Universidad del Salvador
Fac. de Filosofía y Letras
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas

The Teaching of Spanish as a Second Language in Argentina
(A Challenge for Argentine Teachers Trained in EFL)

Doctoral Dissertation

Thesis Candidate: Lidia Juana Adaglio
Thesis Adviser: Aurora Cardona Serrano, MA in Education (Colombia)
Thesis Deputy Adviser: Cristina de Ortúzar, MA in Education (Argentina)

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This thesis is dedicated to those I love and care for, and to those I professionally respect, and greatly admire.

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Abstract

After having taught English as a foreign language for over 20 years in Buenos Aires, Argentina, one day, we were invited to change what up to that moment had been our daily linguistic objective in class for another live language, our mother tongue, to be more precise. In a couple of weeks, we were teaching Spanish to foreigners, visiting Argentina from different parts of the world. The shift meant the recreation, followed by test and trial, of well-grounded EFL*and ESL* methodology (theory and practice), and to our surprise, we soon discovered that the seeds of a most fascinating experience had been planted - the seeds of teaching Spanish as a second language (SSL)* in Argentina.

The aim of this thesis is, then, intimately related to the experience lived, formally, during the two years of rigorous research work as originally planned, and informally, during a good many years after 1992. For this reason, the communicative methodologies and classroom practices as of the 70's, 80's and 90's, and the significant contributions from the field of psychology and of the humanistic sciences that have accompanied them are present in this paper and will constantly be referred to as back-up source of stances taken, decisions made, and conclusions reached.

Teaching SSL undoubtedly poses a challenge before teachers who have been trained to teach English as a foreign language. It happened to us

20 years ago, and it happens every time an Argentine teacher of English is requested to teach his/her mother tongue to foreigners living here or abroad. Why have we used the word challenge below the main title of this thesis? Because, for us, the word primarily stresses the connotation of "choice followed by action." Quite frequently, whenever life sets up a challenge before us, it simultaneously displays a minimum of two options: we can either take up the challenge or leave it, that is, respond with action or quit; 20 years ago, we wisely decided for the first option.

*EFL:English as a foreign language
*ESL: English as a second language
*SSL: Spanish as a second language

INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Reason for Writing this Thesis

> "In the final analysis, all teachers have to develop their own teaching style. In a sense, the methods debate is a dead issue because there will be as many methods as there are classroom teachers. It is our hope that the ideas and resources in this book will help less experienced teachers to develop their own distinctive teaching style, and prompt more experienced teachers to reflect on and refine theirs. In this way, all teachers might ultimately be self-directed."
>
> David Nunan & Clarice Lamb
> Authors' Preface , 3rd. paragraph,
> (1996), *The Self-Directed Teacher*.

As we say in the Abstract that precedes this Introduction, we are a group of qualified EFL teachers who one day, in the 90's, approximately twenty years after graduation, were invited to teach Spanish to foreigners who had the intention of settling or living temporarily in Argentina. The shift of linguistic objective was the first visible and tangible sign of change, but there were others. For instance, the composition of the class and the expectations of its members – from a class with Argentine students (children, adolescents or adults) with the aim of learning to speak a foreign language, we passed on to another class with foreigners (generally young and middle-aged adults), with the aim of learning to speak Spanish, the local language. Other changes also included the choice of a specific methodology: from the very start, we knew that the teaching of Spanish as

a second language would no doubt involve the revision of EFL and ESL methodologies and the test and trial of subsequent adaptations. Indeed, without our knowing it, the threshold of a most fascinating teaching experience had been stepped upon.

Today, almost twenty years afterwards, we have decided to disclose the experience lived at the beginning of the 90's, an experience formally conducted all along the two-year research phase originally planned, and informally, all along the remaining eight years of the 20thC. and the early years of the 21stC. What is the purpose of such a decision? We simply think it is high time we began sharing our experience with colleagues in the field. **The purpose behind this thesis is intimately imbued with the spirit of sharing**. When sharing honest gains we are not only giving assistance and guidance, we are also opening doors to debate and research. Of course, the only two conditions are the right audience and the right time, and both have been insured on this occasion.

