
Textbook Materials and Foreign Language Teaching: Perspectives from the Classroom

Heather Willis Allen, University of Miami

Abstract

This qualitative study explores Teaching Assistants' (TA) beliefs and practices related to the role of textbook materials in foreign language (FL) teaching and learning in beginner-level courses. Results, interpreted from a sociocultural theory perspective, indicate that the textbook was an important tool mediating instructional planning and student learning of FL vocabulary and grammar, but it was considered less valuable for student-to-student oral activities and for teaching culture. The powerful influence of participants' cultural backgrounds was demonstrated as differences emerged in how native speakers and non-native speakers of the FL taught used textbook materials although they had pedagogical coursework and FL teaching experiences in common. Implications include a call for Language Program Directors (LPD) and teachers, including novice TAs, to collaborate on strategies for best practices in textbook use.

Introduction

Textbook materials are an important component of American university-level FL programs, particularly at institutions with multiple sections of elementary and intermediate-level courses. They have been called "the fundament" on which FL teaching and learning are based (Roberts, 1996, p. 375) and "the bedrock of syllabus design and lesson planning" (Kramsch, 1988, p. 63).

As Language Program Director (LPD) of a university-level French language program, I acknowledge the important role played by textbooks in the curriculum. The need for consistency across sections is addressed in part through a common textbook serving as a basis for what is learned and the order in which it is learned (Graves, 2000). Furthermore, most courses are taught by TAs balancing the demands of graduate study with that of teaching, so the textbook allows them to commit their time to facilitating learning rather than materials production (Bell & Gower, 1997). In addition, lexical elements and grammatical explanations included in a textbook offer

Heather Willis Allen (Ph.D., Emory University) is Assistant Professor of Second Language Acquisition and French and Director of the French Basic Language Program at the University of Miami. Her research focuses on the development of beliefs about teaching among novice teachers and on language learning during study abroad. Her research has been published as book chapters in *From Thought to Action: Exploring Beliefs and Outcomes in the Foreign Language Program*, in *Identity and Second Language Learning: Culture, Identity, and Dialogic Activity in Educational Contexts*, and in the journal *Foreign Language Annals*.

a useful yardstick for new TAs unaccustomed to communicating with novice-level FL learners or to tailoring their own language accordingly while teaching. In this way, the textbook may lower the anxiety of beginning TAs related to their FL skills and teaching (Wildner-Bassett, 2000). Furthermore, the Instructor's Edition of a textbook offers concrete ideas for how to use materials in the FL classroom.

Textbooks in the 21st Century FL Classroom

FL textbooks in use today reflect significant changes in design and content with the advent of the "language program" (Bragger & Rice, 2000, p. 110) in contrast with those in use just forty years ago that were dominated by vocabulary lists, seemingly random grammatical topics, and controlled exercises. Improvements in contemporary textbooks cited in the literature on the development of instructional materials fall into three categories. First, a major change has occurred in a move away from rote exercises in favor of meaningful, contextualized activities. A second related area of innovation has been seen in attempts to make material relevant to learners' lives and views (Finneman, 1987). Lastly, the incorporation of technology to provide richer learning experiences has resulted in extensive textbook "packages" that often include a hardback textbook, paperback or Internet-based workbook, website for students, website for instructors, audio CDs, a DVD or video, and other print materials or software.

In spite of progress, *real* change in textbook materials has been slower and less significant in recent years than one might imagine (Di Vito, 2000; Finnemann, 1987; Schulz, 1991; Swaffar, 2006). Bragger and Rice (2000) contended that "despite this explosion of print and electronic materials and the accompanying changes in design and format, today's FL programs reveal a surprising absence of fundamental changes or transformations" (p. 110). A similar stance was reflected by FL textbook publishers Dorwick and Glass (2003) who explained that "[W]hat changes most profoundly are the prefaces and names of the 'features' ... generally in response to the latest movement or trend ... [T]he surface changes, but the actual content of materials remains either remarkably the same or is just slightly altered" (p. 593).

Weaknesses that persist in current FL textbooks relate to content and form. An often-cited drawback is that textbooks are written for everyone and no one and may not be appropriate for specific groups of learners (Ariew, 1982; Graves, 2000; Schulz, 1991). Furthermore, textbook content continues to support erroneous assumptions about FL learners including the ideas that beginning-level learners have limited vocabulary and structural knowledge for expressing themselves and that they cannot gain from intellectually demanding activities (Parry, 2000; Tomlinson, 2003). Likewise, textbook materials may not provide students with opportunities to discuss subjects of interest to them if these are viewed as "taboo" topics running counter to U.S. social norms and a risk-averse publishing market (Bragger & Rice, 2000).

The role and presentation of grammar is the most prevalent criticism of today's FL textbooks. Both Bragger and Rice (2000) and Aski (2003) claimed that traditional grammatical considerations rather than meaning, context, or function continue to drive the organization of textbooks. Moreover, the prevalence

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of textbook activities that are form-focused and not truly communicative has been highlighted numerous times (Frantzen, 1998; Lally, 1998; Rifkin, 2003; Shelly, 1995; Wong & VanPatten, 2003). Parry (2000) described these activities as offering learners limited opportunities to diverge from the textbook's imposed control over "correct" utterances or to add new information about the real world, and Aski (2003) noted a "lag between SLA research that supports activities in which students are forced to process meaning and current textbook activities which continue to employ pattern practice" (p. 63).

Therefore it remains a subject of debate whether today's FL textbook materials reflect many significant changes in comparison with those in use in past decades. But moving beyond this contentious question, it is clear that a textbook's features or focus mean little if instructors do not find concrete ways in which to use those materials in tandem with contextualized instruction — even the most thought-provoking material can be reduced to a series of vocabulary lists and grammar rules. So the most pertinent question may not be *what* is included (or not) in a particular textbook package but *how* instructors are using it (or not) in their teaching practices and *why*. This paper explores these questions through the theoretical lens of socio-cultural theory.

