4-19-2017

An Ecological Perspective on College-Level Modern Language Textbook Usage

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An Ecological Perspective on College-Level Modern Language Textbook Usage

Abstract
Textbooks, though often present in modern language classrooms, have received little attention in classroom-based research. This thesis exposes a knowledge gap between textbook content and usage—a gap that spans over two millennia—arguing for Leo van Lier’s ecological approach as a pivotal bridge. Since the late 20th century, language education scholars have criticized textbook content with the assumption that the content determines classroom activities. However, the lack of research on actual textbook usage in modern language classrooms makes these critiques tenuous. This study analyzed observational and interview data from four college-level modern language courses using the ecological perspective. Results suggest that diverse textbook usage in class stems from teachers’ language learning experiences and pedagogical backgrounds.

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Bachelor of Arts (BA)

Department or Program
Self-Designed Major

First Advisor
Desmond Odugu

Second Advisor
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Third Advisor
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Subject Categories
Higher Education | Language and Literacy Education

This thesis is available at Lake Forest College Publications: http://publications.lakeforest.edu/seniortheses/107
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**Printed Name:** Camille Lemieux

**Thesis Title:** An Ecological Perspective on College-Level Modern Language Textbook Usage
LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

An Ecological Perspective on College-Level Modern Language Textbook Usage

by

Camille Lemieux

April 19, 2017

The report of the investigation undertaken as a Senior Thesis, to carry two courses of credit in the Self-Designed Major Program

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Krebs Provost and Dean of the Faculty

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Jean-Luc Garneau
Textbooks, though often present in modern language classrooms, have received little attention in classroom-based research. This thesis exposes a knowledge gap between textbook content and usage—a gap that spans over two millennia—arguing for Leo van Lier’s ecological approach as a pivotal bridge. Since the late 20th century, language education scholars have criticized textbook content with the assumption that the content determines classroom activities. However, the lack of research on actual textbook usage in modern language classrooms makes these critiques tenuous. This study analyzed observational and interview data from four college-level modern language courses using the ecological perspective. Results suggest that diverse textbook usage in class stems from teachers’ language learning experiences and pedagogical backgrounds.
Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the research opportunities afforded to me at Lake Forest College. Special thanks goes to Professor Desmond Odugu, Professor Cynthia Hahn, and Professor Dawn Abt-Perkins for their guidance and mentorship throughout my college career. Thanks are also due to Professor Rachel Ragland and Professor Jean-Luc Garneau for being part of my thesis committee.

In addition, I thank Professor Ying Wu, Dr. Alan Hirvela, Professor Theodora Bofman, Barbara Harvey, and Linda Blaser for providing opportunities to develop my research and communication skills. I also thank Professor Janet McCracken and the other Self-Designed Major faculty for supporting my studies in applied linguistics. Finally, for their encouragement throughout the research process, I thank my family, friends, and Writing Center colleagues.
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Chapter 1: Why Research College-Level Modern Language Textbook Usage?

This study uses an ecological perspective to examine textbook usage in college-level modern language classrooms. Van Lier’s (2004a) ecological perspective requires that research aims extend beyond traditional scientific reductionism. While reductionism isolates specific phenomena from complex systems, an ecological perspective places complexity at the center of study, focusing on a particular aspect’s relationship to the other aspects of the system. Reductionist approaches to language study determine “what” phenomena are there but not “how” and “why” they contribute to the totality of the classroom. In contrast, an ecological perspective believes that individual phenomena do not add up to a bounded whole but instead a system greater than its parts.

To reach a clearer understanding of the dynamic processes in language classrooms, all facets of the classroom ecology are worth studying. These facets include the teacher, students, classroom materials, physical space, geolocation, and history (including cultural-historical scales and interactional-dialogical scales as described in van Lier, 2004a). Classroom materials consist of any physical object in a classroom used by students or teachers in the course of a lesson. Depending on the context, these materials may consist of textbooks, novels, handouts, whiteboards, projectors, chairs, desks, windows, paper, writing utensils, computers, and cell phones.

Why Textbooks?

Most U.S. classes use textbooks (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Tomlinson, 2012), but few studies detail their actual usage in modern language classrooms (Davey, 1988; Freeman & Porter, 1989; Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Moulton, 1997; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Tomlinson, 2012). Classrooms are multifaceted environments. Prabhu (1992) conceptualizes lessons in the language classroom as having four dimensions: each lesson serves as a piece of some larger curriculum, an application of a method, a social
phenomenon, and an arena of interaction. Emphasizing the intersecting dimensions at play in a lesson, Prabhu wrestles with questions concerning the dynamic and chaotic connections between theory and teaching practices.

In a more grounded study of the classroom’s complexity, Bolitho (1990) asked language teachers to draw pictures representing relationships between themselves, their students, and their teaching materials. The act of drawing such conceptually complex interactions, however, tends to result in simplifying the components and their relationships. These studies are two of several (see Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Larsen-Freeman, 1997; MacKenzie, 2013) that aim to understand the classroom experience abstractly. Aside from conceptual studies, classroom-based research also occurs. Such approaches typically include taking field notes to form anecdotes, categorizing observations based on checklists, and pre-testing/post-testing students’ performance of the target language (TL) (van Lier, 1988).

Most modern language classroom-based studies, however, have yet to explore the ways specific materials may influence the lesson (Tomlinson, 2012; van Lier, 2004a), although Guerrettaz & Johnston (2013) is a notable exception. While students and teachers do interact in complex ways with one another in the classroom, more studies need to take classroom materials into account. Individually, these materials may be used and/or critiqued by anyone. However, holistic studies on the classroom experience that do not include the physical elements of the classroom and participants’ interaction with those elements will not fully grasp the nuanced interactions that may contribute to more explicit interactions. The textbook is particularly interesting. It presents a moment in time—a snapshot of the ideologies, beliefs, ideals, and goals of those who took part in its creation and those who use it. It serves as a culmination of preapproved content, and its content remains static in a constantly changing universe.
Textbook content will not be read, interpreted, or understood in one way. Traces of the author’s intentions, history, and culture are laced throughout its pages. The reader brings to the book her histories, beliefs, feelings, and expectations. Just as one cannot assume that a student will absorb all of the information read in a textbook, one cannot assume that a teacher will attempt to teach its contents as its creators and producers imagined. To judge the quality of a textbook by its content alone is to merely critique a moment in time. To entirely overlook its role and in-class usage is to leave a gap in the total classroom experience.

Studies on textbooks across subjects and schooling levels have explored the connection between theory and content (Aski, 2003; Snider, 2005), pedagogical choices (Alvermann, 1987; Mishan, 2012; Shavelson & Stern, 1981), textbook selection (Angell, DuBravac, & Gonglewski, 2008), and student usage of textbooks outside of class (Berry, Cook, Hill, & Stevens, 2010), to name a few. While some classroom-based research studies have examined actual textbook usage in mathematics, social sciences, and life sciences (see Freeman & Porter, 1989; Ragland, R. G., 1981, April; Sikorová & Červenková, 2014), language education researchers have not studied in-class textbook usage extensively (Tomlinson, 2012).

Why College-Level Modern Language Classrooms?

Most studies that have investigated textbook usage limit the scope to elementary and secondary schooling. Thus, studying college-level textbook usage will provide needed insight into helping adults learn modern languages. Previous studies about college-level modern language classrooms have examined textbook selection processes, textbook content, teacher objectives, and teaching styles (see Angell, DuBravac, & Gonglewski, 2008; Durwin & Sherman, 2008; Landrum, Gurung, & Spann, 2012) with
the assumption that the textbook’s content determines teachers’ and/or students’ actions in the classroom (Moulton, 1997).

Examining textbook usage in any subject and schooling level may help educators learn more effective ways to facilitate student learning. In a survey administered to 45 elementary teachers and 45 secondary teachers, “neither elementary nor secondary teachers reported much reliance on their textbooks for lectures” (Davey, 1988, p. 342). While some elementary teachers reported using textbooks to supplement material and/or for collaborative student work, the secondary teachers reported that they primarily used the textbook for homework (Davey, 1988).

Davey’s (1988) study assumes that no variation exists between course subject and textbook usage; the list of classrooms participating in the study included history, science, math, industrial arts, English, and foreign languages (p. 341). Although modern language classrooms are one part of a student’s curricular experience, the language classroom differs from others (van Lier, 2004a). Language in the modern language classroom is the means to an end and the end itself. It is a regulator of interaction, a transmitter of knowledge, skills, and values, and a developmental goal (van Lier, 1984).

