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Teaching Pronunciation in Foreign/Second Language Textbooks and Training Courses from a Comparative Didactics Perspective

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Abstract

Since the presentation *Teaching Pronunciation in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) Textbooks: a Sample Analysis* in *New Sounds 2013* has been of interest to teachers not only of French but also of other languages, it has been decided to draw cross-language comparisons from a *Comparative Didactics* perspective based on the findings of this presentation. Indeed, this paper reviews an issue that concerns specialists in teaching English, French and Spanish pronunciation: the little attention given to pronunciation practice in some foreign/second language textbooks and foreign/second language teacher training courses. It concludes that comparing the findings of *Specific Language Didactics* in relation to these two issues is not only research generating but also that the conclusive and specific recommendations proposed by some of these didactics to improve teaching pronunciation can be of use to teachers of other foreign/second languages as well.

It could be argued that the main goals of the discipline known as *Comparative Didactics* (*Didactique Comparée*) agree with those of the *Association pour les Recherches Comparatistes en Didactique*: "[…] to group together disciplinary didacticians, whatever their discipline, to compare the concepts and the methods they use […]" as well as "[…] to confront the research of disciplinary *didactiques* with social sciences such as anthropology and sociology (e.g. curricular sociology)" […]" (Caillot, 2007, p. 129). Caillot (2007) points out that the subsequent effect of these two goals should not be to build on the theoretical body of *General Didactics* and to undermine the importance of the research findings of *Specific Didactics* but to identify the generalities of all the *Specific Didactics* and, at the same time, their specificities[1]. Indeed, Mercier, Schubauer-Leoni and Sensevy (2002) explain that there are some general aspects of teachers' and learners' work that may be associated with the teaching-learning process in general and some others that are related to the teaching-learning of a specific discipline. What is more, the authors suggest that generalities and specificities may be identified at different levels of the teaching-learning of a specific discipline. The example they give is that of French as a First Language and of French as a Foreign Language (*FFL*). Even though they are both related to the same discipline, the French language, there are certain specificities that distinguish the former from the latter. A case in point would be the institutions in which they may be learnt: a family in the case of French as a First Language and a school in the case of *FFL*.

Following this argument, it was thought that the study of the teaching-learning of specific foreign/second languages would be of interest to the field of *Comparative Didactics*. Conversely, it was also thought that *Specific Foreign/Second Language Didactics* would also profit from the findings of *Comparative Didactics*. To illustrate this mutual advantage, the following example will be given. *English as a Foreign/Second Language Didactics (EFSLD)*, *French as a Foreign/Second Language Didactics (FFSLD)* and *Spanish as a Foreign/Second Language Didactics (SFSLD)* have certain specificities that differentiate them, e.g. the languages taught as disciplines themselves. This is reflected in the contents of *FFSL*, *EFSL* and *SFSL* teacher training programs: generally speaking, these programs focus on

[1] In this paper, the term *Specific Didactics* is employed to refer to any discipline that looks into how the knowledge of a specific subject, e.g. English as a Foreign Language, is acquired and learnt by specific learners in specific teaching-learning contexts and situations.

the study of the target language and on the most effective ways of teaching-learning it. This is understandable due to the fact that, as Caillot (2007) suggests, "A didactician should be a good connoisseur of his/her academic discipline of reference. For example, to do research in *didactique* of physics, it is better if you know physics well" (Caillot, 2007, p. 127). At the same time, *EFSLD*, *FFSLD* and *SFSLD* share a number of generalities, e.g. the fact that their target languages are taught-learnt as foreign/second ones. Owing to these similarities, it could be inferred that the findings of any of these three disciplines may be beneficial to the other two. Consequently, it would not be mistaken to argue for the existence of a discipline that could be given the name of *Comparative Foreign/Second Language Didactics*.

Comparative Foreign/Second Language Didactics would be considered a branch of Comparative Language Didactics, which, in turn, is a branch of Comparative Didactics. Comparative Foreign/Second Language Didactics will be defined as a discipline that compares the goals, methods and findings of individual foreign/second language didactics with a view to building on existing theory of foreign/second language teaching and learning.

This paper suggests, for instance, that the systematic comparison of research problems that concern teaching-learning pronunciation in *EFSLD*, in *FFSLD* and in *SFSLD* may lead to the conclusion that some of these problems are not unique to the teaching-learning of *EFSL*, *FFSL* or *SFSL* and that the suggestions and recommendations that any of these three *Specific Foreign/Second Language Didactics* could propose may be applied by the other two.

