

Textbook: Focus on Students' National Identity

Foreign Language Teachers as Agents of Using a Coursebook

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Abstract

The article highlights the concept of foreign language teacher agency which can manifest itself in the teachers' decision to introduce changes to the coursebooks they use. The most significant characteristics of the teacher agentic position in this area are clear motives and goals for change, a detailed analysis of the context and of the tools (including coursebooks) that are necessary for positive learner outcomes, an autonomous decision to choose and use the teaching materials that can facilitate effective learning. All these require teacher self-regulation and reflection. The article aims to find out if foreign language teachers are inclined to change coursebooks and why some teachers reject any changes, what factors affect their decision, and what kind of changes are common. The present research is based on the teachers' answers to a questionnaire that was offered to 182 foreign language school teachers from 2015 up to the beginning of 2020. All the respondents were divided into two groups: professionally active teachers in the community (32 teachers) and those who do not actively participate in the regional professional activities (150 teachers). The results of the study prove that the teacher's readiness and ability to introduce coursebook changes are a significant indicator of the overall teacher agency. Though the study has a few limitations, its outcomes can be beneficial for both pre-service and in-service teacher education in terms of coursebook evaluation and material choice/development skills.

Keywords: teacher agency, indicators of teacher agency, coursebook changes.

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Introduction

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Coursebooks have been a major medium of teaching and learning for centuries. They are the backbone for structuring varied teaching and learning materials around which any course unwinds. The coursebook gives teachers and students a perspective for the future and presents a tangible present, directing their activities towards certain goals. In the 70-s of the previous century, I.L.Bim suggested that there should be a special field of study in methods of teaching foreign languages to explore issues of textbook writing and evaluation (Bim, 1977). At present, this field of study has become even more complicated because a modern coursebook is an elaborate combination of various teaching and learning materials (Galskova et al, 2017, p.320). In some countries, coursebook adoption is determined by ministries of education and they approve a list of those to choose from, for instance in the Russian Federation (FGOS) or Portugal (Hurst,2015). Nevertheless, researchers admit that foreign language coursebooks are not perfect (Richards,2001, p.257), even if they are prescribed by authorities. Richards (2001) and Warner (2018) criticize foreign language coursebooks for being too focused on grammar and vocabulary which forces teachers “to supplement their textbooks, if they wish to teach authentic texts and to teach texts authentically-that is, in ways that enable learners to engage with them in meaningful ways” (Warner, 2018, p.122). Another detailed study of five foreign language coursebooks proved that “they cannot be relied on entirely to develop communicative language competence” (Gómez-Rodríguez,2010, p.337).

In the digital era when foreign language teachers have access to enormous internet resources, their desire to bring something new and exciting into the classroom seems to have increased (Richards,2014; Galskova et al, 2020). The majority of the teachers cannot resist the temptation to use diverse ready-made videos and cartoons, quiz platforms, lesson plans, and tests which are free, easily available, and adjustable to mixed-ability groups of learners. Thus, willingly or unwillingly teachers become agents of coursebook implementation and change in a particular context. Teachers as agents make the final decisions on how to use textbooks and what changes, if any, to introduce. Changes are not made for the sake of change, but to achieve better outcomes consistent with the aims of teaching and learning. The article explores the foreign language teacher agentic role in the use of coursebooks in school education. The agent initiates a meaningful, goal-oriented activity, selecting appropriate tools and ways to ensure desired outcomes. Among many, the most distinctive attributes of the agent are a motive and an aim, a choice of tools and means, engagement in activities that bring about certain outcomes, all based on personal self-regulation and reflection. To become agents of change and transform the situation for the better, teachers need both relevant knowledge and skills as well as relative values and needs. Fostering a sense of agency constitutes an essential goal of teacher professional development (Menter et al,2010, p.51).

Consequently, it is also evident that the degree of the teacher agency can be varied, reflecting the relationships between the teacher and the coursebook. We assume that these relationships can be those of

complete dependence (the case of zero agency in the context of the study); partial agency (occasional changes), and strong agency (full awareness of the necessity of change in a particular context that brings about goal-oriented activities). It makes sense to distinguish between an occasional use of attractive and entertaining teaching materials and real agency that manifests itself through in-depth and well thought-out decisions to introduce meaningful changes. In the latter case, it builds upon the foreign language teacher's awareness of the coursebook weaknesses in a particular context and the need to undertake certain actions to meet students' needs, helping them achieve positive outcomes. In our view, teachers as agents of coursebook change are well aware of possible risks that their changes may entail. However, they are ready to assume the responsibility for making changes due to their strong belief in the benefits their students will gain in the end.

