REPORT

Killing the textbook softly: From commercial textbooks to student-centered curricula

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Abstract

This report retraces the 10-year evolution of a higher-educational French language program that went from using commercial textbooks to student-centered curricula through three main stages: from American commercial textbooks to French commercial textbooks, from commercial textbooks to OER) textbooks, and from OER textbooks to student-centered curricula. The gradual evolution illustrates a way to handle resistance to change through the progressive implementation of new research or practice-based methods: action-oriented methodology for the first stage, Second Language Acquisition research-based approaches for the second stage, and practices based on current pedagogical trends for the third stage. The report provides the pedagogical rationale for each transition, highlighting the discrepancy between the very concept of textbook and what current research and practice in foreign language pedagogy advocates and a first-hand experience of what it entails to break away from American commercial textbooks, commercial textbooks, and ultimately textbooks altogether.

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Introduction

Despite the evolution of the fields of Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Pedagogy, the multiplication of online resources for language teaching and learning, the growth of Open Educational Resources (OER), and anti-textbook pedagogical trends like Ditch That Textbook (https://ditchthattextbook.com/), textbooks have still not totally disappeared from our classrooms and remain indispensable for some instructors as a referential, reliable, useful, and/or time-saving tool.

Exclusively relying on textbook may be concerning if we consider the discrepancy between what the research says about foreign language teaching and learning and what commercial language textbooks offer. To cite but one example, a study by Vold (2020) examined grammar instruction in French language textbooks for the Scandinavian market and concluded that even if some textbooks follow research-based principles for grammar instruction, teachers still need to use supplementary materials to follow these principles. Numerous other studies have also shown the limits of textbooks as well as their impact on the curriculum, ideologies and beliefs, and the development of intercultural competence (see for example, Brown, 2014; Canale, 2014; Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013).

The goal of this report is to share a first-hand experience of the gradual curricular changes a private university French language program has undergone over the last 10 years and how it went from using American commercial textbooks to no textbook at all rather than discuss the benefits and drawbacks of using a textbook or not (see Table 1). The program covers 3 levels (Elementary French 1, 2, and Intermediate French) with an average of 28 sections, of 420 students per academic year, and of 3 faculty members and 8 graduate instructors.

Eliminating textbooks from the classroom may seem incongruous to some instructors, go against their teaching belief systems, and lead to resistance to change. Some studies (Akdeniz & Konalki, 2022; Harris & Lázár, 2011) pointed out the challenges to overcoming resistance to change and suggested using logic reasoning as a solution. The strategy we employed to eliminate textbooks and to overcome resistance to change was to implement changes progressively and provide a strong rationale to justify innovation and convince instructors of the benefits of the changes.

The following sections summarize the nature and rationales of the curricular changes and account for the transition from American to French commercial textbooks, for the transition from commercial to Open Educational Resources (OER) textbooks, and from textbooks to student-centered curricula.

From American to French Commercial Textbooks

Our journey toward the end of textbooks started in 2013, when our French language program still used American commercial textbooks. The course curriculum was then strictly based on the textbook contents. For instance, in our elementary French classes, the curriculum was based on the structure of the textbook *Vis-à-vis* and each class covered a "lesson": one fifth of the classes were devoted to vocabulary exercises; one fifth to created text reading comprehension and activities based on cultural vignettes; two fifths to grammar exercises; and the last fifth to building reading and writing skills and analyzing a student-created video presenting a cultural product of a Francophone country. Students were provided with comprehensive grammar explanations and a list of approximately 100 vocabulary words or expressions for each chapter.

Like many textbooks, using *Vis-à-vis* raised the issue of the relevance of the grammar curriculum in relation to the development of interlanguage and the Teachability Hypothesis which states that "the teachability of language that is constrained by what the learner is ready to acquire" (Pieneman, 1989, p. 52). One may wonder about the relevance of knowing an extensive list of irregular plural nouns like *travaux* [works] in the very first month of discovering a new language, when learners are expected to express themselves mainly using lexical chunks. Overall, the textbook seemed more oriented towards developing students' linguistic competence than their communicative competence: they offered comprehensive vocabulary lists and grammar explanations, and activities that are closer in essence to guided practice, focusing on accuracy, than to communicative tasks that focus on fluency (see Blyth, 2010 for additional differences between the two types of activities: https://www.coerll.utexas.edu/methods/modules/speaking/01/). Another main issue noted by Schmitt (2019) concerned the lack of repetition of vocabulary from one chapter to the next and the discrepancy between research on vocabulary acquisition and the way vocabulary learning is presented in many textbooks.

