

Textbook English: a corpus-based analysis of language use in German and French EFL textbooks

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Given that textbooks account for a considerable proportion of learners' foreign language input (Kim & Hall, 2002; Vellenga 2004), this PhD project aims to provide a linguistic description of the lexico-grammatical content of popular English textbooks used in secondary schools in France and Germany. This poster presents the methodology design and preliminary results.

Mindt's pioneering textbook corpus analysis work (e.g. 1987, 1992, 1995) compared the frequencies, functions and co-occurrences of future expressions found in German EFL textbooks with those from a reference corpus of spoken British English. Since, a number of textbook corpora studies following the Mindtian approach – comparing textbook corpora with “authentic” native corpora – have emerged. So far, these have largely focussed on specific grammatical aspects, such as the use of the present perfect (Schlüter, 2002), progressive forms (Römer, 2005), if-sentences (Römer, 2004a; Gabrielatos, 2006), reported speech (Barbieri & Eckhardt, 2007) and constructions typical of spoken grammar (Cullen & Kuo, 2007). These studies reveal considerable discrepancies between “authentic and natural” reference corpora and the language presented in textbooks. However, to the author's best knowledge, no attempt has yet been made to provide a general lexico-grammatical description of textbook English, nor have EFL textbooks targeted at the same level, but designed for use in different countries been compared before.

Thus, this study's first aim is to draw up a general description of the lexico-grammatical content of textbook English following the bottom-up corpus analysis approach advocated, among others, by Biber (1998), Biber & Gray (2015) and Carter & McCarthy (2006). The analysis will include both grammatical features explicitly taught in the examined textbooks such as the use of adjectives, adverbs and verb forms, as well as aspects that are almost exclusively presented in an implicit manner, such as the use of prepositions, collocations and colligations.

The textbook corpus consists of all the texts included in six full series of secondary school EFL textbooks which have been annotated to enable comparisons between text genres, learner level and learner L1. The native reference corpus is subdivided into a number of sub-corpora which reflect the different types of texts featured in textbooks (e.g. conversational language, informational texts and fiction). Comparing the lexico-grammatical content of the textbook corpus and its sub-corpora with the relevant native reference sub-corpora will enable quantitative and qualitative comparisons of the main differences between “the kind of synthetic English that pupils are often confronted with in the classroom” (Römer, 2004, p. 185) and the reference corpus. Furthermore, the degree of authenticity of both the textbooks series and the curricula and pedagogical approaches applied in the countries of the textbooks investigated will be compared.

Preliminary results arise from a comparison of the frequency of occurrence of linguistic features typical of conversations in both the spoken textbook sub-corpus and the spoken British English reference sub-corpus. Major differences are illustrated with examples from both sub-corpora.

It is hoped that pointing to such substantial discrepancies between textbook English and naturally occurring English can contribute to improving the relevance and efficiency of the pedagogic texts presented in EFL textbooks.

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