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Publishing Language Textbooks: Reflections from a Language Road Warrior

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Instructors' Perspectives: Publishing Language Textbooks

Reflections from a Language Road Warrior

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Having authored FL language materials both under contract with an established publishing house as well as independently within the framework of online courses, I feel sufficiently emboldened to make certain observations about the L2 university curriculum in the U.S. Despite being a linguist by training, I was disabused long ago of the illusion that I could write a perfect grammatical explanation that would mystically lead students to successful linguistic outcomes in a relatively short period of time. Years of experience have taught me that time-on-task, recycled rich input, well-conceived tasks, and personal motivation are more flavorful ingredients in a felicitous L2 learning recipe. That being said, the soundness of the learning materials does matter. So, please bear with me as I muse over the problems of either using commercially published materials or the alternative of making up your own digital textbook from scratch. I wish to address briefly the joys and pitfalls of these two curricular paths.

First, working with a publishing house, especially a big one with a seasoned editorial staff, rarely leaves much room for much creativity on the part of the author. Publishing books is about sales. In this case, the buyers—that is, language instructors—shy away from innovations. Classroom teachers tend to prefer a traditional scope and sequence compatible with established, well-oiled classroom practices and the publishing houses know this. From the instructors' perspective, this attitude is understandable: Language instructors teach many classes with a diverse student population and don't want changes that might complicate things; they want books that are familiar to them. Let's be honest: We language instructors are a pretty conservative lot when it comes to pedagogy. How do the publishing houses respond to this marketplace?

I still can remember the constant admonishments from my publisher as I penned my second-year book with a focus on reading: "Dumb it down, Bob, dumb it down." At the same time, I began to notice that language programs were covering my intermediate book in three semesters instead of two, a circumstance that seemed to confirm the validity of my editor's advice suggesting that students were getting dumber and so the difficulty level of the materials had to accommodate this new audience.

But on closer inspection, this has never been the case: Students have always come in all shapes and sizes, some smart, some mediocre, and some switched off. Today's reality is not any different from other moments of history, except for the fact that public education pretends to include more people in the mix, not only the elites.

I believe the problem lies elsewhere. The profession—with its exclusive focus on *real-world communication* has tended to deemphasize analysis and reflection. No doubt, this has happened with the pervasive digital humming in the background of emails, tweets, sound bites, in conjunction with the ascendancy of visual images. If *spin* has taken over our news media, then *splash* has taken over our textbook materials that are chalked full of images, links, videos

accessories, snappy design layouts in all colors, bold face print, and more side-bars than I ever thought imaginable.

What has suffered along the way with these improvements? Reading. My second-year textbook (the one I was told to "dumb down") touted authentic readings with a variety of genres. At the time, the profession, out of one side of the mouth, was loudly calling for more authenticity, but out of the other side, for more simplicity. Authentic readings are hard to digest. Students need lots of vocabulary (at least 5,000 words and many collocations), a solid grammar base, and a sense of pragmatics in order to handle irony, sarcasm, and innuendo. The teachers in the trenches have not normally been trained to deal with the challenges of authentic readings. They are not accustomed to preparing their students with a bank of appropriate pre-reading activities. Not surprisingly, students often fail to handle these readings written by native speakers for other native speakers.

Are our students slower (dumber) now than those of previous generations? No, they just aren't used to reading even in their L1 and, they are especially inexperienced at reading in another language and culture. As I look at today's students, with their faces routinely buried in their smart phones (and *mea culpa*, too), should we wonder why fragmented sentences, abbreviations, pictures, videos, and 140-character retorts are the lingua franca?

I don't mean to imply that today's students would not be able to read critically with adequate training. However, our profession is, by and large, at a loss as to how to train students to read, analyze, and reflect critically especially with authentic materials. This is very subjective stuff, too, because rhetoric is involved—a subject not taught anymore. It's all about learning to interpret, evaluate, and argue. Recently, I read an interview with Spanish author Carlos García Gual who remarked that "the young people spend lots of time with their cell phones, but don't know anything… reading is the only way we can escape the prison of the present" (my translation; https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/02/05/eps/1517841144_118374.html). And that's where we are today: Glued to the next tweet.

Understand that my comments are not intended to be an argument against oral proficiency or real-world communicative practices, but rather a plea to return reading and critical analysis to its rightful place in the curriculum and, then, for the profession to step up to the challenge of training students to interpret their world.

Now, what about the other alternative: Making up your own digital materials and posting them on the web? Ideally, our entire profession will get to this point and escape the confines of the least common denominator imposed by the publishing houses (remember, they have to turn a profit). But the alternative is a scary *Brave New Digital Classroom* (see Blake, 2013, chapter 1). Certain factors cannot be denied if instructors are to thrive in this new learning environment. Students really do like videos, images, intuitive interfaces, and shorter reading passages. That is not going to change. OK. The good news is that the digital environment allows instructors to fine-tune materials to the needs of their students—they are dynamic learning materials. The vocabulary, grammar, and activities can be organized in a staged progression that constantly recycles things. But what's the catch?