An ecological approach to classroom-based research can shine light on the complex relationships between theory, practice, and student competence in the target subject. However, the language education field has only recently begun to establish a framework for this type of approach to research. Because the language classroom is not only a regulator and transmitter but also the goal of instruction, it differs from that of other classrooms in which participants use language as a regulator and transmitter. One could argue that adult students must acquire the language of the field regardless of the course subject. Such acquisition, however, builds upon a language system in which the adult student typically has competency. In a beginner or intermediate language...
classroom, though, the language system an adult brings to the classroom influences their acquisition of the TL system.

Studies on textbook usage in college-level modern language classrooms are scarce. One noteworthy exception, Guerrettaz & Johnston (2013), used an ecological perspective to study textbook usage in a college-level English as a Second Language (ESL) grammar class. The researchers conducted classroom observations, two semistructured interviews with the class teacher, and student focus groups. They also examined a wide array of classroom materials, including the textbook and syllabus (p. 783). Their results suggest that the textbook was the center of the curriculum, classroom discourse, and language learning processes (p. 784). Because the researchers only examined one modern language classroom, their results may have been confined to the experiences of that particular teacher and class.

Their findings and discussion spark a number of intriguing questions about the roles of classroom materials. Does the textbook dictate the curriculum in other college-level modern language classrooms? How does the teacher’s planning process relate to in-class textbook usage? How does their textbook usage relate to their pedagogical goals? To further understand the role of course materials in the classroom ecology, more classroom-based data must be collected and analyzed. Based on their study, I expect to define a particular role or a discrete set of roles that textbooks played in the classroom ecology. I hope to determine the extent to which, if any, the three roles found by Guerrettaz & Johnston (2013) are comprehensive in and/or consistent with other classroom contexts.
Overview

Two research questions guide this study. First, how do teachers and students actually use textbooks in college-level modern language classrooms? Second, what is the textbook’s role in the classroom ecology? To answer these questions, I will examine teachers’ process for textbook selection, teachers’ plans to integrate the textbook in the larger curriculum, teacher and student usage or non-usage of textbooks in the classroom, and activities the textbook proposes for language learning in the classroom that might influence its usage. Further exploring how teachers and students actually use textbooks in college-level modern language classrooms will contribute to our understanding of the multifaceted and dynamic language classroom system as a whole. If teachers better understand their own classroom systems, they may be able to critically self-reflect such that they help their students reach the course goals.

Chapter 2 explores the history of modern language teaching, starting with the ancient Greeks in 500 BC and ending in the 20th century. Language education scholars have long advocated for particular language teaching practices in an effort to discover the silver bullet to learning languages in formal settings. The recommendations proposed have not accumulated; rather, recommendations go through a cyclical process of proposition, mass approval and application, critique, and disillusionment. The second part of the chapter reviews today’s arguments about textbooks and presents an ecological approach as a bridge for knowledge gaps between textbook content and usage.

Chapter 3 revisits the ecological perspective proposed by Leo van Lier, challenging the traditional reductionist approach to scientific inquiry. Such an approach, when applied to human activity, does little to answer “how” and “why” questions concerning contextualized classroom functionality. Although van Lier’s (2004a) conceptual perspective was proposed as a tentative idea in his publications, the concepts
were left largely unchallenged and untested. This chapter details the present study’s methodology for the ethnographic exploration of textbook usage in four college-level modern language classrooms. Chapter 4 details the results of applying van Lier’s ecological perspective to the present study. Chapter 5 advocates for further exploration of classroom materials in relation to the classroom ecology.
Chapter 2: A History of Knowledge Gaps

To understand the benefits of approaching classroom-based research through an ecological perspective, we must first understand the problems behind previous and existing approaches. The large majority of historical studies on modern language teaching and learning concern European countries (McLelland & Smith, 2014, p. 3). Aside from Ramsey’s (2012) documentary history of bilingual education, few scholars have completed a thorough review of U.S. language teaching propositions, beliefs, or materials that spans more than a few decades.

Instead of classifying the field’s development according to “method mythologies” (Howatt & Smith, 2014), I adapted Ricento’s (2000) developmental factors. Arranged in chronological order, each section of the chapter explains key sociopolitical factors and epistemological perspectives that influenced the field of language education. Van Lier (2000) defines ecological linguistics as “a study of language as relations (of thought, action, power), rather than as objects (words, sentences, rules)” (p. 251). I adapt his terminology to describe the more widely-accepted views about language study. A language-as-objects orientation refers to studying language through its discrete parts, such as phonetics, lexicology, and syntax; a language-as-relations orientation refers to studying language as a meaning-making, communicative activity.

Although Sumerians produced the first known writing systems around 3300 BC, and the Egyptians wrote multilingual documents as early as 2000 BC (Sánchez, 2014; Wheeler, 2013), this historical review will focus on societies that heavily shaped U.S. language education. The time periods covered are intentionally wide-ranging to point to major influences to the field. Table 1 serves as a framework for understanding each section.
### Table 1.

A framework for the history of language study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation(s)</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Sociopolitical Factors and Epistemological Perspectives</th>
<th>Knowledge Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>language-as-objects</td>
<td>500 BC - 476</td>
<td>The Greeks studied Greek because they looked down on their neighbors. The Romans studied Greek because they felt the language was prestigious. Greek and Latin were considered ideal language forms.</td>
<td>Language study was a means to gain prestige through intellectual labor, so there was no need for scholars to study authentic classroom practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language-as-objects and language-as-relations</td>
<td>6th C-15th C</td>
<td>Students should master grammar to understand all other subjects. Greek and Roman values persisted, but Catholicism was considered the most valuable knowledge one could obtain.</td>
<td>Texts presented ideal TL forms and idealized teaching practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language-as-objects and language-as-relations</td>
<td>16th C-17th C</td>
<td>Naturalist and empiricist perspectives inspired scholars to teach the TL (Latin) the way children acquire their L1. Inspired by the Tower of Babel, some Christian European scholars sought to discover or create a universal language. European American colonists wrote language texts to convert indigenous peoples to Christianity.</td>
<td>Scholars began using modern languages (L1s) in language teaching. Others wrote bilingual texts in efforts to spread the Christian religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language-as-objects and language-as-relations</td>
<td>18th C-19th C</td>
<td>Following Descartes’ (2013) publication, scientific disciplines increasingly gained respect if they used reductionist approaches to study phenomena. In language education, scholars began searching for the “best” language teaching methods and approaches.</td>
<td>Language scholars began to adopt reductionist approaches to language study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language-as-objects and language-as-relations</td>
<td>20th C</td>
<td>Before the Second World War, scholars emphasized reading in the TL. The war, however, created a new, practical need for effective language learning methods. In the second half of the 20th century, scholars proposed a frenzy of methods and approaches that were widely accepted and applied, critiqued, and then erased from the drawing board.</td>
<td>In their haste to make advancements in the field, scholars focused on the search for the one true method and approach to language teaching.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A language-as-objects orientation began in the ancient Greek Empire in 500 BC and continued until the invention and spread of the printing press in the mid-1400s. Scholars in the 16th and 17th centuries used published texts as agents of conversation and change. Most notably, Descartes’ (2013) work and its reception created a rift between reductionist scientific endeavors and non-reductionist endeavors; the following centuries’ worth of
technological developments led to a hierarchy that placed hard sciences at the top and soft sciences below (van Lier, 2004a).

As the philosophical traditions of naturalism and empiricism gained favor, the language-as-objects orientation overlapped with a language-as-relations orientation. Simultaneously, language scholars aimed to scientifically determine the best language teaching and learning methods. Instead of defining their scientific pursuits based on the complex nature of their field of study (i.e. language learning), the scholars employed scientific methods that separated complex phenomena into isolated categories. By the late 1960s, waves of “approaches” and “methods” proposed by language scholars rolled in and out. Each creator of these approaches and methods believed their recommendations could be the silver bullet to language learning. Instead of looking inside the classroom to better understand the complex forces at work, scholars increasingly turned toward traditional scientific approaches.

While the first part of the chapter lays the groundwork for understanding conceptual gaps in scholarly knowledge, the second part explains how those gaps have led to today’s unproductive arguments about language textbooks. A crucial knowledge gap we have yet to fill in our two and a half millennia of language study is between textbook content and its actual usage in classrooms. Such a gap has yet to be filled with traditional scientific approaches; a new approach may lead to new discoveries (van Lier, 2004a).