The two research problems in question in this paper are the small amount of teaching-learning pronunciation in some *ESL*, *FFL* and *SFL* textbooks and the absence of teaching-learning pronunciation in some *ESL*, *FFSL* and *SFL* teacher training courses. Suggestions made so far within these two research areas to overcome these problems and, as a result, to improve teaching-learning pronunciation in *EFSL*, *FFSL* and *SFSL* courses will be presented as well.

TEACHING-LEARNING PRONUNCIATION IN TEXTBOOKS

Loiseau (2008) analyses the amount of pronunciation taught in *FFL* textbooks produced in France. The author observes that, in general, these textbooks contain few sections devoted to teaching-learning pronunciation and that they do mainly at level one, rarely at level two and

almost never at level three. What is more, the author observes that, in some cases, these sections are not integrated into the whole syllabus, i.e. they are placed at the back of the book or in the activity books that accompany the textbooks. Olsson (2011) targets a set of seven *FFL* textbooks made and used in Sweden between 1990 and 2008 and observes that these could be sorted out into two categories. The first one comprises textbooks that include a small amount of teaching-learning pronunciation and ignores Swedish learners' main difficulties when speaking and listening to French. The second group is composed of textbooks that include parts explicitly designed to teach-learn pronunciation but in a limited fashion. Finally, Orlando (2013) analyses a sample of fifteen European *FFL* textbooks produced over the last thirty years, and finds out that there has been a generally gradual increase in the percentage of sections devoted to teaching-learning pronunciation according to the findings in this sample. The author shows that it is since 2000 that the *FFL* textbooks under scrutiny have included these sections at level two, whereas only the textbook series published in 2009 and 2010 includes them at the three levels. What is more, the percentage of parts allotted to pronunciation in this series is statistically higher than that of the series published before, which, the author argues, may be either a consequence or even one of the defining features of the passage from the communicative approach to the task-based approach to teaching foreign languages that has occurred over the last thirty years.

The conflict between the fact that foreign/second language learners may find the pronunciation of their target language difficult and the little importance given to teaching-learning pronunciation in foreign/second language textbooks has also been reported in studies that deal with teaching-learning *SFL* and *ESL*. As for the former, a case in point is Molinié's (2010) analyses of five *SFL* textbooks used in schools in Québec. These analyses lead the author to conclude that these textbooks lack pronunciation activities, that the few that they contain are not varied and that, as a general rule, teaching-learning pronunciation does not occupy an important place in them.

With respect to the latter, teaching pronunciation in *ESL* textbooks, it has been observed that an important part of the literature has focused on the analysis of *Pronunciation Textbooks* (Breitkreutz, Derwing & Rossiter, 2001; Gilbert, 2008; Torres Águila, 2007 & Foote, Holtby & Derwing, 2011). Nevertheless, teaching pronunciation in *General ESL Textbooks* has also been of interest in the field of *ESL* teaching-learning. In a comparison of the resources used in Canada to teach pronunciation around 2001 with

those employed in the same country about 2011, Foote et al (2011), for example, point out that "[…] a survey of current teaching materials indicates that publishers now incorporate more pronunciation activities into their general-skills textbooks than previously […]" (Foote et al, 2011, p. 2), which seems to match the findings presented by Orlando (2013) concerning *FFL* textbooks and introduced above. However, Derwing, Diepenbroek and Foote's (2012) survey shows that, even though an average of five per cent of the pages of twelve *ESL* textbook series centre on teaching-learning pronunciation, some of these series contain a good deal of pronunciation practice while others contain but a little. Also, as with the *FFL* textbooks, the authors point out that while some textbook authors incorporate pronunciation activities across the whole series, others do so inconsistently, i.e. these activities appear only in some textbooks of the same series.

This section shows that research has revealed that lack of consistency in the amount of pronunciation taught across foreign language textbook series as well as the little presence or almost absence of pronunciation activities in some of them concern researchers in the fields of *ESLD*, *FFLD* and *SFLD*. How this issue ties up with the one that follows and its relevance in foreign/second language teaching-learning will be dealt with below.

TEACHING PRONUNCIATION IN TEACHER TRAINING COURSES

In this section, observations made with reference to the importance given to training to teach pronunciation in *SFL* teacher training courses will be provided first, whereas those concerning the same domain in *ESL* and in *Teaching French* will follow.

