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TOPIC:

Pedagogical Parameters to select EFL/ESL Textbooks in Language Schools

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Introduction

The significance of the role English as a Foreign Language (EFL) materials play in the acquisition of a second language has been discussed extensively. There are plenty of arguments in favor and against the benefits of using textbooks in classroom. Sheldon (1988) argues the textbooks keep recycling the same ideas as simply imitate other books and therefore ignoring “the winds of change from research, methodological experimentation, or classroom feedback” (p.239).

She explains that teachers rely on textbooks as an immediate remedy to deal with heavy work loads, heavy timetables and restrictive curricula. “The teacher (or educational purchaser) chooses a book which only approximates to the needs of the local context. It is not always a happy compromise, and is most often made in haste and with a paucity of systematically applied criteria” (p.238). Supporting Sheldon’s (1988) statements, Allright (1981) notes that the complexity of the learning process does not allow for “one size fits all” textbook concept (p.9).

Hutchinson and Torres (1994) dispute such arguments arguing that the learning process requires a well defined structure that only textbooks can provide (p.317). This statement is embraced by Miekley (2005) whose view is that the root of the problem is that instructors do not know how to select a textbook. He indicates that:

Because of the vast array of textbooks to choose from, the textbook selection process often gravitates to one of two extremes. In the process of evaluating textbooks, some educators ask so many questions that they are never able to complete the process. Others choose a reading textbook with little or no evaluation, yet it becomes the centerpiece of the curriculum until another haphazardly chosen reader replaces it. (p.1)

These conflicting points of view illustrate the importance of further investigating this topic. The present document will look at the ideas, principles and theories behind education and EFL/ESL teaching materials and identify the one that better suit and reflect the EFL teaching/learning scenarios and realities in Salvadorian classrooms.

This paper seeks a) to provide an essential tool for teaching /learning EFL; b) to determine the criteria and aspects at the moment of selecting EFL textbooks, and c) to analyze textbook content in order to define their purpose.

Objectives

The purpose of this essay is to increase awareness among people involved in choosing textbooks in Salvadorian language schools. In particular, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of selecting EFL teaching materials that emphasize pedagogical parameters. As a group, we strongly believe that Pedagogy is the key to make learning easy and effective in students.

Textbooks are the main source of guidance in the process of language teaching and play a crucial role in providing content in English (Hutchingson and Torres, 1994; Cardona 2007). Such content helps students to get around in the target language environment setting. This is why it is important for teachers of English as a second language (ESL), or English as a foreign language (EFL) to be familiar with pedagogical criteria to select EFL textbooks.

Our group wants to make a contribution to the Salvadorian teaching profession. For this reason, this paper seeks to provide: a) an essential tool for teaching/learning EFL/ESL b) Determine the criteria and aspects at the moment of selecting ESL/EFL textbooks; and c) analyze textbook content in order to define their purpose.

Rationale

The question of whether and how to use textbooks when teaching ESL/EFL has long been debated among researchers and specialists in the field. See Allright,(1981); Sheldon, (1988); Hutchington and Torres, (1994); Miekley, (2005); Cardona, (2007). However, despite disagreement among researchers about the importance of EFL/ESL textbooks, and the constant development of technology that allows us to have a higher quality of teaching materials, the demand for textbooks continues to grow. As noted by Miekley (2005), in countries like the United States, Canada and England, the publishing industry sends new series of ESL/EFL textbooks to the market every year. This makes the selection process more difficult for newly graduated EFL/ESL teachers.

From this perspective, teachers may have to ask themselves: What are the pedagogical parameters that we need to take into account at the moment of selecting EFL/ESL textbooks? In Central America, more specifically in El Salvador, some teachers use textbooks as their main teaching resource. The textbook becomes their bible. A single textbook may provide all the exercises they use during a school year. Cunningsworth, (1984); Sheldon, (1988); Skierso, (1991); Ur, (1996) note that in practice the textbook selection process is often based on personal preferences and may be affected by factors unrelated to pedagogy. These may include limited awareness of available textbooks, budget restrictions, and lack of textbook variety.

This certainly reflects the many realities of countries like El Salvador in which book availability may be limited by the difficulty in transportation and importing rules. This is exacerbated by the lack of schools' financial resources to keep materials up to date and teachers' unfamiliarity with the textbook selection process.

