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A Review of Language Practice Exercises within Commercially-available eBooks and Electronic Companion Practice

Carolyn Gascoigne
University of Houston-Downtown

Abstract

Following a brief historical review of the second language teaching profession's relationship with first- and second-year textbooks, this article examines the treatment of language practice activities as found in beginning post-secondary French eBooks, as well as their accompanying electronic workbooks and online learning platform practice. Using Aski's 2003 typology, five post-secondary eBooks and accompanying electronic practice are reviewed in order to examine their use of mechanical drills, meaningful drills, communicative drills, and communicative practice. Two structures were targeted for review across all formats. Electronic workbook and learning platform practice was found to be both more mechanical in nature and more drill-focused than what has been recommended in the literature. Electronic workbook and online learning platform practice was also found to be more mechanical than the corresponding eBook activities.

Keywords: *Drills, eBooks, Electronic Workbooks, Online Learning Platform Practice, Textbooks*

Background

Regardless of the level of instruction, the language educator's relationship with their textbook has been a long and complicated one (Aski 2003, 2005; Chen, 2016; Etienne & Sax, 2009; Wagner, 2015; Walz, 1989). Our needs as educators have evolved, as have our materials, in terms of content, technique, and medium of delivery. Still, our professions' historical reliance on commercially-available materials has fueled our vigilant examination of them. For example, numerous studies of and recommendations for the development of foreign language textbooks and materials span the 1920s to the present day. Our focus has run the gamut. We have examined specific topics such as the treatment of vocabulary (Bieber et al., 2004; Etienne & Sax, 2009; Keller, 1991; Neary-Sundquist, 2015; Talalakina, Brown, & Kamrotov, 2019), grammar (Aski, 2005; Azaz, 2018; Frantzen, 1995; Glisan & Dresher, 1993; Lally, 1998; Mason & Nicely, 1995; Requena & Tissera, 2018; Scott & Randall, 1992), reading (Gascoigne, 2002; Horton, 2020; Osa-Melero, 2012), writing (Lally, 1998; Liao & Chen, 2009; Scott 1996), culture (Li, 2016), sexism (Brosh, 1997; Graci, 1989), accuracy (Herschensohn, 1988: Wagner, 2015), dialects (Schoonmaker-Gates,

2017; Wieczorek, 1991), pragmatics (Vellenga, 2004), strategy use (El Essawi, 2013), and the need for ancillaries (McGrath, 2002; Wagner, 2015). We have also offered guidance to one another on the textbook selection process (Angell, DuBravac, & Gonglewski, 2009; Enkin, 2015; López-Medina, 2021), given general critiques (Aski, 2005; Rings, 2008), and suggested alternative sources of content (Russell & Swanson, 2022).

Certainly, technology has produced some of the most exciting and impactful areas of change within commercially-available second language materials. While we have been using technology for decades (Church, 1986; Corbeil, 2007; Smith, 1991; Yang, Hsieh, & Wu, 2020), a post-pandemic world only accelerates and deepens our relationship with it, as well as our need to examine it (Russell & Swanson, 2022). The following pages, therefore, endeavor to review long-standing and repeated recommendations from the literature made for commercially-available foreign language materials, ostensibly physical textbooks, to see if any traces of these recommendations may be found current online materials. However, before focusing on recent technology, we must pause to examine what the profession has consistently requested of, and what it has found in, commercially-available materials at several points in recent history. To further narrow our focus, we will limit our consideration to the treatment of language practice exercises within commercially-available materials.

A Recent Historical Perspective

Given the intimate relationship between language educator and language materials, our profession has spent more time and energy than most reviewing pedagogical materials, creating and sharing adoption rubrics, and conducting comparative studies of student learning outcomes (Aski 2003, 2005; Bieber et al., 2004; Etienne & Sax, 2009; Lally, 1998; McGrath, 2002; Rings, 2008; Walz, 1989). While these queries span decades, even centuries (Jespersen, 1904) we will focus on the last few decades, beginning with Walz' 1989 review of language practice activities in beginning college-level textbooks, moving on to Lally's 1998 review, and to Aski's 2003 review. We conclude with a 2022 review of language practice and drills as found in eBooks and their corresponding online practice materials (electronic workbook and online learning platform practice) for introductory French.

