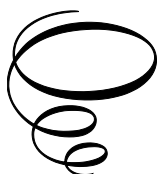


# Developing and Designing Materials for English Language Teaching and Learning

Edited by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	vii
Benâ Gül Peker & Ahmet Acar	
Task Authenticity and Materials Design .....	1
Benâ Gül Peker	
Didactic Innovation and Technological Innovation: The Case of Social Action-Oriented Approach (SAOA) and Digital Technologies.....	27
Christian Puren	
Redressing the Balance of Power in Language Teaching Materials.....	47
Rod Bolitho	
Multimethodological Textbook Design in ELT.....	64
Ahmet Acar	
Creating Authenticity through Role-play Tasks in Materials Design.....	81
Benâ Gül Peker	
A Scale of Competence Levels of the Foreign Language Teacher in the Use of a Textbook.....	108
Christian Puren	
Teaching Materials during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Observations and Experiences.....	124
Alessandra Nicolosi Dönmez & Nurdan Gürbüz	
Integrating Language Activities through the Mini-projects of Language Textbooks .....	141
Ahmet Acar & Christian Puren	
Materials Development for English Language Teaching Using Data Driven Learning: The Case of Language Functions.....	158
Elif Tokdemir Demirel	

Improving ESP for Nursing Course Design Productivity: A Collaborative-autoethnographic Exploration.....	177
John R. Baker & Yun-Ying Hung	

# A SCALE OF COMPETENCE LEVELS OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER IN THE USE OF A TEXTBOOK

CHRISTIAN PUREN<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the historical period of the dominant constituted methodologies, which start in France at the beginning of the 1900-1910 decade with the direct methodology and ended with the communicative approach at the end of the 1990s, training in the use of language textbooks could not constitute a didactic problematic as such: the textbook being supposed to be an instrument for the faithful implementation of the dominant methodology, the only legitimate use being that of scrupulous respect by the teacher –and by his or her students– of its materials, its activities and its approaches, page after page, didactic unit after didactic unit. In other words, between (1) *the design methodology* (as claimed by the authors of a textbook in the preface of the student's book and the introduction of the teacher's book), (2) the development methodology (the one that the authors have actually implemented in the development of their textbook, the one that the didactic analysis of the textbook reveals), and (3) the methodology of use (the one that can be identified by observing the actual use of the textbook by the teacher and learners), any difference was considered a regrettable dysfunction.

By “use of textbooks”, I mean primarily, in my present contribution, what the teacher does with their contents and their methodologies of elaboration. My perspective being didactic, it is the methodological aspect that interests me first and foremost, but content and methodology maintain reciprocal relations. To take an extreme example: a dialogue based on everyday situations necessarily calls for a different methodological treatment than that

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Emeritus of the University of Jean Monnet Saint-Étienne, France.

<sup>2</sup> Acronyms: CEFRL: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (COE 2001), DLC: Didactics of Languages and Cultures, FFL: French as a Foreign Language, L1: source language, L2: target language.

used for a literary description of a landscape. Conversely, the desire to implement the so-called “active pedagogy” with children obliges the teacher to favour contents that are familiar to them.

The end of constituted methodologies and the entry into the eclectic era (Puren 1994) -whether one interprets the new didactic configuration as “post-methodological” (cf. Kumaravadivelu 1994, 2001 and my long critical analysis of this author's work, Puren 2022) or, on the contrary, as “plurimethodological” (Puren 2020)– legitimize all the more varied and variable uses of language textbooks, since these textbooks themselves have long incorporated a great methodological diversity. In France, in any case, it is since the beginning of the 1980s that we have seen the emergence and then the imposition in language textbooks of different forms of eclecticism, more or less empirical or theorized, more or less personal or institutionalized (Puren 1998e, chap. 1.1.2 pp. 16-17 and Puren 2021b). Given the concern of publishers to keep up with the very diverse expectations and demands of teachers –even if, paradoxically, they also have to present their products as incorporating innovations that will enable them to teach more effectively and easily– it is reasonable to assume that most teachers' practices are also very eclectic. This is the assumption made by the authors of the 2001 CEFRL. After presenting two diametrically opposed conceptions of learning –through exposure to comprehensible language input and active participation in communicative interactions, or through explicit learning of grammar and vocabulary– they write, “Between these polar extremes, most ‘mainstream’ learners, teachers and their support services will follow more eclectic practices [...]” (p. 140)

Since then, however, the consequence of this eclecticism has not really been taken into account in the didactics of languages and cultures, namely the need to consider the problem of the use of language textbooks as such in order to train teachers to manage it in an optimal way.

IFAC (Institut Français d'Amérique Centrale) asked me to lead an intensive seminar from July 13 to 16, 2015 at the Alliance Française in Guatemala City for those in charge of teaching and training in French as a foreign language (FFL) at the Alliances Françaises and the FFL programs of the region's public universities. The title that IFAC gave to this seminar was “The place of the textbook in the construction of courses: which choices? What use?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I had warned IFAC that I did not want to limit myself to teaching FFL in the Alliances françaises and at the university, but to extend it to the teaching of all L2s and at the school level.

