

An Analytical Framework for Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL) Textbooks in the Chinese Context

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Abstract: Despite the wide variety of Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL) textbooks available in China, we still lack a reference framework to analyze the textbooks. Based on existing textbook analysis frameworks and taking into account the characteristics of Chinese students, this paper builds a framework to help teachers objectively analyze textbooks. This framework is organized into three levels: external features, internal structure, and textbook content analysis. This work aims to help teachers analyze textbooks from the overall structure to the details and provide guidance for textbook selection.

Keywords: Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL); Textbook analysis; Chinese context; Analytical framework

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1. Background

Spanish is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. With the growing exchange between China and Spain, as well as with Latin American countries, the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language continues to expand in China. At the same time, teaching materials for Spanish are becoming increasingly diverse. According to the research by Kang, up to 2024, China had published 433 textbooks for Spanish language majors in higher education ^[1].

However, when it comes to selecting textbooks, teachers and institutions often operate without clear standards or criteria. As Tomlinson points out, “Materials are often evaluated in an ad hoc, impressionistic way, which tends to favor materials which have validity (i.e. which conform to people’s expectations of what materials should look like) and which are visually appealing” ^[2]. This approach is based on teaching experience but, in fact, lacks systematic analysis and evaluation. Li and Martín Peris also agree with this view that the selection and use of textbooks should be based on a deep understanding of their content, not

simply on personal intuition or marketing^[3].

In China, there are both Spanish textbooks written independently by Chinese teams, such as *Español Moderno*, and also imported ones, such as *Sueña* and *Aula International*. There are clear differences between these two types of textbooks in terms of teaching methods, structure, and other aspects. Therefore, we recommend that teachers take these differences into account during their analysis of the textbooks, compare the characteristics of both types, and select the appropriate one based on specific needs.

We need to make it clear that the purpose of this paper is to establish an objective analytical framework for the textbook. The framework provided in this paper is intended to help teachers analyze the objective characteristics of textbooks, not to directly determine if a particular textbook is suitable for a specific teaching context. Of course, we will also consider the current situation of Spanish language education in China and give suggestions for the selection of textbooks for their reference.

2. Methodology

2.1. Concepts of “analysis” and “evaluation” in textbook research

In textbook research, the concepts of “analysis” and “evaluation” are often confused. But there is actually a difference between them. Textbook analysis is objective. Its main purpose is to observe and describe the textbook’s content, instructional objectives, requirements for students, and other aspects. Evaluation, by contrast, is subjective, as it involves judging the suitability of a textbook for particular learners. This kind of judgment may shift according to factors such as learner profiles and educational goals. Clearly, analysis must come before evaluation. Only after carrying out a careful analysis can teachers determine whether a given textbook is workable in their classes. Unfortunately, many existing investigations into teaching materials mix up these two notions, which makes it difficult to apply the proposed standards in practice^[4].

Besides, because of the importance of the EEE-4 (*Examen de Español como Especialidad Nivel-4*) and EEE-8 (*Examen de Español como Especialidad Nivel-8*) in Chinese Spanish programs, teachers are usually concerned about their effectiveness for test preparation. This means that we should also examine whether the materials cover the language skills that are required for these two exams. This examination is also part of the textbook analysis. Teachers need to first analyze the characteristics of the textbook and then evaluate whether those characteristics are helpful for exam preparation.

2.2. Review of textbook analysis frameworks in SFL

We have selected three analytical frameworks for Spanish language textbooks as references. In this section, we will present, analyze, and summarize these works and their specific focuses. Then, we will synthesize and supplement these findings to establish a framework for the analysis of Spanish language textbooks in China.

Gonzalez divided the analytical dimensions of Spanish language textbooks from the perspective of native Spanish speakers. His analysis of Spanish language textbooks can be divided into three parts: external characteristics, internal structure, and content analysis^[5].

