Handbook for Beginning Level Spanish Classes

Cecilia Silva 1)*

1) Center for the Advancement of Higher Education, Tohoku University.

Abstract
The focus of this article is on the need for the production of didactic materials for Spanish language classes. In the first part of this article, the author refers to role that textbooks play in the classroom, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of using them. A summary of the limitations experienced with a variety of texts is also provided. In the second part, the author proposes a structure for a handbook for use with beginner students of Spanish as a Second Foreign Language at Tohoku University.

Introduction
The purpose of the present article is to examine the rationale and the criteria for writing a handbook for beginning level Spanish classes for students of Tohoku University, to propose a structure for it, and to suggest appropriate content. Unlike other Spanish textbooks published in Japan, which deal either with grammar practice or with activities for oral practice, the intended Spanish handbook will contain:

a) A combination of communicative activities and grammar practice
b) Grammar practice adapted to the topic of the unit and visually easy to read
c) Vocabulary enlargement in accordance with the topic of the unit

This article is divided in two parts. In the first part the role of textbooks is examined, and their advantages and disadvantages, along with their selection criteria, are discussed. Also, the limitations of commercially available books published in Japan are presented, and their unsuitability for the students of this university is explained. In an attempt to address these flaws, the second part of this article explains the requirements for a Spanish handbook, and suggests a structure for it and ideas for its contents.

With regard to terminology, Cunningworth (1984, 1995) uses the term “coursebook” and Richards (n.d.) uses the term “textbook” to refer to the books used in the class as part of the teaching materials. The term “handbook: a concise reference book covering a particular subject” is presented as a synonym of “textbook: a book used in the study of a subject” (n.d., para. 1). The author of this article uses the word “handbook” to refer to written material not designed for publication, with brief explanations, and a great deal of practice and communicative tasks to be used by students in workshop-like classes of Spanish as a second foreign language at the beginning level.

*) Contact : Center for the Advancement of Higher Education, Tohoku University, 41 Kawauchi, Aobaku, Sendai 980-8576, Japan ceci@he.tohoku.ac.jp
The intended handbook aims to be a first test adapted to the circumstances and needs of the students at Tohoku University. Therefore, the amount of material and its level and gradation will depend largely on the frequency of classes at this university. Besides, some of the content, for example Unit 6 ("My city and my university"), contains references to the campus of Tohoku University and to the city of Sendai. Nevertheless, not only the topics but also the tasks can be used at other schools with beginning students. Moreover, the basic ideas considered for writing the handbook and stated in this article is consistent with a communicative vision of the language class, where learning takes place between teacher and students and also among students, thus the intention to design classes more characteristic of workshops. As such, the ideas put forward in this paper can be useful for other language educators aiming at achieving truly communicative classes.

Part I. Textbooks: Their role, their advantages and disadvantages, and how to select them

The textbook as a tool

In language teaching and learning, while the textbook is one of the most important material resources, it is, of course, not the only one. Coursebooks can serve as a resource for presentation material, a source of activities, a reference for grammar and vocabulary, a resource for self-directed learning, and also a support for less experienced teachers (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.7). The teaching process does not need to depend entirely on a coursebook. In fact, the textbook should function as a group of suggestions that teachers will adapt to the group of learners. Cunningsworth (1984) maintains that the coursebook comes after the teacher has established and defined the objectives for the course. Namely, once the objectives have been set in terms of what the students should be able to do with the target language, and also in terms of the structures and vocabulary and whatever other elements are necessary, the teacher seeks teaching materials which will play a positive role in achieving these objectives.

The coursebook: its advantages and disadvantages

Richards (n.d.) indicates a group of advantages and limitations of textbooks that vary depending on how such textbooks are used in the class.

