

Using Children's Books in the college Spanish Class

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BACKGROUND

Since foreign/second language (L2) teaching took a turn towards a more communicative approach, reading and writing have been given less priority than speaking and listening. In the area of reading, problems arise both from the instructor's methodology and the quality of readings found in textbooks. Some of these problems include: poor quality of reading passages, scarcity of pre-reading and post-reading activities, lack of higher-level reading comprehension questions, lack of activities that promote communication or critical thinking, lack of reading in the classroom, using texts for grammar or pronunciation purposes, lack of interesting texts, and so on. If research has found that word-per-word decoding is ineffective for meaningful reading (Dupuy, Tse & Cook, 1996) and that texts are either incomprehensible or not interesting to college students (Cho & Krashen, 1994), these areas should be investigated to see if a different methodology and type of texts could be more adequate for L2 learning.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In order to address the problems found in the area of L2 reading, a teacher-researcher developed a curriculum based on non-traditional reading materials –children's literature— and an innovative approach to reading with the hope of improving the experience of learning Spanish as a foreign language in a first-year college class. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to describe how this project was implemented and how students reacted to the project.

THE PROJECT

The project consisted of creating a curriculum in which reading was a major component and was used as the basis of cultural and linguistic learning. For reading materials, children's books were chosen, and for the approach, a combination of pedagogical practices coming from different philosophies was utilized. Next, I will explain these two important elements.

Innovative approach

By changing the approach to reading, I –the teacher-researcher— wanted to expand the possibilities of instruction as well as to explore philosophies of learning that have been put forward some time ago but have not found their place in practice yet. Under this approach, I proposed to provide meaningful materials, introduce motivating activities, reduce students' anxiety by providing comprehensible texts, clarify mistaken assumptions about reading, provide strategies instruction, use students' background knowledge as basis, and encourage collaboration and independence –as suggested by literature on literacy and pleasure reading (Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri, 2002).

The characteristics of this approach are not usually found in traditional college L2 classes, even though the principles on which these characteristics are based have been posited since the 1960s, such as Information Processing Theory, Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Piaget's Developmental Theory, among others. These principles share characteristics with what Freeman, Freeman and Mercuri (2002) and Peregoy and Boyle (2001) call 'thematic instruction,' that is, when the context is arranged around themes, when there is meaning and purpose, building on prior knowledge, integrated instruction, scaffolding, collaboration, and variety. The characteristics of this approach are the following:

- 1- Use top-down and bottom-up information-processing modes, in that order. With a top-down processing, I encourage general predictions based on higher level, general schemata, as suggested by Carrell (1984). With bottom-up processing, they focus on learning grammar and vocabulary in context.
- 2- Activate students' cultural and linguistic background knowledge. Schema theory defends that new knowledge must be connected to previous knowledge in order to be meaningfully acquired (Carrell, 1984). Therefore, students' knowledge must be known and must be used as a platform from which to acquire the new knowledge via addition or comparison.
- 3- Teach reading strategies. The teaching of strategies or skills is generally recommended for more efficient results and an adequate progress (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Some reading strategies include skimming, scanning, predicting, and guessing. Other general strategies are also encouraged, such as comprehension checks, summarizing, reading aloud, writing key words and ideas, repeating, using gestures, using visuals and realia, reading for pleasure, and using charts and graphic organizers.
- 4- Use class time for pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities. Class time needs to be re-evaluated so that more time is dedicated to the area of reading. Some activities include re-reading, student or teacher reading aloud, independent reading, writing based on reading, discussing readings, summarizing stories, and others.
- 5- Encourage voluntary reading outside of class. Advocates of pleasure reading emphasize the importance of reading outside the classroom (Rings, 2002).
- 6- Use appropriate assessment methods. The instructor must make an effort to assess reading in a manner that reflects the teaching methodology used and the course goals.

