Textbook consumption in the classroom: Analyzing a classroom corpus

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Abstract

This study contributes to current research on foreign language textbook use by analyzing Teaching Assistants' (TAs) textbook use. Three TAs, teaching different sections of the same intermediate level course, were observed and audiotaped during the teaching of a book chapter, i.e., five lessons of fifty minutes each. The lessons were verbatim transcribed to create a classroom corpus. McDonough, et al. (2013) criteria were used to identify textbook adaptations and Shawer’s (2010) strategies for in-classroom curriculum delivery were explored. Results show that adaptation of activities was a very frequent process showing instances of all of McDonough et al.’s categories, with the exception of simplifying. By far the most recurrent adaptation was deleting. Despite using the same textbook and syllabus, the lessons of each TA turned out differently because of their adaptations and their own teaching priorities. Thus, these TAs showed strategies of both curriculum-transmitters and curriculum-developers (Shawer, 2010).

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Peer-review under responsibility of Universidad de Valladolid, Facultad de Comercio.

Keywords: textbook research; Spanish L2; classroom instruction; classroom corpus

1. Introduction

The relationship between teacher, textbooks, and learner establishes how teaching and learning develops within a classroom; especially, given that the textbook is oftentimes the de facto curriculum and the organizing element in

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Peer-review under responsibility of Universidad de Valladolid, Facultad de Comercio.

doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.449
the classroom (e.g., Harwood, 2014; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Shawer, 2010). Classroom corpora can serve to illustrate classroom interactions so that in- and outsiders better understand this language learning environment.

So far, interactions between teachers, materials and learners have not received as much attention as one could imagine given the pervasive role of the textbook. Nevertheless, research on foreign language textbooks has been approached from three perspectives: textbook content, consumption, and production (see Harwood, 2014; Kurtz, 2011). The area of content has been the most widely analyzed whereas consumption, i.e., textbook use, and production have received less attention. Moreover, research on textbook use has mostly focused on English L2 textbooks.

This study approaches textbook consumption by analyzing a classroom corpus of around 12 hours consisting of three Teaching Assistants (TAs) teaching a multi-section L2 Spanish course. The data illustrate how these TAs adapted textbook activities and what their motivations towards these adaptations were. This teaching context—i.e., a multi-section course with the same syllabus, textbook, and testing materials across sections where standardized instruction was sought—highlights the role of the TA as a differentiating element of teaching. TAs are also a particular kind of teachers: while they are teaching, they are also being trained to be teachers.

Analyzing both how and why modifications happen is important to understand classroom interactions (McGrath, 2013). For that reason, data from interviews with the three TAs also complement the corpus analysis. In the following sections, an overview of studies on textbook use and of textbook adaptations will be given. Then, a section on TAs’ roles and characteristics will be included.

1.1. Studies on textbook use

The content of the foreign language textbook has been the main object of study in textbook research. Other disciplines, such as mathematics or history, are in a similar situation: there is more research on textbook content than on textbook use (see Fan, Zhu, & Miao, 2013; Fuchs, 2010). Thus, the potential of the book has been analyzed, whereas how this potential has been turned into teaching and learning is still under-researched (see McGrath, 2012).

Studies on foreign language textbook use have mostly targeted the teacher (e.g., Bosompem, 2014; Sampson, 2009; Shawer, 2010; Yan, 2009). Textbook use, however, also refers to learners’ use (e.g., Canagarajah, 1993; Yakhontova, 2001). Nevertheless, if textbook use is addressed within the classroom, both the teacher and the learner come into play. For example, Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) showed how the textbook can be a trigger for most classroom interactions between the teacher and the learners, being itself the object of discussion and the object that mediates classroom discourse and learning. For them, the textbook is part of the classroom ecology.

In brief, the literature on textbook use is scarce, but it seems clear that the goals of textbook research are in situ use and effective textbook use. Although questionnaires provide valuable data, teachers’ perceptions and practices do not always match (see Borg, 2006). Three of the aforementioned studies can be considered exemplary studies of foreign language textbook use research. Despite different research goals—analyzing teacher autonomy (Sampson, 2009), curriculum delivery (Shawer, 2010), and classroom ecology (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013)—they triangulated data from different sources with data from classroom observations to offer a broader perspective on textbook use.