The first section describes the external aspects of the textbook. This section covers the superficial information of the textbook such as the title, author, bibliographic information, format, and multimedia materials. The second section focuses on an internal analysis. It includes the textbook’s objectives, teaching methods, language levels (A1–C2), target learners, organization of the textbook, estimated hours, and unit structure. The third section concerns the analysis of textbook content and provides most details. To begin

with, we need to identify the textbook's approach (deductive, inductive, or blended), its focus (spoken language or primarily a written language, or a balance of both), and its structure (linear or cyclical). In the following sections, it focuses on communicative content (communicative themes and presentation formats), linguistic content (such as grammar, vocabulary, and language varieties), and cultural content.

It is worth note that this study highlights the key role of authentic materials in foreign language teaching and distinguishes between different sources of teaching materials based on the degree of adaptation: authentic materials, which are presented in their original form without modification; adapted materials, which are derived from authentic materials but modified for teaching purposes; and specially developed materials, which are designed by authors specifically for educational purposes.

The framework proposed by Yang is based on a study of Spanish textbooks in China ^[6]. He selected the following five aspects for analysis: textbook structure (unit organization, supplementary materials, etc.), linguistic knowledge (phonetics, grammar, vocabulary), sociocultural content, teaching methods, and the degree of first language (L1) intervention. This study centers on the learning experiences of Chinese students and highlights the role of the first language in the teaching process, which is influenced by the large differences between Chinese and Spanish. At the same time, Yang's analytical framework takes into account the curriculum arrangements at Chinese institutions of higher education as well as the weaknesses Chinese students face in learning foreign languages. In later sections, the study also analyzes mainstream Chinese textbooks based on this framework as examples.

Li and Martín Peris also propose a framework of three levels ^[3]. Similarly, this study begins by dividing aspects into external and internal dimensions. External factors include publication information, textbook type (general-purpose or specialized), target learners, and objectives. Internal factors include textbook content (authenticity, thematic range, and language use), structure (linear or cyclical, and flexibility and adaptability), tasks and activities, language skills, and the evaluation system. This part of the work also highlights the influence of the first language, which should be utilized appropriately to support the teaching. The internal and external levels of this study are largely the same as those in the two discussed studies. Of course, there are some differences in the classification of details. The unique feature of this study lies in its third level. The aim of this level is to review the relevance and coherence between the first two levels. Specifically, we need to ensure whether the design of the teaching material complies with the teaching objectives and whether it can help students achieve the established learning goals.

The studies mentioned above give three different views on analyzing Spanish language textbooks. Each of them has its own focus, but they also share common ground in many respects. They all agree that the analysis of textbooks should start from the external aspects and move toward the internal aspects, and should progress from the superficial to the profound. The organization of its content is also a key point. The way the content is presented and the logic behind it also deserve attention. And the authenticity of the teaching materials and the degree of first language involvement should also be included in the analysis. We will incorporate all these methods and aspects into the later work.

3. Framework for the analysis of Spanish textbooks in China

In this section, by organizing and supplementing the analytical frameworks proposed and taking into account the specific context of the development of Spanish textbooks in China, we have established a three-tiered

framework for textbook analysis. Before beginning our level-by-level analysis, we must clarify the general requirements for analyzing textbooks. These requirements must be followed during the whole process of textbook analysis.

Additionally, as the two Chinese researchers mentioned, the analysis of textbooks for Chinese students must take into account their characteristics. Most Chinese students have never been exposed to Spanish and lack a language environment in which to practice it. Students who study Spanish in higher education institutions usually start from scratch. English is the only foreign language they have learned before for most of them. At the same time, the significant differences between Chinese and Spanish as language types also cause obstacles for Chinese students learning Spanish^[7]. As a result, the native language plays a key role as a medium in Spanish language education, and the degree of its incorporation must be considered.

