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Learning activities in course books for Spanish as a foreign language produced for the Swedish context: Focus on forms or focus on meaning?

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Abstract

The present study examines the theoretical underpinnings of learning activities found in course books for Spanish as a Foreign Language produced for a Swedish context. The Swedish curriculum adopts a functional, action-oriented approach officially related to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which, in turn, draws on a communicative task-based framework. Provided that the course books have been guided by the official guidelines, it would be expected that communicative task-based activities are the most commonly found type of learning activity.

The study analyzes the distribution of learning activities within receptive, productive and interactional skills, the activity types within each skill, and the theoretical bases underlying the activities found in four widely used course books for teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language in Sweden. In total, 1672 learning activities are analyzed. The study aims at verifying whether there is a dominance of any of the skills, and to what extent the types of activities within each skill reflect the functional, action-oriented approach adopted in the educational steering documents.

The results indicate a dominance of the written language, even in oral activities. The study's findings also show a dominance of more controlled, non-communicative activities with an explicit focus on forms at the expense of the freer communicative activities with a primary focus on meaning, typical of a task-based framework. Very often, they reflect earlier approaches based on a structural view of language and a behaviorist view of learning, such as the grammar-translation or the audiolingual methods, while activity types with a task-based approach are underrepresented.

Introduction

Spanish is the most popular foreign language (FL) taught in Swedish schools, apart from English. In the *First European Survey on Language Competences*, ESLC (European Commission, 2012) carried out by the European Commission with the aim of providing comparative data on foreign language competences in European countries, Sweden performed highly in FL English but, surprisingly, much less so in FL Spanish. Learners were tested in the last year of lower secondary education, and around 86% did not reach the target level A2:1 (advanced basic language user) of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). According to the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2017, 2021), A2.1 has been officially linked to the grade E, the lowest passing grade at the end of Year 9 of Secondary School in Sweden (see e.g., Erickson & Pakula, 2017). Oral production was not included in the ESLC. In a follow up study, Aronsson (2020) analyzed learners' FL productions in Spanish at the same study level, including oral proficiency: 90 written and 90 oral productions were related to both the Swedish grading system and the CEFR levels. The results were in line with those of the ESLC: an overwhelming majority of the learners in the study did not reach the expected target level after Year 9 when the results were related to CEFR scales and, interestingly, this proportion was greater in oral language skills than in written ones. When learners' competence profiles were analyzed, the results also showed that a large proportion of the learners (48%) were better at writing than at speaking. Only a small proportion, 12%, had better oral language proficiency than written (for details see Aronsson, 2020).

These alarmingly poor results raise questions about possible underlying explanations. The results have been analyzed by, for example, the Swedish Board of Education Skolverket (2012, 2013), Bardel et al. (2019) and Aronsson (2020). Various explanations for the poor result for Spanish as compared with English have been suggested, among others, the shortage of certified teachers in Spanish and the low degree of exposure to Spanish outside the school setting in comparison with English. One aspect that, to our knowledge, has not yet been investigated is how much support Spanish course books produced for the Swedish context provide for the teaching and learning of the language according to the functional and action-oriented approach to language learning, i.e, the approach that forms the conceptual basis of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). This view is also reflected in the Swedish Curriculum for Modern Languages (Skolverket, 2011a, 2011b), which has been oriented towards

functional communication skills for the last few decades. From 2011, the CEFR scales have been explicitly connected to the grade E (the lowest passing grade) of the seven steps of the curriculum (Erickson & Pakula, 2017, p. 16). The new curriculum for Modern Languages, implemented in 2022, contains only minor changes and displays the same view of language teaching and the same connection to the CEFR as the current one (Skolverket, 2021). Course books play a prominent role in school, sometimes guiding teachers' practice more than the curriculum itself (Englund, 1999; Skolverket, 2006), especially in more structured subjects such as foreign languages (Englund, 2011, p. 282). Therefore, they could probably be considered important indicators of the content being taught, although, of course, not the only ones.

Objectives and research questions (RQs)

The present study examines the extent to which the learning activities found in some widely used course books for teaching Spanish as a foreign language support teaching based on a functional and action-oriented approach. Furthermore, the study aims at verifying if any of the skills is over or underrepresented. The functional and action-oriented approach has been addressed through a framework based on Task-Based Language Teaching (henceforth TBLT). The reasons for the choice of this framework for our analysis are described in section 3. *Learning activities* are defined in this study as anything learners are asked to do when they are working with the course book, expressed in the form of instructions.

The study addresses the following RQs:

- RQ1: How are the learning activities in the teaching materials distributed between receptive skills (reading and listening) and productive skills (written and oral production and interaction)?
- RQ2: What types of learning activities are found within each of the skills listed in RQ1?
- RQ3: How do the types of learning activities found in RQ2 relate to the functional, action-oriented approach to language teaching?

Theoretical background

While the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) claims not to subscribe to, or prescribe, any specific methods, this does not mean that it “licenses any and every

approach to language teaching/learning” (Little, 2012, p. 6). The authors advocate a functional, action-oriented approach which, in turn, is far from being methodologically neutral. As pointed out by Little (see e.g., 2006, 2011, 2012), member of several Council of Europe expert groups, the CEFR and its use of can-do-descriptors has its theoretical basis in a sub-category of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) research field, labelled Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). The connection between an action-oriented approach and TBLT also appears in the CEFR’s Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018):

The CEFR’s action-oriented approach represents a shift away from syllabuses based on a linear progression through language structures, or a pre-determined set of notions and functions, towards syllabuses based on needs analysis, oriented towards real-life tasks and constructed around purposefully selected notions and functions (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 26).

