiotic point of view, the consumption of symbols can also be elaborated by the notion of sign. In today's world, it is the sign that is consumed in the context of hyperreality. And, there is not always a direct equivalence between the signifier and the signified if the signifier is the consumed product and the signified is the need for such product. In other words, in contemporary consumption, the needs of the human are not necessarily the main drivers of consumption; there may be other drivers used to motivate consumers by using signs. What do these signs signify then? One answer to this question is desires (Bocock, 1993).

Consumption: A Desire-Oriented Process

Consumption within this context refers to an activity not necessarily need-based but rather based on the satisfaction of the desires, concluded with pleasure. When consumption is concerned, "desire" as a term may refer to the desire of consuming more and more, pushing the human into an eternal cycle of acts fulfilled for the sake of deriving pleasure (Wright & Sandlin, 2017). The distinction between the satisfaction of needs and obtaining pleasure may help us to understand the subject better. Needs can be satisfied through material objects while images, dreams and feelings can bring pleasure (Uusitalo, 1996). Therefore, consumers are in search of goods having the potentiality to fulfill their desires. The purchased good brings pleasure provided that the consumer's world of imagination is enriched by means of imaginative symbols which are called "dream symbols" by Baudrillard (1997). He associates these symbols with the desires of the human body floating in the unconscious. As the sensual aspect of desires is introduced, this may remind the reader of flamboyant every-day advertisements in which repressed desires of the human come into being. In those advertisements both men and women appear as attractive figures, trying to seduce one another, or making love. The desires aimed to be evoked within contemporary consumption are closely related with unconscious desires. The taboo or the forbidden in Bocock's (1993) terms are now the profitable tools of the producers.

However, satisfaction of desires comprises a dilemma between the real and the symbolic (Baudrillard, 1997). In other words, there are goods or services which promise to satisfy the desire for pleasure but since the said desire is "symbolic", it normally fails to satisfy the real needs of the human. Accordingly, contemporary consumption, as defined in this article, is mainly hedonistic and illusionary. It is defined to be hedonistic because today's consumption is a devotion to pleasure as a way of life and it is said to be illusionary because the signified is so dominantly emphasized that the consumer enters an imaginary state of association of the self with the "powerful, passionate, beautiful, rich, clever etc." while consuming. Through the use of signs, the unbearable attractiveness of the product triggers the consumer's instinctive desires and his/her perceptions focus on the image of the

item to be sold. This brings forward another aspect of contemporary consumption, which is the relation between the perception of the self and one's consumption patterns.

Consumption: An Indicator of the Sense of Self

What makes today's consumer distinct is that his/her sense of identity is formed on the basis of consumption practices and aspirations rather than work roles in production (Bocock, 1993; Wijetunga, 2015). This means that the construction of one's social identity is closely related to the quality and the quantity of the consumed as well as the consumptional attitudes whereas the ways of supplying the means for consumption have become less significant with regard to identity formation.

So, it is a fact that in the contemporary society, the consumption patterns reflect subjectivity (Wilska, 2002). Consumption is a medium to define and express the self. On the other hand, recent work in cultural consumption has introduced broader perspectives emphasizing that the meaning of the consumed objects is more than a reflection of our subjectivity. Consumption is involved in a dynamic interplay between the self and the material world in which identities, communities, and spaces may be defined and reproduced or fractured or subverted, through shared aesthetics, styles and meanings (e.g. Akdemir, 2018). Consumers possess some of the consumed objects so highly that they become a part of their selves (Belk, 1988).

Moreover, in the contemporary society, individuals are not involved with a single task but are partially interested in several subjects guided through various forms of media (Poplawska, Szumowska & Kuś, 2021). The interests of consumers are distracted by a wide range of alternatives. The consumer can follow different TV channels, listen to different kinds of music, buy different kinds of food and drinks etc. The distinctive characteristics of these consumed items are gathered within the framework of one's own identity forming a synthesis because consumptional patterns are various and are mingled on the same ground (Bauman, 1992, 1993; Poplawska, Szumowska & Kuś, 2021). Furthermore, the term post-modern implies that there is not only one right meaning which can be given to an event or a process (Takala, 1998). Therefore, the post-modern consumer's identity is constituted by various aspects, each of which is characterized with their own qualities and it is not necessary to be in search of 'the one and only right' in such form of identity analysis.

