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RESPONSE  

The Next Course: The Slow Textbook  

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The World Is Not Flat, So Why Are Our Textbooks?

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Abstract: We review the evolution of the modern language textbook, exploring its function in the curriculum of Spanish classes. In light of the advantages offered by new technological resources, we propose that the paper-based textbook has outlived its usefulness in today's multidimensional world, both logistically and pedagogically. To demonstrate, we explore three aspects of the paperless classroom: a transformed focus, a design that makes learning visible, and digital implementation. Specific examples are from two projects for introductory and intermediate Spanish.

Keywords: communicative language teaching/enseñanza de lenguas enfocada en la comunicación, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)/aprendizaje de lenguas por medio de las computadoras, curriculum/plan de estudios, digital tools/herramientas digitales, multiliteracies, textbooks/libros de texto

1. Introduction

In this essay we explore the evolution of the role of language textbooks in Spanish curricula, and summarize challenges presented by traditional iterations of the textbook in contemporary approaches to second language (L2) teaching. In light of the advantages offered by new technological resources, we propose that the paper-based textbook has outlived its usefulness in today's multi-dimensional world, both logistically and pedagogically. To demonstrate, we explore three aspects of the paperless classroom: the transformed focus of materials, a design that makes learning visible, and digital implementation of the materials.

2. Historical Perspective on Language Textbooks

Although instructors frequently point out textbooks’ limitations, we continue to rely on them to give our language courses shape and direction (e.g., Lord 2014). Whether this is because of a lack of time on the instructor’s part, the need for uniformity in multi-section courses, or an implicit trust that the textbook author(s) know(s) best, the fact is that textbooks often play a deterministic role in shaping the program as a whole (e.g., Richards 2001), and we rely on our text to be the voice that "states curricular goals, lays out material to be taught, and suggests ways of teaching it" (Byrnes 1998: 271). Wiggins and McTighe (1998, 2008) have noted that instructors often begin with the textbook to structure courses rather than establishing learning outcomes and then choosing learning materials to achieve these outcomes.

In this vein, language textbooks themselves are responsible for a “coverage model” (Chaffee 1992) approach to our curricula, in which our courses are designed to cover all grammar points we can think of. The Spanish textbook market itself, dominated by only a handful of large
publishers, is partially to blame for this situation, since textbooks must appeal to a broad audience and each text strives to be comparable in coverage to other leading texts (Allen and Paesani 2010; Bragger and Rice 2000; Blyth and Davis 2013; VanPatten 2015). Yet instructors are often resistant to innovation in our texts, even while simultaneously espousing reformed approaches to teaching. In fact, although most researchers and instructors advocate a proficiency-oriented, task-based approach, research confirms that we continue to design our classes around our texts (Bragger and Rice 2000; Fernández 2011; Rubio, Passey, and Campbell 2004) rather than demand that second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research in applied linguistics inform our course materials. Allen and Paesani (2010) note that current FL textbooks, by tacitly endorsing this grammar coverage approach, lack meaningful contexts, relying instead on “form-focused, mechanical exercises and a lack of engaging content” (218), even in texts that claim to be highly “communicative.”

We propose not that we abandon any reliance on textbook programs, but rather that Spanish texts must reinvent themselves to serve the needs of the real-world Spanish classroom; instructors, publishers and students are ready to embrace such modern materials. The time has come for the next generation of language teaching materials.

3. The Future of Language Teaching Materials

Language teaching materials of the future must provide instructors with the tools they need to modify their curricula. The growing criticisms of communicative approaches (Allen and Paesani 2010; Blyth and Davis 2007; Bragger and Rice 2000; Byrnes 1998; Lord and Isabelli-García 2014; Meyer 2009; Rossomondo 2012) signal the field’s readiness for change. Prompted by the MLA’s (2007) call for “new structures for a changed world,” we have seen increasing interest in teaching materials that are more contextualized, more relevant, and more likely to speak to students’ “intellectual” as well as “linguistic” development (Meyer 2009: 86). We need an approach to teaching that connects language and content across all levels of instruction, allowing even beginning language learners to engage in critical analysis.

Although such approaches should continue to focus on oral/aural communication (especially given the unique role of Spanish as a second language in the United States), we must supplement the transactional and self-referential nature of communicative approaches to foster the ability to operate between languages and cultures (Geisler et al. 2007). To do this, the next generation of teaching materials encourages the critical analysis of texts of all kinds, and embraces the tenets of a multiliteracies model (e.g., Paesani, Allen, and Dupuy 2014; Kern, 2000; New London Group 1996; Swaffar and Arens 2005). Note that here we use ‘text’ in its broadest sense, from written to aural, digital to print, lyrical to prose.

