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Preferences for activities in French textbooks used in Slovak secondary schools analysed with Bírova's Communication Curve Tool

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Abstract

Which textbooks are used in French classes? Can the struggle to choose a good textbook affect the communication procedure in French? What is the proportion of language, intercultural and communicative activities in selected textbooks? What are the reasons for purchasing language-based and communication-based textbooks? The present study explores these questions and presents results with broad implications for teachers of French at secondary schools. It points out some significant markers such as textbook type activities preferences and arguments for choosing textbooks for French classes.

Key words: textbooks, frequency, activities, preferences, communication, appropriateness

Introduction

Slovak state standards and curricula are becoming increasingly important not only in the implementation of instruction but also in choosing a good textbook. Many textbook publishers provide a variety of activities in order to fulfil general textbook standards without considering the balance between the intercultural importance, grammar significance and communication needs. In the paper, I present partial results from the empirical research conducted within a year. I propose a survey of textbooks used for teaching French at secondary schools in Slovakia. The objective of this study is not only to show what textbooks are used and with what frequency, but I also intend to demonstrate that, for instance, the textbooks which are used often do not sufficiently attain the communicative objective.

When choosing a textbook, several elements should be taken into consideration—the students, the proportion of language-based and communication-based or task-based activities, the proportion of activities

enhancing the students' input and output, the curricula content. Cunningsworth (1995) suggests four criteria for evaluating language textbooks. They should:

- reflect students' needs and match learning objectives,
- reflect the use of language communicatively,
- facilitate learning processes by eclecticism,
- sustain a clear role as a support for learning.

The problem which was assumed before proceeding with the research, was related to the theories, research or partial research in the works of French-writing authors such as Bertocchini and Constanzo (2008), Besse (1995), Courtillon (2003), Pécheur and Vigner (1995), Slovak-writing authors Nogová and Bálint (2005), Pokrivčáková (2003, 2004), Repka (1990) or Turek (1997), as well as English-writing authors Brumfit and Johnson (1989), Cunningsworth (1995), Dalgalian, Lieutaud and Weiss (1991), Daoud and Celce-Murcia (1979), Lamie (1999), Lee and Vanpatten (2005), Nunan (1989, 1991), Sheldon (1988), Skierso (1991), Thornbury (2006) or Tomlinson (2001) but mainly to the theory of the balance-activity approach mentioned in the work of Harmer (1991) which was the point of departure for creating Birova's theory of CC analysis and seen in the material coverage of everyday class in the form of the proportion of language-based exercises and communication-based activities in the textbooks which prepare high school learners for their final graduation examination in French as a foreign language.

Research methodology

Such methods as a questionnaire and interview concerning the use and the variety of French textbooks and exercise books were used with French teachers teaching at secondary schools. Birova's Communication Curve (CC) content analysis was applied in order to map communicative, language, sociolinguistic and pragmatic activities in randomly selected units of textbooks previously designed by teachers in the questionnaire. The research methodology was devised during the doctoral studies in 2009 and was discussed and published in the proceedings from the World Congress of Teachers of French in Quebec in 2008 (Bírová et al., 2010).

Research objectives

Research objectives are designed regarding the assumed problem. In the present paper, the following is intended:

- to map French textbook policy and exercise typology,
- to map the ratio between communicative, language, sociolinguistic and pragmatic activities in randomly selected units of textbooks,
- to point out some motivating factors behind teachers' choice when selecting textbooks.

Research procedure and results

Frequencies called tallies were used to count up the number of teachers and the number of textbooks. The respondents to the questionnaire turned out to be 108. 2 questionnaires were not suitable and another 6 teachers of French expressed their opinions in the questionnaire but were not currently teaching French at secondary schools. The bank of 100 questionnaires created the corpus of answers that was analysed. The respondents were from the following towns:

6 Banská Bystrica, 1 Brezno, 1 Čadca, 1 Dolný Kubín, 2 Dubnica nad Váhom, 1 Galanta, 4 Hadlová, 1 Hnúšťa, 1 Humenné, 1 Kežmarok, 3 Komárno, 1 Košice, 1 Kremnica, 2 Krupina, 1 Levoča, 3 Liptovský Mikuláš, 2 Lučenec, 1 Martin, 2 Michalovce, 4 Námestovo, 4 Nitra, 1 Nové Mesto nad Váhom, 1 Nové Zámky, 2 Piešťany, 2 Poprad, 2 Piešťany, 2 Poprad, 1 Považská Bystrica, 3 Prievidza, 1 Pruské, 1 Púchov, 1 Rajec, 1 Rimavská Sobota, 1 Sabinov, 2 Senica, 2 Stropkov, 1 Tisovec, 1 Topoľčany, 8 Trenčín, 1 Trnava, 2 Tvrdošín, 1 Vrútky, 1 Zlaté Moravce, 4 Zvolen, 1 Žiar nad Hronom, 5 Žilina, 2 did not specify the town).

Total number of respondents: 100

Table 1: School typology

4-year high schools	8-year high schools (French CLIL classes)	Secondary vocational schools	Associated secondary schools	Others
62	14	14	4	2

According to the first result, the highest number of schools where teachers teach French are 4-year high schools. The development of confident communication in French takes place in 8-year high schools, too. This is due to everyday French CLIL classes. A high level of French is also at secondary vocational schools where students have to learn not only the basics of the language but they also penetrate to the specific fields of their future work.

Table 2: Gender of respondents

Gender	4-year high schools	8-year high schools (French CLIL classes)	Secondary vocational schools	Associated secondary schools	Others	Total	
Female	61	14	18	3	-	96	96%
Male	1	-	-	1	-	2	2%
Did not specify	-	-	-	-	2	2	2%
Total	62	14	18	4	2	100	100%

As it is evident, teaching French is mainly the business of female French teachers (96%).

The respondents are used to using more than one textbook during their classes. Sometimes it even happens that they change the publisher as they are not satisfied with the textbook policy introduced by the Ministry of Education. Some of the interviewed teachers use the textbook entitled *En français 1* in the first grade. In the second grade, these teachers turn to a completely different publisher and start working with *Francúzsky jazyk pre stredné školy 2*. In the third and fourth grades, teachers choose for their learners the textbook entitled *Forum 2*. Other teachers use more than one textbook for the same level of students. For example, in the old textbook entitled *Francúzsky jazyk*, written according to the audiolingual method, they appreciate the grammar exercises and the system which allows learners to automatize grammatical rules. In *Libre échange*, teachers appreciate pre-communicative and communicative activities. During conversation lessons, teachers are used to working with thematic workbooks mentioned above.

Except percentage calculations and dividing textbooks according to the typology of schools, the textbooks were sorted by the frequency of use – from the highest to the lowest. Table 3 is a summary table of all the books (60) the interviewed teachers indicated in their questionnaires. Table 4 shows the rank of cyclic textbooks and Table 5 the percentage rank of the thematic exercise books.

The most frequently used exercise book is *Oui* with the representation of 28%. The other two most widely used textbooks are *En français 1* and *En français 2*. Interestingly, this set of books is designed primarily for elementary schools. Its high percentage of usage at secondary schools reflects common methods of teachers at primary and secondary schools for teaching French language as well

as the similar language content and objectives at A1 and A2 levels of learning French. However, some teachers consider the use of textbooks *En français* and *En français 2* as infantile as they are intended for lower-age audience.

Table 3: Raw frequencies and percentages of using textbooks and thematic workbooks at secondary schools in Slovakia

Rank ¹ of textbooks and workbooks		4-year high schools	8-year high schools (French CLIL classes)	Secondary vocational schools	Associate secondary schools	Others	Total	
1	Oui	12	4	9	1	2	28	28%
2	En français 1	3	9	5	2	1	20	20%
3	En français 2	1	10	5	2	1	19	19%
4	Libre échange 1	10	6	1	-	-	17	17%
5	Forum 2	8	2	1	3	2	16	16%
6	Le Nouveau Sans Frontières 1	3	5	6	2	-	16	16%
7	En français 3	1	6	4	1	1	13	13%
8	Libre échange 2	12	1	-	-	-	13	13%
9	Forum 1	7	1	2	-	2	12	12%
10	Maturujem z francúzštiny 1	7	1	2	-	1	11	11%
11	Maturujem z francúzštiny 2	6	2	2	-	1	11	11%
12	Francúzsky jazyk pre stred. školy 3	5	2	3	-	-	10	10%
13	Le Nouveau Sans Frontières 2	4	2	-	2	1	9	9%
14	En français 4	-	5	-	2	1	8	8%
15	Francúzsky jazyk pre stred. školy 1	6	-	1	1	-	8	8%
16	Monitor	6	-	1	-	-	7	7%
17	Francúzsky jazyk pre stred. školy 2	4	-	1	2	-	7	7%