Drills have long been a staple of instructed language learning even throughout various proclamations for or against their utility. As Walz (1989) stated, despite evolving language acquisition theory, "the idea of practicing language has survived" (p. 160). In his review of twenty-five beginning French textbooks, Walz sought to describe the types and level of contextualization of language practice activities. He found that three of the textbooks examined contextualized essentially all drills, thirteen did so for many or most drills, and nine had no contextualization whatsoever. Moreover, he went on to note several problems with the contextualization that was found, such as:

- a lack of continuity of thought across related activities within a unit;
- a reintroduction of repetitiveness in drills;
- an increase in the use of unfamiliar vocabulary;
- a general lack of forced choice activities in which comprehension is essential

for completing the task;
- a masking of the distinction between mechanical, meaningful, and communicative activities;
- an increase in class time needed to complete contextualized exercises; and
- a falsification of reality resulting from the creation of unrealistic sentences and situations. (Walz 1989 as cited in Lally, 1998, p. 308)

Regrettably, Walz concluded that contextualization "is not an adequate solution to the need for more realism because many of the drills take too much time, confuse drill and communication, and encourage inappropriate meanings or no meanings at all" (p. 165). He also called for a reduction of mechanical drills and an increase in the number of forced-choice activities, wherein the context must be understood in order for the correct answer to be provided.

Ten years after Walz' review, Lally (1998) returned to the introductory college French textbook to see whether or not Walz' suggestions had found their way into the classroom by way of adopted textbook material. In addition to examining the treatment of writing, Lally also compared the number of mechanical drills versus communicative activities along with the availability of forced-choice practice. As opposed to Walz' extensive review of twenty-five textbooks, Lally instead limited her focus to six introductory French textbooks, all of which overtly claimed to espouse a communicative approach. Her review categorized language practice activities into three main types: drills, communicative, and forced-choice. Drills were mechanical in nature and included substitutions and transformations. Communicative activities involved real-word tasks and encouraged open-ended responses. Forced-choice activities forced the learner to select from among alternative responses but required that the context be understood in order for the correct selection to be made.

Table 1

Summary of Activity Type by Textbook **(Lally, 1998)**

	Drills	Communicative	Forced-choice	Other
Text 1	41%	33%	15%	11%
Text 2	19%	49%	16%	16%
Text 3	37%	27%	18%	18%
Text 4	34%	31%	22%	13%
Text 5	30%	15%	42%	13%
Text 6	18%	45%	10%	27%

The majority of the textbooks reviewed still relied heavily upon drills, while also offering communicative practice. Forced-choice activities were rare, with one

exception. Indeed, only one of the six books (Text 5) could be said to have made any strides toward incorporating recommendations from second language acquisition (SLA) research into language practice exercises.

In 2003, Aski conducted a textbook analysis based on a typology of production activities that measured the degree to which learners were forced to process meaning. Aski, however, focused her review on beginning post-secondary Italian textbooks. Ultimately, she too found that language practice activities as found in commercially-available introductory textbooks, lag "behind the findings and recommendations of SLA research" (p. 59). Specifically, she found a reluctance to embrace the importance of language practice activities that emphasize the relationship between form and meaning. In addition to her review, Aski's typology of language practice activities measured the degree to which learners are required to process and negotiate meaning. Activities within the typology range from "mechanical exercises that manipulate forms but require no meaning to be processed, to the most communicative type, in which the primary goal is to generate original and meaningful exchanges" (p. 57). Aski's (2003) typology consists of the following major categories:

• Mechanical drills, such as substitutions and transformations where students substitute or manipulate forms without needing to understand the prompt. Typically, mechanical drills have only one correct response option.

• Meaningful drills, such as verb pools, certain fill-in-the-blank exercises, translation   exercises, or some pair work. Meaningful drills are those in which an understanding of the input and the output is needed, yet there is still only one possible correct answer. Students do not negotiate or generate meaning and no new information is created or exchanged.

