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Evaluating language and literature textbooks: a qualitative framework for the analysis and pilot application

María Carmen Fernández Tijero [1] and Cristina Gabriela Chirila [1,*]

[1] University of Valladolid; mariacarmen.fernandez.tijero@uva.es; cg.chirila@uva.es
* Correspondence: cg.chirila@uva.es;

Abstract: The teaching-learning process relies mostly on communicative competence as a foundational transversal ability for personal and professional development. According to Dell Hymes and Cantero Serena, this competence comprises linguistic, discursive, cultural, and strategic dimensions. Despite the evolution of new active learning methodologies, language textbooks continue to remain some static resources. Previous research show that oral skills are frequently underrepresented and inconsistently aligned with students' developmental stages. To address this gap, this study aims to design and pilot a qualitative analysis instrument to evaluate how Primary Education language textbooks promote communicative competence, meaningful participation, and scaffolding. The methodology establishes determined structured dimensions and indicators applied to a pilot sample of six textbooks across three countries (Spain, Italy, and Romania). This exploratory application seeks to refine the instrument's categories prior to a broader comparative study. Ultimately, this framework provides a systematic approach to assessing the didactic quality of school materials, offering researchers and educators a versatile tool to evaluate practices that support or hinder effective language learning.

Keywords: Language and literature textbooks; communicative competence; comparative education.

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1. Introduction

Key competences are a fundamental component of the educational curriculum. Both the European Council's recommendations from 2006, as well as those gathered in 2018 emphasise that these competences are, as their name suggests, essential for personal, professional, and social development. Their importance is reflected in various legislative frameworks in both countries, including *Ley Orgánica 3/2020*, which amends *Ley Orgánica 2/2006*, and *Real Decreto 157/2022* and *Decreto dal 9 dicembre 2025*, *n.221, Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione*.

An education system that prioritises personal, professional, and social development can therefore also be understood as a quality education system. Quality education is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2016).

In the *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*, UNESCO (2016) identifies quality as an essential component of the right to education, which leads to "relevant, equitable and effective learning outcomes at all levels and in all settings". The document also emphasises the importance of developing a range of competences to ensure quality education, as these enable individuals to adapt to constantly evolving circumstances.

When examining schooling, both in the present and in the past, one of its defining features is the educational material used in the teaching and learning process. Numerous studies have focused on these materials, particularly on textbooks, which have been the quintessential curricular resource in recent decades, either advocating for their use or questioning it (Molina Puche & Alfaro Romero, 2019; Area & Adell, 2021; Crato, 2024). This study adopts a critical pedagogy perspective (Carbonell Sebarroja, 2019), drawing specially on the research conducted by Martínez Bonafé and Rodríguez Rodríguez (2002, 2010, 2016, 2023). From this perspective, the textbook is understood as "*un discurso de poder que nos explica el mundo en una determinada dirección, desde una determinada ideología* [a discourse of power that explains the world to us in a particular way, from a particular ideology[1]]" (2023, p. 158).

Textbooks have, indeed, been examined in several scientific publications. Gómez (2011) investigated the contribution of Spanish Language and Literature textbooks to the development of communicative competence, regarding the textbooks used in compulsory secondary education. The findings revealed significant shortcomings in the treatment of oral expression, with a notable lack of activities designed to develop this oral features.

Another relevant study was conducted by Suárez (2019), who analysed 99 Spanish Language and Literature textbooks used in primary schools in the city of Badajoz. Suárez (2019) examined how these textbooks foster communicative competence and, like Gómez (2011), found out that oral skills were scarcely represented in the educational materials most commonly used in everyday school practice.

Furthermore, Suárez (2019) noted that textbooks do not adequately account for the chronological and developmental progression of language skills. The author reported that the number of oral task prompts in the upper grades was up to three times higher than in the early grades. Another noteworthy finding was that non-state schools tended to select publishers near to their ideological affinity; and these publishers devote more attention to oral expression (Suárez, 2019).

Textbooks as educational tool is characterised by four key features: it is a book designed to serve a curricular purpose; it is an instrument for organising students' learning; it is created focusing on their intended users; and, finally, it supports classroom teaching practice (Crato, 2024). Furthermore, this study identifies seven functions of the textbook: operationalising the curriculum, providing a framework for study, providing a framework for reading, supporting examination preparation, serving as a common reference point, serving as a future reference, and supporting teachers.

To further highlight the relevance of this research, it is worth noting that approximately 70 % of teachers use textbooks as their primary classroom resource

[1] Author's translation.

(ANELE, 2019). Nevertheless, textbooks must adapt to the needs of contemporary society, which is constantly evolving. The publishing industry itself acknowledges that, although its activities are entirely dependent on legislation, it adapts to the context changing circumstances in order to provide innovative educational resources that "*contribuir a mantener nuestra educación en unos altos estándares de calidad y eficiencia*" [help maintain high standards of quality and efficiency in our education system[2]] (ANELE, 2024).