Based on the close relationship between the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) and a task-based approach, and the above-mentioned (section 1) established connection between the CEFR and the Swedish curriculum for Modern Languages¹ (Skolverket, 2011a, 2011b), this study will use the TBLT framework for the analysis of RQ3. It is important to note that neither the action-oriented view of language nor TBLT should be understood as language teaching methods. Instead, the concepts include a broad general approach to language teaching, based upon the assumption that successful language learning takes place in authentic communicative situations.

TBLT and the communicative continuum

TBLT has many versions and many advocates, among others Bygate et al. (2001), Ellis (2003), Ellis et al. (2020), Estaire and Zanón (1994), Littlewood (2018), Long (1988, 1991, 2015), Nunan (2004), Skehan (2002, 2003) and Willis and Willis (2007); but the two key tenets found in all versions of TBLT are “the centrality of ‘natural’ language use where the primary focus rests on meaning” and “the need for intervention involving focus-on-form” (Ellis et al., 2020, p. 335). The interpretation of *focus-on-meaning* has been stretched over time, and Long, in 1988 and 1991, addressed the need for intervention involving a *focus-on-form* in meaning-based activities. Focus-on-form (Long, 1991) involves both production and reception and is a type of *indirect* form-focused instruction in which learners’

attention is drawn to target linguistic features in context, as they are produced during communication, in order to solve the task at hand. The focus-on-form concept, even though it has expanded over time to involve both production and reception, still emphasizes the importance of drawing learners' attention to linguistic features in context, as they are produced during communication. This focus on the formal aspects of language in service of meaning is an essential feature of TBLT and is in line with research about the nature of foreign language acquisition in instructional settings, which recognizes that formal structures are acquired while learners are focusing on meaning within a task (Ellis et al., 2020).

Focus-on-form must be distinguished from a *focus-on-forms* (in the plural), a type of *direct* form-focused instruction in which learners are taught different structures systematically and sequentially as discrete units, one at a time (Long, 2015), as is the case in traditional teaching with a structural syllabus (Ellis, 2016, p. 406). Both focus on form and focus on forms pay attention to the linguistic form, but it should be noted that while focus on forms is limited to a focus on the conceptual forms, a focus on form addresses the importance of pointing out or noticing the form used in situated meaning, i.e. in the communication of messages (Littlewood, 2018; Long, 2015). Focus on form then, serves to help the learner to establish a form-meaning-mapping (term used by Ellis, 2016 to clarify focus-on-form), where the design of the task draws learners' attention to linguistic aspects of relevance for the communicative situation in which they occur (Long, 2015). Thus, it involves a focus on meaning, but not exclusively, as is the case in activity types where the learners' focus is entirely on solving the task.

What the right balance should be between focus on meaning, focus on form and focus on forms, or even whether there should be an exclusive focus on forms in TBLT, has been a controversial issue from a pedagogical perspective and a number of frameworks for developing a curriculum have been proposed reflecting different views on this matter, such as Bygate et al. (2001), Estaire and Zanón (1994), Littlewood (2018), Long (2015) and Nunan (2004), to name a few. In the stricter interpretation, only learning activities that are based on real-world activities or, more specifically, real linguistic everyday activities, can be classified as tasks. They draw on a core definition of the concept where a task is an activity that requires the speaker to use the language with a primary focus on meaning in order to achieve a goal (Bygate et al., 2001, p. 11). Ellis (2003) and Littlewood (2018), on the other hand, believe that entirely form-focused exercises can also shed light on various aspects of the communicative ability. As mentioned above,

Long (2015), who had initially proposed a stricter interpretation of TBLT, also later acknowledged a focus on form, but only in service of meaning.

Specific grammatical structures and lexical units can thus be practiced in order to be able to complete a target learning activity that meets the core criteria for being a task. However, such exercises centered on a sole focus on forms must not take up too much space, but a balance should be found where the predominant element/goal should be to practice real communicative situations from real life. Since communicative activities are understood as important for the development of the learners' communicative competence, Littlewood's framework (2018) can be used as guidance for teachers regarding the balance between learning activities based on focus on forms, form-meaning mapping, or entirely on meaning. This framework was therefore considered to be specifically useful for the analysis of the activities in this study.

In his framework, Littlewood (2018, p. 1227) proposes a *communicative continuum* (see Table 1) for the classification of the different types of activities in which learners may engage in the classroom according to the degree to which each of them “*contributes* to learners' ability to engage in real communication (their ‘communicative competence’)”. The types of activities are geared towards language production and language use in communicative situations that involve production and interaction (see Table 1). The framework is based on the difference between ‘analytic’ and ‘experiential’ learning activities, divided into five subcategories, namely *Non-communicative learning*, *Pre-communicative language practice*, *Communicative language practice*, *Structured communication* and *Authentic communication*. The further to the left in the table an activity falls, the more *analytic/explicit* it is, with a greater focus on forms, while the further to the right it falls, the more *experiential/implicit* it is, with a greater focus on meaning. Littlewood admits that some more analytic/explicit classroom activities may highlight “separate aspects of communicative ability” such as specific grammatical structures and lexical items but warns against letting these take up too much space at the expense of practice in “actual communication”.