The insertion of a quotation in the right-hand corner of the first page of this introduction has an explanation, which is now worth giving. By 1996, when reading, *The Self-directed Teacher* by Nunan & Lamb, in the Preface to their book, we came across the best back-up to the methodological recreation and revision we had undertaken six years before. These specialists in EFL and ESL could describe better than any other specialist in the field, the role we had played in the teaching of Spanish to

foreigners, a role which, in their opinion, was the imminent consequence

of the end of "the methods era" (Richards & Rodgers (2001) *Approaches

and Methods in Language Teaching,* Chapter 1) and the beginning of "the

post methods era" (Richards& Rodgers (2001) *Approaches and Methods in

Language teaching,* Chapter19). The new role Nunan and Lamb disclose in

their book is one in which teachers are more self-directed and less method

dependent in matters of language teaching and learning. Since then, Nunan

& Lamb's words have accompanied us in our daily striving for developing

and refining a style of teaching Spanish, which acknowledges its origin,

but which, at the same time, recognizes the inevitable presence of

adaptations on the path towards success.

**The reason for writing this thesis emerges as a consequence of

the purpose already voiced**. Most of our colleagues are graduates of the

School of Philosophy and Letters, at the University of Buenos Aires, UCA,

USAL, UMSA, and other licensed universities or of Teacher Education

Centres at UCA, USAL, UMSA, and the J.R. Fernández and Dr. J. V.

Gonzàlez Institutes of Higher Education. Colleagues from the School of

Letters are well-informed of the secrets and nuances of Spanish as a means

of oral and written discourse, but their methodological training only

includes the current methodology of a teacher of Spanish who teaches the

language to Spanish speaking natives. These Spanish teachers definitely

need to be introduced to the special methodology that deals with second

and foreign language learning if their intention is to teach Spanish to foreigners with fairly good prospects of success. On the other hand, colleagues from Tertiary Language Institutes or University Language Departments, who have specially been trained in the art of teaching a foreign language, can perfectly make use of their classroom experience, with obvious adaptations, when teaching Spanish to foreigners. There is, yet, a recommendation to make to the latter. They must assume the compromise of revising, reinforcing and optimizing the knowledge they have of their first language, for one thing is speaking it as well-educated native speakers, and quite another, teaching it to foreign students with different needs, expectations and capacities. With the sole intention of illustrating this last point, let us add that twenty years ago, when we began teaching Spanish, after having worked as teachers of English for twenty years, we not only revised and refined known EFL and ESL methodologies in view of the fact that the language objective had been changed, but also committed ourselves to making an intensive review of Spanish, our first language, for the sake of those whom we would soon meet in class.

Chapter I: Literature Review

(Survey of Methods and Approaches in Language Teaching)

Although our Spanish teaching experience started only twenty years ago, when communicative language   teaching was at its highest peak of acceptance, we have decided to date this survey back to 1910, for the present always takes from the past what has proved useful or beneficial, and allows it to stay by the side of change, as a piece of truth with no time deadline. The 20thC. can well be separated into two well-defined periods - the early and mid-decades (1910-1960) and   the late decades (1970- 2000). As regards the 21stC., we will briefly describe what we have witnessed happen during this first decade.

Early and mid-decades of the 20thC.

During the first decade of the 20thC., despite the negative effects and results of the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), this methodology was still being used for teaching not only Greek and Latin, but also modern languages. The constant reference to the students'mother tongue in class, the memorization of grammar rules prior to the presentation of examples, and the presence of written exercises in translating from and into the two

languages involved – the learner's mother tongue and the target language - were commom features of a GTM class. By then, the first methodology that had raised its voice against the GTM was formally recognized as the **Direct Method (DM),** which, owing to its European origin, enjoyed the support of scholars such as Paul Passy (phonetician and educator),Otto Jespersen (grammarian and educator) and Henry Sweet

(grammarian and phonetician).

The main characteristics of the DM, as derived from its underlying theory of language and theory of learning, may be put forth as follows:

1. Language teaching and learning begins by the oral medium (listening and speaking) and   continues by the written medium (reading and writing).

2. In class, the target language is the only linguistic means to be heard and used:
the learner's mother tongue is openly forbidden, and must be kept out of the language classroom.

3. New language in lessons is to be contextualized in everyday situations, and this guarantees the learning of everyday language instead of the obsolete language of oldish literary texts.

4. There are three basic techniques for introducing new language, and they are known as ostensive teaching (visual image + new word in context), contextual teaching (familiar language + new word in context), and ostensive-contextual teaching (visual image + familiar language + new word in context).

5. Oral assimilation of new language (practice phase) rests on the use of oral drills, which have a mechanical and repetitive nature,and whose inner mechanism is triggered by a stimulus. The commonest types are substitution drills, replacement drills, transformation drills and analogy drills, which are used in order to insure assimilation of new language through repeating, imitating and memorizing.