¹ References for textbooks – see Bibliographic References

18	En français perfectionnement	2	-	3	-	-	5	5%
19	Francúzsky jazyk pre stred. školy 4	1	-	2	2	-	5	5%
20	Campus 2	5	-	-	-	-	5	5%
21	Aspects de civilisation française	1	-	2	1	1	5	5%
22	Vocabulaire progressif	3	2	-	-	-	5	5%
23	Espaces 1	2	-	2	-	-	4	4%
24	Nouvel Espaces 1	3	1	-	-	-	4	4%
25	Grammaire progressive	3	1	-	-	-	4	4%
26	Espaces 2	1	1	1	-	-	3	3%
27	Libre échange 3	2	1	-	-	-	3	3%
28	Campus 1	3	-	-	-	-	3	3%
29	Tempo 1	2	1	-	-	-	3	3%
30	Tempo 2	2	1	-	-	-	3	3%
31	On y va 1	1	1	1	-	-	3	3%
32	On y va 2	1	1	1	-	-	3	3%
33	Café crème 1	2	-	-	-	-	2	2%
34	Café crème 2	2	-	-	-	-	2	2%
35	Panorama 1	1	1	-	-	-	2	2%
36	Panorama 2	1	1	-	-	-	2	2%
37	Nouvel Espaces 2	1	-	1	-	-	2	2%
38	On y va 3	1	-	1	-	-	2	2%
39	Extra	-	1	1	-	-	2	2%
40	Bonne route 1	2	-	-	-	-	2	2%
41	Cvičebnice francouzské gramatiky	2	-	-	-	-	2	2%
42	Junior 1	-	1	-	-	-	2	2%
43	Francúzska konverzácia	-	-	1	1	-	2	2%
44	Café crème 3	1	-	-	-	-	1	1%
45	Champion 1	-	-	1	-	-	1	1%
46	Champion 2	-	-	1	-	-	1	1%

47	On y va 4	1	-	-	-	-	1	1%
48	Le français pour vous	1	-	-	-	-	1	1%
49	Junior 2	-	1	-	-	-	1	1%
50	Junior 3	-	1	-	-	-	1	1%
51	Fréquence jeunes	-	1	-	-	-	1	1%
52	Le Nouveau Sans Frontières 3	1	-	-	-	-	1	1%
53	Archipel	-	-	-	1	-	1	1%
54	Escales	-	-	1	-	-	1	1%
55	Économie	-	-	1	-	-	1	1%
56	Le français de l'hôtellerie et de la restauration	-	-	1	-	-	1	1%
57	Delf scolaire A2	-	1	-	-	-	1	1%
58	Delf scolaire B1	-	1	-	-	-	1	1%
59	Delf scolaire B2	-	1	-	-	-	1	1%
60	Francúzština pre pokročilých	1	-	-	-	-	1	1%

High values of usage also represent the following textbooks *Libre échange*, *Forum*, *Le Nouveau Sans Frontières* as well as the textbook conceived according to the audiolingual method principles, *Francúzsky jazyk pre stredné školy*, which was used before 1989. It is surprising that this textbook published for the first time in the 80s of the last century, the era of communism, it is still used. This might be explained as a very weak progress in the textbook policy, yet according to the interviews done with teachers during the research, this textbook is used nowadays for its grammar and, in broadest terms, linguistic know-how which is necessary mainly at the stage of language practice. While other textbooks reveal high interest in communication practice, this old audiolingual textbook is appreciated for its grammar. Teachers recommend this textbook to other colleagues as they are convinced that only with grammar exercises and pre-communicative activities a learner will know how to communicate efficiently.