In this study, the quality of these textbooks is examined from the perspective of communicative competence. To address this concept, reference can be made to Hymes (1972), who argues that communicative competence aims to equip speakers with the ability to communicate effectively in socially meaningful contexts. According to Cantero et al. (2003), communicative competence is one of the fundamental concepts in contemporary Language and Literature Education. Its aim is to develop "*hablantes competentes que sean, a su vez, lectores competentes y escritores eficaces*" [competent speakers who are also competent readers and effective writers[3]] (Cantero, 2019, p. 21). From this perspective, students become the central focus of the teaching and learning process.

Returning to the concept of communicative competence, Cantero et al. (2003) explain that various scholars have contributed to its development and that several classifications of its constituent competences have emerged. Cantero et al. (2003) highlight two classifications for these subcompetences: those proposed by Canale (1983) and Bachman (1990). Canale distinguishes four components: grammatical competence, which refers to the ability to master the linguistic code, both verbal and non-verbal; sociolinguistic competence, which involves mastery of the sociocultural rules governing language use and the appropriateness of utterances; discourse competence, which entails combining grammatical forms and meanings to produce different text genres; and, finally, strategic competence, which involves the use of strategies to overcome communication difficulties.

By contrast, Cantero (2019) organises communicative competence into four strategic competences: linguistic, discursive, cultural, and strategic competence. Each of these strategic competences is further subdivided into four specific competences: productive, perceptive, interactive, and mediational competence. This is the classification adopted for the items observed in the subsequent analysis.

A review of publishers' offerings reveals that their catalogues promise educational quality through an increasingly diverse range of resources and methodological approaches. However, an important question arises: to what extent can this range of materials meet both legislative requirements and the demands of high-quality implementation? Accordingly, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the relationship between educational regulations, teaching resources, and quality. The latter is also one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out in the 2030 Agenda, specifically Goal 4, Quality Education (UNESCO, 2016).

[2] Author's translation.

[3] Author's translation.

2. Materials and Methods

The main objective of this study is to develop a content analysis instrument to conduct a comparative analytical study of the quality, inclusiveness, and relevance of textbooks offered by publishers whose materials are used at schools in Spain, Italy, and Romania, taking into account the current educational regulations and up-to date methodological practices. To this end, a corpus comprising two textbooks from each country was selected, specifically from the following publishers and series: A. Mondadori Scuola, *Noi della Ciurma* series (Italy); Edelvives, *Fanfest* series (Spain); and Art Klett (Romania). For each publisher, the Language and Literature textbooks for the third and fourth grades at Primary Educational Stage were selected to examine the progression of content across one cycle.

The instrument was developed *ad hoc* on the basis of a theoretical framework based both on the competence-based education system (Mulè, 2017), as well as those basis on recent literature on Language and Literature Didactics, particularly the work of Crato (2024) and Cantero Serena (2019) on textbook analysis and communicative competence. The instrument is divided into three sections covering technical and bibliographic information, curricular concepts and progression, and a communicative competence matrix. The units of analysis to be coded include activities, task instructions, model texts provided in the textbooks, and written instructions addressed to students. This paper presents the pilot study conducted to identify areas for improvement and determine whether the instrument needs to be modified before being used in subsequent analyses.

Table 1. Analysis instrument developed based on Cantero Serena (2019)

CONTENT ANALYSIS INSTRUMENT		
Section 1. Technical information		
Publisher		
Series		
Publication year		
Grade		
Section 2. Curricular concepts and progression		
Indicator	Description	
Explicit concepts	Clear definitions, grammatical, spelling or literary rules	
Progression	Development of formal and syntactic complexity	
Use of texts as high-quality models	Presence of high-quality literary or informational texts that serve as models	
Section 3. Communicative competence matrix		
Dimension	Specific competence	Description
Linguistic	Productive	Vocabulary selection tasks involving synonyms, word families or lexical substitution.
	Perceptive	Text comprehension, decoding of elements, and differentiation between factual information and impressions.
	Interactive	Guided dialogues or simulations of basic communicative acts involving real-time interaction.
	Mediational	Exercises involving explanations in one's own words, basic summaries or the use of gestures to support communication.
Discursive	Productive	Production of coherent discourse adapted to the audience and