When we used *Vis-à-vis*, graduate instructors often complained about the quantity of personal work they had to put into preparing for class and offering activities relevant to their students and aligned with what they learned in their teaching methods class. Students also complained about the textbook and often requested that we change it in their course evaluations.

As a response to these issues, we decided to change textbooks and, at the same time, to implement the action-oriented approach recommended by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This approach "views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e., members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action" (CERF, 2001, p. 9). The action-oriented approach goes one step further than the communicative approach commonly used in the United States of America because it emphasizes a task-based approach to teaching and learning. For example, an action-oriented equivalent of a communicative activity such as "Write a paragraph about your food habit" could be "You are going to spend a month in a Francophone host family who asked you about your food habits. Write the email." Although the two activities may involve using similar linguistic content, the action-oriented approach implies the accomplishment of a concrete task, anchored in real-life, and, in this example, the application of pragmatic knowledge around writing emails, which is an integral part of being an

operative member of society.

Unaware of American textbooks following the action-oriented approach, we decided to start adopting textbooks from French publishing companies in Fall 2014. After a pilot phase, we decided to use *Saison 1*, *Saison 2*, and *Zénith B1*, which cost between 10% to 20% of the price of the American textbooks we used before. As compared to *Vis-à-vis*, there is an emphasis on practicing communicative language competences through activities and tasks that often integrate communicative skills. *Saison 1* and *2*, for instance, have the following format: "discover" pages, with activities based on two semi-authentic documents and finishing guided-inductive grammar activities; "react" pages, which contain the same types of activities and require students to react to the information provided and accomplish a follow-up communicative task; "waypoint" pages, which provide vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar exercises; speaking and writing "workshop" pages; and a page that offers a cumulative final task.

The two French textbooks appear to align with research on vocabulary and grammar acquisition: vocabulary should be presented in context and through communicative tasks (see Newton 1995; Laufer & Hulstijn 2001) and grammar can be effectively taught with a guided inductive approach (see Haight et al. 2017; Herron & Tomasello, 1992). Although they provide thematic vocabulary, it is relatively limited compared to the list American textbooks offer, and vocabulary is mainly presented in context. Another difference with American textbooks is that they tend to offer more lexical chunks or whole sentences as part of their thematic vocabulary list. It is interesting to note that they include some grammatical structures (e.g., complement pronouns) in sentences meant to be memorized as chunks before formally introducing the structures, ensuring that students can use certain structures communicatively and thereby following the Focus on Form approach. The textbooks also follow a functional approach to language teaching, offering phrases and expressions that are based on pragmatic functions (e.g., expressing advice, inviting someone, interacting over the phone, etc.).

One of the main challenges with using the French textbooks is their monolingual dimension: we had to create bilingual complementary materials to help students understand and learn the linguistic content. Another issue is that they are predominantly meant for learners living in France and lack the global dimension necessary to expose our students to the linguistic and cultural variety of French-speaking countries and regions.

Overall, students had a positive response to the textbooks *Saison 1*, *Saison 2*, and *Zénith B1,* apart from the monolingual aspect and the amount of homework using them entailed. One instructor who expressed resistance to using them at first, confused by a format that differs from most traditional American textbooks, eventually embraced them fully, to the point that they were reluctant to stop using them. The challenges and issues that the French textbooks presented, however, lead us to stop using them and return to an American commercial textbook again, *Promenades*, during the 2017-2018 academic year, as a transition before implementing OER textbooks.

From Commercial to OER Textbooks

Blyth & Thoms' (2021) edited volume on OER highlights their numerous benefits in language teaching and learning and shows the primordial role they play in the ecosystem of the field: openness encourages the agency of actors (i.e., students, teachers, and researchers) who are usually cut from the closed circle of academic publishing.

The agentive dimension associated with OER motivated our shift toward OER textbooks. Students can learn with materials specifically designed for them and relevant to their socio-educational environment. Instructors can easily change activities within the textbooks and incorporate a variety of authentic documents from the whole Francophone world as well as research-based activities and approaches.