1.2. Textbook adaptations

Teachers modify their textbooks while teaching, the questions then remain: why, when, what, and how (see McGrath, 2013). The main goal of textbook adaptation is “to make the materials of more value to the students using them” by adjusting them towards different classroom realities (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 151). These adaptations can also be prompted by time constraints and other institutional requirements, such as tests and curricular requirements. Thus, the adaptation serves to (a) localize—i.e., adapting the textbook to an specific geographic context; (b) personalize—i.e., “increasing the relevance of content in relation to learners’ interests and their academics,
educational or professional needs”; and (c) individualize—i.e., “address(ing) the learning styles both of the
individuals and of the members of a class working closely together” (McDonough et al., 2013, p. 69).

In his literature review, McGrath (2013) finds three main categories of adaptations, namely “omission, addition
and change” (p. 64). More specifically, McDonough, et al. (2013) include: adding, deleting, modifying, simplifying,
and reordering. Different areas can be subject to adaptations 1) “the language of instructions, explanations,
examples, […] exercises and texts, and the language learners are expected to produce”; 2) processes such as “forms
of classroom management or interactions […] and also the learning styles”; 3) “content” such as “topics, contexts,
cultural references”; and 4) “the linguistic and cognitive demands on the learner” (McGrath, 2013, p. 138).

McDonough et al.’s (2013) classification is based on the authors’ perspectives without necessarily looking into
classroom data. This is actually one of Garton and Graves’s (2014) complaints that textbook research seems to
obviate actual textbook use by practitioners in the classroom. For instance, most authors providing a taxonomy of
adaptations have proposed them in methodology textbooks for foreign language teachers without empirical data to
back it up (McGrath, 2012). There is, however, no doubt that teachers adapt their textbook in their classroom (e.g.,
Bosompem, 2014; Sampson, 2009; Shawer, 2010).

For example, Shawer studied textbook use by addressing curriculum development in ESL university teachers.
Drawing from previous research, the author finds three categories of teachers: curriculum-makers, curriculum-
developers, and curriculum transmitters. Curriculum-makers tend towards a “non-use of textbooks” (p. 180).
Curriculum-developers use the textbook as a “springboard of pedagogical content” and/or as a “framework of
pedagogical content” (p. 178). These teachers are then eager to adapt their materials and even to write their own. On
the contrary, curriculum-transmitters consider the textbooks as the “single source of pedagogical input” and follow a
sequential teaching of this material (p. 181). The author considers the first two groups better able to develop
themselves as teachers.

Both Sampson (2009) and Shawer (2010) portrayed a tight connection between textbooks adaptations, curriculum
and teacher autonomy. However, it is still unknown how these textbook adaptations might influence learning and
how the motivations towards adaptation can vary because of the teaching context. In the next section, some
information on a typical context for L2 Spanish teaching at university level in the US will be discussed.

1.3. TAs as practitioners

In North American universities, TAs can be the core faculty of language courses in modern language departments
where PhDs are conferred (see Laurence, 2001). Their professional development program ranges from “pre-service
workshop or orientation”, a methodology course, to “occasional observations” (Angus, 2013, p. 13). TAs are usually
supervised by a language program supervisor and teach mostly lower-level language courses while pursuing their
PhDs. This group of teachers is considered to be a worthy subject of empirical attention based on the specific
context of their teaching and their needs as present and future university teachers (see Allen & Negueruela-Azarola,
2010).

TAs tend to utilize the textbook for “presentation of new materials and guided practice” (Allen, 2008, p. 21).
Given the nature of their teaching in standardized multi-section courses, i.e., different sections of the same course
using the same textbook and testing materials, researching their use of teaching materials seems very relevant. For
instance, Martinez’ (2011) reflection on the interpretations of textbook activities’ goal by pre-service L2 Spanish
teachers suggests that a specific methodology promoted by a textbook does not automatically translate into the
content being taught according to that methodology. If the book offers a potential for teaching and learning, then the
TAs are the ones that fulfill that potential. The need for discussing textbook use and content with TAs as part of
their training (see Allen, 2008; McGrath, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012) is clear.
2. Research questions

Thus, this study investigates the following questions:

1) What kind of textbook adaptations do Spanish L2 TAs make in their classrooms?
2) How does textbook use shape curriculum delivery?
3) What seems to be TAs’ motivations towards textbook adaptations?

3. Methodology

This study is part of a larger project on vocabulary instruction. Classroom observations and pre- and post-interviews were conducted in the fall of 2012 (see Author, xxxx) and the spring of 2014. The section of the corpus analyzed here is taken from the spring of 2014 data. At that time, three of the TAs observed were teaching different sections of the same multi-section course, which allows for comparisons of textbook use.