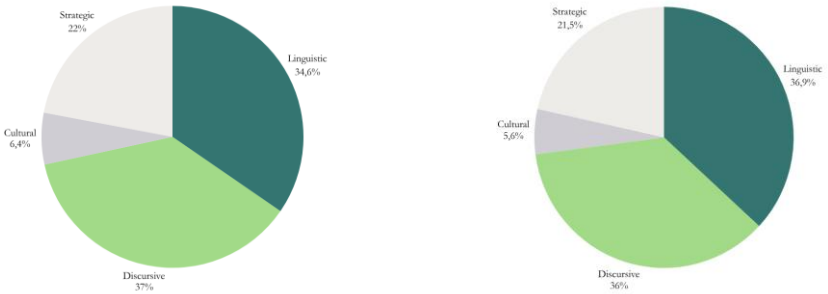
		purpose (e.g., diaries, letters and descriptions).
	Perceptive	Identification of the sender's communicative intention (e.g., to teach, provide guidelines, explain or narrate).
	Interactive	Group work, whole-class discussions or guided debates appropriate to the educational stage.
	Mediational	Interpretation of excerpts or reformulation of complex meanings.
Cultural	Productive	Texts and images addressing personal identity, preferences and customs, and presenting the social environment in a non-stereotypical manner.
	Perceptive	Comparison of contemporary customs with those of other periods, cultures or geographical contexts.
	Interactive	Group reflection on emotions, coexistence or the resolution of situations in a plurilingual and pluricultural environment.
	Mediational	Comparison of subjective or cultural descriptions, recognizing the plurality of perspectives.
Strategic	Productive	Creation of creative messages and resolution of communicative problems using resources available in the surrounding environment.
	Perceptive	Integration of multimodal resources (videos, songs, visual codes and information and communication technologies) into the proposed tasks.
	Interactive	Strategies for negotiating meaning and applying metacognitive principles.
	Mediational	Synthesis, sharing of learning achievements or use of study support tools.

3. Results

The activities from a total of six primary education textbooks were analysed and categorized. This article presents the data corresponding to the third-year primary education courses from the three aforementioned publishers, as well as those corresponding to the fourth-year course from the Edelvives publisher, given that a similar proportion between grade levels was observed across all publishers.

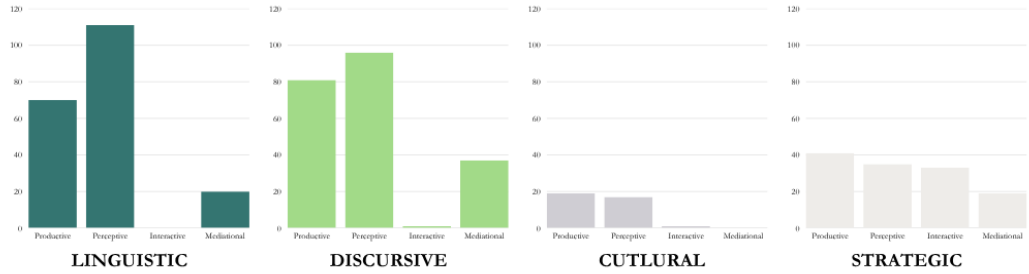
Beginning with the Edelvives publisher, a total of 581 activities were analysed in the third-year course and 591 in the fourth-year course. Examining the proportion across the different categories, namely, the linguistic, discursive, cultural, and strategic categories, yields the data presented in Figure 1. In this case, the predominant category is the discursive one, accounting for 37 %, whereas the least represented is the cultural category, with merely 6 %. For the fourth-year course, comprising 591 activities, the proportion remains similar, although on this occasion the predominant category is the linguistic one, with a percentage of 37 %. This difference between the two grade levels is not significant, as the percentages practically do not differ; however, it is evident that the cultural and strategic categories are relegated to the background.

Figure 1. Distribution for the 3rd-year (left) and 4th-year (right). Edelvives.



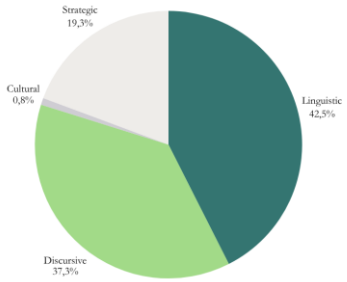
Within each category, the most predominant subcategories pertain to reception, whereas virtually no activities targeting mediation are observed (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Distribution of activities for the 3rd-year. Edelvives.



Continuing with the Art Klett publisher (Figure 3), the number of proposed activities increases compared to Edelvives, totaling 724. Regarding the proportion of categories, the linguistic competence continues to rank first with a total of 43 %.

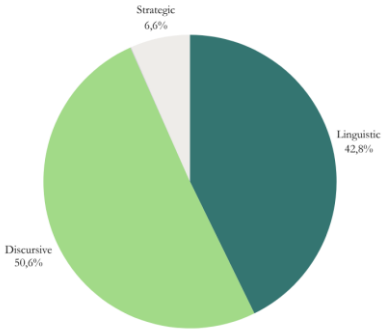
Figure 3. Distribution of activities for the 3rd-year. Art Klett.