And for any language teaching material, we must clarify the level of language for which it is intended. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) provides us with a core framework for evaluating language proficiency^[8]. When a textbook does not explicitly state the language proficiency level of the students it is intended for, the CEFR can be used as a reference. In the context of Spanish language instruction, the *Plan curricular del Instituto Cervantes: niveles de referencia para el español* (PCIC)^[9] transforms the CEFR's general framework into specific content for Spanish language learning. Its content covers grammar, vocabulary, functional concepts, and culture, etc. This reference framework is more effective in determining the content of textbooks, particularly the appropriate language level for Spanish education^[9]. During the analysis, it is important to make sure that the content of the textbook meets the requirements of these two reference frameworks.

In China, the *Curriculum Guidelines for the Foundational Stage of Spanish Language Majors in Higher Education Institutions* (1998)^[10] and the *Curriculum Guidelines for the Advanced Stage of Spanish Language Majors in Higher Education Institutions* (2000) should also be taken into account. These two documents serve as guidelines for Spanish language education in China^[11]. These documents detail the level of Spanish majors in Chinese universities at different grades. And all these are closely related to the EEE-4 and EEE-8 that we have mentioned before.

The relevance and coherence between the objectives and textbook design are no longer treated as a separate level, but rather as a guiding principle that will be followed throughout the analysis.

3.1. Level 1: External level

The first step is about the basic information of the textbook. This is aimed at getting a basic understanding of the textbook. Basic information includes complete book details, such as the title, author or editor, edition, publisher, place of publication, year of publication, and number of pages. The basic information covers the composition of a textbook series as well. For example, whether it includes teachers' guidebooks, supplementary materials such as workbooks, and multimedia resources such as CDs, DVDs, or online resources^[5,12].

The second part of the external information is to clearly define the type of the textbook and the target learners. For example, is the textbook a primary or supplementary textbook? What language skill does it aim to improve? Is it designed for a specific purpose, such as business Spanish or travel Spanish? Is the target audience children, teenagers, or adults? What language proficiency level is it intended for?

In Spanish language programs within Chinese higher education, special attention must be paid to

the correspondence between textbooks and the curriculum, for instance, whether a textbook is designed for “intensive reading” (aimed at developing comprehensive skills), “listening,” “reading,” or “speaking” classes. In particular, when teachers are considering whether to use an imported textbook, besides factors such as translation quality and teaching methods, they must also consider whether the materials meet the requirements of the curriculum and whether they are appropriate for the preparation of the EEE-4 and EEE-8 exams.

3.2. Level 2: Organization of the textbook

In terms of instructional structure, the first consideration is its external organization, that is, the textbook’s units and estimated hours. This point relates to the arrangement of class hours. Regarding the internal structure, we should also pay attention to whether the instructional progression is linear or cyclical, whether the sequence of units is fixed or flexible, and whether the textbook includes sections for review and assessment. This enables teachers to determine the order of instruction and whether they need to schedule extra review sessions or quizzes.

The aspects mentioned above represent the forms that curriculum design takes. The underlying teaching methods are even more worthy of analysis. For example, we need to analyze which of these methods the textbook uses. Foreign language teaching in China has traditionally been based on the grammar-translation method, but in recent years, it has been influenced by new teaching methods such as the communicative approach, the audio-visual method, or task-based language learning, etc.

The approach taken in the use of the textbook also needs to be examined: whether it is a deductive, inductive, or blended approach. The deductive approach refers to first learning general rules and then applying them in practice. In contrast, the inductive approach begins with observing examples and gradually derives rules by applying them in practice. The blended approach combines these two methods. The deductive approach has been the main approach in Spanish teaching in China for a long time. This is because Chinese students are accustomed to a learning model in which they first listen to the teacher’s explanation and then apply what they have learned in practice. When it comes to language learning, they also prefer to start by learning linguistic knowledge, attempting to memorize it, and then trying to use this language. Besides, this is also because students often start from scratch and need to quickly master the language skills ^[6,7].

Concerning the sources of teaching materials, we adopt the classification that divides them into authentic materials, adapted materials, and specially developed materials. What we need to do is sort these materials and calculate their respective percentages and then consider whether this composition is suitable for the target students.