Table 1. The communicative continuum (adapted from Littlewood, 2018, p. 1227)

Analytic / Explicit learning		← →		Experiential / Implicit learning	
Non-communicative learning	Pre-communicative language practice	Communicative language practice	Structured communication	Authentic communication	
Focusing on the structures of language, how they are formed and what they mean, e.g. substitution exercises, inductive 'discovery' and awareness-raising activities.	Practising language with some attention to meaning but not communicating new messages to others, e.g. describing visuals or situational language practice ('questions and answers')	Practising pre-taught language but in a context where it communicates new information, e.g. information gap activities or 'personalised' questions	Using language to communicate in situations which elicit pre-learnt language but with some degree of unpredictability, e.g. structured role-play and simple problem-solving	Using language to communicate in situations where the meanings are unpredictable, e.g. creative role-play, more complex problem-solving and discussion	
Focus on forms and conceptual meanings		← →		Focus on situated meanings and messages	

As Littlewood (2018, p. 1228) points out, many teachers far too often use controlled activities that tend to remain in the first two columns when they should be gradually moving towards activities in columns 3, 4 and 5 that promote a higher and higher degree of “independence, creativity and autonomy”, while still using activities in columns 1 and 2, either as preparation for, or remedial work on, “communicative tasks”.

Littlewood (2018) holds that learners need to be offered varied activities, with a balance between a focus on language structure and a focus on meaningful and relevant communicative situations, something that is also advocated by many other researchers (Canale & Swain, 1980; Ellis et al., 2020; Nunan, 2004; Savignon, 2002, 2007). More specifically, Littlewood’s framework can work as a guide to strike a balance between activities that offer the opportunity to *learn* structures (column 1), to *practice* communication in a more controlled environment (columns 2 and 3) and to engage in freer *actual communication* resembling communicative situations that learners might encounter in the real world (columns 4 and 5).

In Littlewood's (2018) continuum, it is only the activities in the 4th and 5th columns that are considered to be tasks, while all the others would be learning or practice exercises *leading to* communicative tasks. Any activity with a focus on forms, that is, an activity devised for the controlled practice of a target linguistic feature, would be considered an exercise, not a task. Proposing exercises alongside tasks draws on skill-learning theory (Ellis et al., 2020, p. 238), according to which learners need practice to proceed from explicit to implicit FL learning processes (DeKeyser, 2007). Learners need exposure and practice in order to be able to perform or improve their performance in freer communicative situations.

Research design

Material

Four widely used course books designed for the teaching of the course *Spanish 2*, corresponding to the A2:1 level of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) have been chosen as the object of our analysis. This is the level that is supposed to be achieved at the end of Year 9 of secondary school, and the level investigated in the aforementioned ESLC (European Commission, 2012) study. The analyzed books are *Gracias 9* (Hansson & Saavedra, 2012), *Colores 9* (Alfredsson & Lutteman, 2018), *Caminando 2* (Waldenström et al., 2015), and *Vistas 2* (Rönmark & Segalà, 2017). All of the course books analyzed met the criterion of having been published after 2011 and could thus be expected to have been guided by the latest Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2011a, 2011b), which is explicitly connected to the CEFR. In total, 1672 activities in the four course books were analyzed.

Method and implementation

Procedure for RQ1

In order to answer RQ1, the activities were quantitatively classified into receptive skills (reading and listening) or productive skills (written and oral production and interaction). The classification took into consideration the main objective of the learning activities, i.e., the skill that was *intended* to be practiced according to the instructions given in the course book.

In cases where, in the instructions to a learning activity, learners were asked to perform a series of actions, the activity was broken down into one sub-activity for each action. For example, if the instruction was "Write a presentation and

then present your work to your small group” (Rönmark & Segalà, 2017, p. 103, our translation), the activity was broken down into two sub-activities, the first one being classified as written interaction, and the second as oral interaction. Another example is “Choose two topics about Argentina. Search for information and find a matching picture. Write a text to each picture”, which was broken down into two: reading, and written interaction (Alfredsson & Lutteman, 2018, p. 25, our translation).

Productive learning activities were classified as *oral* or *written interaction* if they asked, overtly or implicitly, the learners to consider a receiver, even if the only receiver was their teacher while productive activities that did not involve a receiver were labelled *oral* or *written production*. Learning activities where learners were asked to practice only receptive skills were classified as *receptive skills, listening* or *reading*.

Procedure for RQ2

In order to answer RQ2, the learning activities were classified into activity types based on a rising scale where 1 represents a strong focus on forms with a low degree of freedom, and the highest numbers in each category represent the highest degree of freedom, where the focus is instead on communicative content. The purpose of this classification was to observe the frequency of occurrence of each activity type and to analyze how they were distributed within each skill. The scale in Littlewood’s continuum (See Table 1 above), which was used to answer RQ3, follows the same reasoning, ranging from the lowest degree of freedom due to a stronger focus on forms (column 1 on the left) to the highest degree of freedom due to a stronger focus on meaning (column 5 on the right). The connection between the classification of activity types and how they are distributed into Littlewood’s continuum will be further explained in Tables 3-4 below.

