

WHY AND HOW TO INCLUDE TEXTBOOK ANALYSIS IN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Introduction

While teaching methodologies can sometimes easily get adopted at a worldwide level, teacher education traditions are about as multiple as teaching contexts, without having much influence on one another. Academic and professional, pre- and in-service, theory- and practice-oriented training curricula co-exist and work sometimes very differently, yet all aim at preparing trainees to be efficient language teachers in a classroom. They are all subject to different constraints and correspond to different settings, although the contents of these courses are often to a certain extent comparable.

This article draws on one aspect of the teaching profession that is often a secondary subject of teacher education, even though it is quite universal and central to language teaching, and to teaching in general: the use of textbooks. We will here work with the terms “material” and “textbook” with their broad meaning, referring to teaching tools which may comprise one or a set of documents or books, as well as multimedia material or other resources: Student’s books, Workbooks, Teacher’s books, CD/DVDs, online tools etc. (following Hutchinson & Torres 1994: 327). Teaching material analysis and adaptation are indeed often found in teacher education curricula, but are mostly hidden behind - or next to - other course-development contents and hardly ever stated as central. This article will try to explain *why* and *how* the inclusion of textbook analysis within the teacher training process can have a positive impact both on future teacher’s professional development and concrete preparedness, arguing in favour of more consideration for that aspect and giving an example of a seminar on textbook analysis taught at the Geneva University Teacher Training Institute (IUFÉ). Although it takes language teaching as a starting point, its conclusions can quite easily also apply to other teaching subjects in which teaching material is used.

Why teach textbook analysis?

Training future teachers to analyse textbooks is a task that may in fact look superfluous, somehow irrelevant or at least time consuming. Certainly, no

teacher education program would ever encourage teachers to extensively deal with material rather than train them for efficient decision-making and action, and we can only agree with this. Moreover, there are about as many textbooks out there as there are teachers, and the range of this available material is constantly increasing. Reluctant teacher trainers could thus argue that taking valuable time in teacher training to have a close look at textbooks only brings a short-term benefit for trainees, and that they should rather learn how to build a good lesson plan and fully understand the different skills learners should master. However, giving future teachers the capacity to examine textbooks in a critical way, and not just the ability to use them, refer to them or adapt them to their own needs, is one that we – and our past students as it seems – find essential, for 5 reasons: (1) every teacher uses textbooks, (2) it’s a real bridge between theory and practice, (3) it helps teachers adapt to new contexts, (4) it fosters a reflexive approach and (5) it promotes critical understanding of methodologies.

1. Every teacher uses textbooks

As is commonly noted, “The textbook is an almost universal element of ELT teaching” (Hutchinson & Torres 1992: 315). Whether we like it or not, the content and course design brought by a given textbook plays a role in what happens in the classroom of the teacher who has to work with it. Schools often rely on one or several textbooks which may be designed, mandated or approved by governmental or hierarchical instances as curriculum-adequate. In some cases, the content transmitted to the learners may even be supposed to depend entirely on this material, used in all classes of a school, a region or even a country, which then puts the teacher in the difficult position of being a sole mediator between this pre-established representation of content and the learner. The variations in institutional practices are however not the goal of this article, partly because the importance and preponderance of textbooks is theoretical, as it’s commonly accepted that even in highly controlled educational settings, teachers only seldom follow imposed material closely: “It is rare that the teachers follow [the

textbook] to the letter; they can skip some exercises, modify their order, resort to processes that aren't planned in it, and when they take those that are advised, they put them into practice in their own way, engaging their sensitivity as much as their knowledge" (Besse 2010: 21, my translation; see also: Littlejohn, 2011). There is no doubt though that teachers cannot work without giving at least *some* consideration to their work instrument. In other words, dealing with textbooks is relevant to *all* trainees.