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Textbook as Tool: A Sociocultural Theory Approach

Drawing on Vygotskian cultural-historical psychology, a sociocultural perspective on learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) holds that social, cultural, and historical contexts all contribute to learning. In other words, cognition entails social, cultural, and historical dimensions of the context(s) in which learning takes place. Similarly, learning not only affects the individual's mind, it also shapes and transforms the context in which it occurs. Lantolf (2004) explained sociocultural theory as “a theory of mind ... that recognizes the central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts play in organizing uniquely human forms of thinking” (pp. 30-31).

An important aspect of learning is the role of mediational tools — either physical (e.g., calculators, maps, or computers) or psychological (e.g., literacies, pedagogical frameworks, conceptions of learning, and language itself) (Thorne, 2004). Some examples of tools that help mediate FL learning include print materials, gestures, the physical environment, and classroom discourse (Donato, 2000). Hall (2001) explained the significance of such tools, stating, “The means themselves and the ways in which we use them in the pursuit of action with others do not simply enhance our individual development, but rather, they fundamentally shape and transform it” (p. 29).

Mediational tools are dynamic. That is to say, the use of tools and the role they play in learning depend on the cultures in which they are found as well as human agency (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). An example of the dynamic nature of mediational tools related to FL teaching can be seen in the case of objects whose original func-

tion served to mediate everyday activities such as eating (e.g., restaurant menu) or traveling (e.g., city map) whereas they are adapted for use by teachers in a different cultural context as “realia” or authentic documents to mediate the altogether different activities of acquiring new vocabulary, engaging in analysis of a text, or carrying out a communicative function in the FL.

From a sociocultural theory perspective, the textbook is one tool among many used by FL teachers and learners. *How* individuals use this tool is, in turn, mediated by their conceptions of its role in learning activity and, particularly for FL instructors, by pedagogical frameworks and beliefs about teaching and learning that inform their teaching activity.

Purpose of the Study

This study’s purpose was to explore TA beliefs and practices regarding the role of FL textbook materials and to determine how the textbook functioned as a tool for teaching and learning in the context of one university-level FL program. TAs of university-level FL programs are, as a rule, not in the position to make decisions on the choice of a textbook, and conversations regarding TA experiences with textbooks are often limited to immediate instructional concerns rather than more theoretical considerations. For this reason, TAs’ opinions, beliefs, and practices regarding textbook materials are left by and large unexplored. The following research questions framed the study:

1. What do TAs believe the textbook’s role is in FL learning?
2. How do TAs use their current textbook and its supplementary materials to plan and carry out classroom instruction?
3. What aspects of TAs’ current textbook and its supplementary materials are not used to plan or carry out classroom instruction?

Methods and Procedures

A case study was conducted with the case comprised of 12 TAs of elementary-level French and Italian language courses within one academic department. Several strategies were used for verification of this qualitative study’s data collection and analysis. These included triangulation of data to establish a confluence of evidence, use of an effective organization system for collected data, training of a research assistant to administer the interview protocol (instead of the primary investigator who was serving as LPD for 7 of the 12 participants at the time), member checks during data collection (i.e., participants were asked to read and make corrections or additions to the transcribed interviews), and audio recording of interviews and verbatim transcripts.

Data Sources

The Participant Background Questionnaire was designed to collect demographic data and information on previous teaching experiences. It included 13 items on age, gender, nationality, language training in French / Italian (for the case of non-native speakers of the FL taught) or English (for native speakers of French or Italian), study abroad experiences, and previous teacher training or teaching experiences (see Appendix A). Demographic information for each participant is found in Table 1.

The *Teacher Beliefs and Practices and Textbook Materials Questionnaire* was designed to explore participants' beliefs and opinions regarding the role of textbook materials, the focus of textbook materials in use in the course currently taught, and self-reported practices on its use. After piloting an initial version of the questionnaire which contained 20 items, a revised questionnaire was used in which participants indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement with 15 statements using a Likert-type scale from 1 to 5 with the notations 1 (strongly disagree), 3 (neither agree or disagree), and 5 (strongly agree).¹ Items are found in Table 2.

The *Teacher Beliefs and Practices and Textbook Materials Interview* used a semi-structured interview protocol and included 10 questions (see Appendix A) selected from an earlier piloted version containing 12 questions. Participants were interviewed on beliefs regarding the role of textbook materials, current uses of these materials for planning and instruction, and views on the most and least useful aspects of their current textbook.

Textbook Materials. The Italian textbook in use was the second edition of *Parliamo Italiano* (Branciforte & Grassi, 2002) described on the publisher's website as instilling core language skills by pairing cultural themes with essential grammar points. The French textbook was the fourth edition of *Deux Mondes* (Terrell, Rogers, Kerr, & Spielmann, 2002) described on the publisher's website as based on the Natural Approach and offering students a way to develop language proficiency especially in listening and speaking through inductive presentation of materials and culturally rich themes and topics. Both textbooks were used during interviews for participants to explain specific examples to the interviewer.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place over a ten-week period. After completing the two questionnaires, each participant took part in a digitally recorded interview later transcribed verbatim by both the research assistant and the primary investigator. To ensure accuracy, transcriptions were shared between them to identify discrepancies, and each participant was given the transcribed interview for confirmation and clarification of responses. Finally, a debriefing session was held with the Primary Investigator, Research Assistant, and those participants who chose to attend. During this session, the Primary Investigator and Research Assistant overviewed emerging themes from the data, and the group discussed implications for FL teaching and learning.

Patterns and themes found from the interviews were identified using inductive techniques described in Strauss and Corbin (1990). The Primary Investigator and the Research Assistant reviewed interview data line-by-line, generated categories and labels, reviewed and revised categories, and established more abstract categories. The Primary Investigator

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then established recurring themes and triangulated interview data with results from the Teacher Beliefs and Practices and Textbook Materials Questionnaire. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of responses.

Participants and Setting

The participants included 8 females and 4 males ranging in age from 21 to 36 with an average age of 25 years. Of these, 10 were TAs (5 in French, 5 in Italian) enrolled in a graduate M. A. program in French or Italian literature at a state-related public research university and 2 were exchange students from French universities serving as TAs in French for one year. Each TA participant served as an instructor for one 5-credit hour elementary French or Italian course per term during four semesters, the typical time to completion of the M.A. degree. The nationalities of the participants included six Americans, two French exchange students, and one student each from China, Iran, Italy, and Mexico. This diversity in the participants’ cultural backgrounds would prove to be a critical element in the interpretation of this study’s findings. Characteristics of each participant are summarized in Table 1.

