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Book Review: Nuevos Contextos: 12 Cuentistas Contemporáneos de Hispanoamérica

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Comments

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Nuevos contextos: 12 cuentistas contemporáneos de Hispanoamérica* by Teresa Méndez-Faith

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como a la profusión de ejercicios y aplicaciones que ofrece para actividades dentro y fuera del aula. ¡Lo recomiendo calurosamente!

Domnita Dumitrescu

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Lee, James F., Kimberly L. Geeslin, and J. Clancy Clements, eds. *Structure, Meaning, and Acquisition in Spanish: Papers from the Fourth Hispanic Linguistics Symposium*. Somerville, CA: Cascadilla, 2002. Pp. 335. ISBN 1-57473-024-X.

Como uno espera de un libro que representa las presentaciones de un congreso, ésta no es una introducción a la lingüística hispánica sino una compilación de estudios. Se organiza en cuatro secciones: la lingüística histórica, la adquisición y el uso del idioma, la sintáctica y semántica, y la morfología y fonología. Dentro de estas categorías, los temas de las investigaciones varían desde las patronas de la intonación del español dominicano hasta los modales del catalán. Todos los estudios emplean métodos cuantitativos de investigación.

Los estudios reflejan bien la variedad de temas de las investigaciones que se hacen en la disciplina, pero hay una falta de estudios sobre la lingüística aplicada. En la segunda sección, que incluye estudios sobre el uso del idioma, hay una sola investigación sobre la adquisición de español por los estudiantes. Esta, que se llama "Subjunctive Instruction Enhanced with Syntactic Instruction," es un estudio que examina la efectividad en la concientización del estudiante en cuanto a las características sintácticas que influyen en el uso del subjuntivo. Todos los otros estudios en esta sección tratan el uso del español y no la adquisición. Ya que se menciona en el título del libro la idea de la adquisición, el lector espera más investigaciones sobre el tema en la compilación.

También en esta sección hay un par de estudios sobre el español dominicano. Lunn, cuyo estudio "Tout se tient in Dominican Spanish" presenta una investigación sobre los cambios fonológicos en el español dominicano, teoriza que existen varios procesos que afectan la pérdida de la -s en las formas informales de los verbos en la República Dominicana. Dice ella que su trabajo aquí no contribuye nada al debate sobre los cambios fonológicos en este contexto sino que explica la idea de que no hay solamente un proceso compensatorio y que es muy difícil eliminar otros procesos para probar una teoría. Es bien hecho el estudio, sin embargo, y sí es una buena contribución.

Por su parte, Toribio tiene un estudio en esta compilación, "Focus on Clefts in Dominican Spanish." Es una continuación de su trabajo que intenta sintetizar y analizar las características más importantes del idioma dominicano. Este estudio, junto con el de Lunn, provee al lector una variedad de puntos de vista sobre el español dominicano.

Por lo general, los estudios que se incluyen aquí tratan muchos aspectos del español. Por ejemplo, Rossomondo examina una característica madrileña en "Pronominal Address Forms in Madrid," y Face investiga una subcategoría de la fonología de la entonación en "The Internal Structure of Pitch Accents."

Una cosa que habría sido útil es el uso de los abstractos. Todos los estudios tienen introducciones, pero en algunos casos son bastante largos, y el lector necesita un resumen sencillo para obtener una idea del enfoque de cada estudio. Aparte de eso, el contenido y la presentación de los estudios son buenos, y uno puede sacar información e ideas sobre algunos de los temas interesantes de la disciplina.

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Méndez-Faith, Teresa. *Nuevos contextos: 12 cuentistas contemporáneos de Hispanoamérica*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 2002. Pp. 265. ISBN 0-03-033914-6.

This new reader consists of a collection of twelve short stories by contemporary writers from

Latin American countries, Puerto Rico and the United States. It is designed to serve as the introduction to Hispanic literature for Intermediate Spanish and beyond. Male and female voices are equally represented, including the most recognized writers: Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. Through a variety of topics, the writers share their ideas and opinions about their dreams and life experiences with the reader. Although some stories are more difficult linguistically and stylistically than others, they do not necessarily follow any order. Each chapter is treated as an independent unit to provide flexibility of use. Black-and-white photos and illustrations are presented throughout the text to support the information in each chapter. A useful glossary of literary terms defined in English, a list of suggested films and visual arts correlated to each chapter, and a vocabulary index, with English and Spanish entries as quick reference, are included at the end of the book.

The entire text is written in Spanish. The book opens with a brief introduction to the contemporary Spanish American story by defining the word “story” from the historical point of view. Each of the book’s twelve chapters is devoted to one particular author, along with one or two pieces of his/her writing. The organization of this text follows the same sequence: *Nota biográfica*, *Guía de prelectura*, *Antes de leer*, *Selección literaria*, *Después de leer*, *Más allá del texto*, *Texto en contexto: Una perspectiva entre muchas*, *En torno a la entrevista*. Each chapter begins with *Nota biográfica*, which highlights the background of the author and his/her major works. *Guía de prelectura* immediately follows, presenting a very useful brief orientation to the historical, social and political background of the selected text. Clearly, *Nuevos contextos* adopts the most commonly-used practice to approach reading: that is, the use of pre-reading and post-reading exercises to assist students in the reading process. Although the types of vocabulary exercises, such as fill-in-the-blanks, multiple choices, synonyms and definitions, vary from chapter to chapter, only one exercise is offered in each *Antes de leer* section. Additional exercises to practice new words would expand students’ knowledge of vocabulary, which is crucial not only for L2 reading skills, but also writing and speaking skills. The use of films and Internet resources is a wonderful way to allow students to expand their cultural understanding and awareness of the Hispanic world. In “Para pensar y preparar” under the *Antes de leer* section, students are asked to use the Internet or view a movie and to discuss the issues related to the selected reading. These questions could be overwhelming to the students who do not have access to the movie or do not have the skills to search online to find the information. Perhaps specific instructions for additional project-based activities and strategies for online search could be added to future editions to provide guidance in the practical use of the materials.