Our study seeks to find the pedagogical parameters that language schools can use to select the most adequate EFL textbook for their students. For example,

our study seeks to answer the following questions: How do we select textbooks? What aspects of ESL/EFL textbooks should be taken into account at the moment of selecting them? How culturally appropriate textbooks influence learning a foreign language?

Pedagogical Parameters to Select EFL/ESL Textbooks in Language Schools

To date, in the Central American region, few published studies have touched on the need of defining the parameters to select teaching materials when designing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) programs of study. Studies show that many educators and researchers have discussed topics such as education, teaching, learning, instruction, didactics, parents and school boards, and few Central Americans have devoted time to write about the importance of defining the parameters for the selection of EFL/ESL textbooks when designing EFL/ESL teaching materials.

For the purpose of this study, our team has agreed that the term EFL, better reflects the Salvadorian scenario because Spanish is the native language and English is not widely spoken in the country (see Cardona, 2007). As stated earlier, the objective of this basic literature review is to assist school administrators, principals, teachers, parents and students who are involved in the planning, implementation and delivery of EFL, ESL lessons.

The significance of selecting adequate textbooks in EFL teaching settings has been documented by Cardona (2007) who points out the need for structured learning that takes into account culturally relevant materials. She argues that “in the early stages of second language acquisition, students need to be able to draw from their own experiences, making the language learning process less constraining” (p.1).

With respect to culturally appropriate materials, she notes that “ESL textbooks and materials which are culturally relevant will provide language learners the opportunity to apply their background knowledge in all four language skills [reading, writing, speaking and listening]” (p.1). One of this author’s study findings was that a “common practice among EFL teachers is to pull sections and chapters from various sources in efforts to meet the needs and interests of their students” (p.9). She explains that intuitively, or by their own experience these teachers

appeared to have known exactly what worked well in learning EFL but they had difficulties finding culturally appropriate materials. Cardona's study illustrates how crucial culturally appropriate teaching materials are in learning a foreign language.

Acknowledging student individuality in the learning process

EFL textbooks should be student-centered. The center of attention should be the students and their learning. For this reason, the fact of presenting of new information, the practicing exercises and production should all be concentrated on helping students improve their language macro skills. Piaget (1999) advocates for learning that leads to a more student centered approach to promote closer student involvement in the process. Prieto and Martínez (2003) note that "learning is an active construction process in which the student gets involved in it in his own way; therefore, the instruction should focus on the learner: this demands to take into account his interests, motivations and learning styles" (p 40).

Using Imagery

EFL books should provoke learning by mental imagery when presenting content which can be achievable in vocabulary, reading texts and grammar. In other words, textbooks should promote the use of schemata that is the network responsible for high level non-verbal image. Stevick (1976) notes that once people have gotten the message out of a series of words, whether by reading or by hearing, they tend to hold on to the message but forget the exact words. The words that are most likely to be retained are the ones most closely tied to the parts of the message that has been retained.

People use different techniques to retain information, so books should enhance the techniques people use to help them retain more information. Some people read words from what they have written(kinesthetic); other people hear the echo of the voice from the person who has said the words(auditor); other people

reported seeing pictures as the person gives the information orally(visual). Prieto & Martinez (2003) explain different people learn according to their type of intelligence.

Defining and Identifying Learning Objectives

Objectives have a variety of positive effects on teaching and learning. First, selected EFL textbooks should ideally provide administrators and teachers with clear content activities. Activities should be clear enough to deduce what the purpose to be achieved in real life is. According to Pearse & Davies (2000) “the clear definition of appropriate goals is vital to successful English teaching and learning” (p.119).

Furthermore, EFL textbooks should presumably provide EFL instructors with the content material to plan classes with well organized objectives. The material provided in the textbooks should supply processes of cognitive complexity that help students achieve new tasks. The designed tasks for objectives should help trainers to design specific, measurable, attainable, time bound and reliable objectives. The idea is that students show change of behavior that comes out from the efficiency in the teaching action at the end of a period of instruction. This is measured when the students perform activities that they were not able to carry out before.

The teaching action must be based on objectives that are reached. Therefore, the contents in the book ought to provide sufficient information for the students to reach the collection of objectives set for the class. Galo de Lara (2006) suggests that objectives should be formulated using Bloom et al. verb classification which includes cognitive, affective, and psycho-motor domains. In her view, “setting objectives is the character of scientific pedagogy, the evaluation of the efficiency of the teaching action, the reviewing of curriculum and the categorization of goals” (p.9).