Just one participant, Rob, had teaching experience prior to beginning his course of graduate study in French. All of the participants in this study took part in a weeklong orientation to FL teaching during the Fall semester of their first year of study followed immediately by a required one-term graduate seminar on teaching a FL at the university level.² This training and coursework was complemented by weekly group meetings with other TAs and the LPD for French or Italian.

Table 1. Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	FL Taught	Semesters of Teaching Experience
Ali	24	American	Italian	1
Elena	21	French	French	1
Gina	25	American	Italian	1
Jean-Charles	23	French	French	1
Jin	24	Chinese	French	1
José	24	Mexican	Italian	1
Katie	24	American	Italian	1
Maria	32	Italian	Italian	3
Natalie	23	American	French	1
Renee	23	American	French	3
Rob	36	American	French	3
Souri	22	Iranian	French	3

Findings

Research Question One: The Role of the Textbook in FL Learning

Findings support the notion that the textbook functioned as an important tool mediating FL teaching and classroom learning activity. All the participants cited some

and, in most cases, numerous uses for textbook materials in planning instruction, presenting new material, engaging students in FL learning, and providing means for follow-up language practice outside class. However, differences in *what* materials were used and *how* they were used existed among the 12 participants and between native-speaking and non-native speaking TAs. Trends emerging from interview and questionnaire data related to the first research question included the textbook's role as a common point of reference for teachers and students, a source of material for activities and contexts for framing instruction, and a tool for the teaching and learning of FL vocabulary and grammar.

Common Point of Reference for Teachers and Students. When asked what textbook materials can *ideally* provide for teachers and students, eight participants viewed the textbook as “useful information ... a source to expand on,” “a good reference,” “background information,” “a framework for the classroom lesson,” and “for [the] teacher ... a guide to teach.” Souri, a second-year TA of French from Iran, described the textbook's role as “for pre-reading and post-reading ... if you want to read it before class and then after class if you didn't understand something.” Although Souri's answer applies to how students use the textbook, Renee, a second-year TA of French from the U.S. responded in a similar manner when referring to how TAs use it:

We have a day-to-day plan, but even with the plan, the textbook still helps me, like, look through it, and I know what pages the students are supposed to have read ... I get an idea of what the book teaches them so that I can review what's in the book and go beyond it.

One can interpret from these remarks that the textbook's primary function, even when framed by the interviewer as “*ideally*,” was as a reference point orienting classroom instruction and learning in general terms. Participant responses to the first two questionnaire items (see Table 2) support the perceived prominence of the textbook inasmuch as the majority of participants agreed that the textbook provides an organizational structure for introducing new content.

Table 2. Percentage of Total Participants' Response per Item and Mean Scores, Teacher Beliefs and Practices and Textbook Materials Questionnaire

	Strongly Disagree		Neither Agree Nor Disagree		Strongly Agree	Mean Score/Item
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. A textbook provides an organizational structure for introducing new vocabulary.	0	8.33	33.33	50	8.33	3.58
2. A textbook provides an organizational structure for introducing new grammar.	0	25	25	50	0	3.25
3. A textbook provides meaningful contexts for presentation of new content.	8.33	16.67	50	25	0	2.92
4. The textbook I am currently using presents content in a culturally meaningful way.	8.33	16.67	50	25	0	2.92

Table 2. Percentage of Total Participants' Response per Item and Mean Scores, Teacher Beliefs and Practices and Textbook Materials Questionnaire (Continued)

	Strongly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree			Strongly Agree	Mean Score/Item
	1	2	3	4	5	
5. The textbook I am currently using presents content that is relevant and engaging for students.	8.33	33.33	33.33	25	0	2.75
6. Readings provided in this textbook are helpful for presenting content and cultural information.	0	25	16.67	58.33	0	3.33
7. Images provided in this textbook are helpful for presenting new material.	8.33	25	16.67	50	0	3.08
8. It is necessary for me to search for texts and images not provided in this textbook to present new material.	0	0	0	41.67	58.33	4.58
9. This textbook provides appropriate written activities.	0	16.67	41.67	41.67	0	3.25
10. This textbook provides appropriate oral activities.	0	58.33	41.67	0	0	2.42
11. This textbook is helpful in providing activities when the whole class is working together and I am providing feedback.	8.33	8.33	33.33	50	0	3.25
12. This textbook is helpful in providing independent student-to-student activities.	0	41.67	50	8.33	0	2.67
13. The textbook I am currently using is helpful in providing activities when students are working alone.	16.67	0	16.67	50	16.67	3.50
14. In class it is helpful for students to complete activities from this textbook that are structured and formulaic but require students to produce new information unknown to the person presenting the prompt.	0	8.33	50	41.67	0	3.33
15. In class it is helpful for students to complete activities from this textbook that have one right answer but require them to interpret information provided and understand context and meaning.	0	0	16.67	75	8.33	3.92

Classroom Activities. Another often-cited answer for textbook materials' ideal role was as a source for in-class activities. Five participants (Maria, José, Gina, Elena, and Natalie) gave responses reflecting this in various ways — “for teachers it would provide exercises,” “good exercises for stimulating conversation,” “ideas for [student-to-student] activities,” “some activities ... to practice these grammar rules,” and

“meaningful activities to do in class.” When asked to elaborate on *what* the best textbook activities have students do, two trends emerged: oral activities and activities called meaningful or relevant. Six participants (Ali, José, Gina, Jean-Charles, Souri, and Jin) mentioned activities in which students talk together — expressed as “talk to each other,” “talk to each other in pairs or groups,” and “talk and create language.” The second characteristic, cited by Ali, Gina, Katie, and Rob, was activities described as “meaningful,” “relevant to their lives,” “where they use their own lives,” or “about their own experiences.” Other characteristics mentioned were activities that enable negotiation of meaning between students (José and Souri) and those wherein students use targeted language forms in context (Jin and Rob).