The original French title was: “*La place de la méthode dans la construction de cours : de la bonne utilisation des méthodes FLE<sup>4</sup> : Quels choix ? Quels recours ?*” In this title, “*méthode*” has the meaning that it still often has in France among language-culture didacticians, and that it still has among publishers, that of “textbook”. This use appeared in the mid-XIXth century at a time when some authors and publishers of textbooks no longer wanted to call them “grammars”, as had been the case until then, the traditional grammar-translation methodology being increasingly criticized as unsuited to the new social and institutional demand for oral and “practical” teaching of the foreign language (L2). For them, calling them “*méthodes*” from then on was a way of signifying that they were proposing a modern and coherent way of teaching the L2 with their work. It is thus from this time on that the textbooks, as I wrote above, were conceived as instruments for implementing a determined and claimed methodology.

In the remainder of this paper, I will present, in turn, the criteria for adapting the uses of a textbook (Chapter 1), the scale of a teacher's competence levels of competence in using his or her textbook (Chapter 2), and the instructions for the use of this scale (Chapter 3).

### **Criteria for adapting the uses of a textbook**

In order to elaborate on the scale of competence of a teacher in the use of his textbook, I started from the postulate that the first competence of a teacher consists in his capacity to *manage a certain degree of adaptation* of the contents he teaches and of his teaching methods. I consider this idea to be a postulate based on evidence that has long been shared by many language teachers, didacticians and other specialists in language learning. A French teacher of German, Louis Morel, wrote in an article from 1886:

*“We would willingly say that the only general principle of a sound pedagogy is that there is no marvelous method, no infallible recipe applicable to all cases; it is that teaching must be modified according to changing circumstances, and that is why there are teachers and an art of teaching”*  
(p. 46).

The same idea was expressed a century later by Paul Bogaards, who published a book in 1988 entitled *Aptitudes and Affectivity in Foreign Language Learning*, which was subsequently republished several times:

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<sup>4</sup> FLE: Français Langue Étrangère (FFL, French as a Foreign Language).

mode of specific research to the problematics of field adaptations, the “research,” could be implemented (cf. Puren 2019a).

### **Conclusion: the teacher’s “complex adaptability”**

In Chapter 2, I have classified the four types of criteria under different headings, but these headings may overlap. It is to be hoped, for example, that the official instructions will be drafted in such a way that the criteria of adaptation to the institution overlap at least in part with those of adaptation to the conditions of teaching, to the learners, and to the pedagogical and didactic orientations as advocated by the sciences of education and the didactics of language-cultures; or that adapting to one's textbook, on the part of a teacher, allows him/her to adapt at least in part to the demands of the institution and the learners, because the authors of the textbook have made an effort to take these criteria into account.

But no textbook can or will ever be able to implement all the criteria itself, even if it aims at specific objectives for teaching a given public in a given environment, insofar as there is a contradiction between certain criteria. The two cases most frequently cited by school teachers are: (1) the official objectives are unattainable by some students: the adaptation of teachers to these students is therefore in contradiction with the adaptation to institutional objectives; (2) the contents and official methodology cannot be respected because of the teaching conditions: in the passages quoted *above*, M. Girard refers to “time” (*i.e.* the number of teaching hours) and to the available “means” (*i.e.* teaching materials), and Alceste Steph to the “material conditions”, but the language teachers also complain primarily about the too high number of students in class, their too low motivation and their too great heterogeneity.

Herbert Simon (1969), one of the founders of one of the first scientific approaches to complexity, the systemic theory, published a book in 1969 entitled *The Sciences of the Artificial*, dedicated to these sciences which were for him the sciences of the engineer. This book is of interest to DLC not only because the author draws on the epistemology of complexity, but also because the teacher's job is partly one of “pedagogic engineering”, *i.e.* of the design of artificial teaching-learning devices. The following passage from his book seems to me to be suitable for DCL, simply replacing “business firm” with “language-culture teaching” and “economic actor” with teacher:



*“In the face of real-world complexity, the business firm turns to procedures that find good enough answers to questions whose best answers are unknowable. Because real-world optimization, with or without computers, is impossible, the real economic actor is in fact a satisficer, a person who accepts “good enough” alternatives, not because less is preferred to more but because there is no choice” (pp. 28-29).*

From a didactic point of view, teachers' use of their textbooks, whose approaches are often presented by authors and publishers as optimal, can be defined as essentially (in the strong sense of the word) a constant search for and implementation of the best possible coherent set of different adaptations. There is never total satisfaction, because these will always be imperfect, partial and provisional compromises: the competence level of teachers is judged in particular by their level of dissatisfaction with all the textbooks... and by their ability to get the best out of them for themselves and their pupils despite everything.

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