Purpose and objectives of the study

Thus, the ultimate goal of the research is to explore the foreign language teacher position in using coursebooks in their professional activities. The objectives of the present study are to find out how many foreign language school teachers introduce changes into the coursebooks they use; why they decide to make such changes; what kind of changes are more common, and how this decision demonstrates their agentic position in their professional field. We believe that clear answers to the questions above can contribute to pre-service and in-service foreign language school teacher professional development and also help coursebook writers become aware of what possible changes can be introduced to their products.

Literature review

A coursebook is the basis of a course and it serves as a "core curricular guide" (Tsui, 2003) for both teachers and learners, directing their activities to a specific set of outcomes. It is described as a syllabus (Charalambous, 2011) that determines the specific objectives and content of the course and suggests a gradual development of language forms and functions, going from the most basic to the most complex ones. Therefore, coursebook studies often focus on specific aims and content in a specific context (Uspenskaya et al, 2013; Fedorova, 2014; Nefyodov, 2016; Stolyarova, 2016; Yugova, 2016; Davidenko, 2017; Putilovskaya, 2017).

Among the most important functions of coursebooks, researchers mention their support in planning while providing a structure to the whole teaching and learning processes and designing the language and thematic content (Harmer, 1991); facilitating learners' activities both in class and at home (Harmer, 1991), and motivating them to improve learning achievements. Because of a great variety of functions, modern coursebooks are designed as a complex system of different teaching materials and activities aimed at

delivering instruction and stimulating student practices. Thanks to these functions, coursebooks relieve teachers of the pressure of fulfilling a variety of planning activities. The role of coursebooks in foreign language education is summarized by J.C.Richards who identified their positive as well as negative effects (2014). As Jeremy Harmer remarks, “the textbook is an aid... and not a sacred text”; teachers “should never let the textbook use them” (Harmer, 1991,p.258). The implication is that coursebooks may de-skill teachers (Richards, 2001,p.255), urging them to follow the prescribed instructions and making foreign language teaching and learning book-centered. This may lead to students` boredom caused by the repeated similarity and classroom routine (Harmer,1991,p.257). The point is that published coursebooks are ready-made sequenced sets of content, materials, and activities based on the writers` general ideas of foreign language teaching and learning. They reflect the writers` subjective approach and understanding of foreign language education and are meant to be applicable “to many teachers, students, and contexts (Charalambous, 2011). But the process and outcomes of foreign language acquisition to a great extent depend on the teacher`s consideration of individual learner factors. There are important differences in cognitive style, personality, motivation, aptitude, and modality preference among our learners (Hadley,1993,p.85-86) which affect their engagement and learning outcomes. The diverse effects and contribution of varied learning factors that have an impact on the outcomes of education are summarized by N.Borisenko in her review of Hattie`s model of visible learning (Borisenko, 2018). Consequently, we can find a variety of studies describing foreign language classrooms and textbooks intended for different groups of students with specific characteristics, for instance, those applicable in inclusive education (Assanbayev et al, 2015; Smolovik, 2019). Researchers also highlight more student-centered approaches to the choice of teaching and learning materials, such as individual learning paths (Shemanaeva, 2017, 2018) or based on the principle “diversity of students – diversity of materials and tasks” (Borzova, 2014; 2017). They claim that it allows teachers to facilitate effective foreign language acquisition by every student. The implementation of these ideas brings about considerable coursebook changes. Moreover, learners can exercise a varying degree of autonomy in using the books that their teachers offer (Koryakovtseva, 2020). Coursebook writers cannot foresee all possible context variations. Teachers are expected to be responsive to the peculiarities of their students and tailor coursebooks intended for abstract learners to the needs of those in the classroom.

It is at this point where the teacher`s role as a change agent starts from. The concept of teacher and learner agency has been widely discussed in pedagogy from different angles (Slattenin et al 2002; Biesta,2007; Daniels et al, 2007; Eteläpelto et al, 2013; Dyakov, 2015; Kozhevnikova, 2015; Feng Teng, 2019). “Agents engage purposefully in acts which they know, or believe, will have a particular quality or outcome, and use the knowledge of the act to achieve this quality or outcome” (Pantić,2015). The motivation to act springs from the agent`s values and beliefs (Biesta, 2007) as well as from reflections on the situation and context.