The OER textbooks, titled *Français à la Nouvelle-Orléans* (https://oercommons.org/courseware/lesson/ 94981) were gradually designed and implemented in 2018. The OER textbooks were realized with no

funding and the audio files (e.g., vocabulary lists, created text) were consequently recorded with a basic laptop microphone and the videos, based on created dialogues, were shot with a phone camera.

The OER textbooks mainly follow the action-oriented approach and are also complemented with other research-based approaches, such as structured input and output (Lee & Van Patten, 1995). Following this approach, the OER textbooks employ activities that foster the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar in meaningful and communicative contexts. The textbooks are based on the inventory of target linguistic contents for each CEFR proficiency level created by the *Centre international d'études pédagogiques* (https://www.eaquals.org/resources/inventaire-des-contenus-cles-aux-niveaux-du-cecr/). Each textbook (level 1-3) corresponds to the A1 (with elements from the A2 level), A2 (with elements from the B1 level), or B1 level and is composed of 24 lessons articulated around four modules that correspond to general expected learning outcomes for each level (e.g., I can introduce myself [A1]; I can narrate a trip [A2]; I can express my thoughts on current events [B1]). Each lesson was designed around subgoals of the module goals, e.g., I can tell my age [A1]; I can describe a city [A2]; I can express my thoughts on environmental issues [B1].

The lessons for the first two levels have the following structures: presentation of thematic vocabulary with audio recordings, IPA phonemic transcriptions, and exercises focusing on form (at home); exercises and activities based on the thematic vocabulary focusing on the meaning (in class); written and spoken interpretive activities based on authentic texts or on semi-authentic texts that included the target structures of the lesson (in class); guided-inductive grammar activity (in class); presentation of grammar explanations and mechanical exercises (at home); grammar-based interactional activities (in class); written and oral interpersonal and presentational activities and tasks (in class).

The lessons for the third level have a similar format but instead of exercises and activities based on thematic vocabulary focus on the meaning, lessons include comprehensible input activities with spoken created texts and their transcription that contextualizes the thematic vocabulary and introduced the target structures for the lesson. Instead of offering a spoken and written interpretive activity and a spoken and written interpersonal and/or presentational activity or task, each lesson only offers one interpretive and one interpersonal/presentational activity, alternating modalities of communication from one lesson to the next. The lessons are complemented with cultural activities named *explorez* [explore], designed to foster the development of intercultural competence through a student-centered approach: instead of being given facts about cultural products and practices, students are trained to find the relevant information to understand, analyze, and compare different perspectives across cultures.

The textbooks follow a dual approach to vocabulary teaching and learning: on the one hand, they offer thematic vocabulary lists, following Blyth and Davis (2008) who reported that students preferred learning vocabulary in lists rather than in context and Schmitt (2008) who emphasized the need for students to develop large vocabularies; on the other hand, the textbooks present vocabulary in context though comprehension activities based on realia and production tasks. This dual approach also ensures that students review the vocabulary repeatedly and do not cram a list of approximately 100 words and expressions the night before an exam as is often done with commercial textbooks. Students were expected to start memorizing the vocabulary on the day before the lesson, review it contextualized during class with the vocabulary and comprehension activities, review and use it during the next class with production activities, and finally review it for quizzes and exams. Although the first-year American commercial textbooks we have used (i.e., *Vis-à-vis*, *Promenades*, *Portail 1*) are meant to be covered in two independent courses and do not offer a vocabulary review between chapters, the vocabulary in [the OER textbooks] is systematically reviewed from one level to the next. For instance, the food vocabulary is reviewed at each level through a different approach. At level 1, students are expected to memorize the vocabulary list, ranging from 20 to 30 words, depending on the number of cognates. At level 2, students are expected to memorize a list of 20 words or expressions called *core vocabulary* and review and go over a more exhaustive list of vocabulary called *complementary vocabulary*. At level 3, they are given an exhaustive list of vocabulary on a given topic. They are expected to go over the list, do exercises, and learn as much vocabulary as they can to

accomplish can-do statements listed at the beginning of the vocabulary lists (e.g., I can talk about my food preferences, food habits, etc.).