As it is shown further, *Maturujem z francúzštiny po novom*, *Monitor* and *En français perfectionnement* achieve high representation. These books prepare high school graduates for the final examination not only from the point of view of their thematicity but also exercise typology. Other books in the stated order: *Aspects de*

Civilisation Française, Vocabulaire progressif and *Grammaire française*, achieving 5% representation.

Table 4: Percentages of French textbooks usage at secondary schools in Slovakia

Percentage of French textbooks		Total	Percentage of French textbooks		Total
1	En français 1	20%	24	On y va 2	3%
2	En français 2	19%	25	Café crème 1	2%
3	Libre échange 1	17%	26	Café crème 2	2%
4	Forum 2	16%	27	Panorama 1	2%
5	Le Nouveau S. Frontières 1	16%	28	Panorama 2	2%
6	En français 3	13%	29	Nouvel Espaces 2	2%
7	Libre échange 2	13%	30	On y va 3	2%
8	Forum 1	12%	31	Extra	2%
9	Francúz. jazyk pre stred. školy 3	10%	32	Bonne route 1	2%
10	Le Nouveau S. Frontières 2	9%	33	Junior 1	2%
11	En français 4	8%	34	Café crème 3	1%
12	Francúzsky jazyk pre stredné školy 1	8%	35	Champion 1	1%
13	Francúzsky jazyk pre stredné školy 2	7%	36	Champion 2	1%
14	Francúzsky jazyk pre stredné školy 4	5%	37	On y va 4	1%
15	Campus 2	5%	38	Le français pour vous	1%
16	Espaces 1	4%	39	Junior 2	1%
17	Nouvel Espaces 1	4%	40	Junior 3	1%
18	Espaces 2	3%	41	Fréquence jeunes	1%
19	Libre échange 3	3%	42	Le Nouveau S. Frontières 3	1%
20	Campus 1	3%	43	Archipel	1%
21	Tempo 1	3%	44	Le français de l'hôtellerie et de la restauration	1%
			45	Escales	1%
22	Tempo 2	3%	46	Francúzština pre pokročilých	1%
23	On y va 1	3%			

Table 5: Percentages of French thematic exercise books usage at secondary schools in Slovakia

Percentage of French thematic exercise books		Total	Percentage of French thematic exercise books		Total
1	Oui	28%	9	Cvičebnice francouzské gramatiky	
2	Maturujem z francúzštiny 1	11%	10	Francúzska konverzácia	2%
3	Maturujem z francúzštiny 2	11%	11	Économie	2%
4	Monitor	7%	13	Delf scolaire A2	1%
5	En français perfectionnement	5%			
6	Aspects de civilisation française	5%	14	Delf scolaire B1	1%
7	Vocabulaire progressif	5%	15	Delf scolaire B2	1%
8	Grammaire progressive	4%			

Communication Curve (CC) Content Analysis

In order to map activity preferences of textbooks used for teaching French at secondary schools, the Communication Curve Content Analysis (Birova, 2009) was applied. Preferences were counted upon defined categories. Activity categories were extended from 1 to 7. Language exercises practising language without being put into context were levelled 1. Exercises practising sociolinguistic elements or sociocultural items without context were levelled 2. With the level 3 were associated activities which concerned pragmatic competence elements practice. These elements were predominately put into micro-contexts and represented by short open answer tasks. The fourth curve degree represented pre-communicative contextual activities practising reading comprehension, listening comprehension or mediation. The fifth category represented activities which stimulated learners to work in context with elements of sociolinguistics and socioculture, also practising reading or listening. The sixth degree was oriented on contextual pragmatic activities.

The highest-level 7 incorporates production activities such as speaking, writing or oral and written interactions that encourage learners to communicate in dialogues, discussions or confrontations.

Point 0 on the CC involves extra activities that are neither open nor closed, of no linguistic or communicative relatedness. They appeared in textbooks as

supplementary and had no point common with language learning (example of such assignments: "Hang the project on the board!")

The following tables present the preferred degree of activities in selected textbooks.