Contexts for Framing FL Instruction. The third role textbook materials might ideally fulfill, cited by five participants (Ali, José, Katie, Natalie, and Rob) was in providing contexts for FL use to frame classroom instruction. The TAs expressed this role as “a context ... and words to go along with a context,” “a good cultural context,” and “natural contexts.” Yet unlike other roles participants mentioned (such as its use as a point of reference to orient instruction), participants’ responses here point to the fact that this was more desideratum than reality.

Consider the response given by Ali, a first-year Italian TA from the U.S.: “Ideally, I would like the book to present a context that the students would be interested in and in which grammar would be presented in a way that makes sense to them ... ideally.” Both the repetition of the word “ideally” and the use of a conditional modal verb indicate an opposition to reality; it seems that Ali’s textbook is not, in her view, fulfilling the ideal role now or perhaps not to the degree desired. Moreover, José, a first-year Italian TA from Mexico, explained why this role cannot be fulfilled by the textbook saying, “[A]s teachers, we follow a certain teaching method that the book may not be aware of or may not actually work around it.” As in Ali’s explanation, José’s also suggests an inconsistency between their own objectives for organizing classroom instruction and the way the textbook is constructed.

Several participants referred to what José called a “teaching method” introduced to them during their first graduate seminar on FL teaching. Natalie, a first-year French TA from the U.S., also explained a sense of disconnection between the instructional sequence she uses and the textbook materials:

I think [the textbook] would provide contexts that we need ... it would provide meaningful activities to do in class ... that would take it through the sequence of everything that needs to be covered in class. We’ve learned that you need to do a warm-up, you need to do a presentation, comprehension checks, guided practice, and independent practice ... the textbook has lots of exercises, but in an ideal situation to me ... that’s what it would do.

“Ideally, I would like the book to present a context that the students would be interested in and in which grammar would be presented in a way that makes sense to them ... ideally.”

Her comments imply that although the textbook includes plentiful “exercises,” meaningful activities, sequenced in a way that corresponds with how she plans classroom instruction are not always available. Questionnaire responses to the item “A textbook provides meaningful contexts for presentation of new content” triangulate the finding that participants felt the need to search beyond textbook materials to find contexts to frame classroom instruction as only 3 of the 12 TAs (Jin, Katie, and Souri) agreed with this statement (see Table 2).

Tool for Vocabulary and Grammar Acquisition. When asked to explain what students learn from textbook materials, a majority of participants (11 of 12) indicated that textbook materials enabled acquisition of new vocabulary, knowledge of new grammatical forms, and cultural knowledge to some degree, yet marked differences were seen in the perceived effectiveness of textbook materials in each area. Because acquisition of new vocabulary and knowledge of new grammatical forms through textbook materials were identified as areas of effectiveness, they are discussed here, whereas cultural knowledge will be discussed in a later section.

The acquisition of new vocabulary was identified most frequently as the aspect of FL learning facilitated most by textbook materials (cited by 10 participants). Three TAs (Gina, Natalie, and Renee) commented positively on how high frequency words were identified and grouped lexically in the textbook. In addition, Gina, Rob, and Elena described the use of pictures with FL vocabulary as effective for learning new words and expressions. Elena, an exchange student from France and first-year French TA, explained that using images is an excellent means of presenting new vocabulary “in a way that the students really would understand without turning to English ... I really want them to look at the picture and understand immediately what it is about.”

Components of the textbook package mentioned by participants as most helpful in enabling FL vocabulary acquisition beyond word lists and images were audio CDs (mentioned by Souri and Rob, both non-native speakers of French) and readings (mentioned by Renee, a non-native speaking TA of French). Specific to the Italian textbook, three participants (Ali, José, and Katie, all non-native speaking TA of Italian) mentioned the section *In altre parole* (“In other words”) containing up-to-date idioms and expressions as helpful in exposing learners to real language used by Italian native speakers. Ali claimed that “it’s so funny how my kids remember them and say them

and use them and throw them in on exams and, you know written assignments,” indicating she saw evidence that some students integrated these words and expressions into oral and written language.

Knowledge of new grammar forms was a second aspect of FL learning that eight TAs agreed was enhanced by textbook materials. The other four participants (Jean-Charles, Gina, José, and Renee) explained that the textbook helped students learn about grammar, but this knowledge did not mean that the forms were integrated into the students’ FL. As José noted, the textbook’s grammatical rules and

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examples “help them *to understand* the grammar better but maybe not *to incorporate the language itself*” [my emphasis]. Renee’s response to the question of whether the textbook materials help students learn FL grammar bears a strong resemblance to his when she explains, “[The grammatical explanations] are very well organized, but they’re not assimilating it just from reading it ... the [workbook] is useful ... they can manipulate the forms, but everything’s there for them ... they’re not creating things.” Another response, this time by Jean-Charles, an exchange student from France and first-year French TA, echoes the previous ones and points to a difference between “understanding” rules for language use and “knowing” how to use language:

“...students are exposed to more FL grammar in textbook materials than can be successfully integrated into FL use.”

[The textbook] helps them understand a little bit more target language grammar if I have explained [it to] them before. Only by taking a look at the textbook, they cannot notice, they cannot know language ... I have to explain to them. I see the textbook more like a way to rethink what they are told during class and what they practice.

These three participants all communicate the idea that students are exposed to more FL grammar in textbook materials than can be successfully integrated into FL use. Gina, a first-year TA of Italian from the U.S., echoed this perceived inability of her students to assimilate the new grammatical forms in reference to prepositional phrases: “[The textbook] tells them what some of the things mean and then it gives them examples, so I guess they are supposed to derive from that when to use them, but they were really confused with that.” The rule-followed-by-examples format, nearly ubiquitous in FL textbooks, was mentioned by several participants as ineffective for acquisition of new FL grammar; however, few participants articulated alternatives to this approach. Only Rob, an American second-year French TA explained, “What is needed is something like a listening or reading that presents the new grammar in context.”