• Communicative drills such as yes/no questions, or disjointed questions for group or pair work contain information that is new or unknown to the asker of the question. There will also usually be multiple correct answers. While communicative drills may be formulaic, they
allow for student creativity or opinion.

• Communicative language practice requires attention to meaning in order to produce the correct form. There will be no pattern or formula to rely
upon. Examples include role-playing, or information-gap or task-based activities. (2003, pp. 60-61)

Examining seven introductory textbooks and limiting the focus of her review to the language practice activities accompanying two preselected grammatical structures, Aski found that only 14% of the activities could be described as communicative language practice for the first target structure, and a mere 3% of the language practice activities qualified as communicative language practice for the second target structure.

What do these three reviews completed across the last three decades have in common? Each found that, in general, commercially available introductory post-secondary language materials (textbooks and ancillaries) lag behind the recommended SLA research concerning language practice activities. Also, since drills neither take up much time in the classroom, nor much space on the page, they have dominated our materials. In spite of this overarching trend, each review also

found a blend of activity types in most materials, with a slowly emerging trajectory toward embracing more recent recommendations--at least in some of the materials. This should not be surprising. It takes time for research and recommendations to manifest themselves in published material, either through new editions or entirely new products.

But what about eBooks and electronic workbook type activities commercially produced for use in first-year post-secondary language study? There may be an expectation that these resources, and the language practice activities they contain, will be cutting edge, and therefore nimble and responsive to research and best practices. To find out, the following pages apply Aski's 2003 typology of mechanical drills, meaningful drills, communicative drills, and communicative language practice to five introductory French books available in an eBook format, along with additional practice offered via corresponding electronic workbooks and companion learning platforms, nearly twenty years later.

Materials Review

Most publishers offer their introductory language material in multiple formats to include bound physical paper books, the ability to print off certain page selections, or full electronic versions that mirror the physical book. In most cases, commercially available eBooks for first- and second-year language study tend to be mirror images of their physical book siblings (or twins, rather). While eBooks often have the added benefit of portability and embedded audio and video at the students' fingertips, there are typically no differences in content or organization between the electronic book and the bound physical book.

Electronic workbooks and companion learning platforms providing additional practice can range from interactive and adaptive online practice to the more mundane. Certainly, online resources can provide a wealth of listening, viewing, and writing practice through embedded video and audio links or interactive chat. Even speaking practice can be achieved through online chat or audio pairings, as well as through recordings and playbacks.

Without question, technology offers opportunities for language learning that were unimaginable only a generation ago. But how do these developments and options manifest themselves in our introductory materials, specifically in terms of language practice activities? Do our electronic resources reflect the consistent recommendations repeated over the last few decades concerning the use and nature of drills and other language practice? To begin to answer this question, the following pages apply Aski's (2003) typology of language practice activities, not to physical textbooks as commonly done in the past, but to eBooks and to their companion practice often mediated by publisher-specific online learning platforms.

Methodology

In the fall of 2021, the present author contacted several publishers of introductory French textbooks (Cengage, McGraw-Hill, Vista) to request review access to eBooks, electronic workbooks, if available, as well as access to companion learning platform practice. Recent editions (2017-2020) were targeted for review. As

this project is not intended to be a book review, individual titles are not identified. The anonymity of materials is a practice commonly employed in an effort to keep the readers' focus on the trends and not the individual texts (Byrnes, 1988; Etienne & Sax, 2009; Lally, 1998; Walz, 1989).

Target Structures

Just as Aski (2003) did in her original study, this review limits its focus to the practice activities that accompany two structures. In this case, the focus is on two structures commonly presented in beginning French materials: the present tense of the verb avoir and demonstrative adjectives. The present tense of the verb avoir is usually presented early in textbooks or eBooks, whereas demonstrative adjectives tend to be covered toward the middle or near the end of first-semester materials.

