
Programa de comprensión lectora en lenguas extranjeras: el caso de la UNLa

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Abstract

This case study continues a previous exploratory research project called "Teaching reading comprehension in foreign languages at UBA and UNLa", and in this case we focus on UNLa. This study tries to address the need of creating a reading comprehension program in foreign languages (English and Portuguese) that complies with a new reality, considering all the parties involved within the university. We are interested in knowing and studying the opinion of the students, teachers and authorities of the different courses of studies offered at UNLa regarding the current reading comprehension courses and materials, as well as the characteristics the new courses and materials should have, so that we can meet the needs of all the students and face the challenges brought by the pandemic and the "new normalcy" we are experiencing in academia. Furthermore, we seek to contribute to the internationalization of higher

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education, providing our students with tools that help them become intercultural citizens and professionals, which in turn will allow them to interact with the international community.

Key words: Foreign Languages - Reading Comprehension Program - Higher Education PAPER

Introduction

This case study "Reading Comprehension Program in Foreign Languages: the Case of UNLa" ("Programa de comprensión lectora en lenguas extranjeras: el caso de la UNLa") continues a previous exploratory research project called "Teaching reading comprehension in foreign languages at UBA and UNLa". Focusing on the reality at UNLa, this study tries to address the need of creating a reading comprehension program in foreign languages (English and Portuguese) that complies with a new reality, considering all the parties involved within the university. Since we are interested in knowing and studying the opinion of the students, teachers and authorities of the different courses of studies offered at this institution, we will resort to different surveys and interviews to gather this information. We would like to know their opinion about the current reading comprehension courses and materials, as well as the characteristics the new courses and materials should have, so that we can meet the needs of all the students and face the challenges brought by the pandemic and the "new normalcy" we are experiencing in academia.

This program is grounded on theoretical concepts that we consider fundamental. On the one hand, those related to the approach selected for the teaching of reading comprehension in English and Portuguese, based on Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics. On the other hand, those based on the Global Education Pact, intercultural citizenship, technology and virtual education, and internationalization of Higher Education.

The Global Education Pact proposed by Pope Francis in 2020 contributes with a framework to start thinking. Providing our students with tools to become intercultural citizens and professionals is also significant so we will include the concept of intercultural citizenship developed by Melina Porto and Michael Byram (2015). As we seek to commit to the internationalization of higher education, we will study the documents written by the National University Council (Consejo Interuniversitario Nacional (CIN)) and the Dean Council of Private Universities (Consejo de Rectores de Universidades Privadas (CRUP)). Finally, we will resort to the document "The Rewired Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education" presented by UNESCO in 2021 in which the interconnection between access to technology, connectivity and education are regarded as human rights.

Theoretical Considerations

As mentioned before, to support this reading comprehension program in foreign languages (FL), some theoretical aspects will be considered. The pillars of this new program will be based on: systemic-functional linguistics; the Global Education Pact; intercultural citizenship; technology and the access to virtual education as a human right; and internationalization of higher education.

Systemic-functional linguistics

Considering that interculturalism is a reality in our classrooms, it is possible to think of the academic education system as part of the historical and cultural path of the education community. We believe it is necessary to analyze, in different scenarios, the way of organizing and functioning of our society and its institutions, adapting curricular proposals to these new configurations. From teaching interdisciplinary analysis, we seek to integrate conceptual and functional contents of the languages for the different courses of study of the students.

In this sense, we plan to reformulate the reading comprehension program in the English and Portuguese language, based on systemic-functional linguistics, as developed by Halliday (1982) and his followers, by which a text is conceived as a semantic object connected by interrelating cohesive mechanisms. We will analyze the language from his functional approach to deal with the uses and functions of the different discourse types, and from his systemic approach regarding its global interpretation, as well as the following sublevels which make a system network and operate in the semantic and lexico-grammatical fields. Grammar is functional to the text and only acquires meaning in the communication, within a specific socio-cultural context.

The linguistic contents included in this program will be presented in an integrated way; grammar and lexical aspects will be approached from discourse analysis so as to develop didactic reading comprehension strategies, offering different practices to see the object of study in different situations. Regarding the material to be designed for this program, we will include a selection of mainly descriptive, expositive, argumentative and instructional texts related to the different courses of study offered at UNLa, with activities that promote interaction in the collaborative construction of knowledge within a systemic-functional framework.