The principal advantages can be summarized as follows:

1. Textbooks provide structure and a syllabus for a program, and help students to develop a general vision of a systematically planned syllabus.
2. Textbooks help standardize instruction. The use of a textbook in different classes can ensure that students receive the same content and can be evaluated in the same way. However, each teacher will stress certain lessons or certain points in a lesson depending on his/her personal vision of teaching.
3. If the textbook has been well developed, students will be exposed to materials that have already been tested.
4. Textbooks normally contain CDs, videos and workbooks that provide good variety.
5. Textbooks can save teachers’ time so they can devote time to lesson planning and teaching instead of the time-taking task of developing materials.
6. Textbooks can provide effective language models and input.
7. Textbooks can train teachers. If a teacher has limited experience, the textbook (along with the teacher’s manual) can serve the purpose of teacher training in that it offers a planned syllabus with many well tested activities.
8. Commercial textbooks are normally colorful and very well designed. However, Richards (n.d.) also points to several disadvantages, including the following:

1. Textbooks tend to contain inauthentic language. Since the texts and dialogues found in textbooks are designed to present teaching points, in many cases they are somewhat artificial and are not actually representative of real language use.

2. Textbooks may not reflect students’ needs. Textbooks are written for a global market and need to be adapted to the special needs and interests of particular “local” groups.

3. Textbooks can deskill teachers. If a teacher fails to adapt the textbook to the group and does not add complementary material, choosing instead to stick to the textbook even though not all the content is appropriate to the group, then the teacher’s role is reduced to that of technician whose function is to present materials prepared by others.

4. Commercial textbooks are sometimes expensive. Harmer (1991) raises attention to the structure of textbooks. Since textbooks tend to follow the same format in all the units, it is easy for both teachers and students to familiarize themselves with the learning framework presented. However, a rigid sequence is not adequate for all topics: some units should start with the new vocabulary, some should start with the new grammar points, and others should start simply by illustrating the link between previous knowledge and the information in the new unit.

Evaluating and selecting a coursebook

The coursebook is one of the stages in the design of a language course. García Santa-Cecilia (2000, pp.11-28) defines “design” as the set of decisions in the process of developing a course, and separates course design into the following stages:

a. Analysis of needs: students’ needs and interests and characteristics of the institution

b. Objectives of the course
c. Selection and grading of contents
d. Selection and grading of activities and materials
e. Definition of methods for evaluation

The decisions related to the coursebook are made when deciding how to select and grade activities and materials. With regard to the texts, the teacher has to decide whether to use a commercially available book on its own or in combination with his/her own ideas and activities, or a handbook made for that particular class.

When evaluating the materials to use in class, the following considerations need to be addressed (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986, pp. 29-30 in Cortés Moreno, 2000, p. 157):

- The materials are appropriate for what level of student?
- Were the materials made specifically for students of a determined mother tongue?
- Are the materials appropriate for general language learning or for a specific purpose (for example, Business English, Spanish for Tourism).
- Which skills are included in the materials?
- What is the degree of authenticity of the materials?
- Are the materials appropriate for the learners’ age?
- Are the materials compatible with the teaching approach of the teacher?
- Are the materials appropriate for the diversity in the learning group? (different interests, varying levels of intelligence)

All teachers realize that no commercial textbook will ever be a perfect fit for any particular group. Harmer (1991) points to two factors involved in the production of commercial books. One of them is the author’s effort to make a book that teachers find innovative and is well-suited to the students. The other is that the publishers are motivated by
financial success. The bottom line is, though, that no matter how carefully a textbook is analyzed, it is impossible to make a fair judgement of it without actually using it in the classroom. It is well-understood, however, that commercial textbooks can rarely be used without adapting them in one way or another to make them more suitable to the particular context of the learning group.

Spanish textbooks published in Japan

Most of the textbooks published in Japan are intended either for grammar study in classes taught by a Japanese teacher, or for communication in classes taught by a Spanish-speaking teacher (Escandon Godoy, 2011). When one teacher has to teach both aspects, such books need to be complemented with extra material.