As the significance of consumption has extended the importance of work roles for the individual, this has caused changes in the social hierarchy marked by consumers' lives and consumption styles (Roach, Goodwin & Nelson, 2019). The rivalry for societal position is also driven by desires to consume and how resources for consumption are found often becomes a minor criterion in terms of the position of the individual within the society.

Also, in contemporary consumption, the purchasers are not forced by certain authorities to consume but rather their free will plays an important role during the decision process (Bălău, 2012). They are manipulated by images and challenges of identity formation, but they are also free to choose which signs or ideas to consume. The current era is also governed by strong egoism of consumers (Takala, 1998). This individualistic point of view yields to a serious problem, which is the rapid destruction of the environment, as elaborated below.

Consumption: A Threat to the Survival of the Environment

The upheaval in the consumer culture has intensified the excessiveness of consumption which threatens our planet's survival. Human-induced climate change causes dangerous and widespread disruption in the ecosystem impacting billions of lives around the globe. Despite the fact that egoism is strongly emphasized in contemporary culture, there are attempts for raising collective consciousness to prevent the short- and long-term harmful consequences of mass consumption. Many consumers have realized that they have a potential power to influence sustainable development (Maciejewski & Lesznik, 2022; McMichael, 1993). They establish organizations to execute campaigns,

carry out projects for encouraging consumers to consume less where possible, use more renewable sources and raise awareness of the environmental impacts of the consumed products. These organizations act as pressure groups for safer, fairer, and higher quality production and consumption. They make efforts in order to promote environmentally-friendly consumption, i.e., the consumption of products using a lesser amount of material and energy, or designed to be more durable, recyclable, and reusable or products which do not add to the depletion or destruction of Earth's resources (Sachdeva, Jordan & Mazar, 2015).

Sustainable consumption refers to the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials, and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle (Jackson, 2014). We should ensure sustainable consumption so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations and consumers should take appropriate steps for this purpose like consuming less, utilizing ecofriendly goods and services, and recycling. However, one should also know that dealing with environmental issues involves everyone, governments, the private sector, and the civil society, working together for risk reduction and equity and justice in decision making and investment (Roberts, 2022). There is a need to synthesize scientific and technological know-how and local knowledge and experience to achieve the goal of climate resilient and sustainable development.

Suggestions to Integrate Consumption as a Subject Matter into English Language Teaching

In English language teaching, integrating sociological and environmental issues into the curriculum is essential since they would provide learners with lessons which have meaningful and purposeful contents and cause them to critically reflect on and communicate about the sustainability of the environment as well as their relevant decisions and actions. Consumption is one of the contents that should be incorporated into English language lessons as it has multifarious meanings in the contemporary world which exceed the mere satisfaction of needs and make us feel responsible for our actions. When too much attention is given to buying and owning things, the situation may have adverse effects on nature, the society, and the psychology of human beings. Learners should be made aware of these influences and they must critically question the meaning of consumption in their lives and in what way it serves them. This form of critical reflection could best be done through the harmonious integration of four skills, via reading, listening, speaking, and writing within a thematically arranged content and language integrated learning program. Such form of learning refers to incorporating learning of language with learning of content simultaneously so the language is utilized as the medium for teaching of the subject matter (Thompson, G. & McKinley, 2018). Based on the needs and interests of the students, the content material may well be produced and taught in a meaning-focused, critical, and communicative way. In such programs learning could also be strengthened through feasible in-class tasks as well as projects, a series of purposeful tasks extending beyond the classroom to achieve meaningful outcomes (Gras-Velázquez, 2020).