Table 6: Activity preferences and value scale measured by the CC content analysis in selected thematic exercise books

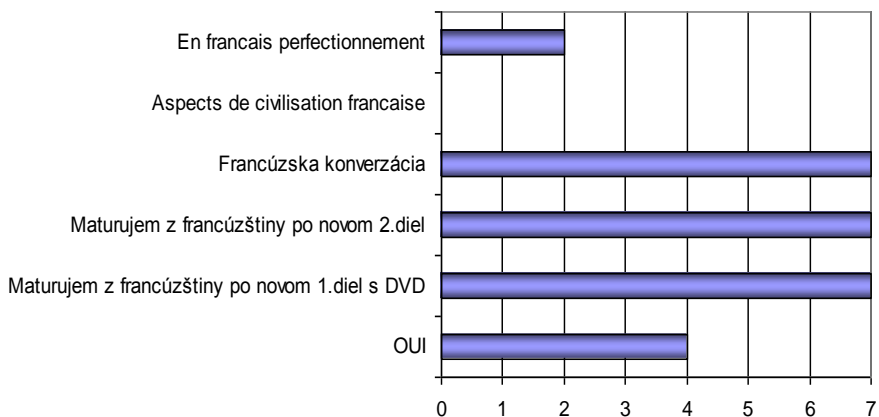


Table 6 presents the preferable aspects of thematic exercise books. While *En francais perfectionnement* attains only level 2 of CC analysis (activities about socioculture and sociolinguistics), *Maturujem po novom* exercise book set prefers communicative activities (level 7 of CC). *Oui* obtains level 4. *Aspects de civilisation francaise* seems to have not been evaluated as its preferences are not demonstrated. It is due to the authorial concept of the book as the authors decided not to invent activities, just to present texts and prepare some extracts of realia input.

Table 7: Activity preferences and value scale measured by the CC analysis in a student's book of selected textbooks

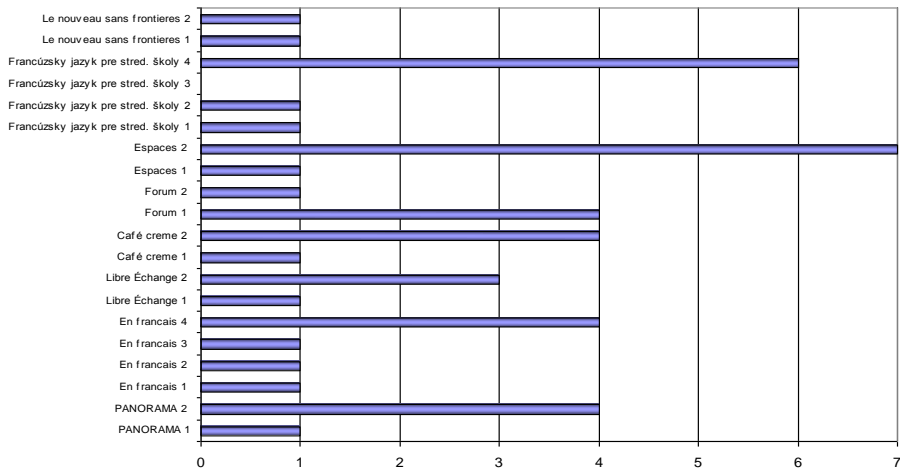


Table 8: Activity preferences and value scale measured by the CC content analysis in workbooks of selected textbooks