2. It is a bridge between theory and practice

The fact that textbooks are almost universally used is not a coincidence: they are helpful and practical, in the sense that they help the teacher be an efficient practitioner. In fact, they are one of the very concrete ways in which subject content is being brought into the classroom, and they represent how this or that theory, this or that methodology, this or that linguistic explanation can be put into practice (see also: Richards 2005). Along with teachers' own lesson management and the way they implement a given content, textbooks and their use are often central to classroom activities and help structure the lessons. Training teachers to get along with the material they will be dealing with can thus have some real impact on practice, meeting the need for trainee teachers to combine practical training and theoretical approaches to the profession (Gordon & O'Brien 2007; Mattson, Eilerson & Rorrison, 2011). Textbooks analysis as part of a teacher education program is therefore an example of how to incorporate practical discussions on concrete work tools and still possibly address some more theoretical or methodological aspects.

3. It helps teachers adapt to change

Being able to discern methodological aspects of a given textbook and grasp some of its core characteristics can also help future teachers adapt to a changing teaching content or context, and be able to quickly seize the essential elements of a new working situation. Moreover, having to work with a different textbook often means an evolution in practice and it is often linked with a new, often institutionally triggered change in teaching paradigm (see: Fullan 2007: 37). Along their career, teachers thus have a great chance of facing the necessity to work with different teaching materials, be it because they teach different classes, because the official recommendations change, or because they decide to teach in a different context, region or even a different country. They may even have, at some

point, to *choose* the textbook they want to work with. In all cases, being able to analyse and assess course material, and to understand what is at stake when one has to work with new resources in terms of content management, methodological choices or even underlying representations can only be an advantage when it comes to dealing with novelties and adapting to change (see also: Hutchinson & Torres 1994; Humphries 2012).

4. It fosters a reflective approach to teaching

In fact, when observing and examining a textbook, teachers may come across many different implementations of differently selected contents. Multiple ideas on what language is and how it should be taught come to the surface, as every textbook shows one way of presenting carefully selected aspects in a precise order and along a certain type of exercises: Are authentic sources selected? Do we learn through reading first? Is the focus put on form or meaning? Should we focus on comprehension or on production? - there are many more examples. Each of the parameters of choice have, in fact, a conceptual meaning beyond the pure practicality, and may come into conflict (or fully converge) with the teacher's own perceptions, some of which go back to as far as when they were learners using textbooks themselves. Being able to examine some characteristics of a textbook and make them resonate with one's own ideas therefore also helps future teachers challenge their own views about language teaching and about language in general, particularly when discussing their analysis with others or linking it to their practice. Besides getting practically acquainted with the tools they will be using in their classroom, teachers can enhance their reflective competence through such an approach, thus following the encouragements for reflexive training (Bartlett 1990; Wallace 1991; Richards & Lockhart 1994; among many others).

5. It helps critical understanding of methodologies

Reflectivity however comes along with some form of necessary critical understanding of teaching situations and concepts, which is a goal for numerous teacher training programs as well. Rather than presenting state-of-the-art teaching methods or (even worse) outdated examples, training future teachers to undertake a critical analysis of some aspects of the teaching practice (or in this case, of textbooks) can only be helpful for their on-going and future understanding of the evolution of the field. Of course, we are not advocating for the replacement of all the means used so far, such as, analysis of in-class situations

through observations or practical training. Nevertheless, by learning to have a close look at textbook structure, content and purpose, possibly comparing different resources, trying to elaborate criteria for a good textbook or discussing their understanding of features, future teachers are also encouraged to take a stance in the world of teaching materials and teaching itself.

How to teach textbook analysis?

As we stated it earlier, the ability to carry out a textbook analysis can be considered as being a secondary aspect of teacher development, and is not systematically presented as a competence as such - let alone promoted - in the different courses. As it can easily be linked to many other fields of the teaching profession, it is often presented 'in addition to' them: some courses will address the topic while dealing with classroom practice and professional action, others along with lesson planning, or even with methodological contents. We are not exclusively advocating for a separate training unit on textbook analysis, or for a completely analytical approach such as the one presented here, but our experience at the University Teacher Training Centre (IUFE) in Geneva proved to be very positive.