Villaescusa Illán (2009) suggests that one of the requirements for any *SFL* teacher to teach pronunciation is that he/she possess a sound knowledge of Spanish phonetics and, if possible, of the phonetics of the learners' mother tongue. Nonetheless, with reference to the former, Ramos Oliveira (2009) cites Poch (1999), who argues that *SFL* teacher training courses aim at teaching future teachers to teach Spanish grammar and lexis but that they neglect both learning and teaching Spanish pronunciation. This situation could probably result in *SFL* teachers' deliberate decision not to teach pronunciation or in the involuntary omission of pronunciation from *SFL* lesson plans as *SFL* teachers would not know how to tackle it. Indeed, Ramos Oliveira (2009) explains that in Brazil, for example, it has been reported that *SFL* teachers get lost when

they correct *SFL* learners' speech. The author particularly points out that they do not know what to correct, when to do it, how to do it or even why. As for the latter, knowledge of the phonetics of the learners' mother tongue, Bartolí Rigol (2005) justifies it by arguing that this could be partly responsible for interlanguage errors.

Lack of attention given to teaching pronunciation in teacher training courses has also been reported by *ESLD* specialists. To illustrate this point, Usó Viciedo (2008) cites Mac Donald (2002), who explains that several studies have indicated that, in Australia, a good number of *ESL* teachers do not deal with pronunciation in class partly because they do not know how to do it, i.e. they have not received any training in it. A similar situation has been observed in Canada.

Breitkreutz et al. (2001) notice that most of the instructors they know "[…] have not had any specific training for the teaching of pronunciation; neither have they had much in the way of linguistic training in phonetics and phonology" (Breitkreutz et al., 2001, p. 52). This comment, which is based on the authors' anecdotal experience, has been corroborated by research. In a survey of 67 ESL programs conducted in Ontario, British Columbia, Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Yukon, Breitkreutz et al (2001) observed that 30% of the respondents had answered that the teachers in their programs had received any training in teaching pronunciation. A similar survey was conducted across eight provinces ten years later to look into any possible changes in teaching pronunciation in Canadian ESL programs. Foote et al. (2011) reported that this figure increased to 50%, i.e. twenty per cent more than in 2001. Nonetheless, while in 2001 73% of the respondents reported that teachers taught pronunciation in their programs, in 2011 this figure dropped to 46%. The authors conclude that "Based on the data from the two surveys, it seems that although there may be somewhat increased training opportunities, instructors are still not receiving the professional development they need to feel completely comfortable teaching pronunciation" (Foote et al., 2011, p. 16), which leads to the conclusion that, between 2001 and 2011, the effectiveness of teacher training in teaching pronunciation has not improved much.

As for French, no specific reference to teaching pronunciation in *FFL* or in *FSL* teacher training programs has been found. However, since two studies that deal with teacher training within the area of teaching *French as a language of instruction* have been conducted in geographical places where the immigrant population is very high, it has been decided to move to a different level (Mercier et al., 2002) and to cite them. Indeed, in many

learning contexts in France and in Québec, *French as a language of instruction* may be a first language for some learners but a second language or even a foreign language for others.

The first of the two studies in question comes from France and is concerned with the didactics of French textbooks and with novice teachers' knowledge of the French language and reliance on the content of these textbooks due to their insufficient training and background. Laparra (1994) does not refer to the extent to which teachers are trained to tackle pronunciation issues themselves. Nevertheless, the author asserts that future teachers of French in France "[…] sont en train de découvrir, avec plus ou moins de netteté, que leur formation universitaire est en décalage par rapport aux exigences de leur métier à venir […]" (Laparra, 1994, p. 107) and that "Les auteurs de man'uels savent que leur ouvrage sera utilisé par des maîtres mal formés […] " (Laparra, 1994, p.110). Bearing in mind that pronunciation is or should be one of the components of teacher training programs and that the author makes no exception to it in her assertions, it is understood that these apply to teaching pronunciation as well. Lafontaine (2005) does refer to teaching pronunciation explicitly.

In a survey carried out amongst seventeen teachers of *French as a language of instruction* in Québec, the author observes that only two have received some university training in teaching speaking skills. What is more, similarly to the *SFL* teachers teaching in Brazil and referred to by Ramos Oliveira (2009), the seventeen teachers explained that "[…] leur manque de formation en didactique de l'oral les insécurisait, car ils n'arrivent pas à comprendre comment enseigner l'oral, quels sont ses fondements et quelle est la progression de son apprentissage" (Lafontaine, 2005, p.99).