To achieve the desired effects, the agent analyzes available resources and evaluates practices (Priestley et al, 2012). The concept of agency is often explored from a broad perspective (Pantić, 2015; Eteläpelto et al, 2013) when the teachers` contribution to society and professional community is considered. This concept is also studied in a more concrete context concerning classroom teaching and learning (Lipponen et al,2011). Researchers describe diverse characteristics attributed to teachers as change agents. These characteristics pertain to lifelong learning (being eager to learn and reflect), mastery (giving guidance, being accessible, positive, committed, trustful, and self-assured), entrepreneurship (being innovative and feeling responsible), and collaboration (being collegial) (van der Heijden et al,2015).

As we mentioned above, among many things, foreign language teacher agency manifests itself in their attitude to the coursebook they use. There have been a lot of papers devoted to teachers` evaluation of coursebooks (Bim, 1977; Littlejohn, 2011; Mikheeva, 2015; Milrud, 2016; Koupriyanchik. 2018; Potrikeeveva, 2018). Sun-Min carried out systematic research of the existing theories of English textbook analysis, classifying them by the time (1970s, 1980s, and 1990s) (Sun-Min, 2013). We can find studies concerning a specific analysis framework (Pemberton, 2018) or focusing on differences in materials evaluation between experienced and novice teachers (Johnson et al, 2008). Researchers analyze and suggest varied checklists that can be applied by administrators and teachers for coursebook assessment as well as their appropriate implementation in classrooms (Richards, 2001). These checklists are also helpful in materials development in terms of adapting or supplementing any textbook (Tomlinson, 2012). Ian Menter et al., referring to a study by Dallat et al, (2000), conclude that “changes to practice are most likely to occur where teachers: have time to reflect and review their practice; participate in collegial discussions and observations to share practice and encourage professional development; learn in their school context; and undertake longer-term professional development”(Menter et al,2010,p.43). In many papers, the authors mention a wide range of changes to the book they use: teachers may either omit, add, reorganize, extend or replace some materials that the coursebook contains (Richards,2014). Teachers may apply ready-made materials or develop them themselves (Tomlinson, 2012). They can do it occasionally or regularly.

Despite the profound exploration of the issue of coursebook evaluation, we cannot be completely certain that teachers follow the procedure. It is time-consuming (Pemberton,2018) and requires a sufficiently developed reflective capacity and inquiry (Vanhoof et al 2009). None of the previous studies have investigated the issue of coursebook change from the teacher`s agentic perspective. Thus, it is not clear why foreign language teachers set out to make changes to the coursebook they adopt, what components are subject to change more often, and why. In our view, the teacher`s coursebook evaluation and the subsequent actions based on the assessment conclusions can explicitly reveal the teacher`s level of professional agency.

Methodology

The study was conducted from December 2015 to January 2020. The research aimed to find out (a) how many foreign language school teachers introduce changes into the coursebooks they use; (b) why they decide to make such changes; (c) what kind of changes are more common and (d) how this decision demonstrates their agentic position in their professional field

The participants of the study were 182 comprehensive school foreign language teachers who were divided into two groups according to their agentic position in the professional community. Teachers in Group 1 (150 teachers) were comprehensive school foreign language teachers who are not actively involved in any professional activities apart from the obligatory ones, like attending in-service development courses. Teachers in Group 2 (32 teachers) displayed their agentic position in the professional community through attending in-service teacher training workshops regularly, supervising university student-teachers, delivering open lessons to both teachers and university students, speaking at different teachers’ conferences conducted in the region as well as participating in the All-Russia Teacher of the Year contest. A distinctive feature of Group 1 and Group 2 was their work experience. The detailed information can be seen in table 1.

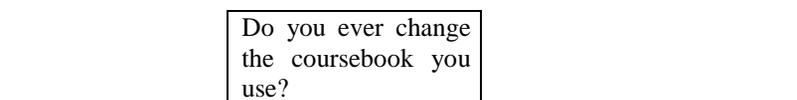
	Gr 1		Gr2	
Work experience				
	1-10 years	40%	1-10 years	0%
	10-20 years	10%	10-20 years	15%
	20-40 years	45%	20-40 years	80%
	More than 40 years	5%	More than 40 years	5%

Table 1. Participants` work experience.