- 7- Negotiation of curriculum. This term refers to a mutual understanding between the teacher and the students in which students have some power of decision about instructional materials, assessment methods, activities, and even instructional content with the purpose of increasing students' motivation, interest and autonomy.
- 8- Student-centered curriculum. Suggested by literature (Nunan, 1993), in this type of curriculum students spend a lot of time in group and pair activities, collaborating and working on their own with the sporadic guidance of the teacher, who does not occupy a central figure.

Authentic reading materials

In this project, authentic texts were also proposed. Authentic texts (oral and written) are defined as those created for the use of native speakers, not for foreign language learning purposes. Freeman, Freeman and Mercuri (2002) define authentic materials as those “written to inform or entertain, not to teach a grammar point or a letter-sound correspondence” (p. 121). Rings (1986) compares different definitions of what ‘authentic’ means for several experts and they seem to be quite different. Some think that ‘authenticity’ is determined by the speaker, and some others think that ‘authenticity’ is determined by the situation. Rings claims that if authentic texts are used in the first semester, a “complete pedagogical apparatus must accompany the texts” (p. 207), implying that authentic materials may be difficult to use in a beginners’ class.

In general, authentic materials are recommended in the L2 classroom for many reasons. Many authentic texts portray the target culture and can be used not only for language learning but also for cultural learning. They are also written in authentic language (Bernhardt & Berkemeyer, 1988), therefore, they do not create impoverished language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983;

Swaffar, Arens & Byrnes, 1991). Some experts claim that authentic texts can be implemented at all levels of instruction (Bernhardt & Berkemeyer, 1988), although there is a heated discussion about this issue. Authentic texts encourage contextualized learning of vocabulary and grammar (Krashen, 1993) and expose students to different registers, genres, and formats. They also increase interest, motivation, and engagement (Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri, 2002; Worthy, 2002), and therefore support language acquisition (Krashen, 1993). Authentic texts develop cognitive skills and strategies (Berkemeyer, 1995; Dykstra-Pruim, 1998), seem more interesting than simplified texts (Krashen, 1993), and offer multiple responses and interpretations (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The major problem with authentic texts is that students find them very difficult, mainly at the lower levels of proficiency. To address this problem, I suggested the use of children's books, which are more comprehensible but still interesting. Children's literature will be defined here as those texts mainly written for non-adult audiences. Children's literature has several genres (e.g. fiction, biography, etc) and formats (e.g., chapter books, picture books, bilingual books, etc). Therefore, it is important to select appropriate texts for a specific audience having into consideration their preferences, their cognitive level, their proficiency level and other factors.

Previous research on the use of children's literature with L2 adults, although not extensive, provided some guidance regarding its benefits. For example, Cho and Krashen (1994) used young adult literature with Korean ESL adults in a reading-for-pleasure project and found that all four subjects became enthusiastic readers and increased their vocabulary knowledge. Dykstra-Pruim (1998) found that her college participants appreciated reading German children's books for entertainment, linguistic and cultural gains. They specially liked illustrated big books, fairy tales, and Sesame translations. Both Blickle (1998) and Metcalf (1998) used children's

books in college to teach content –German children’s literature and the Holocaust, respectively—, and found that these books were the ideal vehicle to convey culture, language, and content knowledge. In Moffit’s (1998) study, her participants enjoyed children’s literature, gained vocabulary and grammar, and improved reading and speaking skills. In a later study (Moffit, 2003), she also found that German picture books provided vocabulary and grammar knowledge, as well as cultural knowledge. Schwarzer (2001) found that “reading children’s literature aloud was one of the most successful activities at the beginning of the year” (p. 56) in his college Hebrew-as-a-second-language class. And Rings (2002) concluded that children’s books are needed in the L2 classroom because of their simple language and quality illustrations that make them more comprehensible and interesting.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

The purpose of this study is to describe how an innovative reading project was implemented in a Spanish-as-a-foreign-language class in a western U.S. university, and also how students reacted to the project.

Research Questions

- 1- How does a teacher-researcher implement an innovative approach using children’s literature in the college Spanish-as-a-foreign-language class?
- 2- How do students react to this project?