Descriptions of the learning activity types are given in Tables 2a–2d below, grouped under Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking.

Table 2a. Categories of learning activities within Reading

Reading
1 Metalinguistic exercise
2 Reading vocabulary lists in Spanish
3 Reading texts in Spanish and answering comprehension questions in writing
4 Reading texts in Spanish and reacting, giving opinions or connecting to one's own experiences
5 Reading something written by a classmate in Spanish
6 Reading freely, e.g.: blogs, websites, etc.

Table 2b. Categories of learning activities within Listening

Listening
1 Listening to recorded material in which a Spanish-speaking person reads a text that the learner can read at the same time
2 Listening to recorded material in Spanish and answering comprehension questions in writing
3 Listening to recorded material in Spanish and reacting, giving opinions or relating to your own experiences
4 Listening to people speaking freely in a movie, on YouTube, etc.

Table 2c. Categories of learning activities within Writing

Writing
1 Metalinguistic exercise
2 Translating vocabulary lists/sentences from Swedish into Spanish or vice versa
3 Filling in blanks
4 Writing something based on a text in the course book
5 Writing something down and reading it out loud
6 Writing to someone (a short message, etc.)

Table 2d. Categories of learning activities within Speaking

Speaking
1 Metalinguistic exercise
2 Translating orally vocabulary lists/sentences from Swedish into Spanish or vice versa
3 Reading out loud/repeating words in, e.g., a computer program or course book
4 Reading out loud a text or a dialogue
5 Listening to written questions read out loud by a classmate and answering them
6 Listening to a question asked by a classmate and answering it in Spanish
7 Talking about or presenting a familiar topic with the help of keywords
8 Talking about or presenting a familiar topic without any keywords
9 Speaking freely with someone (face-to-face or online)

The category *Metalinguistic exercise* within Reading (Table 2a) refers to a type of activity in which learners are instructed to read grammar rules in silence before

doing a grammar activity such as filling in blanks. *Reading vocabulary in Spanish* includes activities such as connecting words and definitions, pictures or synonyms/antonyms, classifying words into categories or filling in mind-maps. *Reading texts in Spanish and answering comprehension questions in writing* is a recurrent activity in all course books, but it is not communicative, since its main focus is on grammar or vocabulary (focus on forms). *Reading texts in Spanish and reacting, giving opinions or relating to one's own experiences* is its more communicative counterpart, since it is focused on the content (focus on meaning). Similarly, the receptive activity type within Listening (Table 2b), labelled *Listening to recorded material in Spanish and answering comprehension questions in writing* focuses on forms, while the following category, *Listening to recorded material in Spanish and reacting, giving opinions or relating to one's own experiences*, focuses on meaning.

The category *Metalinguistic exercise* within Writing (Table 2c) refers to an activity type in which learners are asked to explain grammar rules in writing. The category *Filling in blanks* involves conjugation tables, filling in blanks with a missing word or the correct verb form of a given verb, or substitution exercises in which learners have to alter an element of a sentence, such as verb tense or verb form depending on the subject pronoun. These are recurrent controlled, non-communicative activities. Another very common type of activity, *Writing something down and reading it out loud*, consists of a freer written part in which learners can write whatever they want followed by a highly controlled oral part that is basically repetition. Activities classified as this type are broken down into two sub-activities, as described in the procedure for RQ1. The *write-down-and-read-out-loud*-activities are freer than those in the category *Writing something based on a text in the course book*, since, in the latter, learners are more limited to reproducing what is stated in the text. The category *Writing to someone (a short message, etc.)*, in which learners are free to choose both *what* they are going to say and *how* they want to formulate it, is classified as the freest activity type.

The category *Metalinguistic exercise* within Speaking (Table 2d) refers to an activity type in which learners are asked to discuss grammar rules orally. The difference between the categories *Reading out loud/repeating words in, e.g., a computer program or course book* (no. 3) and *Reading out loud a text or a dialogue* (no. 4) is that no. 3 involves reading decontextualized words or sentences, while no. 4 involves reading words and sentences in context. These types have been classified as *speaking* since the intended objective is to practice oral production, with a focus on pronunciation or connected speech.

The category *Listening to written questions read out loud by a classmate and answering them* (no. 5) is more strictly controlled than *Listening to a question asked by a classmate and answering in Spanish* (no. 6), since in no. 5 only one learner is asked to communicate new information. However, no. 6 is not as free as the freest type, *Speaking freely with someone (face-to-face or online)* (no. 9), in which learners are faced with the highest degree of unpredictability in their communication when negotiating meaning in order to understand each other (see e.g. Savignon, 2002), making it much more like a real-life situation.

Between the more controlled types and the freest type described above, there is also the category *Talking about or presenting a familiar topic*, a freer oral activity type in which learners are required to present information to a receiver *with* (no. 7, more controlled) or *without* (no. 8, freer) the help of keywords. Finally, it should be noted that many of the oral activities are based, wholly or partly, on reading, and that bias from the written language makes them less applicable to real-life situations.