In order to take advantage of the affordances of a digital learning environment, instructors need to know how to leverage learning management systems, be familiar with digital tools, be used to constructing sound task-based exercises—all this, in addition to controlling their content area (i.e., the most frequent words, the most difficult grammar points, the most useful pragmatic knowledge, and the most important cultural themes). Having access to the help of an instructional designer becomes crucial to combine the many digital tools into a coherent learning program. This is a mountain of extra work and cannot be done alone, but requires working in teams. We rarely think in terms of teams when planning the syllabus. Nevertheless,

another piece of good news is that feedback from the students can directly impact the materials and lead to improvements in the curriculum.

The goal here is increased learner autonomy, analysis, self-reflection, and lots of time spent in contact with the L2 language and culture. Of course, this is only the beginning. The L2 trip for the learner is for life—it never stops. Only individualized materials can convey this excitement and break the cycle of dumbing things down.

Blake, R. J. (2013). *Brave new digital classroom: Technology and foreign language learning.* Georgetown, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Response to Blake's Reflection

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I read Robert Blake's article with great pleasure, finding myself in almost total agreement with everything he is saying, especially his point on the importance of the goals of foreign language teaching, which should place more emphasis on learner autonomy, analysis, self-reflection and creativity, which cannot be achieved if the focus remains on a grammatical/functional/communicative approach only. I, too, have authored textbooks and I, too, have been frustrated with editors wanting to 'dumb down' the content of the material I presented to the point of eliminating two chapters of a second-year reader (on diversity and on immigration) because they were considered "too controversial and delicate." I, too, have grown increasingly disappointed with current language textbooks of which Robert Blake gives a very accurate description. I have written my own material for years, often improvising in my classes depending on the 'flow' and 'mood' of the moment (the news of the day, a comment a student made, a story we heard), recognizing that flexibility and creativity are a pedagogical must in our classes and refusing to be straightjacketed by prescriptive syllabi. I agree with Robert on the importance of reading, the simple act of reading together, and share that communal experience that can offer such rich opportunities for interpreting, analyzing and thinking creatively. Unfortunately, to Robert's point, many language teachers are a 'conservative lot,' afraid to step out of their comfort zone, or not equipped with the pedagogical training to deal with difference and unpredictability, or unclear on the goals of foreign language teaching, which is to familiarize students with the Other.

Response to Blake's Reflection

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Language instructors as well as textbook authors should find much to relate to in Robert Blake's reflections on using and creating instructional materials. Allow me to contribute a few thoughts of my own to the very stimulating discussion he has sparked.

A textbook author is indeed subjected to much criticism when working on materials that are to be published commercially—apart from the much lamented "this is not at the right level" or "too difficult" (I remember once being called a "criminal" for having chosen to introduce a certain grammatical topic at a point in the book that seemed out of order to the anonymous reviewer). But the specific dynamics when creating and modifying a commercial product that is meant to be used—and bought—by colleagues and students does also offer unique opportunities to inject oneself into the professional discourse by being able to experiment with new pedagogical formats and to test out what might work and what might not, while at the same time gaining valuable insights into other language teachers' beliefs, practices, and institutional contexts. In the end, having to settle for a common determiner (and, in my experience, not necessarily always the "lowest") will ideally make for a textbook with broad appeal to the diversity and the various needs and preferences of learners we are encountering in today's language classroom.

From an instructor's perspective, I see other major advantages of commercial publications: texts are pre-selected regarding their appropriateness for levels and tasks, there is a wide range of supplements including practice opportunities, tutorials, and testing materials, and pedagogical annotations provide most valuable information on teaching strategies and lesson planning, not only for the novice teacher. This all saves time, a precious resource that one needs a lot of when creating instructional materials, as Blake stresses. And no matter whether these end up commercially published or not. In all likelihood, the time investment will not be acknowledged at most institutions as 'serious' research (let alone the fact that a majority of language teachers do not even hold the kind of positions that award paid time for research).

On the other hand, I can see major disadvantages to commercial publications—their exorbitant price, for example, oftentimes exceeding $200 for an introductory or intermediate program. The advent of online learning platforms to which access must be purchased has all but eliminated the used book alternative and turned collegiate foreign language study even more into a question of affordability. Regarding the content: the need to compromise for marketability can, of course, also have negative consequences, and may, as Blake points out, result in a book that is not progressive enough, does not adequately speak to an individual's teaching philosophy, or does not address the specific curricular desiderata of a certain institutional setting.

