A VUELTAS CON LA INNOVACIÓN EN LA DIDÁCTICA DE LA LENGUA

ABOUT INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

There are already too many approaches to the Spanish language based on formulistic or regulatory assumptions, which are inoperative when it comes to fostering communicative competence, capable of going beyond strictly grammatical studies and calling upon the multidisciplinary. In this sense, the publication of *La lengua española en 100 preguntas* is a fundamental pillar for promoting new approaches to improving the teaching-learning processes of the mother tongue. Making the student the protagonist of learning, based on motivation and the closest and most everyday linguistic samples, guarantees the dynamisation of inquiring, investigative and creative models, fully identified with communicative competence and its didactics.

KEYWORDS: Didactics of language, educational innovation, inquiry-based models, communicative competence.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of innovation is increasingly associated exclusively and irreducibly with the necessary inclusion of Information and Communication Technologies in education. The proliferation of Digital Plans and the creation of unique figures related to the technological development of educational centres leave no room for doubt: the commitment of the educational administration to the promotion of digital media is evident and is also part of European initiatives that provide budgets for digital projects of all kinds. Undoubtedly, digital advances can make a positive contribution to education, but it is important to avoid reductionism, which would make technological means the exclusive preserve of educational innovation. No one can deny the transformative capacity of digital media, but the practices that contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning procedures go far beyond mere educational technologization, as it instrumentalises and impoverishes the concept of educational innovation.

On the other hand, the counter-reformist spirit of certain sectors of the teaching staff, who understand the inclusion of digital media as a surrender of the traditional values of quality education and interpret it as a permissive attitude towards the enemy, adds even more confusion to the issue and hinders effective efforts to implement transformations that contribute to improving teaching-learning processes. These kinds of considerations affect, in general, any extreme of educational innovation; however, it is particularly complicated in the field of language teaching. It would seem that attempts at innovation in this field are limited to teachers' blind trust in textbooks (the use of which has advantages and disadvantages, but which reduce the role of the teacher to a subsidiary role when they are not interpreted from a critical and flexible perspective) or the replacement of paper-based materials with digital ones, In fact, nothing substantial has really changed and, therefore, we are still waiting for proposals that would really bring about educational innovation in language teaching, whose main improvements do not seem to require so much a special design of materials as a profound reflection on the approach itself in the teaching of a mother tongue.

BRIEF STATEMENT OF REASONS

In this sense, we do not seem to be discovering anything new if we insist on recalling the necrotic situation in which the teaching of the Spanish language remains from a methodological perspective. The latest curricular efforts (LOMLOE), to promote a communicative priority in the teaching- learning processes of the mother tongue, relegate grammatical content. Perhaps this observation constitutes one of the stumbling blocks for innovative and comprehensive language teaching, as it experiences the tension between traditional proposals (stagnant in the study of formulistic and regulatory grammar) and certain post-modern perspectives which, with the laudable aim of promoting the communicative facet of language (by no means the only facet); we not only use language to communicate —however successful this concept is becoming— but we also tell jokes, we get upset, we swear, we reflect, we create...), deny grammar and question it as necessary knowledge. Both poles form extremes that distract the discipline from its most important reflection, which goes through classic questions such as: Why teach grammar? What language to teach? How to teach language? In truth, neither traditional nor new approaches seem to address the true nature and meaning of language teaching. Innovations in language teaching and learning must necessarily involve several disciplines if we want a holistic approach. As language is inseparable from social interactionism, in addition to the educational and communication sciences, it will require linguistic, semiotic, sociocultural, psychological, anthropological, literary and strategic-pragmatic sciences. Thus, the core issue is not directly related to the materials, but to the need for a critical approach for their effective articulation in the teaching-learning processes. *Verbi gratia*, we find ourselves with generally rigid and homogeneous materials which do not respond to the multiplicity of singularities which characterise the linguistic contexts of the learners, diverse in their own definition; likewise, the teaching of language in secondary and baccalaureate classrooms (and in infant and primary?) tends to neglect the linguistic environment closest to the learners and renounce active linguistic reflection in favour of imposing the linguistic norm on the learner. Why not promote the inherent creative side of language? Why not reject the conception of language as a

mere instrument or tool and promote it as the inherent nature of the human being? Why not start from the samples of language that surround our students on a daily basis and that can provoke reflection? Why not contribute from language teaching to a transformation of the classroom as a space for social interaction? Why not encourage curiosity and the spirit of research as opposed to models that promote mere labelling and simple identification? Why not adapt the needs of language to a contextual dynamization of grammar? Why not relegate mechanistic communicative approaches as exclusive methods to account for human communication, so far removed from these assumptions? Why not assimilate philological findings to the needs of the learner? Why not exclusively promote conceptualisation as a goal and not establish it as a basis? Why not consider an interaction between grammatical, discursive, socio-cultural, and pragmatic aspects?

