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Research Article

The use of texts in foreign language teaching

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Abstract

No matter how little experience in a profession, every foreign language teacher understands that effective teaching can be based on more than just using the selected book, regardless of the variety of topics it contains. Foreign language teaching is a process that involves the use of supplementary materials from its initial steps. These materials are developed, processed, and adapted as complementary resources to the textbook or even as substitutes for specific elements, especially when they do not meet the needs and requirements of students.

The majority of teaching materials include the texts used in foreign language instruction. Therefore, using texts as instructional materials and utilising them in the teaching process constitute the focus of this paper.

Keywods: Foreign language, texts, teaching.

1. Introduction

Why does the use of texts in foreign language teaching gain particular importance? Meier (2011) emphasizes that: "*The central linguistic-communicative and didactic unit in foreign language teaching is the tex*t.../*Die zentrale sprachlich-kommunikative und didaktische Einheit im Fremdsprachenunterricht ist der Text ...*" The time when texts were used solely for vocabulary enrichment and phonetic and grammatical purposes has passed. Even grammar is considered nowadays as an element that supports learning based on texts, which, in addition to being an informative unit, conveying cultural elements and introducing expressions, grammatical structures, and linguistic phenomena, also serve as models. Mastering these models allows learners, in the future, to formulate and independently produce more complex texts in a foreign language, in other words, to communicate fluently in a language that is not their native tongue.

Nevertheless, what is a text in itself? Etymologically, this word originates from Latin, where "*Textus*" means "*weaving, interlacing*". Even if we look at this term from a linguistic perspective, it does not stray far from its etymological meaning, as it can easily be considered as an "interlacing" of linguistic elements and relationships according to specific language rules. Assuming that, up to now, a universal definition of the text has not been achieved. Still, there are different definitions, some more concise and general, others more detailed and specific, and it can be concluded that it is a complex concept. Generally, a text is considered a linguistic unit either in a written or spoken form, which usually consists of more than one sentence, interconnected in terms of meaning and topic serving a communicative function. The text is regarded as a large linguistic unit linked by semantic and syntactic aspects, expressing a specific topic in a particular situation (Heyd, 1991, 73). Special importance is given to the communicative function of the text by Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) who define the text as "*a communicative event ... that fulfils the seven criteria of textuality / eine kommunikative Okkurrenz ..., die sieben Kriterien der Textualität erfüllt*", thus determining that if a text fails to meet the criterion of cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality, it will be considered as non-Text, since the failure to meet any of these criteria would lead to communication failure. However, these criteria allow for a comprehensive description of texts without any particular significance for their concrete use in language teaching, especially for foreign language teaching.

2. Analysis

Text types are the ones that hold importance in teaching and learning. The categorisation of texts into types is based on the text's external and internal features, which are viewed from different perspectives, making it difficult to have a universal definition for text types. Brinker (2005) sees text types as "*complex linguistic patterns that have emerged within a linguistic community during its historical and social development due to the communicative needs that this community has had*"/*Textsorten .... sollen zunächst ganz allgemein als komplexe Muster sprachlicher Kommunikation verstanden werden, die innerhalb der Sprachgemeinschaft im Laufe der hitorisch-gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung aufgrund kommunikativer Bedürfnisse entstanden sind*".

Indeed, text is a form of communication and serves a specific function. It is precisely the function that is the key criterion for classifying text types. Discourse analysis distinguishes these main functions: informative, narrative-expressive, directive, and persuasive. Within these functions, various text types can be classified, which share similar characteristics.

In foreign language teaching, various types of written texts are used, such as newspaper articles, literary texts, announcements and notices, invitations, forms, various activity programs, brochures, weather forecasts, questionnaires, official and unofficial letters, emails, texts from blogs and internet chats, text messages on mobile phones, informational brochures, travel plans, cooking recipes, and user guides. As for spoken texts, we can mention conversations in cafés and restaurants, interviews,

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phone conversations, audio information, voice messages, news on television and radio, presentations, discussions, and songs. The current methods are rich in various types of texts.

In this wide variety of text types, what would assist the teacher in selecting the appropriate text for using it in teaching?

Several criteria need to be met if we want to achieve an efficient and engaging lesson for the learners since one of the reasons for using supplementary materials in foreign language teaching is to prepare an interesting class, which increases motivation and stimulates the learners' interest and desire to acquire a foreign language.

Authenticity is not only seen as a necessary condition in selecting a text for instructional use but also a need. Therefore, texts not only allow learners to acquire and enhance vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical structures but also create conditions for them to familiarise themselves with reality beyond the language. Authentic texts include texts that are not explicitly designed for instructional purposes; on the contrary, they are created and used in specific situations by native speakers of the language. The main argument supporting the use of authentic texts in foreign language teaching refers to the fact that they strengthen the communicative purpose and make the teaching process more closely aligned with the reality of the culture and the mindset of the country whose target language is being acquired, bringing a piece of daily life in that country into the classroom. Supporters of didactic texts, designed explicitly for instructional purposes, highlight the challenge of using complex authentic texts in foreign language teaching, especially at the beginner levels. However, even at the beginner level, authentic texts can be taken from other sources, not necessarily from magazines or newspapers. An authentic text can also include a recipe or a supermarket flyer, which can be effectively used with beginners starting from level A1, for example, when dealing with topics related to food and prices, allowing learners to practice and consolidate numbers.