Finally, in the case of A. Mondadori Scuola, a total of 1,050 activities were analysed. It is worth noting that the textbook corresponding to the third-year course of this collection is divided into two separate books, one for reading and another for grammar and writing, but both books were treated as a single resource. Consequently, the significantly higher number of activities found compared to other publishers may be attributed to this reason.

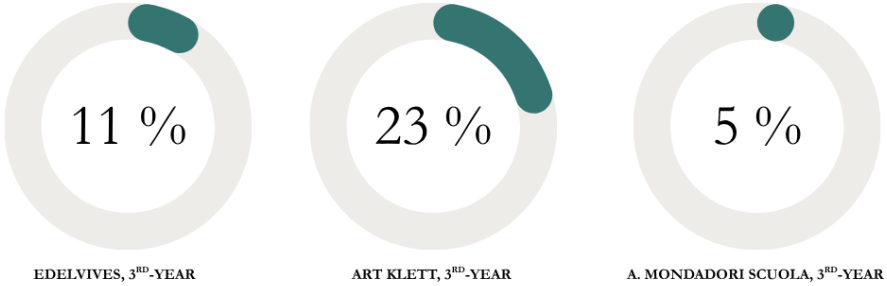
In the case of A. Mondadori Scuola, the highlighted competence is the discursive competence, accounting for 50 % of all activities (Figure 4). It should be mentioned that the cultural competence is addressed in only a single activity.

Figure 4. Distribution of activities for the 3rd-year. A. Mondadori Scuola.



In addition to the categories shown in this section, the frequency of explicitly oral activities proposed in the text was examined. The publisher with the highest proportion of such activities is Art Klett, followed by Edelvives, and finally A. Mondadori Scuola (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Distribution of oral activities.



Lastly, readings derived from authentic texts, such as literary excerpts, news articles, or web pages, among others, were considered, selecting exclusively those that mentioned both the work and the author. In this case, the publisher with the highest presence of authentic texts is Art Klett, with 58 texts, compared to Mondadori with 30 and Edelvives with 26, many of which correspond to newspaper articles or web pages.

Across all three publishers, the competencies with the lowest presence, by a wide margin, are the cultural and strategic competencies. Likewise, the proportion of activities proposed for oral practice does not even reach 30 % in any case. Regarding the specific differences and positive aspects of each publisher, Edelvives stands out for the incorporation of information-seeking activities using other documentary sources; Art Klett is characterized by a high volume of oral activities compared to the other two publishers; and finally, Mondadori stands out for its comprehensive approach to discursive competence through a broad literary repertoire comprising classical and international children's and youth literature, alongside myths, legends from various cultures worldwide, and a wide variety of poetic genres.

Overall, this descriptive analysis through the pilot test demonstrates that the instrument yields striking results regarding a common pattern: cultural and strategic activities are relegated to a background across all publishers. From a methodological standpoint, the application of the instrument across six school textbooks has proven effective for observing didactic proposals, as well as for revealing methodological gaps, such as the scarcity of mediation activities.

4. Discussion

The results obtained reveal how communicative competence is operationalized in primary education textbooks across different European contexts. First, the data reflect a marked difference among the dimensions of communicative competence following Cantero Serena's (2019) classification. Linguistic and discursive competences absorb the highest percentage of activities, coinciding with a traditional trend focused on formal decoding, grammar, and the comprehension of written texts. In contrast, cultural and strategic competences are systematically relegated to the background. This finding corroborates previous studies by Gómez (2011) and Suárez (2019), who previously noted that curricular materials tend to neglect oral expression and sociocultural approaches.

Likewise, the scarcity of activities oriented toward mediation contrasts with the current demands of European and national educational regulations, such as the guidelines of the Council of Europe (2018) and some educational research studies, as Gulisano 2019, which place competence-based and plurilingual learning at the core of personal and social development. From the perspective of critical pedagogy (Martínez Bonafé & Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2023), the textbook thus acts as a discourse of power that prioritizes certain formal contents over students' actual communicative competence. Publishers fail to achieve an optimal balance that integrally incorporates the four dimensions of communicative competence, highlighting a gap between institutional guidelines for educational quality, linked to SDG 4, and the practical reality of curricular materials utilized by nearly 70 % of teachers in the classroom (ANELE, 2019).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the instrument employed for the analysis allows for a specific, broken-down observation of how communicative competence is addressed in textbooks. The results of this pilot test have evidenced a competence imbalance across each of the observed publishers, which prioritize the linguistic and discursive dimensions. This poses a direct obstacle to the actual achievement of inclusive and quality education standards aligned with SDG 4. Finally, as the main area for improvement detected in this pilot phase, the need to refine and more precisely delimit the definitions of the different categories is underscored, so as to guarantee classification rigor in activities that may present ambiguous definitions, thereby ensuring the instrument's reliability to replicate the study on a larger sample of publishers, given that it also allows for the observation of the positive aspects of the methodological quality employed by each publisher.

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