

The Teaching of Languages in the Early and Primary Education Program of Uruguay

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Abstract: In the Eastern Republic of Uruguay there was not a national program for the teaching of second and foreign languages in primary school before 2008. Currently, the teaching of second and foreign languages is neither compulsory, nor offered at all public schools for a number of reasons. The purpose of this article is to compare theoretical basis, objectives and contents for teaching Portuguese as a second language and English as a foreign language in the Early and Primary Education Program of Uruguay, where most children speak Standard Spanish from the River Plate variety. The analysis of this Program shows significant progress as far as language policies are concerned.

Key words: second (Portuguese) and foreign (English) language teaching, language policies, early and primary education program of Uruguay

1. Basis for the teaching of Portuguese

Apart from some isolated instances (ANEP, 2008, p. 55), Portuguese has not been traditionally part of the educational system in our country. With regards to the novelty of introducing the teaching of Portuguese in the official public school Program, it could be noted that nowhere in such program does it explain whether the teaching of Portuguese is compulsory for all schools, or mention the number of instructional hours. It does, however, state the reasons for its teaching.

2. Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Integration of Uruguay into the Southern Common Market (“MERCOSUR” by Its Spanish Initials)

Linguistic integration through the teaching of Portuguese (the official language of one of the States Parties of *MERCOSUR*) is necessary in the context of political, economic, social and cultural integration of Uruguay into the *MERCOSUR*. There appears a need for linguistic integration, and the incorporation of Portuguese into public education turns into a major goal (ANEP, 2008, p. 55). The objective is that, through the teaching of Portuguese, primary students can participate from regional integration at a political, economic, and therefore cultural level. As Barrios states, the objective would be for students to “command a language which allows them to participate from regional cultural development at a technological, scientific, economic, and diplomatic level” (1996, pp. 96-97).

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The linguistic objective is therefore a key to the attainment of political and economic goals, since *MERCOSUR* was created for these purposes.

3. Acknowledging and Respecting Linguistic Diversity and Identity in the Border Area through the Teaching of Standard Portuguese

Bilingualism and diglossia in the border area have been deeply studied by local researchers in the fifties (Rona, 1965; Elizaincín & Barrios, 1987). Behares describes the current situation explaining that “Portuñol” (Spanish with Portuguese) is only used at a private, non-standard, colloquial, and socially inferior level (2007, p. 123).

The acknowledgement of the fact that another language apart from Spanish is spoken in Uruguay is a novelty in educational publications, which have historically denied this reality. A governmental intention to respect and protect linguistic diversity can be noted in the Program in question, mainly through the acknowledgement of the existence of Portuguese varieties in Uruguay. Thus, the linguistic policy of our country has undergone considerable change compared with the nationalist tradition which conceived a national state as a state with a single language. The acknowledgement mentioned above implies the intention to teach the standard corresponding variety (Standard Portuguese) and not the vernacular one (Portuñol or Uruguayan Portuguese).

Since only standardized languages can be taught in formal education, the languages present in the Primary Program are Standard Portuguese and Standard Spanish, and not Uruguayan Portuguese dialects. It could be concluded that the objective is for children who speak Uruguayan Portuguese dialects as their mother tongue to incorporate the Standard variety of these dialects: Standard Portuguese (ANEP, 2008, p. 55).

As Barrios (1996) suggests, this implies that “the teaching of Portuguese cannot be conceived with the purpose of substituting neither Spanish nor Uruguayan Portuguese dialects” in border areas (Barrios, 1996, p. 102). The Government can regulate public language use, such as the language used in formal education. It cannot, however, regulate private colloquial language use. It can only provide the teaching of the Standard variety corresponding to the spoken language through formal education. The acknowledgement of a border-area linguistic identity blends with the search for regional identity, which is, from a linguistic point of view, represented by Standard Portuguese.

4. Basis for the Teaching of English

With regards to the teaching of English, neither the scope of such teaching, neither the degree of obligatoriness, nor the number of instructional hours are stated. It is, however, explained that it should be taught as a foreign language, and the following reasons are put forward in support for its teaching:

5. Knowledge Production and Access

It is emphasized that worldwide, English is the language in which the majority of knowledge is produced (ANEP, 2008, p. 56). However, no sources where the truthfulness of this statement is supported have been cited.