3.1. Participants

Three TAs pursuing their PhD studies in Spanish literature participated in this study. The researcher and the participants were peers at the time of the first observation. The three participants were asked whether they would like to participate, and they agreed. They were told that the study dealt with vocabulary practices in the classroom.

Table 1 summarizes TAs’ L1s as well as whether they were teaching the course for the first time. They all had taken at least a methodology course during their MA studies and had over four years of TA experience at that time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>First time teaching that course</th>
<th>First time using that textbook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although textbook use by the learners in the language classroom was not the focus of the study, it is important to know their characteristics so TAs adaptations can be better understood, especially as the adaptations serve to localize, personalize, and individualize the textbook (McDonough et al., 2013). For most of the students enrolled, taking a sequence of two courses in any foreign language was a general education requirement. After taking this fourth-semester language course with a passing grade, students could decide whether to take Spanish as a major/minor.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

In the spring of 2014, the three TAs were observed and audiotaped while they were teaching the same textbook chapter (Blanco & Colbert, 2010) in a fourth-semester language course. These recordings comprise five lessons of 50 minutes by each TA. In addition, the TAs met with the researcher before and after the observations. In the pre-interview, the TAs discussed some good practices of vocabulary instruction. In the post-interview, the TAs were shown transcribed sections of their lessons and they were asked to elaborate on their motivations for their classroom practices as well as on their thoughts on vocabulary instruction and textbook use and content.
Each chapter in the textbook (Blanco & Colbert, 2010) was organized in nine main sections: 1) a vocabulary section with explicit activities to practice the vocabulary of the chapter, in the lessons observed “Chapter 11. Politics and Religion”; 2) a ‘televé’ (soap opera), a video activity where vocabulary and grammar of the lesson were introduced; 3) a cultural section, where a reading and a video dealt with products and practices of a Spanish-speaking country; 4-5-6) each section included a grammar section, in this chapter: 4) the passive voice with the verb ser, ‘to be’; 5) uses of se, namely passive use, impersonal use and se for unexpected events, a pedagogical case of passive with se; 6) an array of prepositions; 7) a literary text; 8) a cultural text and 9) a one-page section with speaking and writing practice. For the grammar and vocabulary sections, the textbook implemented a Presentation-Practice-Production approach, i.e., it always included an explanation of the grammar and a vocabulary list with L1-L2 translations followed by some closed-activities such as multiple-choice questions and fill-in-the gaps. Towards the end of the section, more open-ended activities/tasks were incorporated.

Five days were allotted for working on the chapter, the last day being a review of the topics covered the four previous days. On the sixth day, there was a chapter exam. All sections of the chapter were assigned in the common syllabus. However, only the vocabulary and grammar sections were tested in the chapter exam and also in the final exam. The TAs did not write those exams, but had access to them prior to the exam date. Given the scope of each chapter, not all activities in each section needed to be included in a lesson. Rather, the TAs could pick and choose the ones they found more relevant. Additionally, students were asked to complete activities in their online workbook at home.

For this data analysis, two interviews conducted in the fall of 2012 were also examined since they provided background information on the TAs and showed their approaches towards textbook use and curriculum delivery. The first semi-structured interview was a general background interview that provided information on the TAs as language learners and language teachers, on their professional development, and on their classroom practices (see Borg, 2006). In the second interview, similarly to the post-interview conducted in the spring of 2014, classroom practices were discussed by utilizing transcribed lessons as prompts.

McDonough, et al.’s (2013) technique list of adaptation techniques — adding, deleting, modifying, simplifying, and reordering (p. 77) — was applied to analyze use of textbook activities and textbooks sections. Teachers’ textbook use, beliefs about use and classroom practices were contrasted with Shawer’s (2010) classification of levels of curriculum delivery. Although a textbook is no longer just a book, but a “course packet” including a workbook, audio-CDs, videos, testing materials, and other extra materials, the focus of this analysis was on the physical textbook that both teachers and learners brought to the classroom.

4. Results

The textbook was used mostly in a linear—i.e., following the sections’ order—and chronological fashion—i.e., one section per day. Rosa slightly diverged from the other TAs in this respect since she tended to give selected textbook activities as homework and reviewed them in the following class. Sally and Fred only required homework from the online workbook. Therefore, by using the textbook’s activities as homework, the order of activities and sections slightly varied for Rosa’s lessons. However, in general, these three TAs did not depart much from the classroom syllabus: they presented all sections to be tested and only differed in the sections not to be tested. Table 2 summarizes the textbook sections that the TAs dealt with in their classrooms. Those sections are highlighted in green. When textbook activities were utilized, they have also been included in Table 2. The sections in red were not discussed in class.