Given that research has shown that lack of a substantial amount of training in teaching pronunciation in *ESL*, *SFL* and *French as a language of instruction* teaching programs may lead to novice teachers' ignorance about how to go about it, and granted that some *ESL*, *SFL* and *FFL* textbooks do not provide sufficient pronunciation practice to which novice teachers may resort, it is to be deduced that little pronunciation is taught in some *ESL*, *SFL* and *FFL*/ *French as a language of instruction* courses. The next section will discuss what research on teaching *ESL*, *SFL*, *FFL* and *French as a language of instruction* has suggested with a view to overcoming this problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The similarities and parallelism between the research problems and the findings related to the importance given to pronunciation in French, Spanish and English as a foreign/second language textbooks and teacher training programs in the above-mentioned studies have led to conclusive recommendations whose specificities may enlighten teachers of any of these three languages.

In relation to *FFL* teacher training and the negligible attention paid to pronunciation in *FFL* textbooks, Orlando (2013) recommends that both future teachers and graduate teachers of *FFL* look into the quantity and content of pronunciation activities in *FFL* textbooks with the aim of identifying when the use of these textbooks should be combined with that of supplementary pronunciation materials. With respect to *French as a language of instruction*, Lafontaine (2005) adds that teacher training programs should place more emphasis on teaching spoken French not only as a medium of communication and as a subject itself but also to train teachers as model speakers of French as "Les futurs enseignants doivent être conscients de l'importance de la diction, des faits prosodiques et de la langue en tant qu'outil de communication" (Lafontaine, 2005, p. 107).

In connection with pronunciation in *ESL* textbooks, Breitkreutz et al. (2001) conclude that "[…] there is a continuing need for curriculum and materials developers to incorporate pronunciation instruction into communicative contexts" (Breikreutz et al., 2001, p. 59) due to ESL students' problems with segmentals and suprasegmentals. As for *ESL* teacher training, ten years later, Foote et al. (2011) observe that it appears that "[…] instructors are still not receiving the professional development they need to feel completely comfortable teaching pronunciation" (Foote et la., 2011, p. 16). Owing to these reasons, the authors recommend that *ESL* teacher training programs include courses that deal specifically with teaching pronunciation more often. Also, the authors suggest that *ESL* programs offer more pronunciation courses and that *ESL* teachers teach pronunciation in the *General English* class as well. Finally, they propose that *ESL* teachers deal with both segmental and suprasegmental issues and that they centre on those pronunciation features that "[…] have the highest effect […]" (Foote et al., 2011, p.19).

As for Spanish, Molinié (2010) concludes that, based on the findings of her analyses of *SFL* textbooks, pronunciation does not play an important role in *SFL* teaching-learning, and argues for attaching to it the same importance as to the other components of the Spanish language.

Villaescusa Illán (2009) agrees with Molinié (2010) and suggests that this should be reflected in course design. This is because the author observes that it is common for *SFL* teachers to tackle pronunciation in the first lessons of *SFL* courses or when pronunciation poses problems for the students, whereas the other contents of *SFL* course syllabi are dealt with the moment curricula are designed. In the same vein, Bartolí Rigol (2005) is in favour of integrating pronunciation into the other components of *SFL* courses as it may also still be thought that grammar should be learnt first and that speaking skills should be developed later. Furthermore, the author places great emphasis on the fact that the first contact with the language should be oral and that pronunciation should not be taught graphically as this may hinder the development of the learners' speaking skills.

As explained in the first paragraph of this section, after putting all these recommendations together, one would be able to build a set of recommendations that could be of use to any teaching professional of *FFSL*, *EFSL* and *SFSL*.

CONCLUSIONS

The exchange of research problems, findings and recommendations between *Specific Foreign/Second Language Didactics* may enhance a better understanding of foreign/second language teaching-learning issues, as this paper has shown with regard to teaching pronunciation in textbooks and in teacher training courses. Indeed, it has been observed that certain research problems and findings in these two areas are not unique to the teaching-learning of a specific language. Much to the contrary, generalities that go beyond the specificities of *Specific Didactics* have been identified.

However, it has also been revealed that the conclusive and specific recommendations that the different *Specific Didactics* have put forward can be of use to teachers of other foreign/second languages as well. It may seem that "going one's own way" in foreign/second language research may be counterproductive as it would inevitably lead to neglecting the findings of other *Specific Foreign/Second Language Didactics*.

Also, this paper has observed that *Comparative Foreign/Second Language Didactics* can be hypothesis generating since, thanks to its comparisons, research gaps in *Specific Didactics* may be identified and, therefore, further research possibilities established and literature reviews outlined. A case in point is the study of the importance given to pronunciation in *FFL* teacher training courses, as this study has had to move to a different level

(Mercier et al, 2002) and refer to literature that deals with this issue in the area of *French as a language of instruction.*

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