In fact, all these questions are still relevant today, and should not be hidden away or resolved in the guise of instrumentalising responses. Indeed, it is not the technical means that are in question, but such far-reaching issues as the very approach to language teaching. It is striking, in these circumstances, that the legislative changes, of which there have been many, have led to such timid and slow progress, if we can detect it at all. The major questions on language teaching remain without valid answers, while progress is being made —very slowly— on the need for a critical spirit on the part of teachers in the face of the textbook (absolutely essential), on the commitment to communicative approaches (still rather relegated and stiff, if not converted into substitutes for traditional linguistic content, but without adding substantial novelties in their didactics) and on strengthening the active role of the students, by extension in the generalised demand for all disciplines. The fact of substituting some contents for others (discursive contents of textual typologies, superficial and mechanical communicative approaches) does not bring anything new to the basic problem: the enormous distance that students feel with respect to the subject, the difficulties in ensuring that language teaching and learning contribute decisively to the improvement of the students' competences, the problem of rote learning, which does not investigate previous knowledge in order to construct learning, the homogenisation of approaches that only promote the identification and labelling of

linguistic units, but not reflection, the unacceptable absence of creative assumptions in language teaching...

Certainly, language teaching seems to be anchored in a philological sequencing of content (of particular interest to scholars, but not necessarily adapted to teaching), to the prioritisation of an imposed prescriptive grammar (neither reasoned nor reasonable) and, ultimately, to formulistic and regulatory models that are and regulations approaches that are limited to identification and labelling (pointing out word classes, identifying functions, recognising text types), promoting an apparently vital debate on terminology and its varieties when, in fact, the big linguistic questions are not associated with names, but with the relationships that are established between concepts and their applications.

All of this points to the need for a new approach to language teaching and learning; a perspective that has to assume language as an element consubstantial to the human being, and not as something external, reinforced by the identification of language with the notions of instrument or tool, objects that are always external and different from the subject, whose instrumental purpose is not worthy of in-depth reflection, but is reduced to its functionality, without further ado.

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH: REASONABLE DOUBT

The panorama, then, requires innovation in the methodological field and not so much in the technological field, at the service of improvements in the teaching-learning processes when it represents a significant and differential contribution compared to traditional media. The challenge lies, therefore, in proposing effective alternatives to identification and labelling (pointing out nouns, identifying functions, recognising textual typology, etc.), while at the same time starting from the linguistic context closest to the pupil. It is not in vain that Spanish Language and Literature teachers are tired of repeating that, despite the numerous and constant reiterations of the curricular contents, students seem to forget everything and do not understand the contents. This can only mean that the approach is not adequate to promote meaningful learning. The non-reflective approach to linguistic contents, alien to relational meaning and even to application to analogous cases, leads to non-competent and isolated attitudes.

The need arises to integrate the closest linguistic samples that arouse the curiosity of our students, in order to foster a permanent metalinguistic awareness; any source is valid for our interests: television programmes, series, films, audio files, radio interventions, family conversations, conversations between friends… Any linguistic sample that catches the attention of our students, by producing curiosity, leads inductively to linguistic articulations and eludes the excessive weight of the prescriptive to give way to the descriptive and use as a natural pretext for reflecting on language. Thus, the aim is for them to work in groups and, through collaborative learning, to collect curious uses of the language, aspects which attract their attention and then organise them into the different grammatical levels (phonetic, morphological, syntactic, lexical- semantic, orthographic, and pragmatic). Linguistic uses which may or may not be correct, expressions they have heard and did not know, which trigger research and exploration (RAE dictionaries, grammars, online dictionaries (colloquial, Americanisms, current Spanish), FUNDEU RAE consultation page…); all of this contributes to a permanent reflection on the use of language, even creative, relational learning, communicative interaction, and linguistic contexts very close to the student. The aim is to pose questions instead of limiting oneself to identifying and labelling familiar answers and, from the learner's motivational interest (does the word *ignoración* exist? Is it *imprimido* or *impreso, freído* or *frito*? Is the expression from my favourite song correct: *Tú me *dijistes que no?* How do we understand grammatical statements with meaning by virtue of the communicative context? Is the Latinism **de motu propio* correct? *Iros* or *idos*?" *De *este agua no beberé o de esta agua no beberé*? Why is **cocreta* an incorrect word and *crocodile* is not? Which expression can be pronounced, but not written in Spanish? Why can you say al *lado mío*, but it is incorrect to say **detrás mía*? *La dije algo* or *Le dije algo*? Can capital letters not have a tilde? If it is semicolon and semicolon, why not *period and end). In addition to planning the group work, the teacher should schedule a minimum of three or four sessions to monitor each group, to check that the different grammatical levels of the language samples have been assigned to the different grammatical levels and that the correct choice of evidence; they are likely to need guidance in their own search for words and expressions in general.