Language-as-Objects

Sociopolitical Factors and Epistemological Perspectives

The ancient Greeks looked down on their non-Greek neighbors such that their word for foreigners, barbaros (today’s barbarian), mimicked the strange sounds of neighboring societies’ languages (Wheeler, 2013). As a result, language study in the
empire meant learning to read and write Greek. According to Wheeler (2013), students used writing boards and pointed tools to learn Greek letters, syllables, and words. As centuries passed, students memorized and recited cultural staples like Homer’s epic poetry. A student memorizing his text two centuries later had to learn the archaic forms of the Greek language to be successful. Characterizing language mastery as the memorization of a language’s individual components marked the beginning of a language-as-objects orientation.

Though the Greek civilization fell to the Roman empire in 146 BC, the Romans regarded the Greek language as a symbol of prestige (Wheeler, 2013). They embraced the language, and their students progressed from learning letters, syllables, words, and sentences to short passages, moral sayings, and public speaking skills. Toward the end of the Roman empire, several bilingual Latin and Greek Hermeneumata Pseudosoiatheana were produced, serving as the first documents in the empire designed explicitly for modern language teaching. These texts, likely used until the fall of the Roman empire in 467, featured word lists, words grouped by subject, short readings, practical dialogues, and substitution drills (Glück, 2014; Sánchez, 2014; Wheeler, 2013).

The dominant education system in the subsequent centuries is characterized in “The Tower of Knowledge,” a 1504 drawing in the Margarita Philosophica. According to Wheeler’s (2013) interpretation of the drawing, students began schooling by learning Donatus’ and Priscians’ grammars. Famous Greek and Roman intellectuals in the drawing symbolize the next stages of learning, which consist of logic, rhetoric, poetry, arithmetic, astronomy, music, physics, and morals. After learning these subjects, the students moved on to theology, the final stage of education (Wheeler, 2013). Based on this drawing, scholars at the time continued pursuing the educational subjects that the ancient Greeks and Romans valued but held the Church at the highest standard.
Interestingly, the first step in education was a mastery of grammar, further signifying a language-as-objects orientation.

The creation and spread of Gütenberg’s printing press in 1450 (see Coşgel, Miceli, & Rubin, 2012), coupled with changes in economic and political relations between European nations, led to an increase in modern languages teaching materials (Corrigan, 2005; Sánchez, 2014). Pasanek & Wellmon’s (2015) indexical approach to examining the Enlightenment period explains some of the effects that the rise in publications had on scholarly thought and communication:

While early modern books were seen primarily as storage devices for preventing another cultural catastrophe or windows into a distant ancient world, Enlightenment books remediated ancient authors and put contemporary authors in contact, controversially, one with another. Through cross-references and links, Ancients and Moderns converse in print, a medium which was presumed to have its own temporality (p. 362).

The influx in publications led to scholarly debates about the best procedures for foreign language teaching (FLT). Proposals made by 16th century scholars such as Erasmus, Johannes Sturm, Roger Ascham, and Wolfgang Ratich emphasized learning Latin or Greek through memorization, grammatical mastery, and translation from the first language (L1) to the TL (Bogen, 1900).

In a preface to his 1614 trilingual publication of the New Testament, Eilhard Lubinus is an example of the changes in thought concerning language teaching. Referencing the naturalist tradition, Lubinus declared that learning begins with sensory input. His commentary progressed into an empiricist tradition as he suggested that vocabulary should be introduced in the form of pictures and/or real items and props to touch (Wheeler, 2013). Jan Comenius brought Lubinus’ ideas to fruition in his 1658 Orbis sensualium pictus, likely the first language learning text to include illustrations (Smith & McLelland, 2014; Wheeler, 2013).
Given the theology’s dominant presence at the time, some scholars grappled with
the relationships between language and religion. The Port-Royalist community in France
aimed to develop moral Christians, a common goal during the early Enlightenment period
(Wheeler, 2013). Inspired by the story of the Tower of Babel, these scholars sought to
determine a universal grammar underlying all languages, a search which would later
resurface through Noam Chomsky’s language theories. Combining religious pursuits with
the epistemological perspective of rationality, John Wilkins created a “rational language”
in 1668, which he hoped could be used to reach one globally accepted interpretation of
the Bible (Wheeler, 2013).

Meanwhile, religion also impacted language education in Colonial America
because language texts were produced to advance missionary education projects. Smith
(1979) explored language and linguistic texts in Colonial America published from 1643
(when the first American publication printed) to 1800. An increase in publishing houses
starting in the late 17th century brought an increase in the number of language and
linguistic publications. Seventeenth century language texts consisted mainly of biblical
translations from English to indigenous American languages because the colonists’ chief
concern was to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity (Smith, 1979).

In contrast to the spread of religious values was the rise of scientific enterprises.
While ancient Chinese and Indian philosophies did not perceive scientific and non-
scientific work as separate endeavors, many other traditions, including that of the ancient
Greek and Romans, separated them (van Lier, 2004a). As van Lier (2004a) argues,
Descartes’ (2013) work in the mid 17th century and its reception created an enduring
divide between scientific disciplines and non-scientific disciplines. While it would take
time for the divide to show itself in the field of language education, its contribution had
tremendous impacts.

13
Knowledge Gaps between Classroom Materials and their Usage

The main goal of language study in the ancient Greek and Roman empires was to master language forms through intellectually laborious study (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Such a goal required a language-as-objects orientation so that the Greek and/or Latin language could be divided into memorizable parts. While scholars have studied the literary texts from ancient Greek and Rome, little has been discovered about how those texts were actually used in language classes. Wheeler (2013) ends his discussion of these civilizations with the excuse that there is “too much time, too many places, and not enough information” to understand how a typical language lesson actually functioned (p. 26). Although we can piece together plausible lessons from the instructions in Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana texts, we cannot assume that every teacher followed the texts word for word in the classroom. The knowledge gap between language teaching recommendations and actual practices still exists today.

Most language texts published in the 16th and 17th centuries consisted of grammars and dialogues that presented ideal TL forms (Bogen, 1900; Howatt & Smith, 2014; Sánchez, 2014). Alternatively, John Brinsley’s 1612 dialogues in Ludus Literarius, or the Grammar Schoole described common teaching problems and potential solutions. As Wheeler (2013) states, the text provides “an unusually realistic look at the language teaching classroom,” at least in England (p. 66). Brinsley does reveal problems teachers likely faced in the classroom and provides solutions that give a sense of the state of language teaching. The text, though, is only as honest as an idealistic representation can be.

Despite calls from some European scholars, including John Locke (2007), to teach children practical lessons, thereby excluding Latin from the curriculum, many classical language teaching traditions continued until the late 1700s. In America, Latin language
texts were published much more often than those of other classical languages, and these
texts were often written by university teachers who wanted to instill self-discipline in
students. In the effort to pull away from British influence, some authors also began
referencing their country of origin in the title of their text, such as Ross’ *The American
Latin Grammar* (Smith, 1979, p. 33). Ironically, this attempt to differentiate the colonies
from England did not extend to changing the structure and content of many of these
publications: Latin texts still included or copied European grammars, literature,
glossaries, syntax, and prosody (Smith, 1979).

While colonists published language study texts in German, Spanish, and Italian,
French texts were most frequently published for teaching the language to native-English
speakers (Smith, 1979). The first French school book was published in Boston in 1720;
however, French did not receive status as an official course of study at Harvard until
sixty-seven years later (Barthold, 1957). English became a dominant language in Europe,
and European publications certainly made their way to the colonies. Most of the English
language texts consisted of spelling books, grammars, and dictionaries (Smith, 1979).
Though Smith (1979) offers a great deal of information about the language and linguistic
publications in Colonial America, we again do not know how teachers or students truly
used these texts in universities or grammar schools.

**Language-as-Objects and Language-as-Relations**

**Sociopolitical Factors and Epistemological Perspectives**

The 18th and 19th centuries brought large-scale changes to the language teaching
field. Scholars using naturalistic approaches turned more closely toward L1 acquisition
processes in attempts to gain more empirical information that might transfer to other
forms of language learning. In Europe, the notion that students should first master their
L1 before learning another language became widely accepted and spread to America at


the end of the 18th century. In the late 1700s, scholars Robert Lowth and Lindley Murray published texts intended to teach English to native-English speakers (Wheeler, 2013). The valuation of using L1s in language teaching continued to increase in the early 1800s. The language teaching field slowly gained more respect as a discipline, and scholars experimented with various recommendations to find the “best” language teaching method.

