

# Literacy Based Textbook Selection

## Criteria for Evaluating High School Spanish Textbooks

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## **Textbook Selection**

Textbook selection is always a difficult process. Wading through all of the different options that are available, weighing the pros and cons of each text and getting a committee to agree on a single text is a grueling process. Defining the specific criteria that the selected text should possess before beginning the adoption process is one way to narrow the options and increase the possibility of selecting a text that will meet the needs of the classroom. Too often, textbook selection is made on the basis of perks offered by the distributors, such as LCD projectors or laptops for teachers. Keeping very specific goals in mind while selecting a text can help a committee maintain focus.

One goal that should play a role in textbook adoption is selecting a text that promotes student literacy. Choosing instructional materials that promote literacy should be a priority in any classroom, but carries special significance in a foreign language classroom where language is the main focus. We want to not only promote literacy in the second language, but also teach the students skills that can be carried over into other areas. Literacy will affect students in every area of their lives and should be promoted across the curriculum. Every instructor that the student has carries the responsibility of exposing students to a variety of texts and creating instruction that increases literacy, not just English teachers. If all instructors work together to choose activities and texts that provide optimal opportunities for building literacy, we will be more likely to produce students who leave our schools enabled to lead satisfying and productive lives in our increasingly complex society.

A teacher who is aware of the importance of promoting literacy can certainly tweak and supplement any textbook to meet the literacy goals of his or her classroom, but

teacher planning time is very limited. Teachers are not just responsible for instructing students. Extra time is taken up with bookkeeping, parent conferences, meetings and routine interruptions such as assemblies and emergency drills. Teachers are expected to work in “extras” such as incorporating technology, National Weather Awareness Week and character education, just to name a few. It can be overwhelming just to cover the required material, let alone to try and incorporate yet another dimension such as making sure that each lesson promotes literacy. Having a textbook that already incorporates activities that help improve literacy and material to help teachers cover the appropriate material will save time for the teacher and better ensure that literacy and other goals are met in the classroom.

Below, I will discuss criteria that should be considered when adopting a textbook for the foreign language classroom and provide a textbook evaluation worksheet as a tool for literacy based textbook selection.

## Criteria

### **1. Text should include components that help build phonemic awareness.**

Awareness of sound and the manipulation of those sounds is critical in foreign language learning. Hearing the sound distinctions in a second language can be a challenge. The National Reading Panel Report states that instruction in phonemic awareness before instruction in phonics can actually help students to better grasp their phonics instruction (NRP, 1999, p. 7). The National Reading Panel focused on the young learner beginning to read in his native tongue, but many of these components could potentially carry over to the older learner beginning to read a second language. Since the NRP did report that older children benefited the least from this type of instruction, this goal may not be quite as important as others on our list. However, making sure that the target textbook helps to foster phonemic awareness can do nothing but help our students. We should be sure that the text includes activities that help students differentiate among the critical sound distinctions of the Spanish language (NRP, 1999).

### **2. Text should include some phonics instruction in the second language.**

Since Spanish is a phonetically perfect language, phonics instruction early on in the learning process should all but eliminate major spelling errors and facilitate accurate pronunciation while reading aloud. The NRP report suggests that phonics is an area where the learner catches on rather quickly (NRP, 1999, p. 13), and since high school students will have already been exposed to this type of instruction early on in their educational careers, it stands to reason that the time span of phonics instruction in the second language need not be dragged out for a lengthy period of time. The report also suggests that phonics instruction only increases reading comprehension when the word that is to be decoded is already a part of the student's oral vocabulary. However, Spanish language instruction is a special case. Phonics instruction will help students to be able to perfectly and automatically pronounce new written words (NRP, 1999).

### **3. Text should promote oral reading fluency.**

The NRP report suggests that instruction in oral reading fluency indeed improves reading (NRP, 1999, p. 19). The text should include activities with oral reading instruction built in, possibly in the form of audio materials or a manual from which the teacher might read. The text might include some activities for pair reading. Dialogs are especially beneficial for a foreign language class.

### **4. Textbook should contain activities which build vocabulary.**

Vocabulary instruction is even more important in a foreign language classroom than in the traditional classroom. Beginning Spanish Students start out at ground zero when it comes to vocabulary. The National Reading Panel suggests that vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly. New vocabulary words should be repeated in a variety of contexts and include activities which require thought on the part of the student. Activities should not be able to be performed automatically, but any drill must be meaningful (NRP, 1999).

**5. Textbook should help increase student reading comprehension.**

The NRP Report suggests that a variety of instructional models can help students increase reading comprehension skills (NRP, 1999, p. 31). Furthermore, these skills can carry over into other situations. Textbook should include a variety of text types and research-based strategies that transfer the learning responsibility from the instructor to the student. Strategies to look for in the target text might include summarization, question asking, story mapping, monitoring and graphic organizers (NRP, 1999).

**6. Textbook should include materials or information which might make the lesson personal, spark student interest, increase motivation and make them likely to continue to read and seek information outside of the classroom.**

Personalization is an important factor for students. When the material is personalized, the student is more likely to retain the information and motivation is increased. Teenagers, in general, also tend to be somewhat egocentric. If the lesson focuses on the student personally, student response to the lesson will increase. Increasing motivation also encourages students to become lifelong learners (Omaggio, 2001, ch. 2).

**7. Grammar must be practiced through meaningful communication.**

Like with vocabulary practice, grammar practice should be meaningful. Students should have to attend to meaning as well as form. Diane Birckbichler, in Classroom Materials for Second-Language Proficiency (2001), says that research suggest that “increased language proficiency is closely related to meaningful or communicative language use”. We should look over textbooks that offer only grammar exercises that allow students to complete them automatically without understanding the sentences (Birckbichler, 2001).