Each group will elaborate a digital presentation that lists by grammatical level the samples of language that they have traced in their immediate context; the aim is not to select incorrect words or expressions, but to ask themselves about the uses of language that catch their attention, whether correct or incorrect (in any case, they will also take care to offer linguistic explanations for the uses and recommendations for use); even curious aspects of the language, such as the formation of words in deverbal nouns with different suffixes or the fact that the same suffix can have different meanings depending on the lexical base to which it is attached, can - and should - be dealt with. Be that as it may, it is vital not to encourage an aspect of linguistic persecution or permanent inquisition, but the realisation that language belongs to the speakers and that it is characterised by that marvellous mixture of tradition and novelty (evolution). It also encourages metalinguistic reflection on natural uses of everyday linguistic samples selected by the students themselves. This initiative reserves for the students a leading role in the teaching-learning process, which is highly motivating, as well as a critical, inquiring, and investigative spirit.

CONCLUSIONS

In short, while the new times point towards the inclusion of technologies and the substitution of some materials for others, language teaching demands new approaches that promote improvements in the teaching-learning processes. These approaches, necessarily, have to be approached from perspectives that deactivate formulistic and labelling models, and opt for investigative and investigative models.

Outdated formulistic approaches are far removed from fostering linguistic competence in learners, which is approached when we succeed in making the learner restless, interested, and motivated by the inclusion of free and close samples.

For this reason, recently published monographs such as *La lengua española en 100 preguntas*, which includes at the end a section on reasonable doubts (they are so because they generally raise doubts and, at the same time, because they are susceptible to the use of reason to explain them) are very interesting initiatives to promote inquiry models from all areas of language and to reinforce the need to work

on language teaching based on everyday uses and to access linguistic knowledge inductively, in a friendly, close and rigorous way. If human beings are distinguished by their capacity for thought and this is elaborated linguistically, reflecting on language is one of the best bets for deepening the formation of what is intimately human, without forgetting that language is not the wrapping of thought, in unamunian terms, but the thought itself.
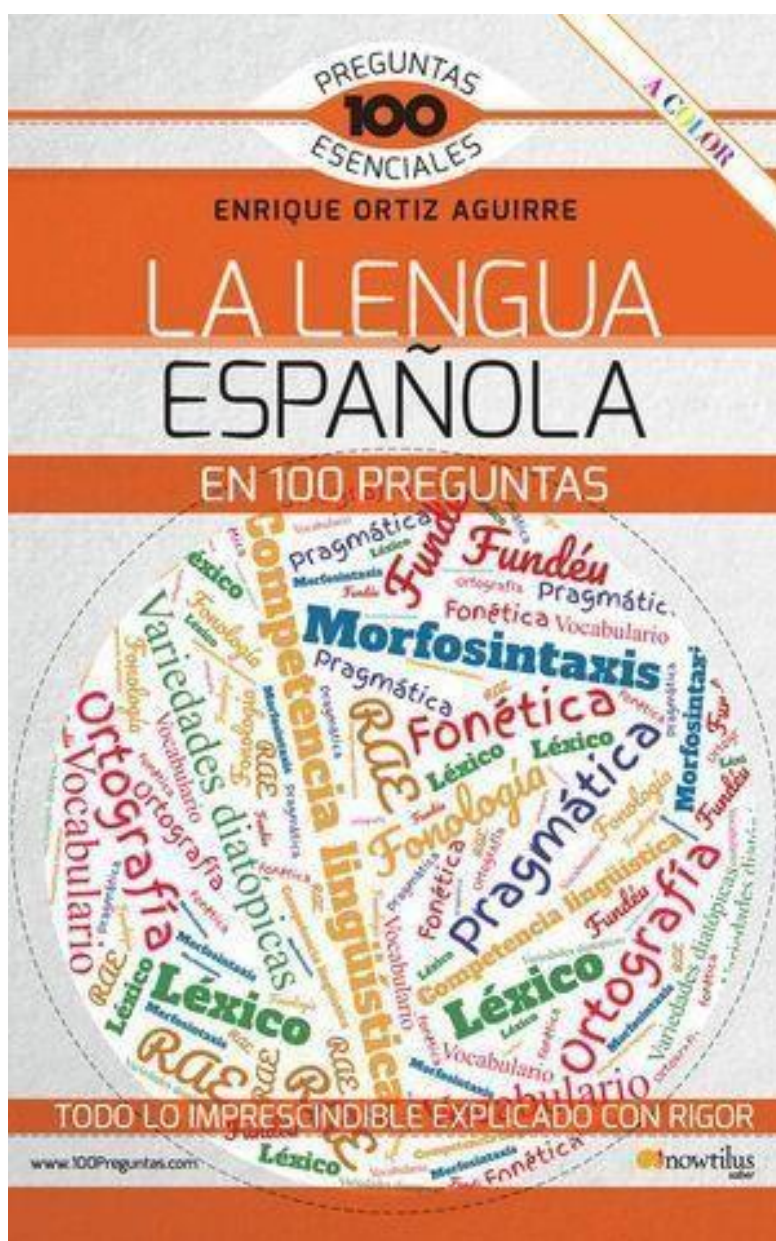
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