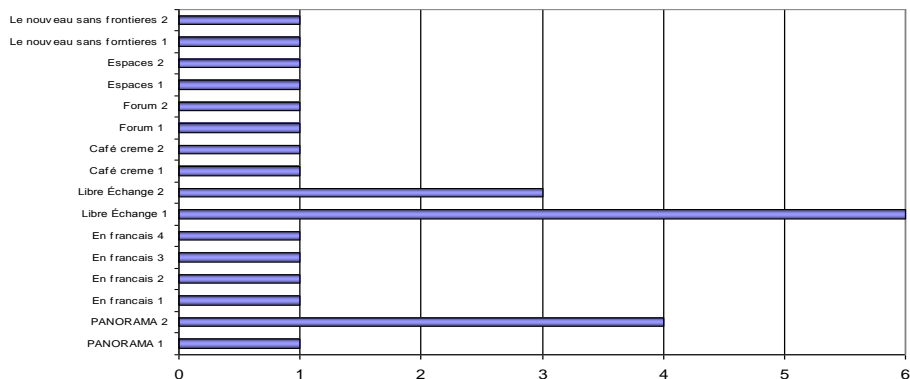


Table 9: A general overview

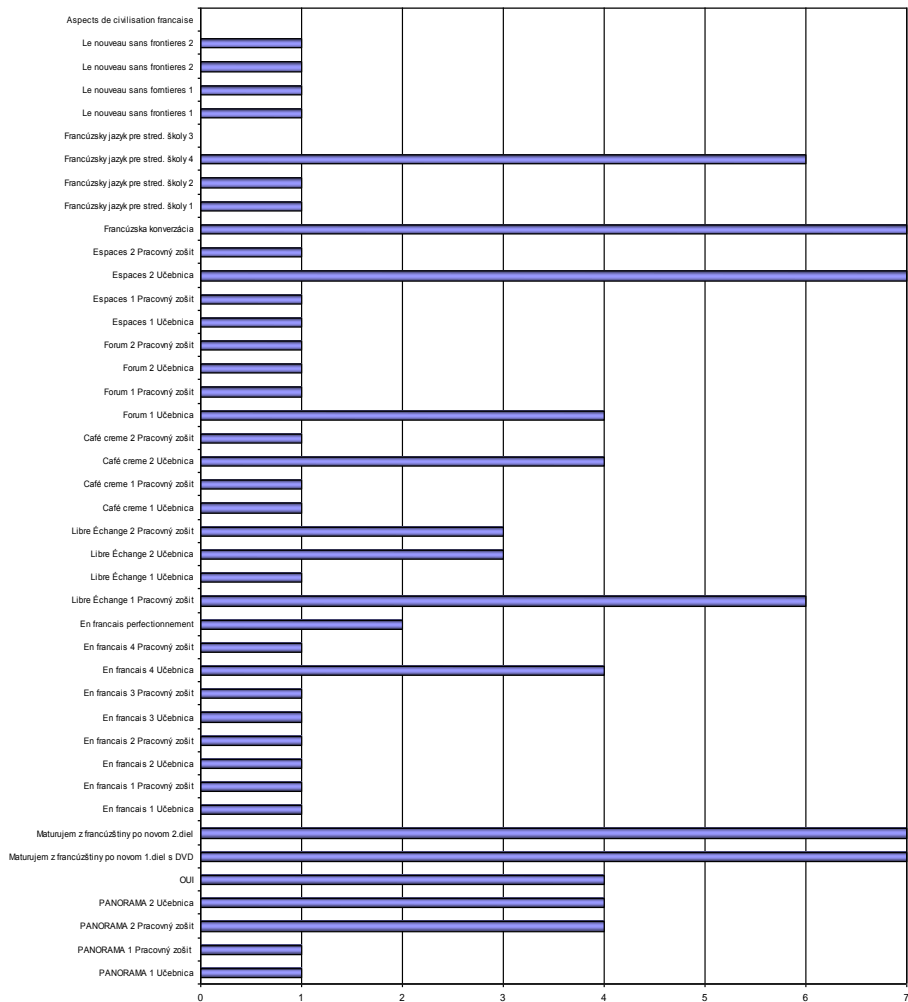


Table 10: Raw frequencies of oral communicative interaction activities and other communicative activities

	French textbook or exercise book title	N Oral communicative intercultural interaction activities	N Other communicative activities	N Total Communicative activities
1.	Forum 2	13	6	19
2.	Forum 1	8	3	11
3.	Espaces 2	7	12	19
4.	Café crème 1	7	2	9
	Café crème 2	5	3	8
	Le nouveau sans frontières 1	5	8	13
5.	Espaces 1	4	1	5
	Libre échange 2	4	7	11
6.	Francúzska konverzácia	3	3	6
	Maturujem z francúzštiny po novom 1	3	16	19
	Maturujem z francúzštiny po novom 2	3	10	13
7.	En français 1	2	1	3
	En français 2	2	7	9
	En français 3	2	3	5
	Libre échange 1	2	0	2
	Panorama 1	2	4	6
	Panorama 2	2	4	6
8.	En français 4	1	5	6
	Le nouveau sans frontières 2	1	7	8
9.	En français perfectionnement	0	0	0
	Franc.jazyk pre stred.školy 1	0	2	2
	Franc.jazyk pre stred.školy 2	0	0	0
	Franc.jazyk pre stred.školy 3	0	0	0
	Franc.jazyk pre stred.školy 4	0	3	3
	Aspects de civilisation française	0	0	0
	Oui – francúzština cvičebnica	0	0	0
	Total	76	107	183