Research Question Two: Uses for Textbook Materials in Classroom FL Instruction

Beyond their conceptions of the textbook’s role in framing FL teaching and learning, participants also described concrete ways in which they used their current textbook. Three major uses for textbook materials emerged from interview and questionnaire data: for presentation of new material, guided practice activities, and transformation of existing textbook activities into new ones.

Presentation of New Material. Textbook materials played an important role for presenting new material for the majority of participants although differences emerged in what materials were used by different TAs. The majority of participants, both native-speaking and non-native speaking TAs claimed to use textbook-based images (Elena, Gina, Jean-Charles, Jin, Maria, Natalie, and Renee). In addition, six participants (Ali, Gina, Katie, Natalie, Renee, and Rob) named listening tracks from the audio CD as helpful,

“...textbook materials are most helpful for controlled or guided practice activities wherein learners either work alone or the entire group remains together with the teacher leading the activity.”

and just four (Ali, Gina, Natalie, and Renee) cited readings as useful. Natalie pointed out various pictures and readings that she had used in class from her textbook including images of Astérix and Obélix (French cartoon characters), “Déjeuner du matin” (a poem by Jacques Prévert), a photo of an apartment’s interior, and real estate advertisements. Questionnaire data replicates the trend of a mixed response to the usefulness of textbook materials for presenting new material — more than seven participants agreed with the statement “Readings provided in this textbook are helpful for presenting content and cultural information,” and six agreed “Images provided in this textbook are helpful for presenting new content.” Of note is the fact that only non-native speaking TAs mentioned textbook listening and reading textbook materials as valuable for presenting new content.³

Guided Practice Activities. The most frequently named use (by 10 participants) for textbook materials in classroom instruction was activities occurring after presentation of new material but before independent student-to-student activities. Participants referred to these student-to-student activities as “guided practice,” “activities that reinforce a structure,” “form-focused,” or “formulaic” in nature. Katie, a first-year Italian TA, described such an activity in the following way:

Here’s one that we used (participant points to the textbook page) ... It’s a very formulaic conversation. “Let’s go first to the coliseum. Is that OK? Sure, and then we’ll go to the ...” and they have to fill in the monuments basically. But in that case I wanted to work on *andiamo a ...* (“Let’s go to ...”)

Rob explained a similar use for this type of activity when asked to point out what types of textbook materials he uses in the classroom. He replied with the following explanation:

One thing that I did was vocabulary lists with definitions on [one] side and the students actually had to ... ask and find but using the text as a reference ... Having the text in front of them they can actually see the image and mark the vocabulary in that way. Or something like “*Ordre logique*,” (“Logical order”) asking one another what is the order you would do things.

Characteristics defining the activities participants claimed to use most often from textbook materials were those with a formulaic format containing items with one correct answer and a focus on form within a limited context (typically a sentence-length utterance). Responses to several questionnaire items support the finding that textbook materials are most helpful for controlled or guided practice activities wherein learners either work alone or the entire group remains together with the teacher leading the activity (see Table 2).

Transforming Textbook Materials for Classroom Use. A last finding related to common uses for textbook materials in class involved the possibility of transforming materials or activities, a practice described by five participants — Ali, Gina, Katie, Natalie, and Renee. Natalie’s interview provides several occurrences of this practice including the following:

I’ve done some information-gap activities, and since I’m a horrible artist I pulled out the little cartoon, this little grid ... and I created an info-gap activity where I covered half the pictures on one sheet and the other half of the pictures on Person B’s sheet. So I used that to create a couple of info-gap activities.

Although the Annotated Instructor’s Edition explains the purpose of this activity as “narration practice,” Natalie used it to create an activity requiring negotiation of meaning between two students. Gina explained a similar way of transforming activities when she said,

There’s some little scenarios that maybe the textbook will say “Get with a partner and discuss this,” but really you can’t do that. They have to have some kind of guideline. So if there’s an activity like that ... we’ll take that idea and adapt it into something more fun and maybe easier, well, not easier, but more focused on what we want them to do.

Other types of transformed activities described by participants were changing listening tracks into classroom dialogues (Ali), reading texts into listening activities (Natalie), formulaic dialogues into more open-ended opportunities for student-to-student oral discourse (Renee), and vocabulary lists into activities to sort and categorize new words and expressions in ways that make sense to learners (Katie). In Ali’s case, she explained the rationale for her transformation of listening tracks into read-aloud dialogues as a desire to focus on oral pronunciation in Italian, something she said her students “seem to like.” In Natalie’s case, the rationale provided for creating information gap activities was explained as “since I am a horrible artist,” yet these types of activities can be found in her textbook’s Instructor’s Resource Kit for each chapter.

Research Question Three: Limitations of Textbook Materials in FL Instruction

Participants used textbook materials extensively as a common point of reference orienting instruction and students’ acquisition of FL vocabulary and grammar as well as a source of certain types of activities or potential transformation of activities. However, several limitations of these materials emerged through interview and questionnaire responses.

Oral Student-to-Student Activities. In contrast to prevalent use of textbook materials for guided practice activities, only four TAs (Ali, Gina, Jin, and Rob) claimed to use textbook materials for open-ended, student-to-student oral activities called “independent practice” by several participants. In response to the questionnaire item “This textbook is helpful in providing independent student-to-student activities,” 11 of the 12 participants selected “Neither Agree Nor Disagree” or “Disagree” (see Table 2).

Jin, a first-year French TA from China, explained she used only those textbook activities “that involve very authentic communication,” whereas Ali described looking for activities “with a response based on comprehension *plus something else*.” This idea of “something else” was echoed in Rob’s description of activities involving “what do you think not what did the person say” and Gina’s description of activities “that are kind of open, like, ‘What did you think?’ after a dialogue instead of ‘What did the person say?’ but ‘Why do you think they said that?’”

When asked to describe textbook activities not used in their classroom, six participants (Ali, Elena, Jin, José, Renee, and Souri) highlighted those designed for oral student-to-student language practice that they found “formulaic,” “mechanical,” or “not realistic.” The problem with these types of activities, explained José, is that

a lot of times we just want them to interact more and to talk more ... with exercises where they can come up with different answers in different ways but they’re still correct. It gives you more of a flexibility to negotiate the language ... rather than to just spit out an answer.