In *Selección literaria*, the use of extra exercises of “Comprensión” between sections of each reading helps to guide students through the reading process. They are, however, inconsistent throughout the entire book. The *Después de leer* section offers numerous interesting and stimulating questions to check students’ reading comprehension with questions specific to the reading. Questions provided in “Para comentar y analizar: Temas de discusión oral o escrita” are designed to prepare students to elicit thoughts, opinions, personal observations about the reading and to engage them in more profound discussions. Unfortunately, question-and-answer is virtually the only type of exercise found between the pre- and post-reading sections. Different types of activities, such as pair/group work, debates, and performance in dialogues could be created for future editions. These would serve to sustain students’ interest as well as to enhance their oral and written expression, rather than to simply answer the questions. Following *Después de leer* is *Más allá del texto*, which requires students to reflect on their own life experiences and to give their opinions on issues concerning the reading. Finally, in my view, the most distinguishing feature of this text is the *Texto en contexto: Una perspectiva entre muchas* section. In this section, a personal interview with each writer focuses on clarifying specific aspects of the reading from the writer’s personal point of view and life experiences. A list of post-interview questions immediately follows to check students’ reading comprehension.

Although the book has a few drawbacks, overall *Nuevos contextos* offers a wide range of readings with a variety of topics, enabling students to discuss and explore Latin American

contemporary short stories. This first edition is a welcome offering, which can be used as a reader for Intermediate and Advanced college courses as well as for personal pleasure reading.

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Mujica, Bárbara. *El próximo paso*. 2nd ed. United States: Heinle and Heinle, 2002. Pp. 600. ISBN 0-03-033928-6.

El próximo paso: gramática, lecturas, composición is a Spanish textbook aimed at third-year students. It simultaneously reviews the more basic features of Spanish as it introduces more complex grammatical points. The readily-apparent goal of this textbook is to increase fluency in both the written and the oral mode. In addition to its primary use in an intermediate/advanced Spanish grammar course, this text might also be used to supplement a third-year literature, writing, or culture course. A majority of the text in *El próximo paso* is written in Spanish, with only occasional English translations for presenting abstract vocabulary that is not easily represented by sketches or images. English is also used within some grammar explanations in order to avoid confusion or to clear up potential ambiguities.

The text is organized in four parts with three chapters each, for a total of twelve chapters. The first three chapters focus on verbal morphology marking tense, aspect, and mood as well as other expressions that L2 learners of Spanish tend to acquire late. The second section is a continuation of similar grammatical themes, providing an in-depth analysis of *ser* and *estar* with accompanying practice exercises. This portion also introduces other high-frequency morphological distinctions that are difficult for L1 speakers of English to acquire (more uses of the subjunctive, etc.). In the third part, instructional materials center around reflexive constructions, clitic pronouns, and their referents. The final section, aptly titled *Trampas gramaticales*, concludes the textbook by guiding students through the challenging terrain of prepositions and connectors (with special focus on *por* and *para*), verb complements, articles, adjectives, and adverbs.

Throughout the book, chapters are organized around a major theme, and explanations include contextual examples. Subtopics within each chapter are practical and directly relevant to student life, and they include food, sports, shopping, university life, and life in the city. Chapters begin with an extensive list of lexical items related to the chapter theme. More concrete target language words are presented alongside simple sketches of their physical appearance, while English translations are provided in most cases only for the more abstract terms. However, there are a number of instances in which the use of English translations rather than visuals does seem unwarranted. Chapters conclude with a composing task (writing a letter, making a list of instructions, etc.) that corresponds with the theme(s) and readings. Composition drafting is well guided with both pre- and post-writing activities that help students outline their thoughts ahead of time and later review their final product.

Through the *Para enriquecer su vocabulario* section, students learn how to form additional words by adding inflectional and derivational morphology to the roots that have already been presented in the chapter. These sections also present false (and true) cognates, compound words, and other morphological intricacies of Spanish. As are all explanations in *El próximo paso*, these insights into word formation are delivered entirely in Spanish and promote direct L2 form-meaning connections. With regard to vocabulary in general, *El próximo paso* makes few assumptions about what students might have learned in previous coursework. This means that students can easily fill in gaps in their learning by gaining further exposure to Spanish words they have already seen at a lower level. To cite one example, even in the final chapter of this fifth-semester textbook, students are reminded of the expressions *hacer frío* and *hacer sol*. Some may even feel that *El próximo paso* could serve as a third- and fourth-semester text for this very reason. There is indeed extensive review amidst the fifth-semester material.

El próximo paso exposes students to a variety of literary genres via its abundance of readings—two per chapter for a total of twenty-four. While the first reading in each chapter tends