The approach used to teach grammar was similar: *Français à la Nouvelle-Orléans* follows a spiral approach, in the sense that most grammar points are reviewed from one level to the next, or even within the same level. For instance, level 1 introduces the past tense, *passé composé* over two lessons, level 2 over one lesson, and level 3 also over one lesson but includes the more complex agreement cases. The grammar curriculum is also based on and determined by communicative needs. For instance, although textbooks like *Promenades* or *Vis-à-vis* cover pronominal verbs exhaustively in a single unit, pronominal verbs are introduced in a very simple fashion, as a chunk (e.g., *je me lève* [I get up]; *je me réveille* [I wake up]) and reviewed with more details along the way in the OER textbooks. As a result, each lesson covers a series of elaborate grammar points that anticipate students' needs when performing communicative tasks based on the learning outcomes.

The communicative tasks are consequently not a pretext to practice target vocabulary and grammar. The interpersonal and presentational communicative tasks start with a pre-activity that anticipate the students' linguistic and pragmatic needs: it can include the lesson, previously studied, and/or unknown vocabulary and structures as well as known or unknown information about intercultural communication. The focus is entirely on building effective communicative skills using real-life communicative tasks, as recommended by the CEFRL.

The format of the OER textbooks was particularly useful for online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic because the lessons could be directly copied onto a Google Doc, which allowed instructors and students to interact easily. It also allows instructors to choose authentic documents easily and change the interpretive activities based on current events and/or students' interests.

Paradoxically, some instructors did not fully embrace this liberty and felt constrained by the format of the lessons, being under the impression that they had to follow all the activities and corresponding lesson plans strictly. Some expressed their satisfaction with the minimal time of preparation it required as compared to traditional textbooks; however, others felt that their workload had increased, principally because students had been assigned more homework. The amount of homework was, in fact, often the main or sole complaint students expressed about the course in their evaluations. Students' reactions were mostly positive. One of them, for instance, emailed us from France where he was doing a study abroad program to thank us because he felt the program had prepared him better than his peers from other institutions to live and communicate in France.

Overall, instructors were torn about using an OER textbook: neophyte instructors seemed to enjoy it, instructors with previous teaching experience with a textbook were either enthusiastic, with, for instance, one of them saying that it was how they would have wanted to learn French, or a bit dubious about not using a commercial textbook, complaining about not having enough class time to lecture about grammar or expressing concerns that we were doing things differently.

The goal of our curriculum was to prepare students to reach the B2 level (after 18 credit hours) required for study abroad in France, which was very ambitious and explains the significant amount of homework students were expected to do. When France lifted the B2-level proficiency requirement for study abroad and following an incentive from our School of Liberal Arts aiming to reduce discrepancy across language curricula, we lowered our proficiency-level expectations and aligned them with those of other language programs in our institution, using NCSSFL-ACTFL standards instead of the CEFR. This change of curriculum led us to include and implement new language pedagogical trends by moving toward a student-centered curriculum.

From Textbooks to Student-Centered Curricula

Student-centered curriculum in language teaching is an approach to curriculum design that Nunan (1988)

advocated and defined as "a collaborative effort between students and teachers, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught" (p. 2). Nunan assumed that since students cannot be taught everything they need to know, letting them decide what they consider most important to know will increase the value of what they learn and their motivation to learn it.

The student-centered curriculum echoes pedagogy principles meant to foster equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), such as to make learning outcomes relevant to students and to empower them with their learning. As Danowitz and Tuitt (2011) argued, "In addition to being meaningful, education should be exciting" (p. 50). Enabling students to decide what they want to learn and achieve strongly contributes to generating excitement: they become full agents of what they do in and outside class and can select activities that truly satisfy their needs and interests.

Our new curriculum is eclectic, drawing elements from the multiliteracies approach (Paesani et al., 2016) and Learning by Design (Zapata, 2022), in addition to using the action-oriented approach and other methods used in *Français à la Nouvelle-Orléans* (e.g., structured input/output), the curriculum offers a list of can-do statements with corresponding activities or tasks that students can select from by voting as a class or choosing them at an individual level. These can-do statements are based on learning outcomes for a module, which are also based on the course final learning outcomes corresponding to NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-do Statements (2017) of the target proficiency level.