Procedure for RQ3

RQ3 investigates how the activity types found in RQ2 relate to a functional, action-oriented approach to language teaching, addressed through Littlewood's (2018) framework. Tables 3-4 show how the activity types described for RQ2 (Tables 2a-2d) have been related to Littlewood's (2018) framework. As shown below, there is a general agreement between the classifications in RQ2 and RQ3. In RQ2, the higher the number of the activity type is, the freer and the more communicative it is. This also applies to Littlewood's framework, in which the further to the right of the continuum an activity falls, the freer and the more communicative it is. However, this correspondence is not always one-to-one. Activities grouped under the same type in RQ2 may be classified as different categories in Littlewood's framework (Tables 3-4) depending on the phrasing of the instructions given to the learner, which can make them more controlled or freer than others of the same type (this has been discussed previously under RQ2). Activities that involve only reception without interaction are not specifically addressed in the five subcategories of the framework since these do not involve a negotiation of meaning in communicative situations (see 3.1). Exclusively receptive activities were therefore classified into the two overarching categories of the continuum, namely analytic (explicit) when receptive activities

had a focus on forms and conceptual meanings, or experiential (implicit) when the activities had a focus on situated meanings and messages (Table 3).

Table 3. Classification of the activity types of RQ2 (Tables 2a and 2b) into Littlewood's (2018) communicative continuum

Activity types →	Reading				Listening	
	1–3	4	5	6	1–2	3–4
1. Analytic/explicit	✓		✓		✓	
2. Experiential/implicit		✓	✓	✓		✓

Table 4. Classification of the activity types of RQ2 (Tables 2c and 2b) into Littlewood's (2018) communicative continuum

Activity types →	Writing				Speaking			
	1–3	4	5*	6	1–4	5–6	7–8	9
1. Non-communicative learning	✓	✓	✓		✓			
2. Pre-communicative language practice		✓	✓			✓	✓	
3. Communicative language practice – decontextualized		✓				✓	✓	
4. Communicative language practice		✓				✓	✓	
5. Structured communication – decontextualized		✓		✓			✓	✓
6. Structured communication		✓		✓			✓	✓
7. Authentic communication				✓				✓

* Even though 5 is considered to be freer than 4, it rarely asks for a longer text – it usually focuses on short phrases, sentences or questions. So, even though both the *what* and the *how* are freer, the effect is that the learner will focus on being grammatically correct or correct spelling .

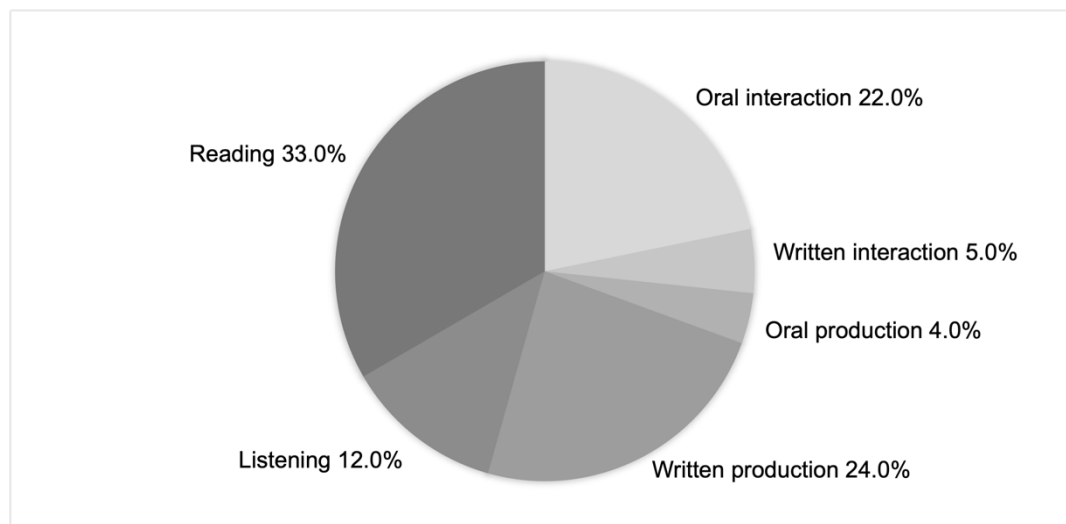
As Littlewood (2018) points out, the five categories in the continuum are just illustrative and have blurred boundaries, which makes it possible to classify activities into more or in fewer categories depending on the objective of the analysis. In this study, two more categories have been added, labelled *Communicative language practice – decontextualized* and *Structured communication – decontextualized* (see Table 4). These categories have been used for activities that do not provide any further information on *why*, *to whom* or *in which format* the learners are supposed to carry out the activity. For example, an activity that asks learners to “Describe an ideal day in your life, real or imagined” (Alfredsson & Lutteman, 2018, p. 60, our translation), but without connecting the activity to an authentic communicative situation such as writing an e-mail, a letter or a phone message is classified as decontextualized.

Results and Analysis

RQ1

The results for RQ1, presented in Figure 1, show that the total distribution of the skills is fairly well balanced in the course books, albeit with a slight dominance of writing-based receptive activities over listening activities. Another observation is that oral interactional activities are more common than individual oral practice ones (22.0% versus 4.0%), and that the opposite pattern is found for writing where individual writing activities are more common (5.0% versus 24.0%). It is important to note here, however, that *interactional* is not the same as *communicative*. A great majority of the interactional oral activities, when analyzed under RQ2, are strictly controlled and involve a focus on the conceptual form (See 5.2).

Figure 1. Distribution of the learning activities according to skills (1672 activities in total)



The most common form of receptive skills practice is reading (33.0%) while activities whose main objective is listening are not only less frequent (12.0%), but they also appear later in the chapters, usually as a repetition or follow-up activity aimed at practicing new structures that are most often presented in writing.