Table 2. Sections and activities used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections in the Textbook</th>
<th>Sally</th>
<th>Fred</th>
<th>Rosa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Vocabulary section</td>
<td>P. 397: 1A, 1B, 1C</td>
<td></td>
<td>P. 398: 3, 4A, 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 2, the textbook was the main source of pedagogical instruction. In class, the TAs referred frequently to the textbook to set context and goals. Nevertheless, several additions to the textbook were observed: Rosa presenting a PowerPoint to introduce the vocabulary section in the first lesson, and the three TAs using activities from the online resources for the review day (the fifth day of class). This was not textbook usage per se, but use of the textbook ancillary materials. The TAs also added referential and display questions to cover the grammar, cultural, and vocabulary sections. Still, all of these additions did not affect the content of the textbook.

A different type of addition was seen in Sally. She focused on an overarching theme within the lessons and added an activity towards that end. Since students had to carry out a debate as a final oral exam, her students were asked to plan a campaign for an imaginary university election. To that end, she organized students in groups and followed a process approach to develop a debate, i.e., brainstorming a topic, developing arguments, etc. In the lessons observed, the learners worked on making suggestions for the campaign so that they could be delivered in the form of a speech. She extended this activity over three days, and worked on the debate after the end of the chapter.

As Table 2 shows, Rosa and Sally included activities from the textbook for every covered section, whereas Fred worked on the literary text, the short film, and the prepositions without using any textbook activity. Rosa and Sally also utilized the same activities at the beginning of their lessons, i.e., they prefer the closed-activities (those numbered from 1 to 4, see Table 2) before moving into more open-ended activities (activity 5 and ff.). However, Fred tended to select more open-ended activities. For example, he used two similar activities based on a textbook activity, i.e., making students create the rules for their own country using impersonal se: in one lesson, he assigned the political and social circumstances of the country—e.g., a dictatorship, an anarchist country, etc.—and in another lesson, the students chose the characteristics of their imaginary country.

Rosa used the highest number of activities from the textbook. This was also due to the fact that she asked her students to complete some of the closed-activities at home. In addition to this, Rosa covered more vocabulary activities than the others. She felt more motivated to include vocabulary practice since her talk with the researcher about good practices for vocabulary teaching. Fred and Sally had also participated in a similar conversation, but this did not seem to alter their way of introducing vocabulary.
Interestingly, Sally spent more time on grammar practice and on grammar explanations than the other teachers. In the post-interview, she claimed that she did not expect her students to run into so many difficulties when doing transformation activities—i.e., one of the closed-activities required students to change sentences from active into passive voice using different tenses—and she had to modify her lesson plan accordingly. She added some translations within the closed-activities to help learners understand the structure. Rosa also had a similar comment about her students: they had trouble doing the transformation activity, and that activity took longer than expected. Fred, however, was more concerned about students learning when to use passive, since he saw the difference between passive and active voice in terms of register. He also added translations into this grammar practice. Furthermore, he found surprising that prepositions comprised a section of the chapter. He considered this topic above learners’ current proficiency level. For that reason, he only discussed it on the review day.

Also, Fred had set other priorities in his teaching. During the interviews, Fred, who had taught that course previously, pointed out how important was to let students see what being a Spanish major entailed since students could declare their major/minor after this course. He firmly believed that it was necessary to analyze at least a literary text with the class during the term. He considered the text proposed by the book, "El Alba de Viernes Santo" by Pardo Bazán, a good piece to that end. Students were supposed to read the text at home, and then in class, he would guide them through questions and comments so that they understood the text meaning as well as learned more about how to analyze a literary text.

Despite these variations in their classroom practices and beliefs, in terms of techniques for textbook adaptations, TAs’ behavior, however, was very similar. Figure 1 shows the raw data of the adaptations of the 31 activities belonging to the sections all TAs worked on, i.e., the grammar and vocabulary sections to be tested in the chapter exam.

As Figure 1 shows, the most frequent technique was deleting. During the post-observation interviews, the TAs pointed out time constraints as the main factor influencing their choices. Rosa slightly reordered the activities given that she assigned some for homework. Modifying was especially frequent for Sally since she projected the activities on a screen, most of the time followed by their answers, in a PowerPoint format. Moreover, in Sally’s class, all activities that were marked in the textbook as individual activities were carried out in pairs in the three classrooms. This was not always the case in Rosa’s class, where some activities were used as they were.