Once scholars began publishing texts intended for communication in the TL, their proposals aimed for a language-as-relations orientation but still divided languages into discrete parts. As naturalist and positivist traditions grew, the language teaching discipline shifted focus from focusing on the past to learning more about the present (Smith & McLelland, 2014). The European sociopolitical landscape changed as technology facilitated communication between nations. Learning a dead language such as Latin became less important than learning modern European languages.

The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) gained increasing popularity in the 1800s. While a debate exists concerning which scholar started the method, the following five scholars tend to receive credit, as Siefert (2013) indicates: Johann Valentin Meidinger (1783), Johann Heinrich Philipp Seidenstücker (1811), Johann Franz Ahn (1834), Heinrich Gottfried Ollendorff (1835), and Carl Julius Ploetz (1848). The texts were intended for and translated into multiple European languages (Wheeler, 2013), again signaling a shift towards a language-as-relations orientation. Additionally, François Gouin’s Series Method and Ludwik Zamenhof’s creation of Esperanto in 1887 (Wheeler, 2013) represented growing interests in widespread communication avenues by means of modern language education.

In America, the shift toward (and rapidly away from) GTM would not take place until the end of the 19th century. The dominant modern language curriculum in American
schools during the early 1800s consisted of reading Latin and Greek texts because these two languages were still considered to have ideal forms and structures (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In both title and content, for example, Webster's (1876) speaker exemplifies the high valuation placed on classical European literature.

The last two decades of the 1800s brought rapid shifts in American language education as linguistic advancements in Europe became more readily available to American scholars with the Industrial Revolution’s increase in communicative technologies. Efforts to teach modern languages by mimicking L1 acquisition processes took hold in the U.S. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Scholars L. Sauveur and Maximilian Berlitz opened schools in America in which teachers taught multiple modern languages using variations of the Direct Method.

At the end of the 19th century, linguistic scholars such as Wilhelm Viëtor, Henry Sweet, and Paul Passy rose to the forefront to push the field toward a more scientific orientation (Siefert, 2013; Wheeler, 2013). Although changes were already developing, 1882 marked the public start of the field’s new direction when German language teacher Viëtor published Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren!, which Sweet later translated to Language Teaching Must Start Afresh! (Siefert, 2013; Wheler, 2013). Viëtor’s pamphlet claimed that the current teaching practices dated all the way back to Donatus’ grammar. To combat the stagnation, Viëtor called for a focus on spoken language in the classroom (Siefert, 2013).

With the Industrial Revolution’s rapid technological advancements and philosophical shift towards empiricism and rationalism, modern disciplines in the late 19th century increasingly earned respect based on their ability to use scientific methods and procedures. As they shifted their field to meet those guidelines to gain respect, linguists focused on studying phonetics, and they progressively drew from advancements
in the field of psychology. According to Siefert (2013), in 1886, Passy led the formation of the Dhi Fonètik Ticerz’ Asóciécon (The Phonetic Teachers’ Association), which eventually became L’Association Phonétique Internationale (the International Phonetic Association).

Henry Sweet published *The Practical Study of Languages: A Guide for Teachers and Students* in 1900, which detailed, as Sweet prefaced, “general principles on which a rational method of learning foreign languages should be based” that considered “various modifications these general principles undergo in their application to different circumstances and different classes of students” (Sweet, 1900, p. v). His text combined psychology and phonetics. He, along with the other progressive linguistic scholars mentioned above, led the movement that finally brought language teaching into the scientific realm.

Before discussing the early 20th century’s changes in language teaching, it is worth introducing one final scholar. Henry Palmer, a university teacher in London, carefully followed the works of Sweet and the International Phonetic Association. Palmer’s texts, *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages*, published in 1917, and the more accessible version, *The Principles of Language-Study*, published in 1921, introduced many concepts that linguistic scholars had yet to propose. Unlike many of his predecessors, Palmer (1921) advocated for an “eclectic” approach, by which he meant “the deliberate choice of all things which are good, a judicious and reasoned selection of all the diverse factors the sum of which may constitute a complete and homogeneous system” (p. 161).

His work hints at a looming problem in the field. Palmer (1921) believed that if scholars “asked a hundred different language-teachers to design what each considered an ideal course or textbook, the result at the present day would certainly be a hundred
different courses” (p. 76). Palmer had hope that in the distant future, linguistic scholars would “gather that the fundamental principles were beginning to stand out and to be respected” (Palmer, 1921, p. 76). However, as the events of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century indicate, the scholarly strides toward perfection did not lead to fundamental principles but instead to an accumulation of diverse methods and approaches to language teaching.

The Coleman Report, published in 1929, declared prior language teaching methods unfit for the realities of foreign language teaching (FLT) and argued that United States’ institutions should aim for strong literacy in the TL, an argument which would characterize teaching practices until the Second World War (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). As a result, foreign language programs in the 1930s and early 1940s featured similar translation exercises and memorization of grammar rules that scholars had proposed centuries past.

According to Jackson (1975), the first and second world wars were met with a decline in foreign language studies due partly to the United States’ isolationistic tendencies. World War II gave birth to American nationalism, causing the languages of the Central Powers to be considered “unpatriotic” (Warriner, 1980) and thus removed from language programs (Ramsey, 2012). After Pearl Harbor, though, the federal government was desperate to increase the army’s knowledge of modern languages, and previous methods of modern language instruction proved ineffective (Jackson, 1975).

To better prepare the army for foreign affairs, the Army Specialized Training Program was created, and the Army Method became popularized (Jackson, 1975; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Warriner, 1980). The Army Method consisted of nine months of immersion, which was equal to four years of high school and two years of college instruction in the TL (Jackson, 1975). The language learning theory focused on pattern drills and explanations of those patterns because linguistic scholars believed that
grammar should be learned inductively and deductively (Jackson, 1975).

From Jackson’s (1975) study we know that textbooks contained translation exercises, dialogues, information about the cultures in which the TL was spoken, and updated vocabulary meant to represent authentic communication practices. Once again, however, no study available to me looked into the actual usage of classroom materials or textbooks in modern language classrooms. “Between 1947 and 1953, 46 colleges and universities dropped the foreign language requirement for the bachelor of arts degree,” (Jackson, 1975, p. 6). In 1952, the Modern Language Association received a grant to reinvigorate the search for effective language teaching techniques (Jackson, 1975).

The late 1950s through early 1960s brought rise to the application of structuralist and behaviorist theories to language learning, leading to the development of the audiolingual method. Originally, the method was deemed a “revolution in philosophy” because the goals of the field moved from reading classical texts to advancing the four major language skills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking (Warriner, 1980).

The Cold War incited a competitive spirit in United States education policy. When Sputnik launched in 1957, interest in developing language programs in the United States also skyrocketed. One year later, the National Defense Education Act passed (Jackson, 1975; Warriner, 1980). From 1961 through 1968, NDEA Institutes received nearly $7.5 million to develop language programs; close to 25,000 teachers were retrained in the audiolingual method; elementary schools that had abandoned modern language programs now welcomed them with open arms (Jackson, 1975).

Knowledge Gaps between Classroom Materials and their Usage

The typical textbook that promoted the audiolingual method included translation exercises, drills, and dialogues (Jackson, 1975; Warriner, 1980). Teachers who practiced this method prioritized speaking and listening comprehension (Jackson, 1975). Language
laboratories were popular additions. “By 1962, some 6,000 high schools had language laboratories” (Jackson, 1975). Meanwhile, “students rebelled at memorization of dialogues,” and “complained about lack of relevancy” (Jackson, 1975, p. 9). In efforts to keep up-to-date with the “best” audiolingual practices, publishing companies modified textbooks so rampantly that teachers had trouble figuring out how to use them (Warriner, 1980).

Classroom research on actual procedures of audiolingualism is largely absent from the literature. Instead, scholars have repeatedly explained the “typical” audiolingual method and practice without contextualization. Such generalization begs the question of how real teachers and students actually used textbooks in language lessons. Nonetheless, the audiolingual method, once considered the silver bullet of inefficient language learning programs, began to lose support in the late 1960s. Although some textbook developers continued offering “best of” audiolingual method practices (Warriner, 1980, p. 82), the field splintered into an eclectic mix of pseudo-panaceatic methods and approaches (Warriner, 1980, p. 82).