Literacy-oriented frameworks, while privileging the development of reading and writing, are not limited to a skills-based approach. Instead, as Warner (2011) explains, this framework “places renewed emphasis on interpretation and critical awareness in language study, but it also maintains language use as an important objective of language study” (10). They encourage learners to engage with texts by pushing beyond decoding what is being said to begin analyzing how and why language is used in different contexts. Despite emerging evidence to the contrary (Allen and Paesani 2010; Maxim 2006), many Language Program Directors (LPDs) fear that such approaches are impractical in foundational-level courses (Rossomondo 2012). We argue instead that from the earliest stages, learners can and should be encouraged to analyze not just linguistic information but other (con)textual information of language, such as images, metaphor and strategies, referred to by Kramsch (2006) as the development of symbolic competence, or by Danesi (2000) as metaphoric competence. This in turn helps learners appreciate the multiple interpretations of any text and recognize the co-constructive relationship between language and ideology. They can be encouraged to think more deeply, to question their assumptions, and to
use language creatively while drawing on these linguistic models for various purposes. If our end goal is a learner who is able to actively participate in our multilingual and multicultural world, this goal should drive our curricula from the beginning.

In our opinion, a new approach to the “textbook” that encompasses all of its many facets is necessary to effectively incorporate the contributions of scholarship in SLA, applied linguistics, and literary studies. The next generation of materials, by capitalizing on digital delivery, offers a new kind of text. As outlined by Garrett (2009), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has evolved to include authentic materials, tutorials, and communication. In conjunction, these developments have the potential to inform the design of self-contained digital learning platforms to offer meaningful content, structuring practice, and purposeful negotiation of ideas and identities among a community of learners.

The following section explores three technology-enabled design features that the next generation of Spanish instructional materials incorporates. We supplement that discussion with examples from existing and in-development digital projects to extrapolate from theory to practice. The first is a commercial product in development for introductory Spanish language courses; the second is Acceso (http://acceso.ku.edu), an open educational resource for intermediate-level Spanish that is collaboratively developed and maintained at the University of Kansas.3

4. Visionary Materials

We divide this discussion into the three primary principles that guide the next generation of teaching materials: transformed focus, design that makes learning visible, and digital implementation.

4.1 Transformed Focus

As we have discussed, the focus of these materials must move beyond the traditional grammar-based approach and towards a focus on textual context. Grammar and vocabulary should be covered if and when necessary as determined by the learning process, so that learning becomes truly contextualized for both students and instructors. A simultaneous emphasis on skill and strategy development is essential as learners build their comprehension and interpretation of the texts. These texts are the bases for the guided critical cultural exploration that engage learners. In this respect, we follow Meyer’s (2009) assertion that “ideas and concepts should anchor students’ intellectual and linguistic trajectories in the college-level foreign language curriculum at all levels of instruction,” although we simultaneously recognize the inherent challenge in developing “students’ thinking abilities at their intellectual levels while developing their linguistic skills in the target language, which are at a much lower level” (86). Nonetheless, by framing “the textual within the communicative” (Allen and Paesani 2010: 134), these materials encourage learners to engage with the text to interpret language use, to participate in critical cultural inquiry through reflection on multiple meanings and perspectives, and to draw on the text to develop linguistic repertoires for expressing emerging identities as participants in Spanish-language communities.

At the earliest levels of instruction, learners do this in the introductory digital learning environment (DLE). For example, the texts in focus are interactive social media profile pages—a genre that is familiar to students and provides contextualized occasions for Spanish language usage. To interact with this content, students must begin to grapple with the dual copulatives (ser and estar); high-frequency vocabulary such as numbers, personal identifiers, descriptive adjectives; and the concept of agreement (noun/verb; noun/adjective). They also explore patterns of social media use in countries where Spanish is spoken (including the United States) and how we present ourselves in this mode. In this way the texts themselves drive the engagement of
relevant grammar, vocabulary, and strategies, and contextualize content learning and cultural comparisons.

At the intermediate level, learners are capable of engaging progressively more complex texts and topics. Students using Acceso work with an excerpt from Manolito Gafotas (Lindo 1994), a popular series of children’s novels in Spain. The text is a humorous narration of Manolito’s adventures at a public swimming pool that occasions the exploration of past tense aspectual distinctions (preterite and imperfect use) and the consideration of the culturally bound aspects of humor. While this excerpt could be included in a paper textbook, the most useful aspects could not be: interactive links to relevant cultural information, glosses with images and explanations, comprehension checks with automatic feedback to constrain and guide the learners’ reading, and digital audio files of naturally-paced and slowed-down readings of the excerpt by a native speaker from the actual neighborhood.