RQ2

The aim of RQ2 was to investigate the types of learning activities found within the different skill areas identified in RQ1. The results show a dominance of the written language, even in oral activities, which often turn out to be based on the written formula. Furthermore, the results show a dominance of focus on the conceptual form in detriment to a focus on situated meanings, with far more

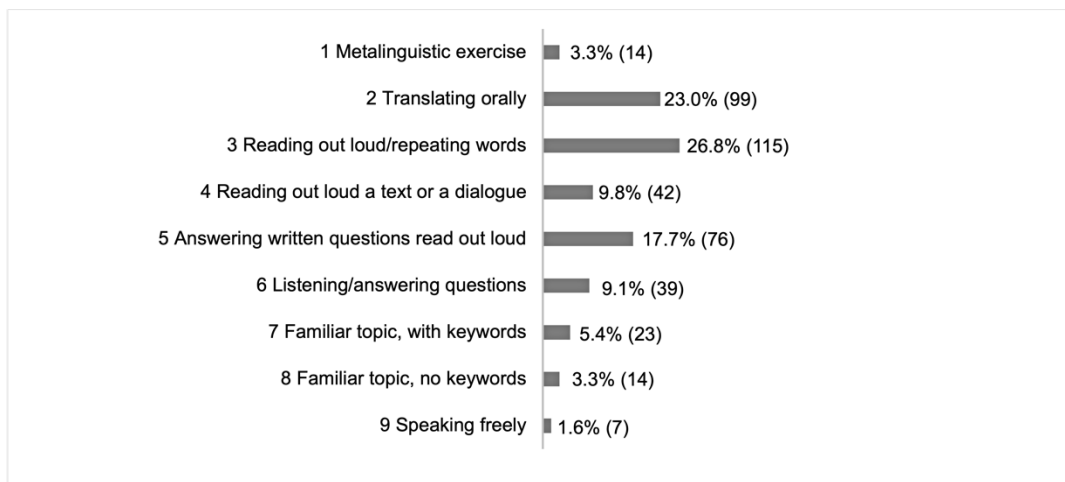
activities that tend towards being structural exercises done individually by learners than interactional tasks that would support more authentic communication with a primary focus on meaning. Even interactional written activities, which involve writing to a receiver, show a dominance of focus on forms and linguistic analysis, with activities that require the receiver to give formal feedback in response to what their classmates have written instead of asking them to reply based on the content. The same dominance of focus on the conceptual form and linguistic analysis is found even in receptive activities, most of which require learners to read or listen and answer comprehension questions that highlight new grammatical structures or vocabulary instead of focusing on content and meaningful communication.

The results for each skill are presented in detail below (Figures 2–5). The names of the categories in Figures 2–5 have been shortened for visual purposes. The full name of each category is provided in Tables 2a–2d, in Section 4.2.2.

RQ2 – Speaking

A majority of the activities that practice speaking skills are controlled and mechanical, with a focus on forms (Figure 2). They are typically based on translation, repetition and reading out loud, which is a clear sign that traditional methods based on a behavioristic, structural language view, such as the Grammar-translation method and the Audiolingual method linger on in the investigated course books. Furthermore, over 85.0% of the activities involve writing or reading in combination with speaking. Freer activities, where learners communicate new information and negotiate meaning without support of the written word, are clearly underrepresented (4.9% in total).

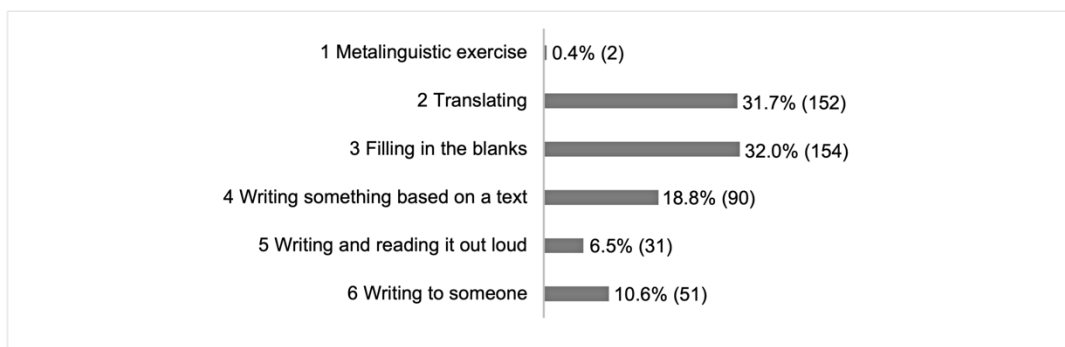
Figure 2. Types of learning activities associated with the skill of Speaking. The categories are presented in order of degree of freedom, with 1 being the lowest. The number of activities is given within parentheses



RQ2 – Writing

As can be seen in Figure 3 below, more than half (63.4%) of the writing activities were controlled and mechanical, involving filling in blanks (32.0%) or translating sentences (31.7%). These were productive activities in which learners worked individually. Of the activities that involved some form of interaction (35.9%), most were controlled (18.8%), e.g., *Write something based on a text in the course book*, and only few of the written activities (11.0%) were of a freer variant, .e.g., *Write to someone (a short message, etc.)*. However, in this freer variant, the only person to read what the learner had written was the teacher and when other learners read each other’s texts, they were required to give formal feedback instead of replying with a focus on meaning.