On the other hand, the fact that English is “a language for international communication” (ANEP, 2008, pp. 55-56) derives from the political, economic, cultural, and military power that some English-speaking countries have acquired. A power that has enabled them to maintain and expand their language beyond their territorial

frontiers (Crystal, 2003).

6. Communication in the Context of Globalization

“Functional characteristics” of the English language (Phillipson, 1992; Barrios, 2007, p. 37) are invoked. English is seen as a language of international use which provides access to culture, communication, and work. It is here necessary to highlight that although speaking an international language can be positive from many points of view, progress and prosperity cannot be guaranteed (Phillipson, 1992; La Paz, 2012, p. 171). However, it could be deduced that the intention behind this Program is to offer greater possibilities of access to communication and culture, which is at the same time intertwined with providing equal opportunities of access to knowledge.

7. Empowerment of Individuals

Thus, the Program states that the objective of teaching English at schools is to offer “equal opportunities” (ANEP, 2008, p. 56) for people to access work, communication, and knowledge. It would seem that through the teaching of English, learners are protected from what Phillipson sees as the threats to a person who rejects learning the English language, namely fewer possibilities to work, and to access communication and knowledge (1992; La Paz, 2012).

8. Relationship between the Theory, the Objectives, and the Contents of the English and Portuguese Programs

Language	Basis (theory)	Objectives	Contents (Sample for First Grade, Primary School)
Portuguese	Political, economic, social and cultural integration of Uruguay into the Southern Common Market (“MERCOSUR” by its Spanish initials) Acknowledging and respecting linguistic diversity and identity in the border area through the teaching of Standard Portuguese	To foster command of the second/foreign language in oral and written skills, from a communicative approach. To teach different cultural aspects of the second/foreign language, through a critical thinking process in comparison to the students’ own culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descrever e representar ações. • Expressar características. • Identificar intenções em textos simples trabalhados em sala de aula. • Localizar informação com ajuda de desenhos.
English	Knowledge production and access Communication in the context of globalization Empowerment of individuals	To foster command of the second/foreign language in oral and written skills, from a communicative approach. To teach different cultural aspects of the second/foreign language, through a critical thinking process in comparison to the students’ own culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capitalizing nouns. • Qualifying things. • Asking about meaning, requesting and demanding information when needed. • Performing and describing actions. • Expressing ability. • Locating information by using illustrations and captions.

As observed above, the basis for the teaching of each of these languages are very different. It is therefore surprising that so similar and general objectives are established from such diverse arguments (basis). It seems inconsistent, for instance, that children from the border area who live in a lusophone cultural and linguistic environment are taught aspects of the Portuguese culture, when this is actually part of their culture already.

However, for the teaching of English the general objectives could be deemed reasonable for all primary students.

Another striking aspect is the contents. When looked at in detail, the contents to be taught in both languages seem very similar (although not identical) in the area of “Communication”.

Portuguese (Sample for First Grade, Primary School)	English (Sample for First Grade, Primary School)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descrever e representar ações. • Localizar informação com ajuda de desenhos. • Expressar características. • Identificar intenções em textos simples trabalhados em sala de aula. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performing and describing actions. • Locating information by using illustrations and captions. • Qualifying things. • Asking about meaning, requesting and demanding information when needed.

Moreover, the same contents are outlined in the areas of “Speaking”, “Reading”, and “Writing” for both languages.

	First grade
Speaking	Communication about classroom topics. * Dialogues in stories. Role play. * Daily and school routines. * Descriptions of animals, people and objects. Memorizing poems, rhymes, songs and riddles. * Stories with visual aids. - Comics.
Reading	Stories with visual aid. Following instructions to accomplish tasks. Inferring from: - poems and rhymes, - comics, - pictures, - lists.
Writing	Writing sentences based on actions.

Then, how is it possible that so similar contents are chosen for such diverse theories and linguistic realities? Would it not be more reasonable that at least a special program for the teaching of Portuguese in the schools of the border area were created?

In conclusion, the same objectives, teaching approaches, and contents are proposed for different theories and realities. There is a manifest contradiction in this, from an educational point of view. It can be noted that hard work needs to be done with regards to this educational aspect. However, the fact that some aspects of the Program need improvement cannot remove the credit it deserves for:

- acknowledging the existence of *Portuñol* speakers in Uruguay and giving them the possibility to learn the Standard variety of their mother tongue;
- and proposing a program for the teaching of other languages apart from Spanish (Portuguese and English).

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