**An Accumulation of Knowledge Gaps**

Language learning began as a means by which Greeks and Romans could gain prestige through intellectual labor. In the eight centuries that followed the Roman Empire’s fall, a language-as-objects orientation slowly expanded to include a language-as-relations orientation as European language scholars adopted naturalist, positivist, and empirical approaches. Only in the late 19th century did the field of language teaching make large strides to adopt a scientific agenda. Language education scholars defined science according to the traditional values of hard science disciplines despite large differences between the disciplines’ methods of inquiry and objects of study.

Today’s major knowledge gaps between language teaching recommendations and
real practices arose for two reasons. First, instead of reflecting on the history of the field, scholars searched for a sole panaceatic approach to language learning. “A bibliography, doubtless incomplete, of French grammars alone, published between the years 1500-1800, includes six hundred and fifty titles, a large proportion of which bear the title A New Method” (Bogen, 1900, p. 348). As Bogen (1900) indicates, the production of more and more language learning theories, methods, and texts created a frenzied search for the most effective language learning and teaching technique.

Similar to the argument Bogen (1900) made seven decades earlier, Strasheim (1969) reflected on the scholarly chase for the next bandwagon to ride:

The rationales we talk about are more appropriately rationales for certain methods than for foreign language study itself…this concentration has led to a kind of “gimmickery” in technology—the machinery we employ—the “teacher proof” materials we want to develop…our profession is both restless and restive today (Strasheim, 1969, p. 494).

The “methods” and “approaches” bandwagons did not slow in production, however (see Clarke, 1982). In response to the inadequacy of behaviorist approaches to language teaching, scholars turned toward cognitive approaches (van Lier, 2004a), which many teachers had been using without necessarily calling the practice cognitively inspired (Jackson, 1975). The 1970s led to the introduction of Asher’s Total Physical Response, Curran’s Community Language Learning, Gattegno’s The Silent Way, and Lozanov’s Suggestopedia. These approaches did not take tremendous hold in the language education field, however.

By 1975, colleges and universities lifted language requirements from programs (Jackson, 1975, p. 10). It seems that language education scholars took a look at their field’s progress over time and found disillusionment in the methods and approaches for which they had advocated for so long. Rather than critically self-reflect, though, they
continued to use traditional scientific processes (language-as-objects) to try to solve centuries’ old problems. The relationship between theory and practice became increasingly dichotomized as educational research aimed to “pinpoint the immediate, short-term, tangible effects of instruction” (van Lier, 2004a, p. 11).

The second reason for today’s knowledge gaps is that respect for the natural science disciplines overtook respect for other disciplines. While scholars in both the hard and soft sciences looked toward the future in their accumulation of knowledge, the outlook caused severe consequences for language educators (McLelland & Smith, 2014; van Lier, 2004b; Wheeler, 2013). Wheeler (2013) states, “Our field…tends to look to the future and dismiss the past, viewing it as full of misguided ideas and techniques. It’s hard to build a history with discredited ideas. The result is professional amnesia on a grand scale” (Wheeler, 2012, p. 3). This amnesia began not only with the increase in printing presses but the ability of the printed text to serve as a communicative agent of change (Pasanek & Wellmon, 2015).

Just as today’s online forums allow for a multitude of instant commentary from people around the globe, the printed text allowed for constant communication about the “best” ways to teach and learn languages. We can scroll through online forums to find the conversation’s starting point and to track its progression, just as scholars throughout the past few centuries could look through citations, references, and indexes to track the history of an idea. However, in a field that incessantly sought progression in any direction, the lack of accumulative advancements led to the field’s retrograde amnesia.

In the 1980s, American language scholars turned a critical eye not toward their lack of historical reflection, methodologies, or approaches, but instead to language textbooks. Human inquiry based on traditional scientific pursuits means that, ideally, scientists will pose questions concerning every facet of their field as time goes on.
Imagine these questions on a to-do list that any well-read scholar would have access to. If such a list existed in language education, it may detail every potential variable in a language classroom that could impact the teaching and/or learning process. Language education scholars, however, plugged away at a list whose items disappeared once checked. By the time they reached the textbook’s impact on language lessons, the list’s items had splintered into such narrow categories that their studies could only lead to relatively unproductive arguments.

In the late 20th century, a distinctly new viewpoint formed: scholars now saw the language textbook as a limitation. Scholars argued that the textbook is generally obstructive, its content is inherently restrictive, and it does not accurately represent theory. The following quotes are examples of those arguments.

“One of the most harmful factors in a second language program is excessive reliance on textbooks…They are always there, setting an unreasonably fast pace, always open…” (Hammerly, 1982, p. 201, as cited in Schulz, 1991, p. 169).

“Knop (1988)...states that the best way to cover a textbook is to sit on it” (Schulz, 1991, p. 169).

“Why does there appear to be apathy and even hostility to the ELT textbook in the literature? Why does it survive and prosper apparently in contradiction to the development of ideas in applied linguistics” (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994)?

“The danger with ready-made textbooks is that they can seem to absolve teachers of responsibility…it is easy to just sit back and operate the system, secure in the belief that the wise and virtuous people who produced the textbook knew what was good for us. Unfortunately this is rarely the case” (Swan, 1992, p. 33, as cited in Hutchinson & Torres, 1994, p. 315).

“The precise instructions which the materials give reduce the teacher’s role to one of managing or overseeing a preplanned classroom event” (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 84, as cited in Hutchinson & Torres, 1994, p. 316).

“Johnson and Markham (1989, p. 42) concluded that ‘mechanical drills were dominant in the overwhelming majority of cases,’ although all textbook authors proclaimed a communicative orientation and communicative goals” (Schulz, 1991, p. 168).
Ever since scholars published the first language learning texts, they rarely stopped to consider the roles those texts played in real classrooms. The history of the language field and modern day critiques about textbooks led me to my research questions. How do teachers and students actually use textbooks in college-level modern language classrooms? What is the role of the textbook in the classroom ecology? The critiques above are laden with assumptions about ways teachers and students use textbooks in classes. While I recognize that the large majority of today’s language education scholars are also teachers, I believe that their hasty renouncements of textbooks as useful classroom artifacts (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013) hinders progression in the field.

Understanding how teachers and students actually use textbooks in language classrooms can help guide future developments in language classroom materials. After summarizing the existing literature on in-classroom textbook usage, Tomlinson (2012) disclosed, “It would help materials developers if we knew even more about what teachers actually do with the materials they are given to use as well as what they would like their materials to help them do” (46). While Schulz (1991) provides a list of components that ideal course materials would contain, which Tomlinson (2012) himself did in his book, the question still remains concerning what teachers do with materials.

To better understand actual textbook usage in the language classroom, we cannot rely solely on textbook content, as so many studies have done (for examples, see Arkian, 2008; Aski, 2003; Clavel-Arroita & Fuster-Márquez, 2014; Derryberry & Wininger, 2008; Diepenbroek & Derwing, 2013; Parry, 2000; Reinders & Balcikanli, 2011; Rubio, Passey, & Campbell, 2004; Snider, 2005). An exploration of actual usage requires a different approach to classroom-based research. Because the ecological approach has yet to receive much attention in classroom-based research on modern language learning, it is the approach used in this study.
Chapter 3: Ecological Perspective as a Bridge

This chapter explains the rationale for adopting an ecological approach to research. Methodological choices were decided based on the key features of the perspective and as such are presented alongside descriptions of the perspective. As indicated in Chapter 2’s historical overview, the scientific enterprise advanced during the Enlightenment period, setting the stage for the growth of disciplines outside of the natural science realm.

Traditional scientific pursuits as defined by the natural science fields typically require context reduction, data reduction, and complexity reduction (van Lier, 2004a). Context reduction requires experimentation on select variables; data reduction requires a preference for the simplest explanations about data. Finally, complexity reduction breaks the items under study down into smaller elements to analyze them each in turn (van Lier, 2004a). These three approaches to inquiry have led to a vast array of scientific discoveries. Language education as a field still defines respectable scientific pursuit as having these requirements (van Lier, 2004; Wheeler, 2013). However, all disciplines may not find the same definition of science to work well in every inquiry (van Lier, 2004a).

Such a definition of scientific pursuit in language education may lead researchers to assume that students behave in experimental conditions as they do in natural classrooms. Yet, many scholars recognize that the classroom is complex and chaotic, such that one class period will not be exactly the same as another (Diane Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007; MacKenzie, 2013; Prabhu, 1992; Sachtleben, 2015; van Lier, 2004a; Wattenberg, 1977). A clear discrepancy exists between understanding the classroom as a complex environment and researchers’ attempts to understand cause and effect relationships through isolated parts.