Materials

The instrument employed to review practice activities was Aski's 2003 typology that includes mechanical drills, meaningful drills, communicative drills, and communicative practice. Mechanical drills typically include transformations, pattern practice, or substitutions. Here, learners substitute or manipulate forms without needing to understand the prompt or the answer. In meaningful drills, on the other hand, students must understand the prompt and the answer, but do not generate their own meaning. Examples can include pair work based on given information, yet where no new information is exchanged (Q: How much does a cup of coffee cost in France? A: 5 Euros.) Unlike meaningful drills where there is one correct answer known to all, communicative drills contain information that is unknown to the person presenting the prompt, such as in an interview. Often one part of the communicative drill is scripted while the other part is left open to the creativity of the students. Communicative language practice requires attention to meaning in order to produce the correct form. According to Aski (2003), the goal of communicative practice is to immerse the learner in a meaningful context in which he or she is motivated to respond. Examples of communicative practice include role paying where learners are able to negotiate meaning, as well as information-gap, and task-based activities.

Procedure

All practice activities for the target structures were identified across all five eBooks and companion electronic practice. After identifying the chapters containing the target structures, each chapter was reviewed twice; once line by line and again using a search function. The present author, a professor of French with 25 years of teaching experience, then reviewed each practice activity using Aski's typology above. In cases where a given classification was not immediately clear, the present author consulted with a colleague before making a final classification.

Findings

The breakdown of language practice types by structure, textbook program, and format is presented in Tables 2-5 below.

Table 2

EBook (EB) Language Practice for the Verb "Avoir"

	EB 1	EB 2	EB 3	EB 4	EB 5
Mechanical drills	46.5%	11%	75%	19%	50%
Meaningful drills	40.5%	56%	25%	31%	25%
Communicative drills	13%	22%	0%	25%	25%
Communicative practice	0%	11%	0%	25%	0%

While drills (mechanical, meaningful, and communicative) constitute the majority of language practice across eBook activities for the verb avoir, we see modest attempts to infuse communicative practice.

Table 3

EBook (EB) Language Practice for Demonstrative Adjectives

	EB 1	EB 2	EB 3	EB 4	EB 5
Mechanical drills	31.5%	75%	50%	0%	33%
Meaningful drills	37.5%	25%	50%	67%	67%
Communicative drills	25%	0%	0%	33%	0%
Communicative practice	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Language practice activities for demonstrative adjectives within eBooks is heavily weighted toward mechanical and meaningful drills, with the inclusion of communicative drills in two of the five eBooks.

Table 4

Electronic Companion (EC) Language Practice for the Verb "Avoir"

	EC 1	EC 2	EC 3	EC 4	EC 5
Mechanical drills	50%	90%	100%	38%	88%
Meaningful drills	33%	10%	0%	31%	12%
Communicative drills	17%	0%	0%	17%	0%
Communicative practice	0%	0%	0%	14%	0%

With a few exceptions, language practice across electronic companion activities for the verb *avoir*, is predominantly devoted to mechanical drills.

Table 5

Electronic Companion (EC) Language Practice for Demonstrative Adjectives

	EW 1	EW 2	EW 3	EW 4	EW5
Mechanical drills	70%	100%	100%	25%	83%
Meaningful drills	18%	0%	0%	0%	17%
Communicative drills	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Communicative practice	4%	0%	0%	75%	0%

Two of the five electronic companion practice sets for demonstrative adjectives are exclusively dedicated to mechanical drills. One of the programs, on the other hand, employed a large number of communicative practice activities.

Discussion

In reviewing the findings of Table 2, language practice for the verb *avoir*, two of the reviewed eBooks offered practice activities in all four categories (mechanical drills, meaningful drills, communicative drills, communicative practice), with one of the two eBooks offering a relatively similar number of activities across all four types. Two other eBooks offered practice in three of the four areas, and only one textbook

was void of any communicative drills or practice whatsoever, devoted instead to mechanical drills (75%), followed by meaningful drills (25%). When looking at language practice activities for demonstrative adjectives, on the other hand, only one of the five eBooks offered language practice across all four types. The remaining four eBooks provided language practice in only two of the four types, but not necessarily the same two. While three of the four eBooks offered only the most limited type of practice (mechanical drills and meaningful drills), one of the five offered meaningful and communicative drills only. Taken together, there appears to be as much variation in the type of language practice across eBooks themselves as there is across the target language structure. For example, eBook 2 offered relatively few mechanical drills for the target structure *avoir* (11%), but 75% of all language practice for demonstrative adjectives were mechanical drills. Only one eBook (eBook 3) was consistent in its treatment of both structures.