During the study, the participants were asked to fill the questionnaire which included the following questions:

1. Do you ever change the coursebook you use?
2. How do you change it? What kind of changes do you introduce?
3. Why do (not) you change the coursebook?
4. Why do you adapt the coursebook to a particular student/group?

Those teachers who do not change anything in the coursebooks did not answer questions 2 and 4. The algorithm is presented in the following scheme (Figure 1):



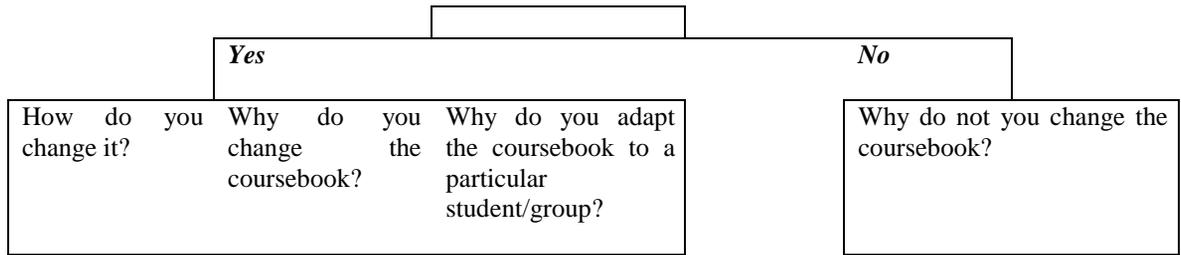


Figure 1. Question-answer algorithm.

Results

The total number of the participants accounted for 182 but some of the participants gave a negative answer to question 1 and they did not fit to answer questions 2 and 4. So the participants who answered questions 2 and 4 accounted for 74 in group 1 and 32 in group 2.

The questions and the answers are presented in table 2.

		Group 1 (total 150)		Group 2 (total 32)	
		teachers' number	teachers' percentage	teachers' number	teachers' percentage
Do you ever change the coursebook?	never	76	51%	0	0%
	sometimes	29	19%	5	15%
	often	45	30%	27	85%
How do you change the coursebook?			Group 1 (total 74 teachers who do change the coursebook)		Group 2 (total 32)
	Drop some materials/activities	56	75%	6	20%
	Add some materials/ activities/techniques	59	80%	32	100%
	Add texts	48	65%	26	80%
	Add exercises/tasks	57	77%	32	100%
	Add technology (ICT prompted activities and materials)	59	80%	32	100%
	Add tests	63	85 %	10	30%
	Add interaction techniques	18	25%	30	93%
Add problem-solving tasks	15	20%	31	96%	

Table 2. The frequency and objects of change.

We can also display the frequency and objects of change in the bar chart (Figure 1).

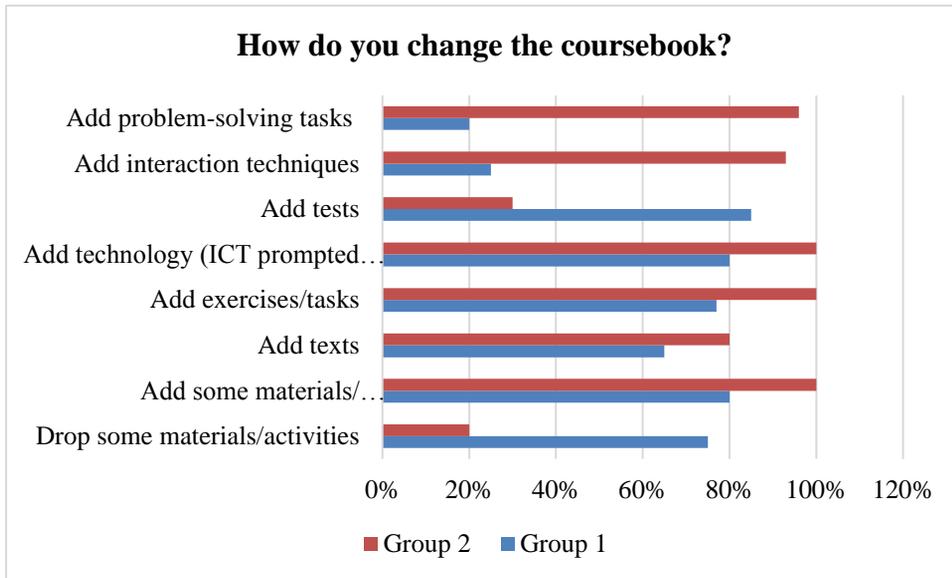


Figure 2. The frequency and objects of change.