Jin’s interview provides an example of why participants do not see formulaic oral activities as valuable for communication. After pointing to an activity in the textbook she does not use, she is prompted by the interviewer who asks, “Can you tell me *why* you wouldn’t use it?” She responds, “[B]ecause in the real conversation, nobody will talk this way — “*Ce soir je vais faire des courses ... Oui / Non.*” (Tonight, I am going to run errands ... Yes / No.) I don’t think this makes that much sense.” The activity’s objective according to the textbook explanation is for students to say whether statements are true or false, adding items as needed to express personal experience. However, Jin sees this dialogue pattern as unnatural, and she later explains she would rather structure the conversation using an open-ended prompt — “*What are your weekend plans?*”⁴

Souri and Renee provided similar examples when asked about activities they do not use. Souri explained her preference to have students “describing their family to one another in a natural way” rather than “So, how many sisters do you have? I have five. How many do you have?” The question of what reflects real communication is also present in Renee’s remarks on an activity asking students to hypothesize what question was asked to produce the response given. She said, “This is a difficult exercise, because they’re asking you to come up with a question from the response ... it never happens, it’s not something that anyone actually ever does.”

The question of what *type* of communication results from student-to-student interaction through textbook activities is a recurrent theme, and three participants (Jean-Charles, José, and Natalie) suggested that language resulting from some activities is not communication at all since speakers are not required to process meaning to produce a response. No participants indicated agreement with the questionnaire item “This textbook provides appropriate oral activities.”

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The question of what *type* of communication results from student-to-student interaction through textbook activities is a recurrent theme, and three participants (Jean-Charles, José, and Natalie) suggested that language resulting from some activities is not communication at all since speakers are not required to process meaning to produce a response. No participants indicated agreement with the questionnaire item “This textbook provides appropriate oral activities.”

The Question of Relevance. The topic of textbook activities was an aspect that concerned the majority of participants who claimed not to use those that are “irrelevant,” “have no applicability to their lives,” or have students “try to imagine themselves in a situation that they would never actually find themselves in.” For the related questionnaire item, only three participants (Jin, Renee, and Souri) agreed “The text-

book I am currently using presents content that is relevant and engaging for students.” Examples of activities from both the French and Italian textbooks in use called irrelevant included “Imagine that you are the mailman,” “Imagine you are an antique dealer,” or “Taking care of a car — how often must you do the following types of upkeep?” In each case, participants felt students would not be interested in the hypothetical topic and thus would have little motivation to communicate in the FL.

On the other hand, participants contended their students need to reach beyond their immediate realities when using the FL TAs indicated a clear distinction between irrelevant activities and those which incorporated imagination. Four TAs (Gina, José, Elena, and Renee) explained that creating activities about one’s “ideal” house, job, vacation, or weekend to facilitate conversation in a way that is relevant to students. Gina claimed “[I]t is natural [for students] to have an imagination, like, to know what you like and know what you’d want if you had the money.” José described an activity he created wherein he and his students collaborated in deciding what furniture might go in each room of a fantasy home. He explained that this was an interactive way for students to use new vocabulary and grammar in context and make choices based on their own tastes and ideas while completing a task with their teacher.

Cultural Learning and Differences Between Native-Speaking and Non Native-Speaking Participants. The textbook’s role in facilitating cultural learning was described as *limited* by nine participants. These descriptions included expressions such as “kind of a side product but it’s not the focus,” “[i]t can tell them a little bit about it,” “maybe a little bit ... I have to draw on my own knowledge,” and “it can give you some cultural ideas, but it can’t teach you current culture.” Several questionnaire items help make sense of participants’ stance toward cultural learning and textbook materials. Nine of 12 participants did not agree with the statement “The textbook I am currently using presents content in a culturally meaningful way,” whereas Jin, José, and Souri agreed with the statement. However, the majority of participants agreed with the statement “Readings provided in this textbook are helpful for presenting content and cultural information.” A possible interpretation is that participants value inclusion of cultural texts and would value *more* texts integrating language and culture to promote effective instruction. This interpretation is supported by interview remarks calling culture in the textbook “a side product,” “like CliffsNotes,” and “when they present the vocabulary, they don’t involve the culture.”

The idea of the “authenticity” of cultural texts in textbook materials was mentioned by several participants, with differences emerging between native-speaking and non native-speaking TAs. When asked to point out what they did not use, the three

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role in facilitating
cultural learning
was described as
limited...”***

native-speaking TAs described “outdated” or “old-fashioned” texts (Elena, Jean-Charles, and Maria). The problem with such documents, in Jean-Charles’ opinion, is that

It gives them an idea of what French or Francophone countries’ culture might be but somewhat ... sometimes in a biased way, you know, just by showing old-fashioned stuff ... you’ve got images of a *discman* of yeah, of a CD player, of a telephone, of a TV, but basically they are products that were created in 1985, if students see this ... maybe they will think, “Oh, in France, they only have *that* kind of stuff.”

Jean-Charles’ example suggests “*that* kind of stuff” does not reflect cultural products from his country today and these misrepresentations can result in students forming erroneous notions. Other cultural aspects in textbook materials critiqued by native-speaking TAs included outdated or low frequency vocabulary (Jean-Charles) and audio or video texts containing unnatural language (Maria).

During the interview each TA of French or of Italian origin asserted their status as native speakers and a more valuable source of cultural learning than textbook materials. Elena claimed, “As long as I am French and native, I think that I can provide everything to them,” and Maria explained, “You always need a point of reference which is the teacher, because I think that students like to listen to a native speaker when they talk about their own culture ... sometimes the material about the culture they contain is not real at all, so I tell them.” Jean-Charles reiterated this stance and went further saying, “I’m a native, so they know that what I tell them is the truth, because it’s where I come from.” For these TAs, the textbook functioned as a secondary source of cultural information whereas they themselves served as their students’ primary point of reference in understanding the FL culture(s).

