

Elen Le Foll. 2024. *Textbook English: A multi-dimensional approach*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 294 pp. ISBN: 978-9-0272-4680-6 (E-book).

Review

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This volume is a corpus-based investigation of the language of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks targeted at students in lower secondary schools in France, Germany, and Spain. It is written in an engaging and accessible style, tackling questions of great importance to educators and other stakeholders about the kind of English students are – and should ideally be – exposed to in the classroom. Specifically, the volume aims to help readers gain a better understanding of (i) the linguistic characteristics of Textbook English, (ii) the extent to which there is internal variability among textbooks, and (iii) the extent to which Textbook English resembles real-world language. *Textbook English* comprises eleven chapters. The first five cover the background, rationale, data, and methods of the study. Chapters 6–8 present and discuss the results, while the final three chapters outline implications, reflect on the methodology, and lay out the conclusion. The present review will summarize the contents chapter-by-chapter followed by a summative evaluation.

Chapter 1 describes the motivations, methodology, and book outline. Le Foll notes that although EFL textbooks play a central role in lower secondary instruction, previous studies have focused on isolated features of textbook language such as vocabulary. To gain a broader understanding of textbook English, a more in-depth investigation is therefore needed. In **Chapter 2**, the rationale for studying Textbook English is outlined. As the author notes, English is the most widely taught foreign language and thus a core subject in European schools (p. 6). Le Foll then discusses the challenges of developing textbooks for use in France, Germany, and Spain that aim to include “real-life” English, despite the lack of a broadly agreed-upon definition of what that constitutes (p. 11).

Chapter 3 presents a systematic literature review of the language of EFL textbooks beginning with a section covering the methods that scholars have employed to analyze Textbook English. These include examinations for the presence of selected linguistic features (a checklist) and comparisons between a target and a reference corpus, such as that of Malaysian EFL textbooks and BNC1994 phrasal verb frequencies. The second section considers principal results from studies on features of lexis, tense and aspect, pragmatics, and spoken grammar.

Chapter 4 then discusses five principal limitations of previous research: unsuitable reference corpora, neglect of register and linguistic co-occurrence, problematic statistical methods, and taking “textbook” as the atomic unit of observation. To improve upon these issues, Le Foll reports on the process of selecting suitable existing corpora and compiling new ones as needed. Specifically, she compiled a corpus of textbooks, the Textbook English Corpus (TEC), comprising nine series of EFL textbooks (43 volumes) used in lower secondary schools in France, Germany, and Spain. To account for the fact

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that the textbooks included different kinds of language, Le Foll manually coded textbook passages for register. This analysis resulted in the identification of eight textbook registers (p. 81). In addition, three reference corpora were enlisted to represent real-world target language use: the Spoken BNC2014 (Love et al. 2017), the Youth Fiction Corpus (300 books compiled by Le Foll), and the Informative Texts for Teens Corpus (texts scraped from 20 English-language websites geared towards teenagers). This chapter also outlines the four research questions of the study, along with an Open Science statement and an admirably clear and detailed overview of decision-points in engineering the corpora.

A review of multi-dimensional analysis (MDA) opens **Chapter 5**. Le Foll credits Doug Biber's seminal 1988 study with demonstrating the ability of MDA to reduce a large number of linguistic variables down to a few functionally interpreted dimensions (see pp. 106–107). The author details the development and piloting of her Multi-Feature Tagger of English (MFTE) and rationale for replacing exploratory factor analysis (the statistical engine of MDA) with principal component analysis. Descriptions of methods for handling dimension scores and presentation of results then follow before the author discusses means for improving reproduction and replication of the analysis.

Chapter 6 presents the results of an analysis of register variation in EFL textbooks. An MDA was carried out, the results of which led Le Foll to extract four dimensions. These were interpreted as “Overt instructions and explanations” (p. 151), “Involved vs. Informational production” (pp. 155ff), “Narrative vs. Factual discourse” (p. 161), and “Informational compression vs. Elaboration” (p. 163). After an exemplary overview of the steps taken in the analysis, Le Foll uses text excerpts to illustrate how the covarying linguistic features are used in the textbooks. She also compares linguistic patterns across the eight textbook registers and the textbook proficiency levels. She finds that Textbook English should not be considered a homogenous variety of English. While both register and proficiency are important as moderating variables, register is particularly important for explaining intra-textbook linguistic variability.

In **Chapter 7**, the comparison between Textbook English and “real-world English” is presented. Like in the previous chapter, an MDA was carried out and four dimensions were extracted. These were interpreted as “Spontaneous interactional vs. Edited informational” (p. 169), “Narrative vs. Non-narrative” (p. 169), “Pedagogically adapted vs. Natural” (p. 172), and a fourth dimension that is tentatively labeled “Factual vs. Speculative” (p. 180). Le Foll reports that the register differences found within textbooks are less distinctive than in real-world English. The results also show that Textbook Fiction is the textbook register that most closely resembles its “real-world” counterpart, although the informative texts are also similar.