This brings me to a final note about a recent experience with a major European publishing house that not only resonates with Blake's struggles but also shows an alternative possibility for the creation and use of language teaching materials. Closely guided by two editors with

significant expertise in the field, my co-author and I were tasked to explore innovative approaches to bring literary texts into the language classroom, which gave us a chance to share and further develop materials we had originally experimented with in our own classrooms. The resulting textbook primarily addresses teachers and contains a selection of authentic literary texts with activities for the language classroom that can be copied and disseminated to students without any additional cost. While the texts are selected for a certain level range, the activities are more differentiated and can be selected according to specific needs and circumstances. Design and layout reflect the underlying pedagogical philosophy, there are few "bells and whistles" except for an accompanying website with supplemental materials and resources, and the whole product is available at a fraction of the price that a U.S.-produced textbook would cost. The final quality of the product remains to be assessed by others, but I am hopeful that publishing models of this kind can help to effectively and economically disseminate teaching materials that foreign language instructors enjoy authoring and using in the classroom.

Response to Blake's Reflection

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To Professor Blake's musings on the lack of creativity in textbooks I would add a lack of controversy. Whether it be the publishers or the authors as the arbiter, textbooks tend to present a rosy picture of the target culture. Sometimes I wonder whether I am looking at a university text or a travel brochure: where, for example, in first-year Russian textbooks is the discussion of alcoholism or the pervasive romanticization of vodka in Russian culture? Where are the depictions of ecological disasters (more than a factoid about Chernobyl)? Or the glamorization of tobacco? Or the divisions between the haves and have-nots, especially seen in the poverty of the Russian countryside? And just as textbooks should raise sensitive issues in the target culture, they need to raise students' consciousness about the same issue in American culture. So, for example, depictions of idealized drinking in Russian media could be followed by a discussion of how alcohol is depicted on American television.

The lack of creativity cited by Blake is not just in the content of our textbooks, but also in their very structure. One can see the template: a reading passage (created for the textbook, with carefully selected grammar and vocabulary) in which limited new grammar and vocabulary has been introduced, followed by grammar explanations, followed by a dialog, followed by various tasks built around the readings and/or dialogs, followed by ancillary materials on a website, and at the end of the chapter a vocabulary list—the same format, chapter after chapter. One could imagine that the repeating structure helps students find things, sets up expectations, etc., etc., but recently having been a student in a language class, I found the if-it-is-Tuesday,-it-must-be-dialog-day approach mind numbing by the 15th week.

And then there is the issue of the "tyranny of the textbook," the need to get through X number of chapters by the end of the semester in order for all sections to be on the same page

and take the same final exam. This institution-imposed structure leaves little room for creativity. And the lack of creativity has another consequence: teachers are less likely to reflect on what worked and what didn't when the materials used were not of their own creation.

The approach employed by my now happily retired colleague, Lisa Little, is quite refreshing: Lisa removed one textbook chapter from each of the semesters of the first-year sequence in order to provide more time to bring in fresh materials. Graduate students under her supervision were given the opportunity to create their own materials for one day of each unit, or design their own five-day unit at the end of the semester for their individual sections. Not only did this give graduate student instructors valuable training in creating materials for classroom instruction, they were able to better appreciate and question the decisions underlying the textbook's presentation.

Over the past 20 years I have had the privilege of working with more than 100 graduate students developing curricular materials as part of the BLC Fellows program, which gives graduate students and lecturers the opportunity (by means of course relief) to work on a project of their choosing. These projects are often quite innovative. For example, one project used native speakers' descriptions of actions in silent film as a way of illustrating Russian verbs of motion; another developed strategies and tasks for student production of a scene from an Italian opera; another designed materials for including a unit on Medieval French in an elementary French classroom; another supplemented a grammar-oriented Tibetan textbook with lessons on Tibetan culture (these and many more are described at blc.berkeley.edu).

It is perhaps indicative that instructors need time outside of the normal teaching routine to create such materials, and also telling of the impossibility of coming up with all the necessary texts, lesson plans, and homework assignments for three courses without the aid of a textbook. A teaching load of 3 courses per semester leaves little time for creativity or reflection, and having everything done for you in the textbook is just too convenient to pass up. There is a wealth of material in repositories (for a repository of repositories, see COERLL: http://blog.coerll.utexas.edu/availability-of-fl-materials-in-oer-repositories/), but the materials are too scattered and, in Blake's words, too chaotic, to be particularly useful. Even if there were one central repository, with a clear tagging system allowing one to find appropriate material for the level being taught, instructors would still need to come up with a way to weave together various modules into a coherent course.

We can only hope that we are in a transition stage from the textbook as we now know it, with its mediocrity, its plodding progression, its high price and its lack of intellectual content, to something new. However, it will be up to language instructors to demand that something new and find the time and energy to implement it into the classroom. They have the creativity—they need the time.