Setting

This project took place in an intensive, immersion Spanish program at a western U.S. small college during the summer of 2004. The intensive nature of the program refers to formal classes from 8:30am to 12:00pm, on-site lunch from 12:00pm to 1:00pm, cultural activities 3 days per week, and organized encounters with native Spanish speakers 2 days a week. During this 8-week program, students were taught the equivalent to two regular semesters of foreign language instruction. The immersion nature of the program refers to the exclusive use of Spanish at all times, as well as visits to Hispanic families in the community (2 hours per visit, 2 visits per week in groups of 2-3 students).

Participants

Participants were selected from the two classes of this program. The beginners' class had 6 students and all of them participated in the study. The course was the equivalent of first and second semesters of regular college Spanish. In this class, there was an equal number of male and female students. The male students varied in ages and backgrounds (44-year-old teacher, 17-year-old high school student, and 20-year-old international college student). The female students were all 20-year-old college students. All students were from the United States with the exception of the international student. The main teacher of this class was a Mexican American woman in her late 20s who had been teaching Spanish in college and high school for a few years. I also taught this class as a co-teacher twice a week for one hour each time.

The intermediate class had 3 students and all of them participated in the study. The course was the equivalent of third and fourth semesters of regular college Spanish. In this class, there was a female in her 40s, a female in her 20s and a male in his 20s). The teacher of this class

was a Peruvian man in his 40s who had been teaching Spanish literature in college for a couple of years. This teacher decided not to participate in the study and therefore, no data was collected in terms of class instruction. However, students were willing to participate in outside-class reading for pleasure and these data were collected.

The Teacher-Researcher

I, the teacher-researcher, am a Spanish female in my 30s. At the time of the study, I was in my second year of the Ph.D. program in Foreign Language Education at the University of Texas at Austin. I have a M.A. in Spanish language and literature and have been teaching Spanish at the college level in the U.S. for nine years. Entrance to the site was gained thanks to my previous experience working as a Spanish teacher at this college.

In this project, my duties were varied: My main job was supervising teachers and teaching assistants, developing curricula, organizing extra-curricular activities and making sure everything worked properly. Besides my main job, I was also a co-teacher of the beginners' class, replacing the main teacher for one hour a day, every other day. In addition, I was also the researcher of this qualitative study. I took the role of participants observer, which gave me the emic perspective necessary to obtain a deeper understanding of the challenges involved in implementing the project

Materials

In this project, children's books were used because they have simple, yet challenging, vocabulary for college students. They also portray the target culture in a simple way. Research has also found that they are usually interesting to students of all ages. Many of them have

illustrations, which support understanding. They offer a great variety of themes, genres, levels of proficiency, and formats. Children's stories can be the basis of numerous activities that promote linguistic and cultural learning.

Funded by the college, I purchased a small selection of books in Colombia, Spain and the United States, and brought them with me to the site. Text selection criteria was carefully considered when purchasing these texts, since there are many children's books that do not seem appropriate for adult readers. The final criteria for selection included content, genre, amount of print per page, illustration support and interest. A wide range of topics was sought in order to please a wider audience, following Brantmeier (2003)'s recommendation about female-oriented and male-oriented topics. Some texts were written in Spanish only, some were bilingual (side by side) and some were translated into Spanish from the original source. See Appendix A for a list of the books used in this specific study.

Data collection

Data was collected from different sources. Classroom observations were conducted Monday through Friday for one or two hours a day. When I was teaching the beginners' class, the other teacher would write the observations, and vice versa. Eight of these 1-hour sessions were also videotaped to provide verbatim evidence and to support observation methods. Classroom observations focused on teaching methodology (to address the first research question) and on students' reactions (to address the second research question). I also conducted informal observations via field notes during lunch sessions, cultural activities and visits to the community.

Documents from the students included their dialogue journals (about their community visits), mid-course evaluation, final-course evaluation, self-assessments (beginning and end of course), exercises and exams.