To date, the author of the present work has used several commercially available textbooks in the classroom and has encountered the following flaws:

a. Lack of coherence in the order of topics.
b. Mixed exercises (containing vocabulary that has no relation with the main topic) and multiple grammar points within one unit.
c. Lack of a good combination of grammar (controlled practice) and communicative activities (semi-controlled and free activities). Textbooks tend to address either one or the other.
d. Outdated references.
e. Lack of authenticity.
f. No consideration of the multiple intelligences theory or diverse learning styles.
g. Lack of listening activities.
h. Inappropriate progression, normally too fast and containing an excessive amount of content, which makes it necessary to choose the grammar points and exercises (this can be confusing for the learners).
i. Lack of vocabulary related to the topic of the unit that could be used for grammar and communication practice.

In an attempt to address these flaws and make material which reflects the situation and context of the students and is adapted for the students of Spanish of a Second Foreign Language of Tohoku University, the decision was made to issue a handbook.

Part II. Handbook for Spanish Classes

Criteria for a Spanish handbook

It has to be acknowledged that a coursebook solves most of the needs with regard to material and organization of the material. However, since there is no textbook written for our particular classes and each class is unique, teachers either have to adapt a commercial textbook or make his/her own material. Therefore, the author hereby proposes the criteria and the structure for a handbook to be used in beginner level Spanish classes. The basic principal of the handbook is to aim for a balance between grammar practice (for the sake of accuracy at the time of using the language) and communication practice (for the sake of developing the ability to use the language and feel a sense of achievement).

The following criteria need to be considered:

1. Learners come from several courses and take Spanish as a second foreign language. Since classes meet twice a week, the amount of content and the expectations of progress should be realistic and suitable for that frequency. This aspect leads us to the concepts of grading and recycling. Cunningsworth (1984, p.25) defines grading as “the speed with which the student progresses, how much material is introduced in a given number of hours, how close together or how far apart new grammatical structures are in relation to each other, how much new vocabulary is introduced in each unit and so on.” What is important at this point is the amount of practice material between two new things and the way
they are linked. Any given topic or new vocabulary item is presented and practiced more than once in a variety of contexts, uses and situations, in order to provide the learner with insight into how to use the target language. This consolidation is called recycling, which is intrinsically related to the way of course progression, linearly or cyclically (Cunningsworth, 1984, pp. 22-30). A course with linear progression deals with each topic exhaustively before passing to the next one. In a course with cyclical progression, the teacher moves quickly from one language item to the other and then returns to it two or more times during the course.

2. Teaching materials should contain an attractive appearance and a variety of activities and include an element of problem solving. Cunningsworth (1984, pp. 59-63) suggests that the material should contain something that the learners want to learn about or something that they can involve themselves in, apart from the language itself. Regarding teaching materials, Stevick (1980, in Cunningworth, 1984, p. 60) suggests the following criteria for personal involvement of learner in the process of learning languages: it should contain something for the emotions and not only for the intellect, provide occasion for students to interact and commit themselves to choices, and allow learners to draw on present realities. Besides, the author of this work considers that teaching materials should address aspects close to the age range of the students and also to the geographical elements close to the setting of the student. Therefore, the intended handbook will contain local references, not only from Japan in general but also and particularly, reference to Sendai city, Tohoku University campus, etc.

3. The classroom work proposed in the handbook will aim to emphasize peer collaboration and interaction in order to promote the exchange in terms of meaning and not just the oral practice of forms (Gelabert, Bueso & Benitez, 2002, p. 8). Therefore, it will contain tasks for working in pairs or in groups so as to use the language in a meaningful way, convey meaning, and achieve an outcome (Willis, 2004, pp. 23-37).