4.2 Visible Learning

The second design feature requires that learning be visible to both learners and instructors. Materials should be developed by following the basic tenets of backward design (e.g., Wiggins and McTighe 1998, 2008), which are to decide what objectives are desired at the outcome, and then determine what tools and skills learners will need to get there. The outcomes that learners achieve need to move beyond mastery of discrete grammar points in isolation and focus on the completion of tasks that combine contextualized language and communication to close the assessment loop. To demonstrate learning in the first introductory module, students are guided in the creation of their own social media profile pages. This profile serves as the jumping-off point for participation in the social platform where they continue to post their products and comment on each others’ work throughout the remainder of the program. In much the same way, Acceso structures intermediate-level students’ collaboration as they create alternative endings for Manolito’s adventure at the pool by drawing on their emerging abilities to employ the preterite and imperfect, new vocabulary, and analyses of culturally-bound approaches to humor.

In an ideal world, learners will be responsible for mastery of the defined objectives, but should be allowed to achieve these through a variety of means. For example, students who have previously studied Spanish or have had exposure at home may not need dozens of activities for every concept but only a review, while less experienced learners might need considerable structured practice processing and producing before moving on to integrate structures for more complex communicative purposes. We know that all learners do not need to progress through the same instructional path at the same speed, so we require only that they demonstrate mastery by completing a carefully designed task that synthesizes the objectives set forth. In this way, practice becomes a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. Inherent in both digital projects are the imperatives that students be aware of their own learning, and that instructors be provided with evidence of this learning in order to provide meaningful feedback to guide their students’ development.

4.3 Digital Implementation

The final element of a successful instructional program is its implementation. Digital delivery offers benefits not only in terms of content and interaction with this content, but also in terms of helping students develop digital literacies. Digital delivery does not mean print materials that have been adapted for online consumption, such as the typical e-text that now accompanies most printed texts. We are referring instead to native digital materials, developed from the ground up for digital presentation and use. Both of the programs referenced in this section were conceived of as digital from the outset.
Our students are accustomed to accessing information digitally and to employing technology to contribute to a collaborative culture of social media, so our materials must provide them the opportunity to further develop these skills in an academic context that promotes critical thinking. As Ganley and Sawhill (2007) have argued, we must work to promote not just the development of the "traditional literacies of critical reading, thinking and communication," but also to foster the development of the "emerging literacies of collaboration, online communication and multimedia navigation" (5).

The social media component of the DLE for introductory Spanish allows students to collaboratively realize tasks in Spanish and share and comment on products that they create. Learning in Acceso is supported through a series of individual and collaborative blog assignments that structure students' online interactions with the content and each other in Spanish. Another component of the first-year program structures critical exploration of digital resources (which are developed around thematic topics, mindful of the learners' limited experience with Spanish and housed in a closed environment): after completing an introductory reading on social media use in the Spanish-speaking world, students are directed to explore how this manifests itself in individual countries by searching for and accessing up-to-date information that is housed in a "virtual globe" repository. They then report back what they learn and work with their classmates to construct a more complete understanding of the variety of social realities that share Spanish as a common language. Acceso, which is entirely Web-based and open, pushes the more advanced learners to conduct similar exploration outside of a protected environment. Students access authentic materials available on the Web and evaluate the legitimacy and bias of these sources before deciding what to bring back to their collaborative learning teams. Realizing these types of activities allows students to develop digital literacy skills that serve them in future Spanish classes, as well as in other disciplines.

Finally, digitally designed and delivered materials can solve the perennial problem of the artificial division between classroom, homework, and testing. We focus instead on how we present material, how students practice and engage with this material, and how their learning of the material is assessed. In both programs described here, learners' initial contact with the material takes place outside of class, as learners refine receptive and productive language use through automatically corrected closed-ended activities and instructor-graded open activities that progress from the sentence to the discourse level. Because this preparatory work is stored digitally, instructors are able to identify gaps in understanding and areas for further explanation before choosing class activities. Class time, whether virtual or in person, is reserved for meaningful student-to-student or student-to-instructor interactions. Following backward design principles, assessments are no longer a surprise to learners, but rather the goal towards which they have been working throughout the unit. Digital assessment tasks are the logical conclusions of each unit.

5. Conclusion

By incorporating these principles, the next generation of Spanish teaching materials will offer learners and instructors a much-needed digital transformation for today's real-world language classes. Regardless of which particular project or product one uses, it is imperative that both publishers and educators rethink their use of materials to better fit the needs of our students in a rapidly changing landscape, with an emphasis on cohesiveness, cultural relevance, and the evolving (digital) epistemologies of college-age learners. Despite the current dearth of available texts fitting this description, we hope that the materials described in this essay can stimulate similarly principled projects in the near future, in order to offer learners and instructors the tools needed to transform not just what we teach, but how we teach it. Rethinking the content, design, and implementation of our Spanish language instructional materials promises to create a learning environment better suited for a translingual and transcultural world.
NOTES

1 The authors are the developers of the materials described in this essay (Rossomondo created Acceso, and Lord and Rossomondo are co-authoring the in-development digital text). They share the same vision for the future of Spanish language instruction and materials development, and both contributed equally to the essay.