She indicates that verbs help us to focus on what our final destination is and adds that the textbook ought to follow a gradual sequence of contents i.e., it should present the study material at a little bit higher level than the student's level. The purpose is to achieve better results. Richards (2003) states that people who have pursued a set of proximal goals will gain a sense of self-efficacy by the fact that they will be approaching and reaching these goals.

Promoting interactive learning

The selected EFL textbooks should promote student-student interaction, a time in which they have the chance to exchange knowledge, thoughts, ideas, and so on. Language learning and teaching place a high premium on the interaction of all the seven basic language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and viewing, writing and thinking and reasoning (National Curriculum Statement Overview, 2001, p.45). Teachers often resort to grouping by ability because of an inescapable fact of life students differ dramatically from one another (Berliner & Casanova 1993, p.6). Everyone at any moment of his or her life faces the need to work with other people to get work done, reach consensus, learn from each other and identify strengths and weaknesses.

It is important to know that interactive learning must be monitored closely. Research done by Harris and Sipay (1980) found that after a year, students of the same ability in reading and mathematics showed that they reduced the range of abilities among group members. Doff (1992) also identified problems teachers face when assigning pair or group work, i.e., it produces too much noise, students make mistakes without being corrected and it is difficult to control every student specially in large classes.

In our work as teachers, we also find the advantages when using pair and group work proposed by Doff (1992). In our experience there is more language practice among the students, students are more involved, feel secure and help each other. Weighing the two aspects mentioned above as a group, we consider

that assigning pair and group work is highly productive in EFL learning. So, textbooks must contain exercises that promote social learning.

How culturally appropriate textbooks influence learning a foreign language?

As illustrated by Cardona (2007), drawing from personal experiences and culture facilitates the learning process. On the one hand, one could argue that this is more relevant when teaching EFL in a country where English is not widely spoken. In theory, this will be more applicable to Salvadorian settings. On the other hand, one must recognize that when learning a foreign language we also learn about the culture and customs of the nations where that language is spoken. From this point of view, textbooks should increase student's awareness and understanding of the cultural values of the English speaking countries and their own countries so that they learn how to act in different situations while being in other countries.

Datesman, Crandal and Kearny (2005) point out the trouble ESL students face while living or studying in an English speaking country. They found that students are frequently confused or even mystified about English speaking countries' values, attitudes and cultural patterns. Datesman and colleagues' study shows that even those students who have mastered enough English to take courses at a university in an English speaking country, often find that they do not understand the cultural rules well enough to be successful as students. It is important to note that not only students need to know about cultures in English speaking countries, but also business people, visiting scholars or government officials and even tourists.

Culturally appropriate textbooks may promote curiosity and interest. Freinet (1999) indicates that EFL textbooks should catch the students' motivation by promoting interest and natural curiosity to succeed in the learning process (pp. 49-51). Galo de Lara (2006) notes that "motivation builds the learning process.

Motivation is innate and personal in a student, the teacher action tries to match it with indoors and outdoors stimuli” (pp 80-81).

Prieto and Martinez (2003) add that “learning is an active construction process in which the students get involved in their own way” They further note that the instruction should focus on the learner because this demands to take into account his interests, motivation and learning styles (p 40). Once teachers motivate students, they learn better and are able to apply their knowledge into real life. Culturally appropriate materials are important because they inspire curiosity, are student-centered and provide a learning link between learning and the student reality.

Grammar vs. Communication

The EFL textbooks should present language through functions because language is a communication system. There are still books which are presenting grammar and vocabulary neglecting the fact that language is intended to be used in real communication. Davies and Pearse (2002) note that Linguists and Language teachers have began to emphasize that language is a communication system used for practical purposes, and that these purposes are the functions or the communicative functions listed in updated syllabi, course books and tables of content. For example, we use language to greet people, to introduce ourselves and to apologize (p.20).

It is important to mention that language teaching is approached from a communicative angle, emphasizing what language will need to do and communicate things. So, textbooks should contain structures that allow for use of everyday communication sentence structure.

Selection vs. Evaluation

According to Miekley (2005), “program directors and classroom teachers are under pressure to adopt new reading textbooks on a fairly regular basis, and often on a short notice” (p.1). He adds that for these reasons many rely on the advice of the sales staff of the publishing companies who have a business agenda. He warns that “while publishers’ representatives may provide some informed assistance, their need to sell new products clearly influences their recommendations” (p.1).