We assumed that there was a correlation between the teachers’ professional experience and their level of agency.

While answering questions 3 and 4 the participants had to offer some arguments for or against changing the coursebook and estimate the frequency of the changes for each argument using the scale from 1 to 10 (1 meaning never, 10 meaning very often). We analyzed the answers and argumentation the participants provided and calculated the mean value for each argument. Also, we calculated the frequency and popularity of the arguments which is expressed in the teachers’ percentage. The results can be seen in table 3 and figures 3, 4.

Why do you change the coursebook? (arguments)

		Group 1 teachers’ percentage	Group 1 mean	Group 1 teachers’ percentage	Group 2 mean
Why DO NOT	No time	100%	10	-	-

change						
	Parents`/administration control is based on covering the coursebook	100%	10	-	-	
Why change			Group 1 mean		Group 2 mean	
Coursebook characteristics	Boring, repetitive content	66%	7	69%	7	
	Outdated information	28%	3	66%	6	
	Information overload	68%	7	47%	5	
	Uncommon vocabulary	7%	1	50%	5	
	Shortage of exercises and tasks	38%	4	81%	8	
	Shortage of up-to-date video	28%	3	88%	9	
	The coursebook does not provide high-quality learning	28%	3	100%	10	
	Shortage of aids/prompts	19%	2	75%	8	
	The coursebook does not meet the students` level (too hard/ too easy)	45%	5	69%	8	
	Repetitive exercises/aids/ insufficient interaction techniques	26%	3	100%	10	
				Group 1 mean		Group 2 mean
The compliance of the coursebook and particular students						
	Lack of student interest	54%	6	66%	7	
	Too easy	45%	5	69%	8	
	The content is out of touch with the students` reality	24%	3	88%	9	
	Student unstable attention/ poor memory	35%	4	47%	5	
	Student low level self-organization skills / low level study skills	8%	1	78%	8	
	The average		3.8		7.5	

Table 3. The reasons for change.

We can also display the reasons for change in the bar charts (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

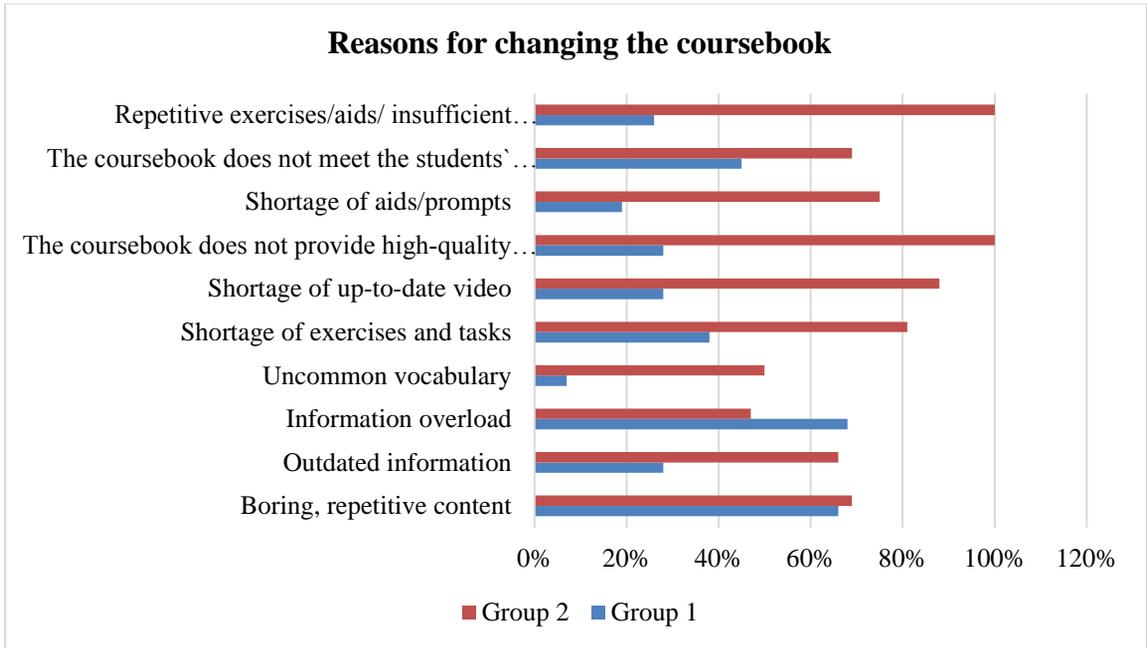


Figure 3. Reasons for changing the coursebook in teachers' percentage by groups.