In terms of the electronic companion resources, language practice activities for the target structure *avoir* were disproportionally mechanical in nature, with mechanical drills accounting for 90% of language practice in e-workbook 2, 100% in e-workbook 3, and 88% in e-workbook 5. When reviewing practice for demonstrative adjectives, this penchant is even stronger, with mechanical drills accounting for 100% of language practice in both e-workbook 2 and 3, 83% in e-workbook 5, and 70% in e-workbook 1. E-workbook 4 was the outlier by offering all four types of language practice for *avoir*, and a split between the extremes of mechanical drills (25%) and communicative practice (75%) for demonstrative adjectives.

On the whole, and with the exception of one program, the electronic companion materials appear to be more committed to lower-level mechanical drills than their respective eBooks, and therefore also their physical book companions. So, not only do lower-level drills survive in eBooks, they appear to thrive in electronic companion practice. This then begs the question: should electronic workbooks online learning platforms not be more nimble and responsive to the research regarding language practice activities since they can be updated without the costs associated with reprinting physical textbooks? They may still be. Because electronic companion practice is ostensibly taking place outside of the classroom, be that a physical, virtual, hybrid, it allows for more time during any type of synchronous interaction to be devoted to meaningful practice. Certainly, flipped or inverted models of instruction wherein the traditional order and manner of instruction are inverted have not only gained in popularity but are almost second nature to many language educators (Moranski & Henery, 2017; Moranski & Kim, 2016). Here, instead of an educator presenting new content during a synchronous class and students completing practice activities as homework, new content might be presented outside of class via video thereby freeing up synchronous meetings for more meaningful interaction and practice (Garrett-Rucks & Russell, 2022).

As language educators have routinely sought to maximize the opportunities for meaningful language practice while together, either through a flipped model or not, we have also tended to push mechanical or skill-getting practice outside of the synchronous class (Cherrez, 2022; Zhang & Cherrez, 2021). As such, finding a higher level of mechanical and meaningful drills among the electronic companion material, or material that we expect will be completed outside of any synchronous meetings,

need not be surprising after all. Perhaps, more mechanical practice, while commonly accepted as inferior to meaningful practice, lends itself to the electronic companion setting. Immediate and unequivocable feedback, such as that which Aski (2003) describes as having only one possible correct answer, lends itself to both automaticity and asynchronicity. If offered as a sacrifice that affords more meaningful practice to take place elsewhere, the current findings become much more palatable. Of course, this assumes that more meaningful practice is indeed the priority.

Conclusion

There are limitations concerning the scope of this study: it looks at materials for one language (French), it limits its review to five textbook programs, and it targets two structures. Therefore, one cannot definitively predict that all other programs, or the treatment of all language features therewithin, will be similar. These limitations have, however, allowed for a review that closely parallels that of Aski's original study, but is now extended to eBooks and corresponding electronic practice either in the shape of electronic workbooks or corresponding online learning platforms.

The findings of this review suggest that eBooks, and the physical textbooks that they reflect, tend to offer a blend of mechanical drills, meaningful drills, communicative drills, and communicative practice. Companion electronic practice, on the other hand, was found to be both more mechanical in nature and more drill-focused than what has been recommended in the literature. This could be due in part to the language teaching profession's embrace of flipped-classroom techniques as well as those where mechanical and meaningful drills are used outside of the classroom thereby freeing up class time for meaningful interaction when together. A follow-up study surveying language educators about their use of eBooks, e-workbooks, and corresponding online learning platforms in general, as well as when, where, and how language practice activities are assigned would shed additional light on this question. Until then, companion electronic practice appears to be less responsive to the recommendations of SLA research than their eBook or physical book companions despite existing within the most nimble and easily updated format possible.

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