

Third Misconceptions Seminar Proceedings (1993)

Paper Title: Changing Student's Conceptions about Non-conservation of Volume in Solutions

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Keywords: Educational Methods, Concept Formation, Testing, Change Strategies, Classroom Techniques, Learning Activities, Cognitive Dissonance, Tests, Pretests Posttests

General School Subject: Chemistry

Specific School Subject: Physical Chemistry

Students: Secondary School

Macintosh File Name: Lorenzo-Barral - Volume

Release Date: 12-16-1993 C, 11-6-1994 I

Publisher: Misconceptions Trust

Publisher Location: Ithaca, NY

Volume Name: The Proceedings of the Third International Seminar on Misconceptions and Educational Strategies in Science and Mathematics

Publication Year: 1993

Conference Date: August 1-4, 1993

Contact Information (correct as of 12-23-2010):

Web: www.mlrg.org

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A Correct Reference Format: Author, Paper Title in The Proceedings of the Third International Seminar on Misconceptions and Educational Strategies in Science and Mathematics, Misconceptions Trust: Ithaca, NY (1993).

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CHANGING STUDENT'S CONCEPTIONS ABOUT NON-CONSERVATION OF VOLUME IN SOLUTIONS

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Pupils' assimilation of certain scientific notions is greatly influenced by their pre-existing ideas. In this study we examined pupils' ideas on the non-conservation of volume during the mixing of liquids. More than two thirds of the subjects retained the misconception that the volume of the mixture is the sum of the volumes of the solute and solvent liquids. However, a conceptual change was performed (and maintained in subsequent years) by students to whom a cognitive conflict strategy was applied using a Predict-Observe-Explain method.

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that pupils' assimilation of certain scientific notions is greatly influenced by their pre-existing ideas, which in some cases can seriously obstruct the learning of science. Many authors have stressed that in designing course material on certain topics it is important to take pupils' conceptions into account. Research in this area has aided understanding of the difficulties involved in learning science, and shown the need for changes in science teaching (Gil-Pérez and Carrascosa 1990).

Pupils' ideas about solutions

A number of studies have brought out the variety of alternative conceptions about solutions that are held by pupils of various ages. These studies have concerned the nature of solutions (Cosgrove and Osborne, 1981; Nusirjan and Fensham, 1987; Prieto Ruz, Blanco López and Rodríguez García, 1989a), conservation of mass during the process of dissolution (Andersson, 1984; Fernández, Trigueros and Gordo, 1988) and the microscopic interpretation of dissolution (Holding, 1987; Prieto, Blanco and Rodríguez, 1989b; Longden, Black and Solomon, 1991). Another aspect of dissolution that it is pertinent to consider is the relationship between the

volumes of solute, solvent and solution (Figure 1); the non-additivity of the volumes of solute and solvent is not only an important theoretical feature of the dissolution process, but also has practical consequences for the preparation of solutions in the laboratory, this non-additivity being, in part, what makes it necessary for such solutions to be prepared first with a deficit of solvent and then made up to the appropriate volume.