The learning outcomes of our first French language course, for instance, is set at the novice-mid level. The learning outcome for the interpersonal mode is "I can communicate in spontaneous spoken or written conversations on both very familiar and everyday topic using a mixture of practiced or memorized words, phrases, and simple sentences" (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-do Statements, 2017). The learning outcome for the first module specifies the topic of the spontaneous spoken or written conversation: personal information. Although the course and module learning outcomes are common to all students (e.g., spoken conversation with instructor for the final assessment, filling in a form with personal information for Module 1 assessment, etc.), students select the specific learning outcomes they will work towards in class to help them reach the general course learning outcomes defined for their proficiency level. In the first module, students can select between being able to get to know someone at a party in Morocco, at a convention in Switzerland, or at a gallery opening in Montreal. These scenarios illustrate how French can be used at a personal and professional level and can be used to introduce elements of intercultural communication about the sociolinguistic context of the three countries: starting with a basic Arabic greeting and asking if they speak French in Morocco, for instance.

To ensure that students reach the target proficiency level, the curriculum includes some essential linguistic components, such as numbers at the novice level. To check their ability to recognize numbers in an authentic document, students were given the choice between identifying numbers in a news report about the Soccer World Cup (relevant at the time), in a song, or in a poem. In the class piloted during Fall 2022, students voted for the poem. The activity used to work on the poem was inspired by the multiliteracies approach and was an opportunity for the students to work on building both their reading skills by using numbers and cognates to infer the theme of the poem and basic literary analytical skills by discussing the effect of iterated numbers in the poem.

In this student-centered curriculum, vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics are presented as useful tools to achieve the target learning outcomes. For example, level 2 covers past tenses to ensure students can narrate a past trip. The approach to grammar instruction, however, follows differentiated pedagogy principles. We offer students the choice between either doing exercises to reinforce their command of the perfective past tense, *passé composé*, and provide useful expressions in the imperfective past tense (e.g., "It was great"; "It was crowded") that they can memorize as chunks and use in their narrative or doing exercises to master the usage difference between the perfective and imperfective tense in narration. Note that grammar is still presented in context in the form of created comprehensible input texts that contain both highly frequent lexical items and thematic vocabulary useful to achieve the target learning outcomes of the lesson, of the

module, and/or of the course.

In addition to offering activities tailored to students' interest and proficiency levels, we strove to make the materials more EDI-oriented by providing inclusive writing spellings and morphosyntactic rules, by encouraging students to discover underrepresented cultures and perspectives of the Francophone world (with approaches inspired by Meyer & Hoft-March, 2021), and by offering Learning by Design tasks related to social justice issues.

Students' and instructors' responses to the 2022 pilot class were largely positive, with the exception of one graduate instructor who thought that the curriculum should be even more oriented toward the multiliteracies approach. All the materials used in this class were OER resources, provided as individual PDFs we created or found online, and were uploaded on our educational platform course pages.

Conclusion

The gradual evolution of our French language program toward textbook-free courses over the last 10 years illustrates one way to kill textbooks. First, demonstrating the discrepancy between traditional American commercial textbooks and research lead us to use French commercial textbooks that better reflected current research-supported practices. Then, highlighting the systemic limits of any commercial textbooks in relation to contents and research-based approaches motivated the creation and use of an OER textbook. Finally, showing that we could empower our students with their learning even more by implementing a student-centered curriculum resulted in the end of textbooks in our classrooms.

Ironically, as I am writing these lines, our French language program is using an American commercial textbook (*Portail 1*) again. As the materials for the student-centered curriculum still need time to be refined and finalized, the easy transitory solution was to use a commercial textbook. However paradoxical this may seem, we thought that it would give graduate instructors the opportunity to gain experience teaching with a popular commercial language program and better prepare them for the job market. We also wanted to accommodate more experienced instructors, who are concerned about no longer using a textbook, are used to teaching with this type of textbooks, and appreciate the well-developed technological functionalities their online platforms offer (e.g., self-corrected exercises).

Our situation seems to be the perfect real-life illustration of Blyth's (2023) metaphor of textbooks as zombies: no matter how hard you try to kill them, they come back to life. Although it is undeniable that commercial textbooks have numerous advantages, we believe that the teaching materials used in our classroom should embody a curriculum that reflects students' and instructors' voices rather than dictate it, which is more likely to happen without a textbook.

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