Structure and contents for a Handbook for Spanish Classes

The intended handbook is divided into two parts: the first part contains topics related to giving and asking for personal information, and the second part focuses on practicing the main verbs tenses (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First part (first semester)</th>
<th>Second part (second semester)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. My house. My bedroom. Describing rooms. Verbs &quot;there is&quot;, &quot;there are&quot; and &quot;to be&quot; to express placement.</td>
<td>11. Past events (2). &quot;Used to&quot; to talk about events in childhood, and make descriptions in the past.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. My city. My university. Vocabulary related to the city and to the university (station, bus stop, faculties, etc.). Verbs &quot;there is&quot;, &quot;there are&quot; and &quot;to be&quot; to express placement.</td>
<td>12. Experiences. Present perfect to describe experiences in the past.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As regards the structure, each unit of the handbook will aim to keep a balance between the communicative or functional approach, in which language is considered a medium of communication among people, the structural perspective, in which language is seen as a system of grammar and vocabulary, and the skills perspective, where the emphasis is put on the four skills of listening, reading (receptive skills), writing and speaking (productive skills).

With regard to language form and language use in a coursebook, it is generally necessary to analyze language and divide it into small units to make it appropriate for teaching. However, since language is a very complex phenomenon which works at several levels simultaneously, it is difficult to separate and isolate individual aspects of language from the whole without losing authenticity. This is one of the most difficult challenges in language teaching and in designing materials. Since students, and particularly beginners, cannot be expected to handle several different aspects of language at the same time, it is necessary to reduce the learning load to suitable units and focus on different aspects separately. The questions of which language to select, and how to isolate and combine language pieces without losing naturalness are central to lesson planning, but are especially important considerations when analyzing and breaking down language for teaching purposes in the process of designing materials (Cunningsworth, 1995, pp.33-53).

Each unit will introduce one topic and will contain the following parts to develop and support it (Figure 1):

1. Grammar introduction and practice. Grammar is a component of any general language course and one of the first considerations should be what grammar items to include and how deeply they are to be treated. This part shows “how the new language is formed, how the grammar works and how it is put together” (Harmer, 1991, p.58) and includes a brief explanation in Japanese and a presentation of models. In other words, we aim to present the form and the use in context of each language aspect. This stage is immediately followed by a practice stage with a number of controlled and semi-controlled exercises, and production, where the students are helped to use the language in uncontrolled activities designed to emulate those in real life. The author of the present work adheres to the perspective that since grammatical competence is a necessary element for communicative competence, the explicit teaching of grammar is necessary. Therefore, this handbook will include activities that combine the use of linguistic structures and the meaningful use of the language (Gelabert, Bueso & Benítez, 2002, p.69).

![Figure 1. Structure of the Handbook for Spanish classes](image-url)
This combination is more than mere mechanical practice, and, as such, the students may have questions and will invariably make mistakes.

2. Vocabulary. Coursebooks should not only teach as many words as possible but also equip students with strategies for handling unfamiliar vocabulary when they come across it. This means that instead of providing students with wordlists and dictionary definitions on their own, they should be given exercises that allow them to become acquainted with the meaning of the words and their contexts. Some activities for developing vocabulary could be based on semantic relations (word groups according to meaning), situational relationships (word sets associated with particular situations), and collocations (words commonly found in association) (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.38). To provide the students with an active vocabulary, it is necessary to set an objective, define the scope of the situation, and activate the students’ previous knowledge to provide a framework for the new information they are working with. Vocabulary activities will be included mainly in listening and reading tasks.

3. Communication practice. In most coursebooks, speaking takes place during the oral presentation and practice of new language items and in several activities varying between controlled and non-controlled. This part includes communicative activities: pair interaction (controlled), pair dialogue (semi-controlled), individual and group activities. In particular, the controlled pair interaction activity ensures that all students have the opportunity to speak, even in a large group, and that those students who are reluctant to speak in front of everybody also can speak. This kind of interaction is an excellent link between grammar practice and free dialogues since it ensures that students practice the structures and the vocabulary that they need. For a smooth practice, it is necessary that students know all the vocabulary and the structures that they will use (Vargas, 2009, p.1).

The content of oral practice activities should be suitable for beginners and should be confined to very concrete topics, such as the school, the family, friends, and the city.