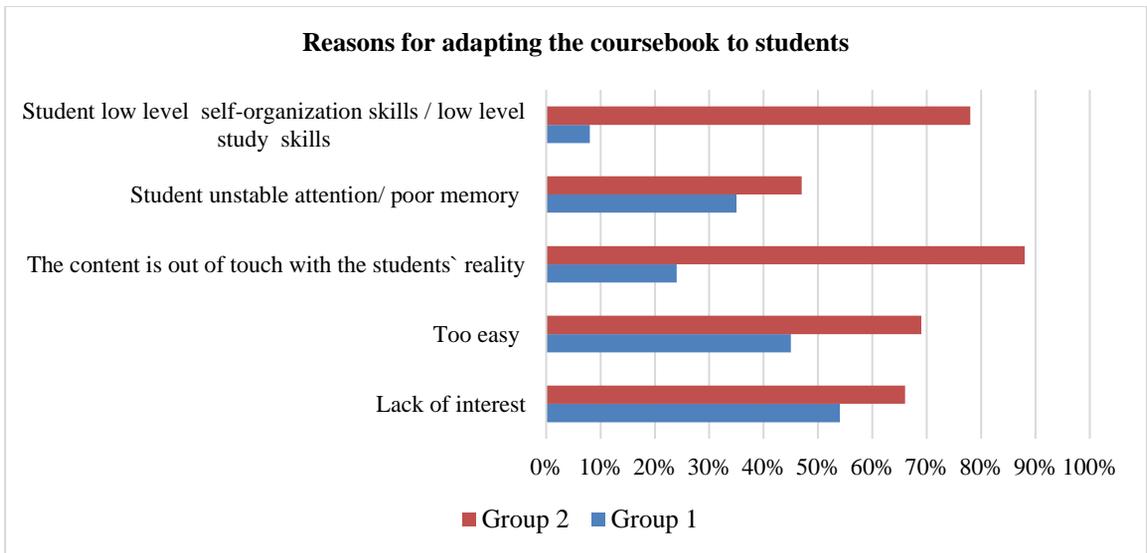


Figure 4. Reasons for adapting the coursebook for particular students in teachers' percentage by groups.

Discussions

While looking at the results of the study, we can see that the majority of foreign language teachers (105 people in both groups) make changes in the coursebooks they use. Table 1 shows that more experienced and more professionally active ones are more prone to coursebook changes. All the teachers who are significantly concerned with their professional development (Group 2) and participate in a variety of activities appear to be real advocates of change.

The list of the changes per se (Table 2) does not differ much in the groups. The most common action in both groups is adding something to the coursebook lesson plans. All the respondents who introduce changes give preference to using ICT (80%/100%). This change is quite understandable because computer technologies are progressing much faster than textbook publication. The teachers in Group 1 drop something from the coursebooks they use more often (75%/20%). It allows to suggest that the teachers from Group 2 are more skilled at their time-management strategies because they drop materials or activities from the books less often, but they also add a lot. It appears that their students deal with more materials than the students of the teachers from Group 1. Thus, we can state that their lessons are more action-packed and their students are considerably more active in the classroom.

The differences between the groups look notable if we consider what exactly the teachers bring into their classrooms. While adding texts and exercises/tasks is common in both groups, the teachers from Group 1 are more inclined to add tests. We can suggest that they are more concerned with student assessment than the teachers from Group 2. The teachers from Group 2 change interaction techniques (25%/93%) and add problem-solving tasks (20%/95%) nearly four times more frequently than the teachers from Group 1. We may conclude that thanks to varied interaction techniques, the teachers from Group 2 succeed in the student intensive engagement into varied classroom activities. It also reveals their desire to involve students in challenging and creative work. In general, the most commonly modified components of the foreign language coursebook are ICT, texts, interaction techniques (pairs, groups, or mingles), and exercises/tasks. The components that are not subject to change are topics, grammar materials, and the sequence of their practice.