Chapter 8 provides a helpful overview of the findings and their significance for the field. In answer to the four research questions, Le Foll describes Textbook English as a heterogeneous variety of English, with the internal variation being attributed primarily to register differences, rather than to differences among proficiency levels, country (France, Germany, and Spain), or editorial policies of the textbook series. Nonetheless, as reported above, there were more prominent differences among the “real-world” registers than among the textbook registers. Overall, Textbook English was reported to differ “considerably from English as used outside the EFL classroom” (p. 203).

Chapter 9 outlines pedagogical implications of the findings. Le Foll identifies textbook conversation as the register that differed the most from its “real-life” counterpart (p. 207). While there might still be pedagogical reasons for using simplified dialogs in textbooks, the dialogs in the text investigated “cannot be considered to be realistic models for EFL learners to acquire spontaneous spoken language comprehension and/or production skills” (p. 209). To remedy this, Le Foll proposes that real-life (corpus) data should be used in textbooks, a claim supported by several other studies as well (see, e.g., Conrad 2000). Some more informational texts that stood out compared to their real-life counterparts were also discussed. The chapter concludes with specific suggestions for teachers and material developers, focusing, among other things, on teaching students how to be critical consumers of authentic sources and data.

Chapter 10 offers some reflection on the methods used in the book. Le Foll discusses the inherent complexity of MDA as a possible issue, but argues that given the complexity of language, the technique is warranted (p. 238). In addition, the advantages of using an open-source tagger and open access

code and data are discussed. In terms of limitations, the author rightly points out that the level of representativeness of the corpus used in any study will directly impact the results of the study. She also mentions the possible effect of relying on automated taggers that will never be 100% accurate. In addition, she highlights the fact that the interpretive labels for the dimensions in the MDA are inherently subjective. In the final chapter of the book, **Chapter 11**, Le Foll provides a concluding discussion.

We will now turn to an evaluation of the book, starting with some of its many strengths. All in all, this book reports on a meticulously conducted study of impressive scope. The prose is easy to follow, and the figures presented to illustrate the findings are very helpful, as are the concise overviews presented at the onset of each chapter. We also find the transparency commendable, as is the author's commitment to thoroughly reporting on all steps of the analysis. The fact that the data and code used have been made available is a further strength of the book. These materials not only allow future researchers to replicate and/or build on the study, but also serve as a helpful resource for researchers new to MDA and who may wish to use these data to improve their analytic skills.

An aspect that deserves special mention is the fact that Le Foll not only carried out a scrupulous quantitative analysis, but also manually coded the texts for register and checked the inter-rater reliability. As anyone who has done manual coding knows, this is a time-consuming task, but one that no doubt adds immense value to the study.

Nevertheless, there are a few points for possible improvement. Given the central role that register plays in the book, it might have been helpful to more explicitly tease out what is and is not considered a register. Le Foll refers to Textbook English as a *variety* and there are reportedly *registers* within Textbook English. However, a register is commonly defined as a culturally recognized variety of English (Biber & Egbert 2023). With that definition in mind, it would presumably make sense for textbooks to be considered a register in its own right; this register may then have internal variability and consist of subregisters. The fact that Le Foll notices clear differences between the textbook (sub)registers and the "real-world" registers would arguably provide further evidence for there being a distinction to be drawn.

In addition, although this is an impressively clearly written account of a MDA of Textbook English, we harbor some doubts on its accessibility to certain members of the presumed audience of the volume. Specifically, we wonder whether the average teacher, publisher, and policy-maker would have the necessary background to be able to fully engage with the study. We recognize that this is an academic publication, and an academic audience will expect the level of detail presented, but as the findings are certain to benefit a much broader audience, it would be wonderful for the author to consider extracting a simplified digest accessible to non-specialists. Such a booklet could, for example, include a summary of the results, key take-aways, and supplementary materials.

As for possible follow-up studies by researchers in the field, it would be nice to evaluate more recent textbooks (i.e., those in use after the present 2018 cutoff), and ideally ones that have been updated to incorporate discussion of – and applications of – generative artificial intelligence. It would also be interesting to learn more about the classroom context in which such textbooks are used (frequency of use, relation with supplemental materials, role in assessment, etc.). Finally, it might be worthwhile to revisit the question of what reference corpora to use, particularly in view of the transient character of much of (teenage) conversational vocabulary and pragmatics. We recognize that obtaining fully suitable reference corpora is a next-to-impossible task, but given their impact on the results, it would perhaps be helpful to think more about what constitutes optimal "real-world" language for the comparison.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that none of these suggestions retract from the overall value of the book. This is an exceptionally well-conducted, impressive study, the usefulness of which will no doubt be recognized by stakeholders both in and beyond academia.

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