Van Lier (2004a) reflects on the field’s 20th century attempts to find panaceas to
solve the problems of language teaching. The lack of answers concerning the “right”
language teaching theories and methods is not at the fault of unfocussed thinkers in the
field:

“Finding that one single truth, the true answer, is like pushing a door that opens
inwards. To open the door we must stop pushing and formulate questions that can
enlighten our work in our own context. We don’t expect to find universal
answers, but with a bit of luck we may find better ways of dealing with the tasks
before us. And perhaps the door just swings open, or perhaps we find that we can
even push down the walls” (40).

Van Lier proposed his interpretation of the ecological perspective as a means to look for
better ways to approach language teaching and learning processes. However, the analogy
may provide a clear introduction to the ecological perspective. Experimental research in
language education has contributed to our understanding of the classroom but has not
provided the full picture. Referring back to the analogy above, in efforts to “push down
the walls,” language education scholars may find a definition of science that includes
“critical and moral enterprise” more valuable to their studies (van Lier, 2004a, p. 6).
Since we study social affairs, we may reject the “rules” and “structures” associated with
traditional scientific endeavors in favor of interacting and interweaving “systems” and
“patterns.”

Researchers can either design new experimental procedures, methods, and
statistical tests, or they can approach classroom research in a different way (van Lier,
1988). Both options would likely yield useful results, but van Lier’s ecological approach
has yet to be confirmed or denied as a beneficial research agenda. Van Lier (2004a)
describes ecological educational linguistics as “a way of thinking about teaching and
learning in all its complexity, a way of looking at language as a tool of many uses and as
a key component of all human meaning-making activity” (p. 224). His approach uses a
language-as-relations orientation to better understand relationships between the student
and the environment (physical, social, and symbolic) that create opportunities for action or that inhibit action (p. 4). Language in this approach is seen as meaning-making activity and as several elements combining together in a form fundamentally different than its parts.

I conducted the study at a small Midwestern liberal arts college. Two months prior to the start of the term, requests to participate in the study were sent via email to the 11 faculty members teaching a college-level beginner or intermediate modern language class. I received six responses, and four of the six accepted the request to participate in the study. The four classrooms I observed were in their second semester of a two-part course. The courses were a beginning Arabic course, a beginning Chinese (Mandarin) course, an advanced intermediate Spanish course, and an advanced intermediate French course. I collected data from the following four sources: classroom observations, teachers via interview, syllabi, and textbooks.

**Teacher and Student Interactions: Classroom Observations**

The classroom is filled with complex interactions between and among students, teachers, physical space, and classroom materials. To quote Dewey (2012a), “all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative” (p. 230). Communication cannot take place without verbal and/or nonverbal language, and any form of communication influences the individuals involved. Concerning today’s formal education, classrooms cannot function without language (van Lier, 2004a). An ecological perspective can apply to any course subject, but since language education is the focus here, I will limit the discussion to that form of study.

An ecological perspective puts context at the center of any study; context and language define one another. To study context, a researcher must also study space
(physical, social, and symbolic parameters) and time (relationships between the past, present, and future) (van Lier, 2004a, p. 193). The classroom is not a discrete system unaffected by any other systems (van Lier, 2004a), boundaries need to be determined to focus the study. It is impossible to capture every interaction at once. Thus, I focused on teacher and student interactions with classroom materials, paying particular attention to interactions with the textbook.

To conduct a micro-ethnographic study, I gathered data in the classroom by watching and recording, as Erickson (1981b, as cited in van Lier, 1988) recommended. As a non-participant observer, I took field notes on the actions that I observed in the classroom. At the same time, I audio recorded each class period and transcribed the recordings to supplement my notes with the classroom discourse. Native Arabic and Spanish speakers transcribed and translated the Spanish and Arabic audio data. Having already taken the French and Chinese courses in previous semesters, I personally transcribed the French and Chinese audio.

I conducted classroom observations in each course for three 50-minute periods. The first observations took place the first three weeks of the semester, the second toward the middle of the semester, and the third within the last three weeks of the semester.

**Interconnected Ecosystems: Interviews and Course Materials**

In adopting the language-as-relations orientation, an ecological perspective considers language as the educative vehicle. In a language learning classroom, the language serves as the vehicle for and the destination of some conception of the TL. Language learning emerges from complex interactions and activities. Considering the classroom’s complexity means extending beyond cause/effect relationships. An ecological perspective instead aims to understand complex processes from a detailed
approach. If we add isolated details of a lesson together, we will not understand the whole picture. The analysis process avoids such reductionism by continuously connecting the details to the larger context (van Lier, 2004a). Interpretive, contextual research of this kind does not seek legitimacy in the form of numerical significance or generalizability; legitimate research concerning human activity means understanding complex systems (van Lier, 2004a).

Each participant in a classroom brings their own series of cultural and historical ecosystems, among other types. Rather than relying solely on my personal interpretations of teachers’ intentions in the classroom, I conducted interviews to give them opportunities to describe their personal experiences, goals, and intentions. Two 30-minute, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher. While classroom observations can help to understand what goes on in language classrooms, the interviews helped to explain why certain events may have occurred. The first interview was conducted at the start of the semester and the second toward the end of the semester. These interviews were also audio-recorded and transcribed to uphold accuracy. The data presented refers to them as “teachers” of their respective modern language to maintain confidentiality concerning their departmental titles.

I collected copies of each course’s syllabus and any updates made to the syllabus to compare prearranged plans to actual classroom activities and to prepare for classroom observations. Comparing the syllabi plans for lessons to actual classroom activities was an attempt to see if and how such plans might influence classroom interactions (Clark & Peterson, 1984). Table 2 provides a list of the course materials listed on the syllabi or used by students and teachers in the lessons observed.

Table 2.
An overview of the classroom materials used according to the syllabi and observations.
The textbook brings its own history. Its authors and developers’ ecosystems are in many ways reflected within its pages. Though their intentions may be defined to some extent in its pages, the people who use the textbook each approach it with an entirely different set of ecosystems. Since the textbook itself has a cultural, political, and historical ecosystem attached to it, the textbook content was examined to see if there was a relationship between the exercises presented and actual activities in the lessons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Textbook</th>
<th>Other classroom materials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Intermediate Spanish</td>
<td>Blanco y Colbert, Enfoques (3rd Edition) + Supersite</td>
<td>Moodle website with worksheets, links to songs, whiteboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Arabic</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Handouts made by the teacher, whiteboard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4: Textbook Usage in the Classroom Ecology

This chapter presents the results of the study and a discussion of the findings, answering the following research questions: First, how did teachers and students actually use textbooks in college-level modern language classrooms? Second, what is the textbook’s role in the classroom ecology? I expected to find a set of uniform roles that the textbook played in the classroom ecology, as Guerrettaz & Johnston (2013) had.

Teacher and Student Textbook Usage

Most of the teachers used textbooks in class for student activities, reference guides, and/or classroom discussion. However, the extent of its usage varied with each teacher. The variations had to do in part with teachers’ planning process and goals for the course. The Arabic teacher did not use the textbook in class. Since the book did not include vowels, she adapted textbook exercises that she gave to students as homework. The Spanish, French, and Chinese teachers began lessons without the textbook visible on the table in front of them; the Chinese teacher began every class period with the textbook open in front of her. Part of the reason for these variations may have had to do with the teachers’ plans to accomplish their course goals.

The French teacher reported that she wanted students to finish the course with “a love for learning French” and “a love for studying about cultures in which French is spoken.” To help students appreciate learning the language and studying Francophone cultures, she planned to put “the information in a cultural context” so that it would “have some real world implication or meaning” (French teacher, personal communication, Interview 1). Rather than sticking solely to textbook exercises, she created some of her own materials to engage students:

I create exercises where I use the students’ names so that they’re personally reflected in the material and try to find ways to [gage] them personally as I get to
know them and their interests, pull from that for discussion [to make] connections to things outside the class, as well as to things we’re learning (French teacher, personal communication, Interview 1).

In one lesson, the class began a new chapter in the book that contained workforce vocabulary and culture. The discussion started as follows:

Original Transcript:  
L’enseignante: Est-ce que vous travaillez?  