Documents from the teacher-researcher included her daily journal.

Other documents included lessons plans, syllabus, calendar of extra-curricular activities, pictures, and so on.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative studies, validity and reliability are always issues of concern. In this study, trustworthiness was enhanced by using multiple sources of data and triangulating the data obtained, by performing a long-term observation (the entire 8 weeks of the program), and by conducting peer examination with the beginners' class teacher who helped me during the study. Some measures were taken to assure the reliability of the data collection tools: Self-assessments were created based on actual ACTFL guidelines, course evaluations were adapted from existing forms from that same college, and exercises and exams were created in conjunction with the other teachers to improve the quality of the product. The specific, unique context of this program restricts the possibility for generalization of results.

Data analysis

Data analysis started with re-reading of the data collected. Exhaustive and exclusive categories that emerged from the data revealed patterns that were contrasted across multiple data sources for consistency. These patterns were driven by the purpose of the study and the research

questions, that is, finding out how the reading project was implemented and how students reacted to the project.

Results

To address the first research question, how this innovative approach was implemented using children's books, findings revealed that some aspects of the innovative approach used were easier to implement than others. For example, top-down processing was difficult to implement for a few weeks because the teachers and the students had never approached L2 reading in this manner. However, once we forced ourselves to use top-down methods, both students and teachers found it easy, enriching, interesting and useful for certain tasks. We implemented this type of processing mainly during pre-reading exercises and this period served to assess students' basic understanding and to evaluate their background knowledge. Bottom-up processing was easier to implement because we all had experience using it. This type of processing was mainly used for post-reading activities that focused on contextualized grammar and vocabulary learning. For teachers, these activities were also a way to assess students' linguistic gains without the stress of being graded.

Activation of background knowledge was not done to the extent that I would have liked because most of the texts that we used were popular fairy tales. Well into the program, we realized that the international student was having some difficulties because he was not familiar with certain fairy tales. This late discovery was a result of not checking students' background knowledge on time. I also found that we did much more post-reading activities than pre-reading activities, again, in detriment of connecting new information with old information.

Reading strategies were used but they were explicitly not instructed. In this area, we could have done a better job, mainly because we were using fairy tales, which usually allow well for guessing and predicting. One of the intermediate students was found to ask the teaching assistant for help in her reading for pleasure.

Pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities were easily integrated into the curriculum and time was purposefully reserved for this. It was not difficult to find the time necessary for this –it just required organization in advanced. In class we did teacher read-alouds. We didn't do as much re-reading or independent reading as I initially envisioned. The time that we reserved for in-class pre-reading, reading and pos-reading activities made a major difference in motivation to read and attitude towards reading. Students found it enjoyable to do all this in class.

Free voluntary reading was encouraged during class breaks and outside of class. Many authentic materials were left around in public areas and classrooms for students to access at any time, along with other reading materials in English that were already present. Students were observed reading magazines in Spanish and browsing through children's books frequently. Some students even asked permission to take borrow some books for a couple of days.

Adequate assessment methods that reflected our new innovative approach to reading were extremely difficult to create and implement. The other teacher and I worked hard to introduce more holistic exercises and culture-oriented activities, but we both found difficulties in this area, probably because of lack of experience. The use of portfolios was not considered at that time due to the lengthy preparation that entails.

A student-centered curriculum was implemented to a certain extent. While most of the class dynamics was teacher-centered, many student activities were done in collaboration, and more proficient students provided scaffolding to less proficient students by their own initiative.

This willingness to help others and work together provided a relaxing classroom environment. A certain degree of negotiation of curriculum took place in the program. Students were given a choice in the reading materials they took home (from a pre-selected bank), but the teachers were the ones selecting the reading materials to be used in the classroom. This freedom of choosing any book was welcomed by the students. “Self-selection is certainly the best way to personalize reading” (Dupuy, Tse & Cook, 1996, p. 12).