Furthermore, the TAs also showed instances of adding during the lessons. Even though, they did not necessarily create new materials, they asked students referential and display questions. The referential questions were mostly to introduce the topic, whereas the display questions were to ensure that the grammar and vocabulary to be practiced was understood, i.e., by asking what a direct object was, by asking for translations, and so forth. That is, except for the review day, where Sally and Fred projected activities from the online resources on the screen and Rosa brought a
handout with a compilation of activities belonging to those resources, no other physical materials were added in the class. In sum, deleting and modifying were the most frequently used techniques within the activities followed by additions in the form of questions.

Following Shawer’s (2010) classification, these TAs did not behave as curriculum-makers. This was to be expected due to the standardized nature of a multi-section course. However, they were not a clear-cut case, but rather they could be placed between curriculum-transmitters and curriculum-developers. Table 3 summarizes teachers’ strategies in terms of textbook use contrasting with Shawer’s categories.

Table 3. Curriculum-development and curriculum-transmission strategies (based on Shawer, 2010, p. 178, p. 181)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum-developers</th>
<th>Rosa</th>
<th>Sally</th>
<th>Fred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple sources of input</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbook framework of pedagogical content</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbook cherry-pick</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible order of lesson treatment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson topic supplementing</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible order</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic skipping-adaptation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task adaptation/task skipping</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum-transmitters</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Fred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single source of pedagogical input</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit-by-unit</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page-by-page</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-by-task</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictable classroom content</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although Shawer (2010) points out that these categories are exclusive, the TAs here showed certain flexibility because of the “cherry-pick” nature of the class—i.e., there was more content in the syllabus than in the chapter exam and more activities per chapter than those possible to be covered in five lessons (VHL, 2014). In fact, although the content was predictable, since it was determined by the textbook and stated in the syllabus, the three TAs designed their lessons in a different way following their own agendas. Moreover, even though the textbook was followed unit by unit—let’s not forget there was a chapter test after each one—the pages and the activities of the chapter were not followed in a linear manner. A mixture of the curriculum-transmitters’ and curriculum-developers’ characteristics better describes these TAs’ textbook consumption. Contrary to some of the teachers in Shawer’s (2010) study, who had freedom to vary their curriculum but chose not to, these TAs did adapt their textbook language, content, and forms of classroom interaction.

5. Discussion

Going back to the first research question, “What kind of textbook adaptations do Spanish L2 TAs make in their classrooms?”, the three TAs used four of the five adaptation techniques proposed by McDonough et al. (2013) adding, deleting, modifying, and reordering. No example of simplifying was found. However, McDonough et al. consider “the main application of this technique” to be mostly for written texts (p. 74), and in the lessons observed, no many written texts were utilized, and when they were, they were assigned as homework without any adaptations. In fact, apart from the literary text, the texts in the chapter were deliberately created for L2 learners and all texts were already glossed.
Due to time constraints, deleting was the technique most frequently employed. Furthermore, most of the utilized activities were modified especially in terms of 1) the delivery of the instructions, e.g., using the projector; 2) adding questions to scaffold the activity and/or increase the communicative practice; and 3) the way the activity was carried out, e.g., changing individual work into pair work. Thus, language and processes (McGrath, 2013) were the main areas adapted.

For the second research question, “How does textbook use shape curriculum delivery?”, the TAs showed characteristics of curriculum-developers and curriculum-transmitters when comparing them with Shawer’s (2010) classification. The textbook was a fundamental element in their teaching, providing the content and the structure, but they still could be flexible and could “pick and choose.” In brief, in a multi-section course, the TAs have room to develop their own professional personality. This can also be seen when addressing the third research question, “What seem to be TAs’ motivations towards textbook adaptations?” Time was a main factor discussed by the TAs, i.e., time in class and preparation time. Furthermore, TAs’ values in teaching such as aiming for grammatical accuracy or believing in the importance of delving into cultural and literary topics varied the way they taught. Moreover, TAs’ previous experience with the content also seemed to influence them. For example, Fred spent his time more effectively on the grammar practice of the passive and se impersonal, as reflected in learners’ classroom productions, while reducing the time on prepositions. Better knowing learners’ proficiency level helped him to decide what to adapt.