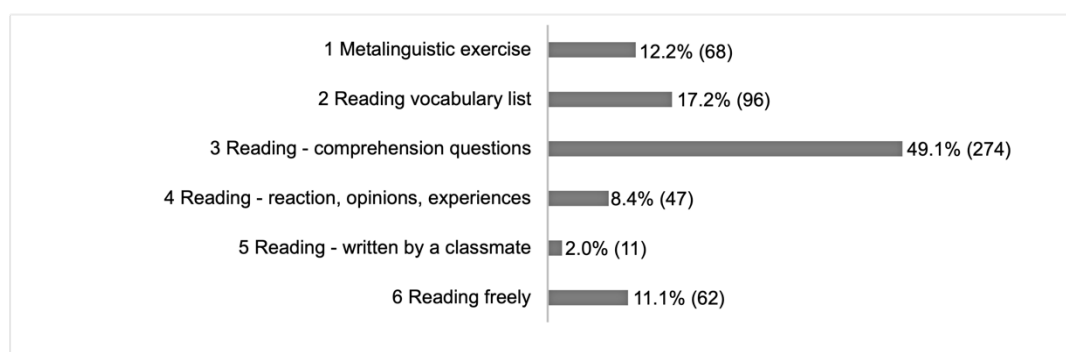
Figure 3. Types of learning activities associated with the skill of Writing. The categories are presented in order of degree of freedom, with 1 being the lowest. The number of activities is given within parentheses



RQ2 – Reading

Most reading activities (78.5%) corresponding to activity types 1, 2 and 3 required analytic/explicit reading with a focus on forms instead of experiential/implicit reading with a focus on meaning (Figure 4). Activities more focused on meaning, corresponding to activity types 4, 5 and 6, represented less than one fourth (21.5%) of the total. However, many of the activities classified as belonging to the freest type, no. 6, involved looking for very specific information online, which actually results in such activities being to some extent controlled and form-focused, as they do not allow for a fully experiential reading focused on meaning. An example of such an activity is “Visit the website of the restaurant Único 29 (www.restauranteunico29.es) and look at their menu. What do they serve as a) an appetizer? b) main course? c) dessert?” (Waldenström et al., 2015, p. 87, our translation).

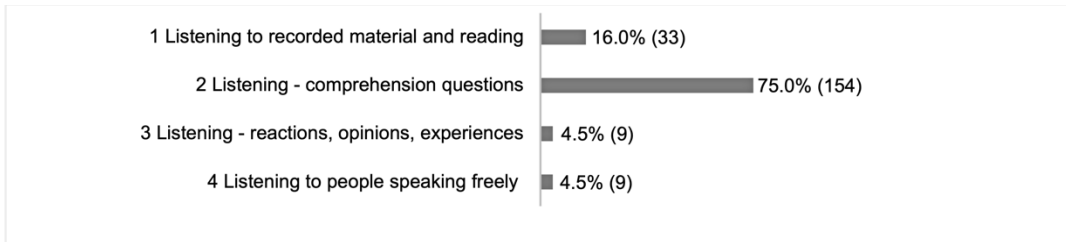
Figure 4. Types of learning activities associated with the skill of Reading. The categories are presented in order of degree of freedom, with 1 being the lowest. The number of activities is given within parentheses



RQ2 – Listening

The most common listening activity by far was *Listening to recorded material in Spanish to answer comprehension questions in writing* (75.0%), followed by *Listening to recorded material in which a Spanish-speaking person reads a text that the learner can read at the same time* (16.0%), see Figure 5. These are analytic activities with an explicit focus on forms. Experiential activities more focused on meaning, where learners listen to audio material with some communicative purpose, such as the ones represented by the activity types *Listening to recorded material in Spanish and reacting, giving opinions or relating to one's own experiences* (4.5%) or *Listening to people speaking freely in a movie, on YouTube, etc.* (4.5%) were very infrequent (9.0%).

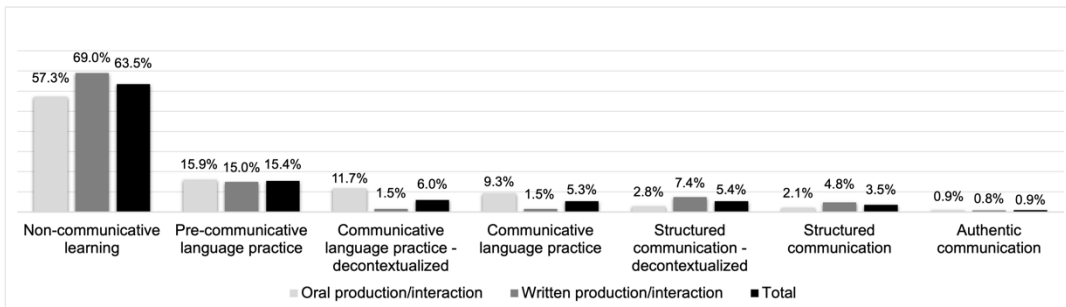
Figure 5. Types of learning activities associated with the skill of Listening. The categories are presented in order of degree of freedom, with 1 being the lowest. The number of activities is given within parentheses



RQ3

The results for RQ3 show exactly what Littlewood (2018) warns against: a big concentration on the left side of the continuum. If we consider the total for all productive and interactional activities (Figure 6), those activities with the strongest focus in forms (non-communicative learning and pre-communicative language practice) together constitute 78.9% of the total while those with the strongest focus on meaning (structured communication and authentic communication) only make up approximately 6.0% of the total. These are the only activities that could, according to Littlewood (2018), be considered communicative *tasks*.