An example of implementation

The training programme in Geneva has since its creation focused both on theoretical content, aiming at giving future teachers an extended academic background in Education and the opportunity to start their practice as a teacher through observations and supervised lessons carried out throughout their 2-year programme. The seminar on Textbook Analysis has been given as an optional subject within the theoretical part of the program, along with other 'Research Seminars'. This seminar was consequently placed in the area of *research practices* in which trainees are specifically encouraged to read scientific articles or other sources on educational issues, carry out empirical or analytical tasks and discuss their results. This focus on source analysis and research draws the analysis of textbooks a little away from a classroom-based approach which may be favoured in settings in which courses are mostly practical, or presented only along with classroom practice content. Nevertheless, even though it did not put an emphasis on concrete adaptations of textbooks for the classroom, our seminar showed strong links to practice, as was revealed in the students' feedback.

A group of around 10 student teachers of foreign languages has been taking part every year

since 2012 in this weekly seminar, during which textbooks are examined through various perspectives. Since the program for language teachers is designed for future teachers of *all* foreign languages (and not just English), and who will teach in a wide range of possible contexts and, therefore, with all sorts of possible textbooks (although in middle-school, an official textbook is used, most secondary-school teachers have a certain range of choice in the textbook they may use), focus has been made on presenting textbooks of different languages (English, German, Italian, Spanish, which are the languages taught by the participants, but also some they barely know or do not teach, such as, Latin, French or Portuguese) and which are designed for various audiences (middle-school, Business students, young adults...).

Each of the sessions of this seminar is widely based on group-work in which trainees are asked to find criteria for different analyses that can help inform the topic of the day, look into textbooks or extracts which have been previously selected, carry-out a comparative analysis, and then discuss their impressions. At the end of the semester and for means of assessment, students have to hand in an assignment paper on a textbook analysis in which they are asked to state the topic and sources of their work, define research questions and/or criteria of analysis, and present as well a factual as an interpretive assessment of two or more textbooks - usually the ones that they will most likely be using themselves - whilst adequately referencing their findings.

Our seminar or assignment topics have so far included quite different contents, which were all a contribution to the global aims described above. Some were in fact precisely designed to have future teachers "share" the material they use even with teachers of other languages and to gain a new insight on it; other lessons were based on particularly old - or at the contrary future textbooks, used as a starting point for discussions on the evolution of methodologies. Most of the sessions were based on textbooks that are used in the schools of Geneva, if not exactly on *the* textbook each of the participant uses, and this material was always looked at in a critical and comparative way that raised interesting debates. Topics included:

- **Discovering the features of historical textbooks (1800-1900)** helps the students understand different teaching currents in place in the last millennium, and investigate as well evolutions as constant factors of language

teaching, situating present questioning and methodologies in a wider frame and realizing that what is done today, or at least some of it, has been on the agenda for quite a long time.

- **Examining adequacy and correspondences between textbooks and reference curricula or other references such as the CEFR** creates a link between actual teaching material and curriculum implementation, examining how specific objectives which are defined in reference programs are put into practice (or not) in teaching materials.
- **Looking for the cultural stance and the socio-cultural input as presented in various textbooks of different languages (through both written, visual and oral content)** shows students how textbooks deal with the link between language and culture, and how seemingly insignificant activities or chapters convey sometimes a lot of cultural content. The comparison between the positions of different EFL textbooks regarding representation of culture(s) proved particularly interesting for that matter.
- **Seeing a textbook for the non-native teachers' own mother tongue** in the light of this socio-cultural anchoring is always particularly interesting as these participants get to see which variety, which side of their own reality is depicted in this material, a finding which can then be transferred to the foreign language textbook.
- **Spotting differences in textbook structures and organisation of content** helps examining how the foreign language is deconstructed into units, and what regular features are chosen by the authors to address linguistic content. Deciding to 'chop' content into functional lessons, providing grammar summaries (or not), as much as deciding to give the different skills a variable weight within a chapter are just a few among all the choices made by textbook designers that reflect a particular approach that can echo with the trainees' ideas.
- **Switching perspectives between Teachers' book and Students' book** is a first step in investigating the link between purpose, intention and practice in the use of textbooks, as it helps realise that what is meant by the textbook's authors does not always correspond to what teachers would actually do with it.
- **Understanding the purpose and position of different textbooks as stated in their introduction, and their relevance for a given teaching/learning context** also contributes to this discussion, as the analysis of the authors' intentions is also a reflection of pedagogical choices. Is the textbook meant to be used autonomously? What types of learners are more specifically addressed? Does it state any particular claim about language teaching or learning?
- **Analyzing the adequacy to different learning styles and processes** provides a good way to examine how activities as planned by teaching material can be balanced and adapted to different learners.
- **Observing the Learner- or Teacher-centeredness of different textbooks** and the analysis of how different interactions (Teacher-students, Pairs, Individual work) are used in the textbook can also prompt a debate on teacher stance and classroom management.
- **Discussing Mono-, Bi-, Multilingualism and -culturalism as promoted in different textbooks**, through investigations about the space given to the language of schooling, the learners' mother tongues, and their cultural background is an excellent opportunity for students to make a stand on the question of pluri- or multilingualism.
- **Defining criteria for a 'good' textbook (at personal and institutional level)** is a very effective content that encourages students to discuss elements of language teaching they find central as well as institutional, individual and practical constraints. Comparing the trainees' criteria with the ones used in other contexts or countries can also enrich a discussion on more general educational policies.
- **Learning about institutional choice processes for selecting new material at a regional level**, through a seminar in which we decided to invite people who are part of the choice process for all the schools in a region, is also a topic that brings up the political side of language teaching and places other practical, methodological and conceptual discussions in a wider context.
- **Comparing specific contents in textbooks designed for different levels, different learners, different languages or edited for different settings**, for example:

