THE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN ARGENTINA AS REFLECTED IN LOCALLY-PRODUCED TEXTBOOKS
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ABSTRACT

Textbooks for foreign language teaching reflect a certain methodological approach shown in features that are characteristic of the different trends in language teaching. Authors base the design of textbooks on the findings of linguistics and learning theories as well as on pedagogic principles. In addition, there are a number of socio-political factors that have an impact on the design of materials to be implemented in a certain context. This paper will present the findings of a research in progress on textbooks produced in Argentina.

Context of the study

It is through textbooks that teaching comes to life in the classroom. Textbooks for the teaching of foreign languages reflect a certain methodological approach shown in certain features that are characteristic of the different trends in foreign language teaching. Authors base the design of textbooks on the findings of linguistics and foreign language learning theories as well as on pedagogic principles.

In addition, there are a number of socio-political factors that have an impact on the design of materials to be implemented in a certain context, in this particular case, the teaching of foreign languages in Argentina. What relevance does the foreign language have in the community where it is taught? What pedagogic traditions prevail? What are the predominant
educational ideals in the socio-cultural context? What roles do teachers and students play in the teaching/learning process? What influence does the market exert over the choice of materials? (Neuner/Hunfeld, 1993).

Since the moment when foreign language teaching was included in the school curriculum in Argentina, many textbooks and teaching materials have been produced locally. However, except for those mentioned by Raufet (1963) in his research on the “Teaching of English in Argentina”, they have not been documented elsewhere. On the other hand, the only analysis of textbooks for the teaching of foreign languages in Argentina is the “Estudio sobre libros de texto para enseñanza de idiomas extranjeros” prepared by the Teaching Supervisor Juan A. Madueño in 1947. In this report, the author makes reference to the contents of the official curriculum for secondary schools covered by the textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education.

It is therefore necessary to update the inventory of texts produced locally and to subject these books to a critical analysis. This will reveal the linguistic schools and learning theories that support them as well as those characteristics that make the textbooks different from those produced for the international market. At present, a new interest on the part of foreign publishers can be perceived in publishing differentiated local versions of textbooks produced abroad, involving in this production local teams of authors. This is the case of “New Let’s Go for EGB” (Rose/Elsworth, 2000), which in its original version is called “Go for English”. The version for our country includes the acronym EGB that stands for “Educación General Básica”. In the case of French, there is for instance a special version for Spain of the book “Le Nouvel Espaces” (Capelle, Gidon, Molinié, 1997). For the teaching of German, the authors of the series “sowieso” (Funk et al., 1994) have asked a team of authors in Spain and Latin America to adapt the workbook to the regional context. Within the framework of applied linguistics,

Through the analysis of the textbooks produced for the local market, it is possible to examine the development of the teaching of foreign languages in the country and to evaluate the influence of the methodological trends in the design of such materials. Even though methodologies for the teaching of foreign languages in general terms follow the principles commonly held in countries where the languages are spoken as mother tongues, -mainly European countries and the United States-, they tend to adopt special characteristics, which, in turn, have an impact on the teaching and learning process in our country. It is, then, necessary to investigate what special characteristics these textbooks have that differentiate them from those produced for the international market and to evaluate to what extent they may assure a more effective teaching/learning process than that proposed by the international editions.

In contrast to other countries (e.g. the Georg-Eckert-Institut fur Schulbuchforschung – Instituto Georg Eckert de Investigación en Textos Escolares- and the journal “Internationale Schulbuchforschung” published in Germany), in Argentina the analysis of teaching textbooks –not only of those for the teaching of foreign languages- is not a relevant focus of investigation, which is evident in the scarce and outdated publications on the topic as mentioned above. However, the study and analysis of textbooks is one of the essential and most direct ways of evaluating the quality and contents of teaching and at the same time of enhancing curricular development.
Objectives

The present research project aims at achieving the following objectives:

Goal:

To describe the characteristics of the teaching of English, French, Italian and German as foreign languages in Argentina over time as reflected in locally produced textbooks.

Objectives:

- To survey the textbooks for the teaching of English, French, Italian and German published in Argentina from around 1870 to the present.
- To classify them according to the method or approach they follow.
- To analyse their linguistic, psycholinguistic and pedagogic underpinnings
- To identify the elements that characterise the texts produced in our country comparing and contrasting them to those published for the international market.

Methodology

The corpus for this research is made up by locally produced textbooks for the teaching of English, French, German and Italian. As there is as yet no bibliography, the first stage of this project consists in the compilation of a bibliography that includes the above mentioned textbooks. For this purpose, a library search has to be conducted. This is in itself a difficult task, since bibliographical resources in Argentina are scarce and there is no library specialised in schoolbooks. We can anticipate that the Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros and the Biblioteca Nacional, as well as the Centro de Información y
Documentación Educativa will be the main locations for the search. The libraries of traditional schools, notably those of the Colegio Nacional de Monserrat and the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires, will also be consulted.

The second stage of the project consists in the comparison of a nationally produced textbook with one produced in either Britain or the USA around the same time, for the same proficiency level and for a comparable group of learners. The analysis will be carried out according to a set of pre-established criteria and the benchmark for the establishment of merit in the points of analysis will be centred on the suitability of the textbook for its use in our teaching/learning context.

The study will be a descriptive-comparative one and will look into the linguistic and learning theories that back up the textbooks as well as into sociocultural and institutional factors such as the prevailing teaching and learning traditions at the time of publication of the textbooks analysed and the degree to which these conform to the requirements of the official curriculum.

The study is also heuristic in nature, since even if we are going to conduct an analysis based on pre-established criteria, we think that the analysis may provide us with additional information not considered beforehand and that may be used in future studies.

**Importance and impact of the project**

Despite the predominantly descriptive nature of the study, we will be considering the hypothesis that locally produced textbooks are more suitable for use in our country since these adapt themselves better to the special characteristics of the Argentine teaching and learning context. Authors of locally produced textbooks are, through their experience, familiar with the
characteristics of Argentine students as well as with the settings in which English is learnt and taught. A drawback is the author's lack of the necessary know how for the elaboration of teaching materials. This is currently being addressed by British publishers who hire Argentine writers to produce textbooks for the local market and provide them with extensive editorial support: "Local coursebooks are usually written either by or together with local authors who know the requirements and problems from the inside" (Freebairn 2000: 5).

An implication of the study is its potential to raise the awareness of the publishing industry as to the convenience of producing textbooks locally, since these tend to address the specific needs of the market in a more effective way. A further possible impact of this project has to do with the criteria to be borne in mind for the production of textbooks for the local market.

References


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