The integration of children’s books with other curriculum components was easily achieved. Many classroom activities were developed based on the readings, including oral discussions about the plots and the characters, written compositions, grammar exercises, vocabulary exercises, games, and others. Integration of children’s books with other components of the program was also easy to do. I worked closely with the teaching assistants in order to schedule certain cultural activities (cooking, Disney movies, papel picado, etc) simultaneously with the reading of books that focused on those cultural issues. Also, students were encouraged to take their children’s books to the community and read them to the children, which they did and found very interesting.

To address the second research question, how students reacted to the project, I found that all students liked using children’s books and the way the teachers presented them in class. Students thought that children’s books helped them with their Spanish as well.

“I think they are very cute! Smart approach, too, because reading help us to develop language skills so immensely.” (female, class I, mid-term evaluation)

“I learned some vocabulary and use of transition. (...) Teachers read slowly and carefully and made sure that every student were understanding.” (international student, class I, final-course evaluation)

“I learned some new vocabulary and maybe new conjugations. (...) [the teachers] did a good job: after the book, we had activities to do which helped understand the story.” (high school student, class I, final-course evaluation)

“I love the message [of *Beauty and the Beast*]: not to judge a book by its cover and also teaching that selfishness is not a rewarded quality. (...) I learned how to do reading comprehension at a beginning level, which is where I needed to start reading comprehension. (...) It was better when Maripaz did reading with us because she didn’t read the story word per word, and if she did, it was a really short, easy to understand story. I didn’t do well when the TA, for example, just read every word in the story (I zoned out)... I had to have it in front of me. (...) Start teaching Spanish in High School using children’s books also! (...) the Disney stories is a very innovative idea and works very well.” (female, class I, final-course evaluation)

The fact that we introduced them little by little intrigued students and picked their curiosity.

“The reading books are very interesting, but I want to see more of them.” (mid 40s male, class I, mid-term evaluation)

They all found the books easier to read than regular textbook readings and more enjoyable too.

“I think using children’s stories is a very effective/smart way to learn the language as opposed to the complicated stories/history lessons we had to read in High School.” (female, class I, mid-term evaluation)

Two participants (the 17-year-old high school student and the international student) confessed having difficulties at the beginning and a little bit of frustration. Here are some of the students’ comments:

“I don’t understand them fully, but are good to increase our vocabulary.” (high school student, class I, mid-term evaluation)

“Very helpful, but not enough time to really read them.” (international student, class I, mid-term evaluation)

In the intermediate class, students also liked children’s books and expressed their positive reactions both in terms of learning and in terms of socializing:

“[I learned] some grammatical constructions. [Children’s books] are a good supplement to regular classes/activities. (...) I am a much faster reading and retention is higher than before.” (male, class II, final-course evaluation)

“El Miércoles yo traje el libro ‘*El Rey León*’ a la casa de L. Esta sorprende que las niñas parecieran muy emocionadas por este libro. L. y M. empezaron a discutir sobre el libro. Luego, decidimos leer el libro junto. Entonces, con excepción de C. (el menor), cada persona tomó su turno para leer el libro. Era una buena actividad y tenía más éxito que yo había esperado.” (mid 40s female, class II, Journal 5).

[translation: on Wednesday, I brought The Lion King to L’s house. I was surprised that the girls seemed so excited with the book. L. and M. started to discuss the book. Then, we decided to read the book together. Then, with the exception of C., the youngest, each person took a turn to read the book. It was a good activity and had more success than I had expected]

I must also mention that on the last day of the program, during the farewell party, each teacher and teaching assistant received a present from the students, something that never happened in previous years. This summer, we all received a children’s book in Spanish. Students had gone out of their way to find a library in the area that sold children’s books in Spanish and had purchased them for us.