4. Listening practice. The main way coursebooks handle listening is by means of recorded listening passages for comprehension, for the extraction of information, and as a lead-in for discussion. Fundamental to the development of listening ability are the pre-listening activities which focus learners’ attention to the topic of the passage, give purpose to the activity, allow an element of prediction, and make the passage more accessible by placing it in a context (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.67). Listening practice includes activities with songs and video-clips made for practicing the grammar structures of the main topic and enlarging the vocabulary. The video-clips also serve the purpose of providing students with a model for oral and written communication and also provide a glimpse of various speech phenomena (hesitation, redundancy, etc.) and colloquial expressions. The use of video-clips specifically made for the class (speeches and dialogues by people from several Spanish speaking countries) provides learners with authentic and spontaneous language and also provides a sense of regional varieties. This is an important issue since those video-clips will not only reflect the students’ reality (level, target topic, interests) but will also reproduce, as much as possible, the authentic use of the Spanish language (Gelabert, Bueso & Benítez, 2002, p.12).

5. Reading. Coursebooks include reading texts for several purposes: developing reading skills,
presenting or recycling grammar items, extending vocabulary, providing models for writing, providing information of interest to students, providing content for oral work (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.73). The reading passages should be as authentic as possible considering the level, and they must be accompanied by purposeful activities. This part includes short texts (either real text or text prepared by the author) where the learners can see the usage of the new language and also enlarge the vocabulary related to the main topic. The activities proposed in this part include reading to confirm expectations, reading to extract specific information, reading for communicative tasks, reading for general understanding, and reading for detailed comprehension (Harmer, 1991, p.191).

6. Writing. The practice of this skill gives learners a feeling of achievement, from writing one word to one paragraph, and is less stressful than speaking. Writing tasks in coursebooks can be very varied, ranging from controlled to non-controlled activities depending on the students’ level. As well as teaching the mechanics of writing at the sentence level, material should also include activities that familiarize learners with text organization and text development (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.80). It is important to consider not only individual writing activities as homework for summarizing or focusing on the topic of study, but also classroom writing within the frame of collaborative activities (Cassany, 2004). Moreover, it is important to think of activities that allow learners not only to practice grammar structures but also to express more subjective, deeper, imaginative ideas.

7. Culture and entertainment. Since language is intrinsically bound up with culture, references to specific cultural settings make the material meaningful by providing it with a context. In this part, films and literature, for example, may be used to take advantage of the opportunity they can provide in the context of certain topics as culturally interesting, and culturally relevant, resources. Likewise, the students’ culture will also be considered in classroom activities since it supports “the creation of specific conditions that foster the creation of communities of learners who are mindful of and actively engaged in their own learning” (Moll, 1990, in Hall, 2000, p.142). Using the students’ culture for practicing the target language “provides opportunities for students to create shared bases of knowledge about different areas of interest” (Hall, 2000, p.142).

Figure 2 shows one part of Unit 2, where students practice numbers with new vocabulary (telephone, telephone number, students register, and e-mail and also terms related to e-mail). Regarding grammar, students revise the third person of the “to be” verb, and study possessive adjectives. Besides, learners revise the basic structure of a sentence in Spanish, Subject/Verb/Object. Then, they carry out a controlled oral interaction: ask three peers for their name, their student number, cell phone number, and e-mail address.

Conclusion

With regard to language teaching, the intended handbook has two language bases: building a grammar base and building a vocabulary base. The progress in these two aspects will be achieved by means of activities that allow the practice of the four language skills and which also integrate language skills.

Regarding the use of commercial material in the class, the author has encountered many of flaws with several books published in Japan (mentioned
These flaws will be addressed in the handbook by taking into consideration a vast amount of experience of modifying, reorganizing, adding or deleting content, addressing omissions, modifying or extending tasks in commercially available textbooks. With regard to class management, the intended handbook will follow the perspective of classes as workshop with a great deal of pair and group work activities. Frequent evaluation of this handbook will be carried out for revision purposes.

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References


Annotation

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