6. The production phase in the DM insists on the use of such structured drills for the sake of correctness, reducing elaboration, if any, to choosing freely one of the options practised before.

7. Behaviourism, a psychological school which focuses attention on the the physical response to a stimulus, ignoring the role of the mind or of conscious experience as data collectors, stands behind the DM, casting its influence on principles and procedures.

8. The skills to be learnt and practised in class are four in number: listening, speaking, reading and writing, and this order of presentation is to be respected in textbooks, lesson plans and teaching lessons.

9. The organization of course materials is to conform to the principle of grading, which recommends starting on simple language forms, and words and phrases of higher

frequency use, in the lower levels, and then, gradually moving on to more complex language forms, and words and phrases of lower frequency use, in the upper levels.

10. Grammar is to be taught inductively, i.e., presented in context, practised in oral drills, and analysed by looking at examples (inference of rule).

The second methodology to raise its voice was also of European origin. It was called the **Oral Method (OM),** and England had been its birthplace. Two of its renown founders were Harold Palmer (linguist and ESL researcher) and A.S.Hornby (grammarian and ESL researcher).

Harold Palmer in his book *"The Teaching of Oral English"*(1940. London:Longman) clearly describes the existence of two phases in the learning process: an unconscious oral assimilation phase during which we are exposed to new language, mainly consisting of a special preview of linguistic signals with no explicit demands of oral or physical response whatsoever, and a conscious oral assimilation phase, during which attention is also drawn towards specific linguistic signals, but now, some kind of oral response is being requested.

Oral production, during the conscious phase of learning, is guaranteed by the presence of drill-like forms of work, and Palmer presents us with two types of drills: *sequential groups* and *homogeneous groups*. The former consists of four questions in a graded and pre-established order; the latter, of two well-combined forms of work, a

dictated homogeneous group (a sort of substitution drill with only one part of the sentence changing) and an independent homogeneous group (a general question requesting answers already practised in the preceding dictated homogeneous group).Very rarely are students invited or expected to frame answers of their own.

Examples:

Sequential group

Objective: fixing the pattern, S + Verb to be + Place, by means of a sequence of four pre-established questions.

Teacher	Student
1. Is Mary in the classroom?	Yes, she is.
2. Is Lucy in the classroom?	No, she isn´t.
3. Where´s Mary?	Mary is in the classroom.
4. Who´s in the classroom?	Mary is in the classroom.

Observation: in the days of the OM, students were made to answer questions 1 and 2, always giving the affirmative short answer first, and then, the negative one; questions 3 and 4 were to be answered in a full sentence.

Homogeneous groups:

Objective: reinforcing the pattern, S + Verb to be + Place, by changing the subject.

Dictated homogeneous group

Teacher Instructions: "So, Mary is in the classroom. I say, Sue, and you frame the same sentence, saying, Sue is in..... Ready?"

Teacher	Student
Mary is in the classroom. Now,say, Sue.	Sue is in the classroom.
Now, use, Bob.	Bob is in the classroom.
Now, Tom.	Tom is in the classroom.

....etc.

Observation: in the days of the OM, this type of drill was not situational and could include as many similar options as the teacher thought fit; usually, a chain of six or seven options was considered good enough for the pattern to be fixed.

Independent homogeneous group

Teacher Instructions: "Now I ask a question, and you answer, using any of the options we have used.

Teacher	Student
Who's in the classroom?	Bob is in the classroom.

> Who's in the classroom?   Tom is in the classroom.
>
> .... etc.
>
> **Observation**: in the days of the OM, the length of this oral drill was always similar to that of the preceding dictated homogenous group, for elaboration was non-existent, and fresh answers, neither expected nor encouraged.

The theory of language behind the OM insisted that language was speech and that form was at the core of the speaking ability. The theory of learning that accompanied this methodology, imbued, as well as the DM, with the dictates of behaviourist psychology, described language learning as a habit forming process based on imitating and memorizing language patterns through stimulus-response repetition.

In general, there were no differences between the OM and the DM in matters of teaching and learning a language. The one main difference between the two methods lay in the respective aim of each: the OM sustained that learning a language was a means of achieving communication, and the DM, that language learning was a means of achieving culture. Consequently, the OM favoured ear work (listening and speaking), and the DM, ear work and eye work (listening, speaking, reading and writing).