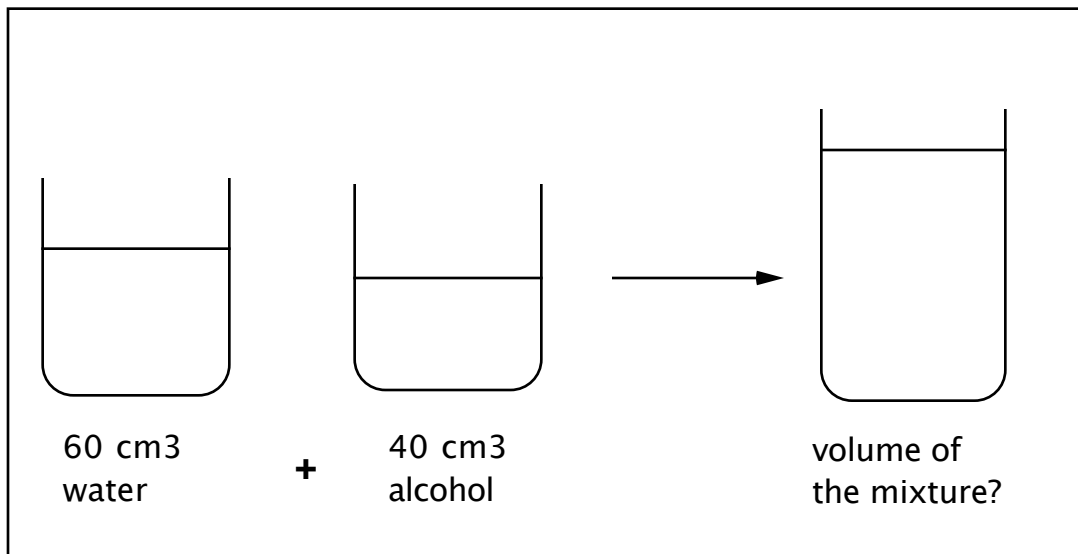


Figure 1.- What is the volume of the mixture?

In this work we studied secondary pupils' notions concerning the conservation of volume during the mixing of two liquids which in fact have a negative excess molar volume (water and ethyl alcohol), and whether misconceptions were successfully corrected by a teaching strategy including cognitive conflict activities.

METHOD

The study involved three phases: a) a cross-sectional study of the conceptions of pupils belonging to four age groups; b) classroom intervention; and c) a longitudinal post-intervention study.

a)The cross-agegroup study

It is important to stress that at no time during the subjects' secondary education did any of their standard textbooks explicitly mention the non-additivity of solute and solvent volumes, though instructions on how to prepare solutions of known molarity implicitly assume awareness of non-additivity. The cross-agegroup study therefore evaluated changes in understanding that had taken place as the result of the pupils' increasing cognitive maturity or the success of unwritten teaching. This study was carried out during the academic year 1991-92 with members of the four agegroups listed in Table 1.

Table1.- Pupils taking part in the cross-agegroup study.

COURSE	AGE (y)	N. OF PUPILS
Primary 7	12-13	25
Middle 2	15-16	10
		3
Middle 3	16-17	50
Upper	17-18	84

b) Classroom intervention

Classroom intervention specifically designed to make pupils aware of the non-additivity of solute and solvent volumes, and of other aspects of solutions, was carried out in the academic year 1990-91 with a group of 15-16-year-olds. This intervention consisted in activities organized and supervised in the normal classroom situation by the pupils' usual science teacher (one of us, J.M.R.). The activities implemented a Prediction-Observation-Explanation strategy (Champagne, Klopfer and Anderson, 1980) designed to create a cognitive conflict in pupils' minds by bringing out the discrepancy that in most cases existed between their predictions and experimental observations

(Figure 1). Such conflict is equivalent to the dissatisfaction with one's own ideas that Posner *et al.* (1982) postulate as a precondition of conceptual change.

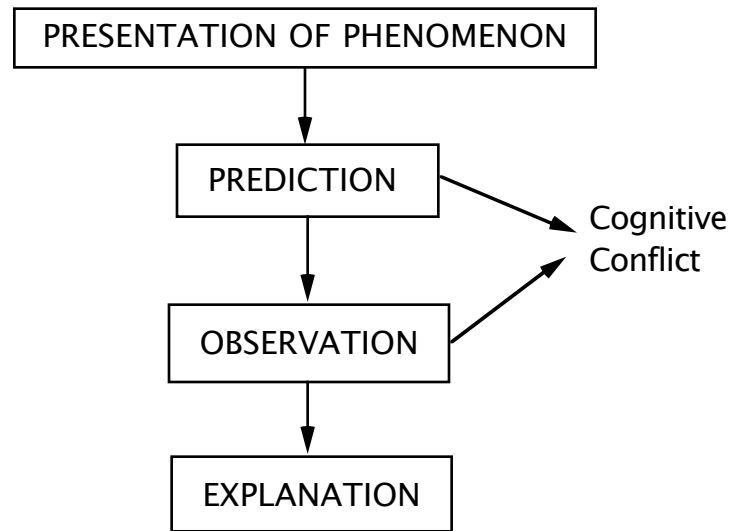


Figure 2.- The order of events during intervention

The specific task the pupils were set (Figure 2) was to predict the volume of a mixture of 60 cm^3 of water and 40 cm^3 of ethyl alcohol; to perform the experiment and note the volume of the mixture; and to explain in writing why the observed volume was less than 100 cm^3 .

c) The longitudinal study

The pupils subjected to the intervention described above were followed up 10-15 days later and during the following two years to determine changes in their understanding of volumetric non-additivity during the mixing of liquids. The number of pupils examined each year is listed in Table 2; drop-outs were due both to school leavers and to many pupils changing school (several new schools have been built in our community in recent years).