In addition to authenticity, it is recommended to use texts that provide as much information as possible about the foreign country, its people, and its culture. It does not mean that we should include only descriptive texts about the history, customs, and traditions of the foreign country; on the other hand, we should also include announcements, various application forms, local menus, travel tickets, etc. It is also advisable to use intercultural texts that aim to help students understand that their perceptions, ways of thinking, and behaviour are influenced by their own culture, which in turn affect their perspective of how they view the foreign culture.

As mentioned above, authenticity is seen as a crucial criterion, but other criteria also need to be examined when analysing the suitability of a text for teaching purposes. According to Neuner (1990) there are four decisive factors:

The first one is related to *determining the teaching objectives*. The teacher needs to know and clearly understand what they aim to achieve by using the text. Is the main goal to analyse the text extensively, or is it sufficient to define the key informative elements enabling students to grasp its overall meaning? Do we use the text for *phonetic purposes* to practice pronunciation, stress, or intonation? In such cases, it is recommended that texts be read or recorded, if they are spoken texts, by native

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speakers. Or is the goal the practice of *grammatical structures* through the text? In such cases, an inductive approach would be preferable, allowing students to discover the grammar rules themselves. Or is *vocabulary enrichment* the main goal of using the text? It is normal for students to discover new words when reading and working with a text; therefore, the teacher must be very attentive when selecting the text to be used during the lesson, ensuring it contains an appropriate amount of new information and language material.

The second criterion is related to the *learner's background*. The text should be suitable for the student's age, language level, and intellectual and cultural background and align with their prior knowledge of the covered topic and interests. The teacher should analyse the text from this perspective before using it because they should avoid underestimating or overestimating students' levels. Personal experience has shown that younger age groups, depending on their language proficiency, can be receptive and cooperative when it comes to working with them using different types of texts. On the other hand, adults tend to be more selective and approach those types of texts that they believe will help them learn the foreign language faster or when the topics align with their interests.

Another criterion relates to the *text itself as a teaching topic*. The text should be analysed in terms of its difficulty level from various aspects, such as grammar structures, vocabulary, and style. What information is already known to the learner, and what new information does the text provide? Is the type of text familiar to the learner? Does it offer useful information to the learner, not only in terms of language development but also in terms of inciting curiosity?

The text should also be analysed from the *aspect of the teaching situation* it creates. How much time does it require to adapt for teaching purposes and work with it during the teaching process? Does it provide opportunities to work systematically with the language and design exercises that encourage and develop speaking and writing language skills? Teachers can only use a text if the teaching objectives have been determined beforehand. The teacher must clearly understand what the use and processing of a specific text convey to the students.

Indeed, these criteria have been outlined in this paper, as each of them can be further specified and elaborated upon.

During the use of texts in foreign language teaching, their functions during the lesson should not be overlooked, such as being a form of language communication with a cognitive, informative, and descriptive character. Therefore, using different types of texts in foreign language teaching is advisable.

3. Conclusion

However, the use of text as teaching material should not be understood solely in terms of reading and acquiring new information, grammatical structures, or new words. Working with texts involves a series of processes requiring particular attention while adapting texts for teaching purposes.

There are various ways and models of working with texts in foreign language

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teaching, but the three-phase model is the most common.

The first phase, known as the introductory or pre-reading phase of the text, prepares learners for the text and its content, aiming to facilitate their understanding. In this phase, exercises, questions, and tasks are designed to activate learners' prior experiences, thoughts, and knowledge related to the topic to be addressed. The goal is to stimulate learners' interest and motivation to engage with the text and activate and expand their vocabulary related to the topic. The teaching activities used in this phase primarily include mind maps, brainstorming, photo descriptions, talking about personal experience, formulating hypotheses, and expressing expectations.

The text processing phase or exercises while reading the text include the second phase, which is the moment when learners encounter the text. During this phase, the reading process begins, starting from the activation of learners' phonetic knowledge and leading to the comprehension of words, which, when placed in the text context, help them understand previously unknown words. The type of exercises, tasks, or questions used in this phase vary depending on the learners' proficiency level. When teaching beginners, more emphasis is placed on language tools, while at advanced levels, the content aspect becomes more prominent. The exercises used in this phase include comprehension questions, presenting the text as a puzzle, multiple-choice exercises, ordering exercises (text with corresponding photos), highlighting keywords, true or false, dividing the text into sections and finding a subheading for each paragraph, etc.

The final phase is known as the concluding phase or post-reading exercises. During this phase, learners are expected to react to what they have read, and the text is often used to accomplish something new while maintaining the connection with the text. The exercises used in this phase also vary but leave more room for learners' creativity. Learners may be asked to summarise the text, discuss its content, take a stance on the main topic or various issues addressed in the text, create dialogues, conduct interviews, or even engage in role-playing games.

Working with texts in foreign language teaching is a broad topic, and hopefully, this paper has provided a general analysis of the main issues related to this subject.

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