In the case of El Salvador, some English as a Foreign language teaching institutions may sacrifice learning needs of students over the institution’s need to ensure higher profits. Therefore, textbook selection is also tied to profits. For example, books may be selected based on a) How much money the institution can make by selling the books to students, and b) The bonuses offered by the publishing company to the executives in charge of selecting the books for the educational institution. This practice seems to be across cultures and not unique to El Salvador. Sheldon (1988) cites Greenall 1984, p.14 to argue that this is what creates a 'course book credibility gap' adding that:

Because of emphatic contradictions and potential conflicts of interest in their creation, commercial exploitation, public assessment, selection, and ultimate classroom use, ELT books are frequently seen as poor compromises between what is educationally desirable on the one hand and financially viable on the other. In simple terms, they often do not seem to provide good value for money.

The fact that the EFL/ESL textbooks are sometimes used for financial gain does not mean that they are not an important tool when teaching or learning another language. Ethical teachers and instructors will put the needs of the students first. Ethical teachers and institutions are the ones who will find our recommendations useful, and those are the ones we want to target

Methodology (six steps in the book “The Literature Review.”)

In this work we have attempted to set down the six steps in The Literature Review written by Lawrence A. Machi and Brenda T. McEvoy.

Step 1 Select a Topic

1. Choose a Research Interest
2. Choose a Research Interest from Everyday Interest
3. Use the Research Interest to Choose the Research Topic
4. Visit the Library

Step 2 Search the Literature

1. Discover the Literature Review
2. Conduct a Literature Search
3. Scan the Literature
4. Use the Internet
5. Manage Your Data
6. Skim Your Literature
7. Map Your Materials
8. Refine Your Topic
9. Expand Your Topic

Step 3 Develop the Argument

1. Build a Case for Literature Review
2. Arguments
3. Evaluate the Basic Parts of an Argument
4. Claims
5. Multiple Claims Arguments

Step 4 Survey the Literature

1. Assemble the Collected Data
2. Synthesize the Information

3. Analyze the Patterns of the Data

Step 5 Critique the Literature

1. Implicative Reasoning
2. The Two Arguments
3. Argument Patterns
4. Backing
5. Fallacious Arguments
6. The Case is Everything

Step 6 Write the Review

1. Write to Understand
2. Write to be Understood
3. Write to Understand

Recommendations

What aspects of ESL/EFL textbooks should be taken into account at the moment of selecting them?

Based on the literature review and on our own teaching experience, we propose the following points that teachers in Salvadorian settings may consider when selecting EFL/ESL teaching materials.

1. Textbook should provide clear content material to help teachers achieve clear objectives.
2. Textbooks should present culturally appropriate content.
3. Bloom's verb taxonomy can be considered when evaluating teaching objectives and textbook content.
4. The content presented should be a little bit higher than the students' level.
5. Textbooks should provide room for evaluation of students' learning. In this way teachers can find out if they are achieving their objectives or not.
6. Textbooks should promote students' curiosity by applying students' learning style based on multiple intelligences.
7. Textbooks should promote student- student interaction, pair work, group work, whole class activities and so forth.
8. Textbooks should help students arrive to conclusions in the exercises they present using mental imagery or schemata.
9. Textbooks should present the manner, the form, meaning, and use of language in a way that allows for controlled exercises, semi controlled exercises, and production through functions.
10. The textbook activities should be student-centered and allow room for failure.
11. The textbook should promote independent learning on students or making students responsible for their own language.

12. Textbooks should increase awareness regarding differences in cultural values of the countries where English is spoken.
13. Textbook should promote peace and inclusion.

Perhaps a final point to consider is Hahn, who indicates that success and failure are equally important in the learning process. Success is important because students need to be successful if they are to build the confidence and capacity needed to take risks and meet increasingly difficult challenges. Failure gives students the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and to persevere when things are hard. It also provides them with the opportunity to learn to turn disabilities into opportunities.

Conclusions

Based on our extensive literature review, we conclude that no textbook will meet the individual learning needs of a student, or the specific teaching approach of a particular instructor. However, a concerted effort from teachers, students and academic institutions can go a long way in improving EFL teaching standards in El Salvador. In concluding this paper we would like to use a Cunningsworth (1984) quote:

No course book will be totally suited to a particular teacher situation. The teacher will have to find his own way of using it and adapting it if necessary. So we should not be looking for the perfect course book which meet all our requirement, but rather for the best possible fit between what the course book offers and what we as students and as teachers need. (p.89).
As quoted in Jiazhi Wang (2006).

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