Oui, a thematic exercise book purchased and used widely in Slovakia in order to prepare future high school graduates for the final examination achieves only level 4 of communicativeness. Analysing the data collected in the chart below, the book does not eliminate oral interaction activities. Why, then, do teachers use

this thematic workbook if not for preparing students for communication? According to the data collected from interviews, teachers are used to using the audiolingual method principles. They let learners memorise texts which are, then, learnt by heart. This principle teaches them to reproduce written texts.

Another thematic exercise book designed to develop communication aspects is *Aspects de civilisation française*. The book conceptors did not include any exercise or any activity. The book consists of sociocultural elements packed in a number of texts.

Francúzsky jazyk pre stredné školy 1, 2, 3, 4 – a set of textbooks conceived upon the audiolingual method principles, inadequately proposes improvement possibilities regarding intercultural communication in interaction. Books following the communicative approach principles reveal a high interest in the development of students' conversational potential by means of information gap activities or tasks involving speech acts. These are *Espaces 2*, *Francúzska konverzácia* and the thematic exercise books *Maturujem z francúzštiny po novom 1* and *2*.

When investigating further the authorial preferences in the aforementioned textbooks, it is surprising that not infrequently there is a small or no difference between the textbook and its corresponding workbook. *Panorama 1* textbook and *Panorama 1* workbook, for example, have the same level of the CC activity preferences – level 1. As a researcher, I ask then: what are the reasons and, more importantly, what are the learners' benefits of the stated identical textbook conceptualization? *Panorama 2* follows the same pattern as both the textbook as well as the workbook are also on the same CC level 4. Consequently, it is only language-based activities, mostly contextualised, that are incorporated, either through reading or listening practice. Hardly any or no opportunity is given to practise oral interaction or pragmatic linguistics.

In the set of textbooks *Forum* (*Forum 1*, *Forum 2*), the randomly selected unit to be evaluated in *Forum 2* consisted of more than 50 exercises and activities out of which 13 propose to practise oral intercultural interaction. 6 other are considered as other communicative activities. They enhance learners' speaking and writing skills. In chart 1 *Forum 2* is considered as one of the most communicative textbooks so far as presented in the tables 7 and 8. This is because the tables 6, 7 and 8 reveal only textbook preferences. The authors of *forum 2* preferred in the selected unit the CC level 1. It means that in the mentioned unit, learners are to practise communicative activities but they are more exposed to non-contextual language-based activities, as, for example, putting the verbs in brackets into the correct form in isolated sentences.)

The set of cyclic textbooks *En francais 1, 2, 3, 4* as well as *Perfectionnement* are also conceived in accordance with the communicative approach principles but the results of the CC content analysis do not validate this statement. The authors were much inspired by the audiolingual method principles. Teachers mentioned in the interview that for this set of textbooks, it is very difficult to get listening activities records. They admit omitting these activities in the class.

Conclusion

Textbooks are in the policy as terms to describe learning support materials. Creating a textbook includes several stages and implements a variety of aspects. The process itself in bringing textbooks from the hands of the author (or conceptor) to the user (teachers and learners) aims to pave the way forward for learners in formal education to have access to learning support materials. Textbooks aim to develop to their full potential in order to make a meaningful contribution to the economic development. The economic and access criterion is sometimes a way to influence teachers' decision. Sometimes, the policy missions of creating a good textbook to plan and implement integrated, sustainable and coordinated learning support materials supply the chain that will provide the best value, curriculum-relevant textbooks in an equitable way to all learners and teachers. This should have a direct and measurable impact on the quality of learning opportunities for all learners.

In the article, the equitable way was measured by the aid of the CC analysis and it was shown that textbooks more commonly purchased do not positively answer the demand of the equal proportion of activities. The most used textbooks were evaluated as the least communicative.

The stated research outcomes lead researchers and teachers of French to reconsider the level of efficiency when using textbooks in class. The Slovak textbook policy is an unrestricted process and does not limit teachers' freedom to choose suitable materials; however the process itself seems to be difficult and inefficient.

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