Table 2.- Pupils taking part in the longitudinal study.

YEAR	COURSE	N.OF PUPILS
1990-91	Middle 2	76
1991-92	Middle 3	42
1992-93	Upper	24

Data collection

The pupils' predictions of the volume of the mixture were solicited with the following multiple choice question, one of six on a broader test paper administered after completion of a learning unit on solutions:

When 40 cm³ of alcohol are mixed with 60 cm³ of water, what is the volume of the mixture?

- A. More than 100 cm³*
- B. 100 cm³*
- C. Less than 100 cm³*
- D. Don't know*

The four choices thus comprised the correct answer, a "don't know" option to minimize random replies, and two distractors.

During the intervention phase, pupils' explanations of their observations were collected in writing.

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

a) The cross-agegroup study

Table 3 lists the percentage of each agegroup choosing each possible answer to the multiple choice question.

Table 3.- Percentage of each agegroup giving each possible answer to a multiple choice question on conservation of volume during the mixing of two liquids.

Answer	12-13 y	15-16 y	16-17 y	17-18 y
More than 100	4	3	4	2
100 cm ³	60	78	64	68
Less than 100	24	18	32	26
Don't know	12	1	0	4

Most replies show that pupils retained a misconceived idea of the additivity of the volumes of the components of a mixture. About two-thirds of the pupils predicted strict additivity, and this proportion was unaltered by five years' standard teaching. We believe that, as with other misconceptions, this one has its origin largely in the persuasiveness of appearances (Driver, 1989). Pupils believe that volumes are additive because they see the mixing operation as analogous to the addition of two volumes of water (which *is* additive, of course). Thus the origin of this incorrect belief in the additivity of volumes is similar to that of the incorrect belief in the nonadditivity of mass during solution (Stavy, 1990), (pupils tend to believe that sugar or salt dissolved in water contribute nothing to the weight of the solution - or contribute less than their undissolved weight - because they are seen to disappear upon solution).

b) Intervention

The experimental group's explanations of their experimental observation (that the mixture of alcohol and water occupied a smaller volume than the separate components) were classified in seven categories (Table 4). Most pupils resorted to macroscopic explanations, most of which simply restated the experimental observation or some aspect of the experimental situation ("upon dissolving", "because it contracts"). Only 16% of the pupils attempted a microscopic interpretation in terms of the behaviour of the particles constituting the mixture.

Table 4.- Percentage of pupils offering various kinds of explanation for the observed volumetric nonadditivity of alcohol and water.

Category	Percentage
1. The particles move or join together	16
2. The liquids have different densities	20
3. Because of evaporation	7
4. Because of losses on mixing	13
5. Upon dissolving	12
6. Because it contracts	12
7. No answer	20

c) The longitudinal study

Table 5 lists the results of the experimental group at each follow-up time. Most of these pupils successfully assimilated the volumetric nonadditivity of liquid mixtures, and retained this knowledge during subsequent years. Thus the persistence of the belief in additivity that emerged in the cross-agegroup study was not due to the intrinsic intractability of this notion, but simply to this aspect of mixtures having been ignored in standard textbooks.

Table 5.- Percentage of pupils giving each possible answer to a multiple choice question on conservation of volume during the mixing of two liquids, after doing the experiment and during follow-up.

Answer	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93
More than 100 cm	6	0	4
100 cm ³	24	33	29
Less than 100 cm	70	67	67
Don't know	0	0	0

Discussion

The chief lesson to be learned from this work is that the assimilation of certain scientific topics is facilitated if teachers and syllabus designers are

aware of pupils' difficulties and include, in their classroom teaching or syllabuses, activities specifically aimed at overcoming these difficulties. In the case of the topic on which this work centred, our results clearly imply that volumetric nonadditivity should be explicitly dealt with during class activities on solutions. Since the predominant misconception (additivity) seems to have a largely perceptual origin (the volume of the mixture appears to be the sum of the volumes of the original components), it would be desirable for such activities to involve mixtures that are rather spectacularly nonadditive, such as sulphuric acid and water (though in this particular case the activity would for safety reasons have to be a demonstration by the teacher). Only in this way does it seem likely that certain scientific topics will be successfully learnt by a substantial percentage of pupils.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Xunta de Galicia under grant XUGA 22701B91.

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