Figure 6. Distribution of productive and interactional activities along Littlewood's (2018) communicative continuum



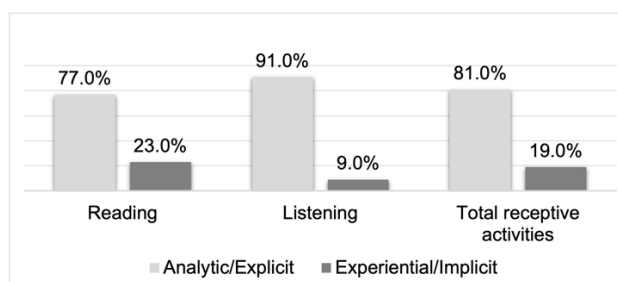
Along the same lines, if we consider only oral activities (*Oral production/interaction* in Figure 6), 73.2% of the activities fall into the two categories further to the left, non-communicative learning (57.3%) and pre-communicative language practice (15.9%), while only 3.0% of the activities fall into the two categories further to the right of the continuum, namely contextualized structured communication (2.1%) or authentic communication (0.9%), which are considered tasks. That such a high proportion of oral activities are classified as non and pre-communicative activities in Littlewood's (2018) continuum may seem

contradictory, as the high frequency of interactional oral activities found in RQ1 would point to the opposite, more communicative end of the continuum. Here, we want to remind the reader that the great majority of the interactional activities identified in RQ1, turned out to be strictly controlled and focused on forms in the analysis performed in order to answer RQ2. *Interactional* therefore must be distinguished from *communicative*. Communicative interaction characteristically should involve new information, unpredictability (Littlewood, 2018) and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 2002).

A similar analysis with similar results can be done for written activities (*Written production/interaction* in Figure 6). A total of 84.0% of the activities fall into the two categories further to the left, non-communicative learning (69.0%) and pre-communicative language practice (15.0%), while only 5.6% of the activities fall into the two categories further to the right of the continuum, namely contextualized structured communication (4.8%) or authentic communication (0.8%) and can therefore be considered to be tasks.

The receptive activities have a strong focus on forms, with 81.0% being analytic and only 19.0% being experiential (Figure 7). This means that receptive activities most often ask non-communicative comprehension questions focused on forms instead of more communicative activity types in which learners are given the opportunity to express themselves or negotiate meaning (Savignon, 2002). This tendency is even stronger in receptive listening activities where only 9.0% were experiential, in comparison to 23.0% experiential reading activities.

Figure 7. Distribution of receptive activities along Littlewood's (2018) communicative continuum



In summary, the selected course books give learners few opportunities to function as *social actors* and interact with others in different situations so that they can develop the *all-round communicative skills* advocated in the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2011a, 2011b). Most activities fall towards the left side of the communicative continuum, which means that there is a strong dominance of non

or pre-communicative activities with a focus on forms over communicative tasks with a focus on meaning. Activities further to the right of the continuum, which would be expected in a functional and action-oriented approach based on TBLT, are strongly underrepresented.

Conclusions and future research

Our findings indicate that the course books are not aligned with the functional, action-oriented approach advocated by the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2011a, 2011b) and the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) when analyzed from Littlewood's (2018) TBLT perspective. A further observation is the dominance of the written language, even in oral language activities, as well as a dominance of a focus on conceptual forms in all activity types.

We suggest that the results from this study could form part of an explanation for the weak results for Spanish as a FL in the Swedish setting found in the ESLC (European Commission, 2012), where 86.0% did not reach the A2:1 level. If we take into consideration that the ESLC study evaluated the learners' knowledge according to the descriptors of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), which assess performance on the basis of aspects of communicative language competence measured as can-do-statements of real-life tasks, the strong dominance of activity types based on a focus on conceptual forms found in the course books could be a factor contributing to the low results, provided that the course book guide the teachers' practice. If the teachers were guided by the course books, the learners had few opportunities for authentic interaction with peers in real life tasks.

However, it cannot be assumed that the teaching materials alone form the basis for the learning activities that the learners had access to. It still remains unknown how Swedish teachers implement the activities presented in the course books and in what way the pupils' acquisition of Spanish is supported by extramural (out-of-class) learning. In order to shed more light on this issue, it is suggested that future research should be focused on the learners' perceptions of what kind of activities support their learning of Spanish, both in and outside the classroom. In their experience, what activities are the most common ones in the classroom, and what kind of out-of-class engagement with Spanish do they have? We also propose additional research based on observational studies of what teachers actually do in the classroom. An investigation of what activity types learners perceive to form the basis for their learning and to what extent these connect to

the content of course books and teachers' practice could provide a useful platform for pedagogical improvements which may have a positive effect on learners' development of their communicative abilities.

Notes

1. The term *Modern languages* refers to all languages except Swedish, Swedish as a second language, English, classical Greek, Latin and sign language.

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