English Translation:  
Teacher: Do you work? I work. I’ve already had many work experiences in my life. I had the experience of teaching English in France when I spent a year in France, but that was an internship…

The teacher then described other positions she has held over the years. After she shared her work experiences, the students began asking for vocabulary to help them describe their jobs in the TL. Instead of going directly to the textbook content, the teacher and students began the lesson with their personal work experiences. When the students did not have the vocabulary needed for them to express their thoughts, they asked questions to facilitate communication. In turn, the French teacher asked follow-up questions to learn more about each of her students, which is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Classroom discussion about personal work experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Dialogue</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Étudiant 1: Comment est ce qu’on dit “part time job?”</td>
<td>Student 1: How do you say “part time job?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’enseignante: À temps partiel. Vous avez un travaille à temps partiel?</td>
<td>Teacher: À temps partiel. You have a part-time job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’enseignante: Trois?</td>
<td>Teacher: Three?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Étudiant 2: Trois?</td>
<td>Student 2: Three?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’enseignante: Vous avez trois postes à temps partiel?</td>
<td>Teacher: You have three part-time jobs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quelles sont les trois postes?</td>
<td>What are the positions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Étudiant 1: Day care.</td>
<td>Student 1: Daycare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Étudiant 1: Nursing home.</td>
<td>Others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’enseignante: Donc, aide. Vous êtes une aide.</td>
<td>Student 1: Nursing home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Étudiant 1: Et dans l’office.</td>
<td>Teacher: Assistant au bureau.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’enseignante: Assistant au bureau.</td>
<td>Student 1: And in the office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Étudiant 1: Oui.</td>
<td>Student 1: Yes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The teacher wrote the newly introduced vocabulary from the dialogue on the whiteboard, as Figure 2 illustrates.

Figure 2.

New vocabulary written on the whiteboard in the French lesson.

The French teacher explained her textbook as a gateway into some knowledge about Francophone cultures:

I tend to focus more on the culture and then insert the grammar into culture. I try to give cultural context to the exercises. And most of [the exercises] in the book are already culturally contextualized, so that’s not too difficult. But I look for a way into the topic and then introduce vocabulary and culture around the topic…It’s called the communicative approach (French teacher, personal communication, Interview 1).

These ideas manifested in the class period. After the students shared their own work experiences, the French teacher asked them to describe the image on the introductory page of the chapter, which led to a discussion about work culture.

The French and Spanish teachers used many supplemental materials in their lessons. The materials most prominently used were handouts the teachers created, YouTube videos, and the whiteboard/chalkboard. The Spanish teacher wanted students to take away “a solid grounding in the grammar” (Spanish teacher, personal communication, Interview 1). She planned to do this through the following means:

I do simple rote stuff like conjugating the verbs on the blackboard…and then
building up practice. I do some improvisations, which kind of force them into the kind of situations where they’ll have to use what I want them to use. And also, I have them writing compositions that are very much framed. Today, they handed in a composition today where they had to retell either a movie a story that they’ve worked on so that I can see, ‘Do they get verbal aspect? Do they know when to use the preterite? Do they know when to use the imperfect? (Spanish teacher, personal communication, Interview 1).

In the observations, she used the whiteboard and blackboard to not only conjugate verbs but also display sentences, vocabulary, and drawings. Figure 3 and Figure 4 show examples of vocabulary and drawings. As the class discussed conditional verb tenses, the Spanish teacher wrote examples on the board.

Figure 3.

Verb conjugations.

Figure 4.

Vocabulary and drawings.
While the French and Spanish teachers described materials they created themselves or those they could use in multiple lessons, the Chinese teacher credited the textbook and her knowledge of Chinese culture. When asked how she planned to accomplish her course goals, the Chinese teacher said, “I follow the structure of the textbook. We go through the dialogues and exercises from the textbook and workbook. I also incorporate…some elements of Chinese culture in the classroom” (Chinese teacher, personal communication, Interview 1).

In each lesson, Chinese teacher looked at her copy of the textbook at least once. When students completed dialogue exercises in the book, she walked around the room with the textbook in hand, listening in to conversations and answering any questions students had. Occasionally, she wrote vocabulary (characters and pinyin) on the blackboard while conversing with students. The vocabulary written was most often a word or phrase that the student(s) were unfamiliar with and that the textbook did not contain, which was similar to the French and Spanish teachers’ usage of the board. The Arabic teacher used the whiteboard to review vocabulary and grammar that students studied for homework or in past lessons.

The Spanish and Chinese teachers brought props to some lessons to supplement textbook exercises. In one observation, the Chinese teacher asked students to “go through the exercises” in the chapter they were currently studying. Students would then spend between ten to thirty minutes working in pairs or groups of three to complete the exercises. As they completed the exercises, students either filled in the blanks of predetermined sentences or used vocabulary in the chapter to ask and answer questions aloud. During one observation, students completed textbooks activities for the majority of the class period. However, the last twenty minutes were dedicated to skit performances. The Chinese teacher brought in artifacts (three blouses and multiple yen bills), and
students acted out scenes in which they used the textbook’s vocabulary to communicate with one another in Chinese as if they were shopping for clothes.

Most students in each course had the textbook out and open; however, only in three out of the twelve class periods I observed did the textbook heavily influence class dialogue. In the majority of observations, teachers and students would refer to part of the textbook as part of a larger discussion concerning culture, grammar, or vocabulary. With the exception of one observation of the French class, the Chinese course was the only one in which the textbook seemed to heavily influence classroom activity and dialogue. Overall, all four teachers supplemented textbook content with other classroom materials, including props, videos, and student input via discussion.

The Textbook’s Role in the Classroom Ecology

It is arguable that focusing on the textbook and the classroom environment is in itself a reductionist approach to research. However, an ecological approach to classroom-based research does not mean that every aspect of the participants’ lives and the research setting must be examined all at once. Every ecosystem, from the students’ backgrounds to the geolocation of the school and historical, political, social, and cultural events that take place outside of the classroom are worth studying. Reaching a full understanding of even one person’s behavior, however, would require an examination of every ecosystem across time and space that might have influenced that individual’s current ecosystems. To avoid taking on that enormous task, an ecological approach must have a focus point and boundaries.

The data from this study suggest that variability in textbook usage is driven by two factors, teachers’ pedagogical expertise and cultural backgrounds. In focusing on textbook usage and implementing the false boundary of the classroom, I aimed to take into account some aspects of the nested ecosystems at play. Starting at the classroom
level helped me better understand the nuanced interactions in that setting. Although I expected to be able to find uniform roles textbooks played in classroom ecologies, I instead found no distinct pattern. The textbook’s function differed in both lesson planning and pedagogical processes because of the diverse ecosystems that interact in the classroom environment.

The course of a lesson could be thought of as the logarithmic spiral depicted in Figure 5. In such a conception, the ever-growing spiral maps diverse events that may occur during the lesson. The horizontal line extending from the center of the spiral out toward the end represents the duration of a lesson. Given that each teacher and student brings to each class period different experiences, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and expectations, the course of a lesson spirals and expands into many pathways that are nearly unpredictable and complex. The spiral is logarithmic, however, because though the particular details of a lesson are unpredictable, some aspects of the classroom experience are predictable. Time constraints, curricular objectives, and teacher-student relationships tend to create expectations and impose loose boundaries on the events that take place. The solid lines in Figure denote those loose boundaries.
I expected, based on Guerrettaz and Johnston’s (2013) work, to find that the spiral begins with the textbook and that the classroom activities, discourse, and language learning expand from that material alone. Some common arguments against textbooks seem to suggest the same conception, as Hutchinson & Torres’ (1994) review of contemporary pedagogical views and the textbook’s role in those views indicates. However, such a neatly packaged explanation is not consistent with the results of the study. A lesson may begin with the class watching a Shakira music video, as one of the Spanish lessons did. It may begin with the textbook wide open on students’ desks as they scramble to review as much information as possible before their teacher tells them to close their books and begin a quiz, as took place in a Chinese lesson. In other cases, as happened in the French course, a class period may begin with students reciting a tongue twister. Where the lesson goes from there depends entirely on the subtle interactions of each person, each plan, each action and reaction.

Each of these fifty-minute courses described above began with vastly different
events and ended just as diversely. Given the varying ecosystems at play, the overlapping possibilities of a lesson are depicted in Figure 6. The usage of the textbook and other materials was too subtle and diverse in each minute, let alone hour, to determine discrete cause and effect relationships. I provide this conceptualization to illustrate that there was no uniform role, function, or duty that the textbook held. Each teacher and student brought their history, culture, and experiences to a textbook; simultaneously, the textbook brought the history, culture, and experiences of its creators to teachers and students. Teachers and students assigned roles, functions, and duties to the textbook. In lessons, this notion played out when teachers and students used the textbooks as a point of reference to guide conversations about their own experiences, culture, and histories.