In contrast, non-native speaking TAs were more likely to explain specific components of the textbook package they found helpful in teaching culture such as audio recordings and readings (cited by Gina, José, Katie, Natalie, Renee, Rob, and Sourì) and photos of the target language cultures (cited by Natalie and Renee). Unlike native speakers who viewed the textbook’s listening materials as “unnatural,” non-native speaking TAs had a different stance. Renee explained, “it’s stilted and it’s slow, but that’s what they need and that’s what they can understand right now.” It is important to note that these findings are consistent with those reported in previous sections of this study’s findings regarding audio and video textbook materials for teaching vocabulary and presenting new content in the classroom; in both cases, only non-native speaking TAs reported their use.

The responses of both native and non-native speaking participants suggest that inclusion of more information about cultural practices and perspectives in FL textbook materials would be welcomed. In particular, TAs reported a desire for a more thorough treatment of everyday culture such as lifestyle, social issues, and the transition from student to professional life.

Discussion

The results of this investigation point to numerous ways in which FL textbook materials mediated the activity of FL teaching and learning for participants and their

students, a finding articulated in the past (Bragger & Rice, 2000; Kramersch, 1988; Parry, 2000) borne out in this empirical study. The textbook informed the participants' teaching and their students' learning as reference tool, anchored learners' acquisition of FL vocabulary (10 participants) and grammar (8 participants), and provided images, readings and audio materials for classroom instruction. In addition, numerous uses for the textbook in classroom instruction were articulated by participants, and these uses were prevalent for presentation of new materials and guided practice activities (10 participants each).

Drawbacks of textbook materials cited by participants included a lack of usable oral student-to-student activities, relevant topics, and limited cultural content. These limitations provide ideas useful not only for academic departments but also in terms of future directions for commercial FL textbook development by publishing companies seeking insights from university-level FL teachers. In addition, several of these drawbacks echo concerns highlighted in past research on FL textbook materials including a reliance on form-focused rather than truly communicative activities (Aski, 2003; Frantzen, 1998; Lally, 1998; Rifkin, 2003; Shelly, 1995; Wong & VanPatten, 2003) and activities that lack relevance or opportunities for learners to add new information about the real world (Parry, 2000). This study also provides further information on the prevalence of controlled (or "guided") practice activities with one right answer in textbook materials, activities with limited opportunities for oral discourse beyond one or two utterances per turn, and a perceived lack of open-ended (or "independent") practice activities for student-to-student communication mirroring real-world language use. However, it must be emphasized that the limitations of textbook materials found in this study apply to just two textbooks and are thus not generalizable.⁵

Important differences emerged in the ways in that non-native speaking and native-speaking TAs used textbook materials, a finding consistent with a sociocultural perspective on how social, cultural, and historical contexts influence individuals' beliefs and practices. For example, non-native speaking TAs used textbook materials for teaching FL culture whereas native-speaking TAs did not. Moreover, native-speaking TAs tended to posit themselves as cultural experts: Recall those participants who said they could "provide everything," and equated native-speaking status and "truth." In addition, six non-native speaking TAs reported transforming textbook-based images, readings, and activities into new ones whereas the three native-speaking TAs did not.

These findings substantiate past research pointing to previous language learning as a powerful influence on teachers' beliefs and practices (Borg, 2005; Pajares, 1992). Although this study did not explore specific cultural, educational, or historical influences on individual TAs' teaching practices related to textbook materials, it could be hypothesized that because of varying contexts where these teachers were educated and learned foreign or second languages (China, France, Italy, Iran, Mexico, the U.S.) their current pedagogical frameworks and beliefs about teaching and learning differ

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in significant ways despite common pedagogical training, teaching experiences, and collaboration with one another and their LPD at their current institution. These varying pedagogical frameworks and beliefs influence, in turn, how TAs conceive of the textbook as a tool in FL teaching and learning and how they use it in concrete ways in the classroom.

Moreover, it has been illustrated through this study that although the textbook is a tool with a conventionality of purpose (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), individuals' repeated use of this tool resulted in varied

functional uses. From the perspective of sociocultural theory, people are agents in charge of their own learning (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), and we might extrapolate that despite the institutional structure in place, TAs remain agents in charge of their own classroom teaching. Although the FL textbook may be viewed as a tool to “standardize” instruction and student learning, individual teachers exercise agency in how and when the tool is used. For instance, within one level of FL learning, different groups of students may experience the FL and its culture or cultures in ways that vary significantly depending on what materials are used and how they are used.

Furthermore, the specific ways in which some participants transformed existing textbook materials into novel artifacts demonstrates the dynamic nature of tool use described by Lantolf and Thorne (2006): “Even though mediational means predate their individual users, having been created by others at different times and in different sites, this does not mean that they must necessarily be used as they were originally intended” (p. 65). Other researchers (Tomasello, 1999; Wertsch, 1998) have referred to a spin-off function or ratchet effect — shaping or adapting new tools from existing ones. Examples of this can be seen in the six participants' practice of using existing textbook activities to create new ones. By applying this conceptualization of dynamic tool use to teaching with FL textbook materials, we might begin to address the paradox explained by Ariew (1982) that textbooks aim to please as many people as possible and therefore please very few and by Graves (2000) when she presented her own textbook to an audience saying it “is written for everyone and ... written for no one” (p. 174). Through the novel uses of textbook materials described by participants in this study, we see that agency is a critical element in working with textbook materials. They provide the point of departure from which individuals must plan and carry out instruction based on their own teaching style, their students' needs and preferences, and curricular objectives.

Recommendations

The findings in this study related to TAs' beliefs regarding the textbook's role in FL learning and TAs' practices in using textbook materials in the classroom lead to a number of practical recommendations. The following suggestions might serve as a point of departure for evaluation, use, and adaptation of textbook materials by administrators, publishers, and teachers:

1. LPDs are encouraged to provide contexts to facilitate new teachers' reflections on personal experiences as FL learners with textbook materials and how resulting beliefs may influence their assumptions about these materials. This might take the form of discussion or written reflection and involve comparisons of responses among teachers educated in different cultural contexts to better understand perspectives of native-speaking and non-native speaking teachers. Such reflection and discussion could serve to heighten teachers' awareness of their own conceptions of FL learning and teaching and as a point of departure and future teacher development. LPDs and teachers might identify those pedagogical concepts which informed teachers' past FL learning practices and discuss which concepts are compatible with current curricular objectives. In addition, the role of native-speaker status and the questionable idea of representing an entire culture or language group as a FL teacher is a critical point of discussion illuminated by this study.