2 The reader is referred to Kern (2000; see chapter 3) and Allen, Paesani, and Dupuy (2014) for a thorough discussion of this approach and the considerations for implementing it in the classroom.

3 See Rossomondo (2012) for a description and examples of the Acceso project.

4 These models follow a social constructivist approach (c.f., Vygotsky 1962, 1980) to structuring formal language study by exploiting the community of learners that forms our classes.

WORKS CITED


Response to “The World is Not Flat, So Why are Our Textbooks?”

The Next Course: The Slow Textbook

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Keywords: authorship/autoría, collaboration/collaboración, curriculum/curículo, textbooks/libros de texto, Slow/lento

Piano, piano...
—Farmer Giuseppe Siragusa

“T he World is Not Flat, So Why are Our Textbooks?” reflects the tension of looking forward and looking back that both underlies and impedes progress in curriculum design. While it is indisputable that “the time has come for the next generation of language teaching materials” (Rossomondo and Lord 252), as Bill VanPatten and others have noted, innovation in the world of textbook design moves at a pace that can best be described as “glacial.” In addition to the ideas mentioned in the accompanying article, one further way to transform the focus, design, and medium of “flat textbooks” is, ironically, for instructors to just slow down by adopting the principles of the Slow Movement and authoring “well-rounded” digital teaching materials either individually or, ideally, by teaming up with their language departments.

The Slow Movement is about achieving balance in life by eschewing modernity’s “cult of speed” with its inevitable shortcuts of quality, thought, and empathy for under-represented groups. Slow embraces local, seasonal, organic, and sustainable practices for a life that privileges quality over quantity. Carlo Petrini’s Slow Food Movement arose, in part, as a reaction to globalization and situations in which multinational capitalist ventures (embodied by the American fast food “restaurant”) impose foreign definitions of time, relevance, and productivity on countries with deep cultural traditions. Such situations create unwelcomed outcomes in the commercial, cultural, and public health spheres of economically marginalized individuals. As recent debates about GMOs have shown, corporations make decisions at a distance from consumers and clearly have competing sets of interests.

Fast culture manifests itself in many areas of university life, especially, for our purposes, in the co-dependent relationship between language instructors and “Super-Sized” corporate textbook programs. (In a provocative quip, VanPatten (2015) bemoans the possibility that many university language instructors may in reality be nothing more than “skilled as textbook users” [7]). The uniformity, sequencing, and scaffolding that textbooks provide to large, lower-level language programs staffed by novice TAs has its place, but do we really want to train university instructors with teaching materials shaped by editorial teams at publishing houses? We are all familiar with the shortcomings of mainstream texts which, despite the good intentions of their authors and editors, are necessarily constrained by formatting, budget, copyright, design, and market pressures that instructors or graduate programs working together outside the parameters of profit simply do not have.
When individuals write their own Spanish programs, the resulting materials can be tailored to their local audience and academic calendar. Collaboration between “language experts” and colleagues (particularly native speakers) will strengthen and enrich instructional approaches and deepen cultural activities. Furthermore, when instructors share the burden of quality control over what they teach, decisions over relevant contexts, scope, and sequencing can be made for purely pedagogical, rather than market-based reasons. Teachers, after all, understand the needs of their students better than sales reps or focus groups. Self-authored slow-textbooks can also reflect the heritage and realities of local (rather than imagined) Hispanic communities and thus facilitate opportunities for outreach and service. Sustainable, digital materials can contain innumerable images and texts organic to a department’s study away options and thus help feed a program’s upper level offerings and major. Finally, these new “books” can truly be seasonal by focusing on holidays in context while helping keep student costs low, strengthening language departments, and improving communication with local Hispanic communities.

In their 2016 book *The Slow Professor*, Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber argue that “adopting the principles of Slow into our professional practice is an effective way to alleviate work stress, preserve humanistic education, and resist the corporate university” (ix). As Martha Nussbaum and others have proven, motives of profit change the fundamental democratic nature of higher education. Slow-textbooks, on the other hand, send a strong message of self-reliance, lifelong learning, and a healthy skepticism of the influence of corporations to students that may never experience such lessons again after graduation.

Local, seasonal, sustainable, non-corporate, and organic to an institution: these five visionary lessons from the Slow Movement can help transform the future of teaching Spanish in the United States.

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