Conclusions

Data revealed that this innovative approach was somewhat difficult to implement in this Spanish program. Some of the aspects or characteristics of an innovative approach can be a real challenge for teachers who have no prior experience or are not well organized beforehand. Collaboration with the other teacher proved to be essential in creating activities and checking progress, and also very helpful to the research investigation itself. The project could have been more successful if a) we had found a better way to activate student’s background knowledge – mainly for the international student—, b) if we would have taught reading strategies in class, and c) if we would have developed more appropriate assessment tools. Nevertheless, the general

approach was innovative in many aspects and quite successful in achieving the main goal of improving students linguistic knowledge and interest. Cultural gains were not specifically emphasized in this study because the majority of the children's books used were fairy tales with little or no Hispanic culture in them. For cultural learning, we used the community, the extra-curricular activities, the textbook, some magazines in Spanish and only one of the children's books.

Data also revealed that students received children's literature with open arms. They enjoyed the experience of reading this type of materials; they were able to see the benefits that these books had on their L2 acquisition; and their attitudes toward reading in the foreign language improved. They found the texts simpler than regular textbook readings yet still challenging. The students who experience more difficulties were the international student and the high school students. These two students also had a very low proficiency level in general in Spanish. The other teacher and I both concluded that, in general, students had acquired a comparable proficiency level to that achieved by traditional L2 college students.

Pedagogical implications

Results strongly suggest that children's literature in the college Spanish class is a viable alternative to textbooks readings, which students often find complex and not interesting. In this study, children's literature provided comprehensible input and served as the basis of multiple activities in different areas (e.g., writing, listening, speaking, etc). Children's literature was easy to implement in the curriculum as well.

A limitation of this specific project might be found in the selection of the texts, which mainly included fairy tales. A wider selection of genres is suggested for future experiments,

mainly those texts that explore cultural issues as well. A wide selection of texts is also recommended to satisfy students' different preferences. As a starting point, children's books worked well in developing their reading skills and love for reading in the L2. As students progress in proficiency, it is suggested that more complex books are selected, such as chapter books, poetry, etc.

It was difficult to find appropriate assessment methods for the new texts and approach. It is suggested that teachers explore further in this area to find adequate tools that help evaluate students' progress more accurately.

Limitations of the study

This study has a few limitations, including the small number of participants, the lack of interviews, the absence of members' check, and the teachers' lack of experience in certain fields. Nevertheless, as a pilot study, it worked well in the sense that provided enough information to investigate this field as well as suggestions for future projects and research studies. Further studies with larger populations or in more traditional settings are suggested in this area.

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Swaffar, J.; Arens, K.; & Byrnes, H. (1991). *Reading for Meaning: An Integrated Approach to Language Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Worthy, J. (2002). What makes intermediate-grade students want to read. *Reading Teacher*, 55(6), 568-569.

APPENDIX A

List of books used in this project

Bourgeois, P. & Clark, B. (1998). *Franklin tiene un mal día*. Lectorum.
ISBN: 1880507528. Cost: \$6 approx.

Disney, W. (1999). *Blanca Nieves y los siete enanitos*. Bogotá: Colombia. Grupo Norma.
ISBN: 958045521-X. Cost: \$4 approx. (in Colombia)

Disney, W. (1999). *El Rey León*. New York: Random House.
ISBN: 0736401385. Cost: \$9 approx.

Disney, W. (2002). *La Bella y la Bestia*. New York: Random House.
ISBN: 0736421106. Cost: \$9 approx.

Disney, W. (2002). *Lilo y Stitch*. New York: Random House.
ISBN: 0736420835. Cost: \$9 approx.

Disney, W. (1999). *Tarzán*. Mouse Works.
ISBN: 0736400575. Cost: \$7 approx.

Izquierdo, O. & Andersen, M. (2003). *The little mermaid / La sirenita*. Chronicle books LLC.
ISBN: 0811839117. Cost: \$7 approx.

Lomas Garza, C. (1996). *In my family / En mi familia*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
ISBN: 0892391634. Cost: \$8 approx.

Other texts: *Las trillizas y Moby Dick*; *El pato Donald y sus sobrinos: Los deportes* (Disney); *El domador de monstruos*; *Gigantes*; books on letters of the alphabet; magazines (*People en español*, and others from Colombia and Spain).