“Although the FL textbook may be viewed as a tool to ‘standardize’ instruction and student learning, individual teachers exercise agency in how and when the tool is used.”

2. LPDs and teachers are called to collaborate in identifying how FL textbook materials in use serve programmatic goals and objectives both globally and in terms of specific learning outcomes. At beginning stages of teaching, teachers can be challenged to identify textbook activities that support particular goals for a classroom lesson and to discuss why and how they think certain activities would (or would not) enable FL development. In many cases, new teachers simply are not well acquainted with their FL textbook and the variety of ancillary materials provided. In addition, new teachers often display great enthusiasm for creating their own materials and activities, a practice which while both typical and even necessary at times can result in extraordinary expenditures of time for finding or developing materials. By better mapping which textbook materials and activities are helpful in targeting instructional objectives, teachers might better utilize their time in developing only those materials not actually provided by the textbook or its ancillary materials.

3. LPDs and teachers are called to collaborate in ongoing dialogue on the effectiveness of FL textbook materials in use in light of the ever-changing market of available instructional materials. This can be accomplished through informal discussion among teachers and LPDs, periodic opportunities for individual teachers to provide LPDs with written feedback on textbooks in use, and written feedback by FL students themselves on what they learn from textbook materials.

Recommendations for future research efforts include investigation of classroom discourse patterns emerging from textbook-based activities (for example, I-R-E pattern or Initiation-Response-Evaluation, in Cazden, 1988) how FL textbook materials can enable Instructional Conversations (Hall, 2001) in the FL classroom, or strategies for integrating relevant cultural information into textbook materials. Whereas this study focused on two FL textbooks — of French and Italian — future research might

“By better mapping which textbook materials and activities are helpful in targeting instructional objectives, teachers might better utilize their time in developing only those materials not actually provided by the textbook or its ancillary materials.”

focus on textbooks used in teaching different FLs or textbooks based on different theoretical approaches than those in this study.

In conclusion, Scollon (2001) stated that mediational tools amplify our abilities yet “reduce and constrain them in other ways” (p. 117). Today’s textbook materials, indeed, serve as important tools for FL teaching and learning. However, it is the task of teachers, program administrators, and researchers first to work together to identify aspects of these materials that need transformation to meet the challenges of tomorrow’s FL classroom and second to communicate these ideas to those who write FL textbook materials.

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Notes

1. Initial versions of the Teacher Beliefs and Practices Questionnaire and Interview were piloted with Intermediate-level French TAs, a group of instructors, both native and non-native speakers of French.
2. The faculty member who taught the required graduate seminar on teaching FL at the university level was not the primary investigator of this study. Instead, it was taught by a faculty member specializing in applied linguistics with a joint appointment in French and Education.
3. Responses from the Teacher Beliefs and Practices and Textbook Materials Questionnaire related to textbook images and readings (Item # 6 and # 7) were divided for both French and Italian TAs. In other words, for both languages, some TAs felt images and readings were helpful for presenting new content and cultural information whereas others did not.
4. Whereas carefully structured activities were seen as valuable for classroom use in guided activities, Jin’s remarks refer to her perception that they are less valuable for independent activities that focus more on negotiation of meaning between students and less on production of certain forms.
5. It is well possible that other FL textbooks based on different theoretical approaches to FL acquisition might feature different content and activities (e.g., task-based or content-based textbooks) and thus produce different results than the present study.

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Appendix A

ID # _____ (Leave blank)

1. Date of Birth: ___ / ___ / _____ (Month/Day/Year)
2. Gender: (Circle one) Male Female
3. Nationality: _____
4. Semester you began graduate studies: _____ (Semester) _____ (Year)
5. Semester you began teaching: _____ (Semester) _____ (Year)
6. Total number of semesters teaching experience in this department : _____
7. Check off all of the following courses you have taught in this department and how many times you have taught the course:

	Course	Times Taught
French / Italian 1	_____	_____
French / Italian 2	_____	_____

8. Have you taught any French / Italian courses at other institutions? Please list what, when, and where.

9. What is your first language? _____

10. For non-native speakers of the language taught, check off in which contexts you studied the this language. For native speakers, check off in which contexts you studied English:

	Number of Years
Elementary School (Ages 5-12)	_____
Middle School / Junior High (Ages 12-14)	_____
High School (Ages 14-18)	_____
College	_____
Other (explain)	_____

11. For non-native speakers of the language taught, list experiences studying or living abroad in a culture where this language is spoken with dates and places. For native speakers, list experiences in an English-speaking country with dates and places:

12. Please list any teacher training experiences you have participated in besides departmental orientation and the first-semester pedagogy course:

13. Please check off your current level of graduate studies:

MA ____ Ph.D. ____

Appendix B

The Teacher Beliefs and Practices and Textbook Materials Interview Protocol

1. In an ideal situation, what does a textbook provide for FL teachers and learners?
2. What were your own experiences with FL textbooks like when you were studying FL(s)?
3. Is FL textbook use or evaluation something that you have received instruction on or training for in your coursework or other training experiences?
4. How do you use your current textbook* when you are preparing to teach and also when you are in the classroom teaching?
5. What do you look for in the information or images provided in the textbook if you want to use it in your classroom teaching?
6. Do you think that your textbook helps your students learn about the target language culture? If so, how? If not, why not?
7. Do you think that your textbook helps your students learn target language grammar? If so, how? If not, why not?
8. Do you think that your textbook helps your students learn target language vocabulary? If so, how? If not, why not?
9. Show me some examples from your textbook of activities or information that you have used or would use in class and explain why you would choose those.
10. Show me some examples from your textbook of activities or information that you would not use in class and explain why you would not choose those.

*Note. Participants were told before the interview began that the term “textbook” included the textbook itself and all supplemental materials that were part of the textbook package (e.g., workbook, listening CD, video).