In the contemporary world, consumption may highly influence what makes up an individual and how the world is viewed. Learners should be made to question this, the fact that the real power is in themselves, not the material world. Through lectures, readings, videos, communications with people from real life and reflective interactions, they should be made aware that materials they consume can only be a means to realize their actual selves, they are not the ends. Besides, via writing and speaking, they should be invited to be selective and rational in their consumption patterns. In doing so, they should discover who they are and construct their own paths in becoming a free and emancipated individual appreciated on the quality of their behaviors and actions rather than the quantity and prices of their possessions.

Learners should be made aware of the signs and symbols intertwined with the capitalistic marketing of goods and services. They should be provided with activities questioning advertisements

and societal meanings of consuming certain products and services. They should be made cognizant of the fact that through signs and symbols, products and services can be marketed in a way as if they would straightforwardly give the consumer positive feelings. It is necessary to make learners aware of the verbal and non-verbal messages conveyed by advertisements. For this purpose, they should be asked to make semiotic analyses of advertisements surrounding themselves. They should also be provided with reading and listening texts about the illusionary world of advertisements. They can also be invited to make observations of the consumption habits of themselves and people in their environment and to what extent they are influenced by the advertisements. They should be given assignments and/or projects that make them question if they really need the items they purchase and why. Learners should know that materials may give one comfort and happiness as there is possibly a relationship between psychological well-being and material wealth; however, when one owns a certain level of wealth, possessing more resources does not increase happiness, indeed buying more and more materials would bring about ever increasing psychological and environmental costs. Education must clearly emphasize this.

English language classrooms should also become ecofriendly settings. Learners should be asked to question consumerism in their own lives and at their schools. They should be encouraged to rationally use their time and money and reduce their carbon footprint on nature. They should be taught that with every action that releases carbons, they increase the burning of fossil fuels, which destructively harms nature. They should be made aware of the measures that they can personally or collectively take like using more environment-friendly products, meeting needs in more eco-friendly ways (e.g., walking, using a bicycle or public transport instead of driving a car), reducing consumption, either voluntarily or through regulations, and recycling.

Attention should also be given to engaging in collective action to raise awareness in community. For instance, learners can fulfil language and content integrated projects aiming to protect the environment and calling others for action. For this purpose, they can be asked to read, watch, listen and write about the subject of climate change as well as the activists' relevant actions and develop their own ways of calling people for action. This can be done through tasks and projects including production of pertinent individual and collective outputs like posters, talks, essays, literary works, videos, and movies emphasizing the vitality of the issue. Applying content and language integrated as well as project-based learning highlighting critical reflection, all stakeholders in English language settings should focus on how to make the earth a better place to live.

CONCLUSION

Consumption is a dense concept with economy-related, sociocultural, and ecological dimensions. Rapid growth of technology and the rise of capitalism have affected the status of consumption tremendously. Products are marketed to consumers by being encoded with attractive symbols driving target people to an illusionary zone where the dominance of the signs and ideas arouses the desires of the human, conscious and/or unconscious. In contemporary culture, consumption has also become a major determinant of the perception of identity. The sociocultural identity of the individual is highly based on consumption patterns. Also, excessive consumption in contemporary life threatens the environment. Despite ego-centric consumers on one side, there are collective attempts to raise awareness of the adverse effects of consumerism on nature, on the other side.

Consumption should also be included in the curricula of English language programs since it is a crucial subject that requires critical questioning. While learning and improving their English, learners should be exposed to meaningful and purposeful content that makes them question their consumer identities, their stance on the earth as a being and their responsibilities for their environment. Consumption, as a subject matter, fits into this scope well since it is a multidimensional

phenomenon with personal, social, and environmental consequences. The context of such lessons should be content and language based and learners should be encouraged to improve their four skills, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, focusing on this topic via critical reflection. Consequently, the ways the products and services are marketed, the meanings attached to them, the illusionary identities of the individuals shaped by their consumption patterns and the psychological and ecological threats that excessive consumption poses to all of us should all be critically questioned and discussed in English language lessons. Learners should also be encouraged to make projects calling others for action. It is a fact that education for responsible consumption necessitates commitment and effort. English language teaching and learning is no exception. All the stakeholders in English language teaching should do their best to raise awareness of the meanings of contemporary consumption and how it substantially impacts our sustainability and future.

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