Global Education Pact

We seek to develop a new reading comprehension program which is inclusive, in other words, which considers and represents all members of our university (students, teachers, authorities). In this line, we consider the guidelines proposed by Pope Francis in the Global Education Pact (2020). The Pope defines this pact as an invitation to discuss the way in which we are building the future of our planet and the need of investing in everybody's talents,

since every change requires an educational path that fosters a new universal solidarity in order to build a more welcoming society. These are the commitments proposed in this document:

1. To make human persons the centre.
2. To listen to the the voices of children and young people
3. To advance the women.
4. To empower the family.
5. To welcome.
6. To find new ways of understanding economy and politics.
7. To safeguard our common home.

Each of the items mentioned above are fully developed in the document. Values, ideas for reflection and suggestions for educators are listed so the commitments become part of educational practice.

As regards higher education Pope Francis considers the fundamental role of universities in "the construction of the Global Educational Village" (2020: 17). These institutions are asked to carry out scientific research in the five thematic areas that are the cornerstones of the Pope's idea of university. He mentions five thematic areas and universities of reference with which other universities can collaborate:

1. Dignity and human rights. University of Notre Dame (USA).
2. Fraternity and cooperation. Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (Italy).
3. Technology and integral ecology. Pontifical Javeriana University (Colombia)
4. Peace and citizenship. Pontifical Lateran University
5. Cultures and religions. Pontifical Saint Thomas University (Philippines)

Even though all of each of the commitments mentioned before are of utmost importance, we consider focusing on the dignity of the person in any educational process, and educating others and ourselves to embrace those unprotected and marginalized, fundamental pillars of our study. It is also worth highlighting the importance Pope Francis gives to collaborative work among peoples from all over the world, which undoubtedly invites us to think in terms of intercultural citizenship.

Intercultural Citizenship

As regards to the concept of intercultural citizenship, the contributions of Melina Porto and Michael Byram in their paper "Developing intercultural citizenship education in the language classroom and beyond" (2015) will be considered. The approach to foreign language teaching they propose combines aims from this discipline with those of education for citizenship. The authors echo what UNESCO presented back in 1996 explaining that the context of economic globalization and the world marketplace "provides opportunities for people to go beyond mere communication in the form of exchange of goods and information and to begin the process of living together". They consider four

stages to what they call international citizenship. The first stage discusses the purposes of foreign language teaching. While these have lately been considered from the point of view of communication, Byram argues that these goals should include the ability to interact with others and to be introduced to other views of the world. The FL will become a *lingua franca* through which we can engage in this exchange. Byram (1989, 2008) highlights that FL teachers are educators, and so they shape the “manners, behavior, social and moral practices, etc.” of learners “in a particular way”.

The second stage introduces the concept of criticality. Educators often encourage critical thinking in their learners' responses. As Porto (2013) explains this inspires students to take action in the world as a consequence of their learning in the classroom. They define criticality resorting to the work of Barnett (1997) in which he argues that higher education can be analyzed as dealing with three domains: knowledge, self and world. These domains can achieve different levels of development, namely critical skills, reflexivity, refashioning of traditions and transformatory critique. The interaction between these two axis will determine the forms of criticality developed: critical reason, critical self-reflection and critical action. Barnett's work has questioned FL language teaching at universities and wondered whether these courses develop criticality.

The third stage analyzes the notion of education for citizenship as presented in Europe and the USA, which encourages interaction beyond the boundaries of one's state. This notion has often had a limited scope since it only works at a local, regional and national level. Illustrating their statement with the English national curriculum, Porto and Byram explain that education for citizenship has three purposes. These goals, which do not go beyond the national level, are the following: social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy. They advocate for education for citizenship, which would work at an international level.

Finally, the fourth stage aims at combining the aims of FL teaching with those of education for citizenship to create a sense of social engagement and intercultural citizenship. Porto and Byram resort to a definition provided by Stavenhagen. This scholar presents the idea of intercultural citizenship and points to the building of political and social institutions by which culturally diverse communities within a multiethnic and multilingual nation can solve their differences democratically by consensus without tearing apart the common structures and values or having to abandon their particular cultural identities, such as language, culture and ethnicity (2008, p. 176).

In short, Porto and Byram argue that foreign language teaching should be called foreign language education, with the implications this brings about for personal development and societal improvement. They insist that it should develop criticality and this would lead to action in the world. To conclude, they state that empirical evidence demonstrates that foreign language education in fact develops criticality in courses in higher education. We consider this a

fundamental pillar for our program since it goes beyond the classroom sphere and helps students at the Higher Education level become better citizens of the world. This is deeply related to virtual education as a new space to explore, especially after the pandemic.