The degree of first-language intervention also needs to be analyzed. Since Chinese and Spanish are quite different, and Chinese students have few opportunities to use Spanish, the involvement of the first language as a medium of instruction directly affects teaching effectiveness.

3.3. Level 3: Textbook content

3.3.1. Language knowledge and language skills

The study of phonetics plays a crucial role in areas such as spelling, spoken expression, and listening comprehension. This is because Spanish is considered a relatively phonetic language, and that means there is a high correspondence between the spelling and pronunciation of words. So, when analyzing textbooks, we

need to pay attention to how pronunciation is presented. This content may be presented as a separate part, or incorporated throughout several units or the entire textbook.

As for grammar, we need to analyze whether the content aligns with the requirements of the CEFR, PCIC, and the curriculum guidelines in China. We also need to examine whether the textbook includes a specific section for explaining important grammatical concepts. Some grammatical concepts in Spanish—such as verb conjugation—may be entirely new to Chinese students. It would be beneficial if textbooks included grammar explanations specifically designed to address the common weaknesses of Chinese students.

In the vocabulary section, we first need to check whether the textbook includes all the required vocabulary listed in the curriculum guidelines. Then, we should identify how the vocabulary is presented. Vocabulary can be integrated into the activities of each unit, appear as a separate part, or be presented as a glossary.

Finally, we need to examine and analyze which language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) the textbook emphasizes, as well as the proportion of content dedicated to each skill. Comprehensive textbooks or those used in China for intensive reading courses should provide balanced training in all four skills.

3.3.2. Teaching materials and activity design

In foreign language education, teaching materials are used in the input process. Besides the authenticity of the materials, which we mentioned before, we also need to analyze their diversity. This includes, for example, diversity of topics, genres (such as dialogues, narratives, expository texts, etc.), and presentation formats (text, images, videos) ^[4].

For students, learning activities represent a process of output ^[13]. The diversity of these output activities requires attention as well. For example, these activities may be individual or group activities; they may consist of repetitive exercises or critical thinking exercises; they may focus on developing a single skill (such as listening, speaking, reading, or writing) or multiple skills; and they may emphasize the study of grammatical knowledge or focus on the development of communicative skills ^[14].

3.3.3. Cultural content

Spanish-speaking culture represents not only the culture of Spain but also that of numerous Latin American countries. Therefore, we need to pay attention to which countries' cultures are introduced in the textbooks. We should also examine whether the material involves cross-cultural comparisons between China and the Spanish-speaking world.

To be more specific, the analysis should also consider which aspects of cultural content design to examine, such as literature, art, festivals, famous figures, lifestyle habits, social etiquette, and ways of thinking. Finally, the materials must be reviewed for any stereotypes or biases related to gender, race, occupation, or region ^[15].

3.3.4. Assessment mechanisms

The assessment mechanism includes formative assessment (such as in-unit exercises and feedback), summative assessment (unit tests or periodic tests), and self-assessment tools (reflection sessions).

4. Conclusion

Based on several researchers' analyses of Spanish language textbooks and considering the unique context of Spanish language education in China, this paper establishes a framework for such materials. The objective is to provide Chinese Spanish teachers with a reference framework to support the evaluation and selection of teaching materials according to their specific needs. This framework begins with external structural elements and moves toward the organization of instructional content.

The design of the framework takes into account those difficulties and the specific needs of Spanish education in China, such as the large differences between Chinese and Spanish and the close alignment of university Spanish programs with the EEE-4 and EEE-8 exams. During the framework design process, we have also included relevant considerations and suggestions.

This framework only serves as a reference for the objective analysis. It can only be used as a foundation for the evaluation of teaching materials and should not be regarded as a standard for such evaluation. In the evaluation process, the importance of each aspect within the framework also depends on the specific situation. In future research, this analytical framework can be used as a basis to continue exploring evaluation systems for different types of teaching materials or different teaching objectives.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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