The answers to questions 3 and 4 reveal the teachers' argumentation concerning their decision to make changes in the coursebook (table 3). Those who reject any changes to their coursebooks explain their decision by more pragmatic reasons that do not refer either to their learners or teaching. All the teachers from this group write that they are "overloaded and have no time for changes". The second reason is related to the administrative and parental control over covering the textbook that limits the teachers' freedom to change something. These teachers do not care much about the quality of the book they use and its adaptation to particular learners. Those who introduce changes from both groups (105 teachers) are likely

to evaluate the coursebook they are going to use first and then they consider its accommodation to a particular context and learners. One part of the arguments in table 3 deals with the book itself. There are noticeable differences between the answers in both groups. Though all the items in the coursebook evaluation coincide, the teachers from group 2 seem to pay considerably more attention to content, language, and techniques as compared with the teachers from group 1. Among the drawbacks of coursebooks, the teachers in group 1 mostly mention boring, repetitive content (7) and information overload (7), while the teachers in group 2 emphasize repetitive exercises/aids/ insufficient interaction techniques (10), shortage of up-to-date video (9), shortage of exercises and tasks (8), and shortage of aids/prompts (8). Anyway, the teachers who are inclined to hold the agentic position conclude that “the coursebook does not provide high-quality learning” and needs change (3/10).

The second list of the arguments for coursebook change (table 3) deals with the students` characteristics that urge teachers to tailor their teaching materials and techniques to their learners. The most frequent answers in group 1 are “lack of interest” (6) and “the book is too easy” (5) while in group 2 there is a different focus: “the content is out of touch with the students` reality” (9); “the student low-level self-organization skills / low-level study skills” (8), though some teachers in this group also consider the coursebook “too easy” (8). This difference shows that the teachers in group 2 recognize the students` role as agents of learning and realize that the outcomes of foreign language education depend on the students` personal contribution. The answers of the teachers from group 2 seem to be better thought-out, covering all the aspects of foreign language teaching and learning. An important change motive is connected with the teacher's concern for more attractive materials as well as the necessity to provide scaffolding to those who need assistance. We can also guess that the coursebook evaluation by the teachers from group 2 is more profound. This conclusion is backed up by the average mean in both groups (table 3): 3,8 and 7,5.

Summing up the results, we can conclude that those foreign language teachers who are active in their professional community, are more inclined to alter the coursebooks they use, while a bit less than half of those who are not community active can also make such changes. The readiness and ability to do this are some of the indicators of the teachers` agency in their professional activities. This assumption is based on the teachers` in-depth coursebook evaluation and on their awareness of the textbook weaknesses in meeting the student needs (either partial or strong agency). Therefore, the teachers are driven to make changes in the tools they use. If a foreign language teacher rejects coursebook changes, it is evidence of the teacher`s passive position and zero agency level, demonstrating dependence on the book, regardless of its quality, teaching context, and student characteristics.

We admit that the problem of the present study needs further research. The limitations of the study are

related to the teachers' subjective assessment of the changes they make or do not in the coursebooks they use. We cannot state whether the introduced changes bring about positive effects to teaching and learning foreign languages. As the results of the study are based on the teachers' reflection and personal estimation of the modifications in the coursebooks, further research of the issue can be conducted with the help of close classroom observations and a more detailed account of the results.

Conclusion

Foreign language teacher agency is a significant manifestation of the high level of their professional competency and their high-level motivation for excellent outcomes. An essential indicator of agency, though not a single one, is connected to the teachers' readiness and ability to introduce changes into the coursebooks they use. As the present study shows, those teachers who are active in their professional community tend to alter textbooks regularly. There is evidence that their changes are based on profound coursebook evaluation, are more diverse and well thought-out, catering for student particular needs, interests, and proficiency levels. Foreign language teachers as agents are more learner-centered and goal-oriented, contributing their efforts and time to achieve better outcomes in their professional activities. As the majority of foreign language teachers consider it necessary to introduce such changes, coursebook evaluation procedures and strategies of making reasonable choices from a variety of numerous teaching materials must be incorporated into pre-service as well as in-service teacher development courses.

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