- examining how comparatives and superlatives are presented in several elementary English textbooks and ESP textbooks
- identifying linguistic specificities of pronunciation content and layout between a textbook for pre-intermediate learners of Spanish, German and English
- investigating the differences in the use of authentic literary material in a German textbook for beginners and for advanced learners
- noticing how presentation of vocabulary in the field of food is linked to social aspects of culture in EFL and Italian textbooks
- discussing the choices made in ‘reference target cultures’ for different EFL textbooks

This list is of course non-exhaustive, and is adjusted every year to the participants’ background and experience with textbooks. In fact, in the feedback we called from the trainees after their completion of the teacher program, they often mentioned different contents to be those who had most impact - from the institutional choice process to the possibility to look at textbooks for another language than the one they teach or the usefulness of examining teachers’ books; the advantages were apparently manifold.

Also, although the seminar was not directly linked to their practical assessment and did not go as far as implementing textbooks in class but stayed in the realm of libraries and group discussions, all the responses in the seminar assessment indicated that the teacher trainees find this content very “useful” and “practice-oriented”. In her reaction, one student noted the implications of this seminar: “I have concretely taken the results of my research [i.e. her textbook analysis she handed in as an assessment] into consideration in my work today, as well as other observations that were made by other students on other topics”. Another stated that “the seminar brought her to question the different activities that are offered in a textbook”, which led her “to pay attention and to make [her] students more aware of what they’re really doing”. One of them also gave a very interesting summarizing comment: “the seminar ‘forced’ me to analyse the textbooks that I use in a critical way, to find positive and negative elements even where I wasn’t looking for anything. Even though I had already read the

teachers’ book, I was able to seize some new aspects and to take a clearer stand. Also, since I’m now using another textbook, I realize that I had a ‘different’ first look at it, and at the upcoming new official textbook as well”.

Conclusion

As our students’ assignments have shown so far, it seems clear that both the goals of actual analytical competence (defining criteria, performing a critical investigation of varied sources) as the more subtle ability to see the bigger picture of language teaching and reflect on teachers’ actual use of textbooks were achieved; most of the papers and discussions showed that trainees also understood that “there can be no model of an ideal teacher, or lesson, or learner (or textbook)” (O’Neill 1994: 108) and were able to discuss the whys and wherefores of authors’ choices in a well-argued way.

This possible implementation of textbook analysis as presented here however only shows one of many ways to address the topic. There is no doubt that existing language teacher education programs or courses may be bound to prioritise their contents differently, possibly giving trainees a more practical experience on analysing or using textbooks and teaching devices in general, without proving any less relevant. We are convinced though that, even if put into practice differently and according to the needs of the trainees in their training and/or teaching contexts, the multiplicity of competences that can be trained through textbook analysis make it one of the most profitable contents for future teachers.

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