Overall, the three TAs aimed at personalizing and individualizing their textbook. This can be seen in Fred working on learners’ literary knowledge and in Sally and Rosa spending more time in the areas they considered the learners to have more difficulties with. The three of them tended to ask personalized question to the students, which increased the communicative interactions in class. Nevertheless, some of the adaptations, and their lack thereof, did not necessarily take into account this need of personalizing and individualizing, but rather were applied in order to meet classroom deadlines and because of TAs’ lack of preparation time due to other commitments, such as finishing their PhDs studies. Deleting and modifying were the most popular techniques because of the relatively little time required when designing and implementing them.

These results also concur with Yan (2007), who found adding, deleting and modifying to be the most frequent adaptations during the period of practical teaching of a group of pre-service teachers. Nevertheless, for Sally, Rosa, and Fred, adding was not at all the most frequent adaptation. As Yan suggested, time influences in-service teachers who do not have the possibility of doing so many adaptations. Also depending on the textbook characteristics, e.g., number of activities, readings, and so forth, deleting could be more or less utilized. In this case, the textbook was conceived for a course like the one examined here and even for a course meeting five times a week (VHL, 2014). Thus, there was ample room for applying the deleting technique.

Contrary to Yan (2007), the TAs in the study did not seem to evaluate much the quality of the textbook activities utilized. For example, for the practice on the prepositions, none of them added a picture to discuss their meaning, a very frequent approach when teaching prepositions (e.g., Rísquez Aguado, 2011), which the textbook also lacked. Furthermore, TAs did not question the way to introduce different values of se, which is a difficult topic both for L2 learners and linguists (see Arús, 2006; Gili Gaya, 1974; Toth, 2008). Nevertheless, Fred utilized translation practice and focused on the meaning of passive and se impersonal, whereas Rosa and Sally followed more closely the textbooks’ activities and grammar explanations. This lack of adaptations could also be one of the reasons why Rosa and Sally found more difficulties when addressing the grammar topics, i.e., these activities were more demanding for the learners than they had foreseen.

Similarly to Sampson (2009), years of experience, and more specifically experience with that specific textbook, seem to influence the behaviors and beliefs of these teachers. For instance, Fred had already taught the course and seemed to run into less unexpected “issues” with his students. Sampson also noticed differences among native and non-native teachers. Here, the only differences observed that could be tied to the L1 of the teachers were the way
they faced the topic of the chapter, namely politics and religions. For example, both Fred and Sally, the two English L1 speakers, spent some time dealing with the connotations of the topic for English and Spanish speakers in the first lesson; while Rosa, the Spanish L1 speaker, started directly asking questions about students’ political beliefs and religions. Thus, Sally and Fred added some cultural reflections on different ways to understand this topic. However, Rosa, because of her cultural background, was able to provide more context for the short film helping students to understand the situation it depicted. Without a doubt, the teaching context—i.e., learners, teachers, and materials—can determine the adaptations that take place.

6. Conclusion

Every teaching context demands different adaptations. This study has contributed to literature on textbook use and adaptations by focusing on a specific teaching context, namely TAs in Spanish L2 multi-section level courses. Analyzing three TAs within the same context allowed to draw comparisons among them as well as with Yan’s (2007) pre-service teachers, and Sampson’s (2009) and Shawer’s (2009) university teacher. Although the role of the textbook in shaping classroom content and activities is fundamental, the TA is always in a position to adapt motivated by their own beliefs and experiences.

This study can also serve to inform teacher educators. It is important to make current and future teachers reflect on how to optimize in-classroom textbook use, i.e., to make teachers aware of the importance of localizing, personalizing, and individualizing the textbook to better suit classroom needs. Moreover, teacher education needs to recognize the specific contexts of the teachers and not obviate textbook use if it is really a major element in that context. Being aware of the characteristics of their textbooks and of the adaptations performed can also help teachers continue their professional development (see McGrath, 2013).

For further research on textbook use and adaptations, analyzing teachers’ practices from larger classroom corpora can yield valuable data to recognize patterns of behavior motivated by factors such as learners’ proficiency, teachers’ L1, kind of textbook, teachers’ experience, etc. Moreover, longitudinal data could provide evidence on changes in teachers’ textbook use. One point not addressed in this study is how the adaptations improve or reduce the learning potential of an activity. By examining conversational exchanges in classroom corpora, the learning potential of the adaptations could be analyzed. Finally, an analysis of teachers’ cognitions and beliefs also need to complement a corpus analysis since teachers are key to understand classroom processes (see Borg, 2006; Freeman, 2002).

Acknowledgements: To Ana I. Diaz Garrido and Martin Wilson.

References

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