Figure 6.

A lesson with diverse starting points, events, and end points

Language Learning and Pedagogical Backgrounds

Two factors that contributed to the diverse results were the teachers’ personal experiences learning languages and their pedagogical expertise. Both the Spanish and French teachers were U.S.-born and had taught undergraduate language learning courses

Comment [ID01]: Refer to earlier feedback suggesting the use of this or similar words to characterize your expectations.
for 28 and 45 years. When she was eight, the French teacher studied with a French woman who lived in her neighborhood. She also took an afterschool French program where she engaged in the vocabulary taught by presenting skits with the other students.

In high school, both teachers tutored the respective modern language they studied. In their modern language classes, they learned largely through traditional teaching approaches, which included rote memorization of dialogues and translation exercises. After graduation, the Spanish teacher taught second graders as an assistant in a reading lab, an experience she said she “loved” (Spanish teacher, personal communication). In graduate school, both teachers served as teaching assistants. The French teacher studied abroad and attended national seminars in a variety of Francophone countries, which likely contributed to her belief that “teaching language is teaching communication and hopefully enhancing understanding of other cultures” (French teacher, personal communication).

The Spanish teacher, when describing her rationale for asking students to memorize stanzas in songs they listened to in class, thought back to her own experiences:

When I first started learning Spanish, it was when they were starting out this approach where you would memorize long dialogues. People don’t do that too much anymore…But I still feel that it’s not a bad thing to have structures tucked into your brain that you don’t have to come up with…I’ll have them learn a couple of stanzas of a song if I like the grammar (Spanish teacher, personal communication).

The Arabic and Chinese teachers grew up speaking the language(s) they taught. With a degree in Biology, the Arabic teacher first taught undergraduate courses in natural science disciplines and began teaching college-level Arabic and French in 2005. Since she grew up speaking Arabic, French, and English, she described her pedagogy as “teaching [students] what I know.” She said that she enjoyed joking with students and
having fun in class to keep students interested in the conversations (Arabic teacher, personal communication).

The Chinese teacher grew up in China and began learning English when she was thirteen. She learned how to write English in classes but did not learn to speak until moving to the U.S. for graduate school. There, she studied Chinese linguistics, sociolinguistics, and modern teaching approaches. In graduate school, she cited her favorite class as Spoken English. “In the classroom, the teacher gave us simulated situations, and we’d try to act it out. I think I had a lot of fun doing that…that helped me choose the communicative approach later in life” (Chinese teacher, interpersonal communication). As described earlier, the Chinese teacher asked her students to engage in communicative dialogues. She brought in props in an effort to help students act out the scenarios.

Because each teacher went in with her own cultural, pedagogic, and language learning backgrounds, their personal ecosystems shaped the classroom ecosystem. The Chinese teacher, who studied applied linguistics extensively, implemented specific modern language teaching approaches most often. The Arabic teacher, who used to teach natural sciences, taught her mother languages in a less structured approach. The French teacher, who sought to help students bridge cultural gaps through language, tried to incorporate her students’ lives into the classroom in each lesson. Lastly, the Spanish teacher aimed to help students master the grammar necessary to help them in upper levels while also taking care to teach them current cultural features of Spanish-speaking societies.

The ecological perspective proposed by van Lier (1988, 2004a; 2004b) opened channels that likely would have been closed with a reductionist approach to the study. These channels allowed an emergent exploration of the classroom such that multiple
relationships among organisms and non-organisms were considered. Textbooks may be used in infinite ways depending on the context and user. Teachers and students did not use textbooks in one uniform way across the classrooms observed because every individual came to each class period with a history of dynamic, interacting ecosystems. The ecosystems each individual and group of individuals bring to a classroom setting make arguments that a textbook’s content directly influences classroom activities, dialogue, and language learning processes inapplicable to many contexts.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study aimed to determine how and why teachers and students used textbooks in college-level modern language classes. The classroom is a complex, dynamic environment that is often difficult to conceptualize and understand. Even though Western formal language education began over two millennia ago, scholars in the field have not made many large-scale efforts to understand the language classroom in its complexity. Instead, the search for one true language theory or teaching method preoccupied most scholars’ attention. Language education has often approached research through a reductionist lens. Attempts to reduce the complex phenomena language, language learning, and language teaching down to smaller input/output or cause/effect relationships only led to greater understanding of minuscule parts. Adding these parts together does not, however, give us the whole picture. Rather than continuing the processes previously used in the field to conduct research on the language classroom, I used van Lier’s (1988, 2004a, 2004b) ecological perspective. To avoid reducing complex systems down to discrete and isolated cause/effect relationships, I looked at the language classroom as a complex system.

This study brought to light some diverse possibilities of the roles textbooks play in classrooms. However, it used too small a sample to make definitive claims about textbook usage. With more data gathered from language classrooms, it will be easier to discover larger patterns about the classroom experience. Additionally, it will be beneficial to explore student backgrounds as well as teacher backgrounds and material development to reach a broader understanding of the interacting ecosystems in a particular context. While I touched on the teachers’ language learning and pedagogical backgrounds, future studies could explore teacher backgrounds in greater depth. Such studies would contribute to scholars’ understanding of the relationships between teachers’
use and teaching practices of the TL, their planning processes, and their usage of the textbook in class.

More critically, though, the results of these studies should be shared with the teachers themselves to encourage self-reflection. These results could help teachers reflect on their course goals and compare their intentions to their actual practices. As Prabhu (1992) points out, scholarly suggestions for methods and approaches, when given to current teachers, prescribe “new classroom routines” (p. 240). To reduce these outsider recommendations, teachers can continue creating and developing their own theories and practices based on their particular contexts. While researchers can help teachers understand how their classrooms function through ethnographic studies like this one, teachers can decide how to improve or build upon their own teaching styles. As shown in the results of this study, teachers and students are autonomous in their usage of materials.

If teachers continue to conduct action research, they may find it useful to use an ecological approach to make more constructive decision about their pedagogical aims and actions. Suggestions proposed by Dewey (2012b) and Freire (1996) to reconstruct teacher and student roles such that both groups learn from one another can promote the integration of both parties’ personal histories in lessons. Embracing each individual’s various ecosystems in the classroom can allow for more meaningful communication. Teachers and students may, in turn, step away from textbooks and other pre-made materials to form stronger connections between their personal experiences and the language learning process.

The ecological perspective is still in its early stages of modern language classroom-based research. Much more must be done to devise specific research agendas to inspire more contextualized classroom-based research. An ecological research approach can apply to many disciplines, including those that study in-class textbook
usage more often than the language education field. Over time, such an approach may provide insight into ways to bridge gaps between theory and practice.

Educational linguistics requires a field wide critical reflection if its members hope to break from the cyclical process of recommending, accepting, critiquing, and dismissing “new” proposals. The field will likely benefit from researching and integrating its own history into its current recommendations. Rather than continuing to look toward the future of the field, language scholars may avoid repeating prior recommendations by exploring predecessors’ artifacts. In doing so, scholars can more constructively develop goals that will lead to growth in all directions. Referring back to van Lier’s metaphor, scholars may end up pushing down the restrictive walls of traditional perspectives and research practices in favor of exploring other possibilities.
Appendix
Baseline Interview Questions

Section I: Attitudes, beliefs, experiences
1. Which language learning course are you teaching this semester?
2. Have you taught the course before?
3. How long have you been teaching at a college/university level?
4. Do you have other, prior teaching experiences? If so, what were they?
5. What do you want students to take away from the [course name] course?
6. How do you plan to accomplish this during the semester?
7. Describe your teaching philosophy for foreign language teaching if you have one.
8. How did you arrive at this teaching philosophy?
9. Explain a time last semester when you felt you taught a lesson particularly well.
10. Explain a time last semester that you wish you could have taught a lesson better.
11. How will this course help students learn [language]?
12. What is the best way for students to learn [language] at the College?

Section II: Materials
1. How did you design the syllabus for the course?
2. What materials do you plan to use in the classroom for this course?
3. How did you decide on those materials?
4. Describe if and how you used a textbook in a language learning class last semester.
5. Will you use textbooks in this class?
6. How did you decide to choose this/these textbook(s)? What made you decide not to use textbooks in the course?
   What do you like about the textbook you chose for the course? (if applicable)
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