Technology and virtual education

Another fundamental component of our program are IT tools, which are of utmost relevance as has been exposed by the education content during the Covid-19 pandemic. Nowadays, having access to the Web allows us to rely on different resources regardless of our geographical location. As Garbarini and Quiroga (2021), teachers at UNLa, point out in their article "The Challenges of University Teaching in the postpandemic" ("Los desafíos de la enseñanza universitaria en la pospandemia"), during this time we worked in "interdisciplinary teams creating protocols, opening virtual classrooms and strengthening communication between teachers and students". Integrating IT tools in the reading comprehension program in foreign languages is fundamental, since these tools facilitate teaching and learning processes, develop skills in teachers and students, tend towards informational literacy, and lead to inclusion and the development of intercultural citizenship. To put this into practice, we believe it is important to do so from a decolonial pedagogy situated in our Argentina and Latinamerican reality. In that regard we consider the contributions of Catherine Walsh in her text "Pedagogías Decoloniales. Prácticas insurgentes del resistir, (re) existir y (re) vivir" (2013, p. 19), who defines "decolonial pedagogies" as "insurgent practices that crack the modernity/coloniality and make possible very different ways of being, thinking, knowing, feeling, existing and living-with".

Virtual Education as a Human Right

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on all the spheres of life, and education is no exception. UNESCO discusses that while the central principles of the right to education remain unchanged, the realities of diverse and ever-changing societies, the increased use of technology, and climate change are some of the causes of the shifts occurring in our education systems. The challenges brought about by the pandemic resulted in the document "Futures of Education Initiative".

This document gives a great importance to connectivity and discusses in the Rewired Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education its fundamental aspects. This declaration, launched in December 2021, provides a new orientation for the digital transformation of education. It "puts forward principles and commitments to ensure that connected technologies advance our aspirations for inclusive education based on the principles of justice, equity and respect for human rights." This declaration is grounded on three core principles which consider technology as "an enabler of human-centered education".

The first principle is to centre on the most marginalized and those most in need of opportunity as the first recipients of these policies and actions.

Technology would aid refugees, students with disabilities, girls and women, and teachers in remote areas. The second principle is to expand investments in open, free, and high-quality digital education content. Connectivity must open doors to rich learning resources and facilitate interactions that advance learning and development. All countries should have public options for public education on the internet. The third principle is that the digital transformation of education requires pedagogical innovation and change. Online and virtual environments demand new types of learning content and new forms of teaching and learning.

As it can be noted this is in tune with the Global Education Pact proposed by Pope Francis and places in the centre of attention those people who have often been disregarded by state policies.

Internationalization of Higher Education

At a national level it can be noticed that the Argentinian university system needs to design and implement institutional policies that regard languages as a safeguard and driving force for inclusion in university education, for strengthening the quality of its training offer, for regional integration, and for participation in the knowledge exchange worldwide.

The joint statement of the National University Council (Consejo Interuniversitario Nacional (CIN)) and the Dean Council of Private Universities (Consejo de Rectores de Universidades Privadas (CRUP)) "Towards the drawing-up of linguistic policies in the service of the purposes of the Argentinian University", June 24th, 2019, proposes the adoption of a linguistic governance model as a paradigm to approach the difficulties Argentine universities are going through. The Secretariat of University Policies (Secretaría de Políticas Universitarias (SPU)) through the Program of Internationalisation of Higher Education and International Cooperation (Programa de Internacionalización de la Educación Superior y Cooperación Internacional (PIESCI)) seeks to promote the internationalisation of the Argentine universities so as to strengthen their position, developing activities of international cooperation, promotion of Argentine universities in the world, articulation of the demands and needs of the Argentine university system regarding this issues.

On account of this need for **Internationalization at Higher Education level**, this new reading comprehension program in FL (English and Portuguese) that we propose, intends to contribute to this internationalization process in order that our students have the tools they need to become better citizens and professionals, which in turn will help position the Argentine university system in the world.

Conclusions

The topics discussed above constitute the theoretical background that we have resorted to to base our research project "Reading Comprehension Program in Foreign Languages: the case of UNLa". We believe each of the components are

closely interrelated since all of them claim for revision in our teaching programs. Such a revision should respond to the needs of a changing world and focus on those peoples who have often been silenced or disregarded. We are at the first stage of our research project, and we are currently in the process of data collection to determine which changes are needed in this reading comprehension program according to the different members of our university community. Surveys and interviews are being carried out among students, teachers and the authorities of the courses of studies. Once this information is processed we will be able to start designing our new program in which the FL, intercultural citizenship and IT will come together and play a key role.

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