**8. Text will promote cultural awareness.**

Language is almost impossible to separate from culture. Certain words and expressions are culture bound. Also, the main goal of a foreign language class is to prepare students to interact in another cultural environment. Learning the language is, of course, of paramount importance, but just learning the language is useless without knowing something of the culture. American students must learn how to move from a low-context culture such as ours to a high-context culture such as Spain, where every gesture is culturally loaded (Seelye, 1993).

**9. Texts and graphics are culturally authentic and texts teach culture both implicitly and explicitly.**

To help students to absorb the culture as well as the language, texts and graphics should be culturally authentic. This helps students to filter new information through a culturally appropriate schema. Take, for instance, the word “milk”. Milk in Spain comes in a box, is kept on a shelf and is served at room temperature. Here in the U.S., milk comes most often in a plastic container and is kept chilled. The Spanish textbook should not feature an American carton of milk with the word “leche” beside it, but instead should feature a graphic with a Spanish box of milk. This links culturally authentic imagery to the word as well as opening up the classroom for cultural discussion. Why is our milk different from theirs? Does it have to do with climate, with the economy? When do we most often drink milk here? There? With which meals? Is it a common beverage or is it mostly used in

cooking? With culturally authentic texts and images, culture is absorbed almost effortlessly by the student. The teacher does not have to only teach culture separately from the language. There may be some points where culture is taught explicitly, but this does not replace implicit cultural instruction (Seelye, 1993; Birckbichler, 2001).

**10. Text will connect language to other subject areas.**

Teachers are encouraged to teach across the curriculum. One way to do this is through the use of thematic units. Looking for a text that is set up thematically will help not only to develop schemata for the appropriate vocabulary but will also provide ample opportunity for the connection to other subject areas and to real world situations (Meinbach, Fredericks & Rothlein 2000).

**11. Does the textbook have activities that help a student increase all skill types from reading and writing to speaking and listening?**

Whether or not the book is based on holistic principles, the textbook should allow a student to work on each skill. Spoken communication might be the most important ultimate goal of a foreign language class, but written communication is also important. Standards require that students be proficient in each of these skills (Omaggio, 2001, ch. 1).

**12. Layout and sequence makes sense.**

It is important that the layout and sequence of the textbook makes sense. Preferably, reading activities will follow the model of pre-reading, guided interaction, synthesis and personalization. Grammar activities will hopefully begin with quality input, have some focused practice and then output. In selecting themes, the most useful, relevant themes possible are selected (Lee & VanPatten, 2003).

**13. Textbook is visually appealing.**

In addition to culturally authentic graphics, the textbook should be visually appealing to inspire interest.

**14. Instructions and activities are clear and have a distinct purpose.**

There are no mechanical or pointless activities. Each activity is clear and easy to follow. Instructions are not confusing. Any activity assigned as homework will not generate confusion for the student .

**Textbook Evaluation Worksheet**

Name of textbook: \_\_\_\_\_

15. Text should include components that help build phonemic awareness.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

16. Text should include some phonics instruction.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

17. Text should promote oral reading fluency.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

18. Textbook should contain activities which build vocabulary.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

19. Textbook should help increase student reading comprehension.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

20. Textbook should include materials or information which might make the lesson personal, spark student interest, increase motivation and make them likely to continue to read and seek information outside of the classroom.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

21. Grammar must be practiced through meaningful communication.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

22. Text will promote cultural awareness.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

23. Texts and graphics are culturally authentic and texts teach culture both implicitly and explicitly.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

24. Text will connect language to other subject areas.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

25. Does the textbook have activities that help a student increase all skill types from reading and writing to speaking and listening?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

26. Layout and sequence makes sense.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

27. Textbook is visually appealing.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

28. Instructions and activities are clear and have a distinct purpose.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

additional

notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Subtotal of points out of 140: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional points awarded or taken away for items not listed in criteria: \_\_\_\_\_

Explanation of additional

points: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL POINTS AWARDED: \_\_\_\_\_

## References

Birckbichler, Diane W. *Classroom Materials for Second-Language Proficiency*. Theory Into Practice, Autumn 87, Vol. 26, Issue 4, 294-297.

This text discusses the quality of current foreign language textbooks and how current language research and attitudes toward language learning may affect textbook evaluation. Trends such as cultural and global perspectives, communicative focus, and a focus on basic skill development are discussed. Birckbichler provides some criteria that should be considered during textbook selection.

Lee, James F & VanPetten, Bill. (2003). *Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen*. Second Edition. New York: McGraw Hill.

This text identifies some road blocks on the way to successful communicative language teaching and how to overcome them. Input-output theory is discussed and activities and techniques for maximizing student performance are suggested. Evaluation of different skills is also discussed.

Meinbach, A., Fredericks, A., & Rothlein, L. (2000). *The Complete Guide to Thematic Units: Creating the Integrated Curriculum*. Second Edition. Massachusetts: English Clearinghouse.

This text provides solutions for intergrating literature into every part of the curriculum through the use of thematic units. Suggestions are provided on how to design activities appropriate for multiple intelligences plus all of the extras that today's educators are asked to incorporate. This text also provides ideas for assessment.

National Reading Panel. (1999). *The National Reading Panel Progress Report*. (BBB35631). Bethesda, MD: English Clearinghouse.

The National Reading Panel was established at the request of government to research methodology related to literacy and early reading skills. This report outlines effective, research based techniques to promote literacy in our schools.

Omaggio Hadley, Alice. (2001). *Teaching Language in Context*. Third Edition. Boston, MA: Heinle&Heinle.

This text discusses the intricacies of communicative competence, proficiency and how they relate to the National Standards. Theory and methodology is discussed and research-based activities promoting language proficiency are outlined. Practical guidelines for planning instruction are provided.